

# STORYTELLING IN GAMES



# LEVELS



## Why Stories Matter

For business and pleasure.



## Story Structure and Theme

What happens next?

## Storytelling in Games

The good, the bad, and the explodey.



## Creating Character

What's my motivation?

## Writers and Narrative Designers

What do these crazy word wranglers do?



## Delivering the Story

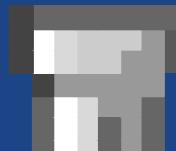
From your brain into the player's





01

# WHY STORIES MATTER

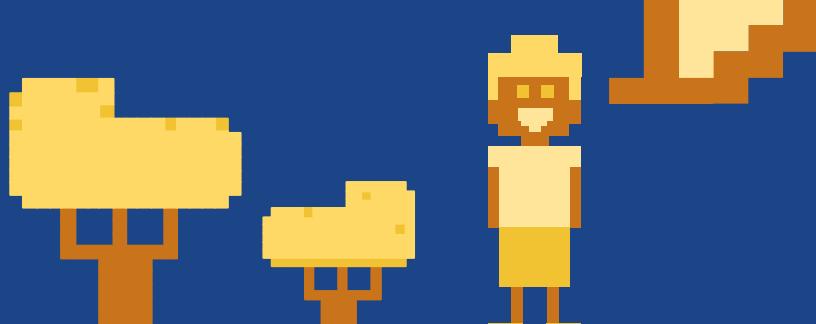




# Guess the Game



After his unit is killed during an investigation on the martian moon, Phobos, a marine is forced to fight his way through hordes of the demonic undead to find his way back to Earth.

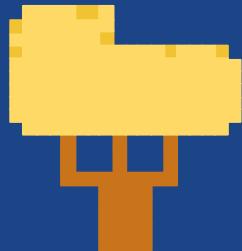




# Guess the Game



After an invading force lands on his island, a young warrior must find allies and learn new techniques to rescue his lord and free his people.

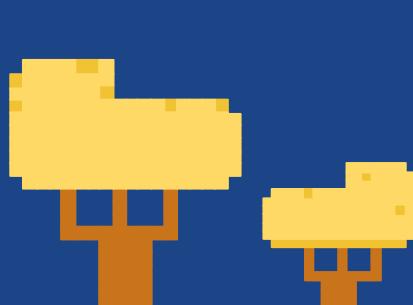




# Guess the Game



A young farmer inherits a farm in the country and forges a new life, learning ways to improve the farm and build connections within the community.

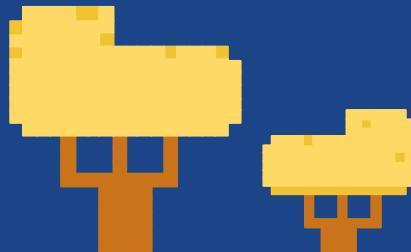




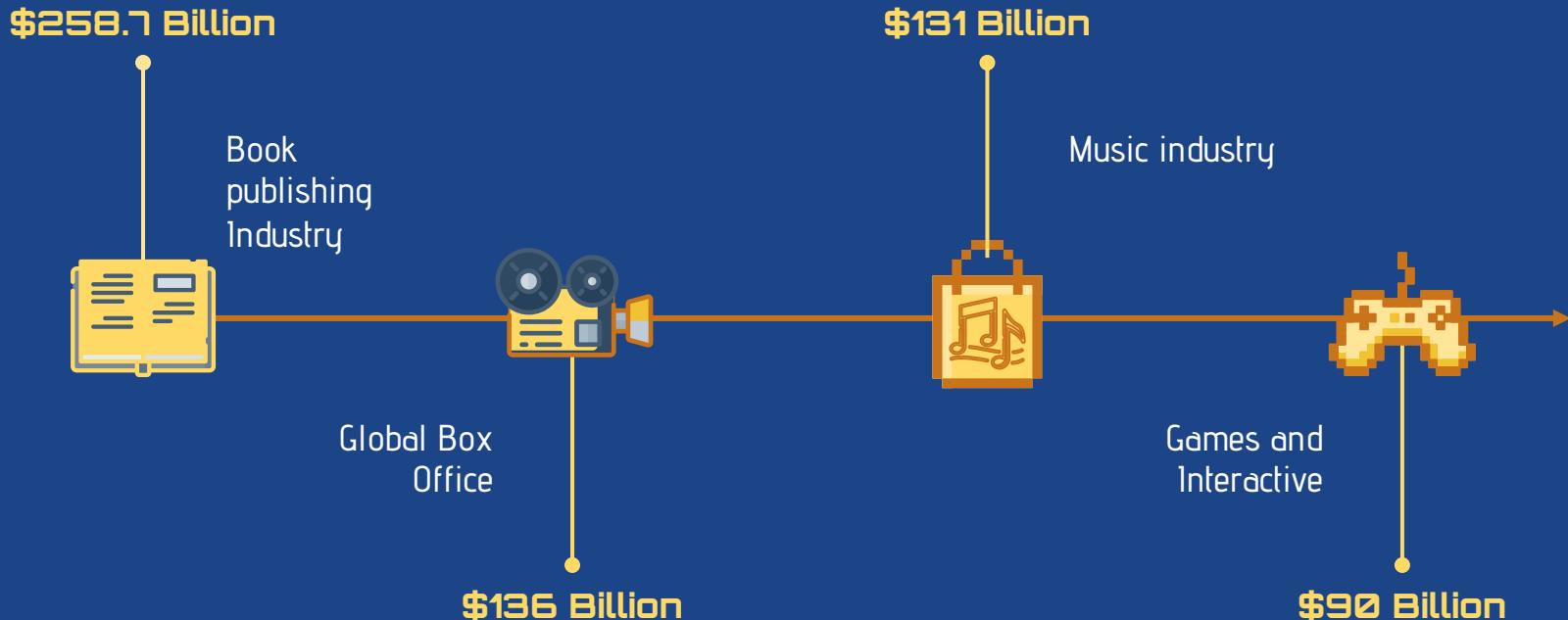
# Guess the Game



An eternal battle between a guy who just wants to eat crumbs and fruit and the four ghostly beings who seek to end him.



# STORIES ARE BIG MONEY





# WHY WE LIKE STORIES



Sharing knowledge

Exploring concepts

Escapism

Fun



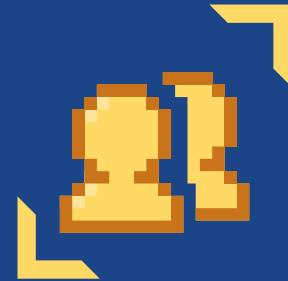


# STANDING OUT



## GET PEOPLE INTERESTED

Pairing an interesting gameplay mechanic with an equally interesting story hook creates buzz

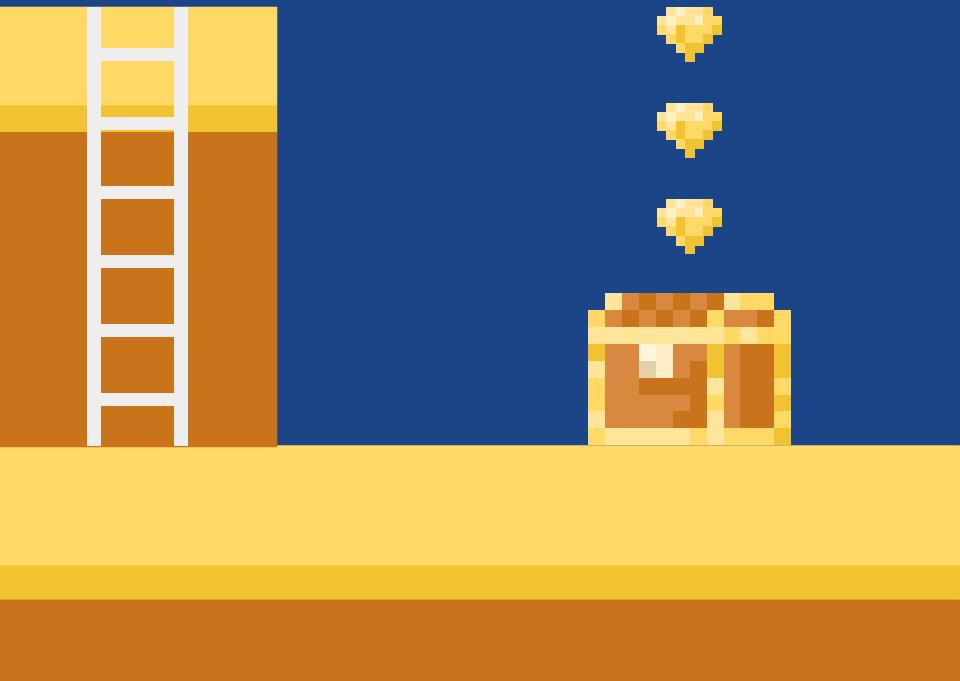


## CONVINCE THEM TO SHARE

People like to share the things they enjoy. They want their friends to have fun too. Emotionally engage your players through storytelling.



# BUILDING A FRANCHISE



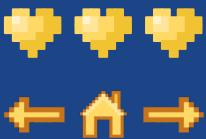
## SEQUELS

Benefit from a pre-existing fanbase.



## SPINOFFS

Branching out into other media can give your studio multiple revenue streams.



## 02

# Storytelling in Games

Does my game need any storytelling?





# IT'S NOT THAT DEEP

What if your game is a simple  
solitaire card game?

Or just a linear roquelike where all  
you do is shoot zombies while riding  
an undead dinosaur?



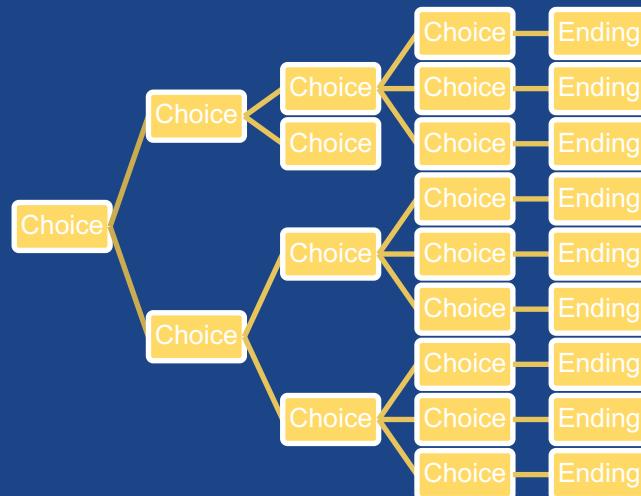
Wait... but Minecraft never had any story.

