All Choice No Consequence:
Efficiently Branch Your Game's Narrative

Cass Phillipps

Episode

Interactive Narrative Is In!

- Interactive Story Games – DUH!
  - Episode (Mean Girls: Senior Year, Demi: Path To Fame)
  - TellTale (The Walking Dead, Game of Thrones)
  - Inkle (80 Days, Sorcery)

Episode

telltalegames

inkle

Interactive Narrative Is In!

- Interactive Story Games – DUH!
- Adventure Games – Well Sure!
  - Broken Age
  - Kentucky Route Zero

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- Adventure Games – Well Sure!
- Even Triple-A titles!
  - Fallout 4
  - Mass Effect
  - Shadow of Mordor

Interactive Narrative Is In!

- Interactive Story Games – DUH!
- Adventure Games – Well Sure!
- Even Triple-A titles!

But is it worth it?

WRONG

Why Are You Sitting Here?

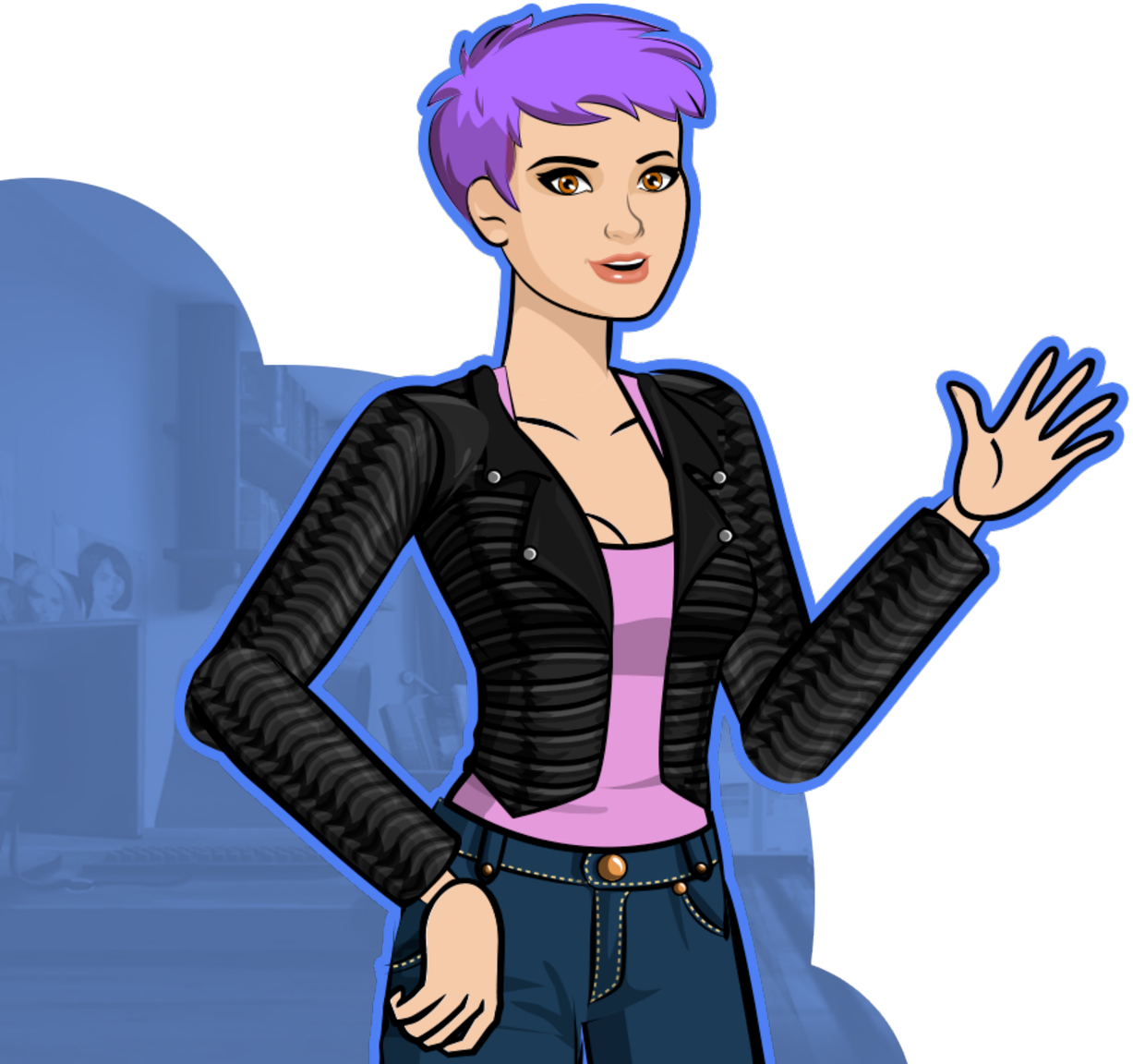
- Having choices matters
- Having choices that FEEL impactful matters
- Having choices that ARE impactful is irrelevant
  - It wastes valuable time and money

