

# G54GAM Games

Structuring Games  
Premise and Narrative

# The middle-class schoolboy who became a classroom killer: How teenager who murdered teacher Ann Maguire turned into a loner obsessed with zombie video games

- William Cornick sentenced to life in prison for murder of his teacher
- The 16-year-old stabbed teacher Ann Maguire in his classroom

He had numerous images of knives on his mobile phone. He also had a keen interest in ultra-violent video games, including Dark Souls II, in which players hack zombies to pieces.

20 years and a life sentence is too long.'

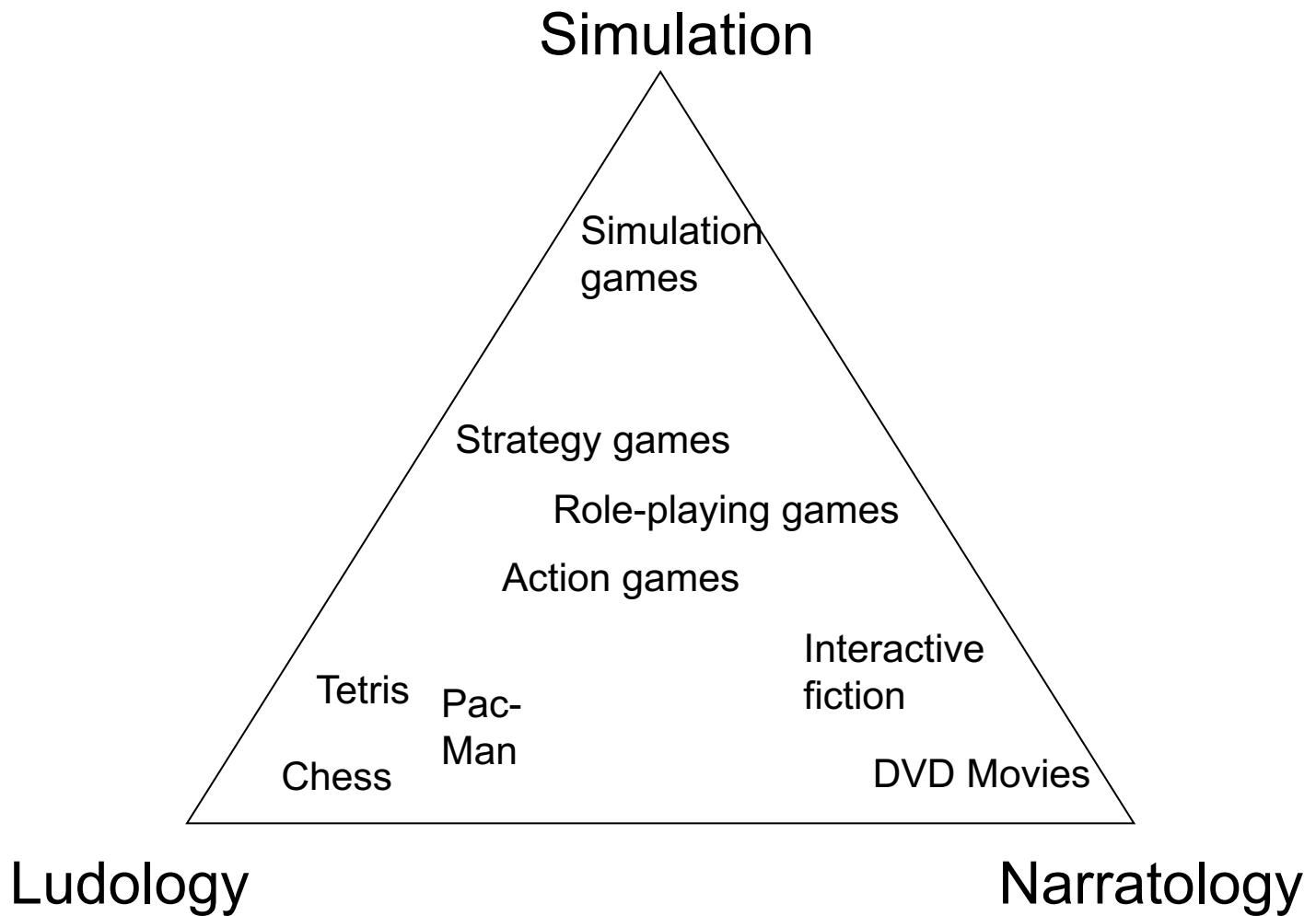
Players devour the souls of their fallen enemies to the sound of cries of agony. Disturbing images include a character made up of hundreds of human corpses. It was voted one of the ten Most Violent Video Games of 2014.

One pupil recalled Cornick saying disgusting things at a party. He said: 'He was saying twisted stuff

# Dramatic Elements of Game Play

- Challenge
  - What keeps a player keep playing
  - Learning new skills, inability to do something
  - Constant reward
  - Control over own destiny
- Play
  - The experience of the game is an end in itself
  - Exploration, competing, being creative
- Premise
  - Why you are playing
- Narrative
  - Character development
  - The unfolding storyline

# Craig Lindley (2003)



# Narrative Components

- Premise
- Characters
- Developing Story
- Conflict and Dramatic Arcs
- Dialogue

# What's the Game?

- *Imagine you're in a one-man space shuttle traveling though the heavens at the speed of light. You and your tiny ship are totally engulfed in darkness, except for the luminance of an occasional passing star.*
- *Suddenly, without warning, there's a brilliant flash straight ahead. You check the radar screen. Nothing. Pretty soon there's another flash, and another. Next thing you know the flashes have turned into one gigantic force field of some kind and it's dead ahead. You check the radar screen, still nothing.*
- *The colors in this mysterious force field are so bright, they're almost blinding. And they seem to be in layers. But the strangest thing is that nothing shows up on the radar screen. What could that mean? Is it possible to travel through this mysterious force field or will you crash and be destroyed? And what about the layers? If you make it through one, can you make it through the next, and the next? It's decision time and there are only a few seconds to think about it. Turn back or blast ahead and try to make it through the layers of this brightly colored force field. It's up to you.*

