

**BiOWARE**



# Contrastive Juxtaposition

Contrast and Context in BioWare Story and Cinematics

**Jonathan Perry**

Cinematic Lead - BioWare

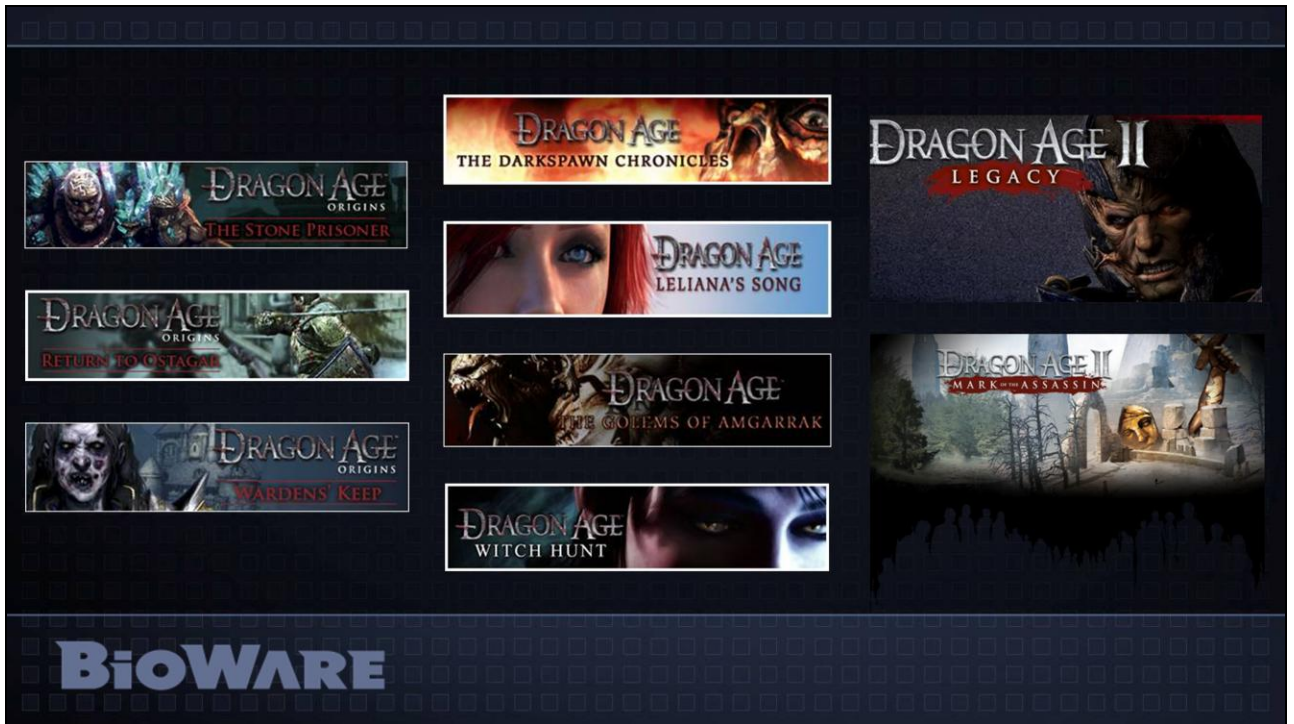
# Jonathan Perry

## Cinematic Lead | BioWare



**BioWARE**

My name is Jonathan Perry and I'm a Cinematic Lead at BioWare. I've worked on Mass Effect 1 and 2 and all of the Dragon Age titles,



And I've worked quite a bit of DLC for the Dragon Age franchise as well.



# CONTRASTIVE JUXTAPOSITION

This talk is titled "Contrastive Juxtaposition". Contrastive Juxtaposition is a technique we use when creating emotional scenes in our games and it involves a dramatic reversal or a rapid shift in narrative, audio, and visual polarities. Here's a brief scene from Mass Effect 2 to show you what I mean. This scene is very early in the game and the Normandy is under attack from a Collector ship. The crew has been evacuated and Shepard is moving Joker to an escape pod.







This scene was a really powerful and emotional experience for me and others who played the game. Part of it was losing a character that I'd spent over 40 hours saving the galaxy with, but it's the manipulation of contrast and context in this scene that really make it hit home. That quick shift from being alive to dead, was also supported by a dramatic shift in the audio and the visuals in the scene. So we'll talk about creating the timing and content involved in creating these moments.

We'll also take a closer look at how contrast and context can be used as creative tools throughout the development process.

# Agenda

- Story and Cinematics
- Intro to Contrast and Context
- Creating the Story
- Creating the Content
- Creating the Experience

**BIOWARE**

I'll start by talking about the role of story and cinematics at BioWare and about the people and processes involved. We'll take a look at contrast and context and talk about why they're important and how they affect the player experience.

From there I'll discuss how contrast and context can be used to create strong story themes and a narrative possibility space, to create content that supports story themes, and how to create a more meaningful experience.



I'll be using a lot of great examples from the Dragon Age and Mass Effect games, including Mass Effect 3 (released 2 days ago). It's pretty spoiler light, there's not a lot that hasn't already been shown in the game trailers or the demo, but I know there are some people who've been actively avoiding any information, so consider yourselves warned.



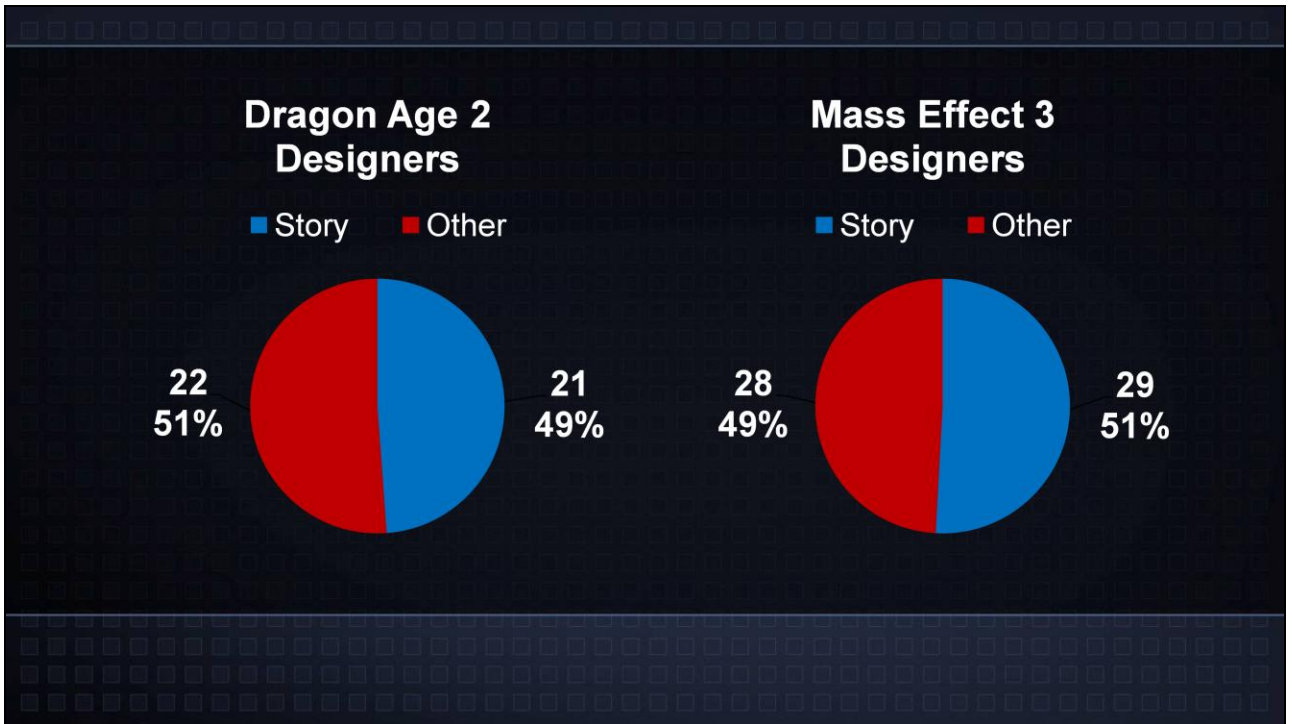
As most of you already know, story is a very important part of BioWare games.





Create the best **story-driven** and  
**emotionally engaging** games in  
the world.

Our goal at BioWare is to create the best story-driven and emotionally engaging games in the world.



To that end, BioWare has a lot of storytellers. If you look at the design team for Dragon Age 2 or Mass Effect 3, you can see that half of the designers on the project are dedicated to creating and telling the story through writing, editing, and cinematics (the other designers are combat, level, and systems designers).



When I talk about cinematics, I'm not just talking about pre-rendered cutscenes for the big, action-packed moments in the game. Every single line of a conversation is a cutscene as well. BioWare is a bit different from other studios in that we have two cinematic teams.

The cinematic animation team creates biggest and most complex moments in the game. Scenes like the epic battle scenes in Dragon Age...



...and the giant space combat sequences in Mass Effect...



They create many of the character driven scenes, such as the introductions to your possible companion characters.





As well as many of the highly choreographed combat sequences and ambient creature kill scenes.



Cinematic designers work on the interactive conversations and cutscenes in the game and create these scenes using a massive library of animations.



We work closely with the writers to develop the narrative flow of the game and we design the tools for generating and iterating on massive amounts of interactive cinematics.



Between the two cinematic teams, we create over 30 hours of custom cinematic content for an average BioWare game.





# Story ⇨ Content ⇨ Experience

**BioWARE**

Here's a very basic model of production for creating the story and cinematics in the game. The writers create the story, content teams then create the various assets needed to tell that story, and then the cinematic teams put it all together to create the cinematic experience. We'll refer back to this model throughout the session.



# CONTRAST

“The state of being strikingly different from something else, typically something in juxtaposition or close association.”



**BIOWARE**

So first let's take a closer look and contrast and context.. how they work, why they're important, and how they're used to create meaning and shape an experience.

The picture on the right is one of my favorite pieces of concept art from Dragon Age and I think it's a great example of contrast. In the same image we see light and dark, life and death, gentleness and brutality. It grabs your attention and feels meaningful, it's easy to imagine the story here.

But why does contrast get our attention?



Because like it or not, we are hard wired to notice contrast or change in our environment. From an evolutionary perspective, it's really a survival instinct as contrast often means danger.

Seeing the orange lion in the field...



Hearing the snapping twig in the dead of night...



or the smell of smoke in the air could mean the difference between life and death. It's a good thing; it's a built in "spidey-sense", and we use this attention to contrast all the time.



High Contrast is great at getting your attention. It can be used to make your make your game stand out and pop off the shelf.

In print media this contrast occurs all at once, but once you're watching a film or playing a game the rules of contrast change a bit. The contrast or change occurs over a longer period of time. Audiences like to see characters undergo transformative change or change the world or people around them over the course of the narrative. We love seeing characters get thrown into unfamiliar roles, struggle to adapt and survive, and learn something in the process.





## Contrast > Polarity

When talking about contrast or change over time in narrative, I like to think of it in terms of polarity. Polarity is still about the difference between two things, but it takes that contrast or change and applies it to a two-dimensional coordinate system. So we have positive and negative polarities and these could be anything.

**EVIL** ← → **GOOD**

Contrast > Polarity

Good vs. Evil



**DARK**



**LIGHT**

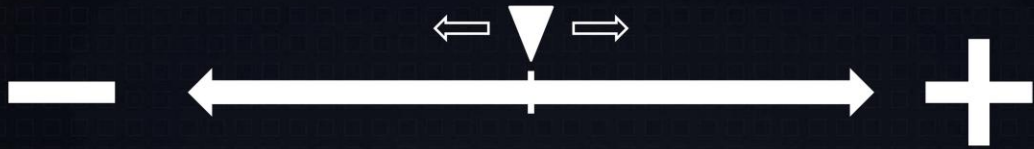
Contrast > Polarity

And Light side vs. dark side are some polar opposites that people are familiar with.



Contrast> Polarity

Polarities don't have to fit the pattern of good and bad, they just have to be different. Up vs. Down, Left vs Right, and A vs B would all work too.



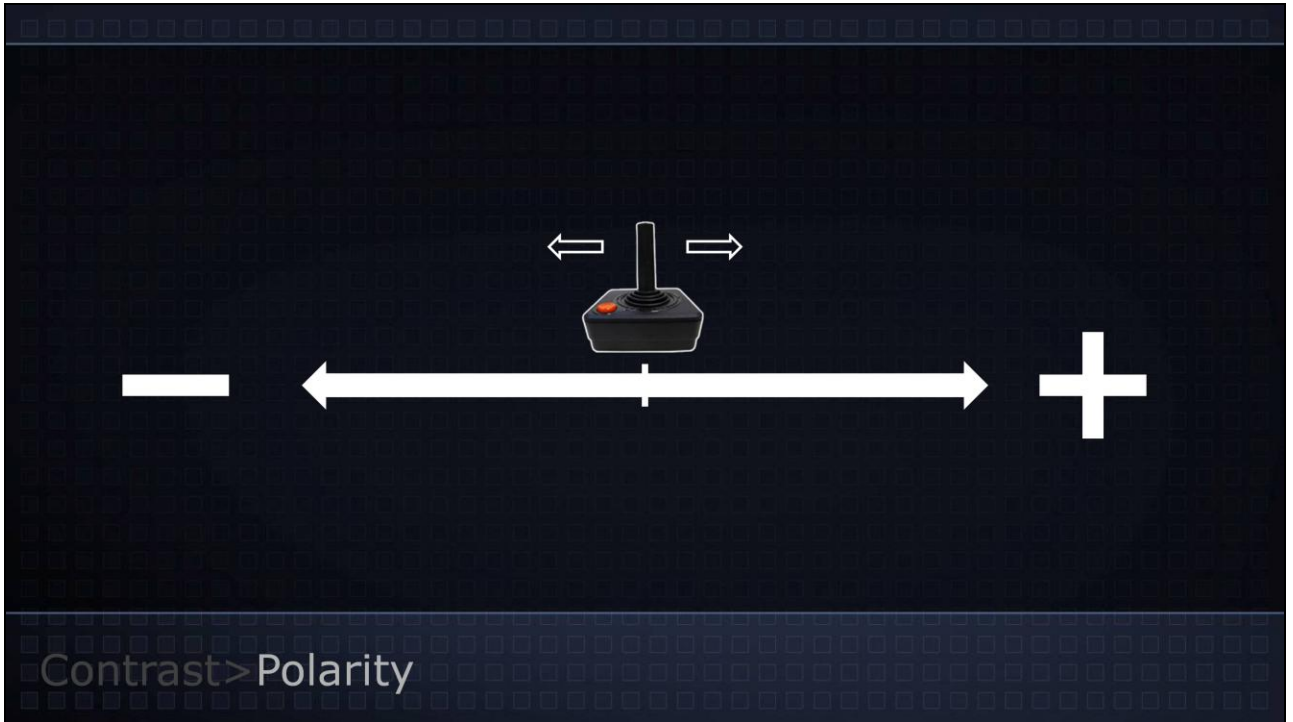
Contrast > Polarity

Visualizing contrast with a polarized system makes it easier to see the movement over time. Polarity create conflict or struggle between two opposing forces and allows us to see not just that a character is changing, but that they are changing in a direction, moving towards or away from a state of being.





