

# Thematic Integration in Board Game Design

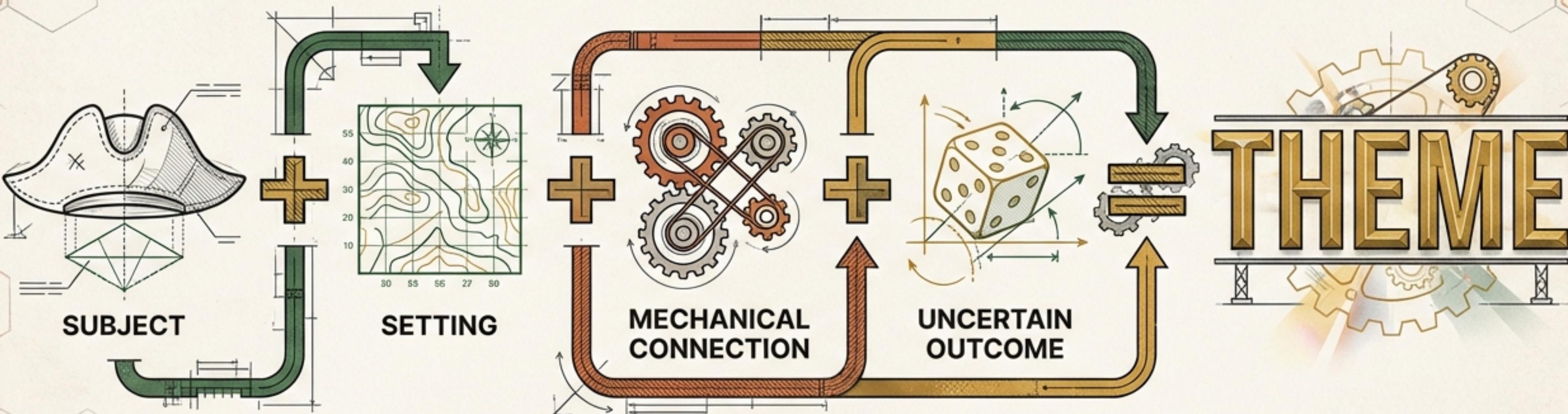
## Knitted Narrative into Mechanics



Based on the work of Sarah Shipp

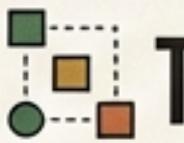
*“Theme is not just the art on the box—it is the structural promise made to the player.”*

# THEME IS A SYSTEM, NOT A COSTUME



 **THE STORY**

If the outcome is **scripted**.

 **THE ABSTRACT**

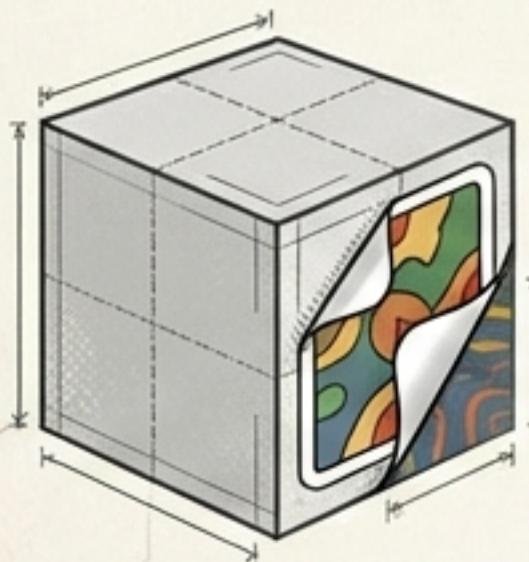
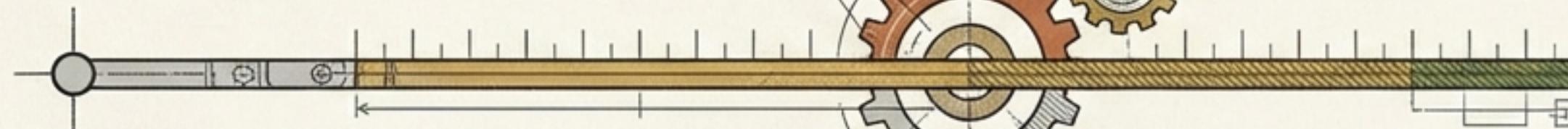
If **mechanics** don't connect to the subject.

 **THE GAME THEME**

Requires the **uncertainty** of play to drive the narrative.

# THE INTEGRATION SPECTRUM

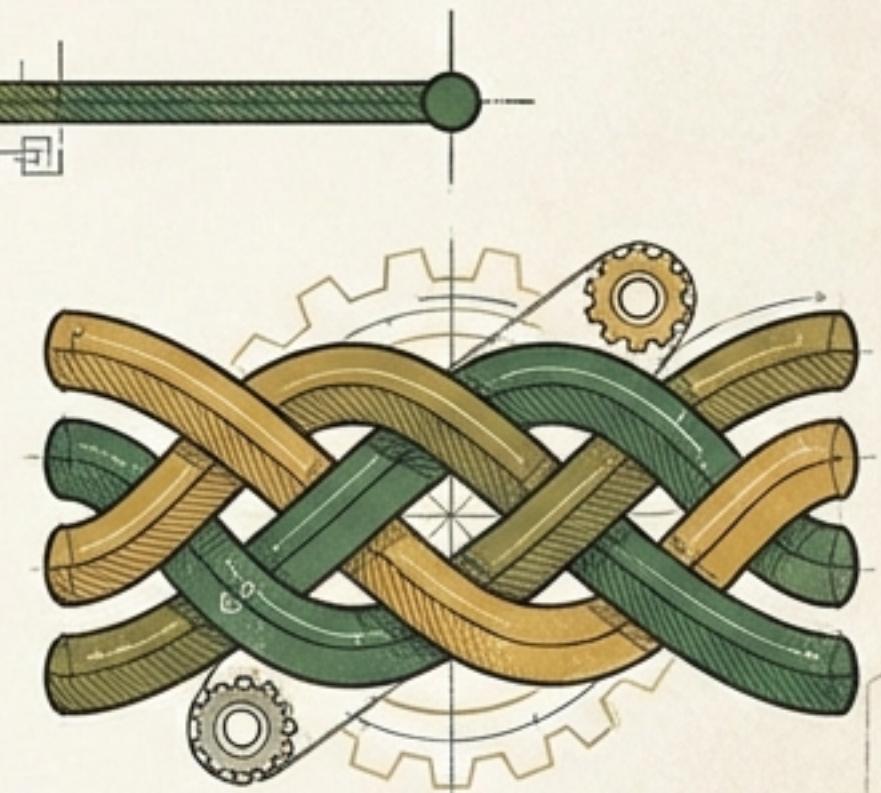
## LAYERED (Pasted-On)



Theme developed separately.  
Connection points feel  
inorganic.

