

MAKING PLAYER CHOICES FEEL LIKE THEY MATTER IN YOUR GAME NARRATIVE



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OVERVIEW



- Balancing act between maintaining a cohesive narrative, exponential scaling, and delivering **impact** for choices. **Impact** is the measure of players believing your choices matter.
- We're not tabletop GMs. Narrative video games, by nature, are limited by finite choices. Make them count!
- Creating impact is a function of knowing when to put in the blood sweat and tears, and when to use misdirection and illusion. You need BOTH, and you can create **impact** in multiple ways.
- You know your backend. Your players don't. A blessing and a curse.
- All comes down to player **emotions** — know your players and pay attention to feedback.

TYPES OF IMPACT



CASCADES



CALLBACKS



HEURISTICS

WHAT ARE CASCADES?



- Cascading impacts are what most people are referring to when they reference a big decision, or say that a choice “matters.”
- Choices in a cascading decision promise to permanently alter the game or world in a major way.
- Example: does Duke (the farmer) die, or does Gretchen (the pug) die?

CASCADE EXAMPLE

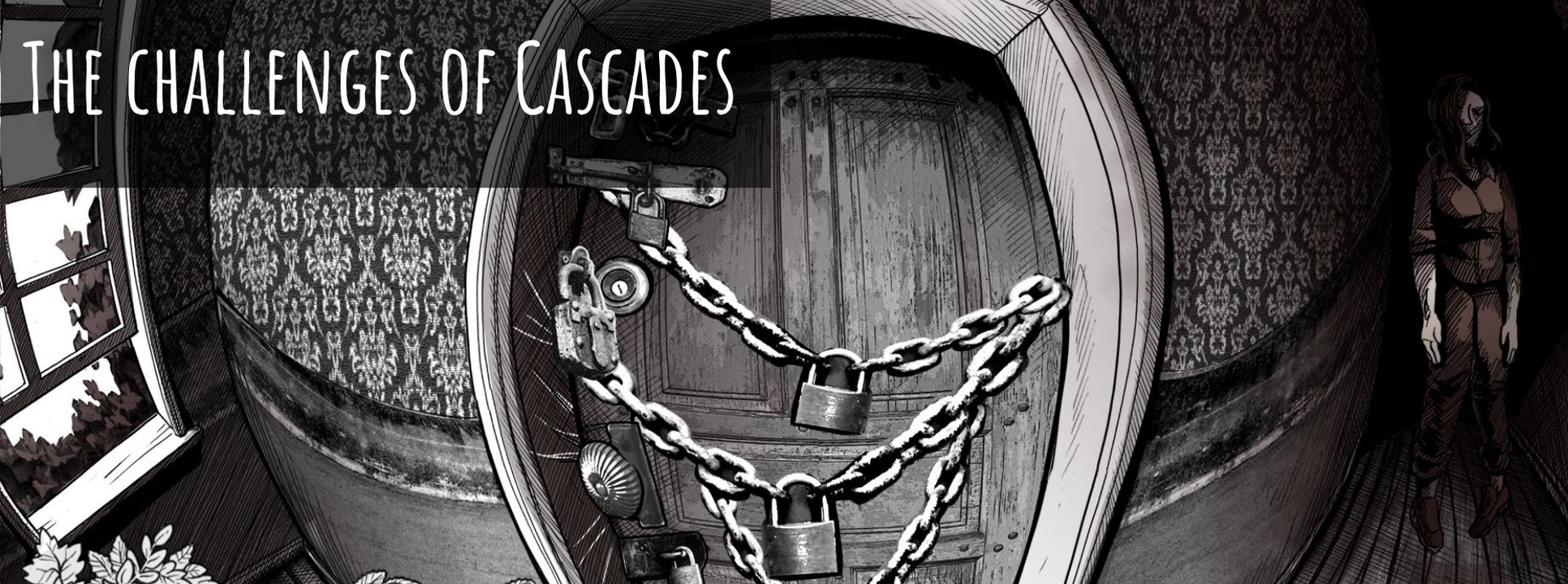


THE ADVANTAGES OF CASCADES



- They're (relatively) easy to **set up**.
- They're attention-grabbing.
- They're memorable and discussion-worthy.
- You (usually) only need a single flag to track them.
- Players understand what they're being presented with.
- A proper execution is *impressive*.

