

Narrative Design

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What will we talk about today?

- What is narrative design?
- Story structures
- Elements of narrative design
- Toolbox
- Q&A



Who am I?

Anna Högberg Jenelius

Any pronouns

Indie Game Developer/Consultant

Games since 2011

Indie since 2015

Valiant Game Studio since 2017

Credit on 40+ games

Based in Stockholm, Sweden



Stockholms
universitet



DOUBLE
MOOSE



CULT



Climate
re:play





Warning!



Spoilers ahead!



What is Narrative Design?



Narrative Design

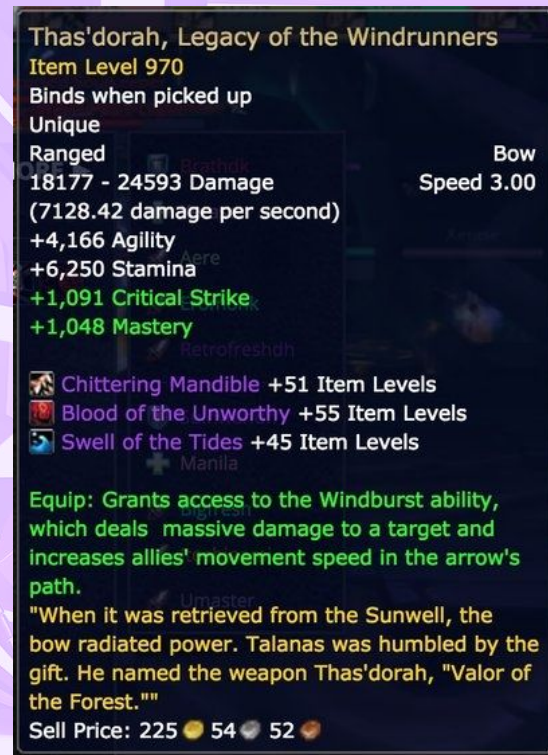
The design of how the player will interact with the world, the characters, and the story.



Narrative Design vs. Writing

Writing is the actual words shown on screen

Two different professions



An interactive medium

We have a power no other medium has

The player's actions should matter



“I did this”

You are the hero.

You are complicit.



Mass Effect



Spec Ops: The Line

Narrative Design <3 Game Design

Even if the story is linear, tie it into the gameplay!



Ludonarrative Dissonance

When gameplay and narrative tell different stories

Are you really the good guy?

Can you limit the amount of harm committed?

How does the game react to your actions?



Uncharted 2



The Last of Us

Gameplay is king

After all, we are making games

Gameplay trumps everything, in the vast majority of cases (exception: interactive fiction)

Let the players have fun!