# Premise vs Story

- Premise
  - Gives motivation to play
    - Does not limit outcomes
    - Sets “geography” to explore
  - Has many dimensions
    - Physical (scale, perspective)
    - Temporal (time compression)
    - Environmental (art style)
    - Emotional (horror, humour)
    - Ethical (good vs evil)
  - Makes the formal system **playable**
  - Sets up the point the player begins playing

# Premise vs Story

- Story
  - Creates an emotional setting
    - Defined by NPC behaviour
    - Drama builds tension
  - Typically has a **narrative**
    - “Voice” of the author
    - Gives direction to the game
    - Gives a sense of progression
      - Driven forward by the player’s actions
    - But involves necessary loss of **player choice**

# Premise

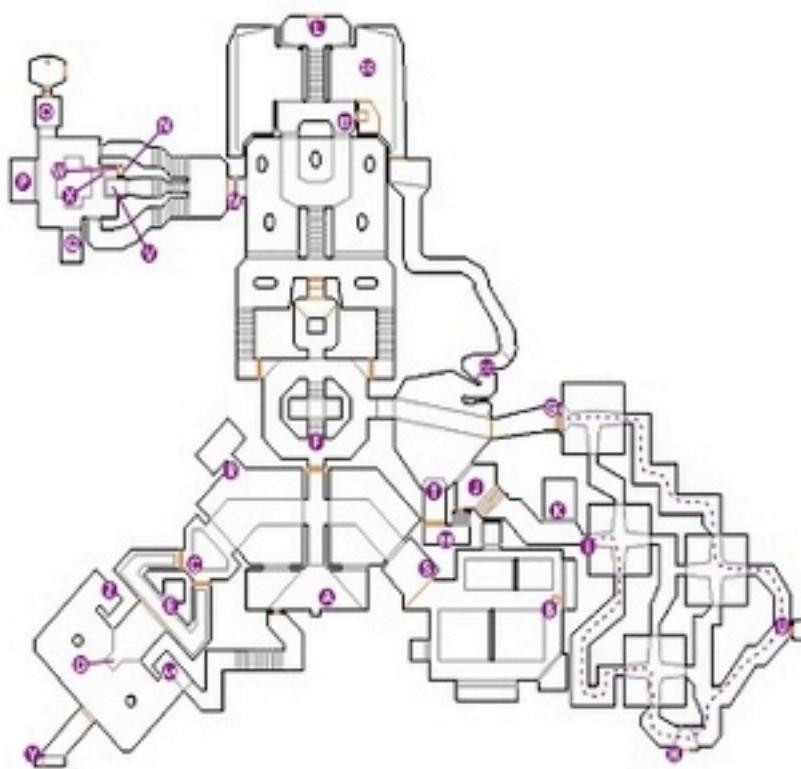
- Space Invaders
  - Set on a planet attacked by aliens
  - An anonymous protagonist is responsible for defending the planet from the invaders
  - Shoot aliens (not abstract blocks on a screen)
  - No real story?
- Grand Theft Auto San Andreas
  - Set in fictional town called San Andreas
  - Return after 5 year absence to find family and friends in disarray
  - Story begins after cut-scene introduction

# Story and Gameplay

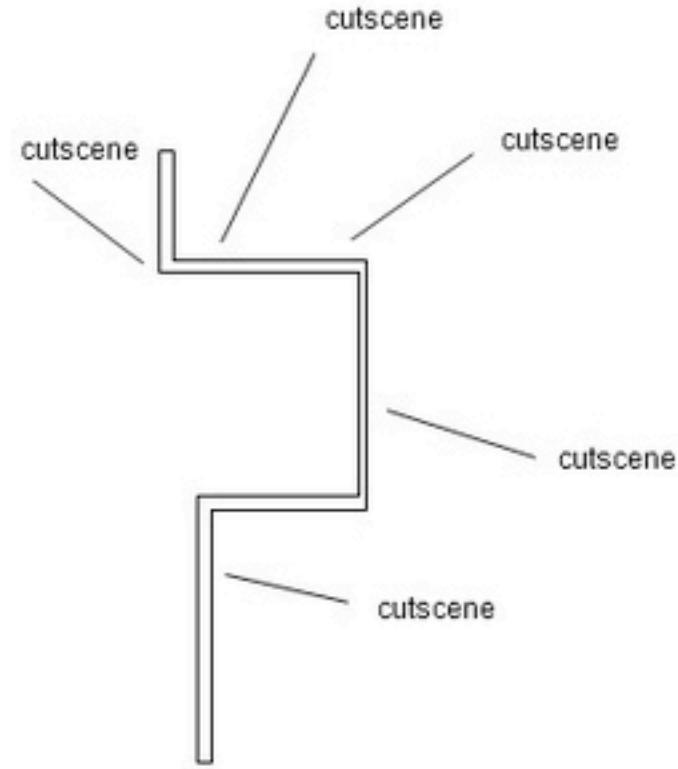
- Aim to create dramatic tension in the game
  - Heightens emotional investment
  - Story becomes an integral part of gameplay
- Story structure is important
  - Pacing
    - How story elements unfold in the game
  - Dramatic flow
    - Rising and falling action
  - How do we structure this?
  - How does it affect meaningful choice?
- Story vehicle
  - How is it revealed?
  - Relation to gameplay?
  - Can story be missed?
  - E.g. cut scenes, character dialogue, in-game text, game manual

## FPS map design

1993



2010



the cake is a lie.  
the cake is a lie.