Design Choices Smartly

Why Am I Standing Here?

- Creative Manager for Episode Interactive
  - Platform of interactive animated stories
  - +13,000 stories published by our players
  - 3.5 million weekly active users
  - 1.5 billion episodes played
  - Regularly a top 20 grossing iOS game

A Choice Example



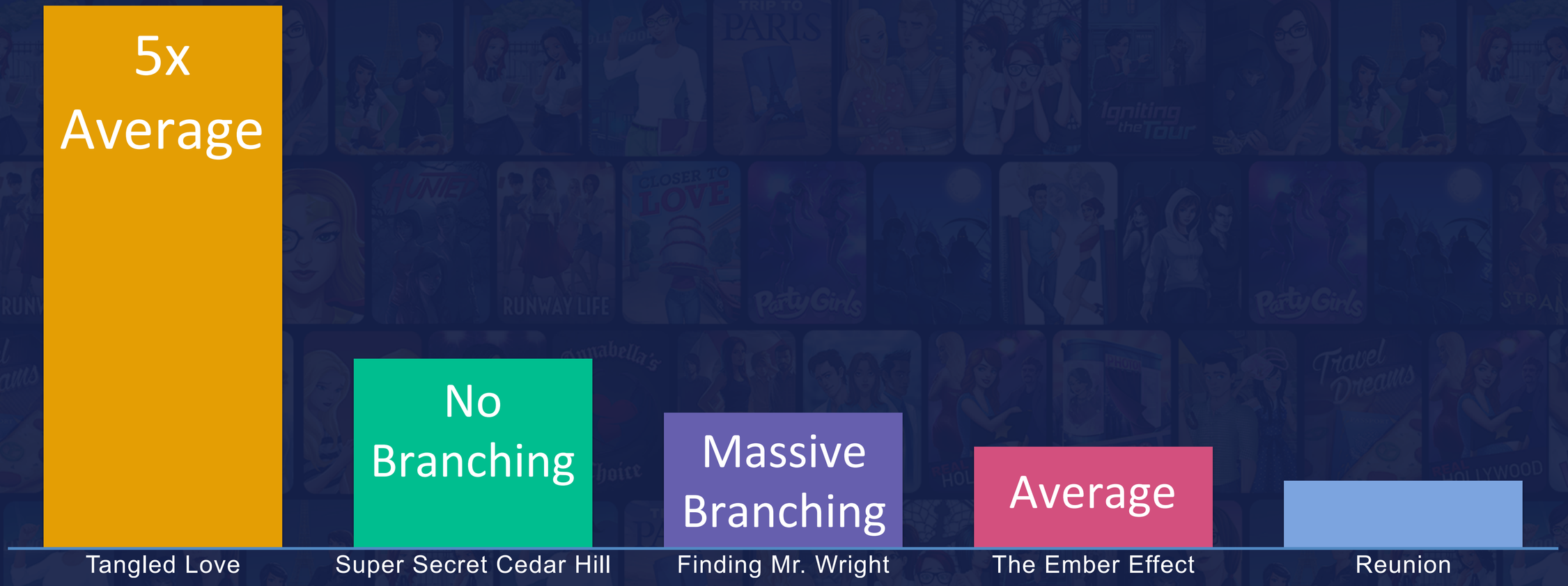
What would you like to hear first?

