



A Narrative Approach to Level Design

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Level Designer, Ubisoft: Studio SF
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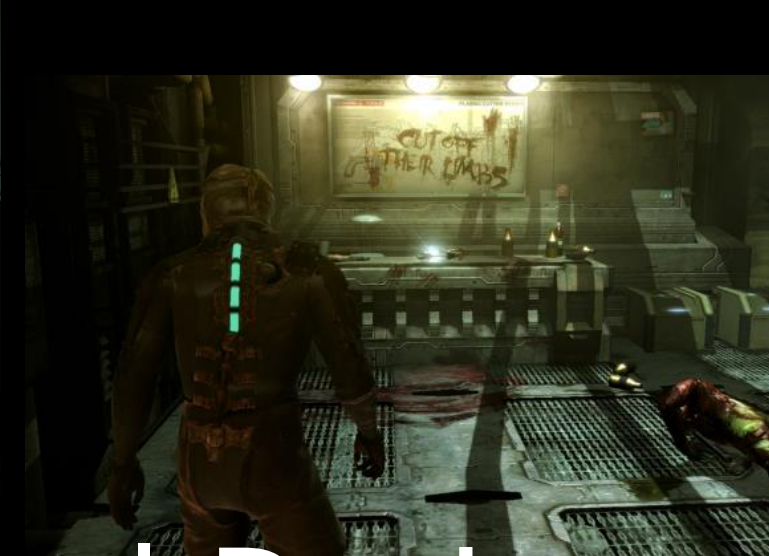
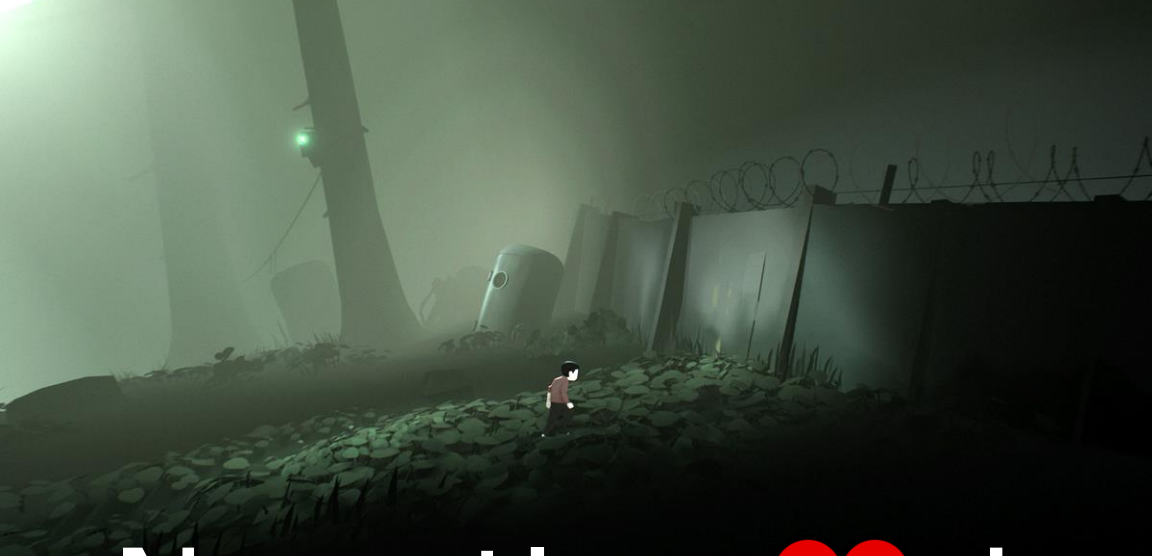
Narrative

??????



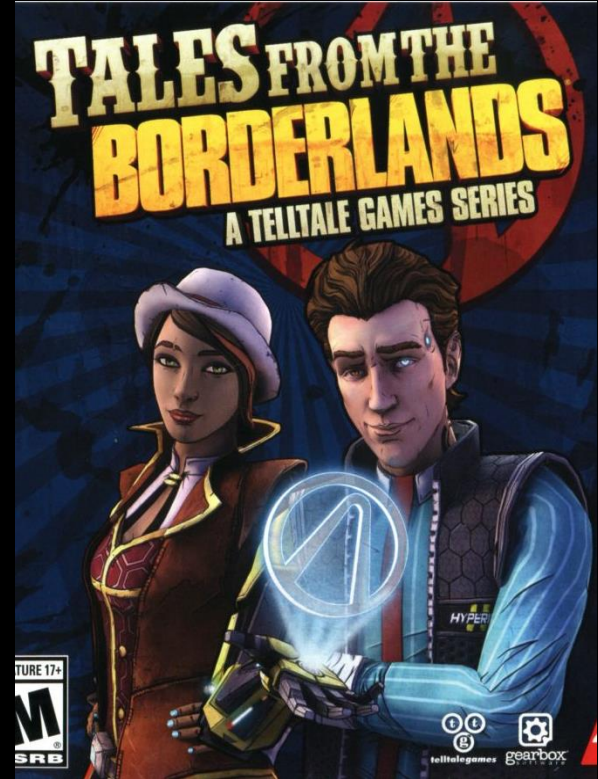
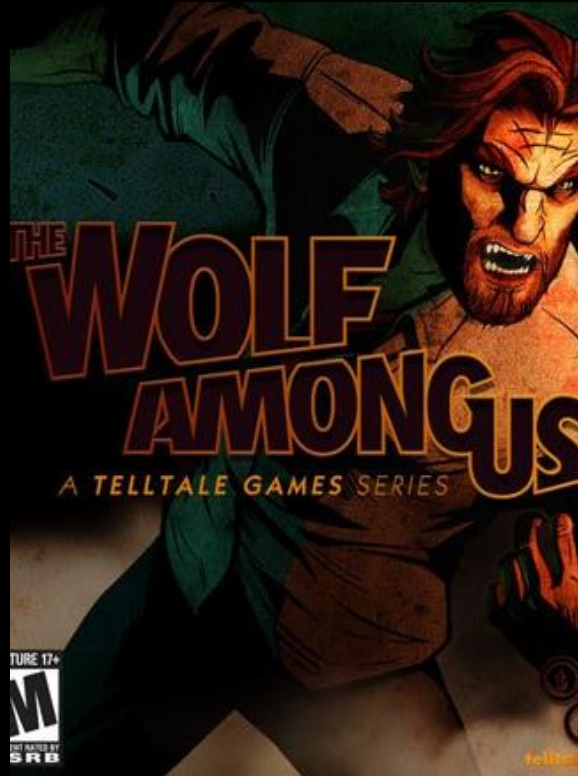
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Level Design