And by changing the chart a little bit, we can track movement between polarities over time.



As players, we like to be the ones driving the change. We want to choose how to play, what side to align ourselves with, who lives and who dies. We want to be the ones who are driving change in our characters and the world around us.



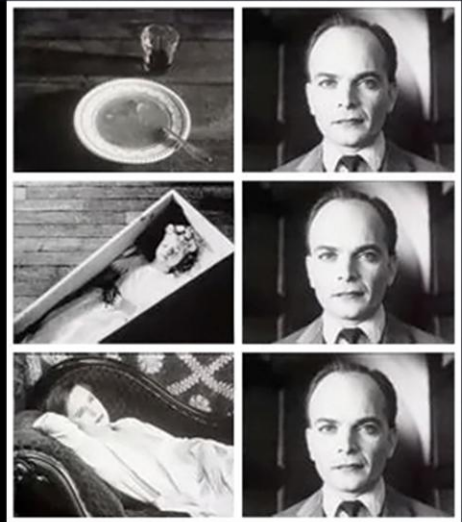
Polarities are an important part of all narratives. It allows us to create characters with unique personalities, beliefs, and values. It's that difference that creates conflict, and conflict motivates a need for change through action.



The struggle between polar opposite forces creates the suspense and drama that holds us captive as an audience. Who's right, who's going to win, what happens next?

# CONTEXT

“The set of circumstances or facts that surround a particular event, usually influencing its meaning or effect.”



**BiOWARE**

Now let's take a closer look at context. Whenever someone asks what a certain word means, the response is usually "what's the context?" , meaning "what's around it?" because that can have an effect on the actual meaning.

The Kuleshov Effect is a classic example in film of how context can influence the meaning of an experience.





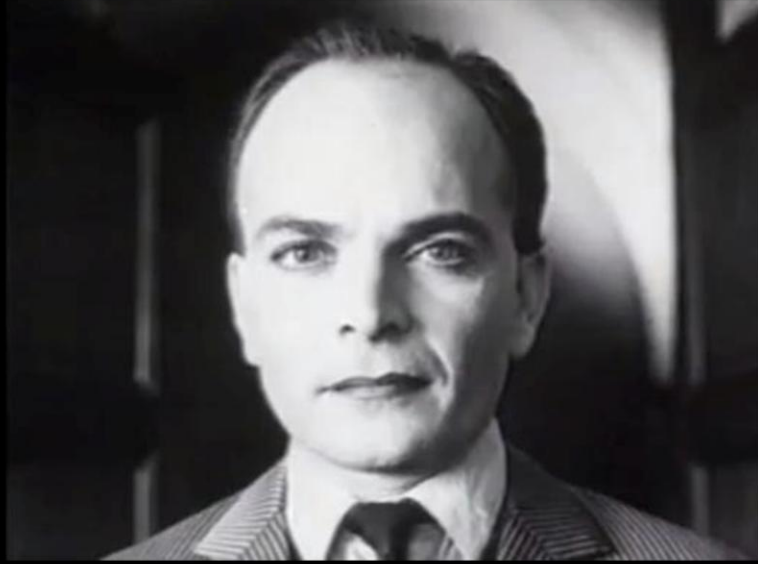
In this experiment the Russian filmmaker Lev Kuleshov first showed a bowl of soup...



... then an actor's face



A child in a coffin...



...then the actor's face



A woman lying in a seductive pose...





...then the actor's face.

The audience was then asked to comment on the actor's performance. Audiences who watched this experiment raved about it... "What an amazing actor! What a subtly magnificent performance! You could see how hungry he was when he saw the bowl of soup, how sad he was when he saw the dead child, and the lust in his eyes when he saw the woman!" In reality, each shot of the actor was the same every time. Audience perception of the actor's performance and what it meant was heavily influenced by the surrounding content.

The **CONTEXT** of an experience can  
hold more meaning than the  
**CONTENT** of an experience.

The Kuleshov Experiment demonstrated that the **CONTEXT** of an experience can hold more meaning than the **CONTENT** of an experience.



The effect itself might have been hard to see in the previous example, so I'll show you a slightly more modern example of this effect as demonstrated by Alfred Hitchcock.



TRANSCRIPT:

"Now the third way is what one might call "pure" cinematics. The assembly of film and how it can be changed to create a different idea.

Now we have a close up, then we show what he sees. Let's assume he saw a woman holding a baby in her arms.

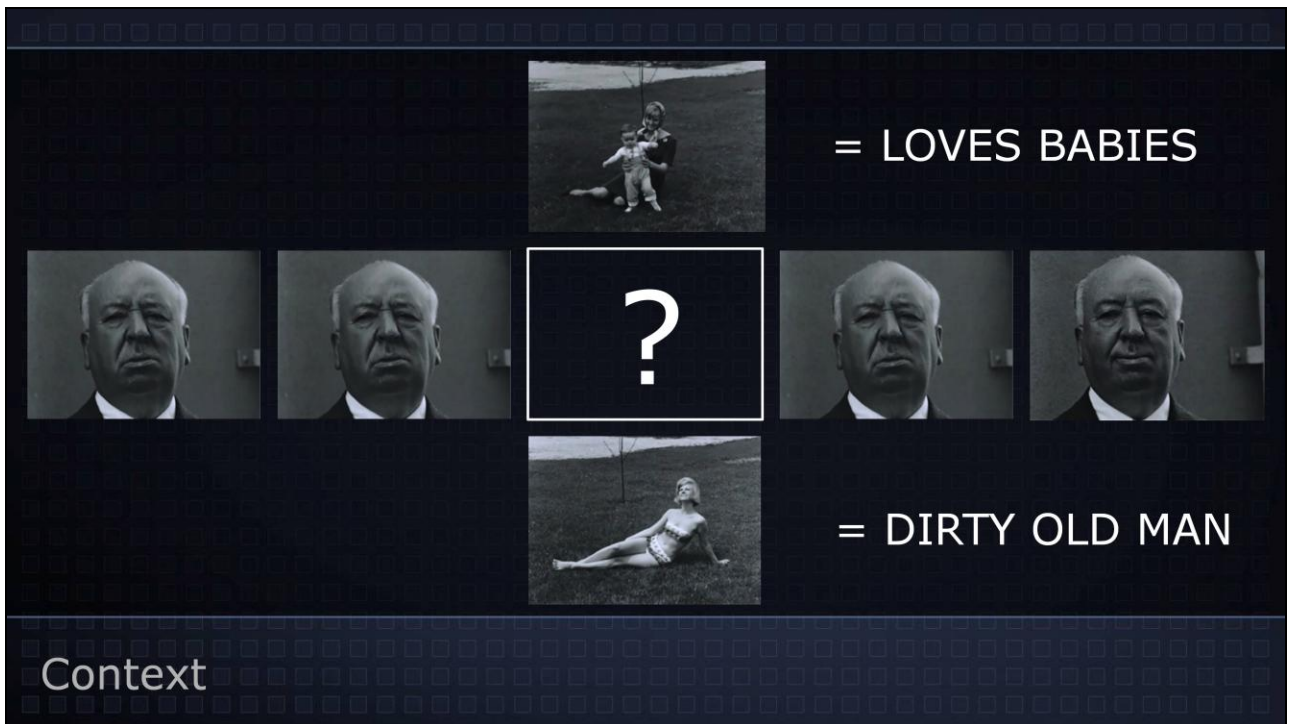
Now we cut back to his reaction to what he sees, and he smiles.

Now what is he as a character? He's a kindly man, he's sympathetic.

Now let's take the middle piece of film away, the woman with the child, but leave his two pieces of film as they were. Now we'll put in a piece of film of a girl in a bikini.

He looks... girl in a bikini... he smiles. What is he now? A dirty old man. He's no longer the benign gentleman who loves babies.

That's the difference... that's what film can do for you."



This is a great example of how changing one shot in a larger sequence of shots can change the meaning of the entire sequence. We do this a lot in BioWare games, swapping in shots or sequences that are influenced by your previous decisions, creating a more meaningful experience for the player

We'll talk about some additional forms of context in a bit, but the important thing to keep in mind here is that we can manipulate the order or context of events to enhance meaning or even create meaning that would not be there otherwise.





Story ⇨ Content ⇨ Experience

**BiOWARE**

Now that we've covered the basics of contrast and contest, let's take a look at how we can apply contrast and context to improve story our games.



Contrast and context can be used as creative tools when developing a strong narrative theme for your game and to fill out your world with characters and missions that explore a wide range of issues and perspectives. You can then throw the player in and let them choose how to align themselves in the narrative possibility space you've created.



# THEMES

The first thing we do when working on a new game is identify the key themes of the game or story. If your game is more than a bunch of mechanics holding hands, what do you want it to say? If your game has a story, what do you want it to mean? This can be hard, but it's important to establish these themes as early as possible so they can help inform design further down the line.



VS

Story > Themes

An easy way to start thinking of themes is to think along the lines of “something vs. something”.



Like the Grey Wardens vs. the Darkspawn



## Or the Galaxy vs. the Reapers

Once you've established the major players, think about what each side represents. If your game is about a conflict between two people or forces, what is it that they're in disagreement over? What beliefs, ideals, or background do each side represent? These can be deeper or more abstract themes that don't have to fit into the pattern of good and evil, or right and wrong.



Innocence

Free Will

Chaos

VS

Authority

Determinism

Order

Story > Themes

For example, in Mass Effect 3 humanity represents innocence, free will, and a force of chaos in the universe.

The reapers represent authority, determinism, and restoring order to the universe.

We then support these themes with content, starting with the very first scene in Mass Effect 3. Let's take a look.



Video: Opening scene of Mass Effect 3



We start with a boy playing with his toy ship, but it's more than that. This is the only child we've ever seen in the Mass Effect series!

He stands out by contrast and seems important. That's because this boy represents humanity. Young and innocent, with his whole life ahead of him to make his own decisions, to shape his own destiny.



And then we cut to Shepard watching. It's very similar to the Hitchcock clip we watched. She looks down on him playing and she smiles. So what does that say about her as a character? It shows she loves humanity, and that she wants to protect it.



And we see this after the reapers attack, as Shepard tries to coax the boy out of a vent...



... and later sees the boy boarding a transport out of the city. By this point it's clear that this boy and what he represents is what you'll spend the rest of the game fighting for.





We explored similar themes in Dragon Age 2.

Free Will  
Individual  
Freedom

VS

Fate  
Community  
Security

Story > Themes

Themes like fate vs. free will, being an individual versus being part of a larger community, and the balance between freedom and security.



VS

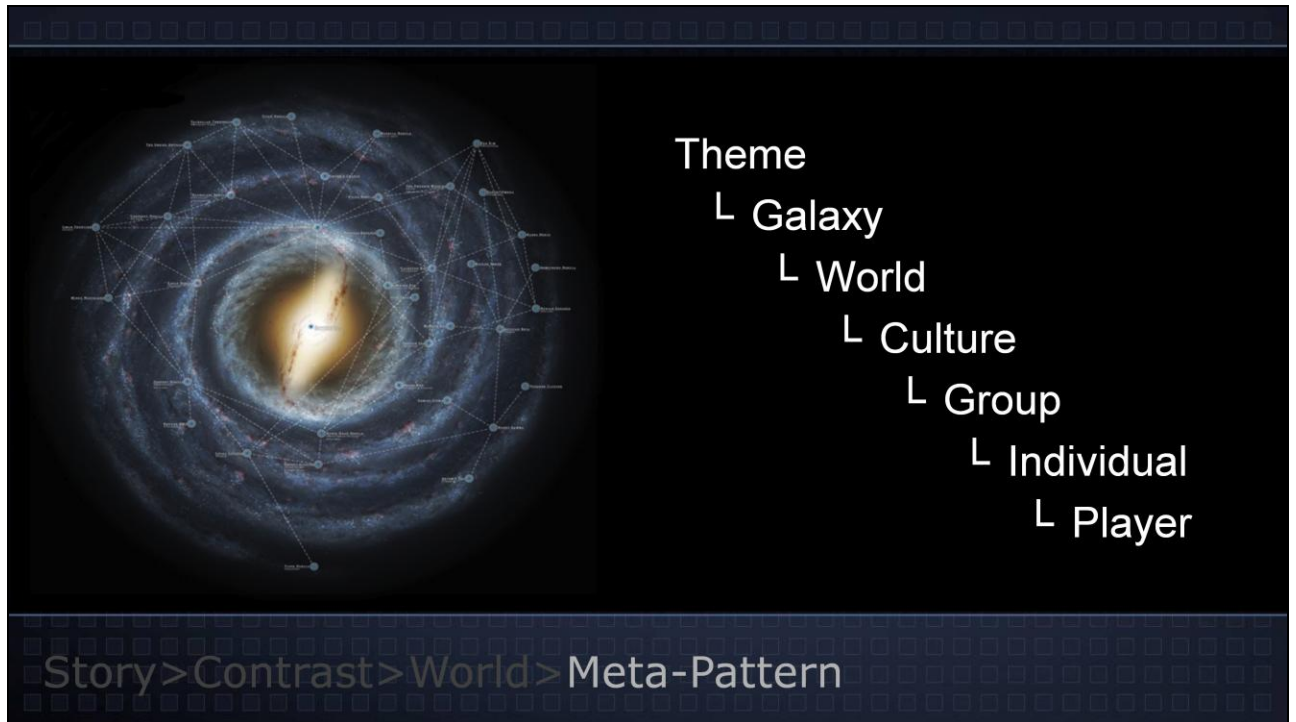
Story > Themes

So look at your game, think about what the different sides are and what they represent, when establishing the major conflicts and story themes of your game.