- Learn more about Episode, me & our data.
- Learn more about branching execution.
- Avoid engaging as much as possible.

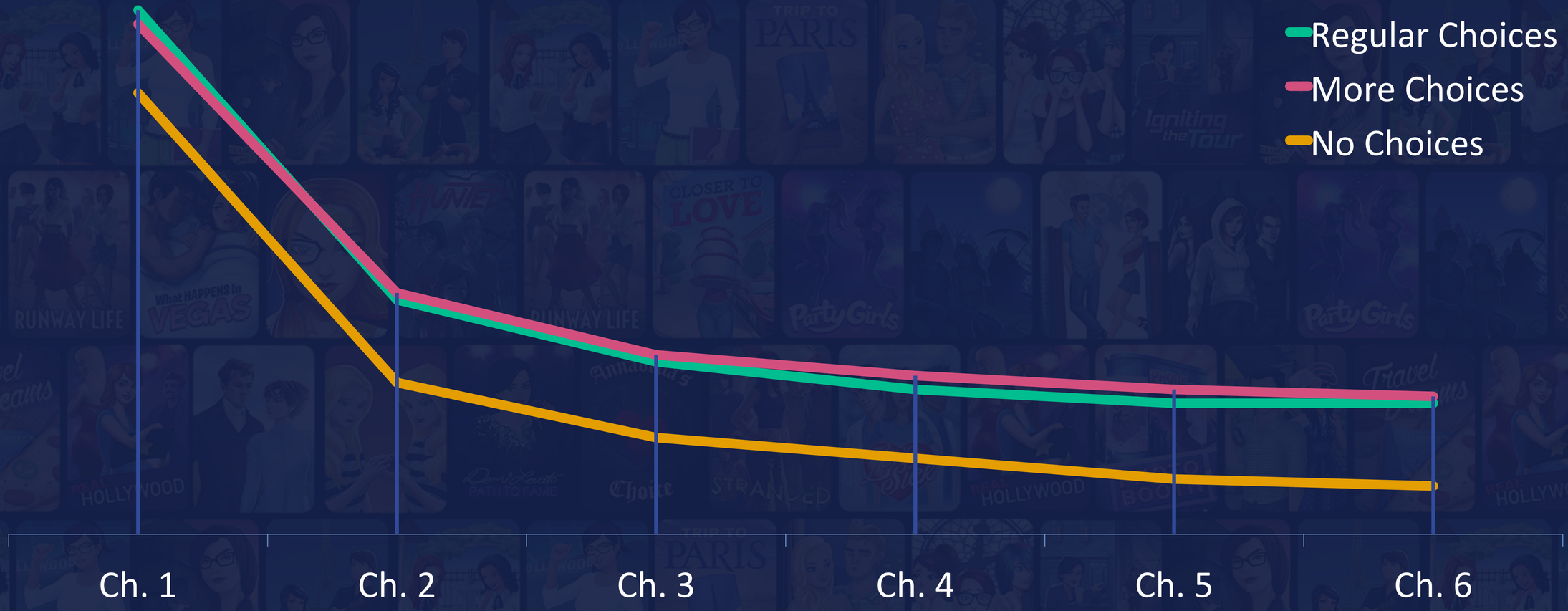
More About Episode & Me

- Design proprietary tools to tell mobile stories.
  - Library of art
  - Easy-to-learn scripting language.
- Creative Lead on Demi Lovato: Path To Fame
  - Tested various branches & choices
  - Watched how choice effected retention
  - Tested hypotheses on choice type, amount, and length on various stories.

% of People Who Replay



Retention Based On Choice Count



4 Facets of Branching Stories:

Which is most important to your process?