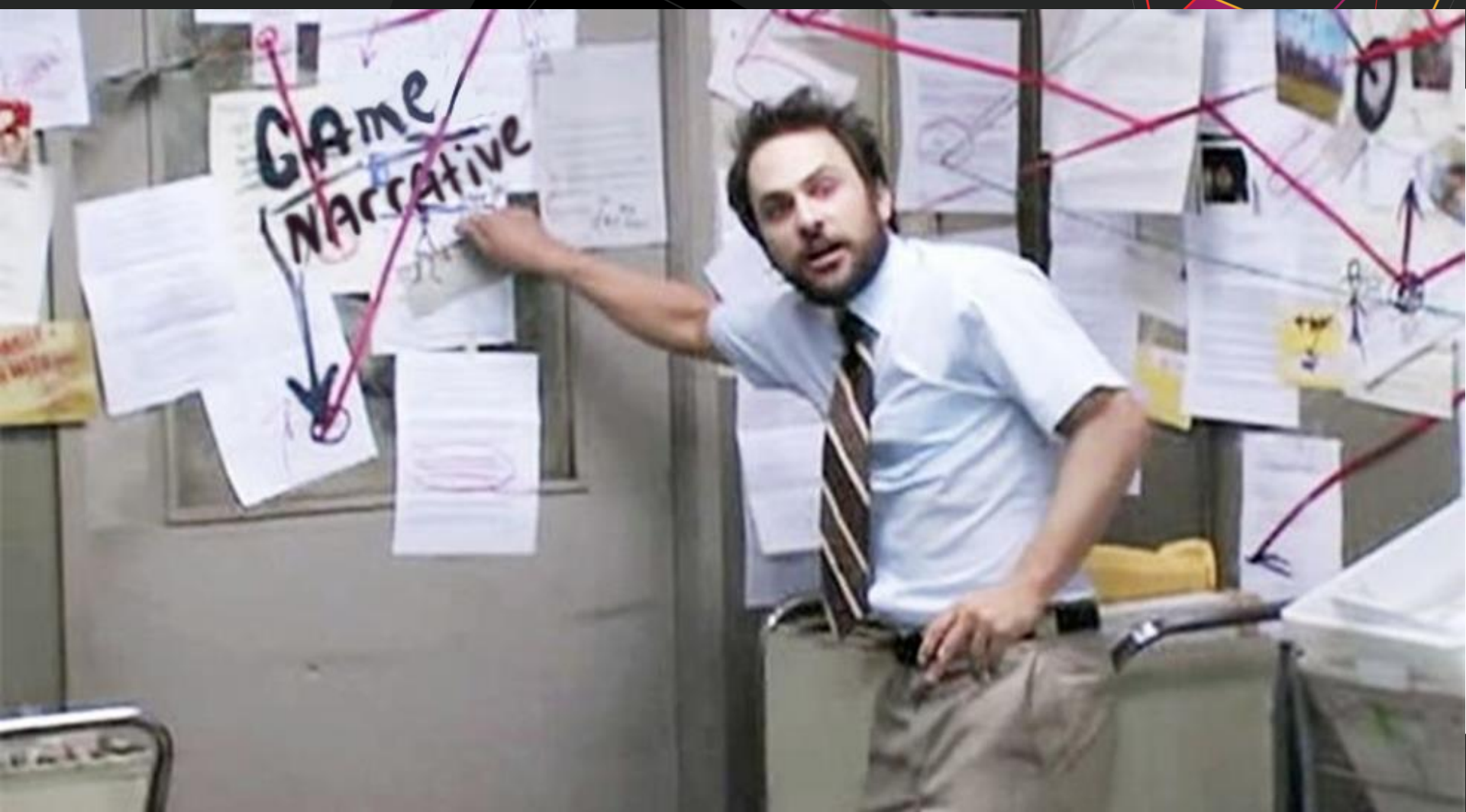
Narrative Level Design





SOUTH PARK
THE **Fractured**
BUT **WHOLE**



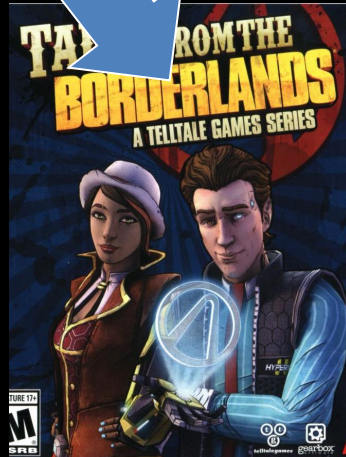
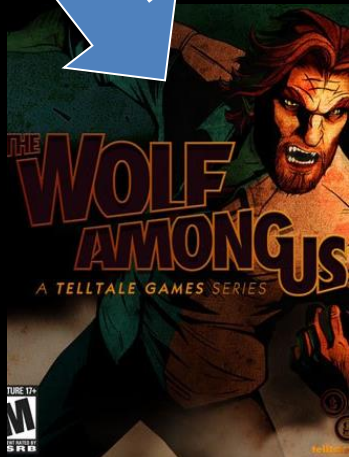
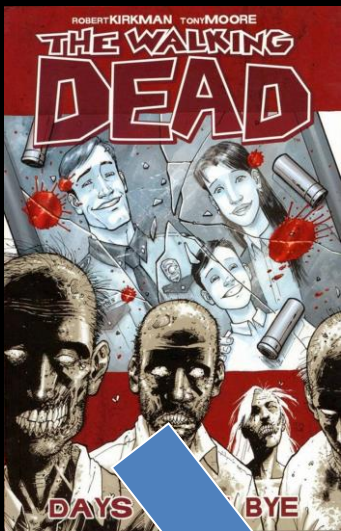




A Narrative Approach to Level Design

- Using story as the true vision for gameplay
- Treating games as a storytelling medium:
Gameplay and storytelling are one and the same.
- Examining story themes and expressing them through game design.







How do I make this
game/level/mission/combat
feel like
(X)?





*Indiana Jones: Raiders of the Lost Arc
(1981)*



Uncharted 2: Among Thieves (2009)



The Lost World: Jurassic Park (1997)



Uncharted 2: Among Thieves (2009)



Mission Impossible (1996)



Uncharted 2: Among Thieves (2009)



James Bond: Tomorrow Never Dies
(1997)



Uncharted 2: Among Thieves (2009)



Road to El Dorado (2000)



Uncharted 2: Among Thieves (2009)



What makes a Narrative?