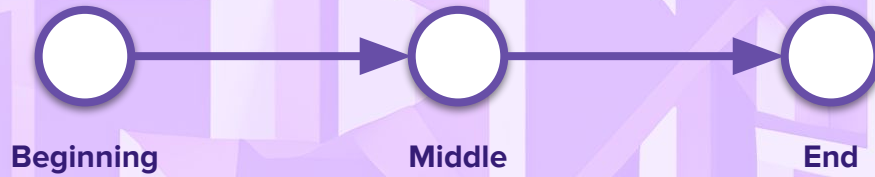


Horizon: Forbidden West

Story Structure



Linear game



Half-Life 2

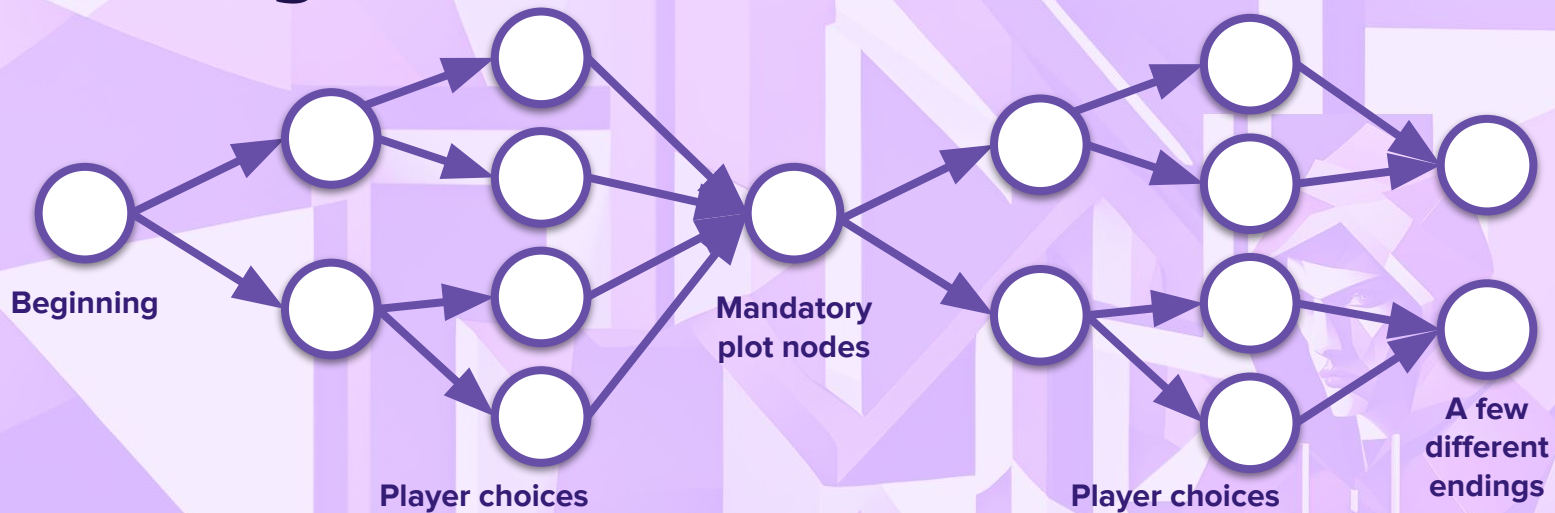


The Last of Us



Ratchet & Clank

Branching narrative



Life is Strange

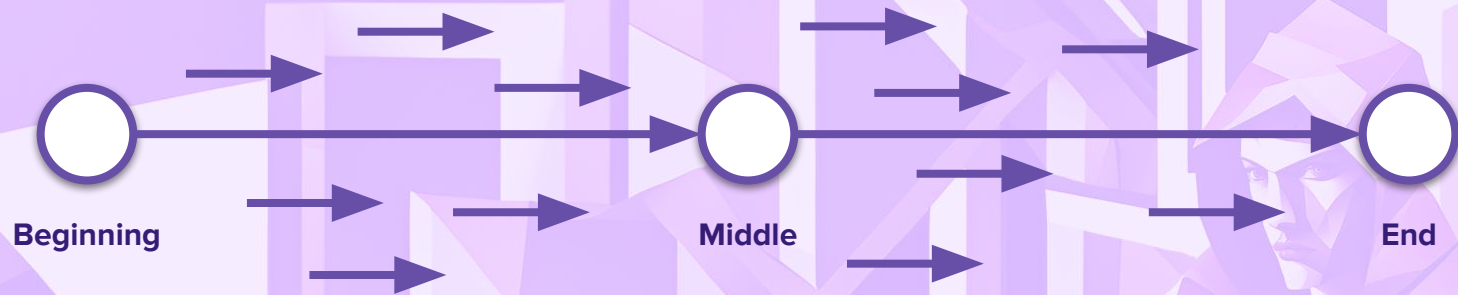


Baldur's Gate 3



Pentiment

Linear story with sidequests



Fallout 4



The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

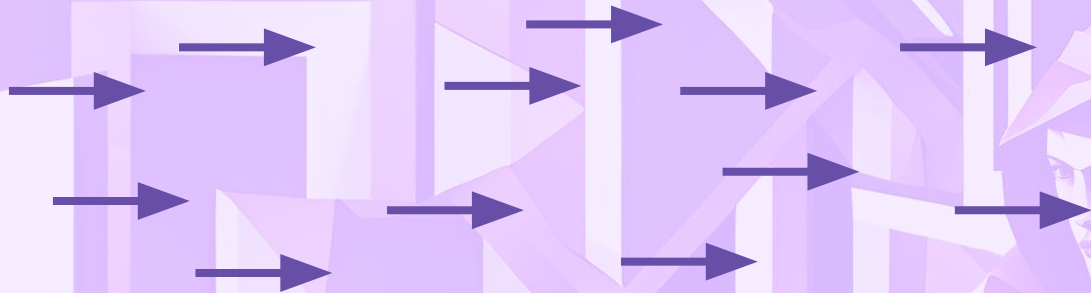