NO



EXCERPT FROM 1957 AND COMMENT ON IG REPORT  
"OPERATIONS OF TSD"

7. Influencing Human Behavior

e. The potential use of psychochemicals in political action operations is well recognized, although it has not been explored as thoroughly as might be expected. Chemical Division includes it as an objective of its program to be prepared to support or make such operations possible. Non-chemical methods of accomplishing political action operations are also included in the program.

Note: (J.Lawler/April 15, 1958) Present the above MKULTRA excerpt to Technical Services Division for budgeting and authorization of continued research into research of Dr. Rudolf Wernicke (asset 14866) and project WALRIDER. Autopsy of recovered test subjects shows chemical content of bodies (metallic tumors, evidence of sub-dermal combustion) that indicates heavy psychochemical dosage. (See note: 92387-HS.BERLIN.6.Sept.1938)





184 Be advised, some problem ... at Beacon Memorial ... radio.

# Inside (2016)

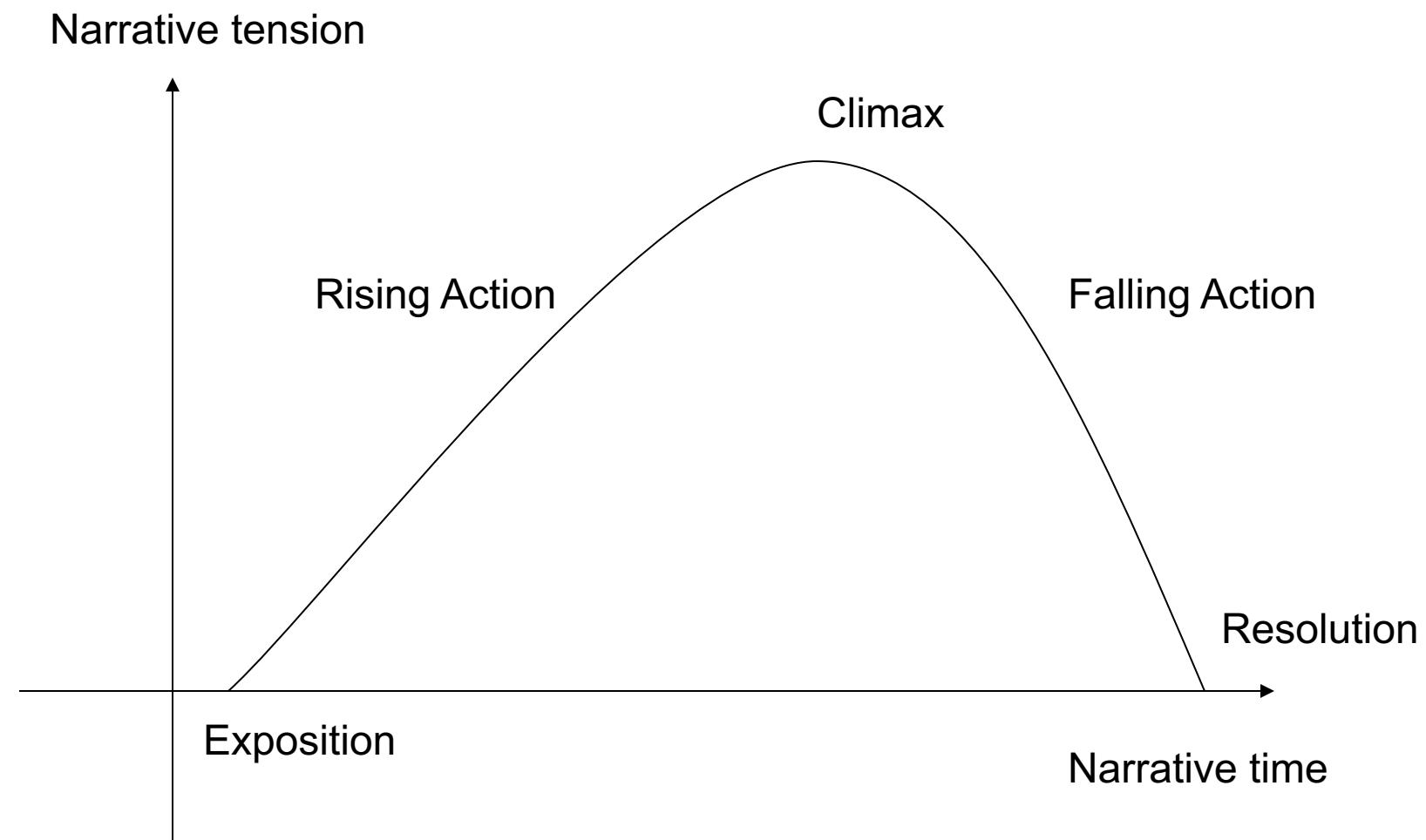
- <https://youtu.be/5k17aVeY2rl?t=100>

# Characters

- Story is told through the actions of characters
  - Player identifies with characters and the outcomes of their goals
- Protagonist (main character)
  - Engagement with challenges creates conflict
- Antagonist
  - Opposes attempts to solve the problem
  - A person or some other force
- Character types
  - Major / Minor
    - Level of impact on the story
  - Round / Flat
    - Depth
    - Realism of personality
  - Dynamic / Static
    - Change in personality
    - Stock Character
  - Recognisable Stereotypes
    - Good, evil, traitor

# Conflict and Dramatic Arcs

- Conflict is the key to a good drama
  - Keeps players from accomplishing goals too easily, draws players into the game emotionally by creating a sense of tension as to the outcome
- Traditional drama
  - Conflict occurs when protagonist faces obstacle/problem that keeps them from accomplishing their goal
- Games
  - Conflict from other players, obstacles, other forces/dilemmas
- Conflict must escalate to provide drama
  - Escalating conflict creates tension
  - Tension gets worse before it gets better
  - The dramatic arc describes the amount of dramatic tension in a story