WHY Theme

WHO Characters

WHERE Setting

WHAT Plot and events

WHEN Time of events (relative to each other)

HOW Presentation







**Twelve terrorists. One cop.
The odds are against John McClane...
That's just the way he likes it.**

B R U C E W I L L I S
DIE HARD

Die Hard (1988)

WHY

WHO

WHERE

WHAT

WHEN

HOW



Die Hard (1988)

WHY

Masculinity

WHO

Following your gut

WHERE

Love

WHAT

Greed

WHEN

Duty

HOW

Humility



Die Hard (1988)

WHY

McClane

WHO

Hans Gruber

WHERE

Holly

WHAT

Sgt Powell

WHEN

the terrorists

HOW



Die Hard (1988)

WHY

Los Angeles

Verticality

WHO

Nakatomi Plaza

Vertigo

WHERE

Unfinished floors

Claustrophobia

WHAT

Elevator shafts

Isolation

WHEN

Opulent board rooms

Roof and Helipad

HOW

Christmas



Die Hard (1988)

WHY

WHO

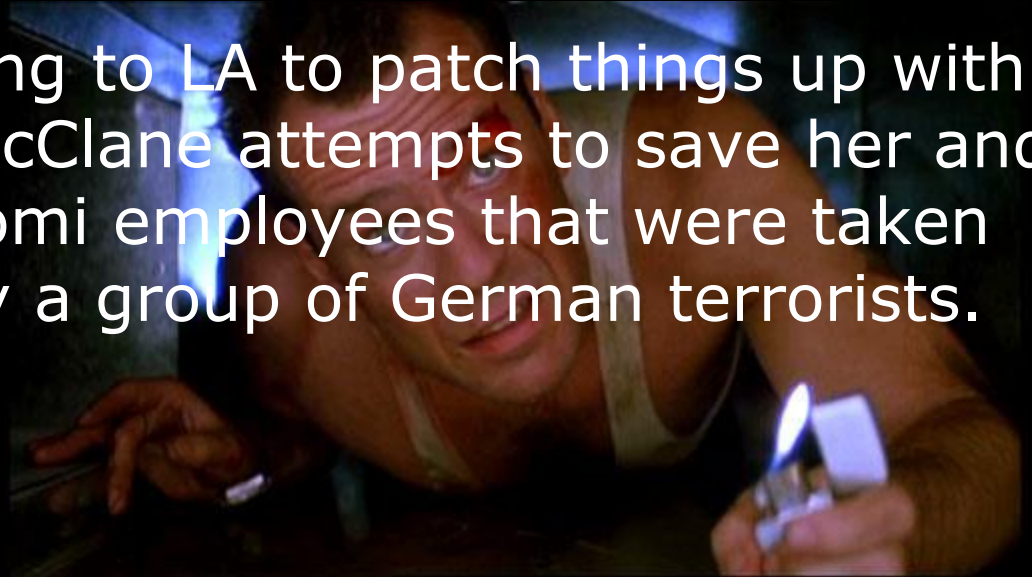
WHERE

WHAT

WHEN

HOW

After coming to LA to patch things up with his wife, McClane attempts to save her and the Nakatomi employees that were taken hostage by a group of German terrorists.



Die Hard (1988)

WHY

WHO

WHERE

WHAT

WHEN

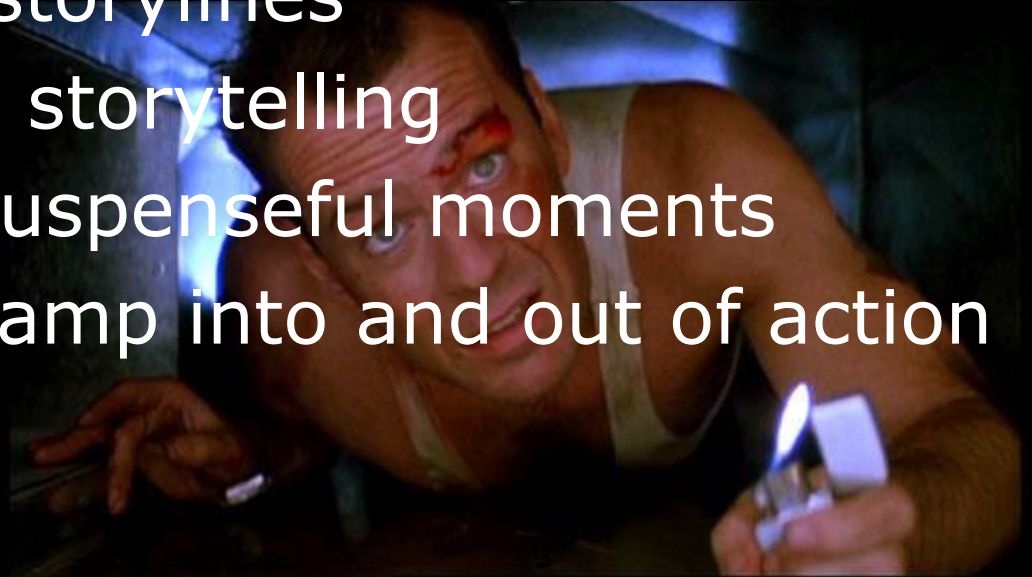
HOW

Linear storylines

Parallel storytelling

Slow, suspenseful moments

Quick ramp into and out of action



Die Hard (1988)

WHY

WHO

WHERE

WHAT

WHEN

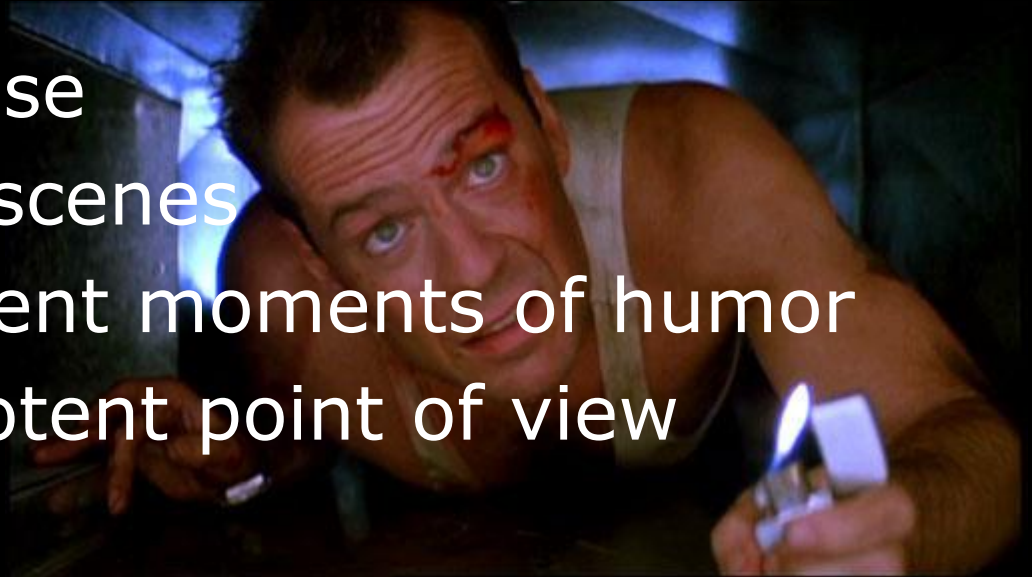
HOW

Suspense

Action scenes

Irreverent moments of humor

Omnipotent point of view





WHY Theme

WHO Characters

WHERE Setting

Story Constants

WHAT Plot and events

WHEN Time of events

HOW Presentation

Game Variables





WHY Theme

WHO Characters

WHERE Setting

WHAT Plot and events → **MECHANICS**

WHEN Time of events → **PACING**

HOW Presentation → **TONE**





Plot and Mechanics

WHAT Plot and events → **MECHANICS**

Methods by which the player interacts with the game.