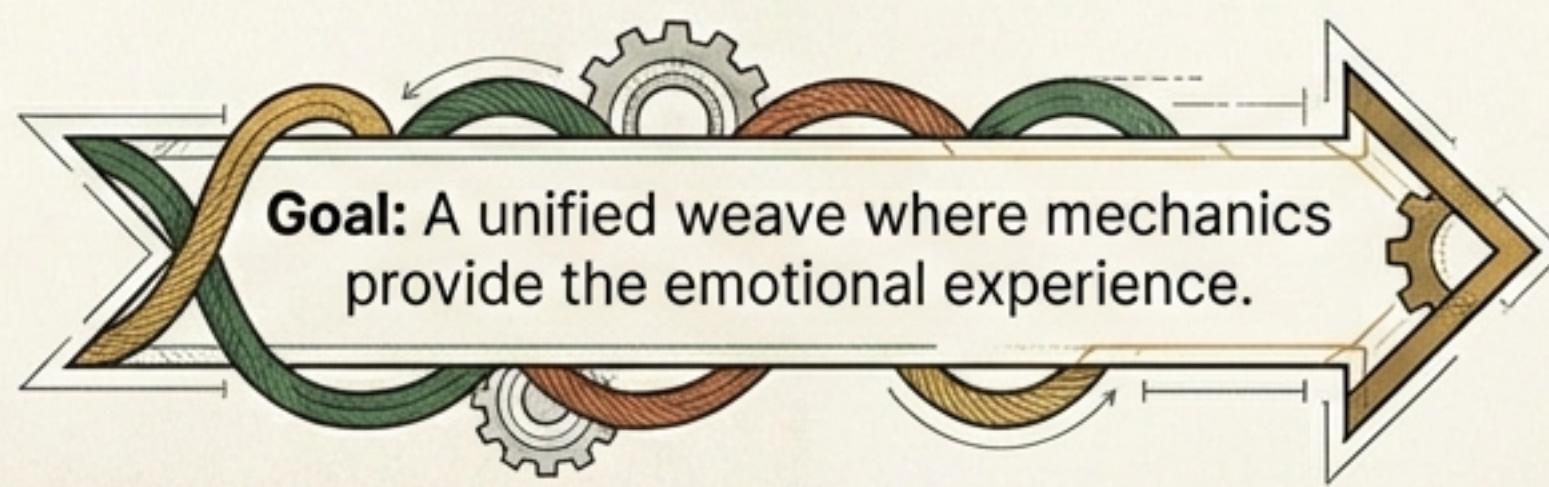
**Example:** *Love Letter*.

## KNITTED (Integrated)



Mechanics are motivated  
by the theme. Developed  
simultaneously.

**Example:** *Everdell*.



# THEME MUST EXIST IN THE BONES

## GAME ANATOMY

### LAYER 1: CORE GAMEPLAY

The raw mechanics, rhythm, and tension. Theme starts here.

### LAYER 2: BAKED-IN ELEMENTS

What players must touch and see: Board, Icons, Components.

### LAYER 3: OPT-IN ELEMENTS

Flavor text, lore, meta-play. Can be ignored.

**CRITICAL INSIGHT:** You cannot rely on Layer 3 to carry the weight of your theme.

# THE CENTRAL THEMATIC METAPHOR

Designing for the Intended Player Experience.

## CASE STUDY: PALEO

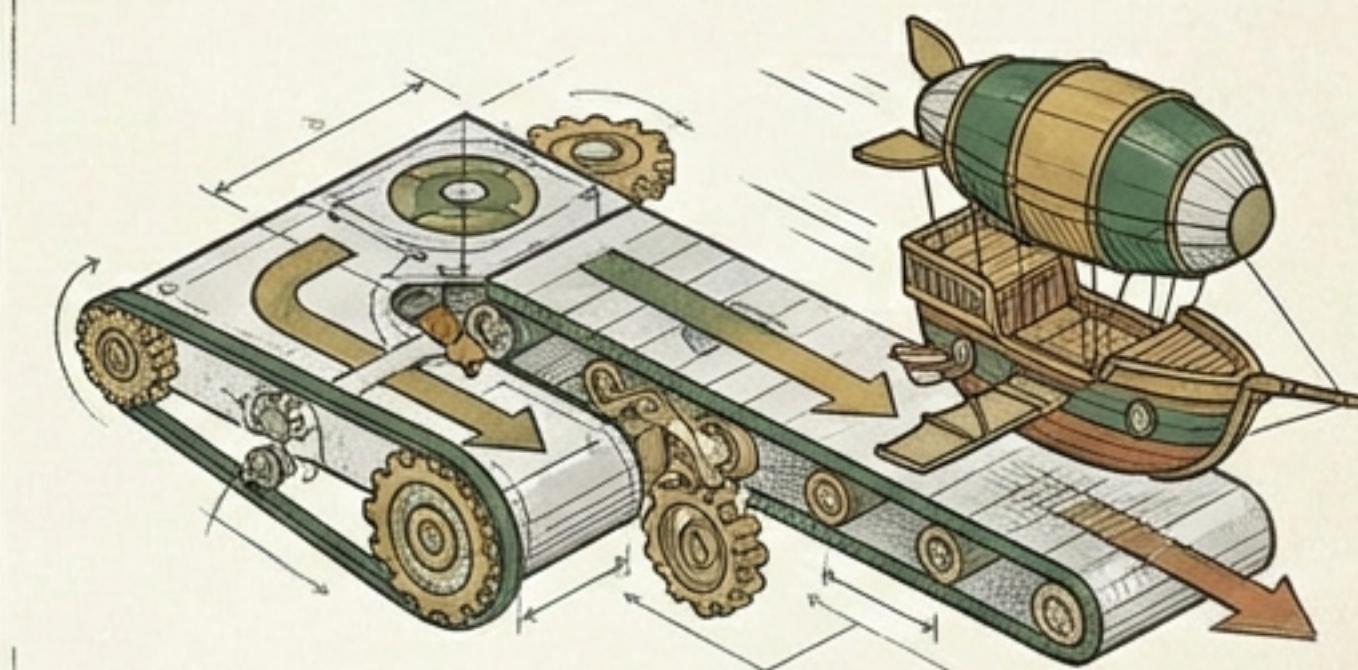
**Metaphor:** Struggle for Survival.