# WORLD

We use contrast and context when creating the world of our games.



Contrast or Polarity is a meta-pattern; it exists on multiple levels. So think about all of them when building an IP or story! Even if conflicts or struggles on certain levels aren't central to the game, they can be extremely useful for creating context, to help explain the state of the world you've developed or why a character behaves as they do.



You could have polarized states of reality. In Mass Effect, Shepard is fighting a war in the real world





But also explores her subconscious in her dreams...



On a galaxy level in Mass Effect, the entire galaxy is engaged in a war between Reapers and Everyone Else



Within that galaxy, there is polarized conflict between different worlds. For example between the Krogans and Salarians.



Within every world, there is conflict between different groups. For example, between the mages and templars in Dragon Age 2.



There is polarization within every group or organization.  
Mages in DA2 could be blood mages, apostates, or part of the Circle of Magi.





The individuals that compose every group represent various polarities. In our games, every companion character stands for or against something. There are many different personalities represented and clashes in goals, beliefs, and character are inevitable.

The banter between the different character combinations in the Dragon Age games is so entertaining because it draws so heavily on the differences between characters for comedic effect.



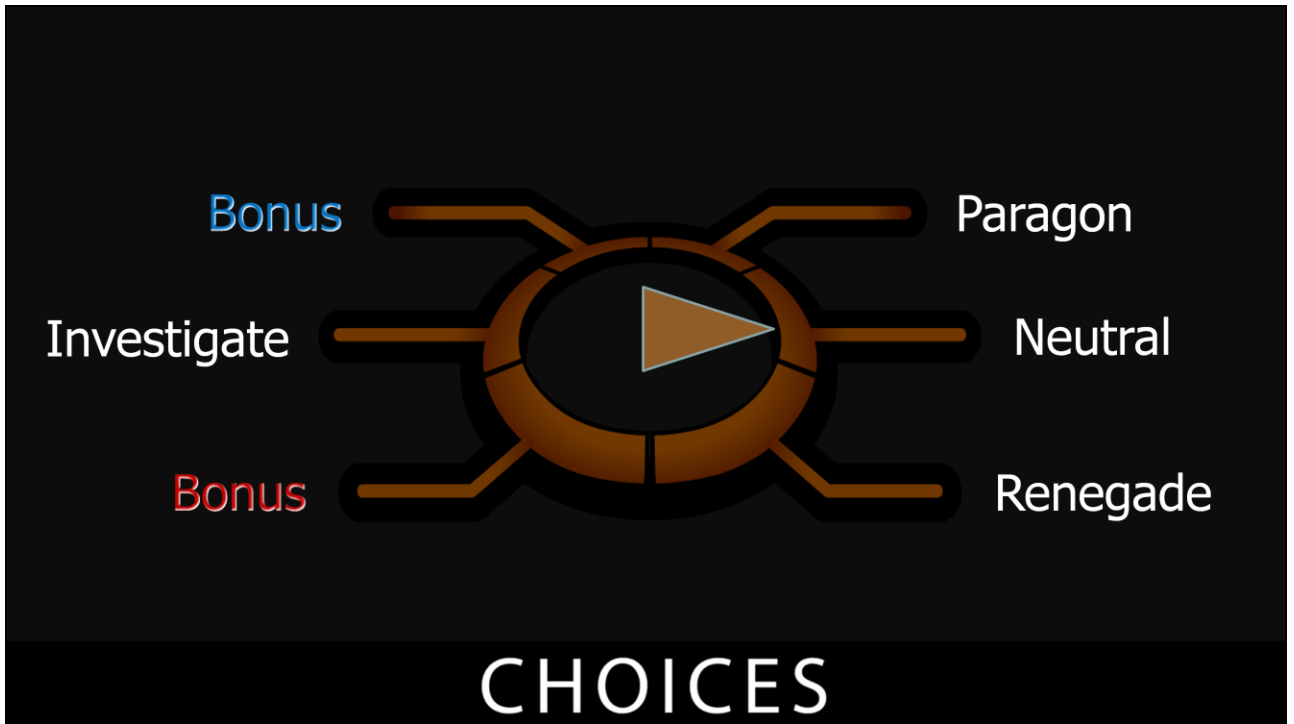


There is conflict within every individual. Fenris hates mages, but he also hates slavers, so what does he do when he sees mages being enslaved?

Within an individual there can be a struggle between revenge and forgiveness, love and hate, trust and suspicion for example.



Polarized conflict exists within the player as well. Who to support or oppose? Who lives and who dies? Paragon or Renegade? We let the player influence the world around him through choice.



As much as possible, we want these choices to be meaningful and to have a real impact on the world or the people around you.

In previous Mass Effect games, the player usually had Paragon, Neutral, and Renegade options on the right side of the wheel when making a choice in conversation. We love giving players choices, but the neutral response was essentially the “meh” of the conversation wheel. It didn’t do anything to shift the player towards one side of the polarized conflict.



One difference you'll notice in Mass Effect 3 is that in most cases that middle option is gone. In this game there is a lot at stake, there are hard choices to be made and you're no longer allowed to sit on the fence. The interesting thing is that even with this option removed, it feels more like a role-playing experience than ever before. Choices are harder and have real consequence.



While the player has control over the polar alignment of their own character, it's interesting to see the effects the player's actions can have on the companion characters in the game. Every one of these characters has a unique collection of attributes, behaviors, and values that define them as a character. While these don't change much over the course of the narrative, the choices you make as a player can influence your relationships with these characters.





## Story>Contrast>Relationships

In Dragon Age: Origins your followers had very clear opinions on what was right or wrong and when you were faced with making a major decision, they'd chime in and let you know what they thought.





## Story>Contrast>Relationships

After making a choice, you'd receive approval or disapproval points from each follower in your party based on whether they agreed with you or not. High approval improved that follower's combat performance in the game and opened the door to pursuing a romantic relationship with some characters. Followers with low approval might leave your party.



The player's relationship with Leliana was a great example of how different things could be.

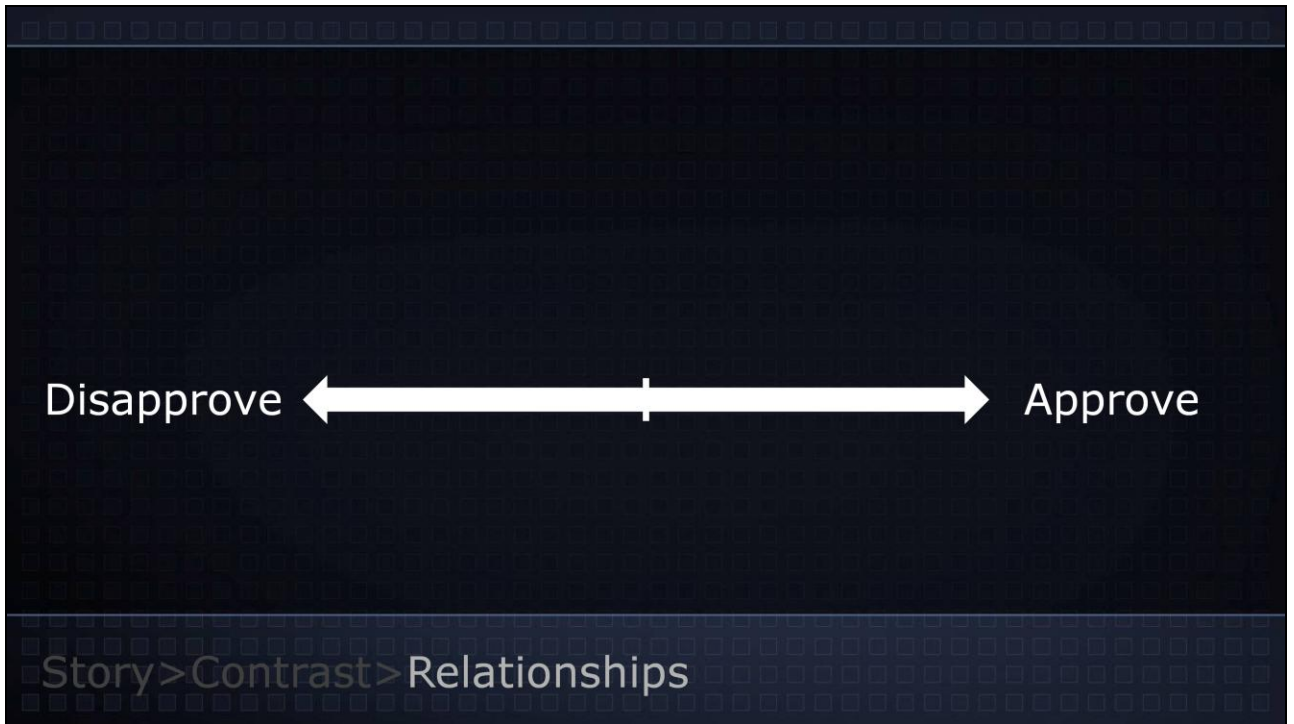
Leliana and I were in love. I had maxed out her approval rating and was romancing her. But in the Temple of Sacred Ashes, I made one decision she disagreed with so strongly she attacked me in a fight to the death! I had to kill her!

Oh no, what have I done!

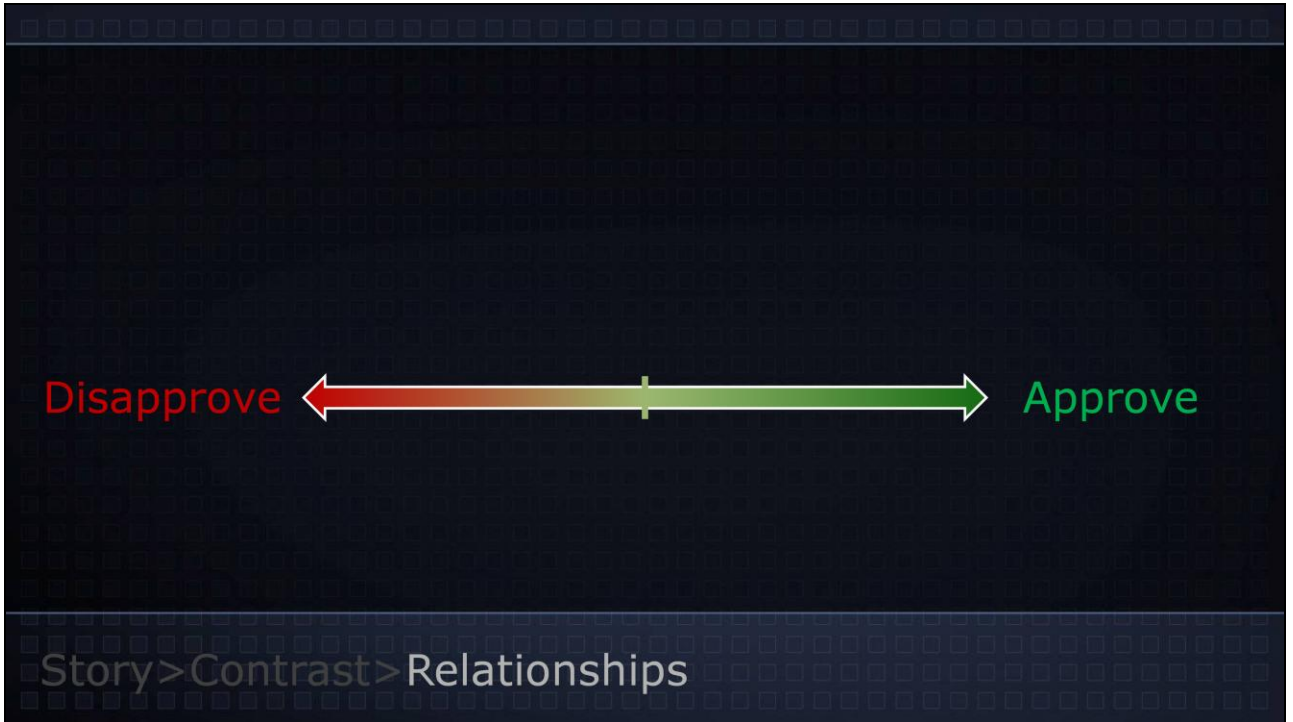


## Story > Contrast > Relationships

It's a great example of contrastive juxtaposition in narrative to create an emotional reaction in the player. The rapid shift from friend to enemy or from alive to dead creates an emotional experience.



We presented the approval system as a polarized system, and it was very clear to the player.



Disapproval is bad, Approval is good. The system worked well.



## Story>Contrast>Relationships

But some players felt like the system limited the choices they could make. Everyone wanted their followers to have high approval ratings, so in some cases felt like they had to make the choices their followers would approve of instead of the choices they wanted to make. Or that they had to only take along the followers whose values were most similar to theirs. We wanted players to feel free to make the choices they wanted to make, so we changed the approval system a bit for Dragon Age 2.