THE CHALLENGES OF CASCADES



- Impacts that deviate too far from each other present exponential scaling issues in your narrative, especially when you have multiple cascading decisions in one game.
- Players have been burned before. Some people **will** get mad at you.
- Very emotionally charged decisions. Some people **will** get mad at you.
- Delicate line between making your cascades feel important and still being able to finish your game.
- Easy to over-promise and under-deliver.
- Both extremely labor-intensive and subject to the highest levels of scrutiny.

CASCADES - TIPS AND TRICKS



- Write your impacts to be modular (can slot into your narrative arc) whenever possible.
- Think about what purpose major decisions serve for the direction of your narrative. How do they make your story *feel* different?
- Your decisions are going to have to revert to the mean until the end of the story, or you won't finish. But you can make that mean reversion impactful in big ways.
- Don't make people feel like they're losing content. If a character dies, make content about that death.
- Combine with other types of impact to heighten effectiveness.

WHAT ARE CALLBACKS?



- Pretty straightforward. They reference something that happened earlier in the story specific to a player choice without interrupting the flow of the narrative.
- The choice they reference can be big (causes a cascade) or small (said #girlboss)
- Track them with boolean flags.
- That's it.

CALLBACKS - ADVANTAGES



- They're one and done and scale linearly over time. It always takes the same amount of effort to add a new callback.
- Not as common as cascades so players don't expect them.
- Easy to under-promise and over-deliver. If you track #girlboss, what else do you track?!
- They feel personalized and make your players feel good.