The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom

Emergent narratives



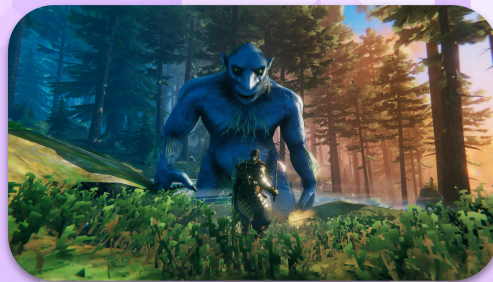
Beginning



End?



Crusader Kings III



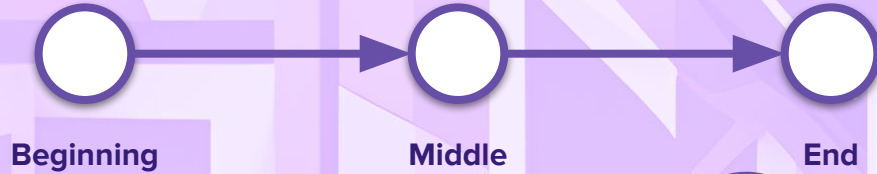
Valheim



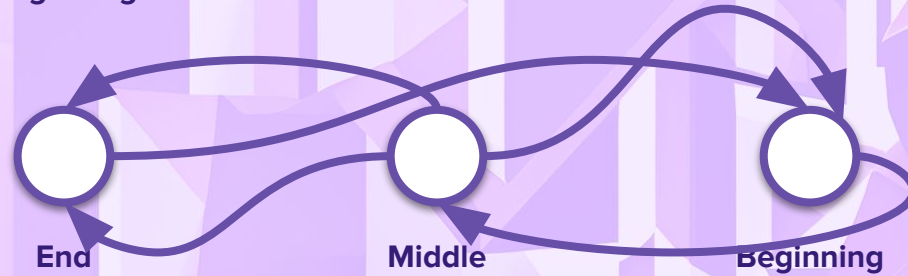
Minecraft

Outliers (example)

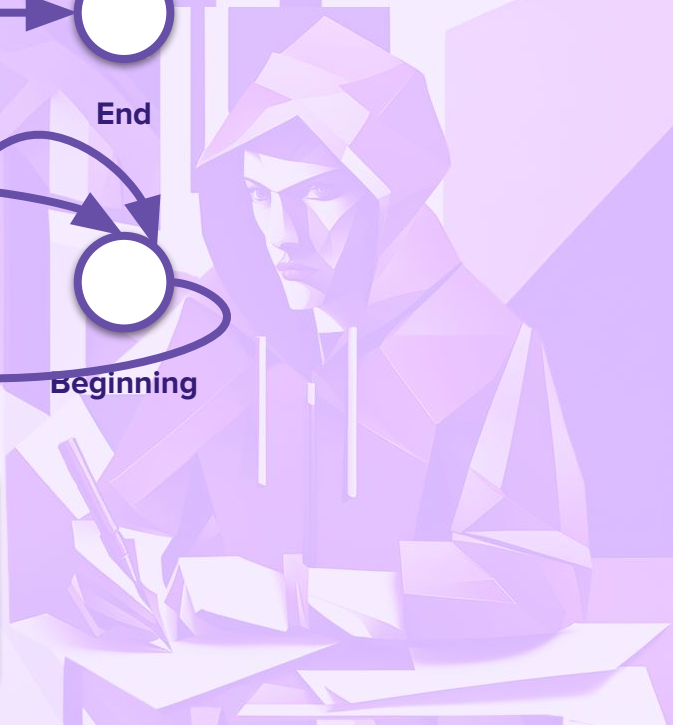
Player story:



Perceived story:



Return of the Obra Dinn



Elements of Narrative Design



Worldbuilding

Where does the game take place?