# KINDS OF GAME STORIES

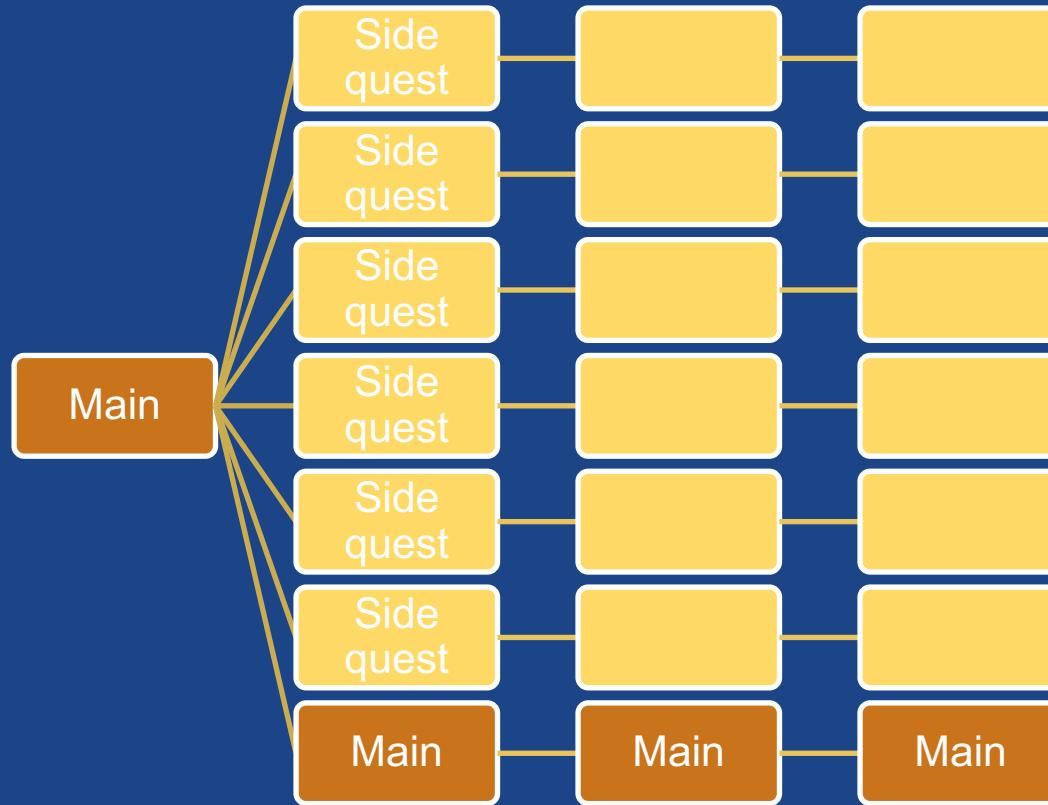
LINEAR



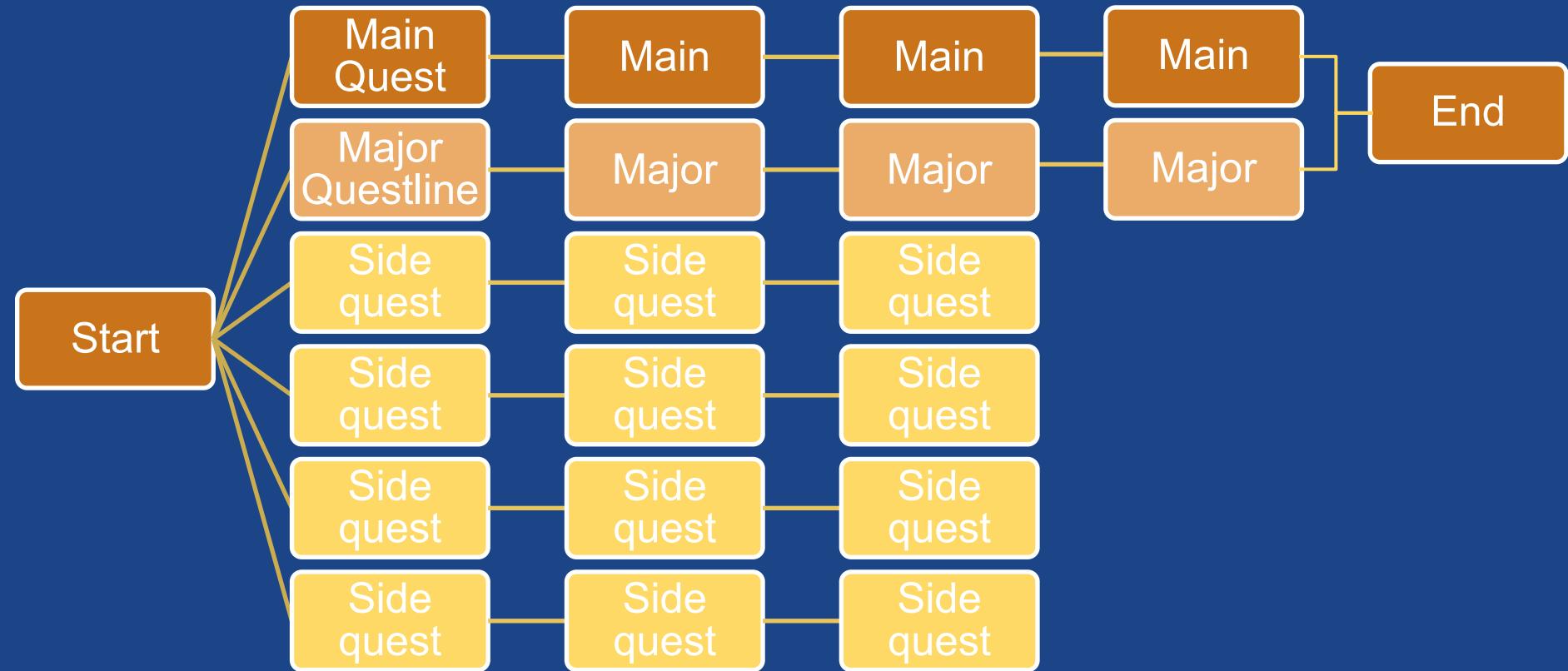
Non-LINEAR



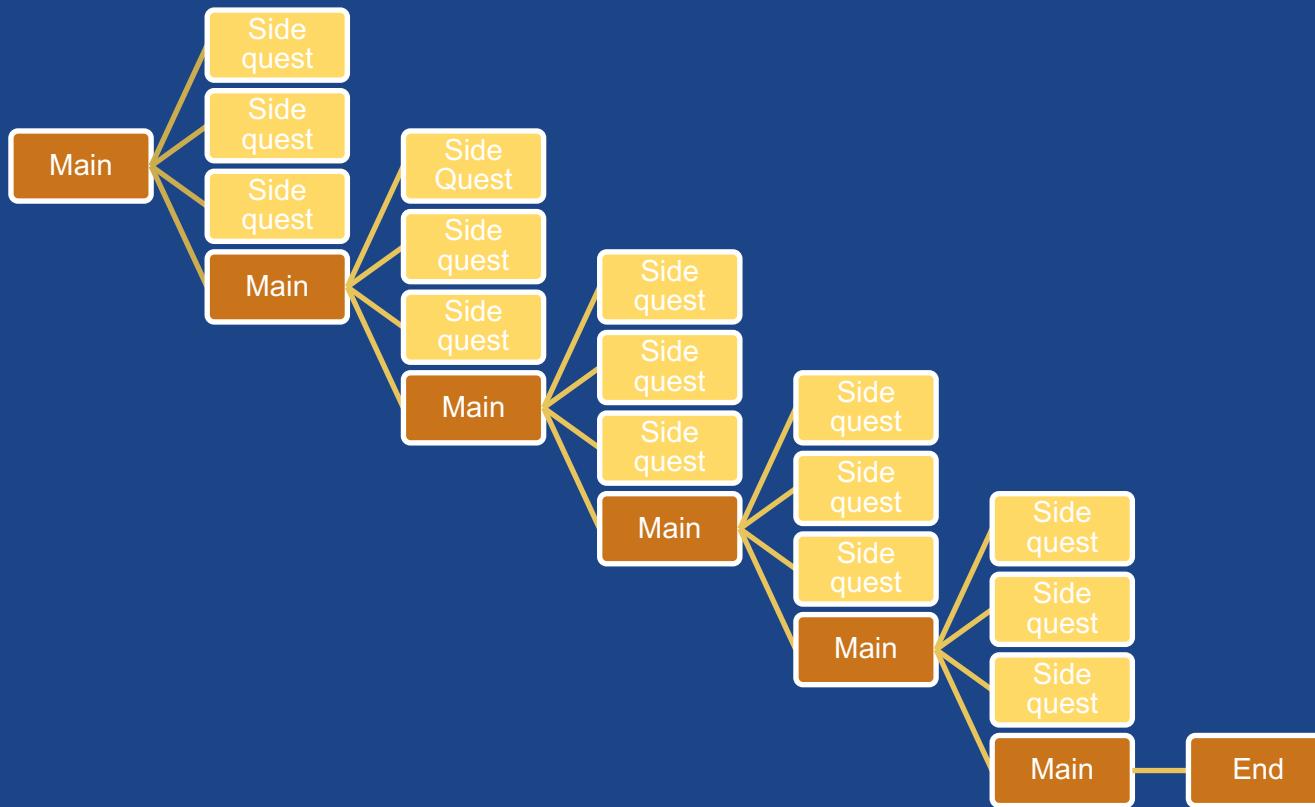
# ◀ LINEAR WITH SIDE QUESTS ▶



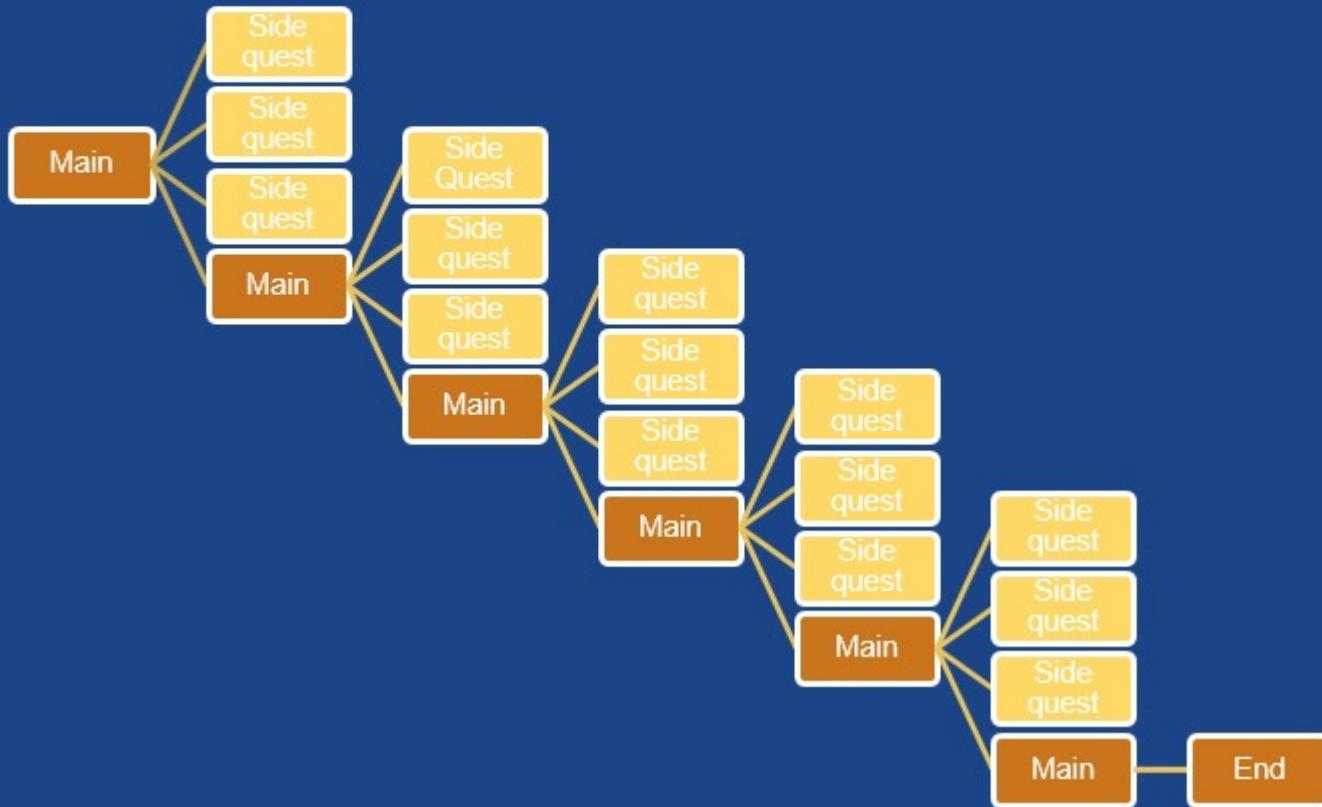
# LINEAR STORY WITH SIGNIFICANT ‘B-STORY’



