



Snap to Character

Building Strong Player Attachment
Through Narrative

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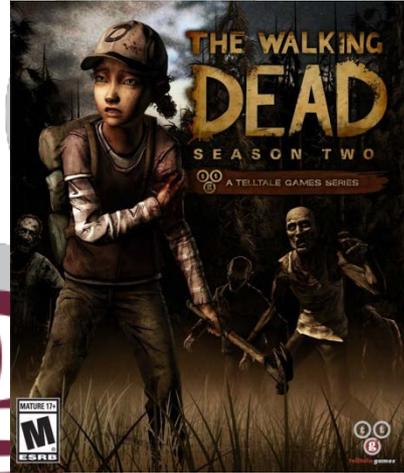
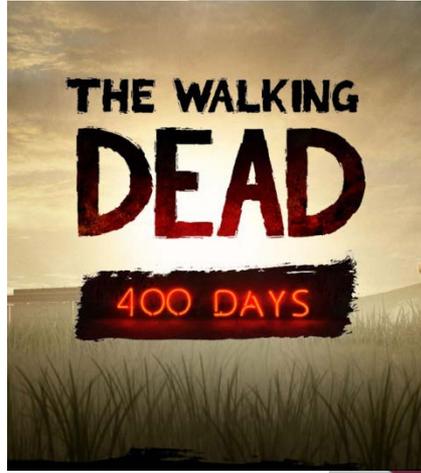
Game Designer, Hangar 13 Games



What does that long-winded title mean?

- Everyone can think of chars they love and chars they didn't attach to.
- Why?
- Let's explore









Lessons I've learned (and mistakes I've made)

1. Quality Time
2. Emotional & Motivational Parity
3. Balancing Pragmatism
4. Depth and Specificity

(There will be spoilers for TWD, TftBL & Mafia 3)





1. Quality Time (and space)

- In real life, people don't form emotional connections instantly.
- The same goes for emotional bonds between player and digital character.
- Bonds (IRL or digital) take time to form naturally on their own.





**There is absolutely no way
to cheat or shortcut this.**





- Some narratives add a previously established relationship
- Usually familial (but not always)
- “The Dad-ification of video games”





- Assumption: Humans care about their IRL family, therefore they will care about their digital one.
- Assumption: “Family” as a concept alone will automatically cause you to care for characters.
- This is never the case. Just because you know you’re *supposed* to care for a character doesn’t mean you do.





- Real familial bonds are built up over years of shared experiences.
- Narratives can create a familial connection instantly, but it holds no weight on its own.
- “Family” is just a descriptor for the nature of a relationship. It doesn’t project any emotional connection on its own; it simply describes an existing one.







Stranger

Love



Stranger

Love





Stranger



Love



Stranger

Love





- TftBL breaks this rule!
- It has to work quickly to make up the ground.
- Spends most of the introduction “catching you up”





- Within the introduction scene, the player learns:
 - Rhys has friends (Yvette and Vaughn).
 - They care about him and support him.
 - They will work together to get revenge for him.
- Both the player and Rhys experienced the pain together.
- So when Yvette and Vaughn console Rhys, they also console the player





The big secret is:

Emotional connection will always take TIME.





- It will never be the same amount of time; each player is different.
- Allowing players time to meet, learn about, warm up to, and eventually fall in love with your characters is as crucial in a digital space as it is in real life.





- 5 short stories centered around one specific place over 400 days.
- Experiment in short-form, highly focused storytelling.
- Get to know characters enough for one big emotional decision.





- Problems:

- Each story is only ~20 minutes long. (*Not enough time*)
- Extremely small cast. (*Not enough vectors of exposure to personalities*)
- Most of the running time is introducing characters and giving context to the one big choice.





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- Each story is only ~20 minutes long. (*Not enough time*)
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- Most of the running time is introducing characters and giving context to the one big choice.
- Players could feel the big choice coming, which felt like the end of the story. **Consequences are more interesting than the decision.**



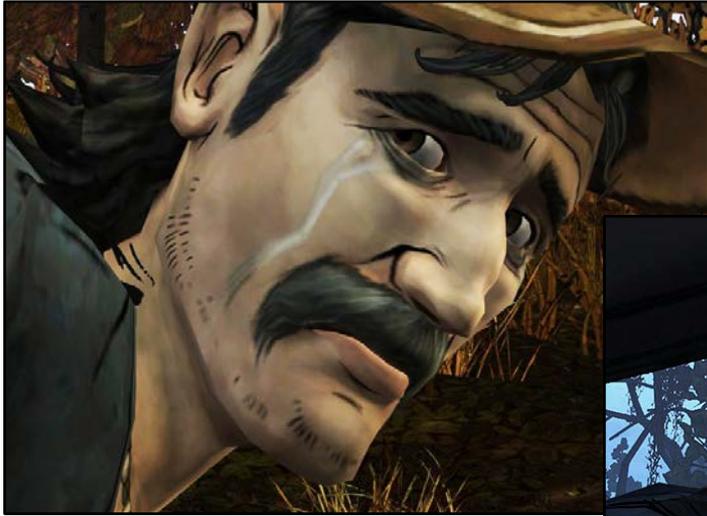




Important supplementary lesson:

- Not all time spent is created equal.
- Spending time sharing experiences is much more valuable



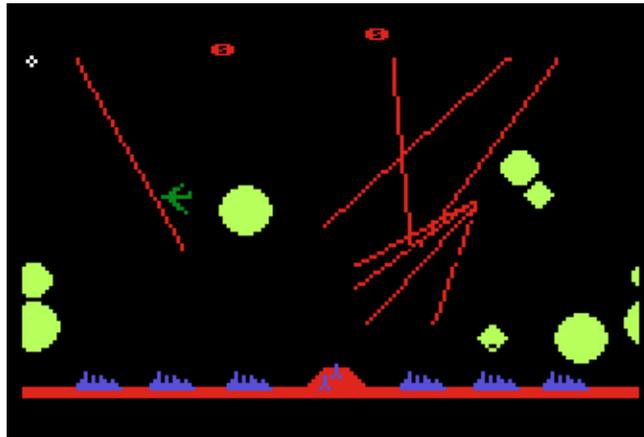




2. Emotional & Motivational Parity

- The goal is to allow the player and their avatar to occupy the same emotional space.
- This allows for a much deeper emotional bond, and allows the player to forget for a moment that they *aren't* their avatar.







Emotional & Motivational Parity

At the start of the game, a player's primary motivation is **to do whatever takes, whatever the game asks them to do to continue playing the game and preventing the experience from ending.**

(This is a completely legitimate motivation that should be respected)

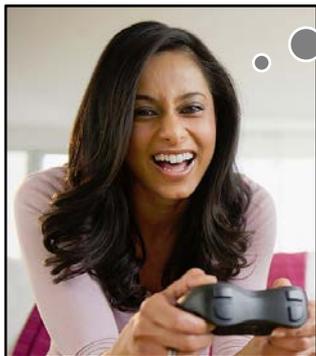
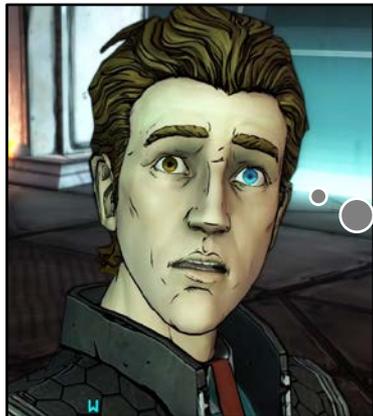




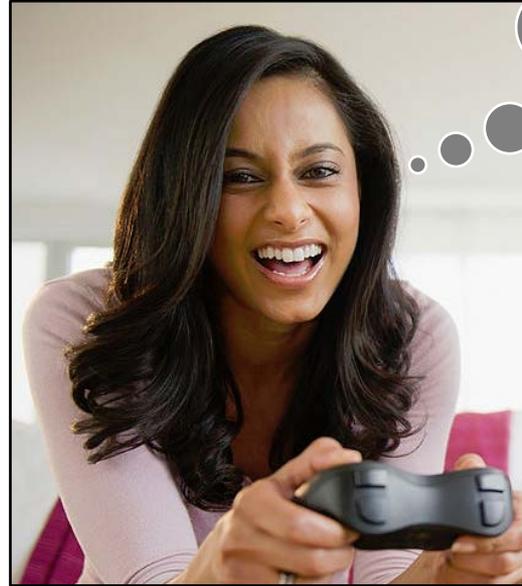
Oh boy
promotion
time!