Who lives there?

Fantasy races?

Political systems?

Geographical features?

Magic system?

Unique physics?

Etc etc etc



House Flipper



Themes

What is the story *about*?

- Good vs. Evil
- Coming of age
- Social injustice
- Loss and grief
- Family bonds
- Revenge
- Generational trauma
- Etc etc etc



Red Dead Redemption 2



Spiritfarer

Plot

What happens in which order?

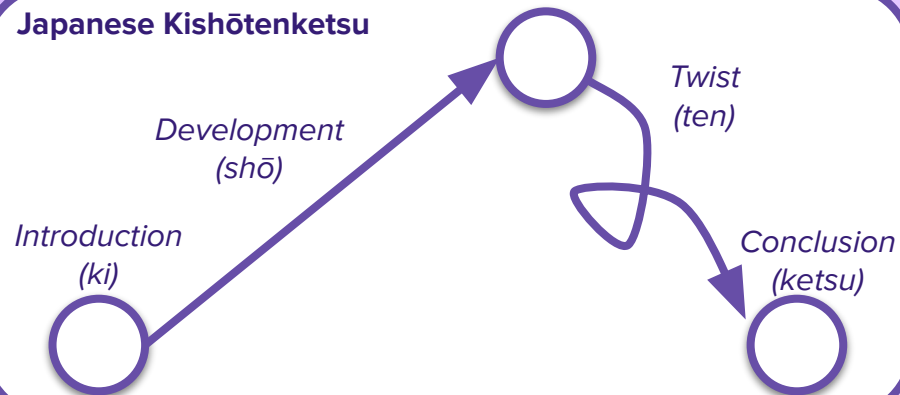
What is the conflict?

How does the tension rise?

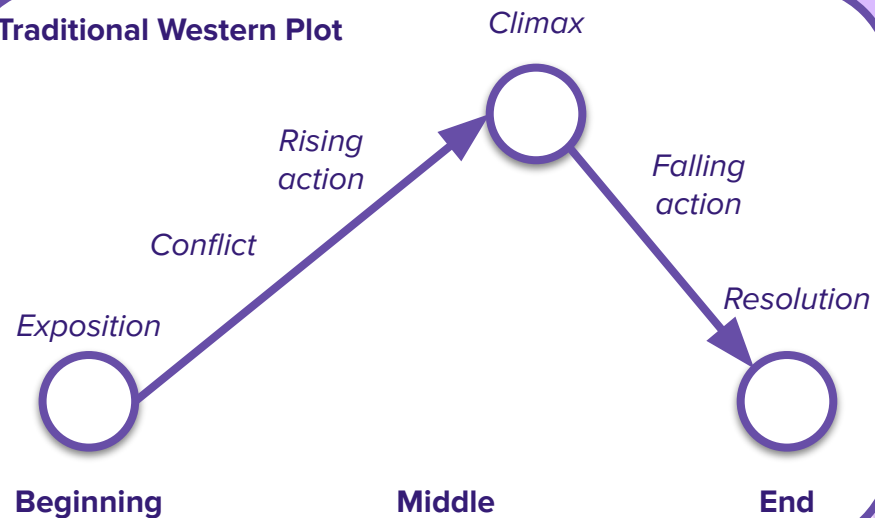
Every scene should have a stake, a reason to be

Importance of plot depends on the game!

Japanese Kishōtenketsu



Traditional Western Plot



Plot twists

Lead the player in one direction, then reveal new information that changes everything

Recontextualize

Don't try to outsmart the player!



The Wolf Among Us

Characters

Motivations

Backstory

Arc

Positive traits, negative traits

Interests, families, dreams, quirks

Consider diversity

Make them 3D, not paper cutouts!



