

# Today and tomorrow: **Storytelling and Narrative**

## Deliverables:

- Game World - Done
- Character - Done (or soon done)
- Story - By end of week
- Game Treatment - Keep working!

## Today:

1. Why put stories in games?
2. Key concepts: player, **in-game & narrative events**
3. Storytelling engine
4. Types of stories: **linear, branching, foldback, emergent**

These slides are based on PowerPoint slides provided at the Instructor's section of the textbook's online Companion Site.

## Fundamentals of Game Design

by Ernest Adams and Andrew Rollings



Chapter 7: Storytelling and Narrative

## Tomorrow:

1. Granularity
2. Mechanisms for advancing the plot
3. Emotion
4. Scripted conversations, Dialog Trees
5. When to write the story
6. **Episodic games, Other considerations**

## Why put stories in games?

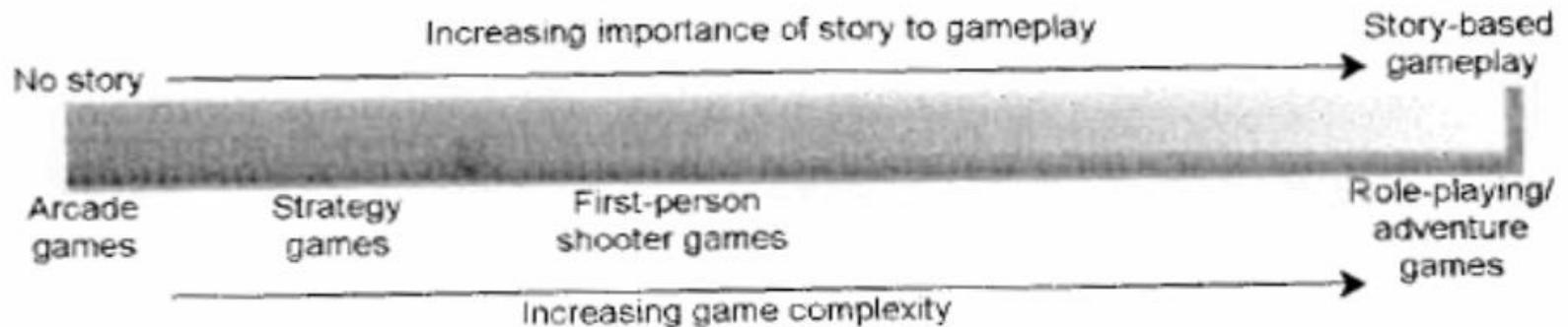
- Stories add entertainment
- Stories attract a wider audience
- Stories maintain players' interest in long games
- Stories help sell the game



# Why (and why not) put stories in games (continued)?

- Story should not be more important than gameplay
- Factors when considering how much story to include:
  - Length of the game
  - Focus on individual characters
  - Degree of realism
  - Emotional richness

How important is story to YOUR game, on a scale of 1 (no story) to 10 (story-based gameplay)?



**FIGURE 7.1** The story spectrum.

# Key Concepts

- A story is an account of a series of events
- Requirements of good stories:
  - A good story must be credible, coherent, and dramatically meaningful
- An interactive story includes three kinds of events:
  - Player events
  - In-game events
  - Narrative events

An interactive story is a story that the player interacts with by contributing actions to it.

- A story may be interactive even if the player's actions cannot change the direction of the story.

# Key Concepts (Cont.)

- Narrative is the part of the story told to the player by the designer
- Primary function of narrative is to present events over which the player has no control
  - Narrative may be in the form of a scenes, scrolling text, or voiceover
  - Narrative must be interruptible
  - Balance narrative with action to keep players interested
  - Try to avoid seizing control of the player's avatar during your game's narrative segments.

# Key Concepts (Cont.)

- Dramatic tension and gameplay tension
  - Dramatic tension
    - Something important is at stake. What will happen?
    - Dramatic tension comes from the plot
    - Fades in the presence of randomness and repetition
  - Gameplay tension
    - Something important is at stake. What will happen?
    - Gameplay tension comes from the challenges (gameplay)
    - Tolerates randomness and repetition for much longer

Page 165 of your text contains a nice example to illustrate the difference between dramatic and gameplay tension.

# Recall: The Key Components of Video Games (note etc)

Green box describes a

**gameplay mode:**

the particular subset of a game's total gameplay that is available at any one time in the game, plus the user interface that presents that subset of the gamplay to the player.