Choices

Dialogue

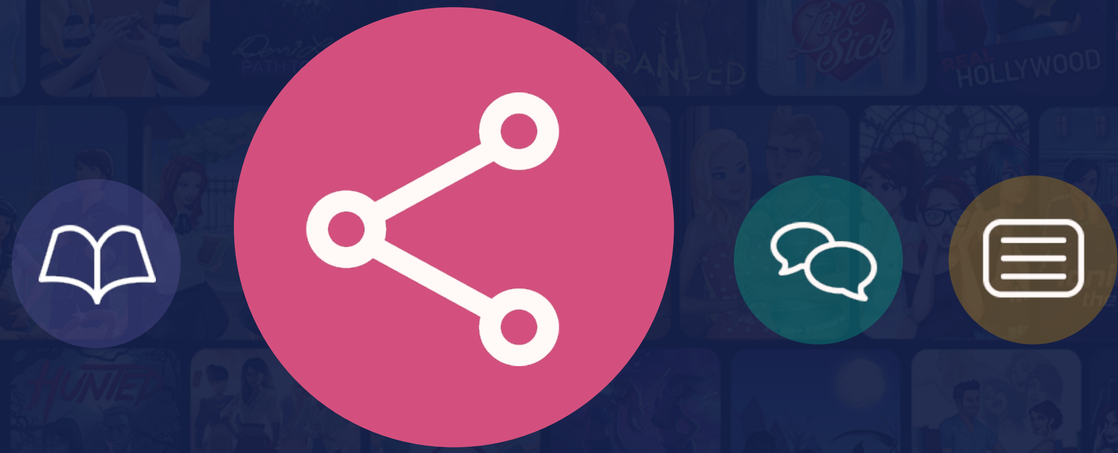
Story

Branches

1. Story

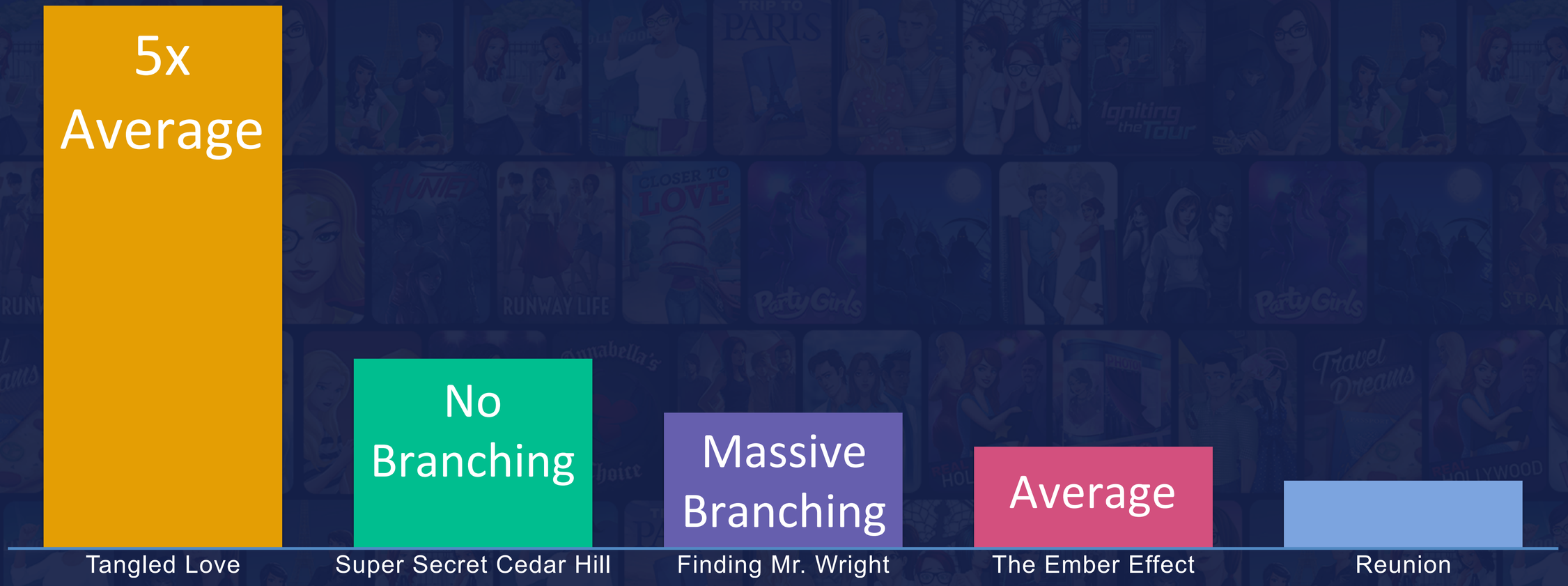
Start With the Story

- It must be impactful and meaningful
  - Don’t distract yourself with choices
  - Slows down the story process and can hurt the end result
- Create a strong outline
  - Loose enough to change
  - Tight enough so you know beats works



2. Branches

% of People Who Replay



Find Your Major Branches

- What's a major branch?
  - Changes in scenes or characters due to the choice
  - Unique ways to reach the same goal
  - Strong enough to be referenced periodically
  - NOT completely disconnected story lines (not worth it)

How To Find Branches

- Story room disagreements

How To Find Branches

- Story room disagreements
- Reorder scenes
  - Can I learn things at different times?

How To Find Branches

- Story room disagreements
- Reorder scenes
- Work backwards from major conflicts or goals
  - This is why you should keep the first outline loose

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Find 1 Branch ASAP, then one every ~20-30 mins of play.

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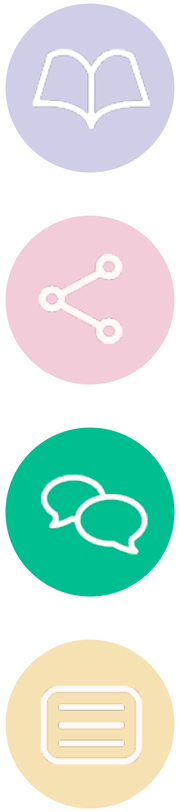
Find 1 Branch ASAP, then one every ~20-30 min of play.

Do NOT get hung up on small choices at this stage, you'll get too lost in the weeds