Harrier "Harry" Du Bois, Disco Elysium



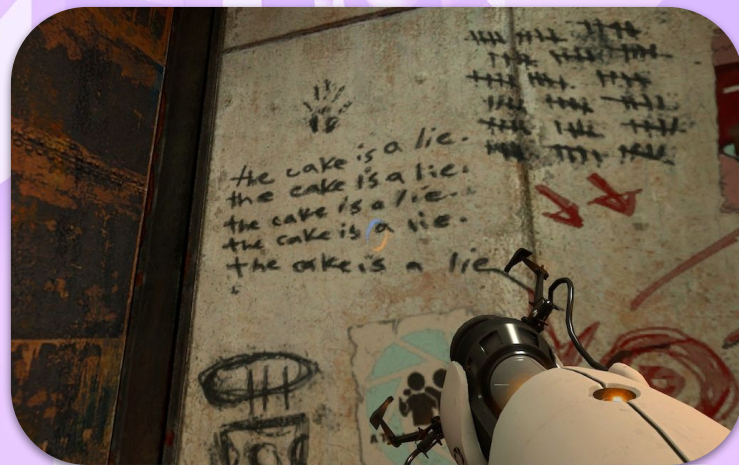
Lara Croft

Environment

What is the environment telling you about its inhabitants?

What has happened, what lies ahead?

Collaborate with the level designers & artists!



What can you tell about a place?



Day Z



The Division

Toolbox



Immersion

The feeling of being fully *in* the world

Losing track of time

Can easily be broken:

- in-world logical issues
- technical issues
- reminders of the real world (achievements, real-money stores)



The player as a storyteller

Just like theater writers and performers, we need to keep the player in mind

Allow them to have fun

Trigger their imagination, let them participate



Körkarlen, Västana Teater



The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim



Matt Mercer playing Baldur's Gate 3

Guiding idea

What do you want your players to leave the experience with?

What do you want to add to the discussions in society?

Base all your decisions on this idea



Politics belongs in games

All art is political

Don't be afraid to make deliberate statements

Making unconscious statements is way worse

Not everyone has to like your games



Tropico 6

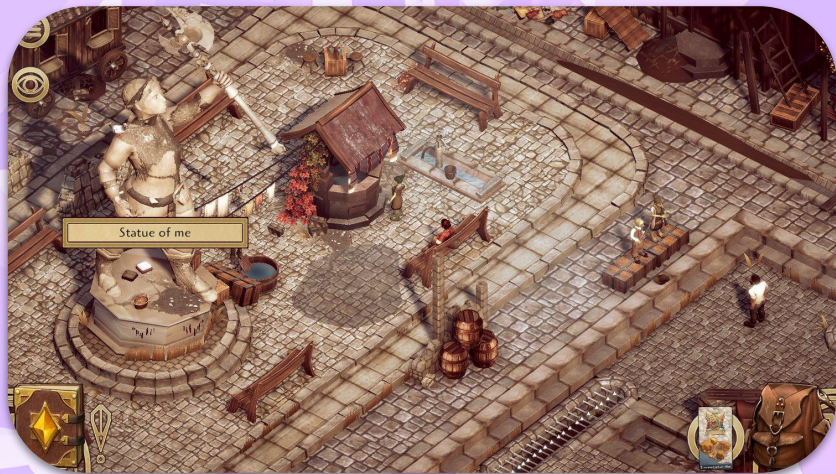
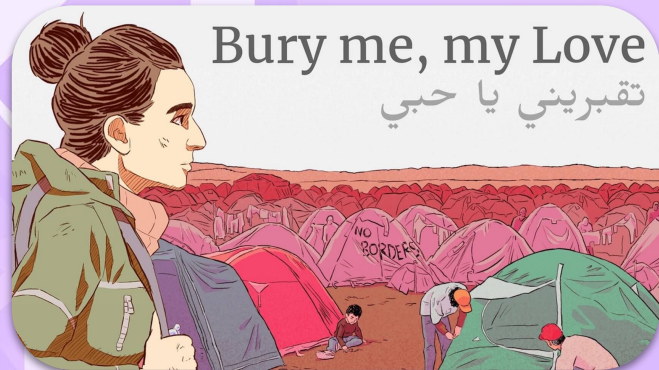


Animal Crossing: New Horizons

Don't preach to the player

Even if you have something important to say:

Allow the player to explore and come to their own conclusions



Pendula Swing

Death to the magnum opus

Games are not for auteurs

You have a long career ahead

Don't try to cram everything into one game that never gets done

Collaborate with your team!