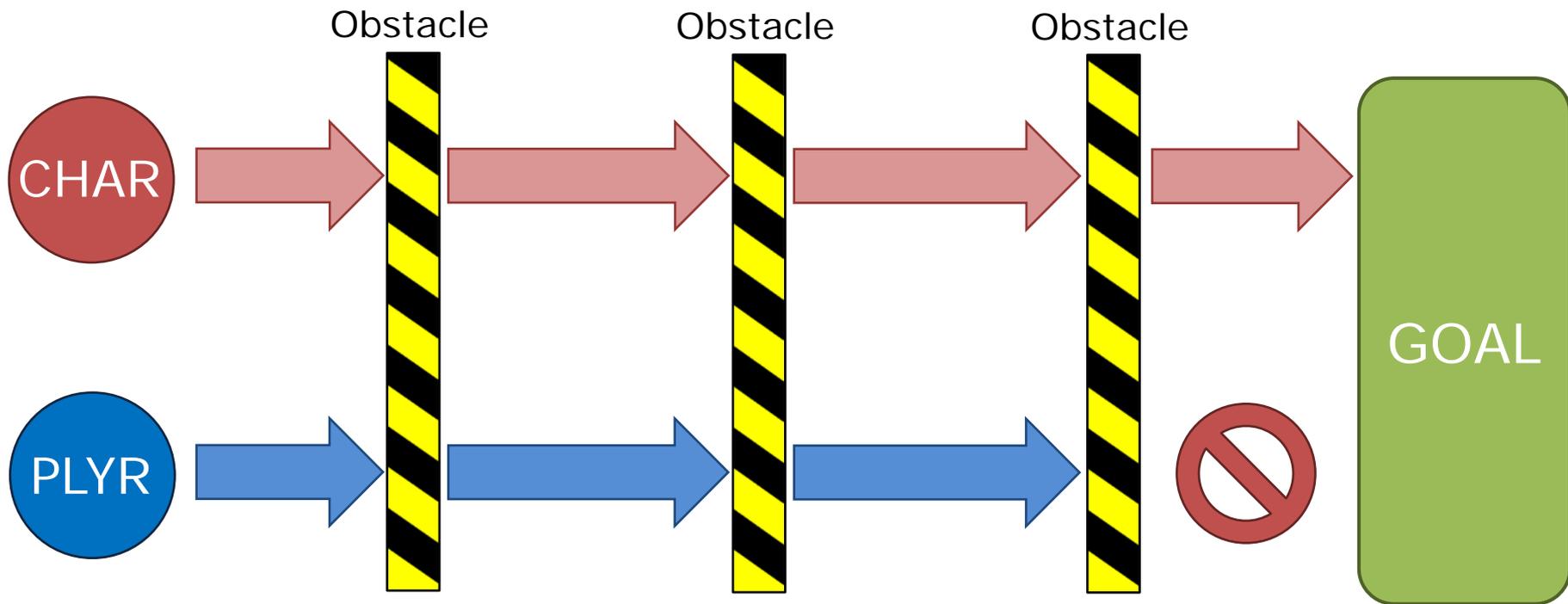






- Player and their avatar are in-sync, and share the same emotional states (betrayed, hurt, angry).
- No need for exposition to explain motivations. Player experienced it firsthand along with their avatar.
- You want revenge for yourself, and Rhys wants revenge for himself.







CHAR



Motivation



GOAL:

Save
loved
one



PLYR



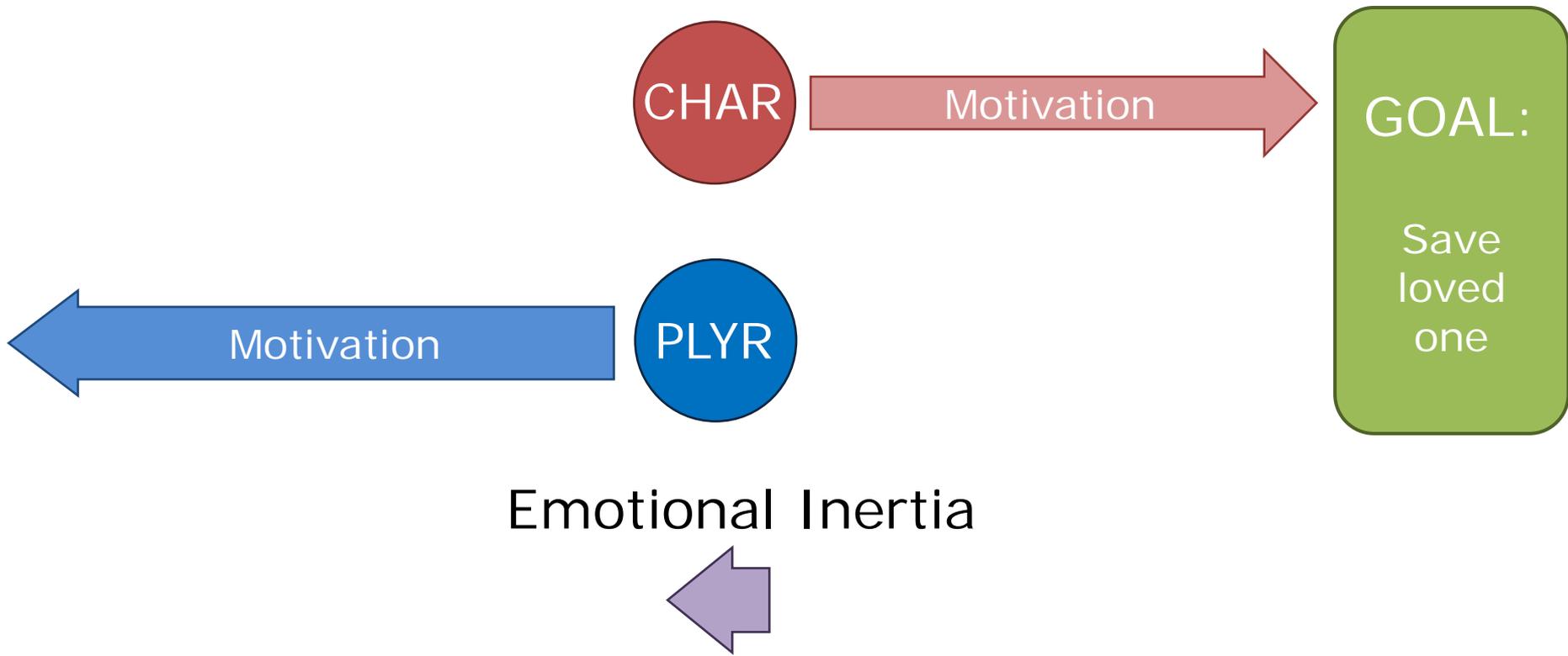
Motivation

Emotional Inertia



Player + Character







Emotional & Motivational Parity

Remember:

- Keep the player and the avatar's emotional state and motivations in-sync as often as possible.
- Be aware when your game is asking your player to make a judgment call or puts an obstacle in their way that will make them re-evaluate their emotional attachment through their avatar.





3. Balancing Pragmatism

(Previously)

- At the start of your game, the player is focused on the pragmatic task of ensuring the game experience continues.
- All their choices will be dictated by this task.







Speed ★★

Power ★

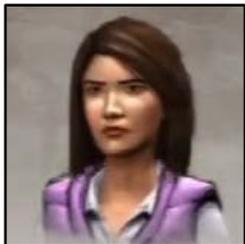
Technique ★★★



Speed ★★★★★

Power ★★

Technique ★★★



Speed ★

Power ★★★★★

Technique ★★

- There is early value in establishing mechanical value of other characters.
- This lets the player build investment immediately (even if it is pragmatic)



Speed ★★

Power ★

Technique ★★★



Speed ★★★★★

Power ★★

Technique ★★★



Speed ★

Power ★★★★★

Technique ★★

- Pragmatic value also supports a player's emotional investment.
- However: don't stop there!
- Pragmatic value is shallow and holds less value long-term.



At this moment:

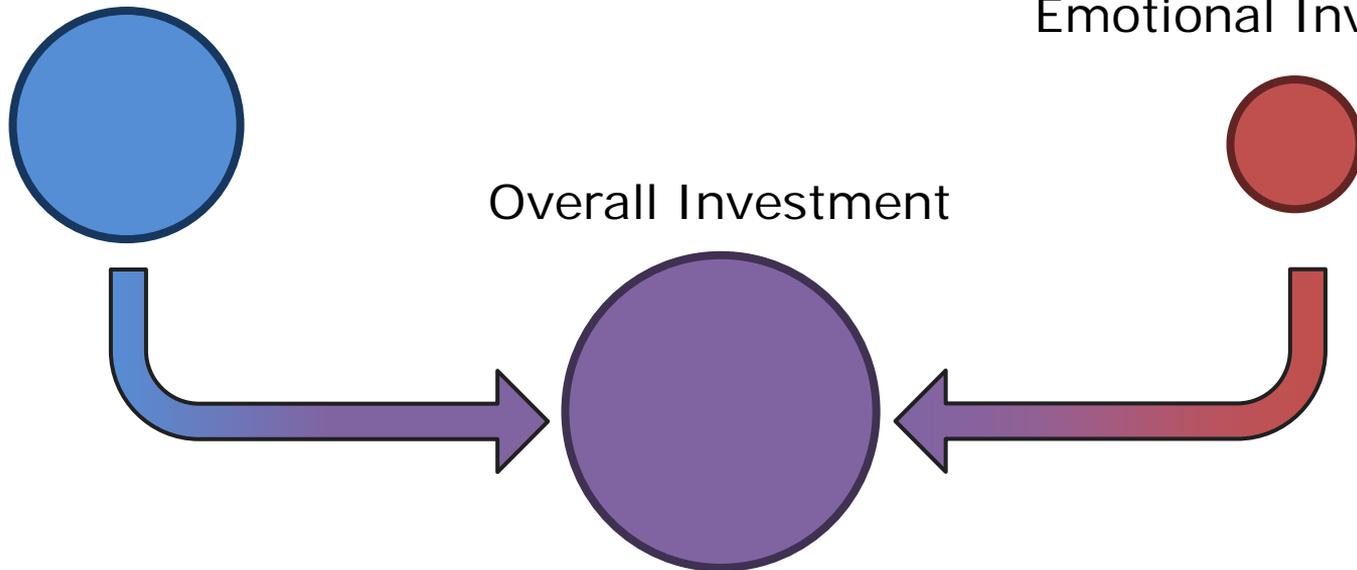
- The game has tutorialized that choices branch content permanently.
- The player is aware of the gravity of the choice
- The average player hasn't had the time to deeply emotionally connect, yet the moment still works. Why?