Methods by which the player experiences the story.



Mechanics are largely defined by **genre**

Open World RPG



Turn-based RPG



Simulation



Pacing

WHEN Time of events → **PACING** (Rhythm, Tempo)

Rate of activity or movement, the flow of the gameplay

Rate of activity or movement, the flow of the story





Controlling Pace

How hard is the player being pushed to move forward vs. to stay put?

Movement **Incentive** vs Movement **Deterrent**

Movement Incentives:

- Threat
- Objective
- Movement
- Time limits



RUN AWAY!

RUN AWAY!!



Super Mario Sunshine (2002)



Controlling Pace

How hard is the player being pushed to move forward vs. to stay put?

Movement **Incentive** vs Movement **Deterrent**

Movement Incentives:

- Threat
- Objective
- Movement
- Time limits

Movement Deterrents:

- Tension (perceived threat)
- Obstacles
- Change in gameplay/movement
 - Puzzles, dialogue choices





The Last of Us (2014)



The Last of Us (2014)



Controlling Pace

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Pacing in Storytelling Methods

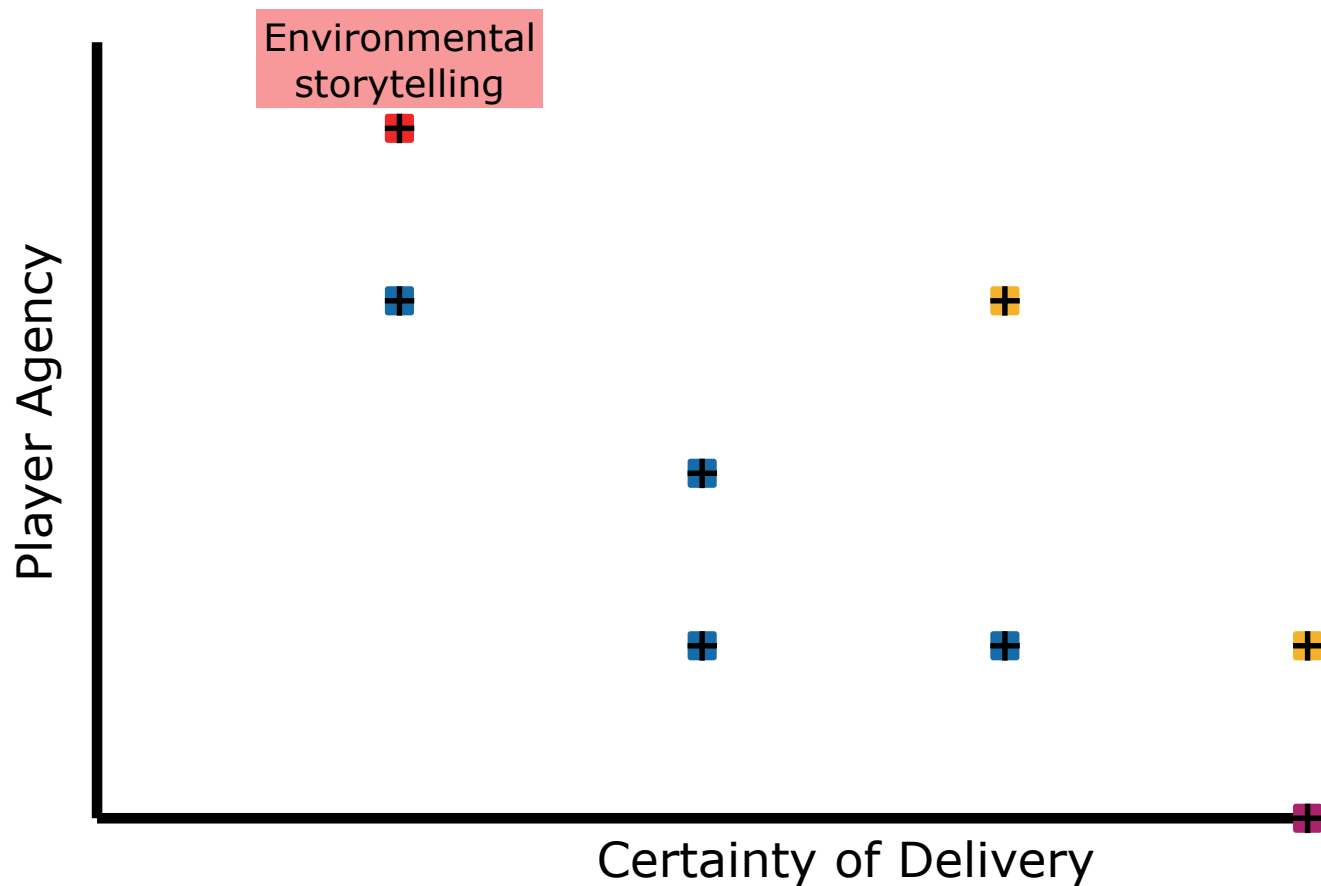
Allow for gameplay **Player Agency**

Tell the story **Certainty of Delivery**

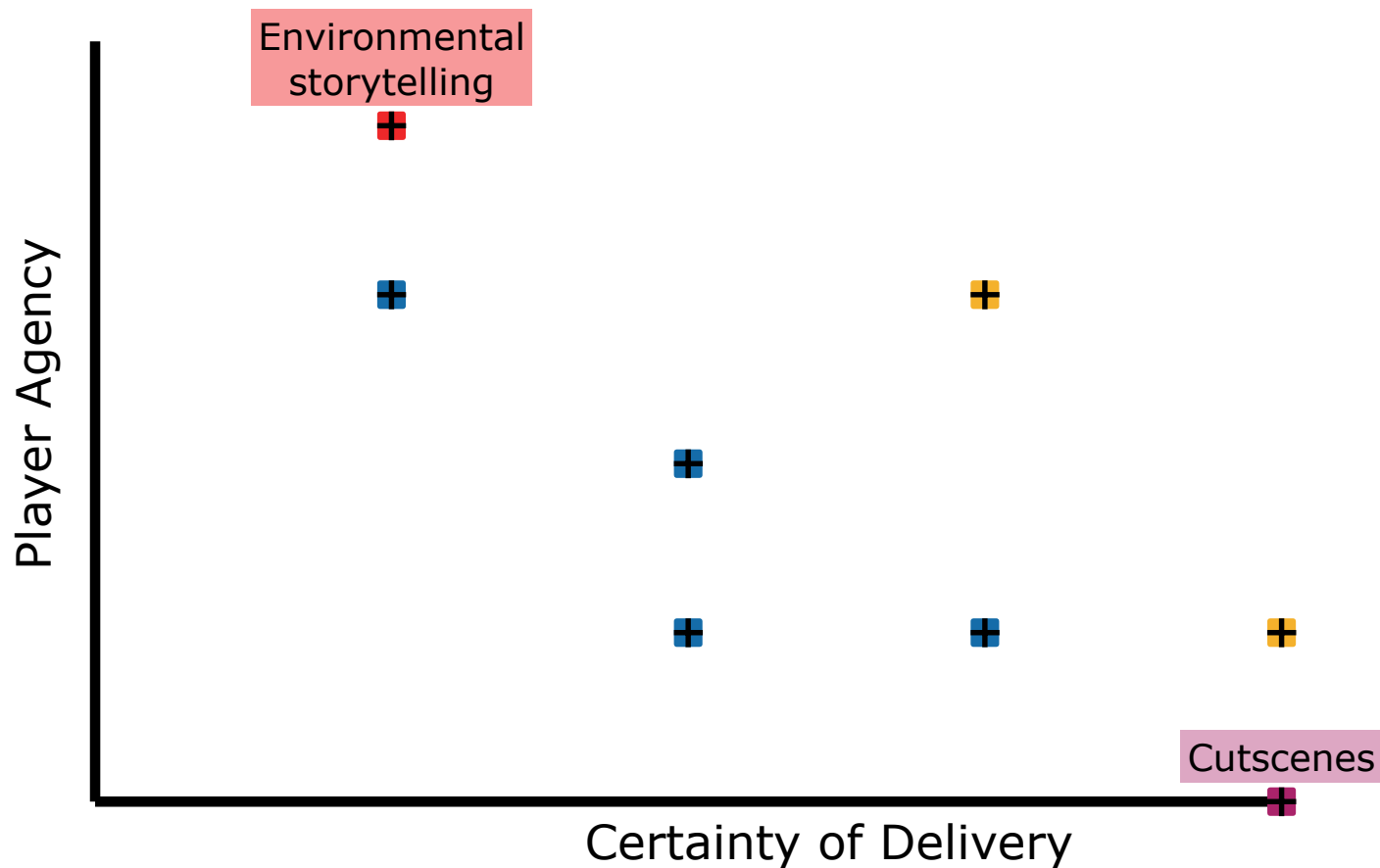
- **Cutscenes:** High certainty, Low agency
- **Environmental Storytelling:** Low certainty, High agency
- **Triggered Dialogue:** Variable Certainty, Variable Agency
- **Narrative Systems:** High certainty, High agency



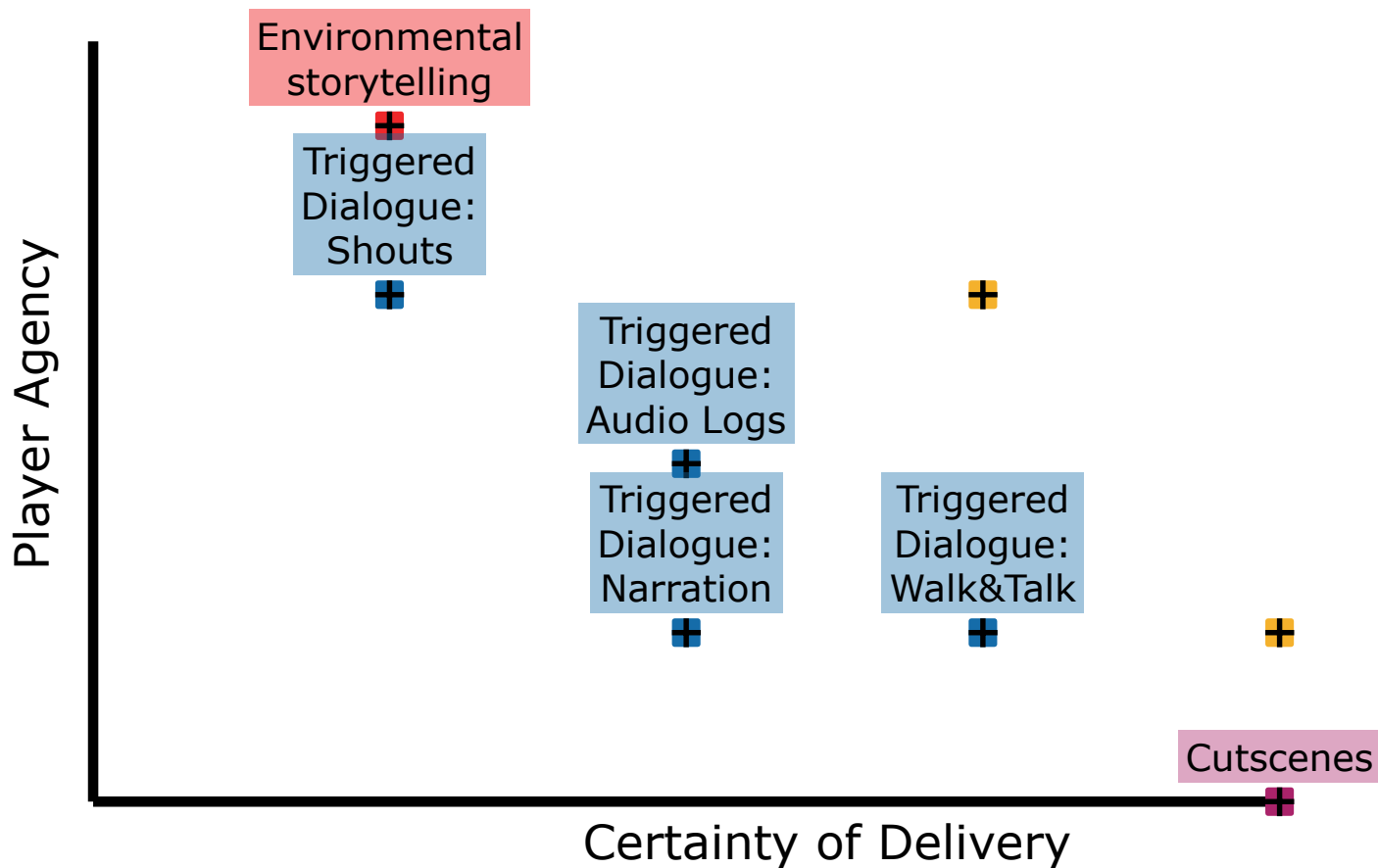
Player Agency vs. Certainty of Delivery in Interactive Storytelling Methods