CALLBACKS - CHALLENGES



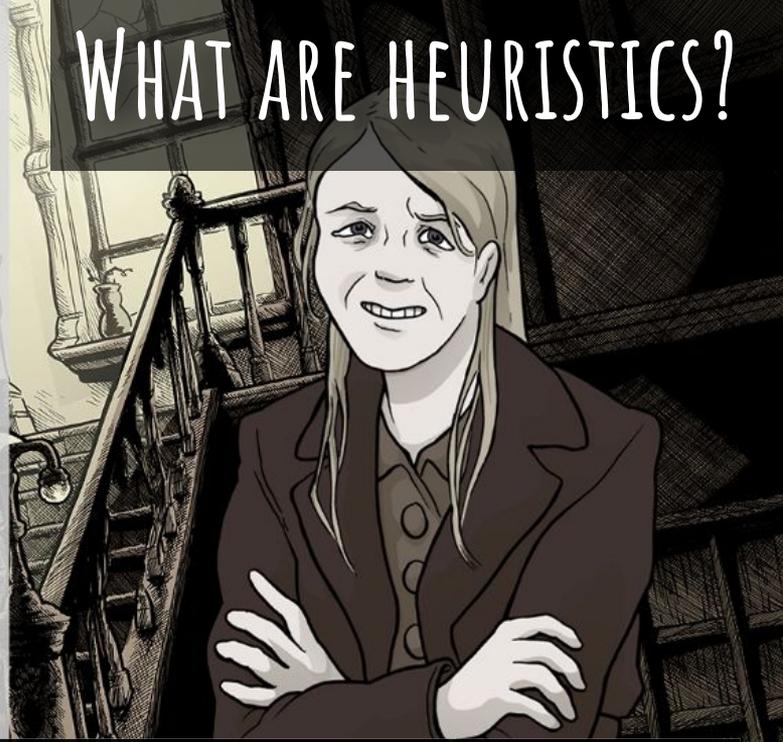
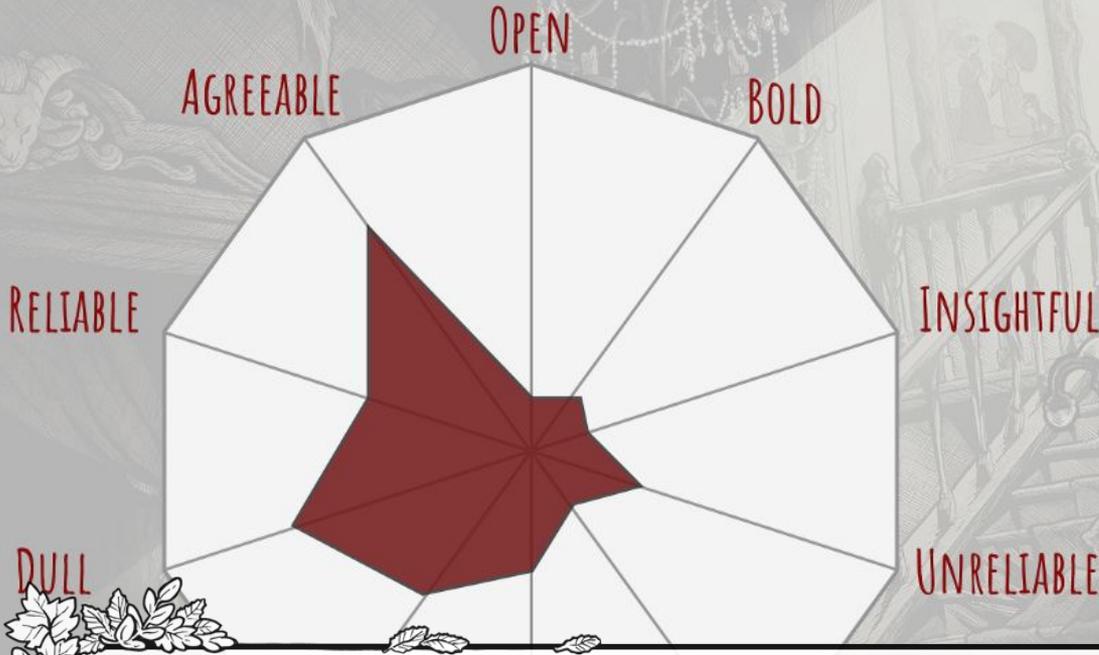
- They're not enough on their own. If you **only** have callbacks, your players will feel like their choices didn't matter.
- You need a lot of them for your players to notice them.
- They can require a LOT of flags to cover all of your bases. We use over a thousand.
- Can require you to have an encyclopedic knowledge of your own story.
- You'll break your brain if you rely too heavily on them.

CALLBACKS - TIPS AND TRICKS



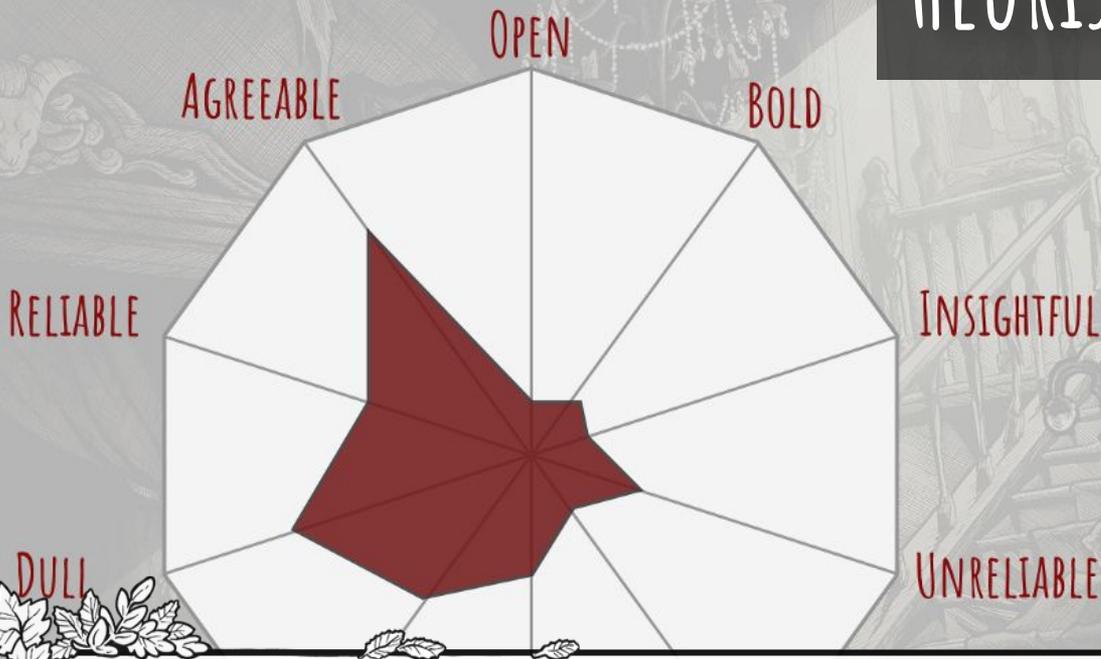
- Use callbacks to make your dialogue less awkward and your conversations flow better. A character acknowledging that something's already been said goes a long way.
- Flag **everything**. You never know when tracking something might come in handy later!
- Set up naming conventions for your variables so they're easier to track — for us, it's usually `episode_scene_character_flag`
- On top of keeping them in a spreadsheet, where you define them can be an easy way to sort.