**Mechanism:** The card deck acts as a harsh environment that exhausts the players.

## CASE STUDY: SOLENIA

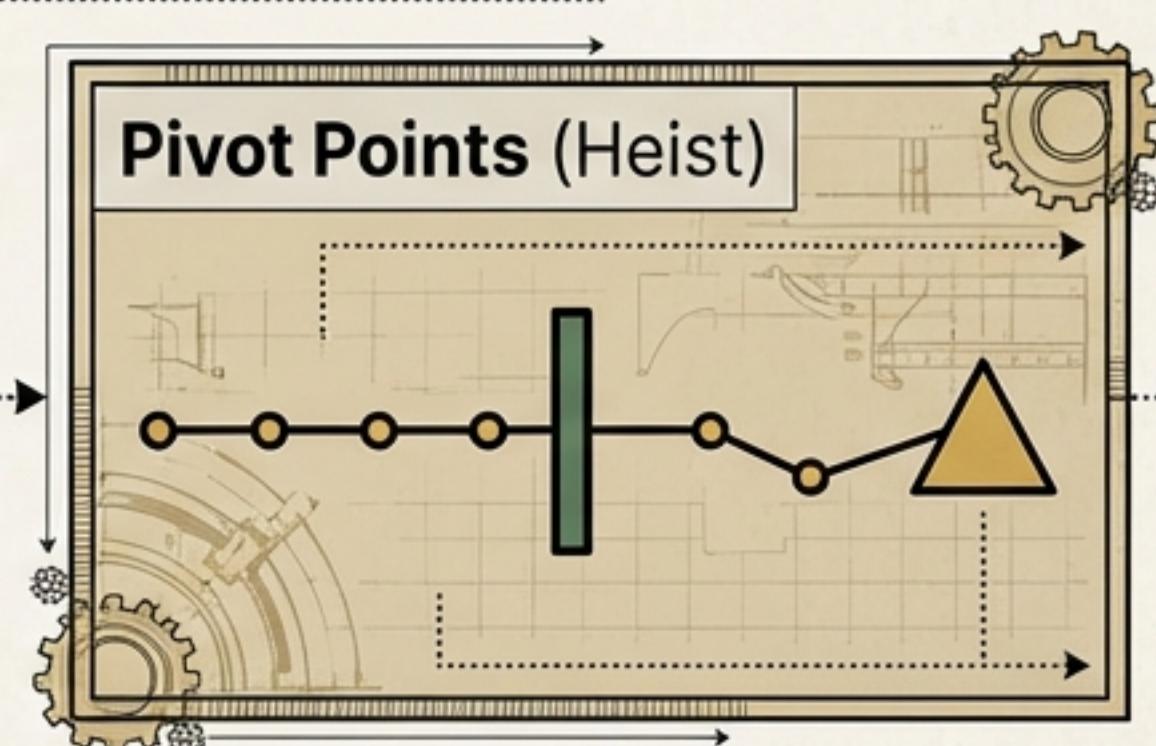
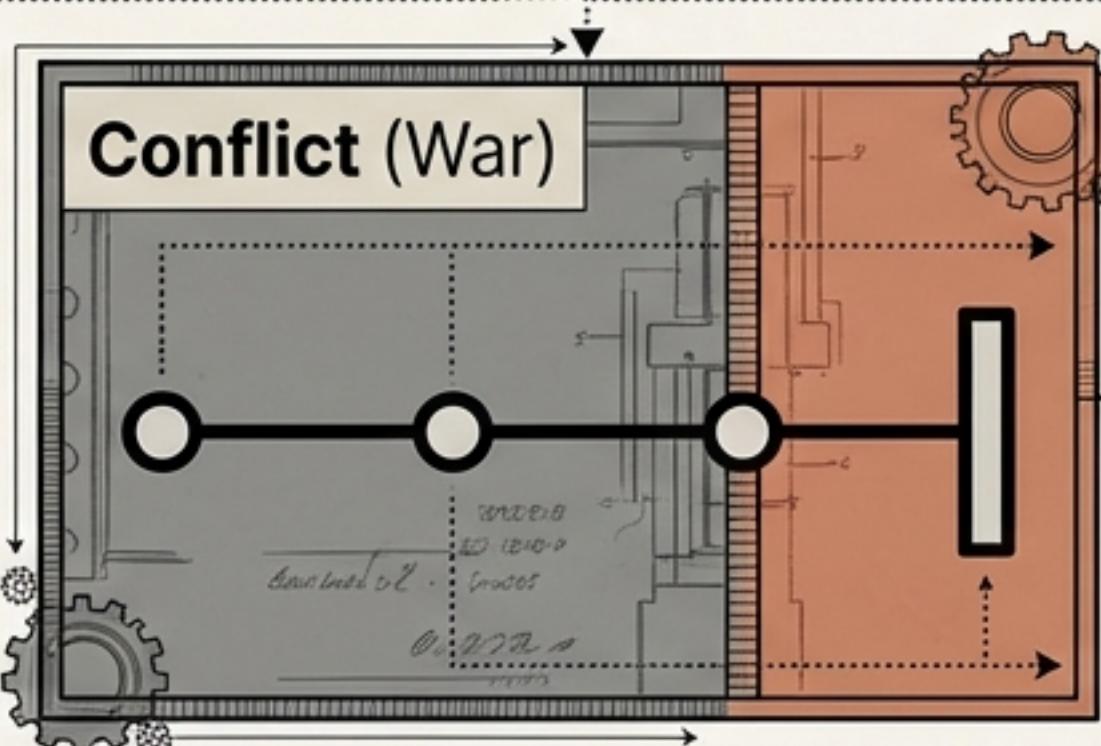