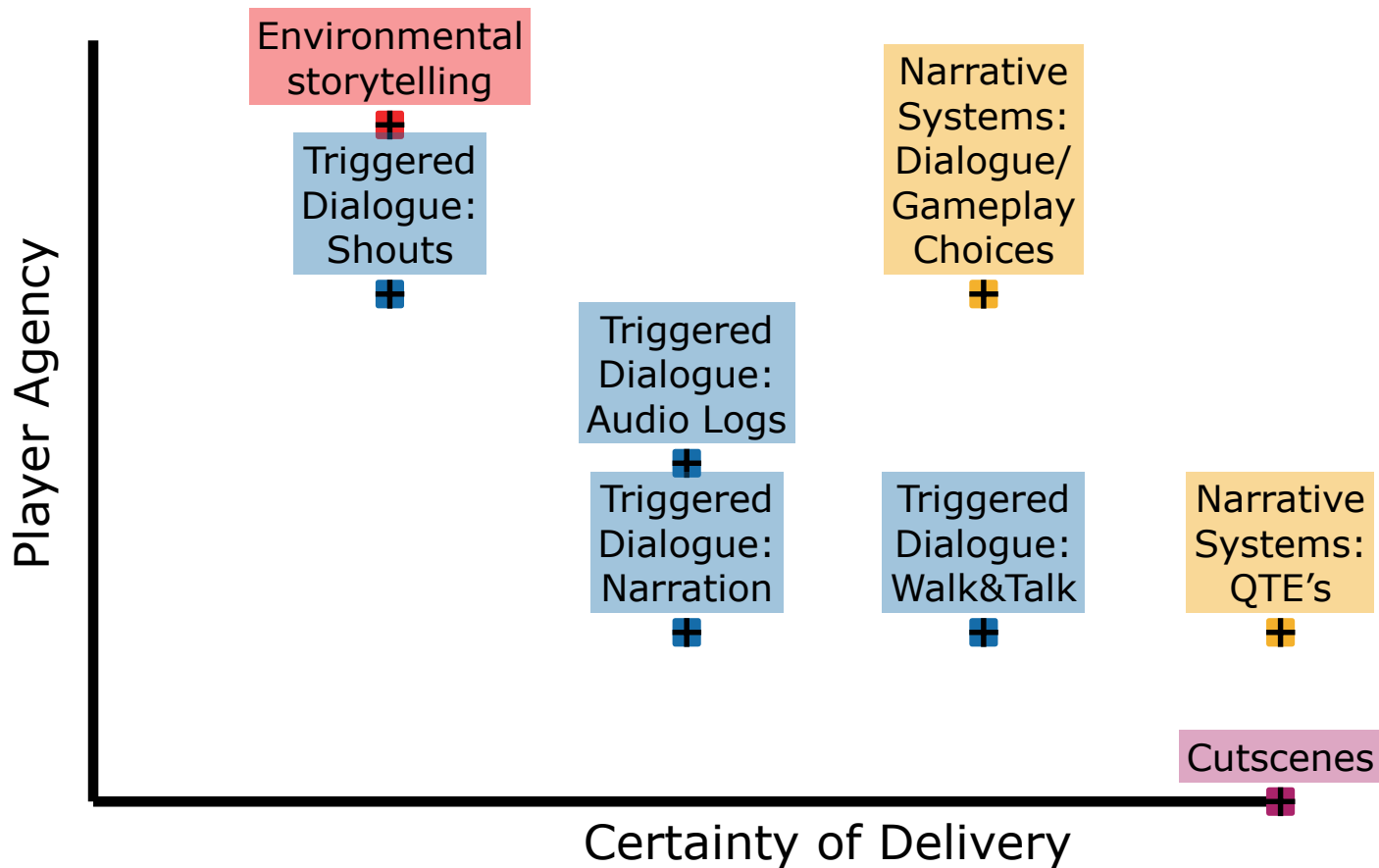
Player Agency vs. Certainty of Delivery in Interactive Storytelling Methods