WHAT ARE HEURISTICS?



- A heuristic is a problem solving technique that relies on simplification to quickly arrive at a “good enough” solution to a problem at the cost of some level of accuracy.
- Ex. “I’ve never known someone who was struck by lightning, it must not happen a lot.”
- Alt. ex.: “I’ve heard two news stories about people who were struck by lightning, it must happen a lot!”

HEURISTICS IN SCARLET HOLLOW



- Most common ex in games is an affection meter, but 1 axis cannot handle bootlickers.
- Scarlet Hollow uses a 5 axis (and 10 variable) heuristic to measure player relationships with other characters.
- Most dialogue choices impact some or all of these variables in small ways.
- Major decisions (choices with cascading impact) change these variables in big ways.
- You don't need 10 variables to do this. But you probably want more than 1 or 2.

HEURISTICS ADVANTAGES



- People use heuristics all the time in real life, so using them correctly allows your character to feel more fluid and lifelike.
- You don't need to memorize or remember a thousand specific details.
- You can use them to add flavor and nuance to both cascades and callbacks.
- They can be constructed as sliding scales, so you have a wider range of potential character reactions
- Modular by nature.

HEURISTICS CHALLENGES



- They're difficult to set up. If you have hundreds of dialogue choices, you need to think, hundreds of times, about how those choices impact another character.
- They need cascades and callbacks to reach their full effectiveness.
- They're as good as your writers are— true of all types of impact, but much more pronounced here. Your writers need to keep several versions of characters straight at all times.
- Can create a lot of extra complexity in your narrative.
- If you oversimplify things, it can your narrative feel too game-y. See earlier bootlicker comment.