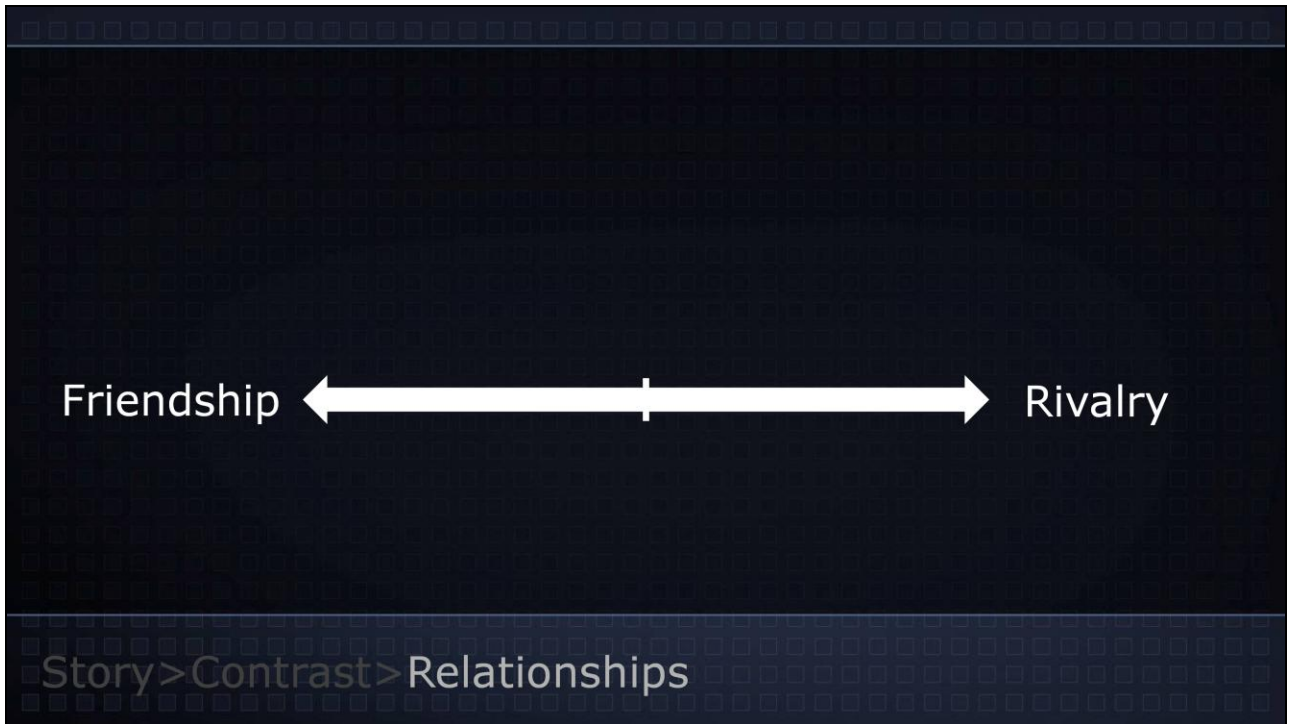




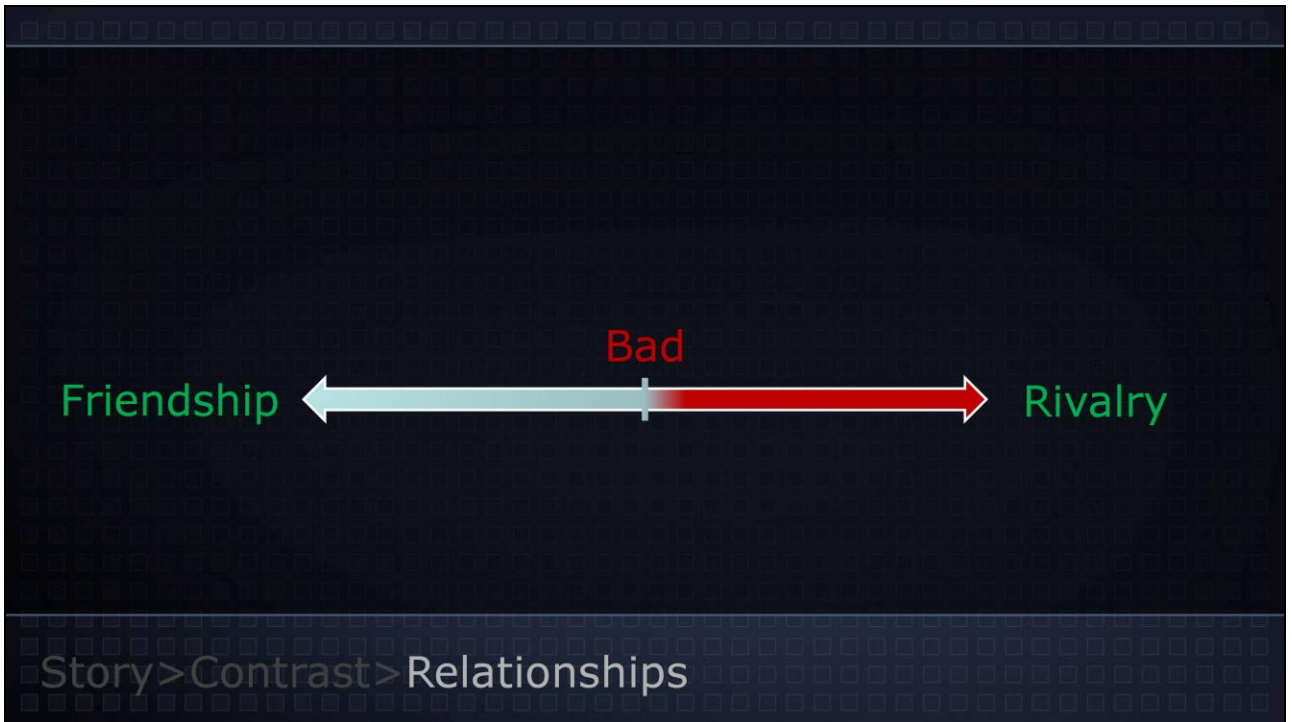
In Dragon Age 2, we switched to a friendship and rivalry system. The idea was very similar.. followers' polarities would move towards friend or rival based on whether they agreed with your actions or not. The difference was that rivalry was not bad.

Achieving a high rivalry value triggered a dramatic conversation where the player and follower would hash out their difference, improving their relationship as a result.

High friendship and high rivalry were both good, but players were used to the old system and assumed that rivalry was bad. Looking back at it, it's easy to understand why.



We presented it as a polarized system, with friendship and rivalry on opposite sides.

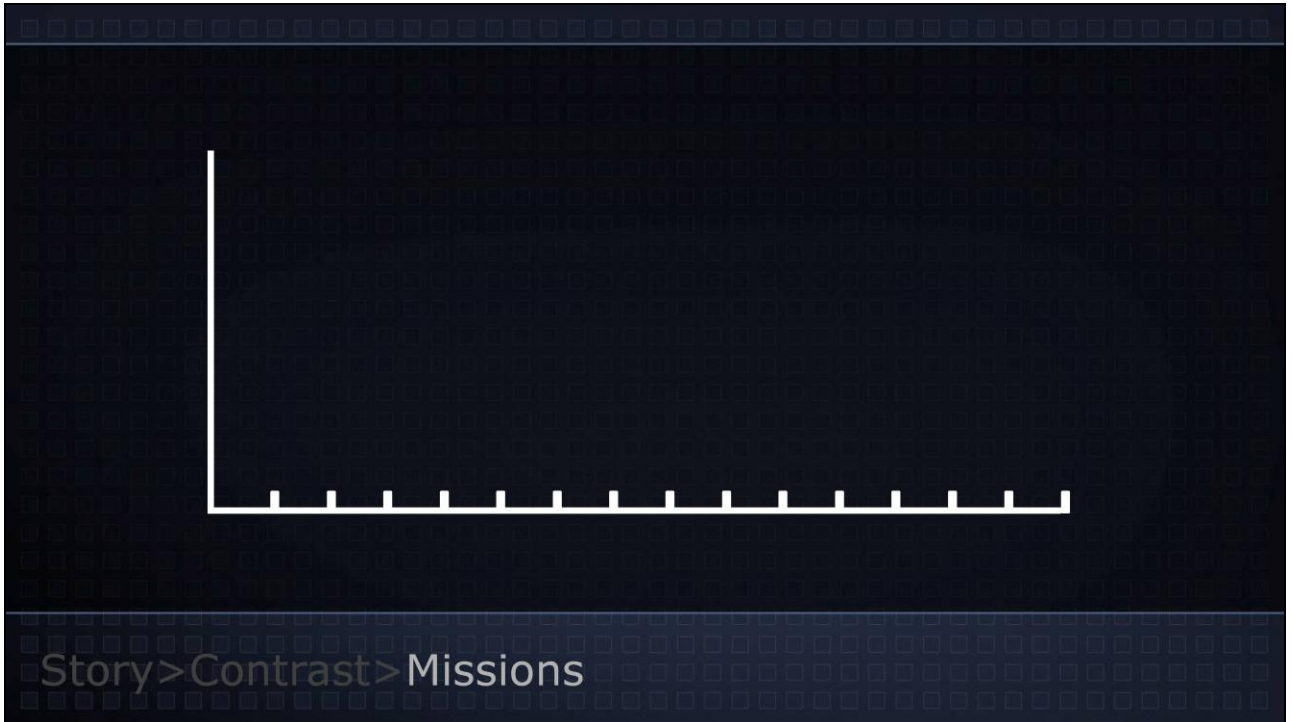


But it wasn't clear that friendship and rivalry were both good, and it was sitting in the middle that was bad.

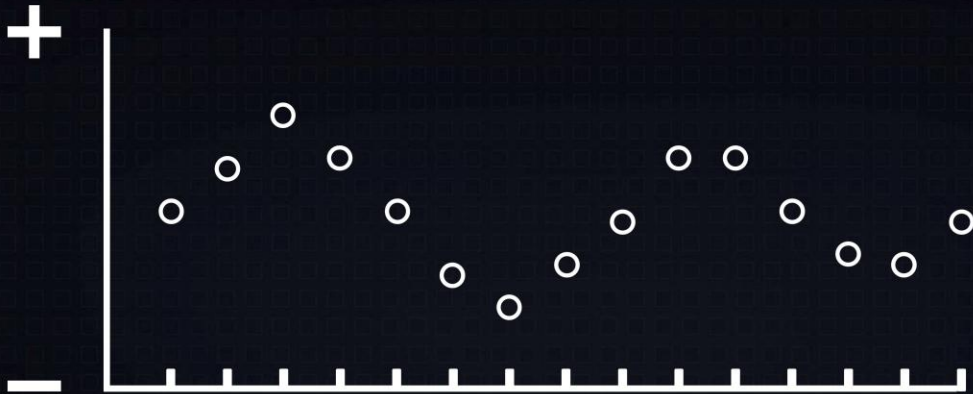
When creating polarized systems, make it clear to your player what the different sides are and do, especially if the system has changed from previous versions.



We use contrast when designing the missions or quests in our games.



Once you know the plot of a mission, a great exercise is to map out the narrative beats, as seen on the bottom in this image.

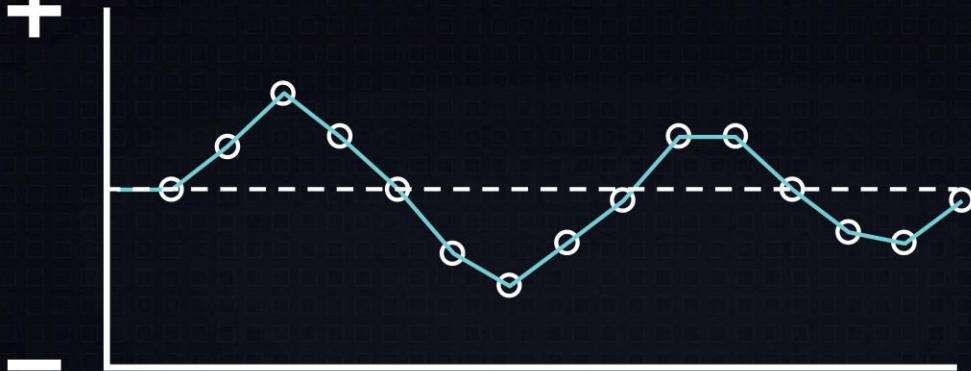


## Story > Contrast > Missions

Pick any of your polarities and think about which side you want the player to be exposed to at each of those narrative beats. Whether it's how you want them to feel, or what side of a conflict you want to expose them to.



+



## Story>Contrast>Missions

We like to expose players to both sides of a polarized conflict before letting them choose which side to align themselves with. We try to present the player with choices that aren't good or evil, but force them to choose between shades of grey. This exercise is great for making sure each side gets proper coverage. The back and forth between polarities also helps to keep players engaged



Let's look at a mission from the middle of Mass Effect 3.

In the demo that was released last month, one of the missions involved helping Mordin escort a female Krogan out of a Salarian research facility. This female Krogan has a unique genetic trait that might help create a cure for the Genophage. In a later mission, you must help get the female Krogan to the Shroud facility where Mordin can create the cure and release it into the atmosphere to cure the Genophage. Before setting off to do the mission however, you receive a message informing you that there is a way to sabotage the cure in such a way that the Krogan will not know. The Krogan will think the cure worked and give you their support in the war against the Reapers, and the Genophage will still be in place. You don't have to decide yet, so at this point you know you have two options.

**SABOTAGE**

**ASSIST**



Story > Contrast > Missions

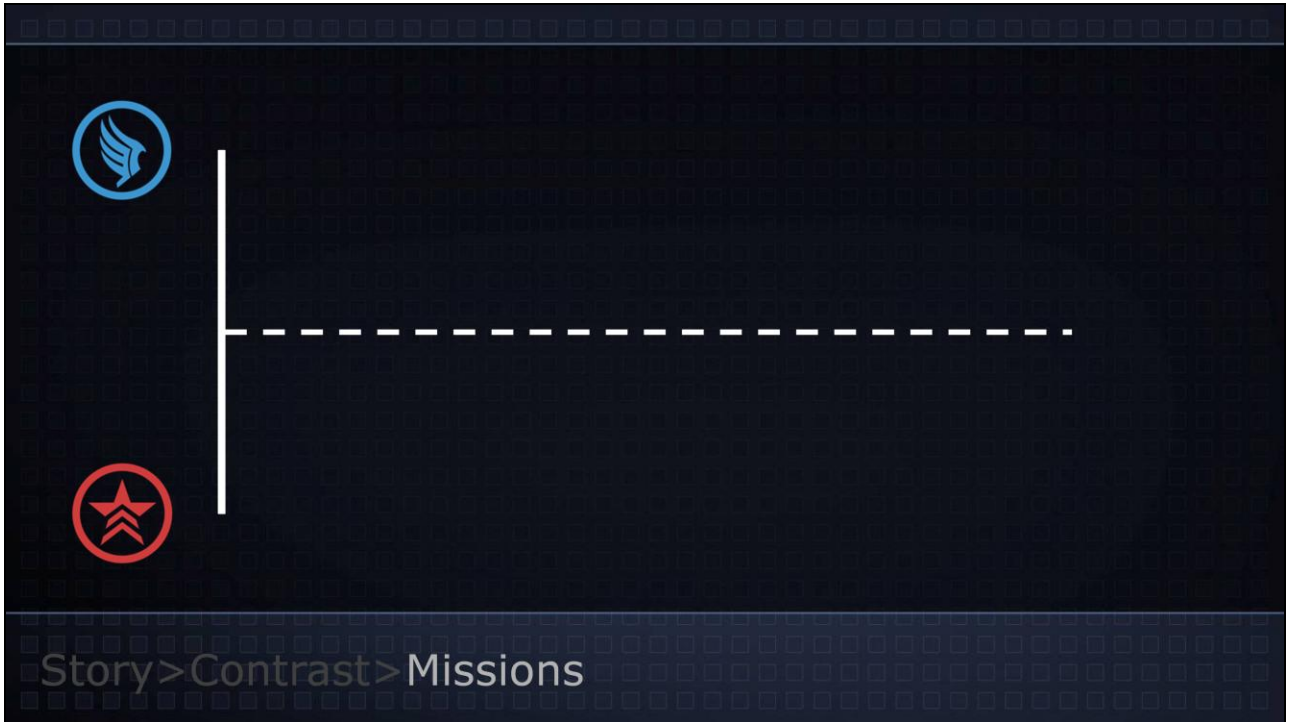
Sabotage the cure, or assist the Krogan and end the Genophage.