# Three-act Narrative Structure

- Standard for movie screenplays
  - All major movies follow it
    - (Pretty much)
  - Proven formula for the dramatic arc
- Accepted standard for games too
  - But less well understood
  - Open to debate whether it is the most suitable

# Act 1 – Set-up

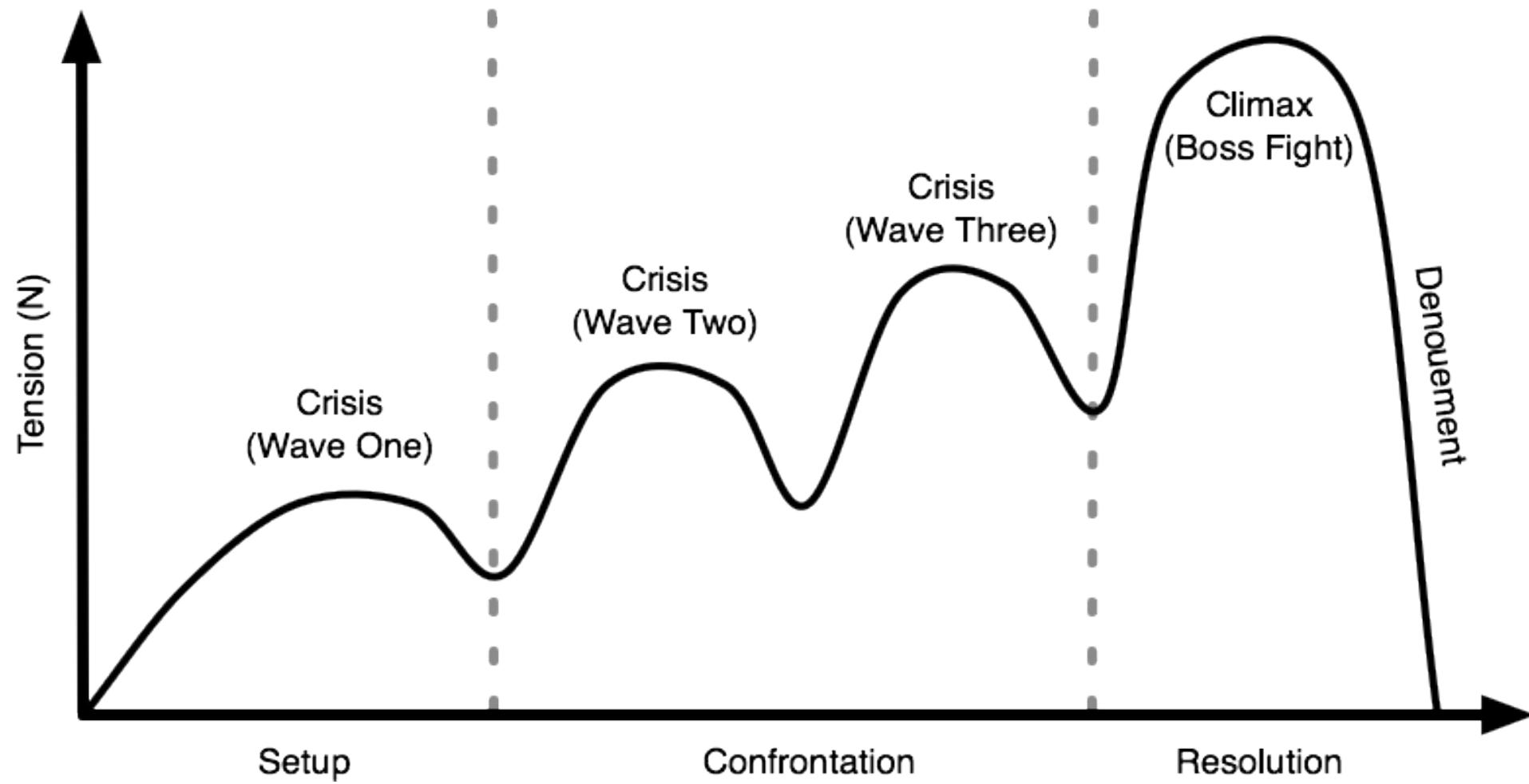
- Exposition
  - Introduce the protagonist
  - Introduce dramatic premise
  - Character relationships
- Inciting Incident
  - Sets the plot in motion
  - Half-way through the act
- Plot Point
  - Indicates the end of the act
  - “Reversal” – new direction to the narrative

# Act 2 – Confrontation

- Obstacles block the goal
- First Culmination
  - Just before the halfway point
  - Protagonist seems close
  - Then everything falls apart
- Midpoint
  - Protagonist at lowest point
- Plot Point
  - Indicates the end of the act
  - “Reversal” – new direction to the narrative

# Act 3 - Resolution

- Second Culmination
  - Tension at greatest point
  - Forces confront one another
  - Often called the “climax”
- Denouement
  - After the climax is completed
  - Return to equilibrium
- Typically much shorter
  - E.g. the boss battle



# Gameplay vs Narrative

- Narrative
  - Audience experiences story that progresses from one point to the next as determined by an author
  - Audience not an interactive participant, cannot change outcome of the story
- Gameplay
  - The very definition of a game
  - Player is an interactive participant
  - Can potentially change short or long-term outcome (non-linear)
- Game narrative elements
  - Characters
  - Storyline
  - Dialogue
    - Easy way to allow player choice
- How should these be combined?