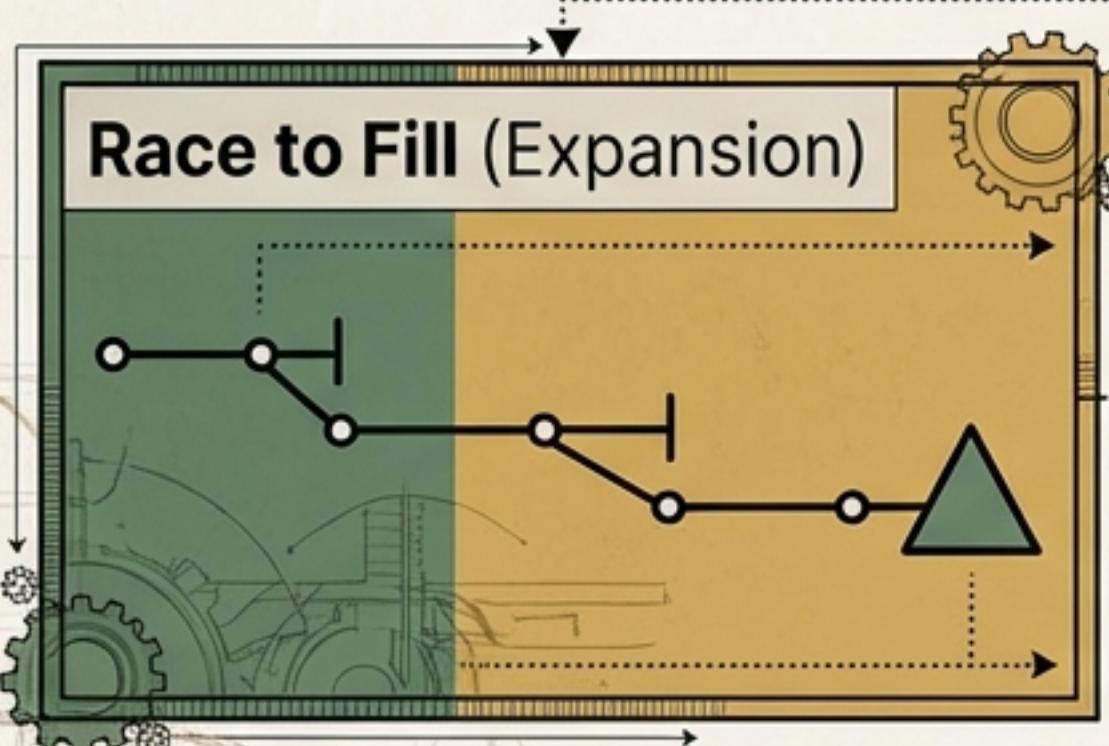
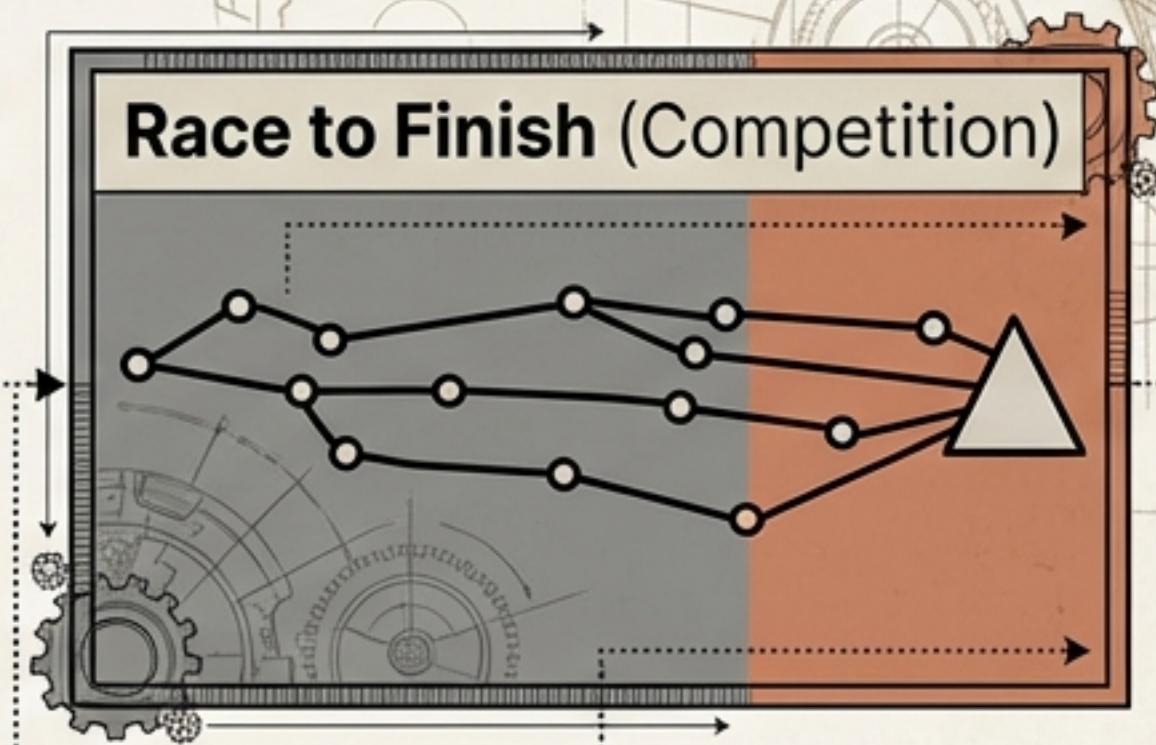
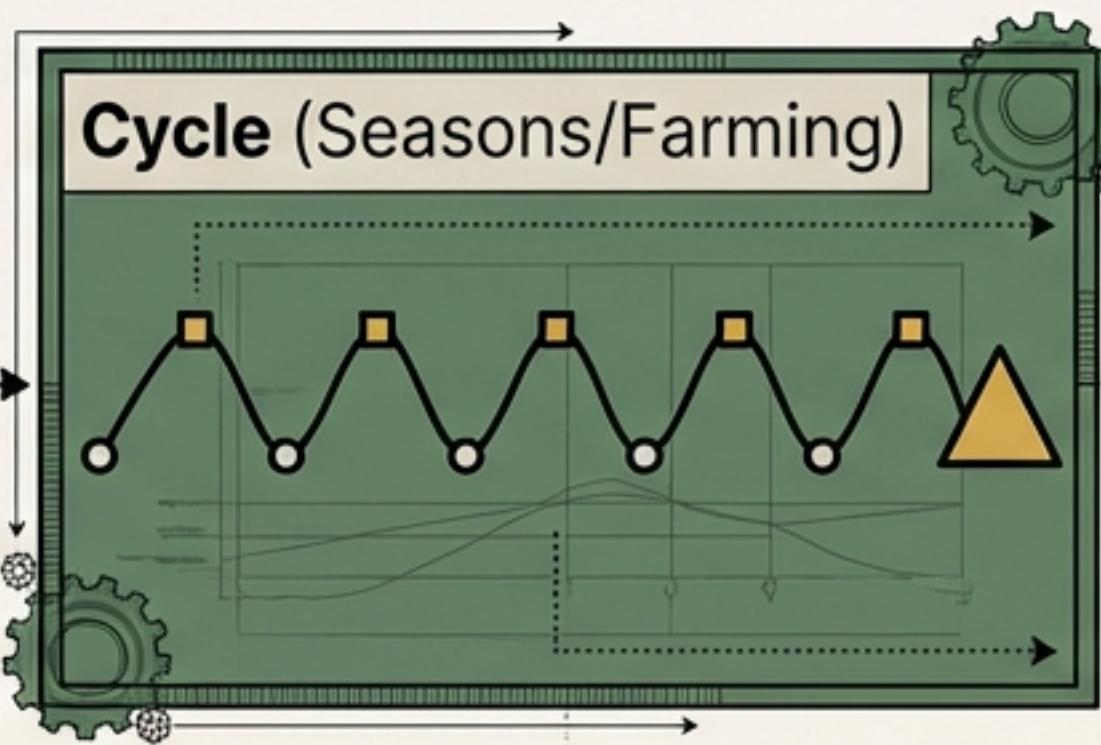
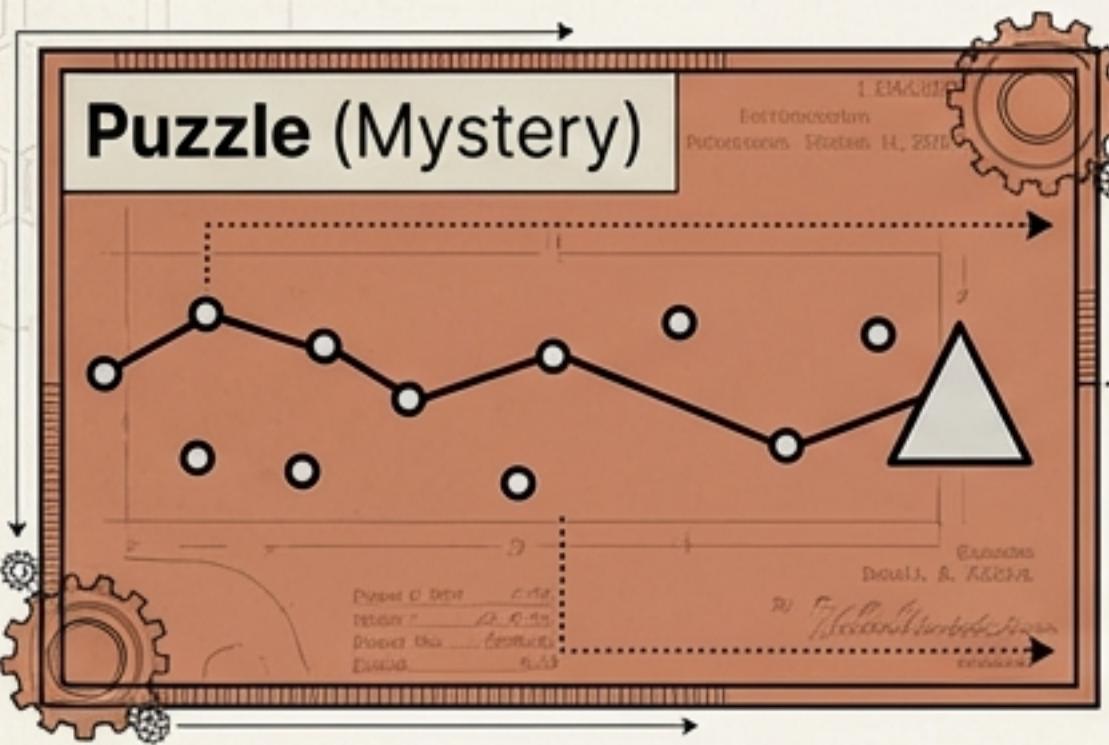
**Metaphor:** Traveling Wonder.