To make it easier to charting this out on our narrative map, we'll put actions and events that support sabotaging the cure on the bottom, and actions or events that support assisting the group and releasing the cure on the top.



These roughly map out to renegade and paragon options, so we'll represent the different sides with these icons.



These roughly map out to renegade and paragon options, so we'll represent the different sides with these icons.

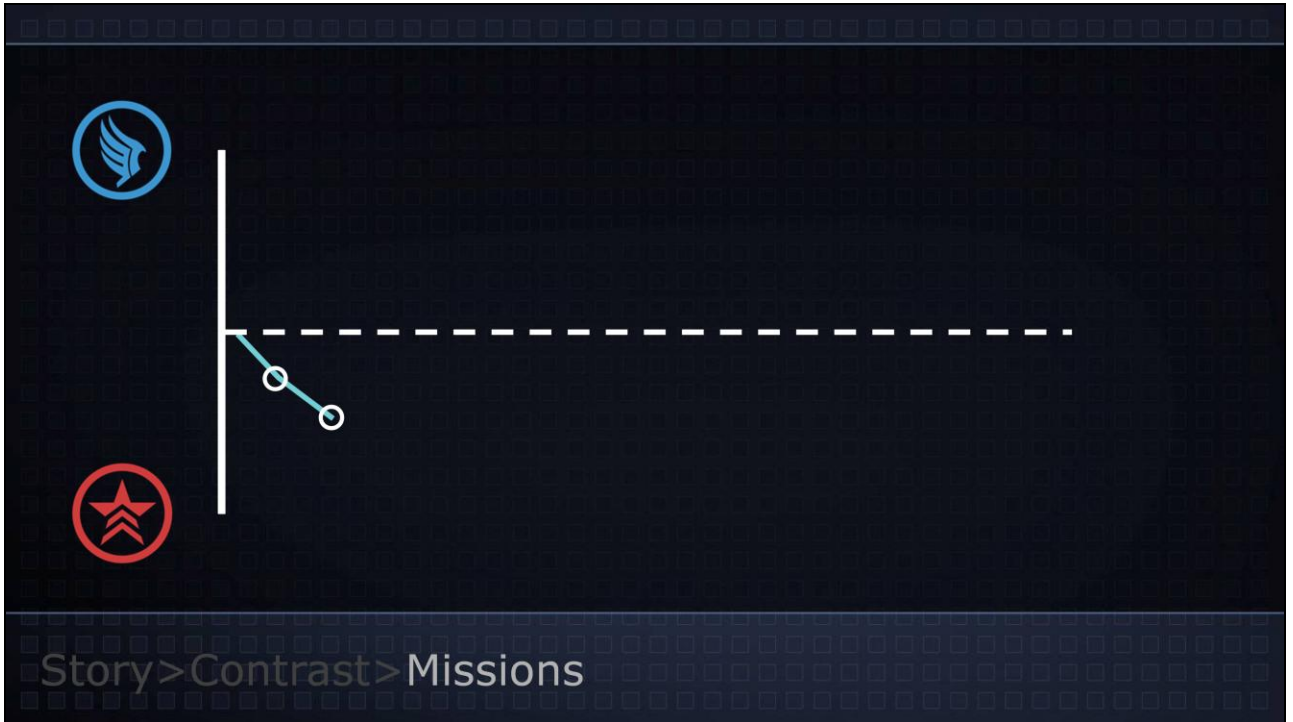




While on the way to the rendezvous point the Krogan leader Wreav says "after today, Krogan superiority will be obvious to everyone." The mission has barely even started and Wreav seems to already be planning his revenge and Krogan dominance.



You meet up with some other Krogan clans and they immediately start fighting with each other. You see how cruel and vicious they are to each other.



Not off to a good start, maybe sabotaging the cure isn't such a bad idea.



But then the female Krogan shows up and stops the fighting.  
The groups unite.



You load up and roll out and now the music is inspiring! Let's do this thing! On the ride there, the female Krogan tells Wreav that the Krogan need a leader that doesn't seek war. The Krogan spread war across the galaxy before and the Genophage was the result. The Krogans must learn from the mistakes of their ancestors or be doomed to share their fate.



Wow! Maybe all the Krogan need is a strong female to keep them in check! I see now how helping them could be a good thing.





But Wreav's not buying it... he's still determined to seek revenge on the Salarians.



And looking around, you can see what happened when the Krogans grew tired of a peaceful life and started nuclear wars with each other, destroying their world long before the Salarisians implemented the Genophage.



Hmmm...



But we also show the player that the Krogans were once a peaceful and advanced society, they weren't always creatures of war. You can see this in their architecture...



And their art. There's a sense of wonder and history here and you can imagine how things were long ago.



There's a lot more that I won't spoil, but you can see how we expose the player to both sides of an internal polarizing conflict through the world and the characters before we make them choose how to align themselves.





Eventually you get to the Shroud and must make a decision. You've seen how vicious and vengeful these Krogan can be, how they've waged wars against others and even themselves. But you've also seen how hard they've fought for their future, what they had been and could be again, how a strong female just might inspire them to a peaceful greatness once again.



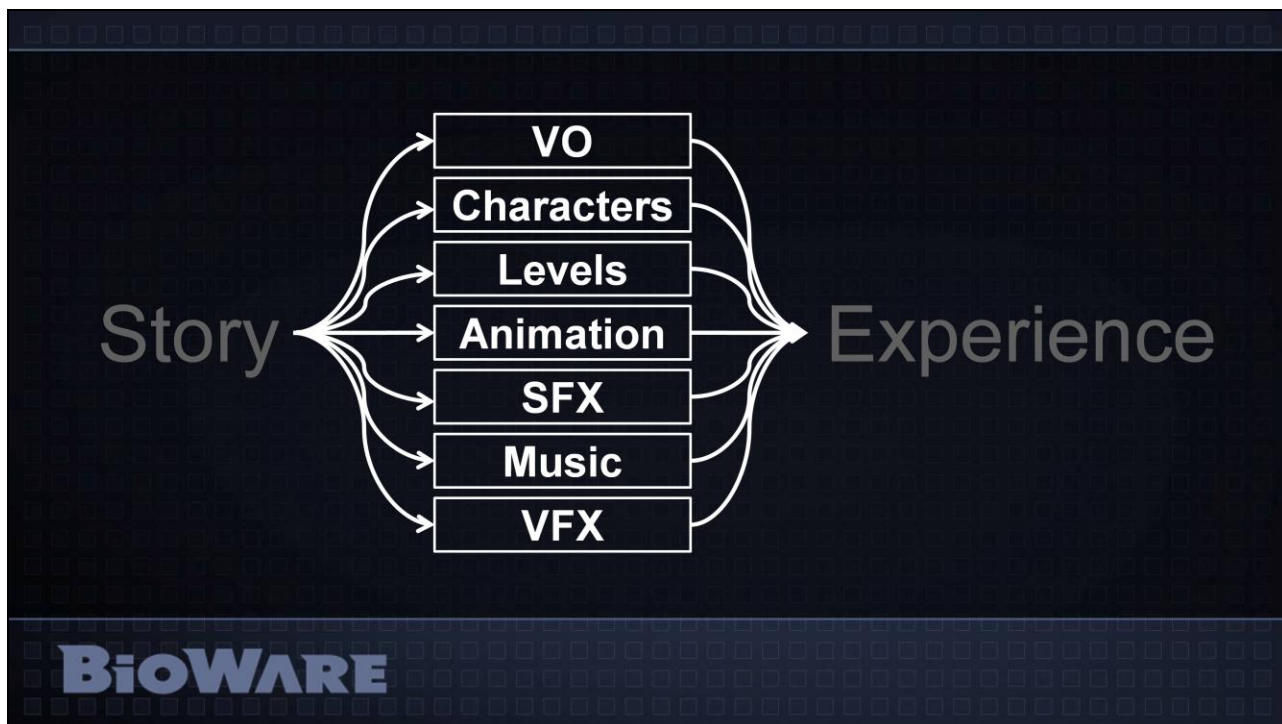
And you now have a narrative map that can be used when working with the content teams and can start thinking about how you can use various content to support both sides.



Story ⇨ Content ⇨ Experience

**BiOWARE**

Once you've established the high level story themes and polarities, you want to create content that supports them. This is about creating a language with visuals and audio to develop unique identities for the different sides of a conflict, or for the various people and places you'll encounter over the course of the game. You also want to think about how the visual or audio design can change over the course of the narrative to provide feedback to the player about the state of the world and how it's reacting to the player's actions.



When I talk about content, I'm talking about creating the VO, characters, levels, animations, sound effects, music, and visual effects.

At this point good communication is essential. This process can be a bit like the game of telephone. The message is clear in the story, but once the story moves to the content teams and starts moving through the different pipelines and workflows, the original message can get lost or diluted. It's sometimes the case that when we assemble all the content to create the cinematics, the assets aren't all telling the same story. Maybe the tone of the VO or the music doesn't fit the scene, or a character's appearance doesn't accurately reflect their personality.



A great example of this is the character Larius from the Dragon Age 2 Legacy DLC. Larius was a Grey Warden commander who went off on his calling to the deep roads to die fighting darkspawn. But he didn't die... he became corrupted enough that the darkspawn left him alone and he just wandered around slowly losing his mind.

Everyone felt they understood the character, so someone went off and recorded mocap, someone else recorded the VO, and another team created the character. It wasn't until we put everything together that we realized how different everyone's idea of this character was. The way he looked, moved, acted, and sounded were all completely different! He ran around like a young monkey, sounded like a crazy wheezing geezer, and looked like a nuclear fallout victim. So we had to go and rerecord the mocap, rerecord the VO, and change the character model. How could we have prevented this? Surely more documentation right?

# TL;DR

(Too Long; Didn't Read)

## Content > Planning

Sometimes excessive documentation is one of the problems. We're occasionally guilty of writing plot summaries and narrative overviews that read like George R. R. Martin wrote a "Choose Your Own Adventure" book. I once made the mistake of printing these overviews out and the resulting stack of papers was overwhelming.



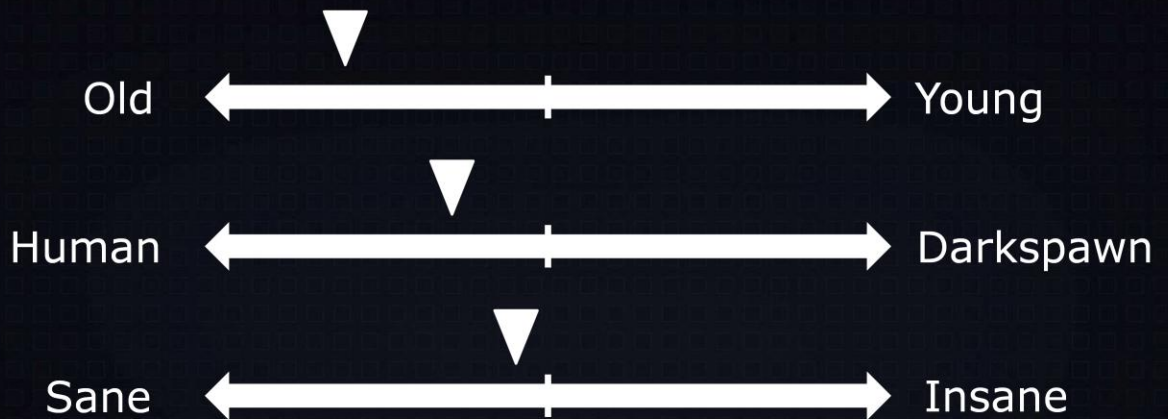
# TL;DR

(Too Long; Didn't Read)



## Content > Planning

Most developers aren't going to read that stack of papers and in many cases remain unaware of the central themes of the game. This can lead to developers creating content that is "cool", but doesn't support the themes of the game as well as it could.



## Content>Planning

We could have avoided this if we had just spend 5 minutes using contrast to talk about where the character sat between different polarities. This process is really about communication and making sure everyone understands what something is and what it is not.

# STORY

Visual Audio Gameplay

Content > Planning

We want everything to support the story. The teams responsible for creating the narrative, the visuals, the audio, and the gameplay elements should all be telling the same story with their work.

Communication is obviously key here and it's not about communicating more information, but about boiling that giant stack of information down to easy to understand ideas.



VS



## Content > Planning

The idea here is to keep it simple. When communicating the story vision with the content teams, you want to be able to give them a clear idea of the polarities you want to explore in the story and then let them decide how to support those narrative polarities with audio, visual, or gameplay polarities.



Artists can use visual polarities to support the narrative themes.

Going back to the basics of visual design, it's very much along the lines of "Does the villain dress in black? Does the good guy wear a white hat?"