Player

Outputs

Inputs

Perspective

Interaction Model

User Interface

Challenges

Actions

Gameplay

Core Mechanics

documented in a **flowboard**

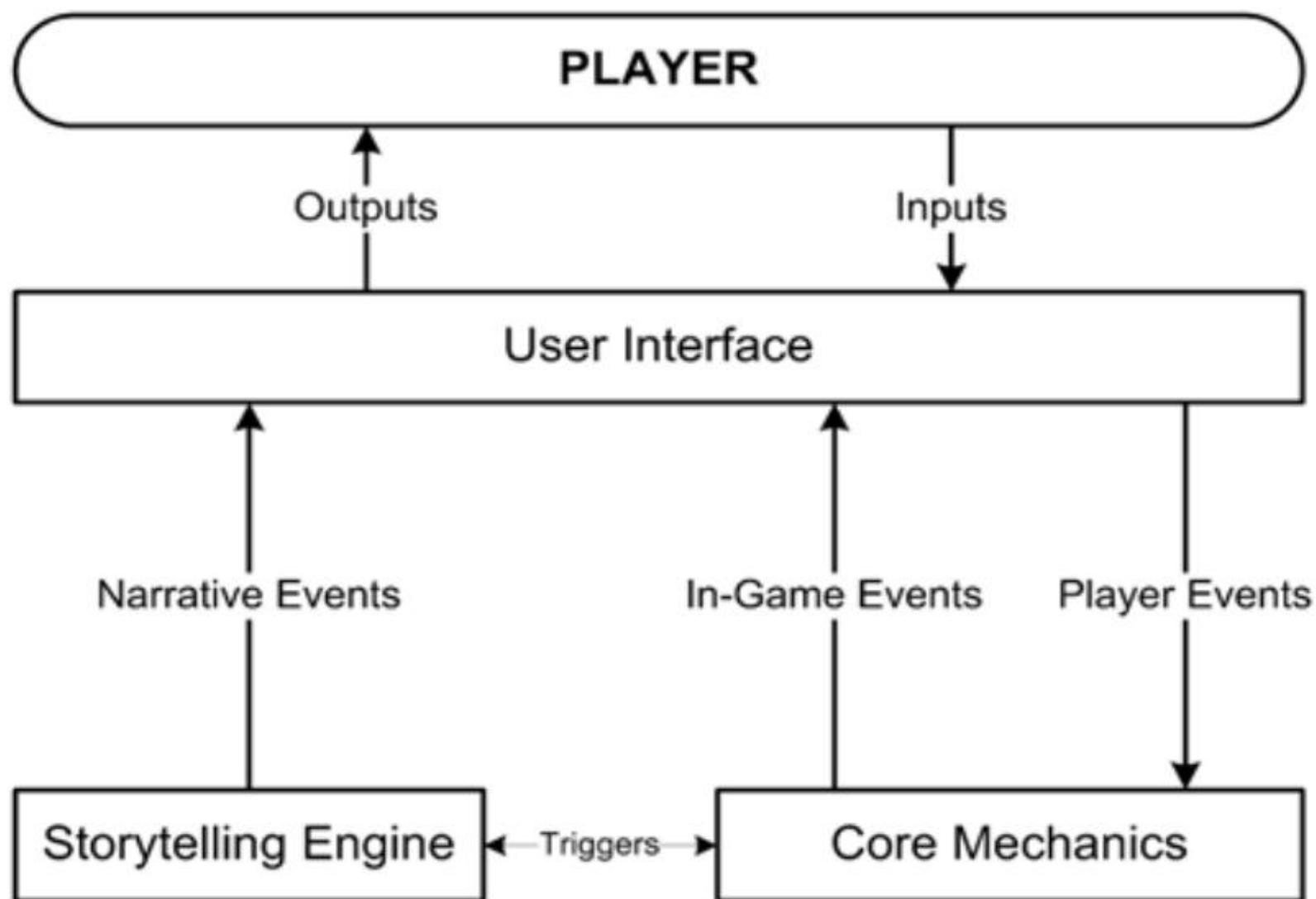
Story Engine

AI

etc.

The **core mechanics** (Chapter 10) are more specific than the rules - they give all the details that programmers need to implement the game.