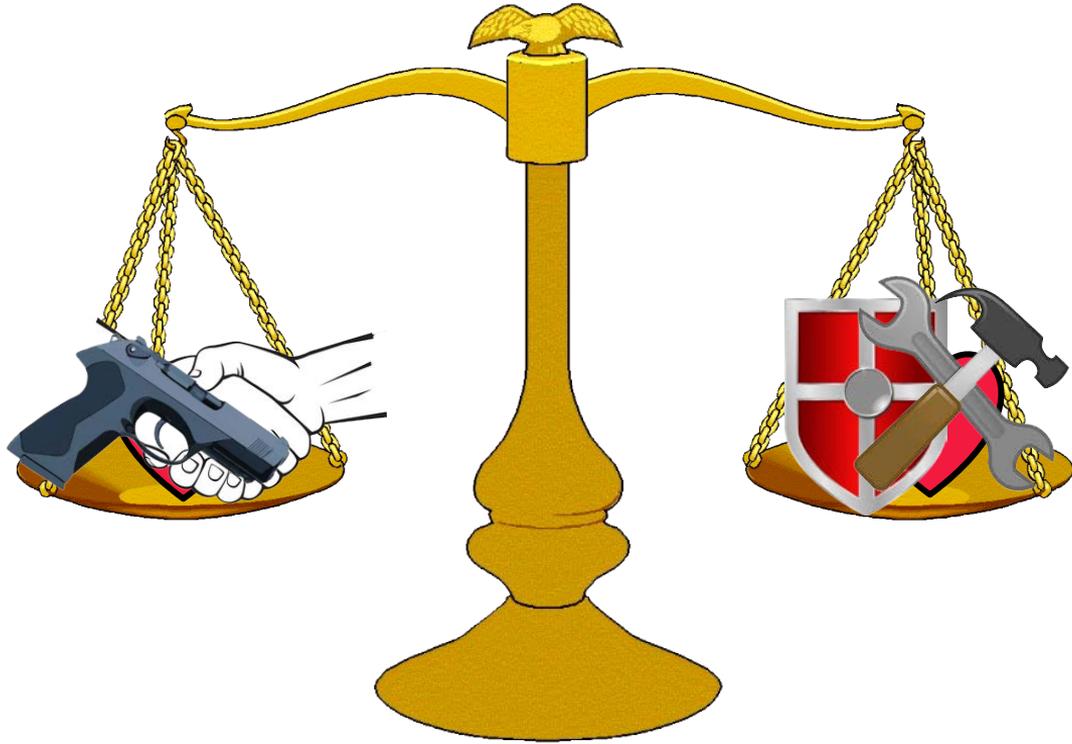
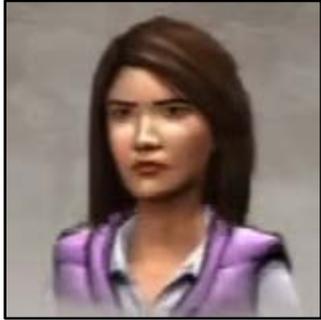