Hideo Kojima, who most of us are not

Become inspired!

Don't just consume other games - it will screw your perception

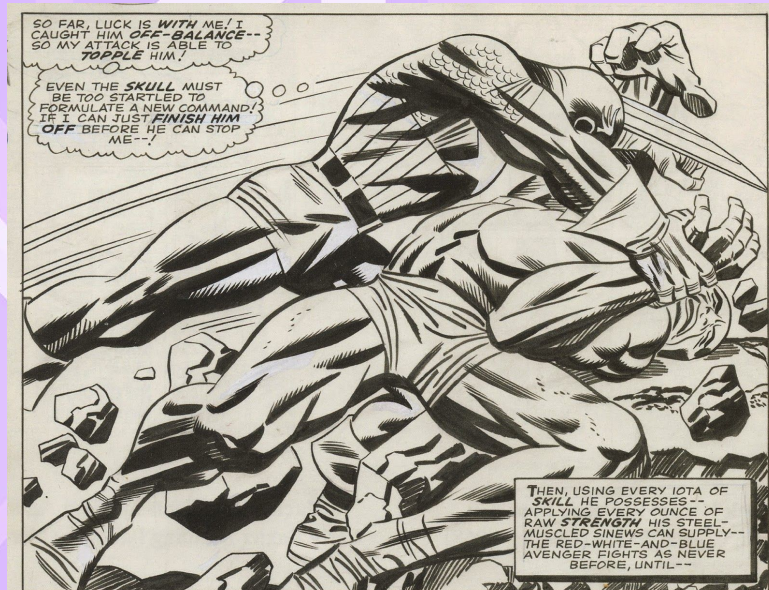
Immerse yourself in all types of art and media

Go for walks in nature

Talk to people!

Captain America

(Jack Kirby)



Bojack Horseman

(image by Johnny 2 Cellos)



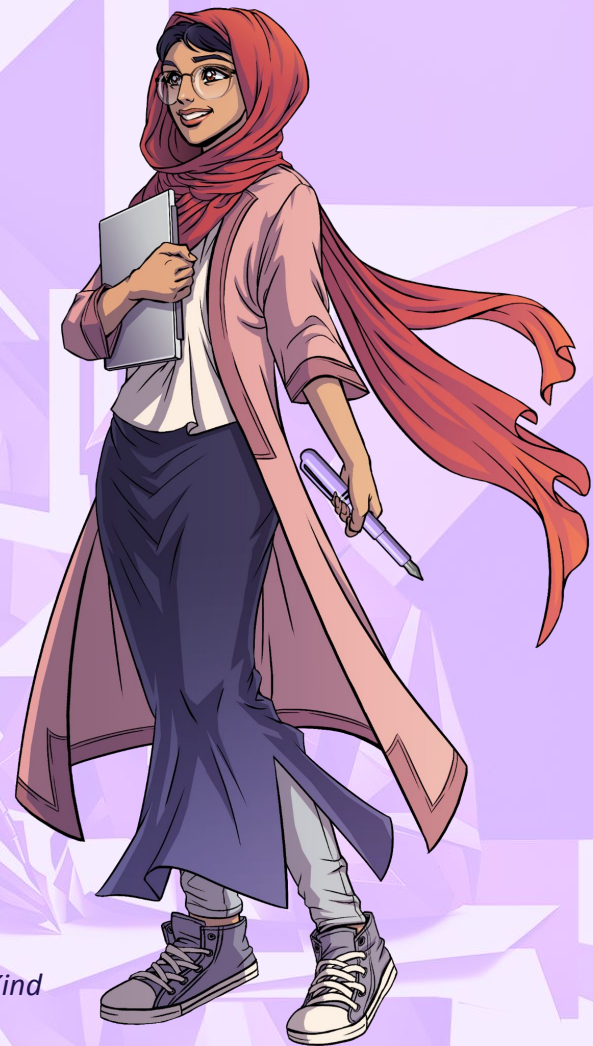
Summary

Gameplay is king

Find the type of narrative that fits your game

Figure out your guiding idea

Become inspired



KreatureKind

Wishlist on Steam :D

KREATUREKIND

Questions?

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GAME STUDIO 