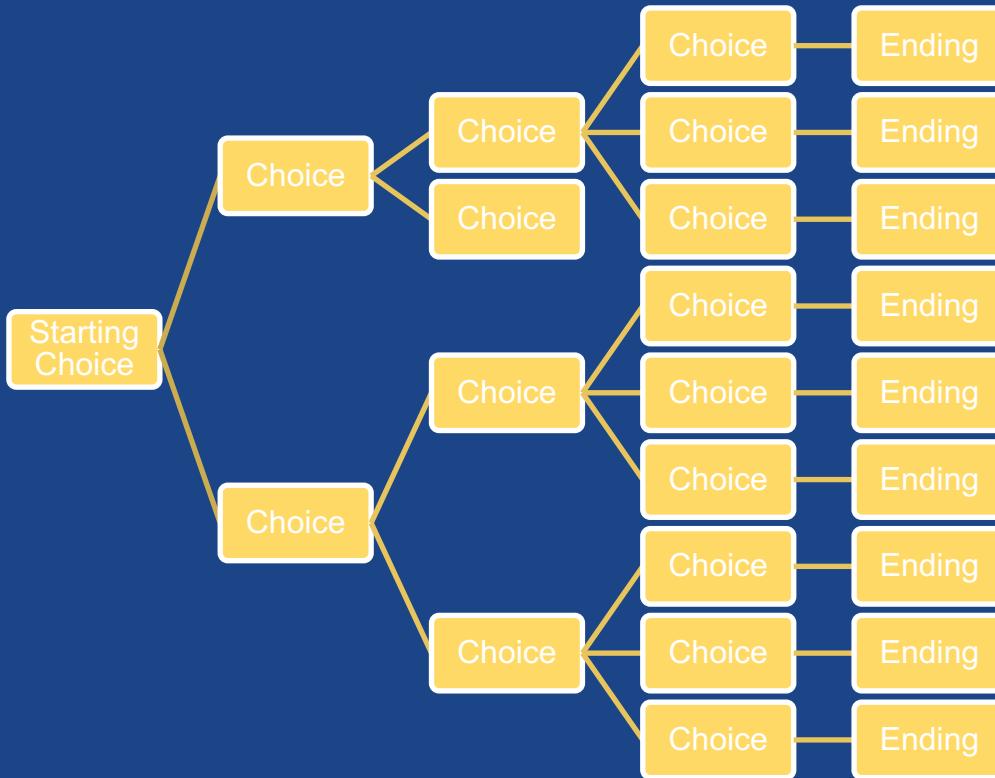
# LINEAR WITH GATED SIDE QUESTS



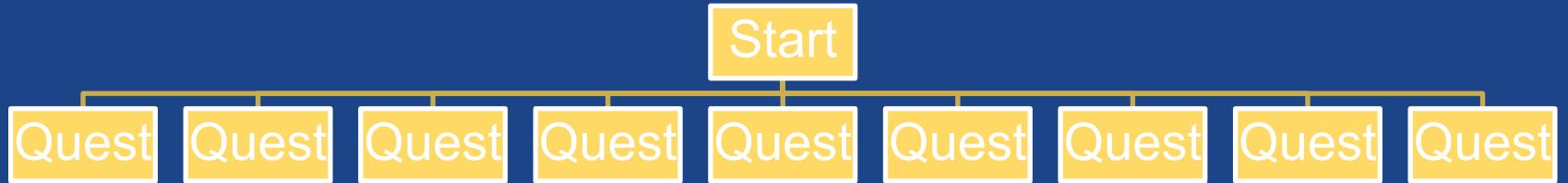
# LINEAR WITH HARD-GATED SIDE QUESTS



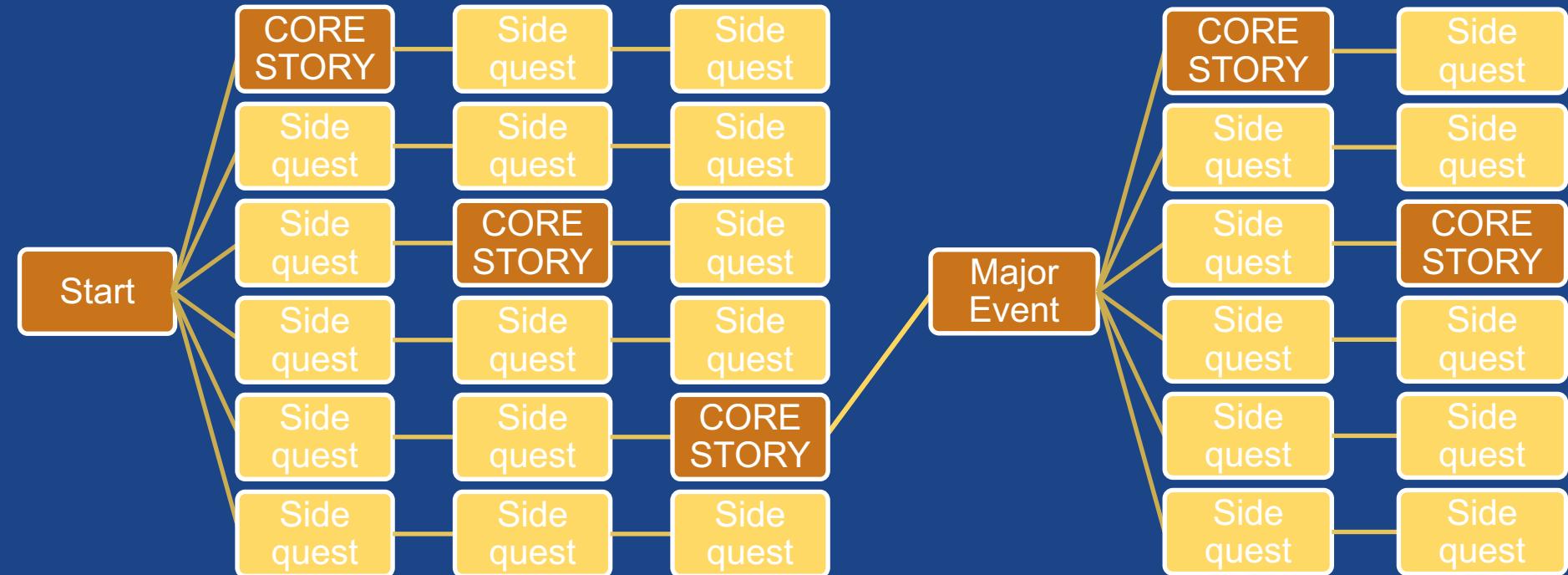
# NON-LINEAR BRANCHING STORYLINE



# MODULAR STORYTELLING



# MODULAR WITH GATES

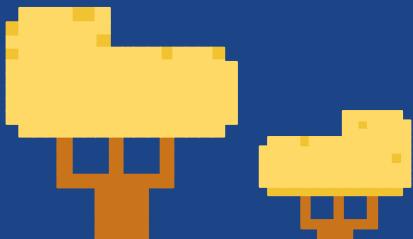




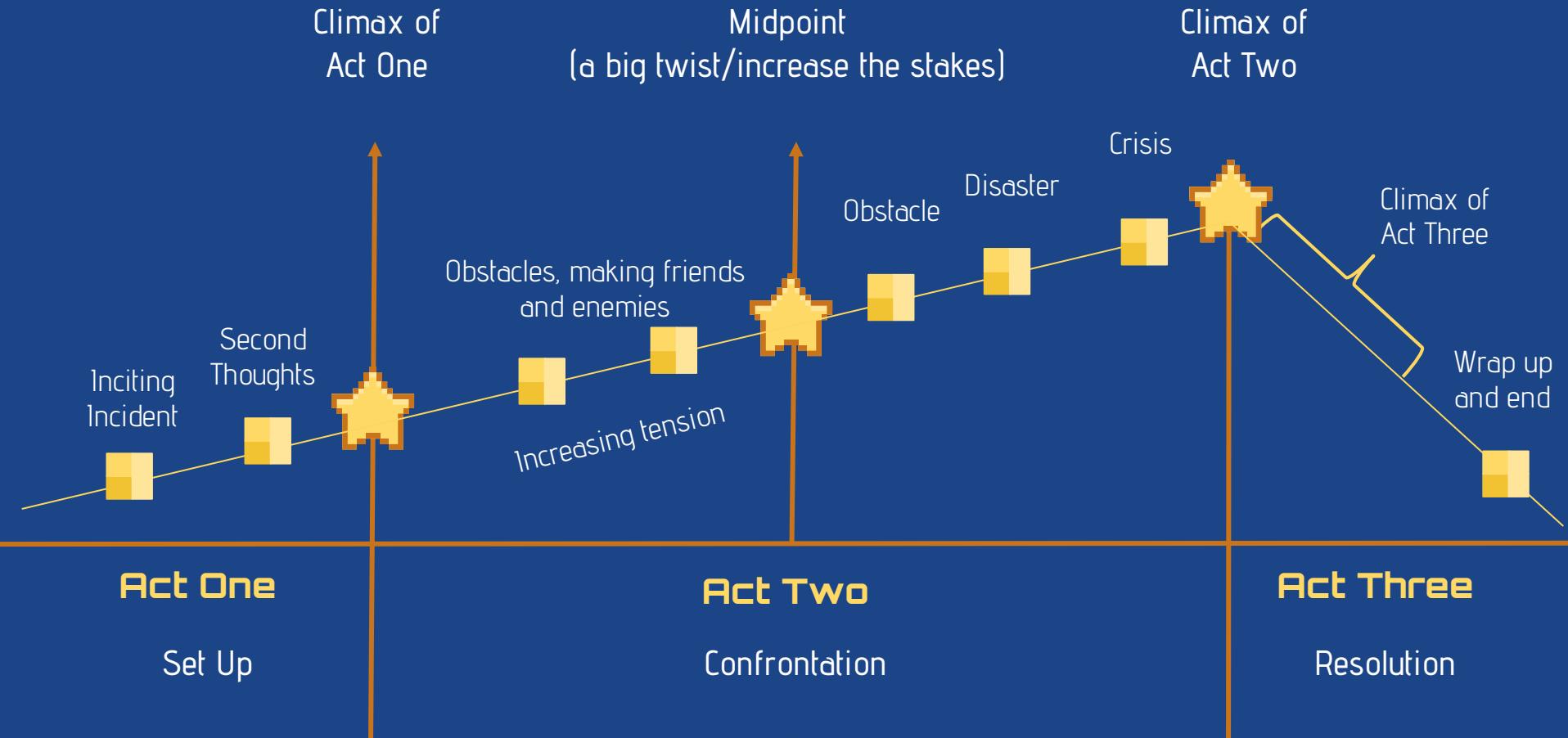
# GAME PROGRESSION VS. NARRATIVE PROGRESSION