Pragmatic Investment

Emotional Investment



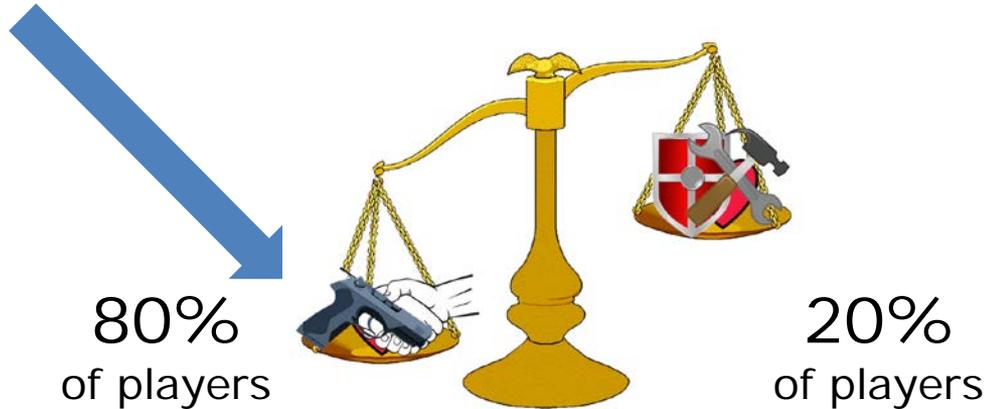






3. Balancing Pragmatism

The majority of early emotional investment is calculated by players trying to figure out which choice gives them the **best chance of “winning” the game.**





Although the choice itself is largely pragmatic, the outcome is *extremely* emotional.

The player (and their avatar) and the surviving character have shared an extremely intimate experience. (Remember Quality Time?)

If they didn't feel a bond before the choice, they will begin to feel one now. The choice has laid a strong foundation for the future.





(Pragmatic)
Investment: 10%



+



(Pragmatic)
Investment: 65%



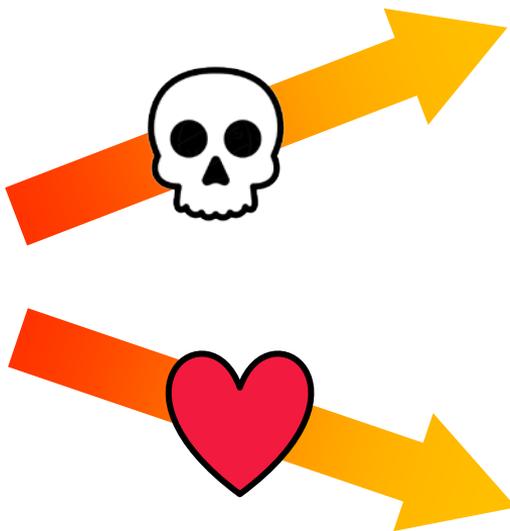


You can use this combination of pragmatism and emotional connection to create compelling moments.

A choice between two options, one being more pragmatically valuable, becomes much more complex and interesting when a player's emotions pull them in a different direction.