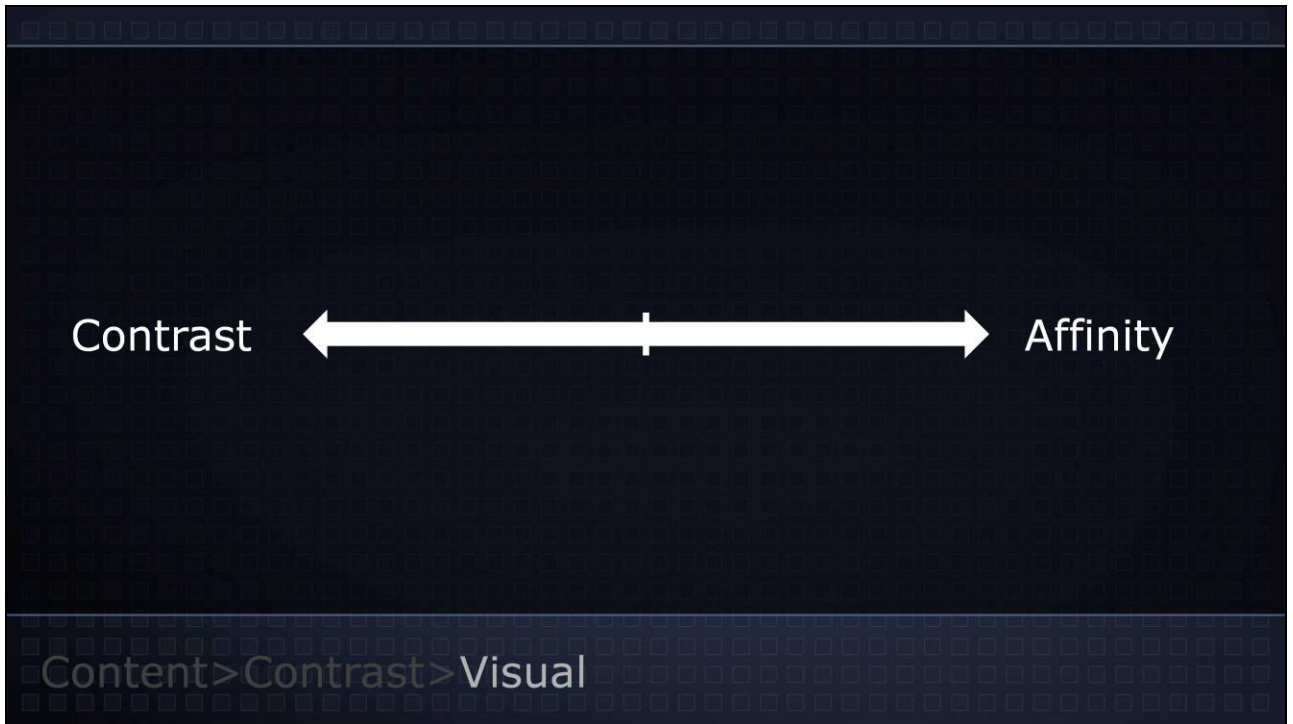
You want to be able to see a character and have a good sense of who they are and what side they represent.

- Line – Horizontal vs. Vertical
- Color – Light vs. Dark
- Shape – Square vs. Round
- Space – Deep vs. Flat
- Movement – Slow vs. Fast

Content>Contrast>Visual

Familiarize yourself with the basic components of visual design and how they can be used to tell story or convey emotion. Visual components like line, color, shape, space, and movement should all be considered when creating a character or staging a shot.





Kind of meta here, but the opposite of contrast is affinity. It's not always about making different groups look different. It's also about making respective groups look similar.



Content>Contrast>Visual

For example, we used color, shape and patterns to make the different groups or Templars or Grey Wardens look like they belong together.



In Dragon Age: Origins the Darkspawn all looked cool, but they were all so different. We wanted them to look like they belonged together...



Like a family. In Dragon Age 2 we used color and tone to make them feel more like a group that all came from the same place. Their skin is blotchy and sickly looking, visually representing the death and corruption they spread.



In Mass Effect 3, it immediately clear who the bad guys are.





Content>Contrast>Visual

Visual polarities are also great for showing character progression or for externalizing the internal qualities of a character.





If Shepard plays as a thinking, sympathetic paragon, he looks human. But when playing as a logical, unfeeling Renegade, his skin starts to split, revealing the cybernetics underneath.

I love these visual polarities because they reflect the larger "Humanity vs. Reaper" or "Humans vs. Machines" theme in the game.



Think about how color can tell a story. For example the red in this scene represents danger.



Or how the polarities of light and dark can tell a story. In this case a transition from life...



To death.

# Audio Polarities

- Volume – Soft vs. Loud
- Pitch – Low vs. High
- Speed – Slow vs. Fast
- Rhythm – Ordered vs. Chaotic

**BiOWARE**

Same thing for the audio, whether it's music, sounds effects or ambient sound design. Start by thinking about the basic components of audio, what the polarities are, and how they can be used to support the different sides of the world or stories in your game. Things like volume, pitch, speed, and rhythm.

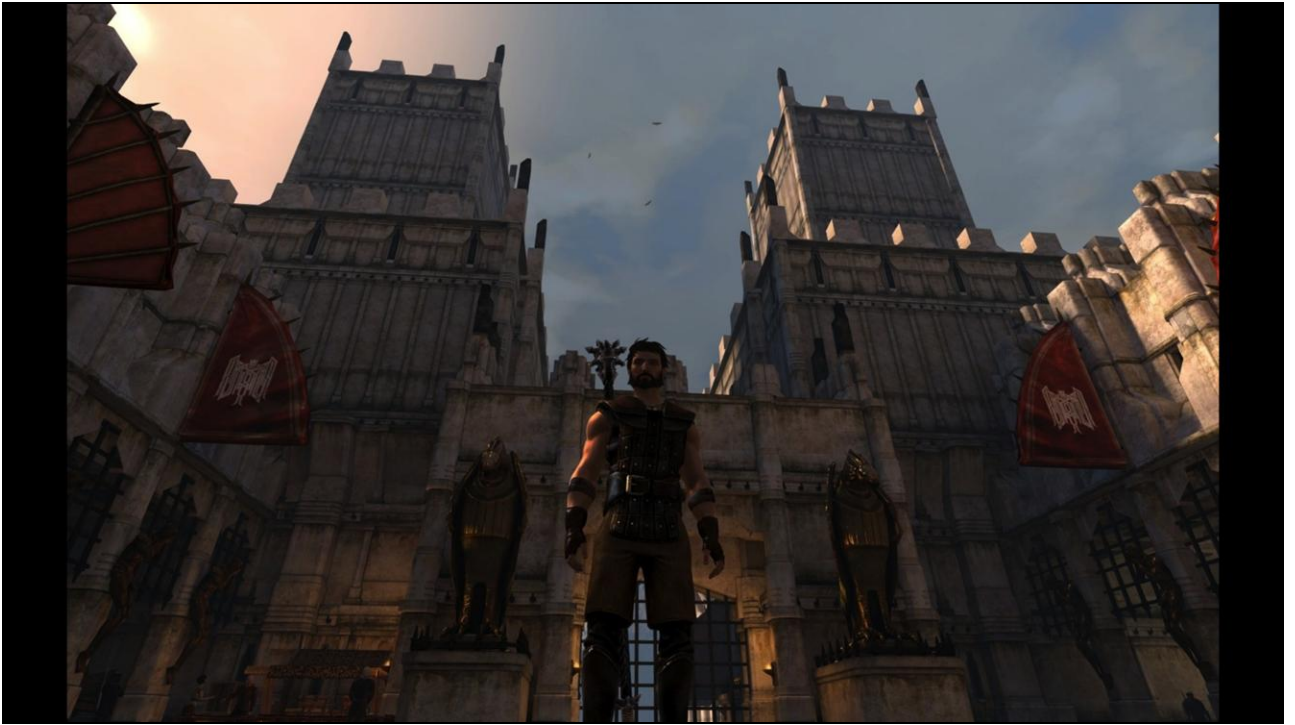


Known ←→ Unknown

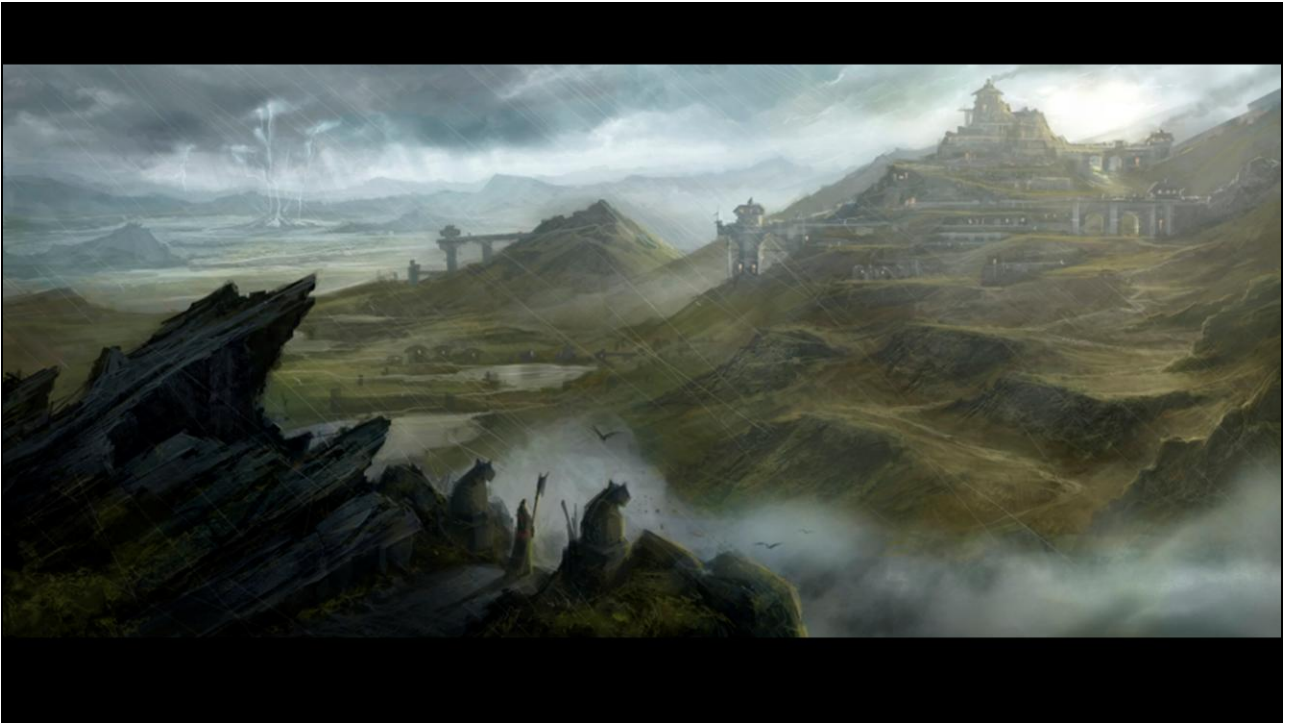
Content>Contrast>Audio

For example in Dragon Age 2, we used the polarities of Known vs. Unknown when designing the ambient sounds in a level.





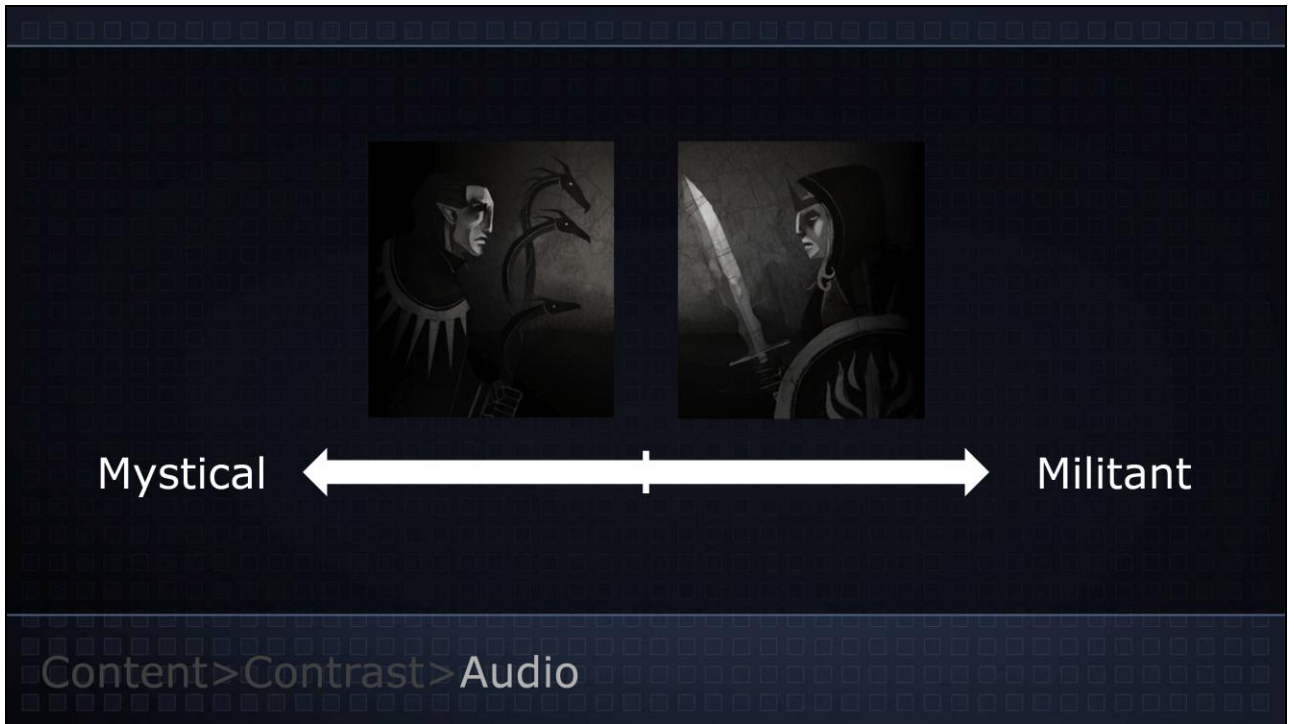
We wanted Kirkwall to feel like your home. We wanted the player to feel like it was a safe and familiar place where he belong. So when the player is running around Kirkwall the ambient sound design is full of real and familiar sounds: dogs barking, merchants shouting, kids playing. It's your home and it's full of safe and recognizable sounds.



By contrast, when you venture outside the city, these locations are full of unreal and otherworldly sounds. It creates a sense of unease and unfamiliarity. It makes these locations seem strange and dangerous in comparison.



We use contrast in the rhythm and tone of music when exposing the player to different sides of a polarized conflict. For example the Mages vs. Templars in Dragon Age 2.



The music changes as the player completes quests for the different sides. It has a mystical sound when pursuing mage-related plots, and a more militant sound when on Templar plots.



## CINEMATIC POLARITIES

I love working in cinematics because we get to assemble this great meaningful content, and then add our own layer of meaning on top. The camera can tell a story too, and it's a powerful tool in creating an experience.

- Camera Angle – Low vs. High
- DOF – Deep vs. Shallow
- Lens – Short vs. Wide
- Depth – Foreground vs. Background
- Movement – Push vs. Pull

Content>Contrast>Cinematic

The camera angle, lens, shot composition, and camera movement all tell a story. So, again, it's important to understand what the different cinematic components are and how they can be used to create meaning and support the story you're trying to tell.





The camera angle can make a character feel weak and vulnerable...



Or powerful and oppressive. In this case supporting the larger theme of Humanity vs. Reapers.