**Mechanism:** A sliding board creates the illusion of infinite distance.

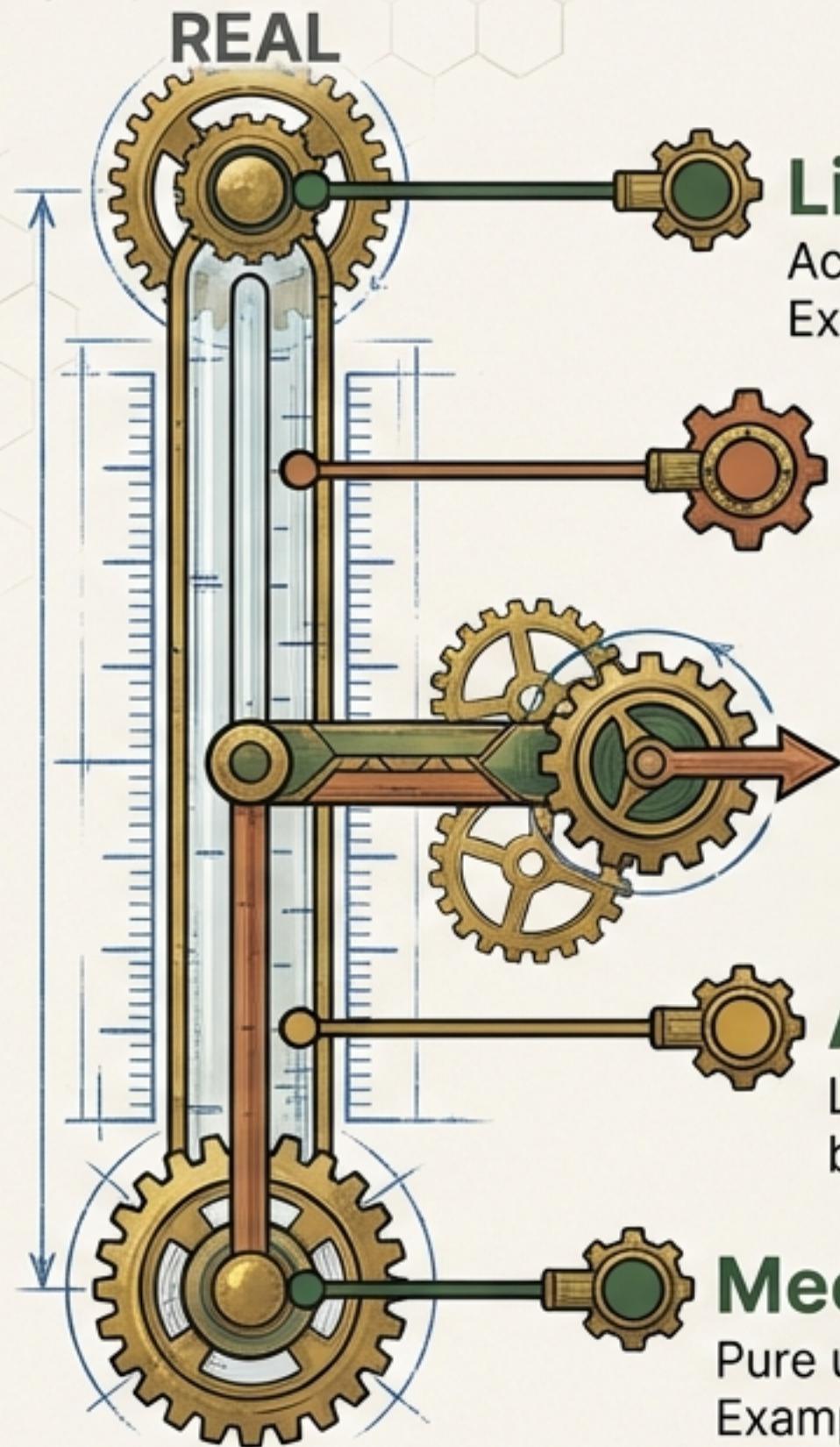
The metaphor acts as the 'North Star' for design decisions.

# THE SHAPE OF THE STORY.



# THE SPECTRUM OF THEMATIC ACTIONS

REAL



## Literal

Actual performance.  
Example: Drawing a sketch.

## Simulative

Physical mimicry.  
Example: Flicking a disc.

## Metaphoric

Evokes the feeling or idiom.  
Example: High roll = Hard kick.

## Associated

Labeled thematically,  
but abstract function.

## Mechanical

Pure utility.  
Example: Draw a card.

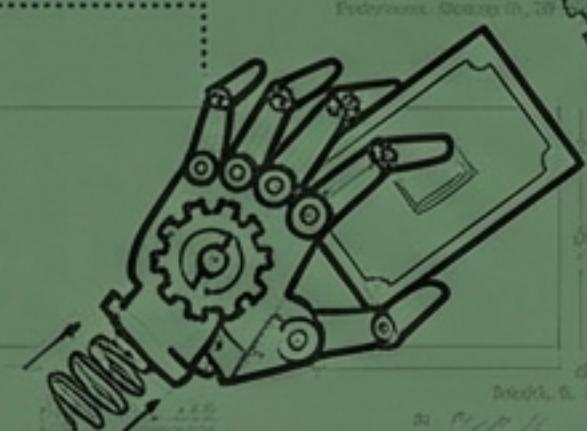


# ACTION CATEGORIES & GOALS

Every mechanic must answer a thematic “Why?”

## ACQUISITION

Why? Greed, growth, preparation.



## DEPLOYMENT

Why? Exploration, territory, combat.