# Characters

- Agency vs empathy
- Agency *through*
  - The character *is* the player
  - Can be utilitarian
    - Allows player choice
  - Can support role-playing, creativity
- Empathy *with*
  - The character in the narrative
  - Develop an emotional attachment
    - Difficult if there is complete player control
  - Requires some predefined personality

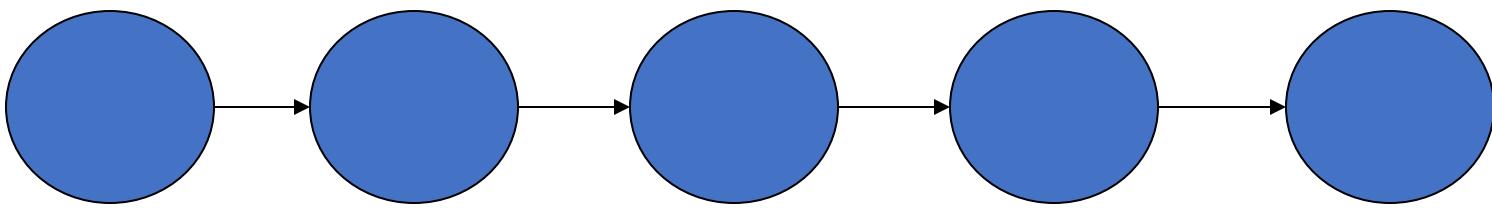


character

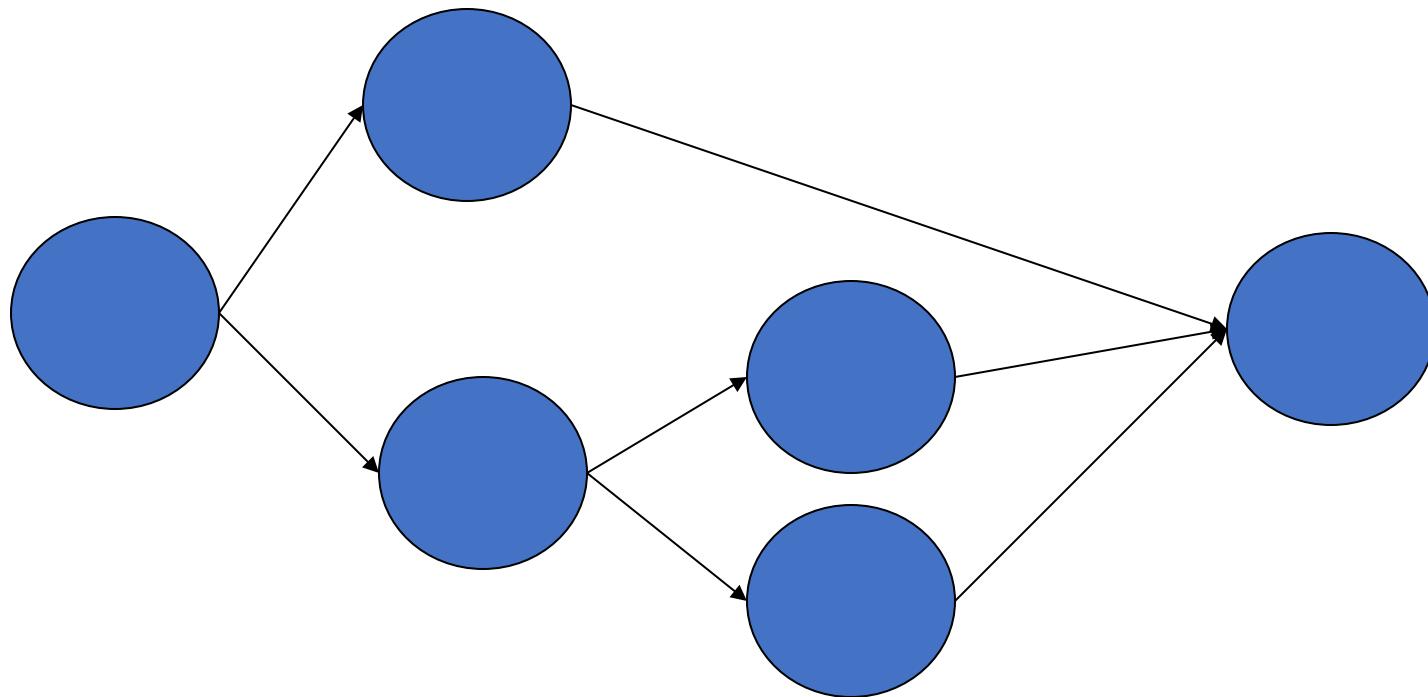


avatar

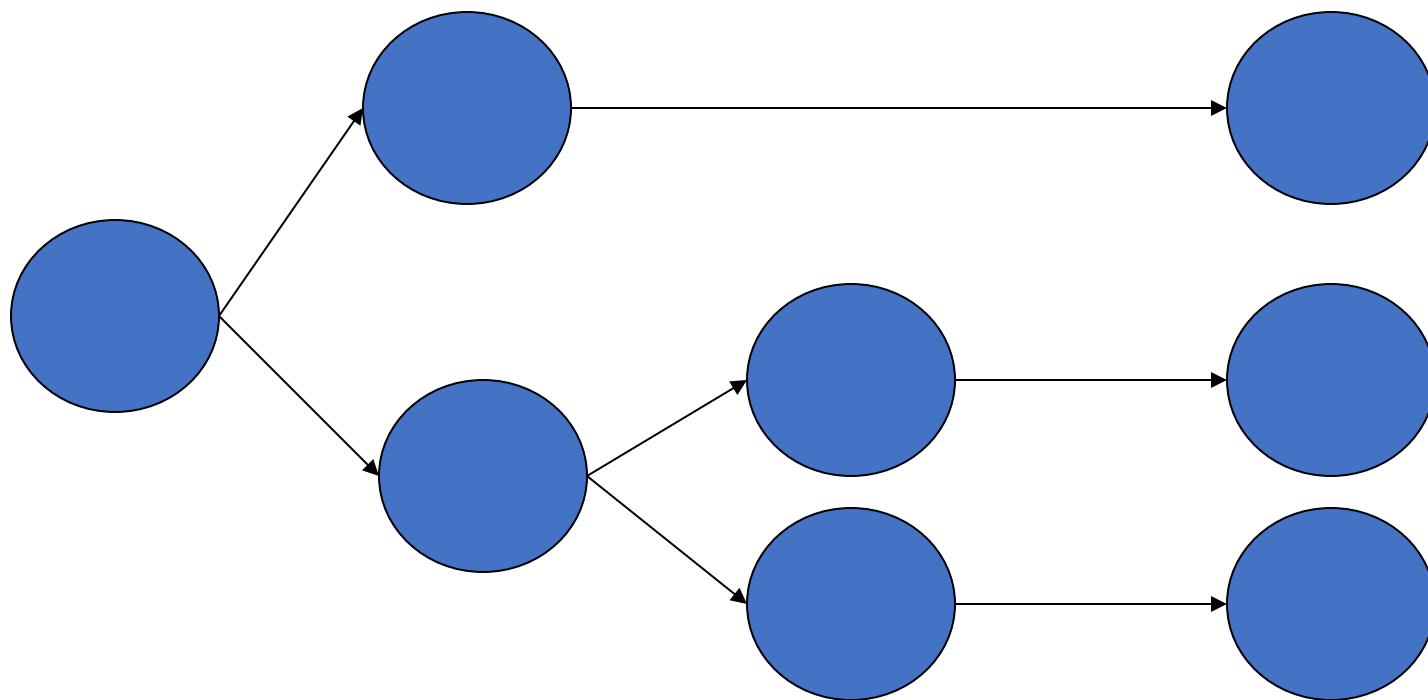
# Linear Storyline



# Branching Storyline



# Open Ended Storyline



# Open Ended Storyline

- Player actions have consequences
  - Nb. Within the *story*
    - Not success or failure within the *game*