Tilting the camera can make the world seem chaotic or out of balance.



A close up is personal...



While a long shot feels detached.



And we combine these elements to create more complex emotions, in this case a feeling of isolation or detachment in a world out of balance.





## SPATIAL CONTEXT

We can also use spatial context to add meaning through environmental storytelling. In Dragon Age II, we wanted to give the followers their own space that could further reflect their personalities. Staging scenes in a specific location also gave us greater control over how we filmed the scene and allowed us to use the visual polarities discussed earlier to add additional meaning. The books and chair in Varric's space convey that he is a storyteller. Varric sitting in the chair reminds the player that Varric is also telling the story in the interrogation room in the framing narrative.



We essentially moved to the same model as Mass Effect 2 where all the followers had their own space. This is fun and a great way to work with the level artist to tell a story outside of dialog. I love Thane's room in particular... he's a reptilian badass, so we put him in this assassin's aquarium with fluorescent lights and guns everywhere.



The environment around the player can also serve to remind them of the stories and adventures they've had so far.



Story ⇨ Content ⇨ Experience

**BiOWARE**

So now that you've used contrast and context to create your story and create content that supports that story and the narrative themes of your game, you can put them together and everything should be telling the same story right?



When this works it's amazing. There is a dream sequence in Mass Effect 3. It's emotionally powerful and stuck with me for a long time after playing the game. In contrast to the real world in the game, the environment dream-world is desaturated and foggy, your movements are slow and heavy, the sounds are strange, the music haunting. It really stands out from the rest of the game because the visuals, the audio, and the cinematography are all working together to tell the same story and create the experience.





# REFLECTIVE CONTEXT

We also use reflective context to further shape the player experience. We want your current experience to be shaped by your previous choices and actions. This takes a player experience and makes it a personal experience, and that personal experience is how we convert players into fans.

For example, your experience of the Genophage mission I described earlier could be significantly different if Wrex is still alive. It was hard not to kill Wrex in Mass Effect 1, so if he's still alive, it means you've developed a relationship with him, and have a better understanding of Krogans. This shapes your experience of that mission.

Your previous actions also influence the choices you have in future conversations. We have thousands of choices in our game, and each one opens or closes future choices. Some people occasionally lament the lack of choices in our game not realizing that in BioWare games, the choices that are available to the player at any time are a direct result of how they've been playing the game so far.

We also want you to see your choices reflected in cinematics.





In Dragon Age: Origins the player had several opportunities to kill various NPCs. As a player I wanted to perform these kills with my giant battle-axe with purple electricity shooting out of it. But we always had to use this because our cutscene system had no way to know what class the player was and what or weapons they had equipped. So when the player chose to perform a kill in conversation or cutscene, we ALWAYS had to use what we now call the "murder knife"... it was like a kitchen knife with a wooden handle that you'd pull out from behind your back.



Experience>Context> Reflective

This completely broke immersion and was a missed opportunity to create that personal experience. For Dragon Age 2, we wanted the player to be able to execute cinematic kills in a way that was consistent with the class they had chosen, with their weapon of choice.



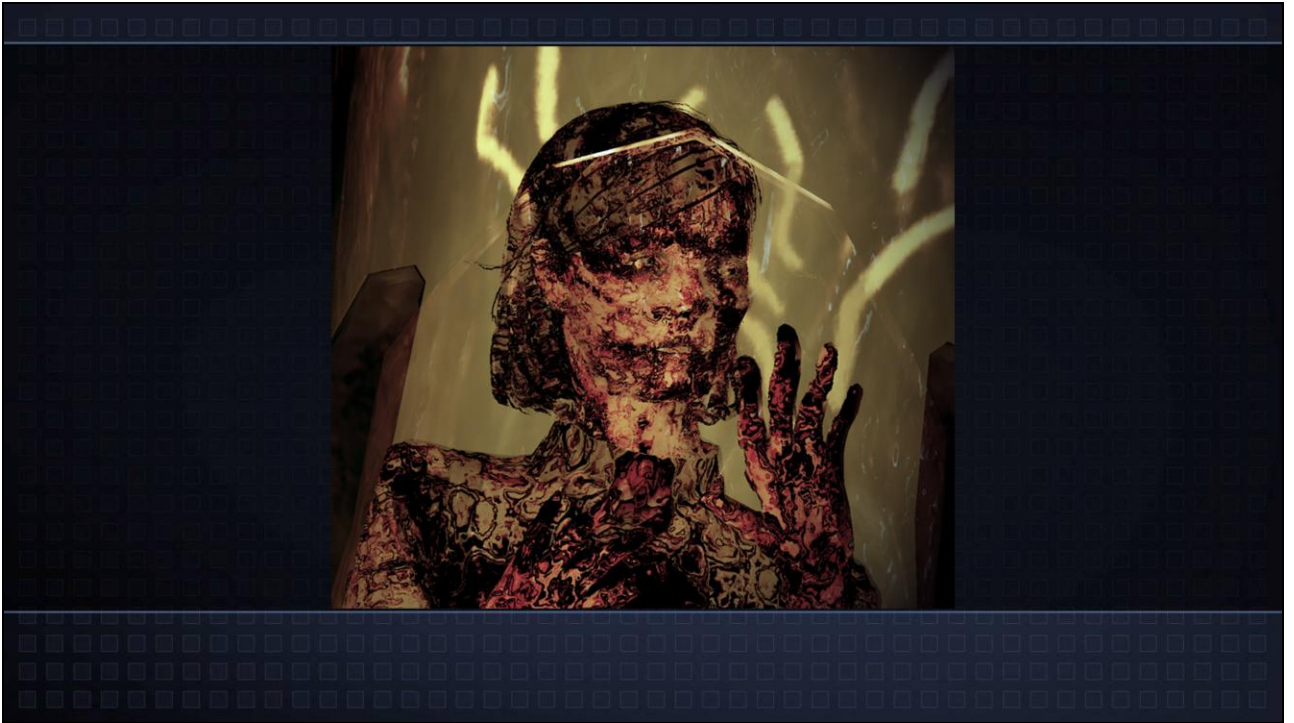
Experience>Context>Reflective

You can see the results throughout Dragon Age 2 and the DLC. Here we see how different the scenes can be with Hawke as an archer, dual-wielding rogue, or mage. This creates a much more satisfying and personally consistent experience for the player.

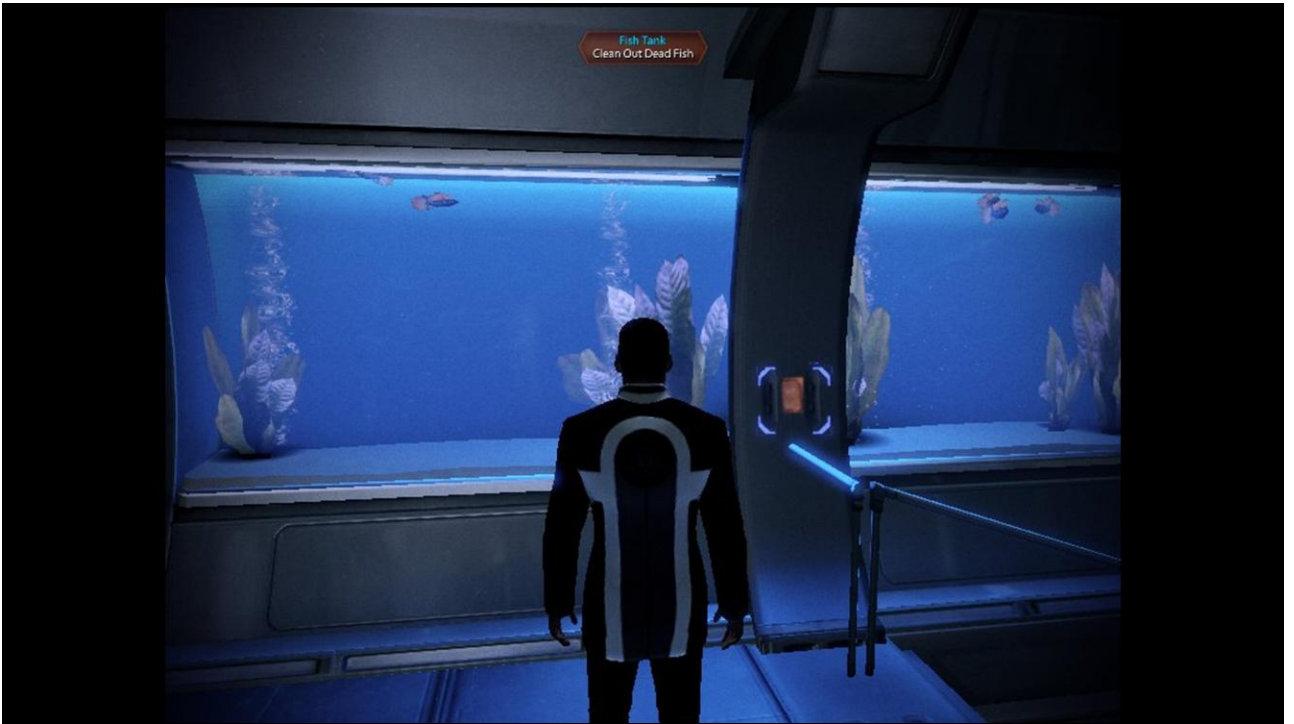


We also use temporal context to shape the player experience. In BioWare games in particular, the player has a lot of freedom in which quests or missions he/she wants to do and the order in which to complete them. So when working on conversations and cutscenes, it's important to consider the temporal context. When in the player's game is this happening? What have they done already and what do they know or not know at this point?





Sometimes not doing missions fast enough can have consequences. In Mass Effect 2, if you don't save your crew from the collector ship fast enough, many of them will die. Including Kelly Chambers!



Who's going to feed your fish now?





Story>Context>Temporal

Temporal context presents an interesting challenge (or opportunity) for DLC since the player can play that content at any time. All of the Dragon Age 2 DLC could be played while in Act 1, 2, or 3 of the main play-through. A lot of consideration had to be given to what the player's previous experiences were and how they could shape the current experience.



In the Dragon Age II DLC, Legacy, Hawke learns about the true nature of his father. It was important that Hawke be able to discuss his findings with his mother, but depending on when the player plays the DLC in relation to the main campaign, Hawke's mother could be alive, missing, or dead. The scene was filmed the same for either case, but the content of the conversation and its meaning is significantly different. If the player's mother is dead, the conversation is a conversation with Hawke's memory of her, adding emotional weight to the scene through temporal context.



Occasionally players are able to play through content in an order that might not have been anticipated by developers. In Dragon Age: Origins, the party camp was considered a safe place the player could go to equip the party and chat with and romance followers. You never got attacked in the camp... except that time when we decided it'd be neat if you got attacked in the camp. You fight off the attackers and you're completely covered in blood, but you can go back to business as usual... trading gear and chatting with your followers. You could actually initiate a romance scene! These romance scenes were big moments in the game. This scene was very personal and sensual, the music soft and romantic. But in this case...



You were covered in blood! What was supposed to be sweet and romantic, was in this context was quite disturbing or hilarious. The lesson here is to be careful and consider all the possible game states that could exist leading up to your key moments.



# CONTRASTIVE JUXTAPOSITION

So back to contrastive juxtaposition. Now that we know all about contrast and context when creating story, content, and cinematics, how do we use this to create these powerful and emotionally engaging scenes?



First I'd like to give you a simple example of contrastive juxtaposition in music. Now normally I wouldn't suggest this when showing a clip from this show, but pay close attention to the dialog, especially towards the end.





#### VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

(Music: verse is slow and soft)

Butthead: "Uh, what is this?"

Beavis: "Don't worry, it gets cool in a minute"

Butthead: "It better start rocking or I'll really give him something to cry about"

Beavis: "Shut up Butthead, it gets cool. Check it out, check it out... here it comes."

(Music: chorus is faster and louder. Exclamations and head-banging ensue)

Butthead: "This is pretty cool!"

Beavis: "Yeah, yeah!"

(Music: verse is slow and soft again)

Beavis: "Uh, what? What's going on? How come they don't they just like, play that cool part through that whole song?"

Butthead: "Well Beavis, if they didn't have, like... a part of the song that sucked, then it's like... the other part wouldn't be as cool."

Beavis: "Really? You're pretty smart Butthead. Here it comes again! Yeah!"

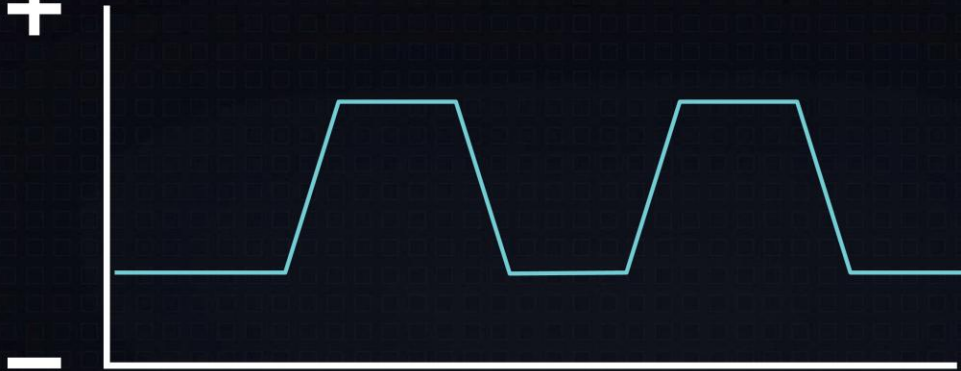
(Music: chorus starts, faster and louder again)

So, it's kind of a silly example, but it demonstrates the basic concept of how the juxtaposition of two contrastive elements (in this case a soft verse and a hard chorus) can have an impact on the viewer experience. I love the idea that "if they didn't have a part that sucked, then maybe the other part wouldn't be as cool."



Now obviously you don't want any part of your game to "suck", but it makes the point that you can't just crank the intensity to 11 and leave it.

+



## Contrastive Juxtaposition

It's that back and forth between contrastive elements that grabs and holds your attention. Sometimes you need that slow moment, or the calm before the storm, for your big impactful moment to really stand out.

To do this you have to first identify the story moments around your target moment.



In the example from the beginning of Mass Effect 2, Shepard helps Joker into the escape pod.



Gets thrown back...



Barely presses the eject button...





Before another blast...



Sends her flying out of the Normandy.



The Normandy explodes.