## SOCIAL LEVERAGING

Why? Politics, deceit, manipulation.

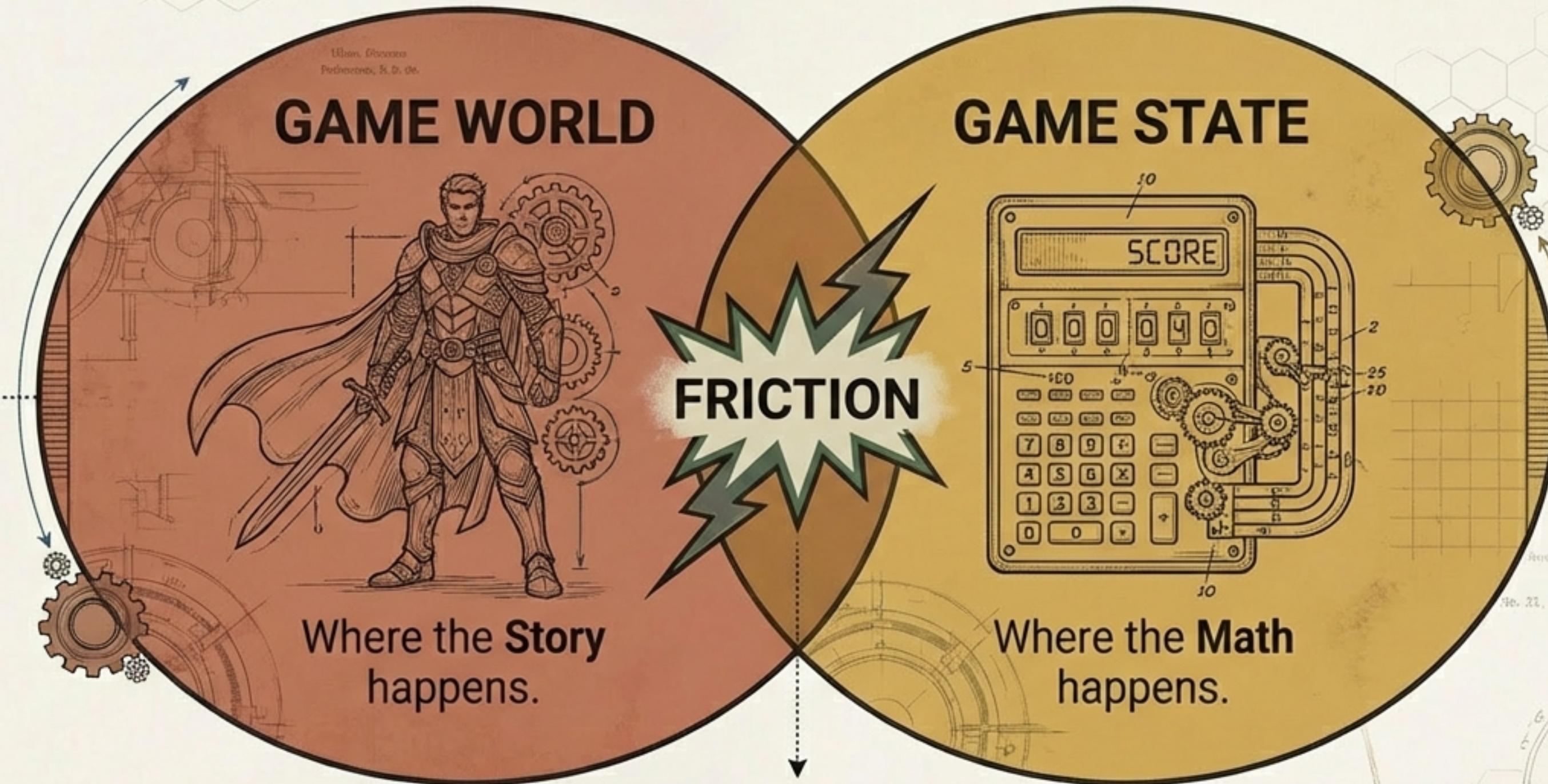


## VALUE ADJUSTMENT

Why? Trade, damage, market fluctuation.

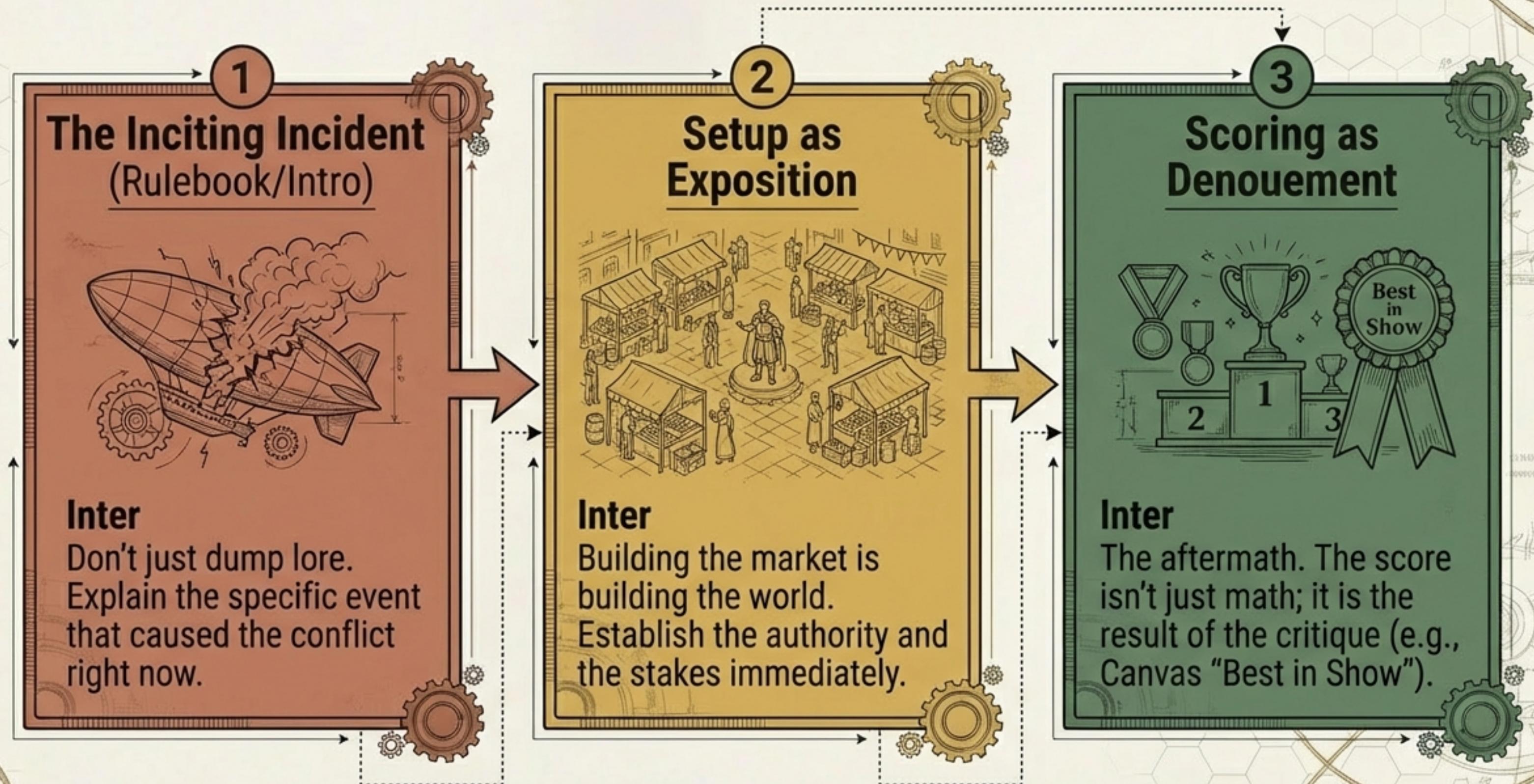


# GAME WORLD VS. GAME STATE



- ➡ **Thematic Upgrades:** Make stat boosts feel like motivated choices.
- ➡ **Pauses:** Treat upkeep as narrative transitions, not interruptions.