  - Often a notion of good vs bad
  - Value judgements
  - Can provide direction in place of narrative
- Multiple storylines
  - “Good” and “bad”
  - Some players want to see all of the stories
  - Some feel that the choices are emotionally painful

# Deus Ex: Human Revolution (2011)



# BioShock (2007)



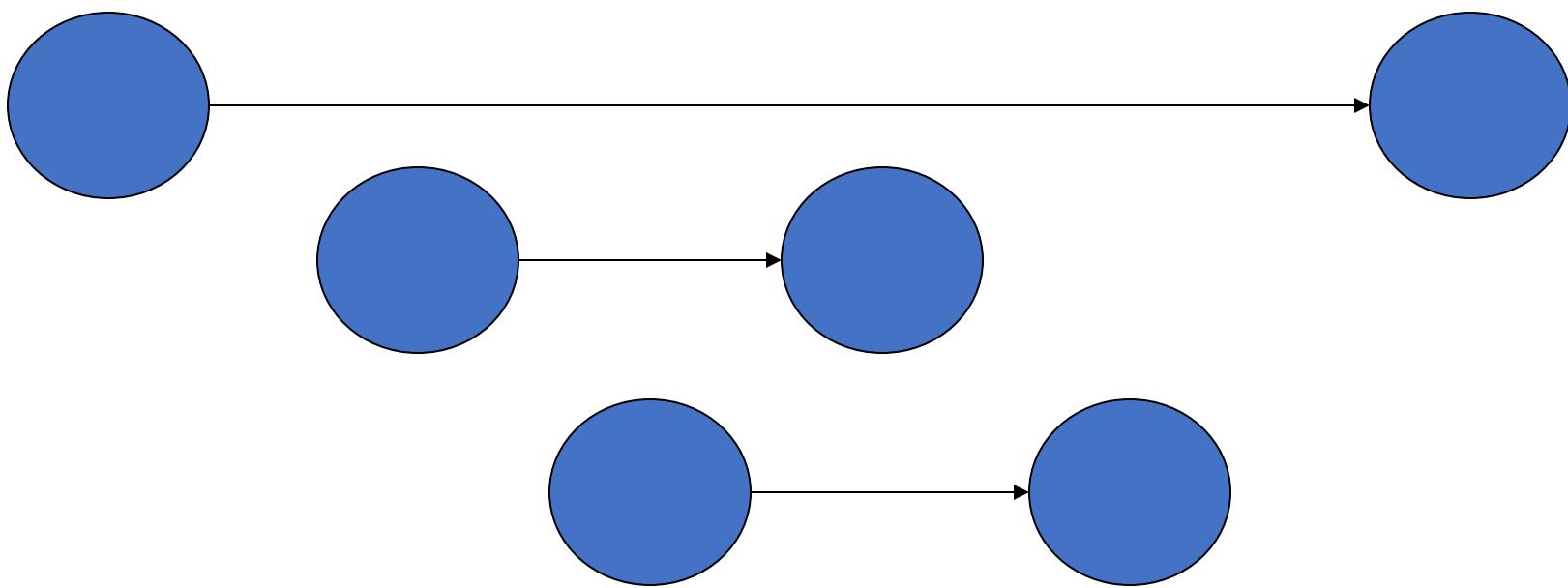
# Black and White 2 (2005)



# Branching story vs Meaningful Choice

- Players want meaningful choice
  - Gameplay actions have an effect on the storyline
  - Actions needed to achieve story outcomes
  - We necessarily must make some outcomes unattainable
- Players want to experience all of the story
  - Closing off plotlines requires a new game