Player Agency vs. Certainty of Delivery in Interactive Storytelling Methods



Player Agency vs. Certainty of Delivery in Interactive Storytelling Methods



Player Agency vs. Certainty of Delivery in Interactive Storytelling Methods

.....
Player's
control of
narrative
exposition
and pace

Player Agency

Environmental
storytelling

Triggered
Dialogue:
Shouts

Narrative
Systems:
Dialogue/
Gameplay
Choices

Triggered
Dialogue:
Audio Logs

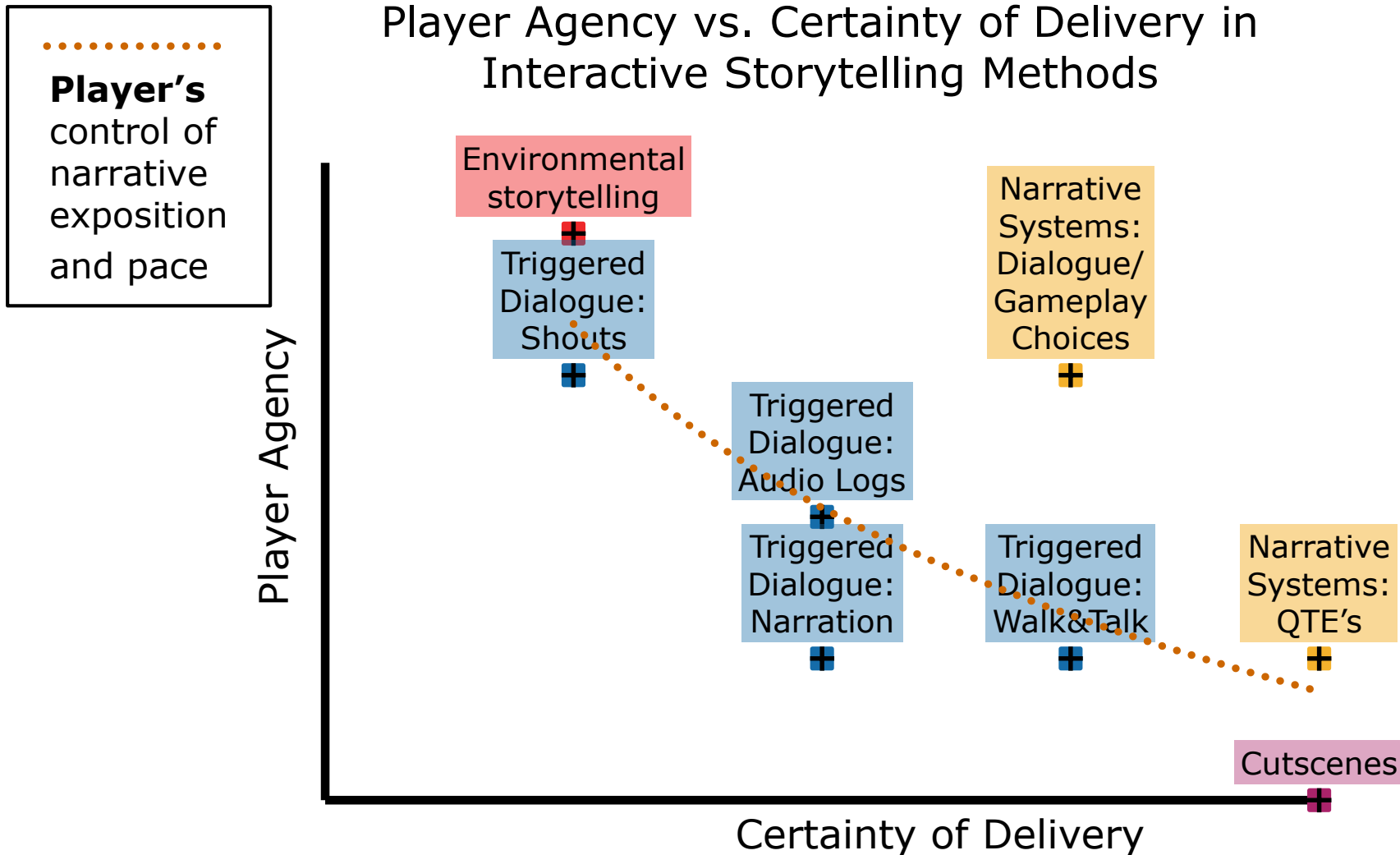
Triggered
Dialogue:
Narration

Triggered
Dialogue:
Walk&Talk

Narrative
Systems:
QTE's

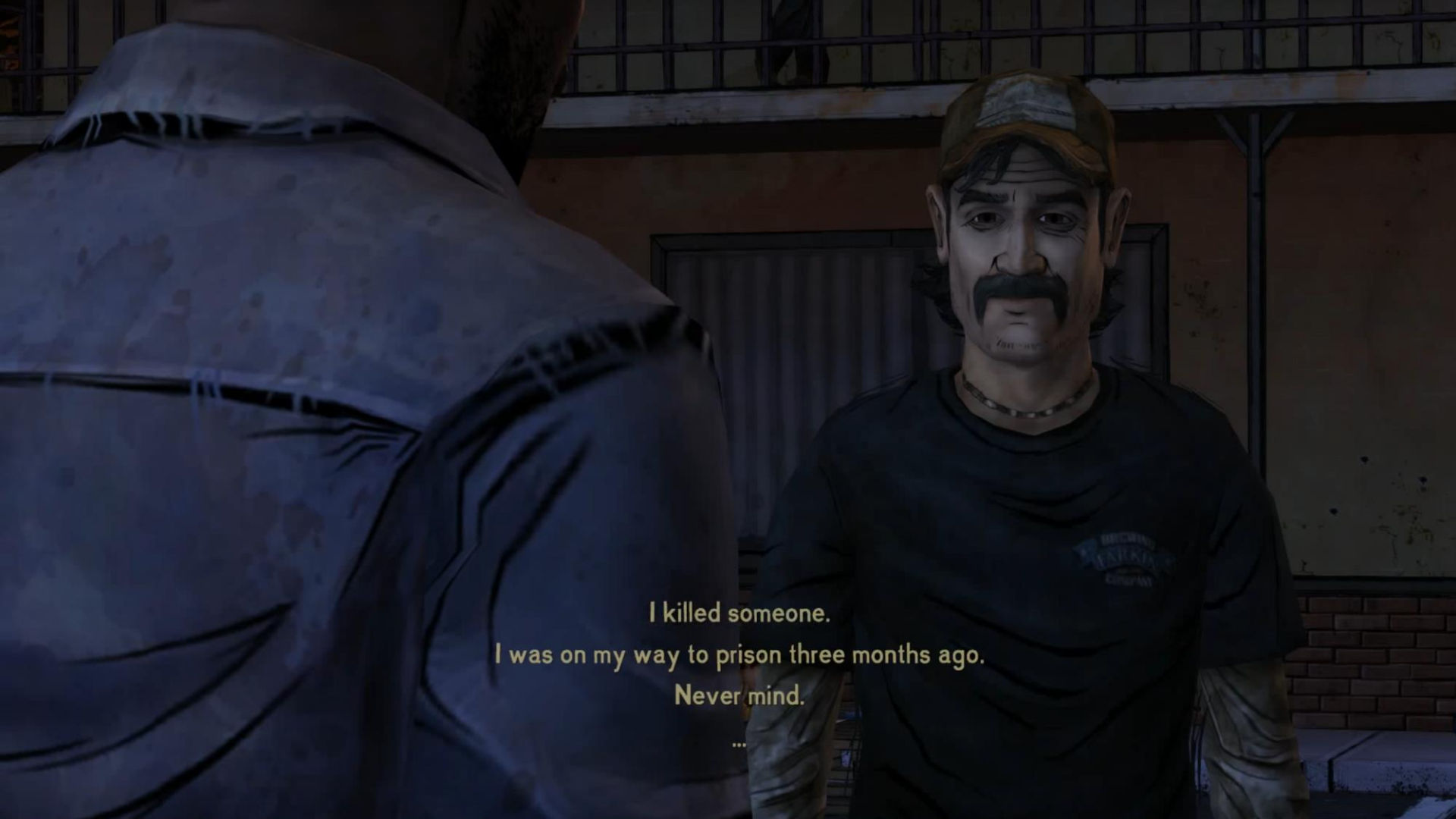
Cutscenes

Certainty of Delivery



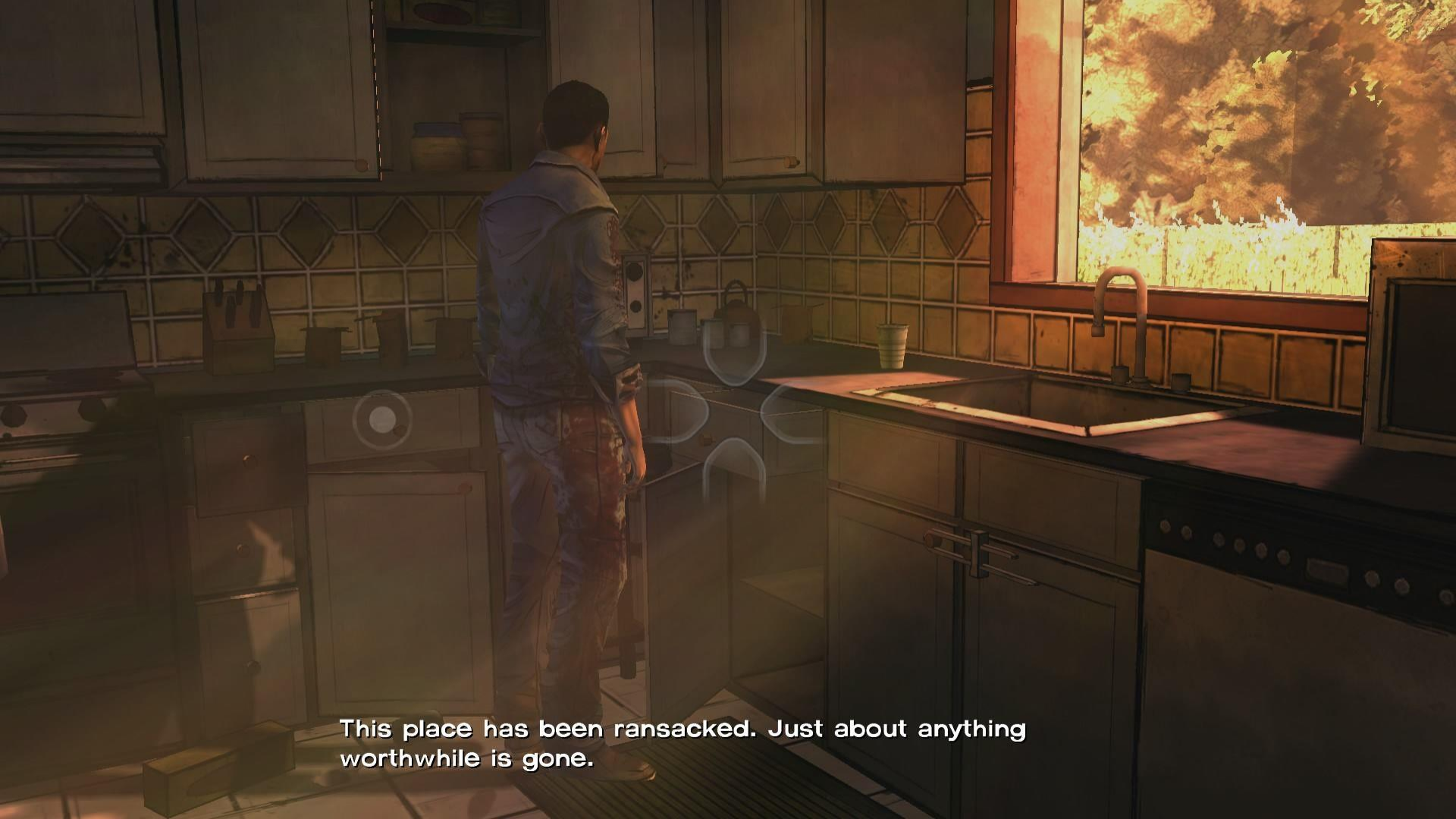


Look At
Gate

A man with a mustache and a baseball cap is talking to a person whose back is to the camera. The person is wearing a hooded jacket that has some bloodstains on it. The man is wearing a dark t-shirt with a logo that says "RECKING YAKKIE COMPANY". The background is a building with a brick wall and a window with bars.

I killed someone.
I was on my way to prison three months ago.
Never mind.

...



This place has been ransacked. Just about anything worthwhile is gone.







Tone

HOW Presentation → TONE

Style or manner of expression.
How the **THEME** is approached.
How the **FEELING** is attained.



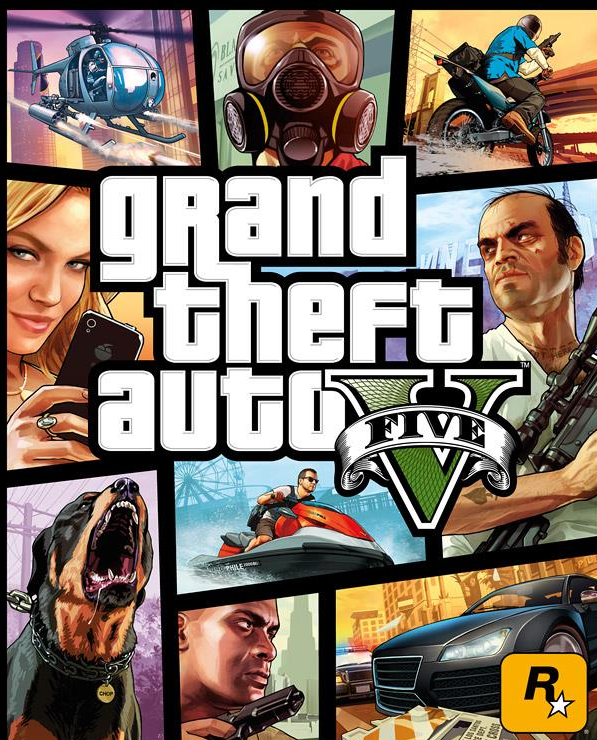


Setting the Tone

- Cameras and viewpoint
- Lighting
- Color Pallet
- Writing (characters, menus, UI)
- Character Performance (acting, VO)
- Music and SFX

Presentation of your theme







Mafia III (2016)



Grand Theft Auto V (2013)



Saints Row: The Third (2011)



"THIS CHANGES EVERYTHING"



DEFEND GIORGI

◇ CURRENT OBJECTIVE



0/0

8/5



+ 0

0

SO


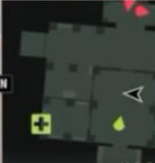
✱

SO

0

NO WITNESSES 11