3. Dialogue

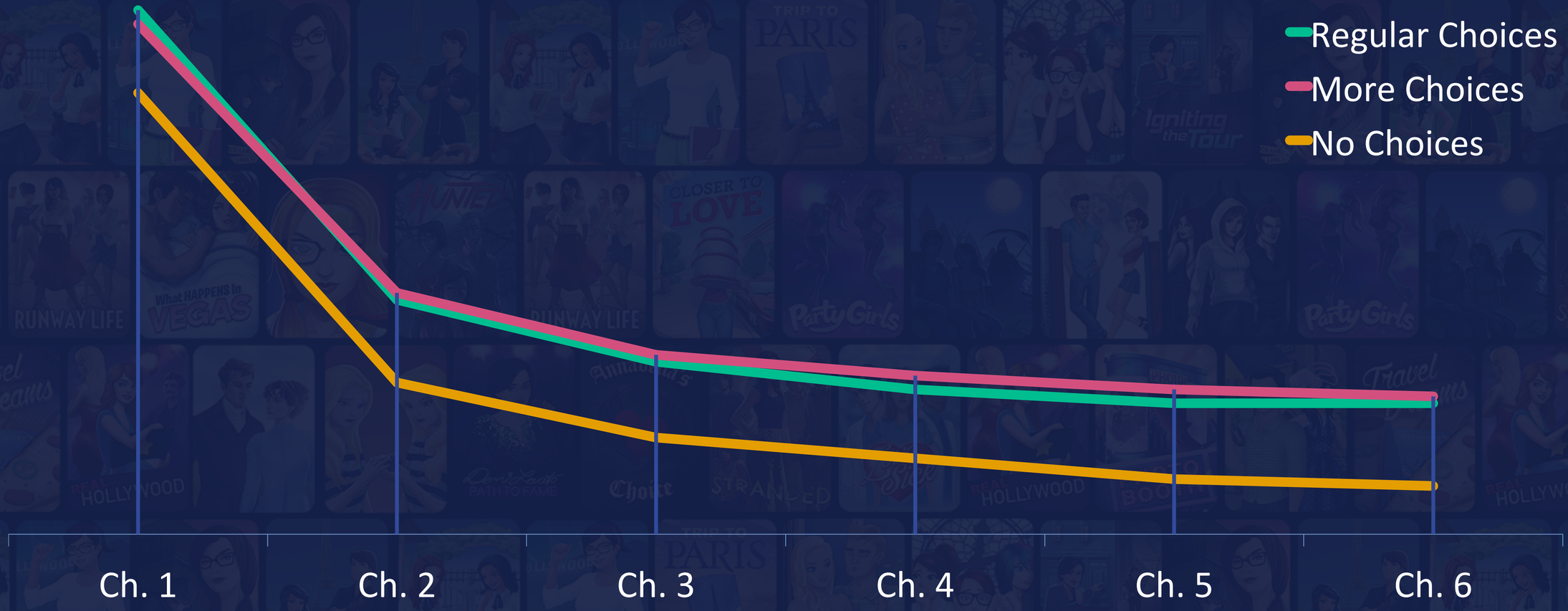
Dialogue Makes A Difference



- Unique character voices
- Succinct & clear purpose
  - Attention spans are short
- Clear consequences & goals
  - Be a bit on-the-nose
- Discuss with design team
  - Triple AAA FPS? Adventure Game? Interactive Fiction?