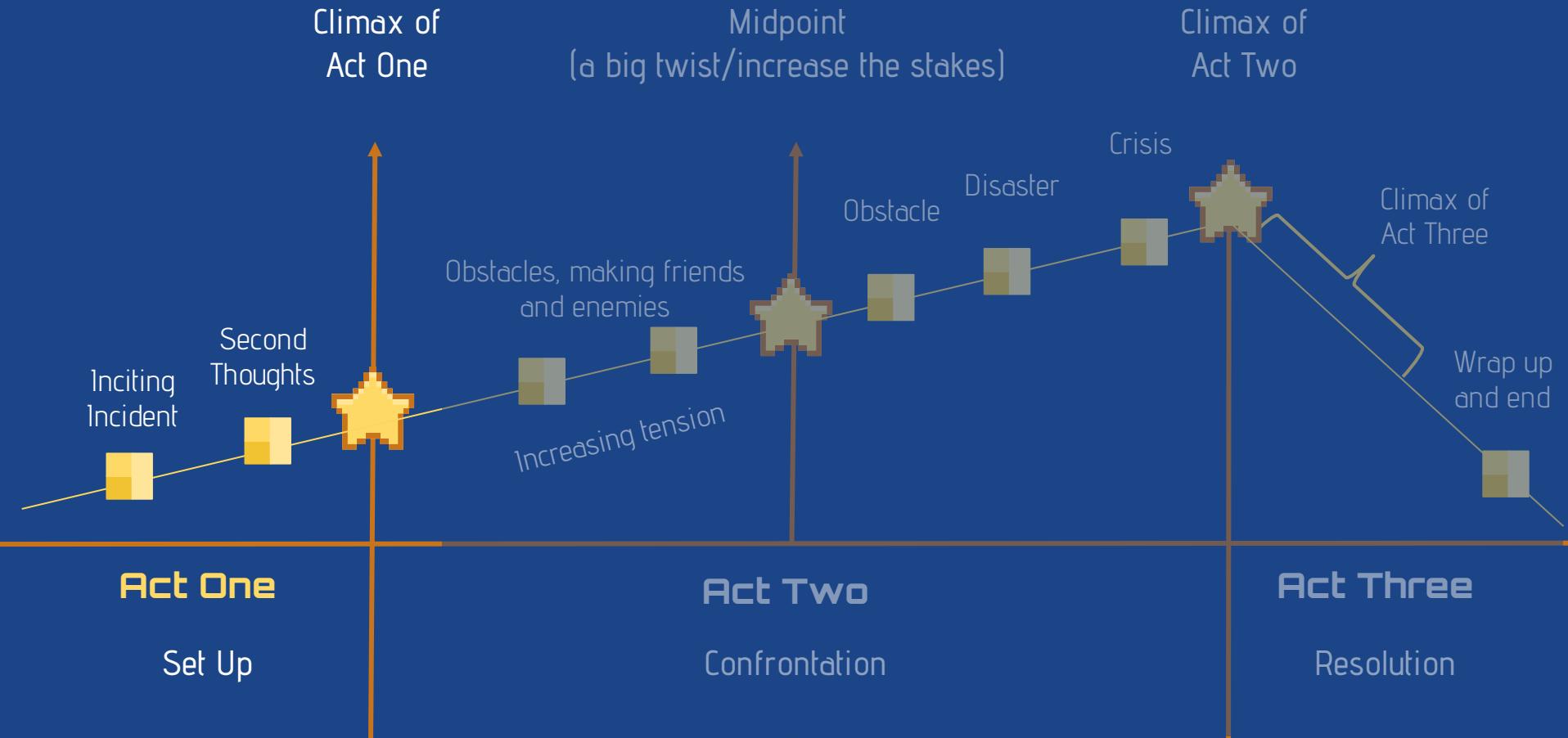
# STORY STRUCTURE



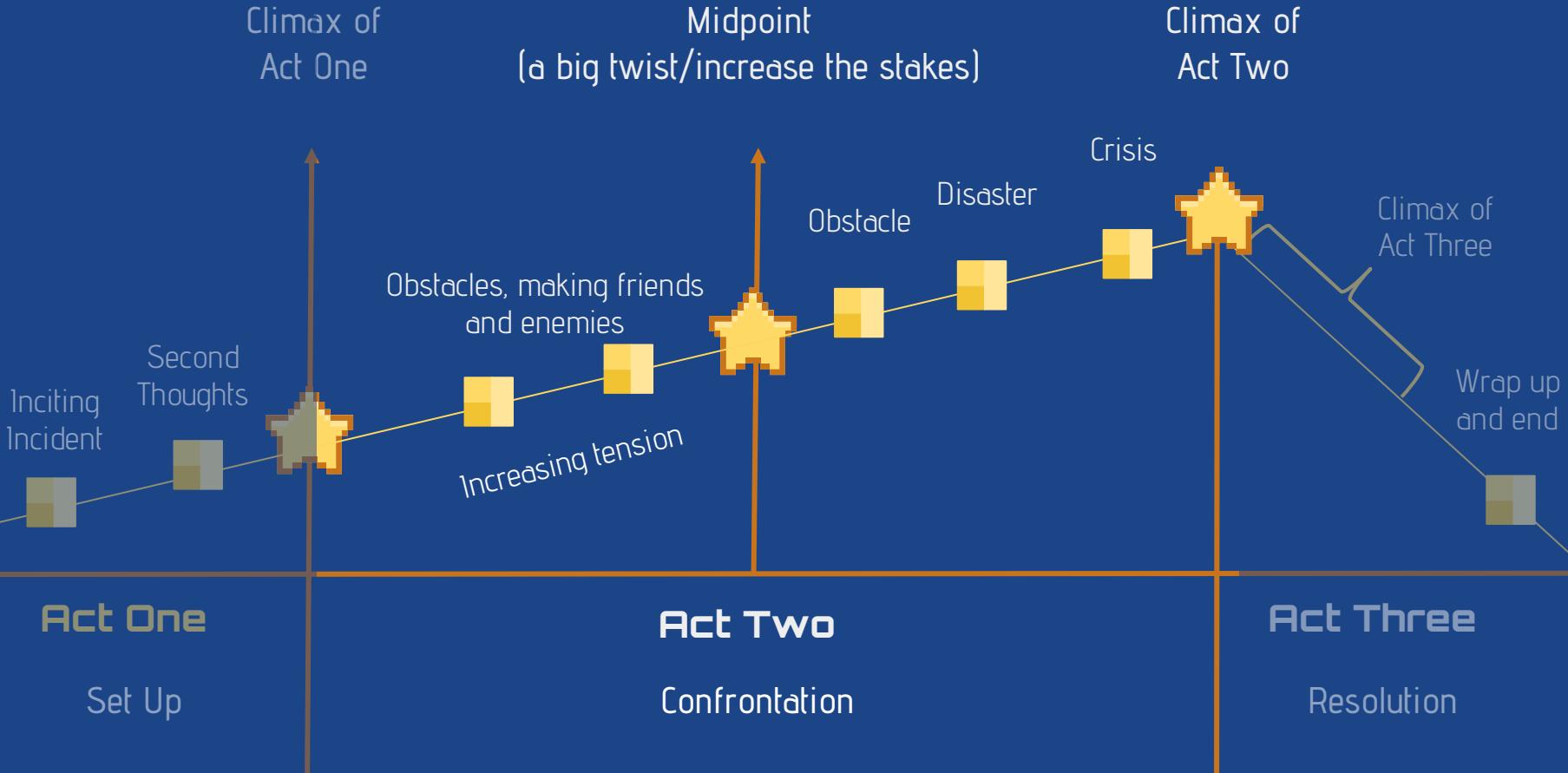
# Three Act Structure



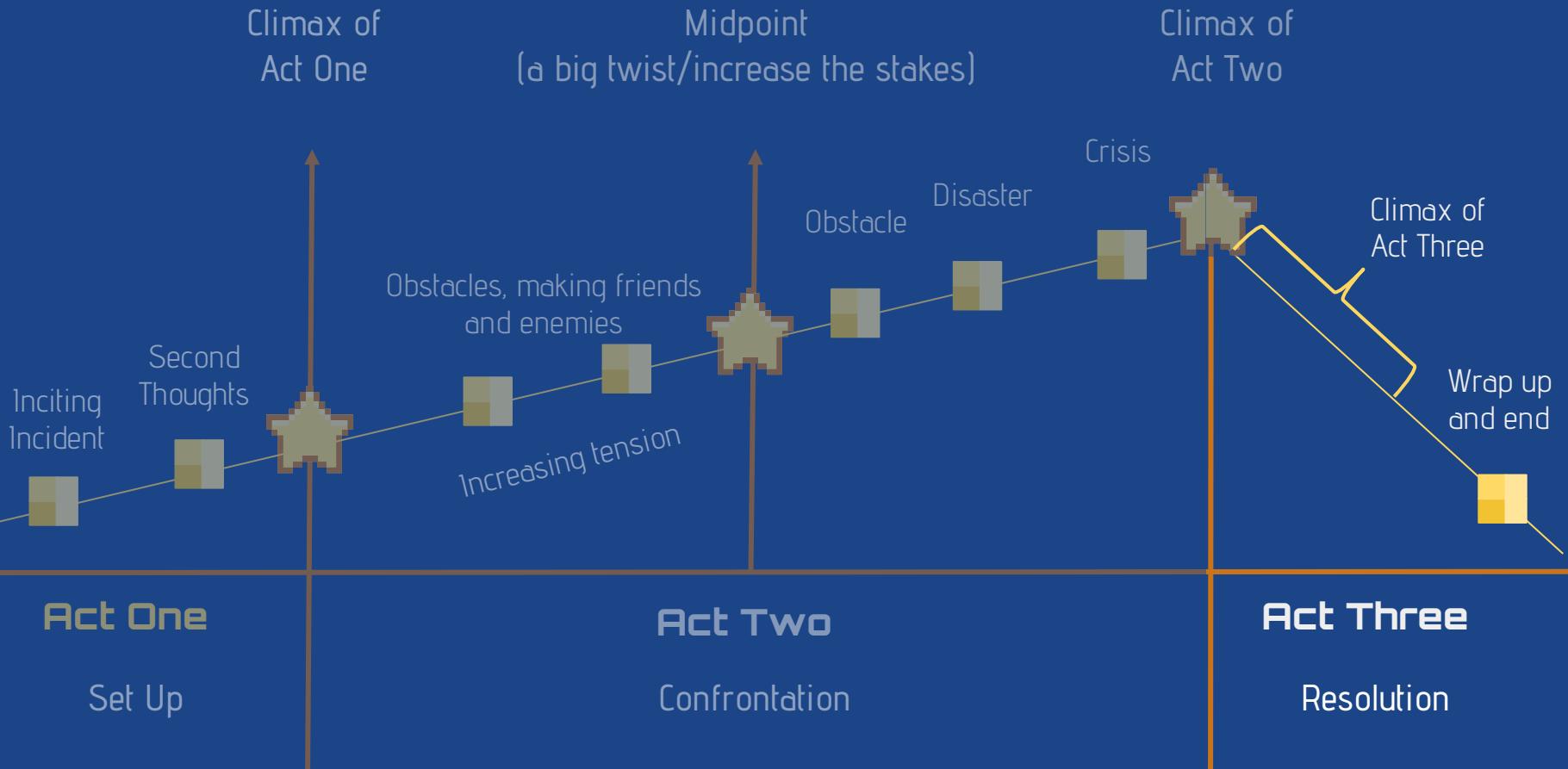
# Three Act Structure



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# Three Act Structure



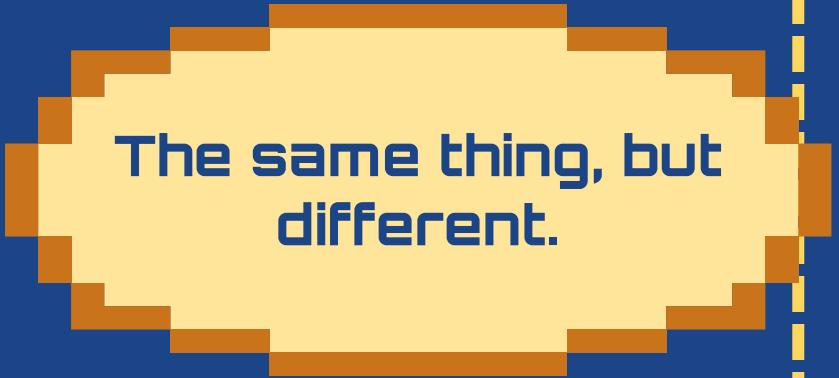


# STORY ARCS FOR NPCS



Keep each character to one story arc. Otherwise it gets overly complicated, especially if you have multiple characters.