COMBAT 11



HOSTAGE

★★★★★

500 30



★ GO UPSTAIRS

CHECKPOINT-REACHED

8 m



17/∞



**Twelve terrorists. One cop.
The odds are against John McClane...
That's just the way he likes it.**

B R U C E W I L L I S
DIE HARD



PAL

DIE TRILOGY HARD™



PlayStation™
PLATINUM

5030932017123
5030935017120

FX006101440F

The background of the title screen is a blurred image of a modern building with large windows. In the foreground, a car is partially visible, and a person in a dark jacket is lying on the ground. The title "DIE HARD" is written in large, bold, red capital letters with a slight shadow effect.

DIE HARD

NEW GAME



Die Hard (PS1)

WHY Masculinity - Violence

WHO McClane

WHERE Nakatomi Plaza

WHAT Kill bad guys

WHEN Linear, singular storyline, constant flow

HOW 3rd Person wide shot, quippy, constant action, fast-paced action music









Die Hard: Elevator Shaft

WHY Masculinity (following your gut)

WHO McClane, Karl

WHERE Elevator shaft and vents

WHAT Escape and Outwit the terrorists

WHEN Linear, fast action mixed with slower, tense moments

HOW Suspense and danger: tight cameras, tense music, personal moments with McClane; moments of levity via McClane





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Die Hard: Elevator Shaft

WHAT/MECHANICS

STORY

Escape and Outwit the terrorists

GAMEPLAY

Escape:
Running, finding cover

Outwit:
Stealth, puzzles





Die Hard: Elevator Shaft

WHEN/PACING

STORY

Fast action mixed with
slower, tense moments

GAMEPLAY

Fast moments:
Cutscenes, QTEs

Slow, tense moments:
Env storytelling, Shouts





Die Hard: Elevator Shaft

HOW/PRESENTATION

STORY

GAMEPLAY

Suspense and danger:

tight cameras

tense music

personal moments

moments of levity





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