# The Storytelling Engine (Cont.)



# Four forms for stories in games:

- Linear
- Branching
- Foldback (next panels)
- Emergent (next panels)

## ■ Branching stories

- Provide a different experience when different choices are made
- Player has an immediate, deferred, or cumulative effect on the game
- More expensive and complicated to build than linear stories
- The player must play repeatedly to see all the content

## Linear Stories

- Player can't change the story
- Challenges are part of the story
- Pros and cons of linear stories:

- They require less content than nonlinear ones
- The storytelling engine is simpler
- They are less prone to bugs and absurdities
- They are capable of greater emotional power
- They deny the player dramatic freedom
- They reduce the replay-value of the game

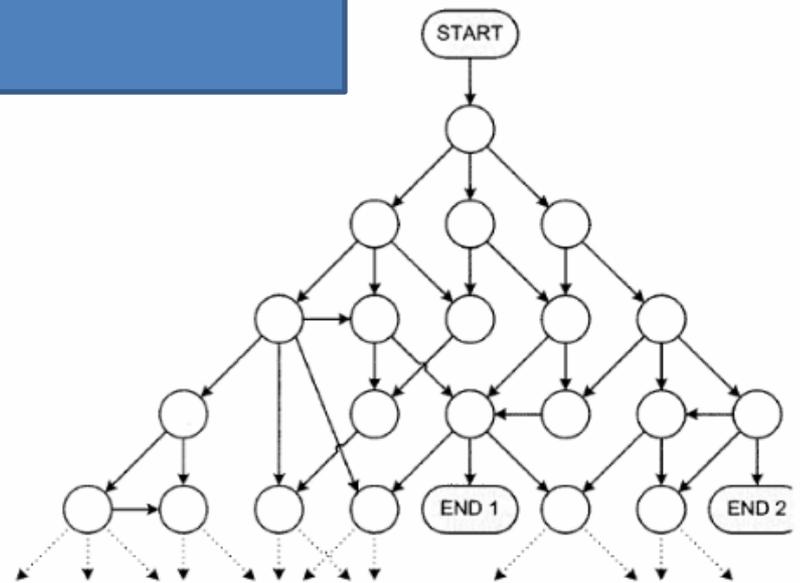


FIGURE 7.3 Part of the structure of a branching story.

# Four forms for stories in games (continued):

## ■ Foldback stories

- Compromise between branching and linear stories
- Plot branches, but the branches fold back into a single inevitable event
- Offer players some dramatic freedom without the cost and complexity of a branching story
- Easiest nonlinear story type to devise and most commercially successful

**Requirement:** You must make a serious attempt to have a foldback story in your game (so that you can learn this form of storytelling)

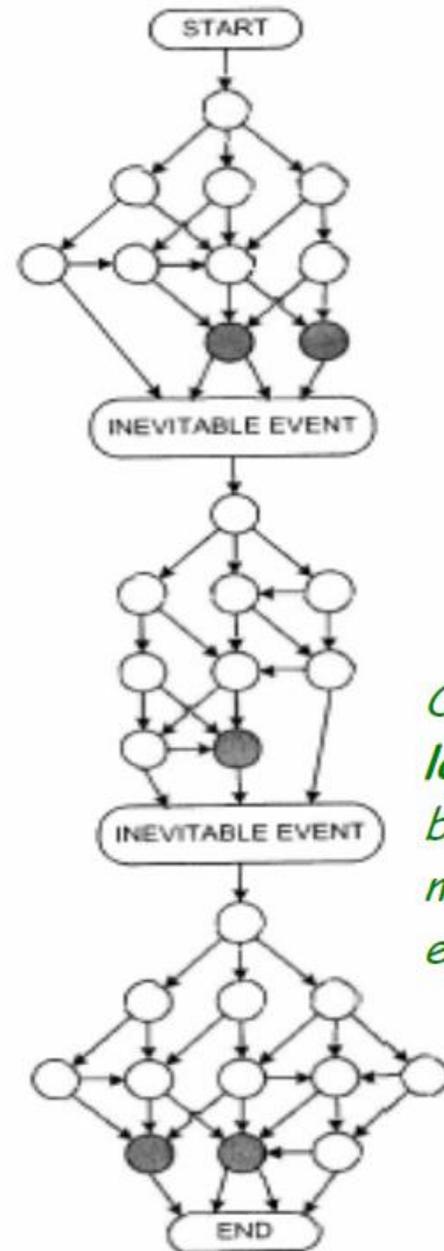


FIGURE 7.4 Simplified structure of a foldback story.