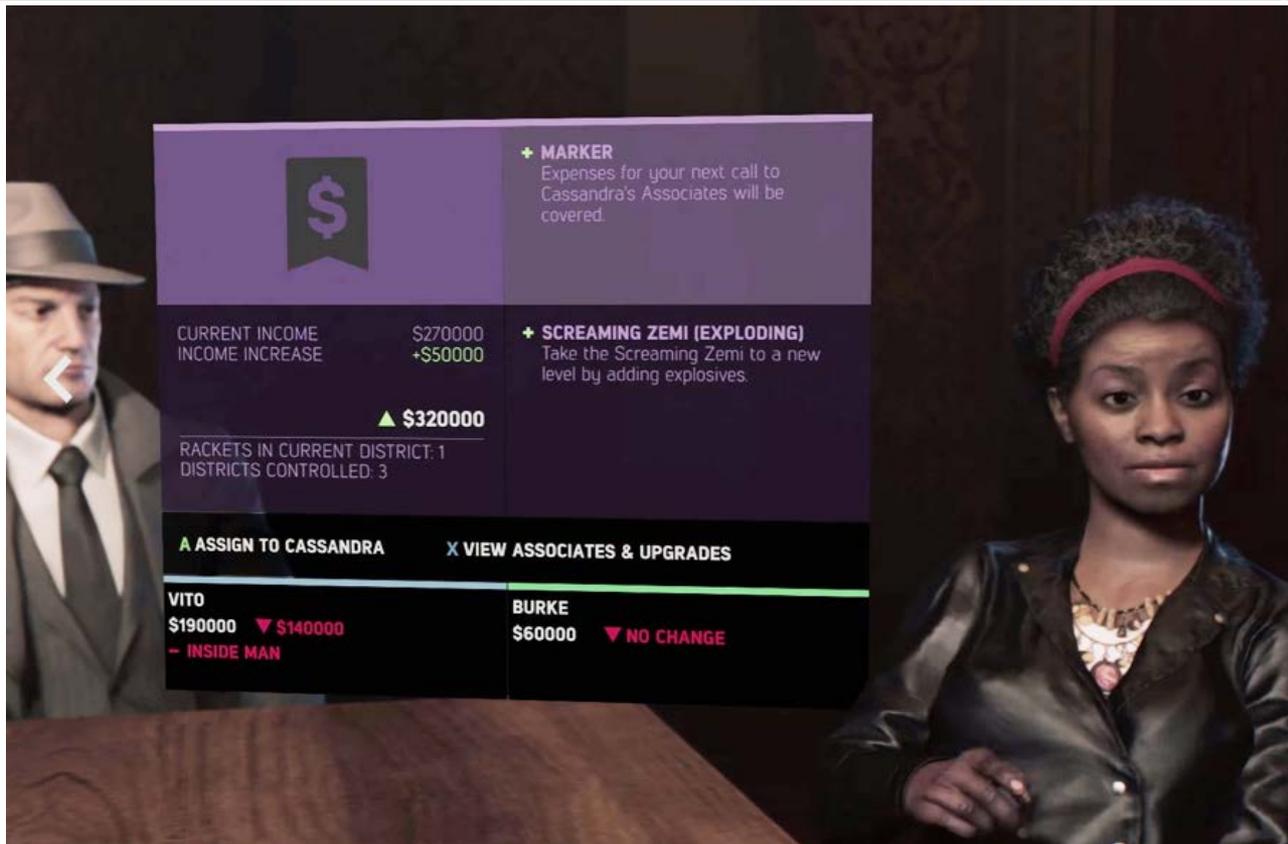




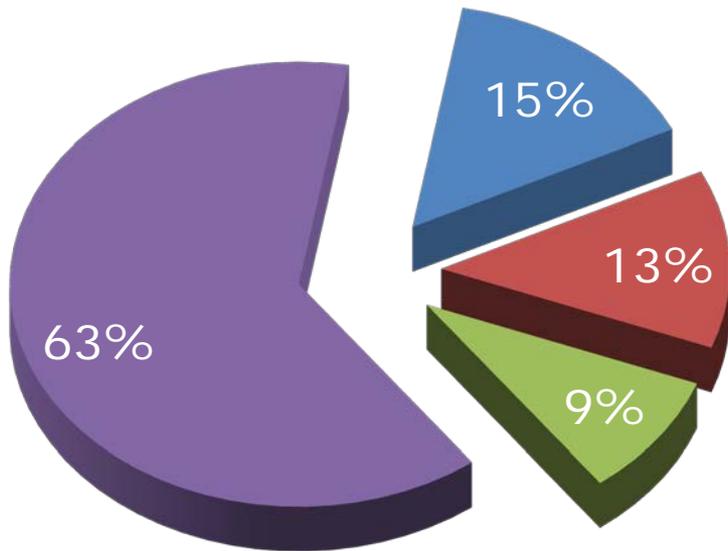


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Which lieutenant betrayed you?



■ Vito

■ Cassandra

■ Burke

■ Kept family together



Designing System Driven Dialogue in 'Mafia III'

Remy Boicherot | Systems Designer, Hangar 13

Location: Room 2005, West Hall

Date: Thursday, March 2

Time: 11:30am - 12:30pm





3. Balancing Pragmatism

Remember:

- There's value in allowing players to find mechanical value in characters.
- Over time their emotional value to the player will increase (with quality time spent together.)
- Give players opportunities to weigh pragmatic value vs. emotional value.





4. Depth & Specificity

- Depth of personality allows for a more believable character (obviously).
- Everyone knows someone in their life who has a quick temper, or has separation issues, etc.
- Not just surface level things like “My favourite colour is red.”





- Real people are impossibly varied and unique. Allow your characters the same luxury.
- This gives players more angles to approach the character emotionally. Let them find an endearing or sympathetic quality they can identify with.
- After you save Doug or Carley, you learn more about them. Doug likes robots, Carley was a reporter in war-zones.





- It's a mistake to force all of their personality to come out in dialog. It always feels forced in the moment.
- Some of it will naturally emerge from dialog, but much more depth can be shown through their actions.
- Example: Kenny tells you he was a fisherman, but his actions tell you he's short tempered, but loyal, and that his family means everything to him.





- Important clarification: I'm not referring to the quantitative depth of their backstory.
- The world building behind a character is interesting, but less emotionally important than their personality traits, quirks, actions and turns of phrase.





Why?



Why?



Why?







- It's vital to remember that real people are not perfect. They have flaws, they make mistakes, they get angry, they act unfairly.
- A character who is all-powerful and always correct is emotionally shallow.
- A player will have a difficult time believing that character is real, and will limit the emotional investment.





4. Depth & Specificity

- How can we empathize with a character who doesn't feel rage, or sadness or loss?
- Empathy is born from an understanding of what another person is feeling.
- Most humans inherently understand what it feels like to want or need something and never get it.