**The same thing, but  
different.**



Questions?





# WHAT IS YOUR GAME'S THEME?





“War, war never changes.  
Men do. Through the roads they walk.”

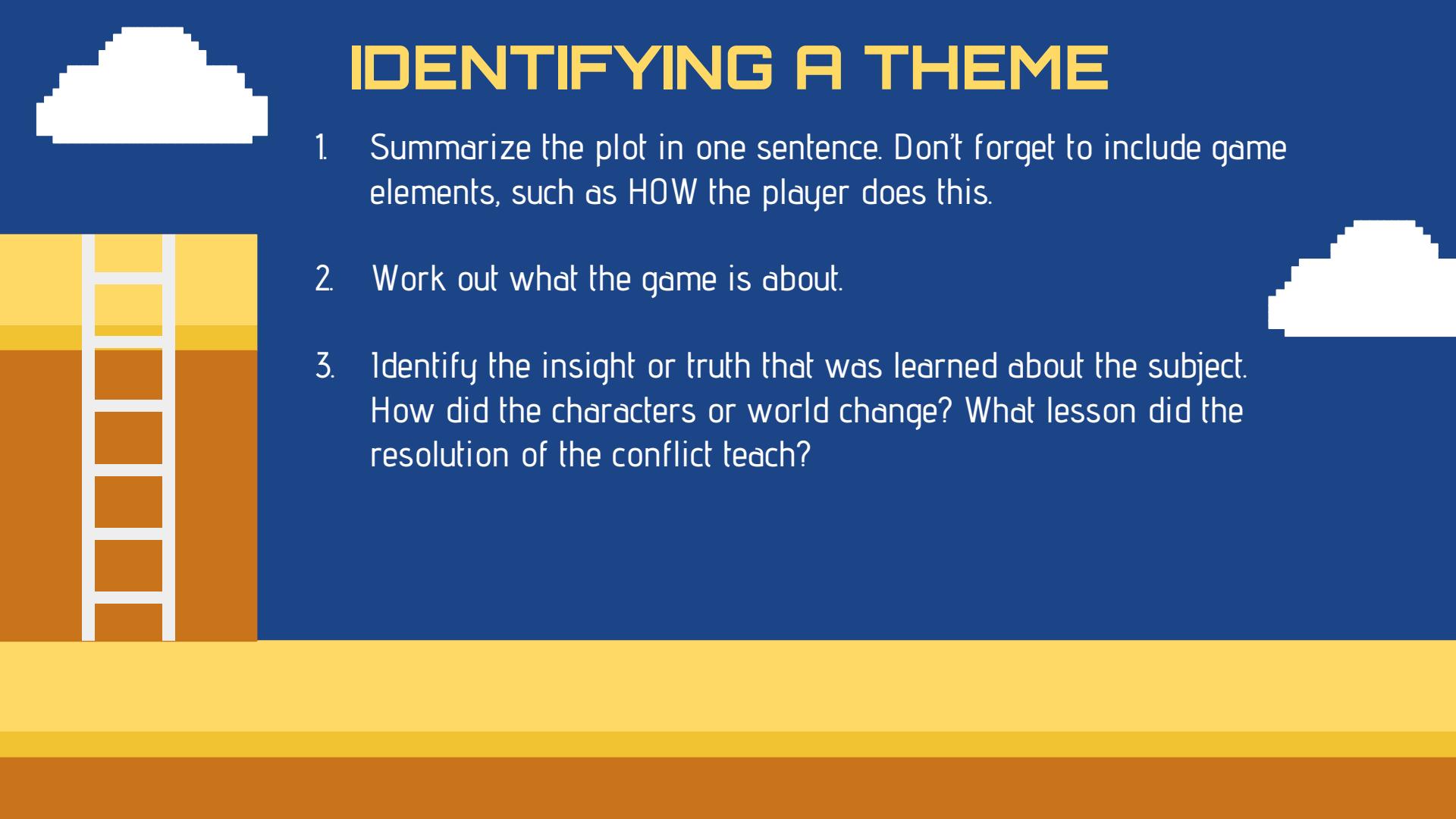
— **Fallout 4**



# WHAT'S IN A THEME

- Related to but not the same as genre
- It's what you're saying about the world (game or real)
- Theme isn't just story but is connected to gameplay





# IDENTIFYING A THEME

1. Summarize the plot in one sentence. Don't forget to include game elements, such as HOW the player does this.
2. Work out what the game is about.
3. Identify the insight or truth that was learned about the subject. How did the characters or world change? What lesson did the resolution of the conflict teach?



## CONFLICTED THEMES



### WHAT YOUR STORY SAYS

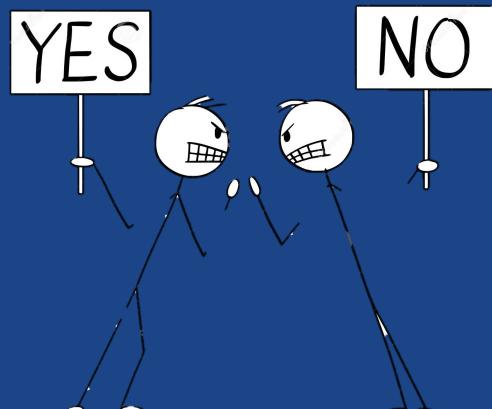
Our heroes are good, honorable people, fighting to defeat the evil invaders.



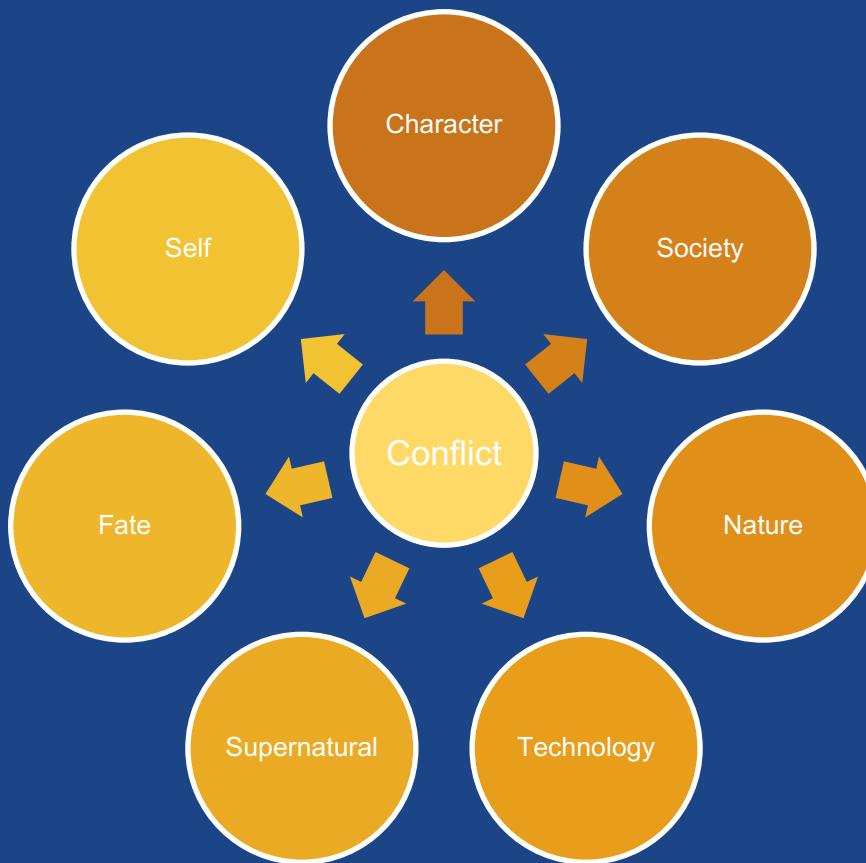
### WHAT YOUR GAMEPLAY SAYS

Hold my sword while I loot this peasant's cottage and steal their last bag of grain.