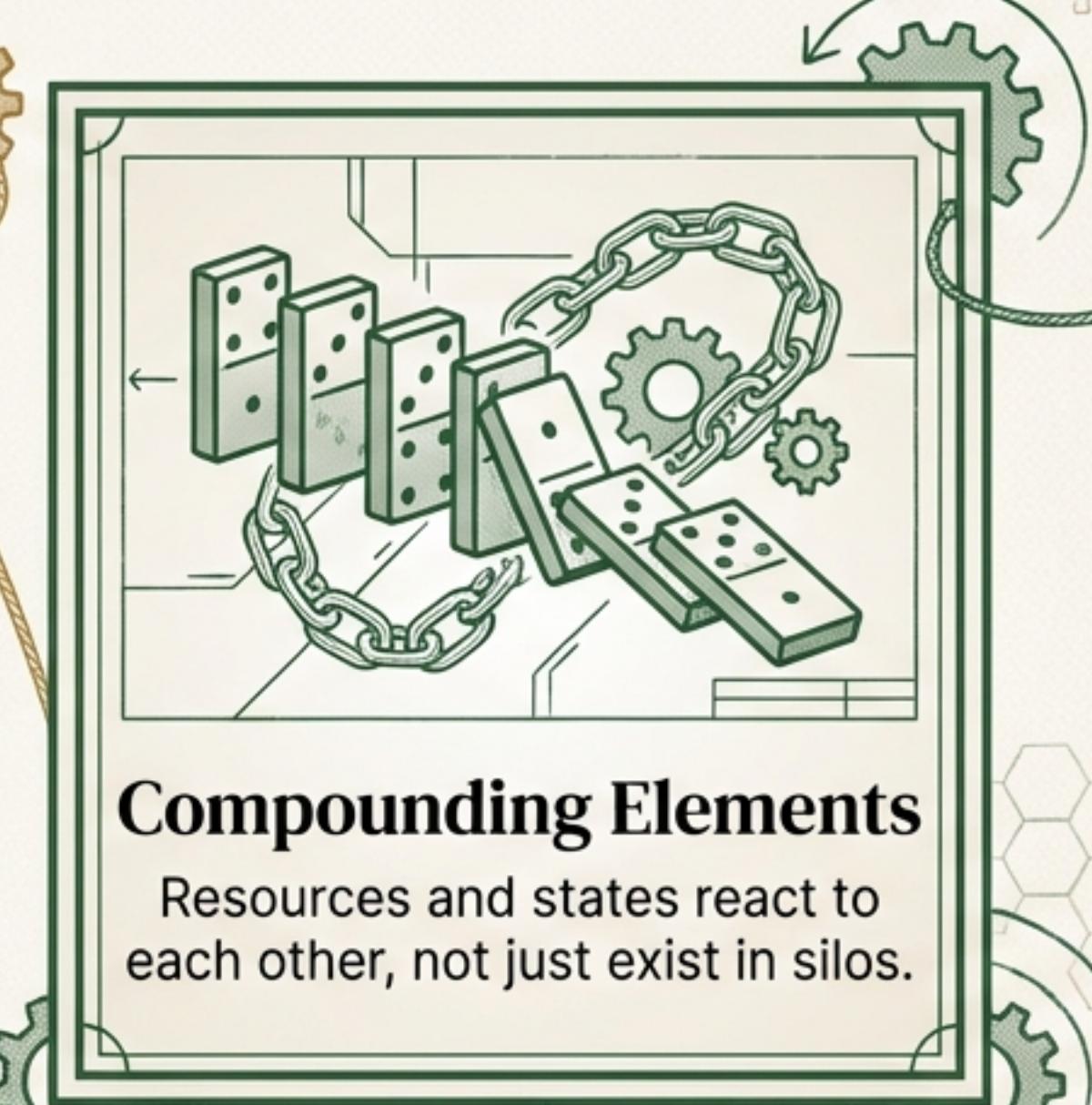
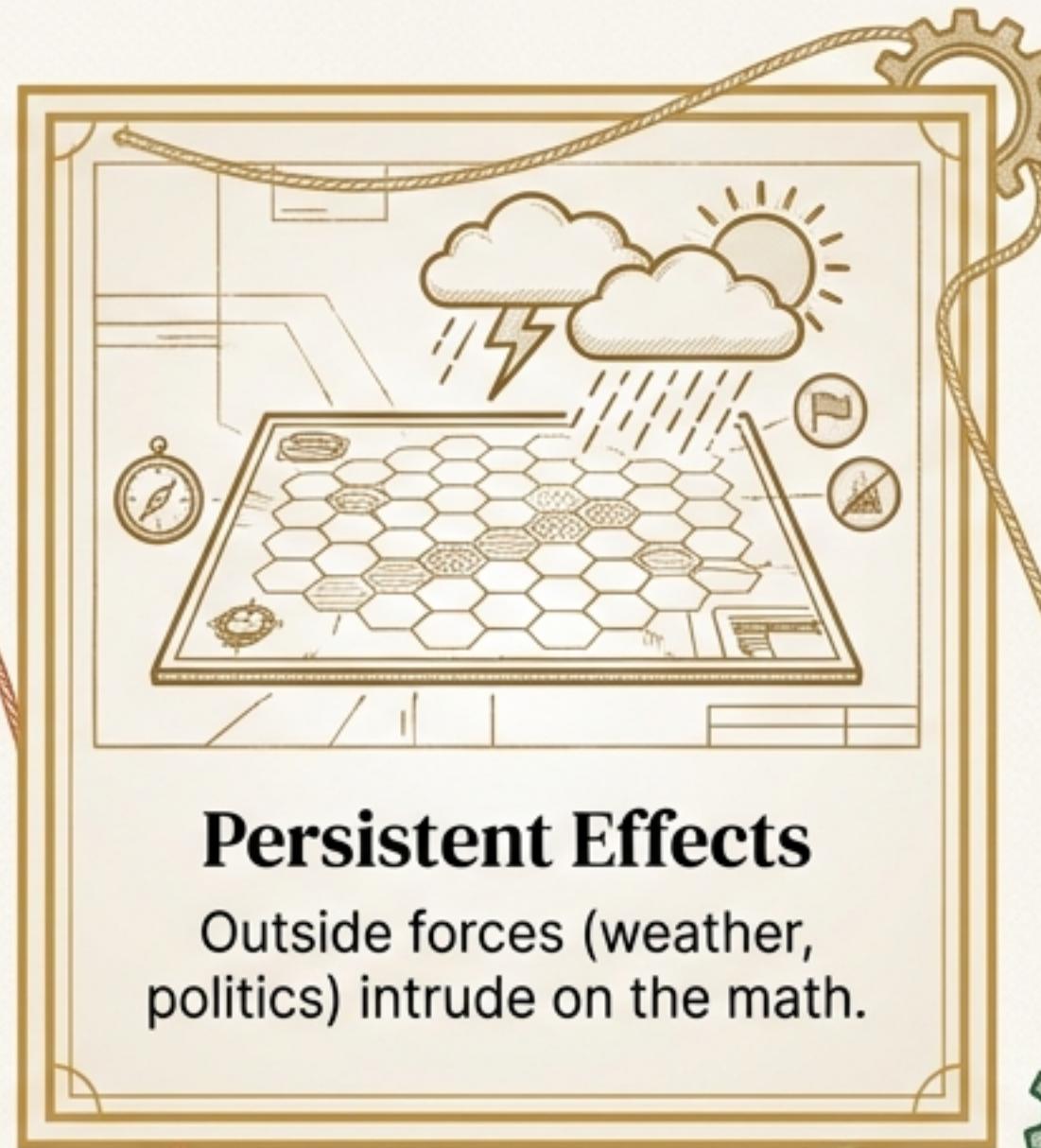
# NARRATIVE FRAMING