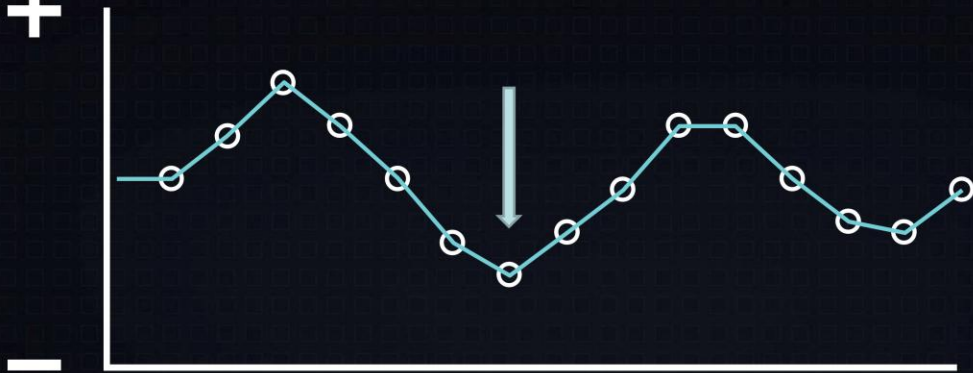
And Shepard floats away to her death.

- Shepard puts Joker in the escape pod
- An explosion knocks Shepard back
- Shepard hits the escape pod launch button
- Another explosion
- Shepard has left the Normandy
- The Normandy explodes
- Shepard floats away into space to die

### Contrastive Juxtaposition

What is the most important part of this scene? What is the big moment you want to have an emotional impact on the player? In this case, it's Shepard's death.

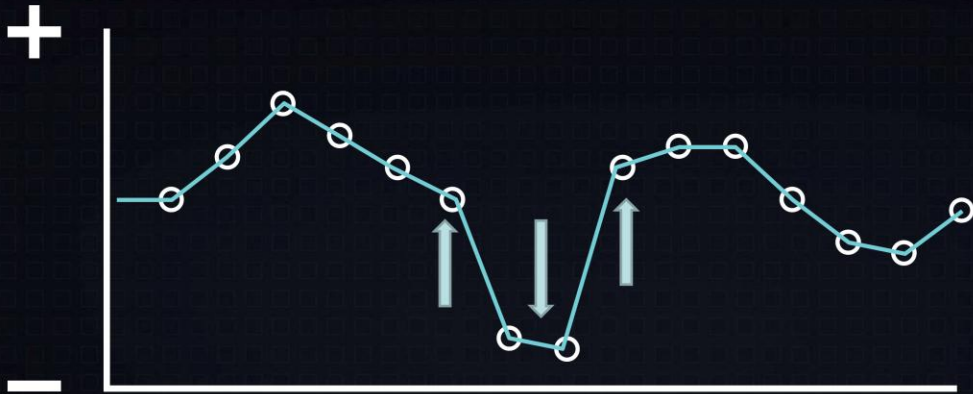
+



Contrastive Juxtaposition

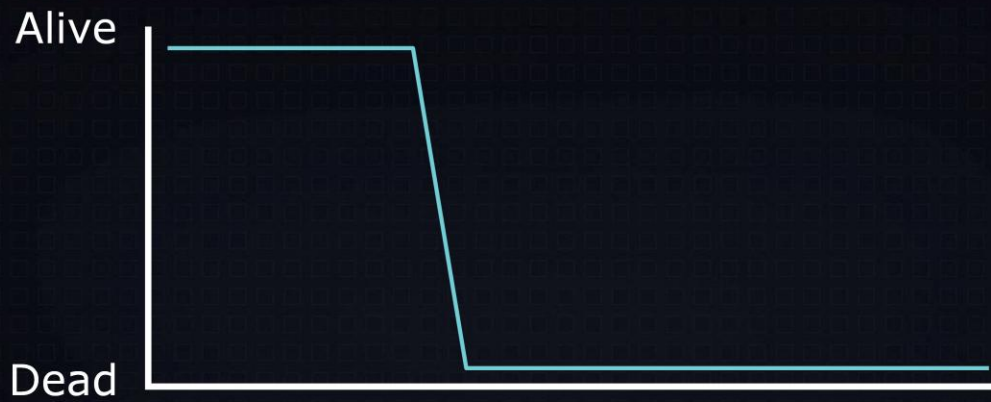
So if this is the moment, how do you make it stand out?





## Contrastive Juxtaposition

You want to make your lows lower, and your highs higher, creating that rapid shift in polarities in the audio, the narrative, and the visuals.



## Contrastive Juxtaposition

In this case if we want to highlight the narrative shift from alive to dead...



We show a huge explosion that fills the screen...



And then cut to a shot with tiny tiny visual effects.



## Contrastive Juxtaposition

Here's a map of that polarity shift.



The music cuts out completely as Shepard is thrown out of the Normandy, and doesn't come back until the sad piano. And sad piano will always make you cry.



World

Self

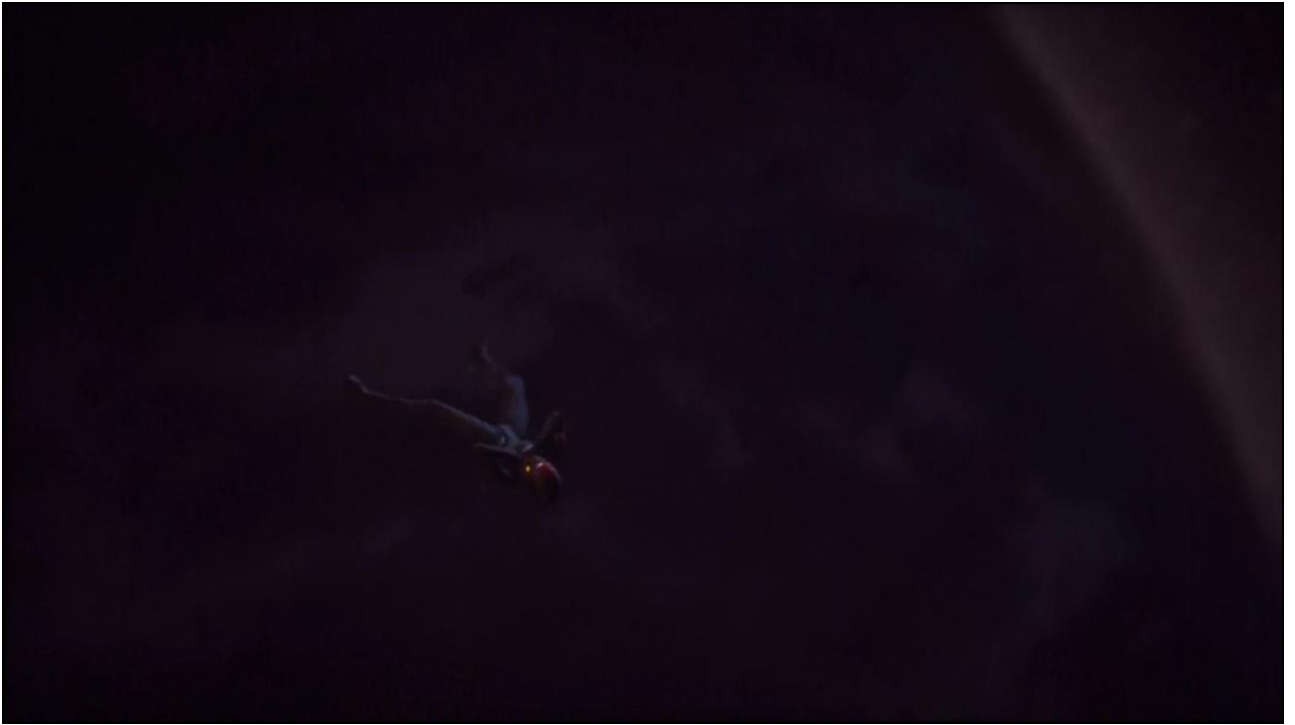


## Contrastive Juxtaposition

The sound design in the scene goes from sounds of the world around Shepard to just the sounds of Shepard gasping for air.



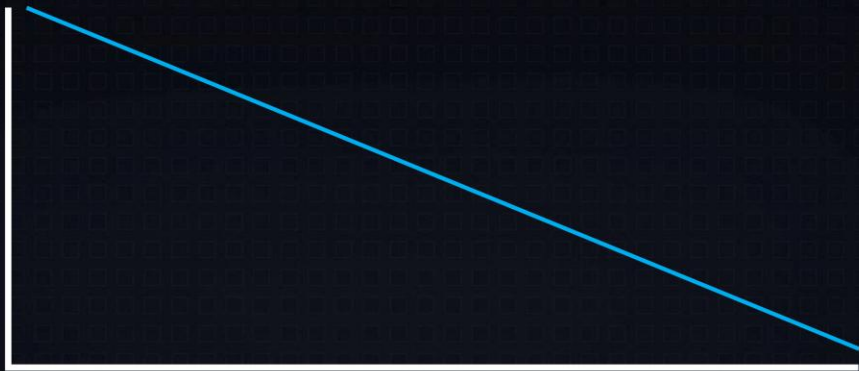
In a single shot, we move from close up...



To a wide shot, creating a feeling of loss, detachment, and separation.

Close

Wide



Contrastive Juxtaposition

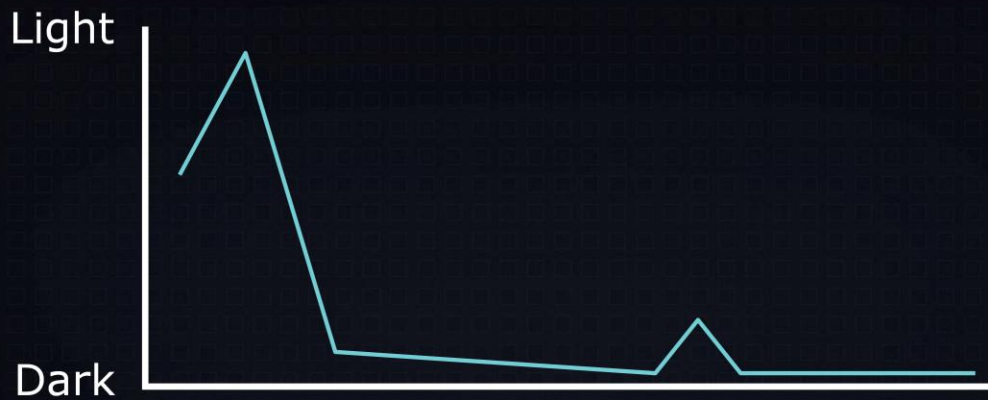


And in the final shot we watch the sun set...



Until the world is dark...





## Contrastive Juxtaposition

And this shift in visual polarity mirrors the narrative shift from life to death. Let's take another look at the scene, and see how these elements all work together.

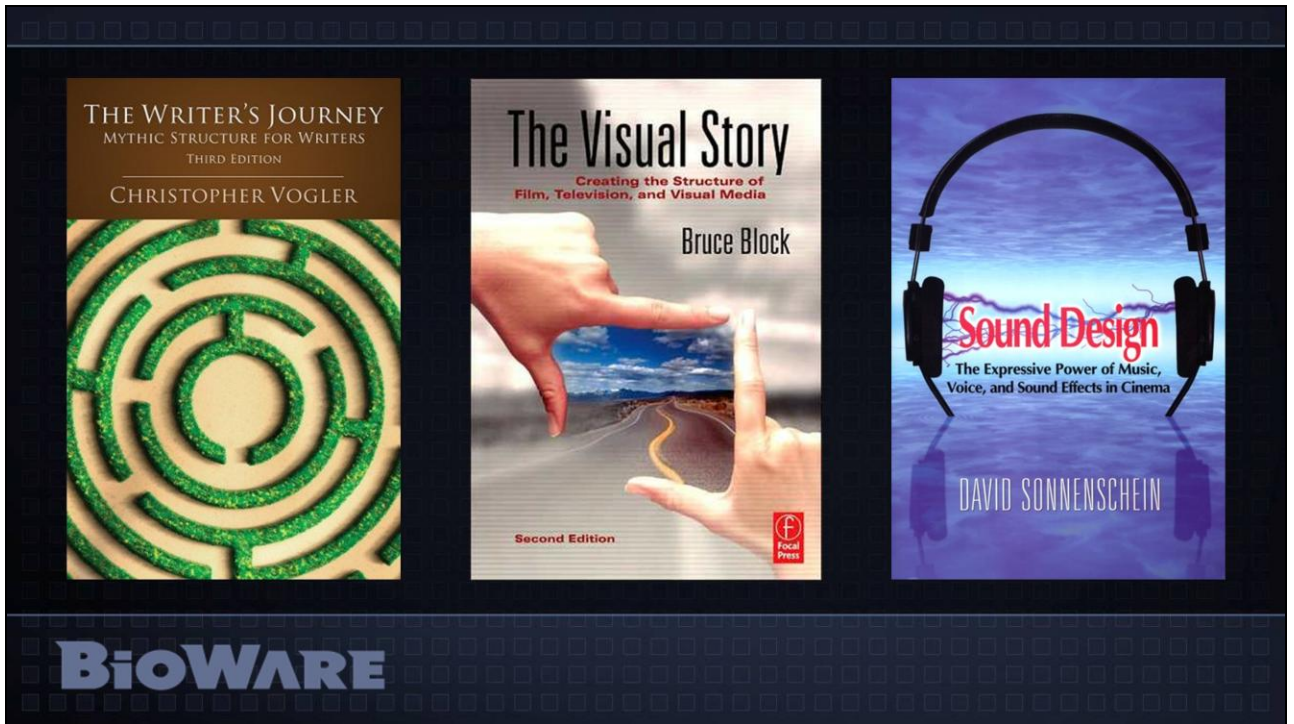




# Story ⇨ Content ⇨ Experience

**BiOWARE**

I hope I've given you a better understanding of why contrast and context are important and how we use them as creative tools when creating the story, the content, and the cinematics or experience. Some takeaways are identify your story themes early, keep it simple when communicating them to your content teams, and remember that context can help shape the meaning of an experience.



If you're interested in learning more about narrative, visual, and audio polarities, I'd highly recommend these books.

The Writer's Journey – Christopher Vogler

The Visual Story- Bruce Block

Sound Design – David Sonnenschein

# Questions?

Jonathan Perry  
Cinematic Lead | BioWare

Email: [jperry@bioware.com](mailto:jperry@bioware.com)

Twitter: [@machinimated](https://twitter.com/machinimated)

**BiOWARE**

Thanks!