# STORY IS CONFLICT

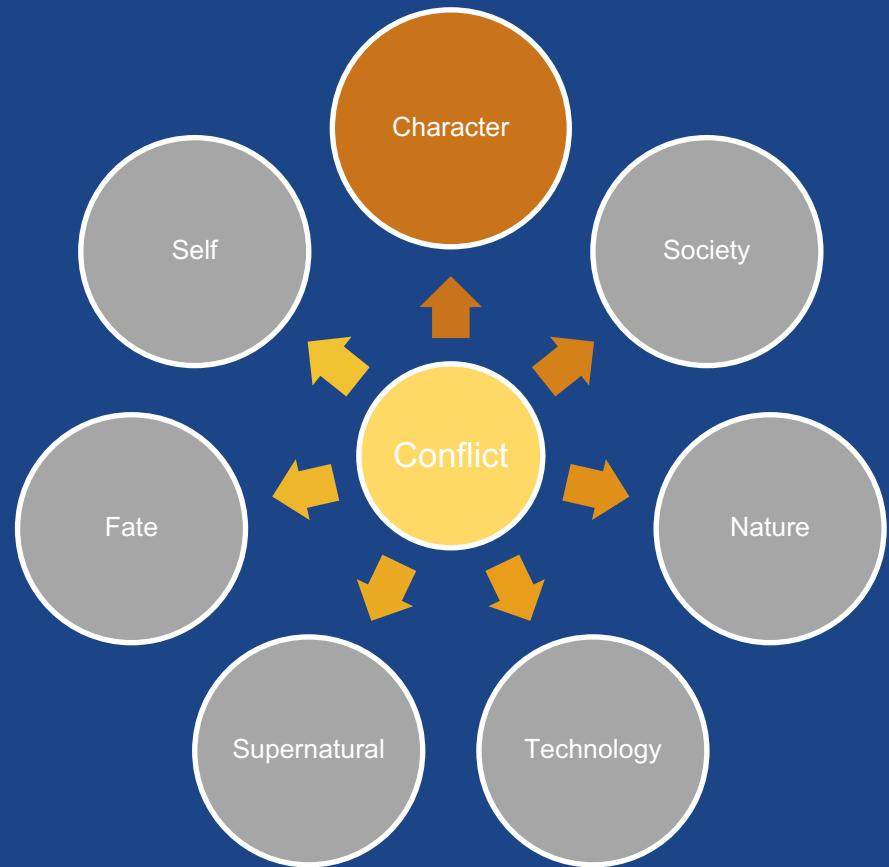


# KINDS OF CONFLICT



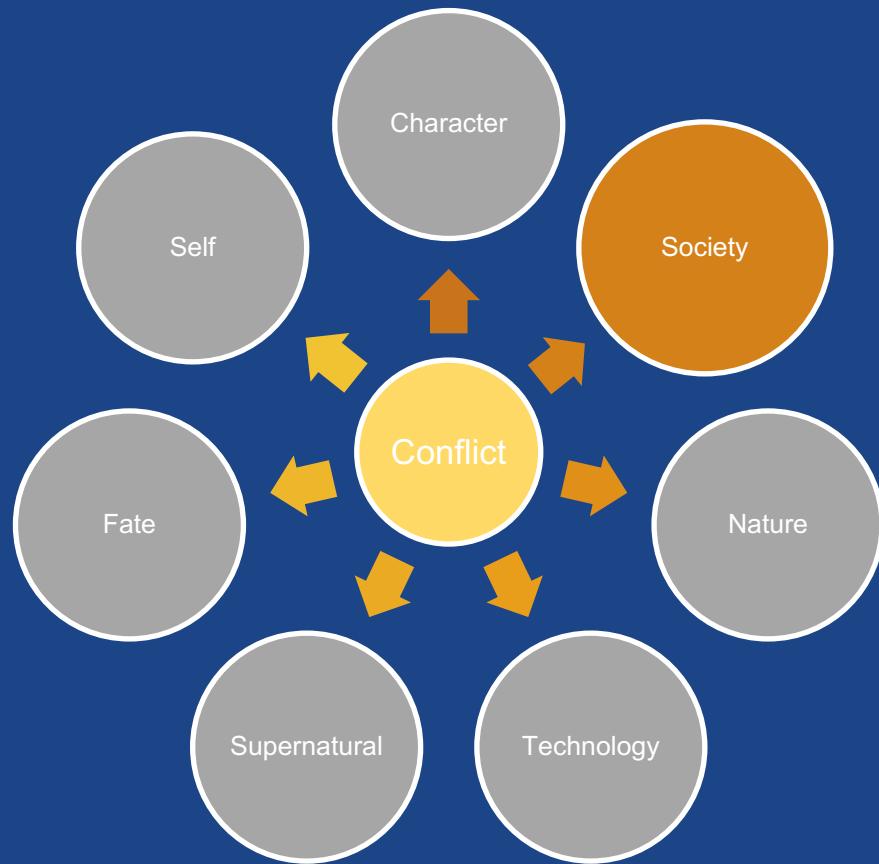


# Character



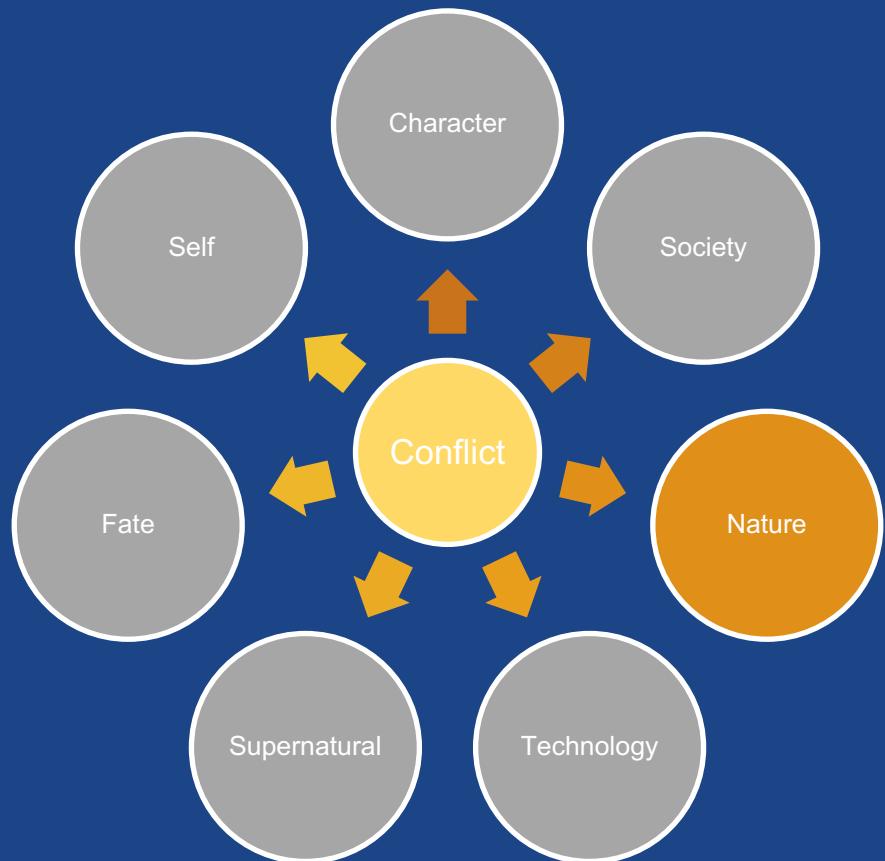


# SOCIETY



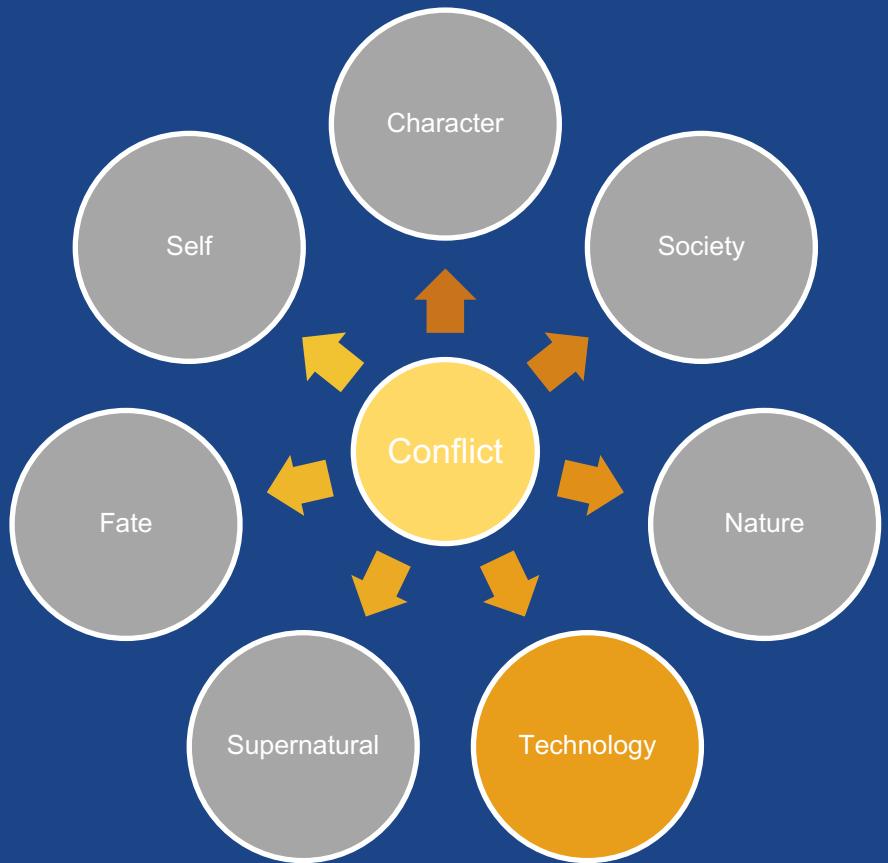


# NATURE



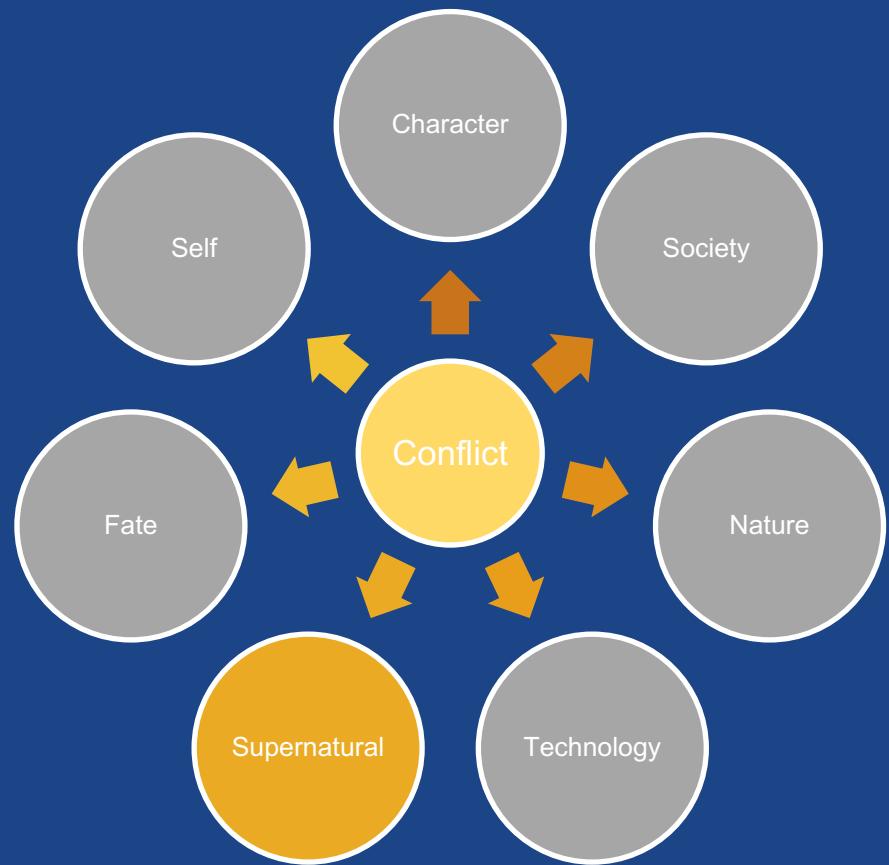


# TECHNOLOGY



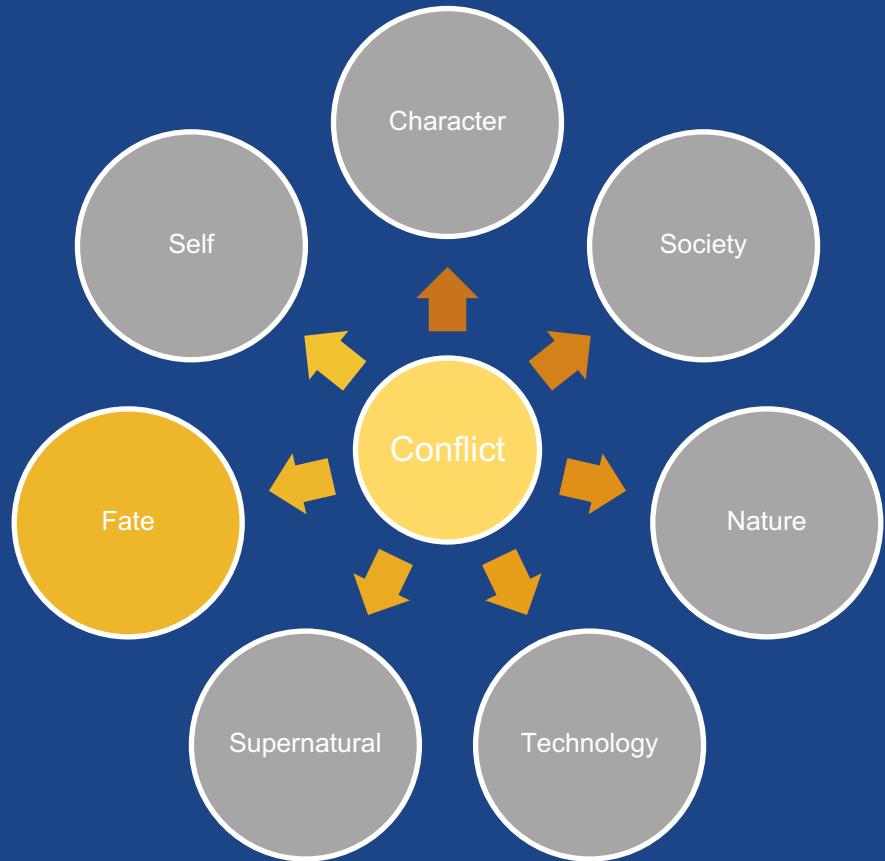


# SUPERNATURAL

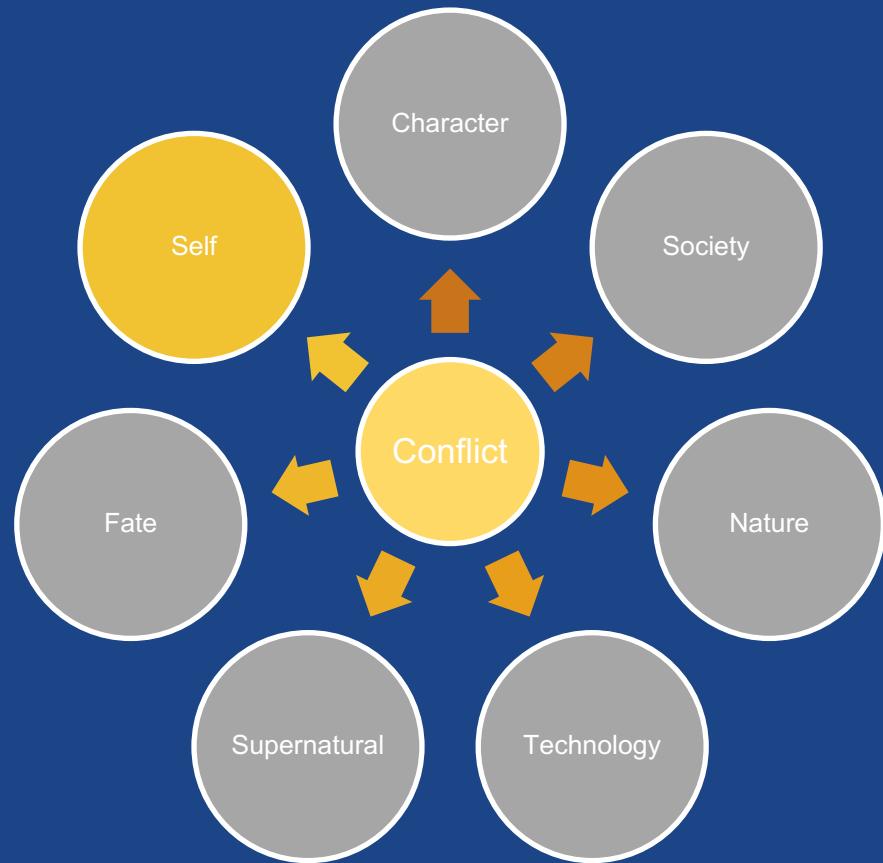




# FATE



# SELF



## Create Your Hunter

Presets

Face

Skin

Hairstyle

Eyebrows

Eyes

Nose

Mouth

Facial Hair

Makeup: 1

Makeup: 2

# CREATING CHARACTERS

Change Background



Zoom Out

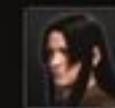
Zoom In

Location > Character



Hairstyle

Type



◀ U 4/4 ▶

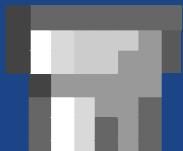
Change Color

Confirm

Cancel



# WHAT'S MY MOTIVATION?



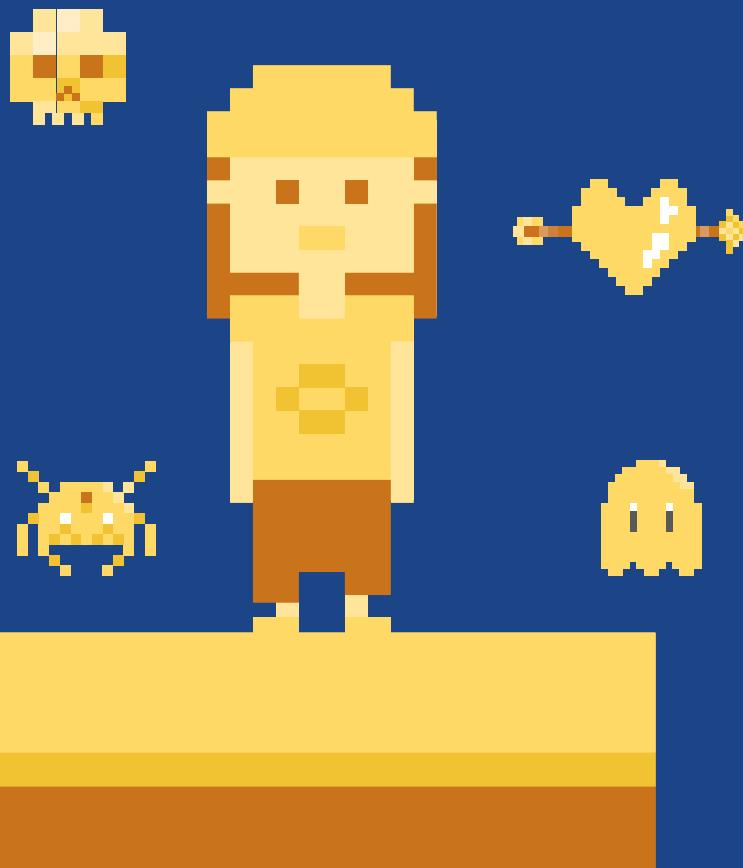
# THE PROTAGONIST(s)

Who the player is?



- What does the character want?
- What's the point of the game?
- How much agency does the player have in deciding this?

# MAKING YOUR PROTAGONIST INTERESTING



## Top Tips

- Put them in danger
- Show they're willing to sacrifice themselves for others
- Show their misfortune is undeserved
- Share their painful past
- Show they are brave
- Taking responsibility for them (sims style)

# THE ANTAGONIST(s)

Who's stopping the player?



- What does the antagonist want?
- How do their wants make things hard for the player?
- What are they willing to do to get what they want?

# NPCs

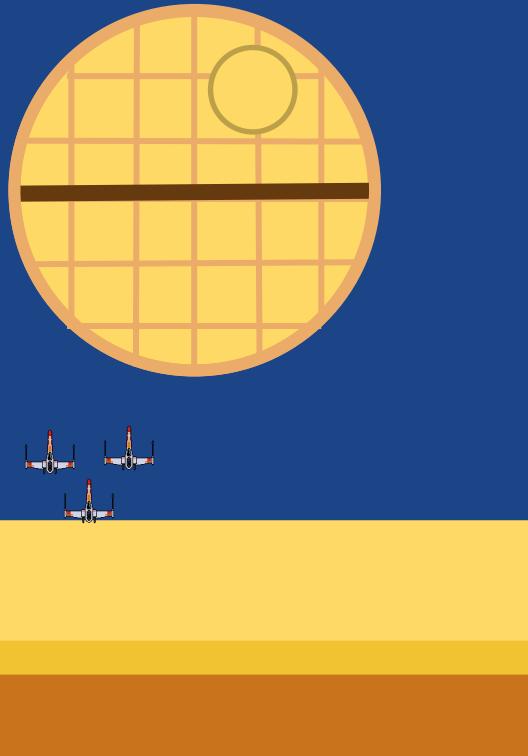
## Who else is in the world



- What do other people want?
- Are they helping or hindering the player?
- Do their motivations make sense?  
What's their end goal?

# Society and Factions

What motivates factions,  
corporations, galactic  
empires?





## MOTIVATING YOUR TEAM



Questions?



# ANYONE CAN WRITE

But should they?

By the way, here's some concept art  
I did for your game.