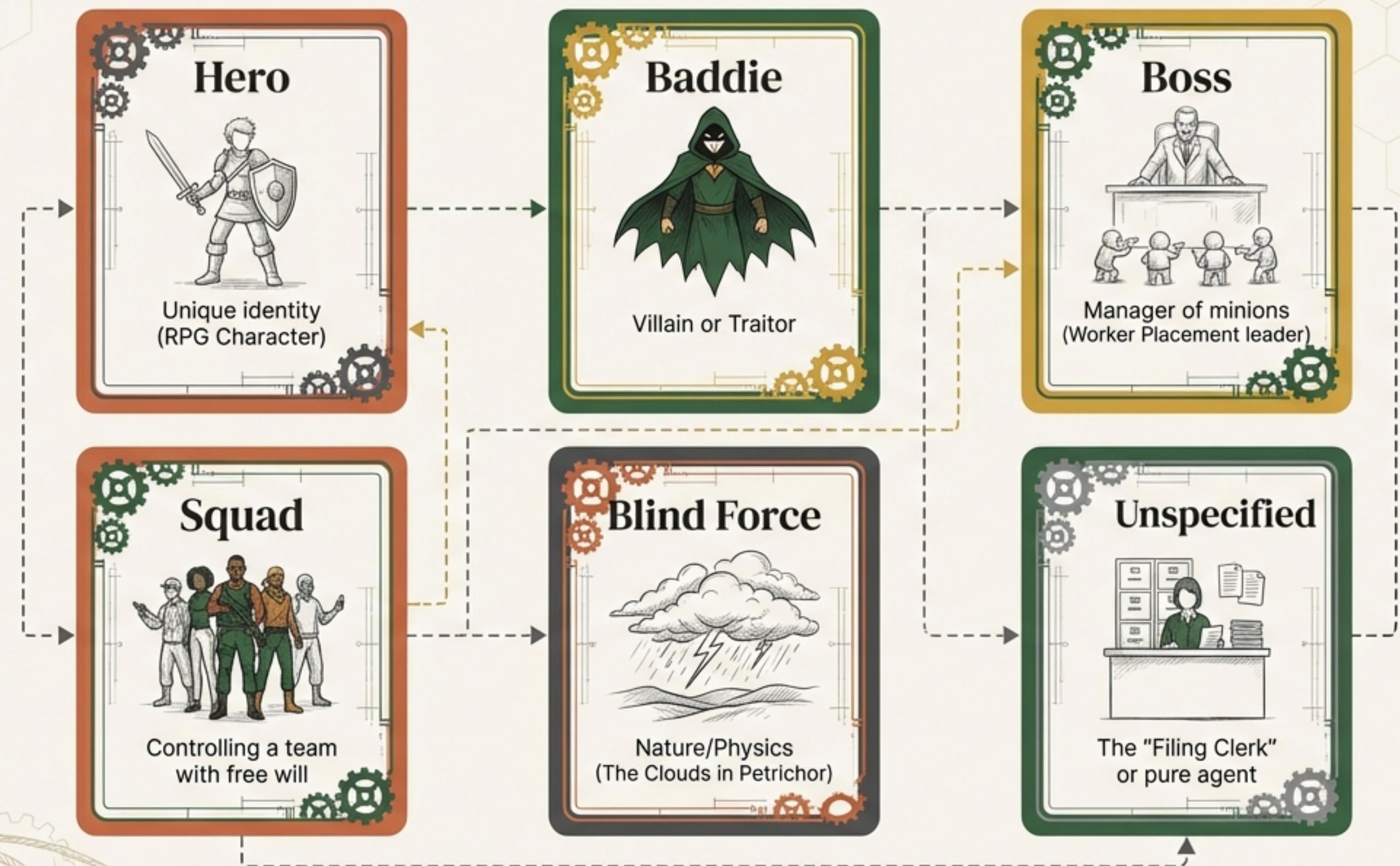
# Constructivist Editorial

## Building a Dynamic World

A static board is a puzzle. A dynamic board is a world.



# Avatar Archetypes



# The Ladder of Motivational Exchange

How deep is the player's connection?

## Surface Level: “Pure Agent”

Playing only for the math.



## Level 2: “Unseen Operator”

Puppet master; sacrificing units for the greater good.

## Level 3: “Self-Insert”

“You are the customer.”  
Acting as yourself within the game’s bounds.

## Deepest Level: “Embodiment”

Adopting the character’s personality and values. True roleplay.

# Strategies as Personality

Mechanics ARE character traits.

## The Turtle



**Strategy:** Defensive / Isolationist.  
**Trait:** Paranoia.

## The Rusher



**Strategy:** Speed / Efficiency.  
**Trait:** Greed / Impatience.

## The Politician



**Strategy:** Social Leveraging / Negotiation.  
**Trait:** Charisma / Manipulation.



**Design Tip:** Think Sideways. Apply a non-trope agenda to a mechanic to create unique characters.

# The Weaver's Checklist

- 
- Action:** Does the gameplay match the narrative promise?
  - Goals:** Do the win conditions align with character desires?
  - Roles:** Does the avatar fit the world logic?
  - Conflict:** Are politics and friction expressed through mechanics?

**Knit the thread.  
Don't just layer the fabric.**

Source: Thematic Integration in Board Game Design by Sarah Shipp.