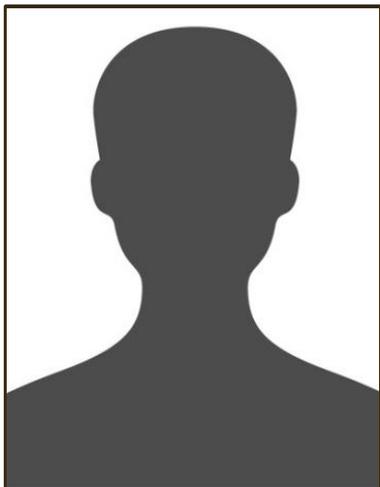
4. Depth & Specificity

- It was an explicit decision that Lee Everett was not leader of the group of survivors.
- The leaders sometimes they make a call that is not what the player wants.
- Allowing the player the power to dictate direction would be in direct opposition to the emotional core of the game's narrative.

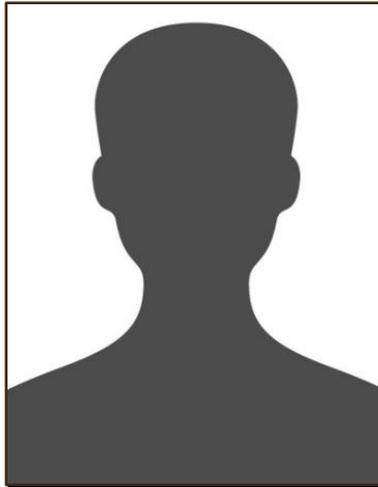




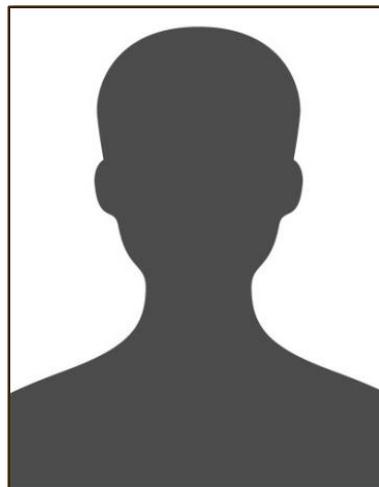
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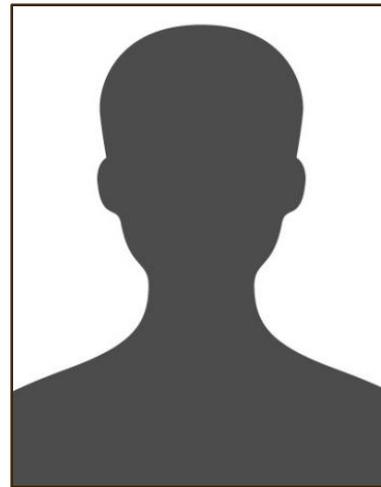
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#3



#4





#1



#2



#3



#4





However:

- On the flip side, it can also be valuable to leave certain parts of the character vague or un-addressed.
- If it isn't pertinent to the needs of the narrative, it can be omitted.
- Allows players to fill in the missing info themselves.
- Head canons / fan theories are an extremely good way to give players their own feeling of ownership.





- Players are going to imprint what they want and care about onto your characters regardless of your intent.
- It's an extremely powerful way to allow emotional bonds.
- Characters reflect players experiences / interests back to them.





Wrapping Up

- Time spent together is a **prerequisite** for emotional connection.
- Time spent **sharing an emotional experience** or striving to accomplish a goal is the most valuable.
- Pre-established emotional connections do not **shortcut a player into caring earlier**. It can actually have the opposite effect.





Wrapping Up

- Your player and their character should have **emotional parity** to ensure the inertia moves them forward.
- If your character has previously established relationships, spend the time to emotionally **catch the player up**.
- Spend the time to let your player build the **same primary motivations** as the character. Let them experience the events that kick the story off together.





Wrapping Up

- Give players **pragmatic reasons** to invest on the ground floor.
- Start with pragmatism, but **don't stop there**. It's a short-term investment.
- Try to find opportunities to force your player to choose between their **emotional attachment and their pragmatic needs**.





Wrapping Up

- **Weaknesses and flaws** make a character more relatable.
- Ensure that moments of character exploration **fit the tone** of the intent of the scene. Don't shoehorn them in.
- Leave **undefined space** in a character to allow players to see themselves in them.
- Focus on what the characters are **feeling and how they're reacting** over their backstory.





Thank you! Questions?

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More questions? I'll be at the Wrap-Up room:
Overlook 3014, West Hall