A photograph of a young couple sitting on a brown couch in a living room, playing video games. The woman, on the left, has long brown hair and is wearing a yellow ribbed sweater. She is smiling broadly. The man, on the right, has dark hair and a beard, and is wearing a blue and red plaid shirt over an orange t-shirt. He is also smiling and holding a black game controller. They are looking towards the right side of the frame. The background shows a white brick wall, a window, and some indoor plants.

**DO YOU HAVE  
TIME?**

# Things I've been asked to do as writer

- Write dialogue (including barks, cutscenes and interactive conversation)
- Design and document characters (personas, backstories, relationships etc)
- Create item descriptions
- Design fake languages
- Write notes, books, audio scripts for in-world items
- Design and document the world lore and story in the story bible
- Design quests and quest systems
- Script cutscenes
- Direct voice actors
- Respond to journalists and write articles
- Create game screenshot posters with character quotes
- Write social media posts
- Name locations in the world
- Create factions in the world and flesh them out with motivations, histories and key characters

# Narrative Designer vs. writer

## Writer

- Advocate for the game story
- Story premise and arc
- Story background, game lore and character development
- Scriptwriting for dialogue and cutscenes
- World building
- Communicating the project vision through the team

## Narrative Designer

- Advocate for the player experience of the story
- Designs how the story will be delivered to the player
- Quest design



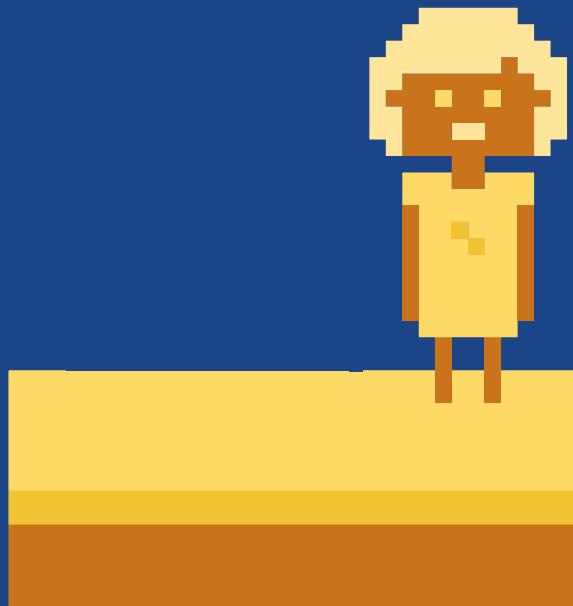
# What to look for in a writer

- Experience writing dialogue (tv, film, radio plays, theatre, comics, other games)
- Ability to be concise
- Ideas around non-verbal narrative delivery.
- Understanding of how non-linear narrative works (in interactive media, not film/tv)
- Great skills around story and character arcs and building stories that are satisfying, varied and open to expansion.