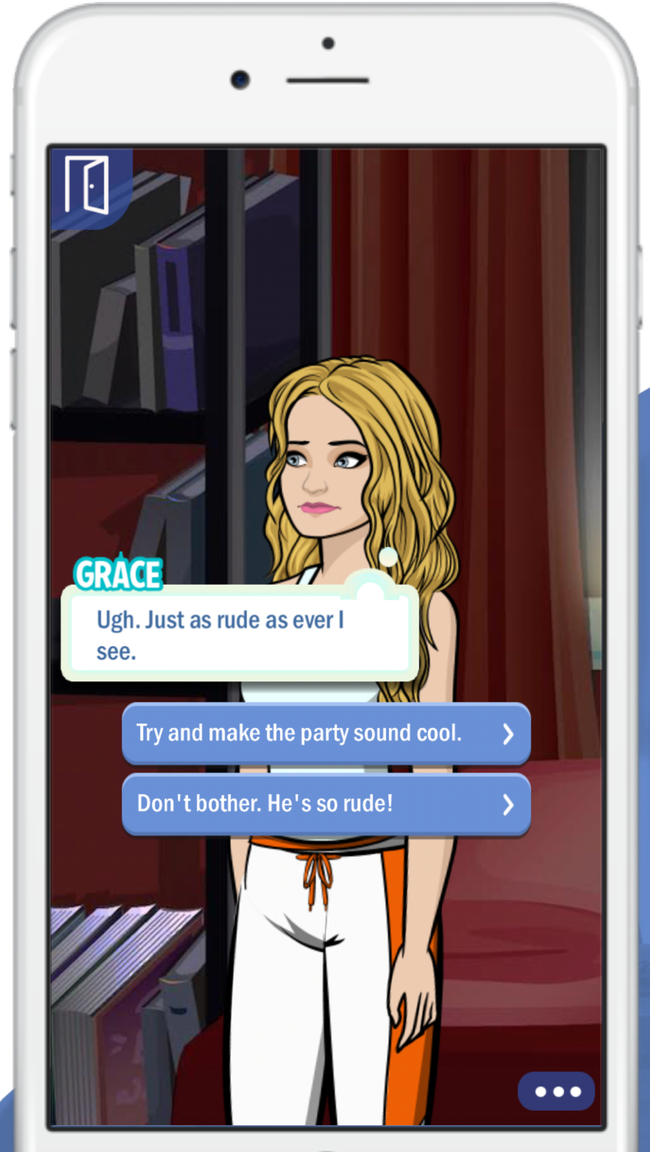
5. Choices

Retention Based On Choice Count



Where To Find Choices

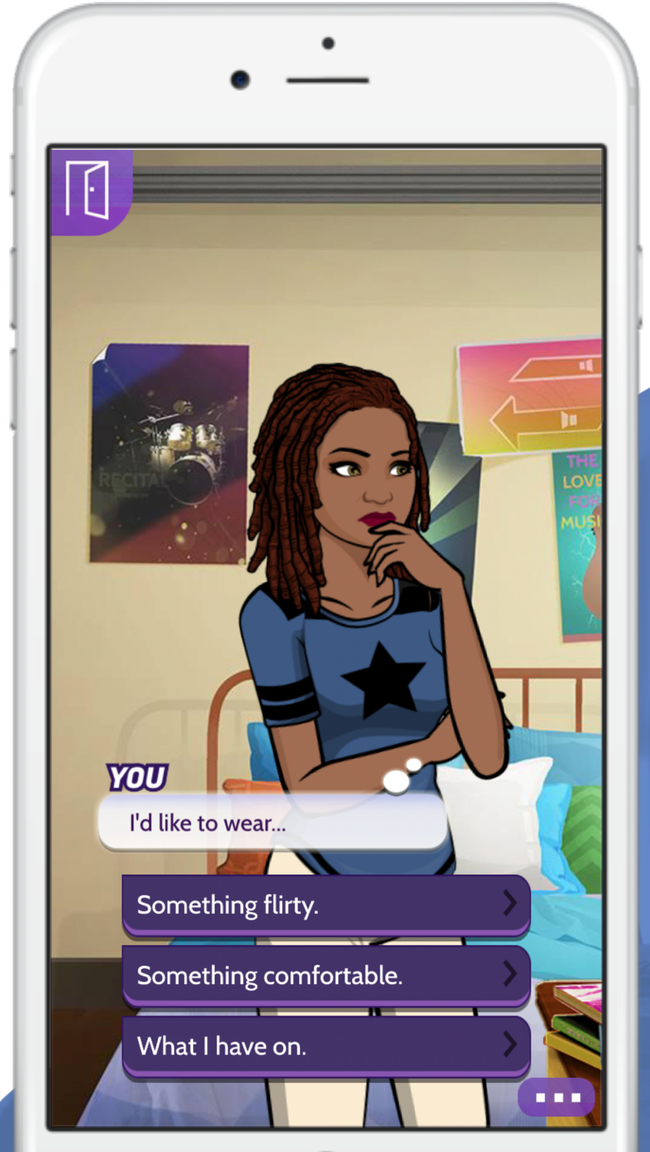
1. Character reactions
   - NPC Questions are a GREAT source of these!



Where To Find Choices

1. Character reactions

2. Character-defining traits
   - Outfits, avatars, attitudes.



Where To Find Choices

1. Character reactions

2. Character-defining traits

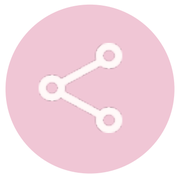
3. Unavoidable Consequences
   - Bury it in choices.

TIFFANY
Volleyball? Come play with me, Alex!
TAP TO CONTINUE

Can't you get out of one show??
Yeah, I'll see what I can do.
I can't be there, Callie.
Callie, this show is important.

MARK
Well, we have a little treat for you, Cass. A familiar voice from home!

Make Choices Matter



1. Character Scores and Comparisons
    - Create code to assign characters point values
    - Be able to quickly reference it.
        - But only edit a single line of early dialogue

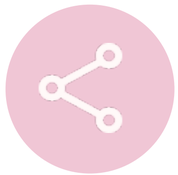
Make Choices Matter

1. Character Scores and Comparisons
2. Immediate Reactions
   - Unique responses from the environment
   - But just 1-3 lines

Make Choices Matter

1. Character Scores and Comparisons
2. Immediate Reactions
3. Clear Consequences Up Front
   - Make it clear what they may gain & lose
   - Split allegiances, multiple events, or conflicting goals

Make Choices Matter



1. Character Scores and Comparisons
2. Immediate Reactions
3. Clear Consequences Up Front
4. Every Option Has Equal Weight
    - Make sure people pick each option equally
    - Always have 3+ options
    - Personally, I avoid RIGHT vs. WRONG
        - Feels less fun

A Common Choice

- Your crush is talking with your revengeful ex-boyfriend! Want to eavesdrop?
  - Yes
  - No

A Common Choice

- Your crush is talking with your revengeful ex-boyfriend! Want to eavesdrop?
  - Yes
  - No

~85% of people pick “Yes”

Give The Options Equal Weight:

- Your crush is talking to your revengeful ex-boyfriend!
  Do you…
  - Text your ex asking for details!
  - Butt into their conversation!
  - Cause a scene down the hall!