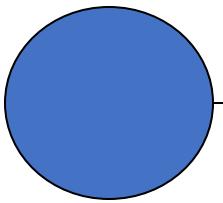
# Concurrent Storylines



# Grand Theft Auto – San Andreas

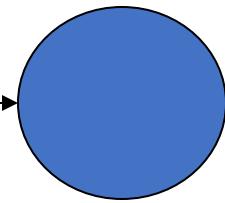


Cut Scene



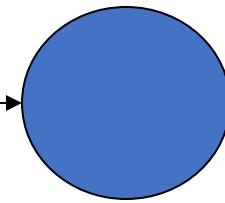
Driving

Cut Scene

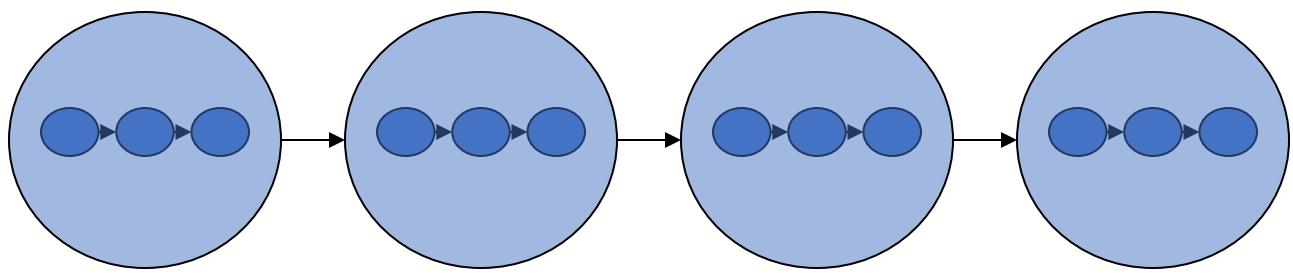


Shooting

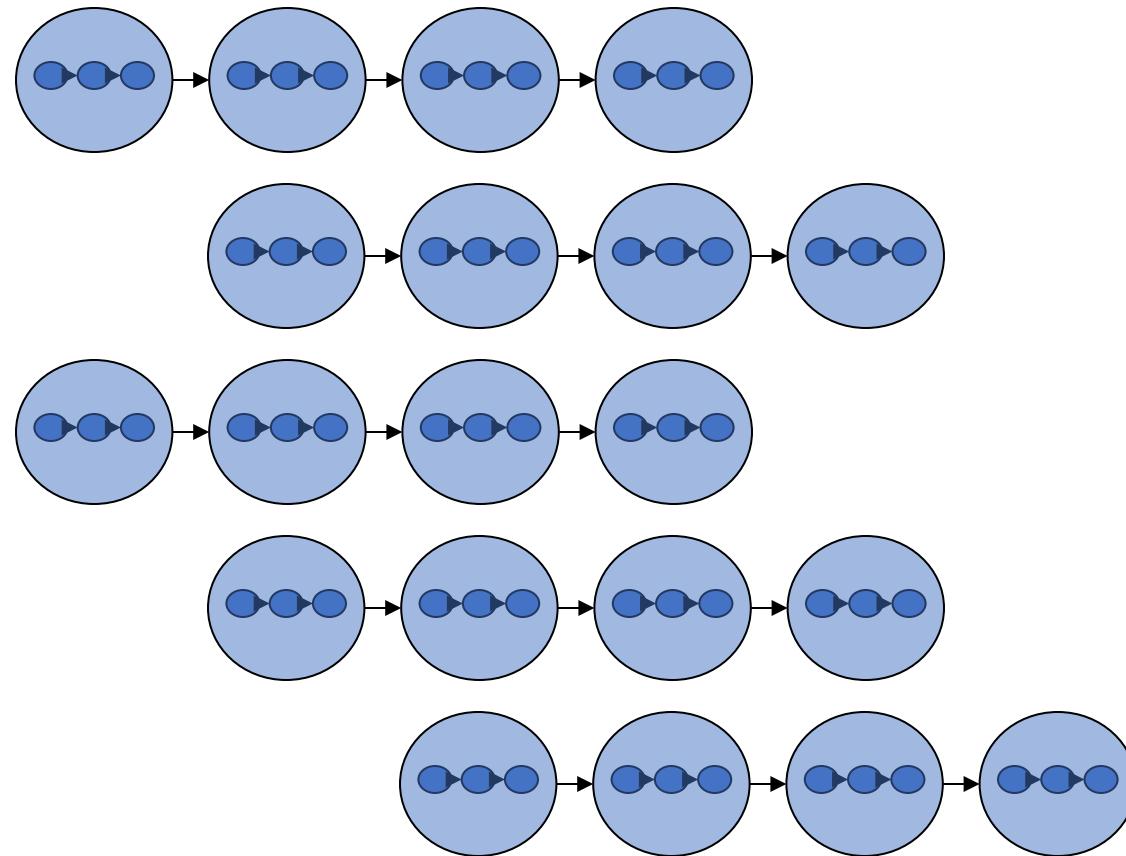
Cut Scene



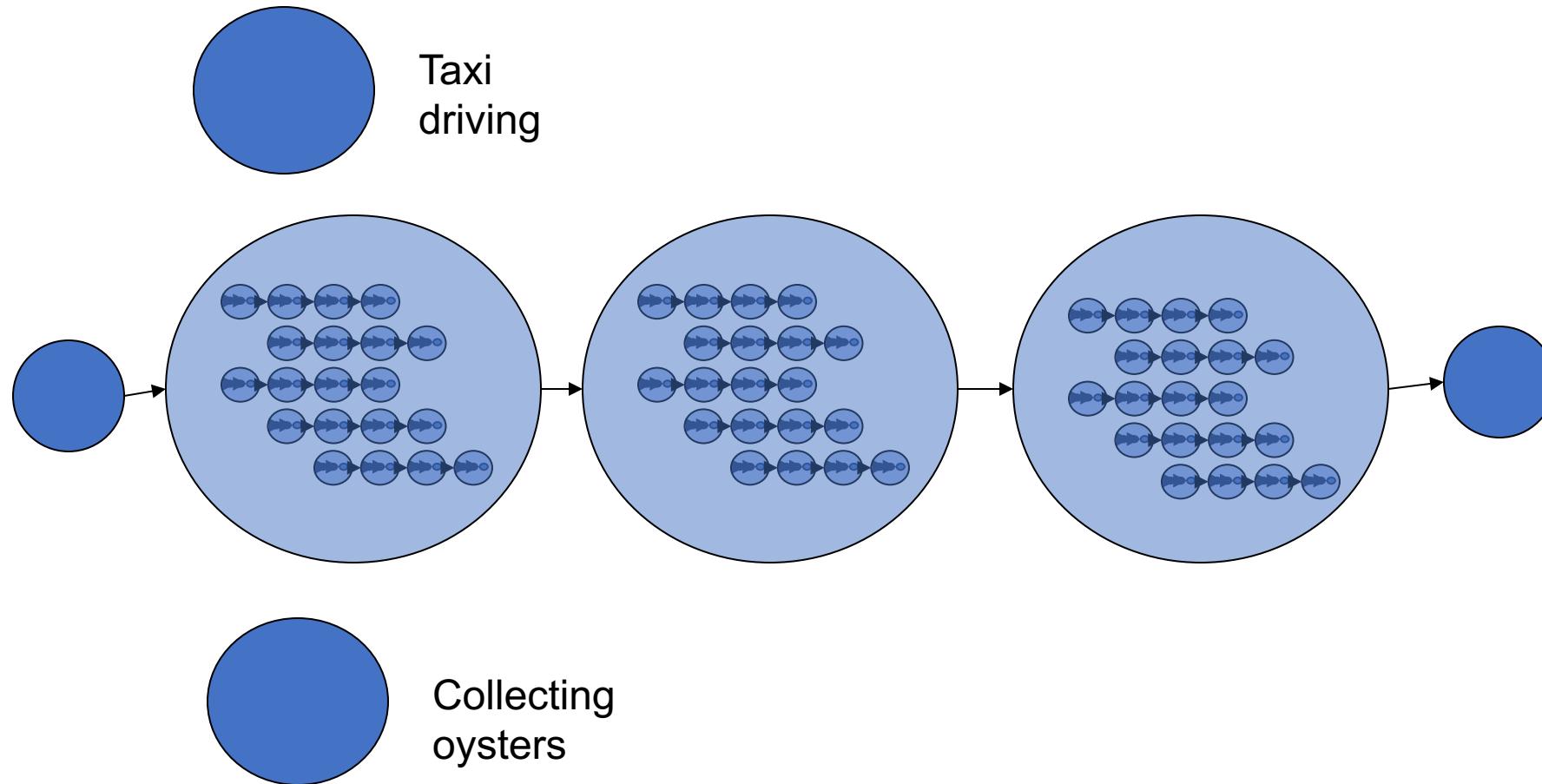
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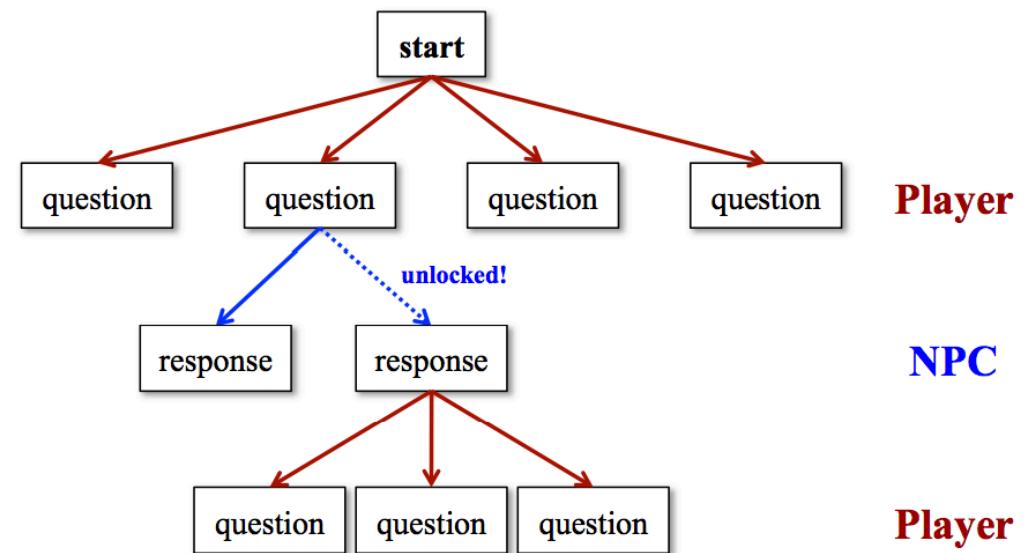


# Grand Theft Auto – San Andreas



# Dialogue

- Dialogue
  - Story vehicle
  - An easy way to enable player choice
    - If there is no choice, might as well have a cut-scene
  - Limitations quickly manifest
- Non-gameplay interactions reduce to dialogue
  - Conversation between two or more entities / characters
  - Animated responses are non-textual dialogue
  - Interactive cut-scenes are a response to the player



# Dialogue

- Reveal information
  - Story as investigation
  - Integrate with gameplay
    - Relate directly to resources acquisition or inventory
    - Preconditions such as quest completed, reputation points
    - Actions such as completing current question, open up new dialogue
- Reveal character
  - Reveal NPC personalities
  - Define player personality
    - Protagonist
  - Heighten sense of risk
- Break up the narrative
  - In-game humour
  - “NPC banter”

# Fallout: New Vegas (2010)



# Facade (2005)



# References

- Rules of Play chapter 26
- <http://www.interactivestory.net/>