# What to look for in a narrative designer

- Understanding of the game development process and the iterative nature of development
- Ability to design quests (and work with programmers and designers to implement it)
- Some game engine experience helps, but more helpful is an ability to envision and request features in a way that makes sense to the rest of the team
- Meticulous record keeping and planning
- Understanding of all the different ways you could deliver the story and how to do it effectively to keep them engaged without being overwhelmed.
- Patience.



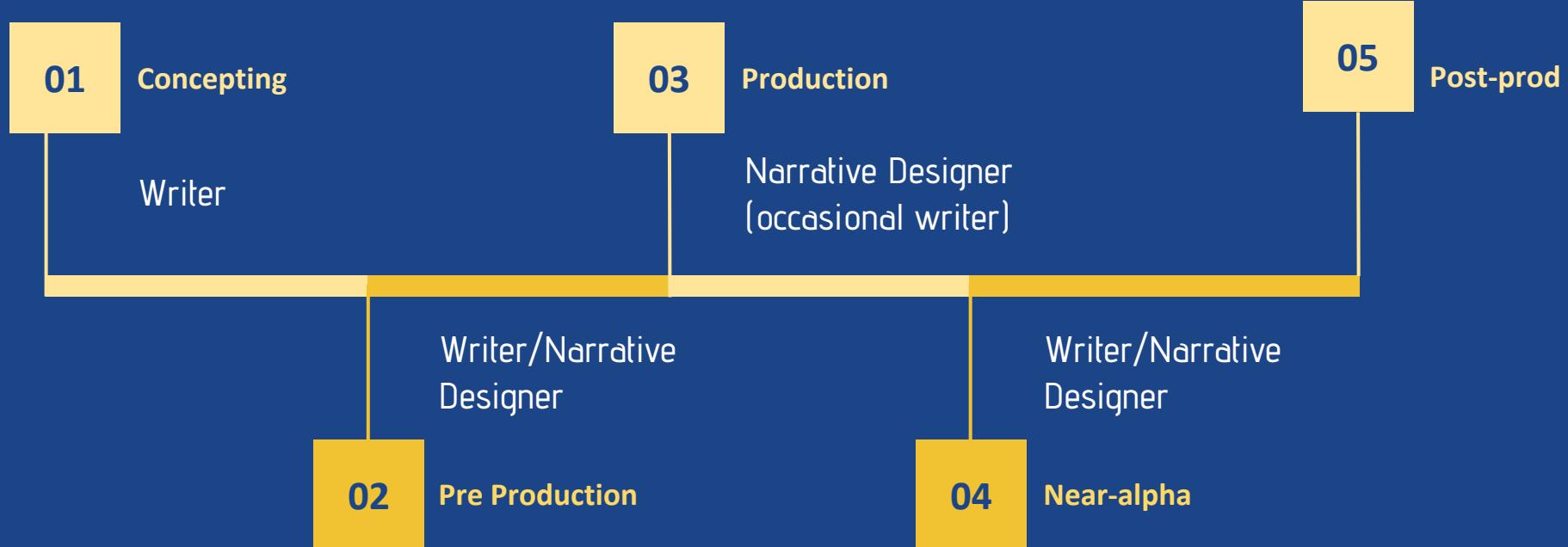


THERE CAN BE ONLY ONE



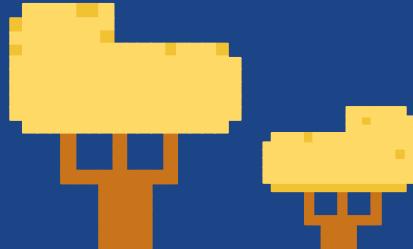


# WHEN TO HIRE WHO



## ◀ Six Months Before Alpha ▶

"Cool, so we built most of a game and we've got this really cool dolphin with a gun for a nose and it's running around the ocean shooting everyone. Can you give us a story and like, mission dialogue and stuff?"





## No person is an island

- Writers rooms and how they help

Helpful Roles for a Writer's Room

Creative Director  
Lead designer  
Writer  
Narrative designer  
Art director  
Audio director

Questions?



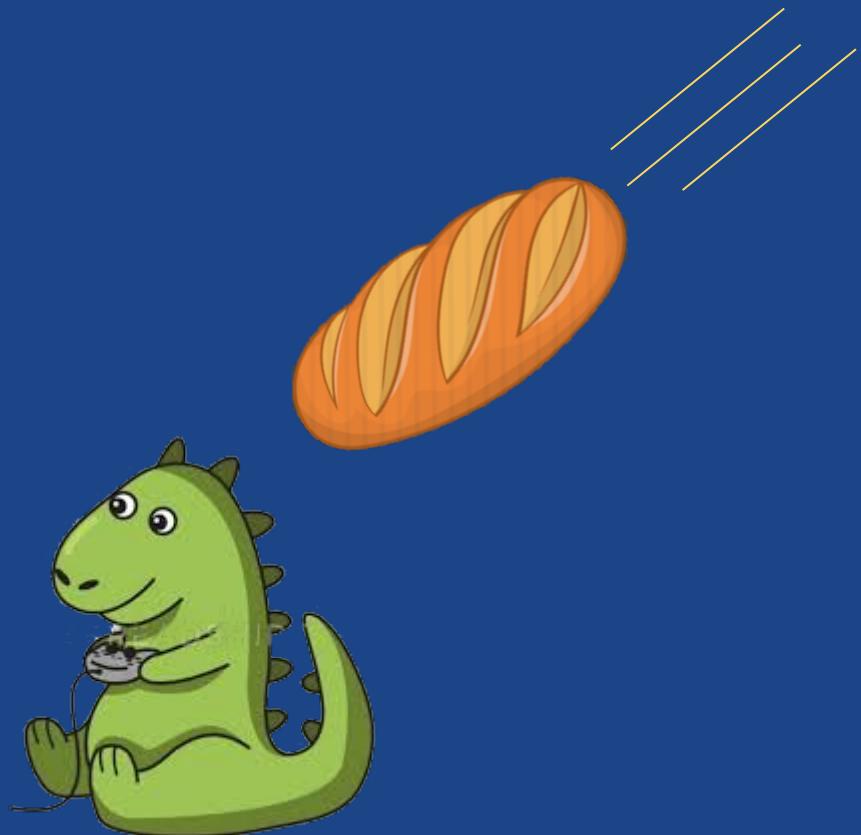
**WRITING**



**WRITING EVERYWHERE**

## DELIVERING YOUR STORY

Deliver the story in breadcrumbs, don't throw the whole loaf at the player all at once.



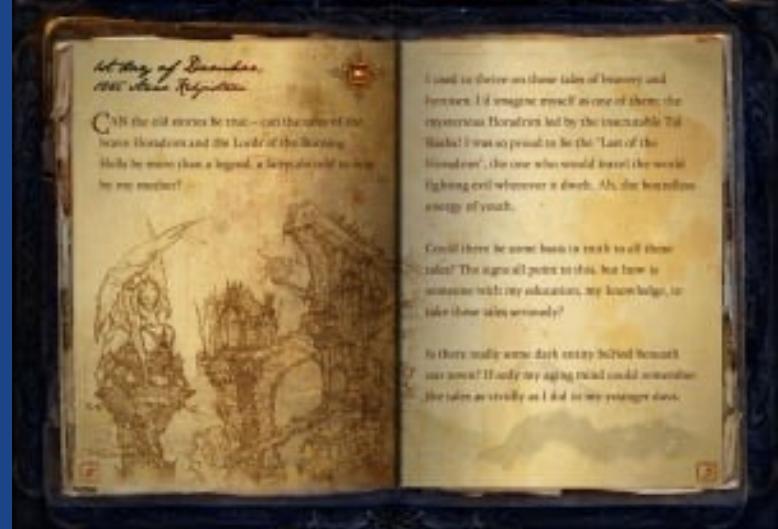
# ENVIRONMENTAL STORYTELLING

## Examples

- You can hear a helicopter circling somewhere but can't see it.
- A decayed cake rests in the centre of a circle of toys, a brightly-coloured party hat placed on a single chair.
- A wall of family pictures, one has half of it missing.
- A door with scratch marks around the handle, an empty cage and blood spatters in the room.
- A section of forest where no birds sing and the wind doesn't blow.
- A room is filled with plungers attached to every conceivable flat surface.
- An abandoned house with lights on and food left half eaten on the table.

# MENUS AND ITEM DESCRIPTIONS





## CHARACTERS

THE BLOODY BARON THE GHOST IN THE TREE THE HERMIT AT LAC GRAYVY THE MAD CASTAWAY OF UNOVIAK THE MYSTERIOUS ELF THE PELLAR THE UNSEEN ELDER TRISS MERIGOLD UDALRYK UMA

**The Mysterious Elf**

It turned out not only Geralt was looking for Cirilla. Also on her trail – a mysterious elven mage. Like the witcher, he had gone to Keira Metz to inquire after Cirilla's whereabouts. During this conversation he also revealed that he kept a hideout in the ruins near the village of Midcopse.

Geralt decided to follow up on this lead. Though he was not able to establish the mysterious mage's identity, he did learn that he had been travelling with Cirilla some time before and the Wild Hunt was after him as well.

Geralt's investigation in Skellige unearthed evidence that the mysterious elven mage had protected Cirilla from certain death at the hands of the Wild Hunt's warriors.

Skjall's word drew a new outline to the emerging picture of the mage. After the Wild Hunt's attack, Skjall had seen Cirilla and a mysterious elf sail away from Skellige, their course set for the high seas.

B Back





“ ”  
“ ”

# MAKING UP YOUR OWN LANGUAGE

Audio tools to create fake languages  
Using emotive sounds



# DIALOGUE

- To voice or not to voice?



Considerations:

- Budget
- Localisation
- DLC/Sequel plans
- Number of characters
- Variations of NPC dialogue
- Diversity of voices

# ◀ DIVERSE CHARACTERS ▶

“Y'all gott hear about this  
snake I found.”

JOHN JAMES



“Like OMG did you see that  
snake?”

LIZ PATTERSON



“Now that is an intresting  
speciamen, dangerooodalis  
if I'm not mistaken”

JENNA SMITH





DID I SAY THAT OUT LOUD?

## Inner or Outer Monologue

- Some games choose to bare their protagonist's thoughts.
  - Others stick to factual information.
- Some keep that information in a notepad or journal.

# Localisation



"Good evening,  
gentlemen. All your base  
are belong to us!"

# RESOURCES

**Creating Emotion in Games**

David Freeman

**The Narrative Design Toolbox**

Tobias Heussner

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**Writing for Video Game Genres**

Wendy Despain (ed)

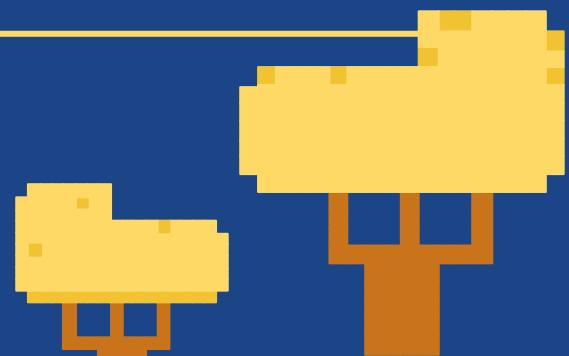
**Story**

Robert McKee

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**Video Game Storytelling**

Evan Skolnick, D.G. Chichester, et al.





# QUESTIONS





# THANKS!



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