Establish Clear Consequences:

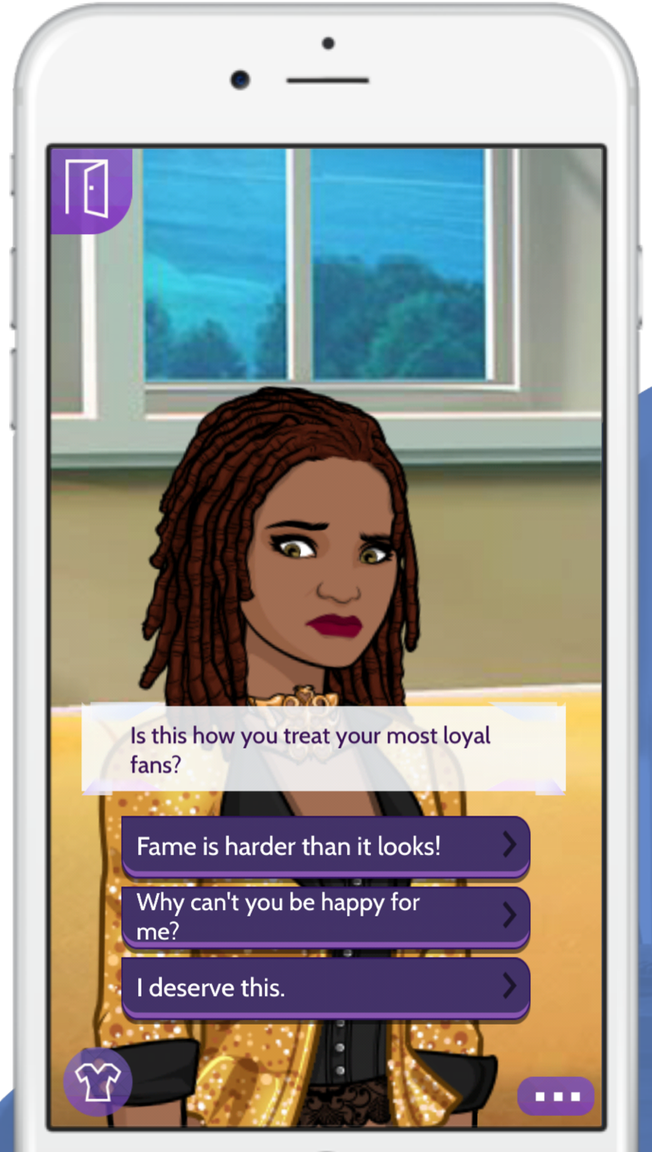
- Your crush is talking to your revengeful ex-boyfriend, but class is about to start! If you're late to English once more, she'll flunk you! What do you do?
  - Eavesdrop
  - Hurry to class

Bad Choices

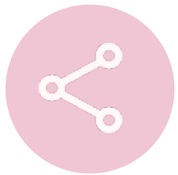
1. False choices
   - I make a choice and the player-character immediately negates it

Bad Choices

1. False choices
2. Misleading choices
   - I make a choice but the story interprets a different meaning than what was presented



Bad Choices



1. False choices
2. Misleading choices
3. Vague choices
    - When the player isn’t sure what an option means

Takeaways

- Don’t add branches until you have a great story
- Don’t add choices until you have a great script
- Every choice has clear meaning, goals, and consequences
- Write immediate reactions
- Never negate player agency

Questions?

Work With Me - http://bit.ly/EpisodeJobs
Contact Me - cass@pocketgems.com

Episode