HEURISTICS TIPS AND TRICKS



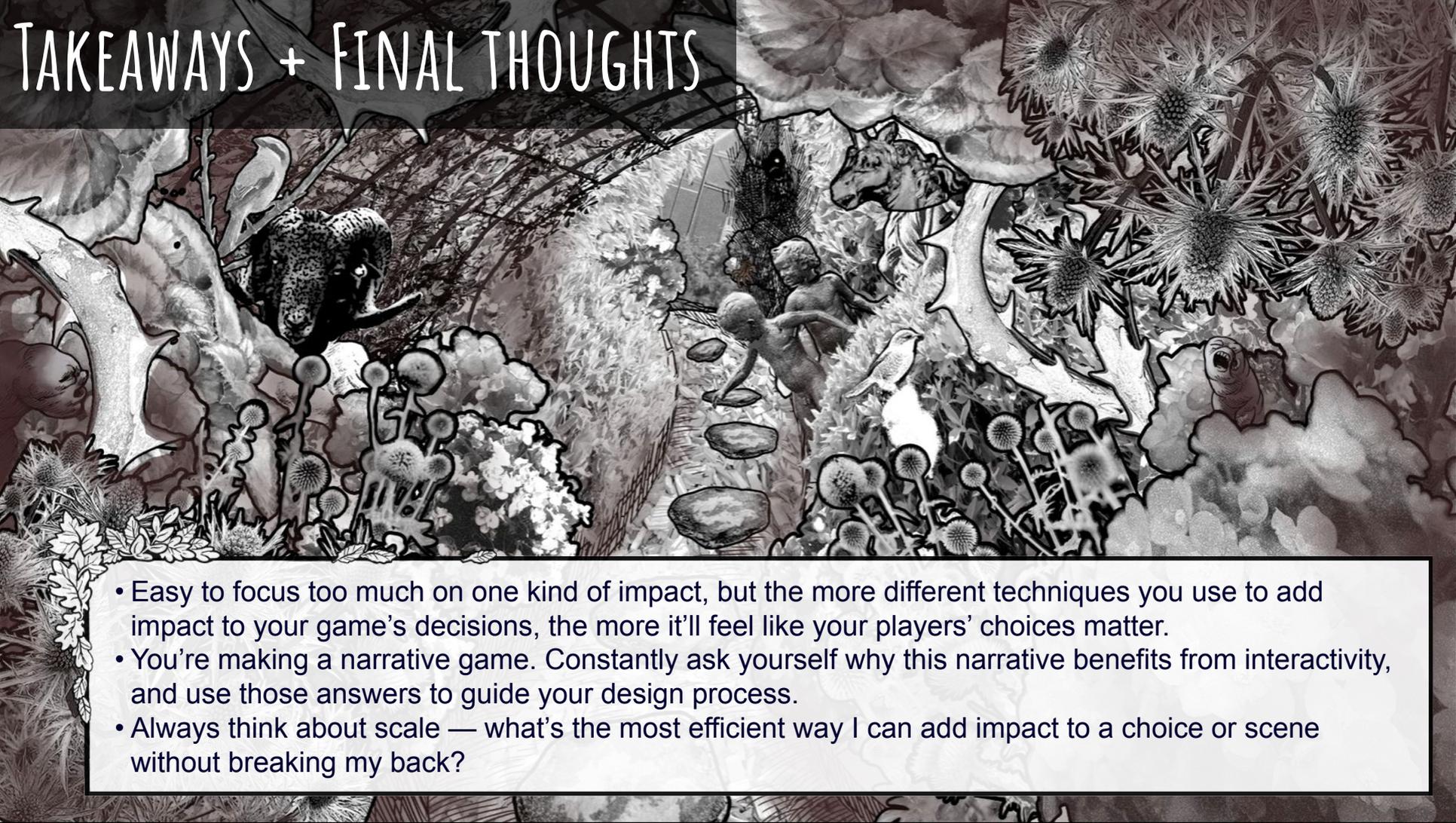
- Once set up, they're the most flexible tool in your arsenal. Use them to contextually change music to reflect character relationships! Use them to change out sprites to alter the meaning of a line of dialogue. Use them to offer up different perspectives on events and different amounts of information!
- Use them in conjunction with flagged decisions. A character's lost a friend — how much are they willing to open up to you about that? How does your relationship change their perspective?
- Use them to change what options are available for big decisions that lead to cascades.

COOL THINGS YOU CAN DO WITH HEURISTICS, CONT'D



- Combine heuristics with flags. (Saying it again for good measure)
- Combine heuristics with other heuristics. If your character is bold, how does that affect your relationship with someone who wants to impress you? How does that affect your relationship with someone who's already decided they don't like you?
- Use existing heuristics data to *alter* the way that new decisions affect those numbers.

TAKEAWAYS + FINAL THOUGHTS



- Easy to focus too much on one kind of impact, but the more different techniques you use to add impact to your game's decisions, the more it'll feel like your players' choices matter.
- You're making a narrative game. Constantly ask yourself why this narrative benefits from interactivity, and use those answers to guide your design process.
- Always think about scale — what's the most efficient way I can add impact to a choice or scene without breaking my back?

THANKS FOR COMING! TIME FOR Q&A



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