## Four forms for stories in games (continued):

- Emergent narrative
  - Storytelling produced entirely by player actions and in-game events—story emerges from act of playing
  - More dramatic freedom because the sequence of events is not fixed by a story structure
  - Puts a perhaps impossible burden on the core mechanics to produce credible stories
  - At present, no commercial games use purely emergent narrative



The Sims comes close, but it is more a vehicle for the player to *create* a story.

You may include emergent narrative in your game, but be forewarned that the AI engineer who implements the emergent narrative may not be up to the task (and hence the emergent narrative will not be implemented).

# Endings

- Often the most critical *emotional* moment of the game
  - Premature endings (e.g. avatar dies) don't count (i.e. no ending needed)

## When should you include multiple endings?

- If the game ending reflects only whether the player met challenges, then a single ending is usually enough
  - Or maybe two: one if the player met the challenges well, another if not.
- If the game endings reflect the player's dramatic choices, then the player will definitely expect her choices to affect the story's outcome.
  - Games that include a lot of decision-making (especially moral choices, which feel dramatically important) should be nonlinear and offer multiple endings.
- Multiple endings require the each one wraps up the story in a way that is:
  - dramatically meaningful and
  - emotionally consistent with the player's choices and play

[How Many Endings Does a Game Need?](#)

Exploration opportunity: Read Adam's

# Summary:

- **Why put stories in games?**
  - Add entertainment, hold player's interest, attract wider audience, sell the game
- **Key concepts/vocabulary:**
  - A good story must be credible, coherent and dramatically meaningful

- **Storytelling engine:**

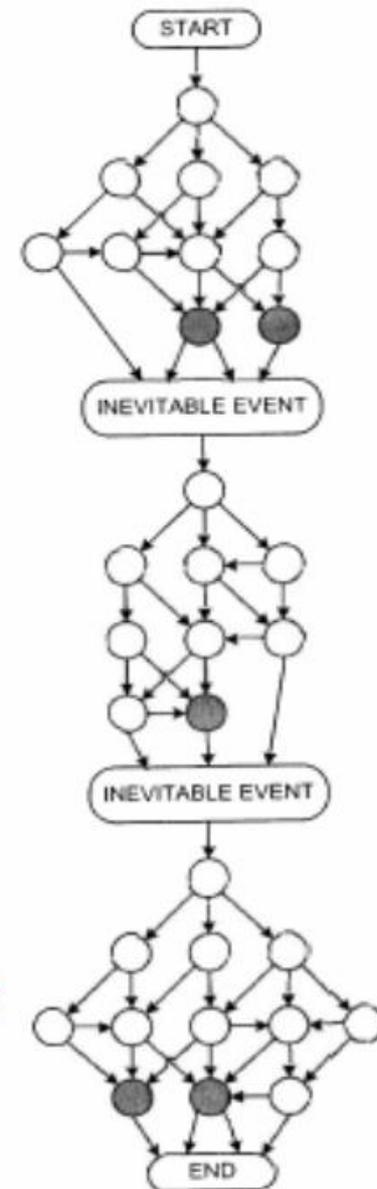
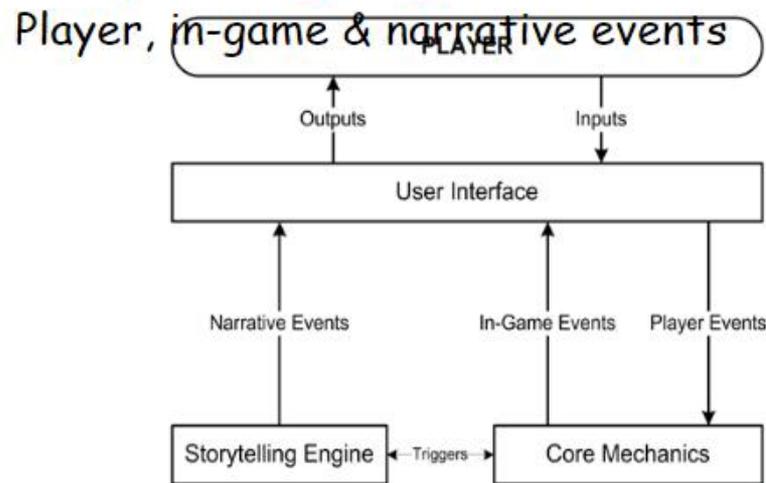


FIGURE 7.4 Simplified structure of a foldback story.

- **Four kinds of stories:**
  - linear, branching, foldback, emergent

## Review from yesterday:

- **Why put stories in games?**

- Add entertainment, hold player's interest, attract wider audience, sell the game.

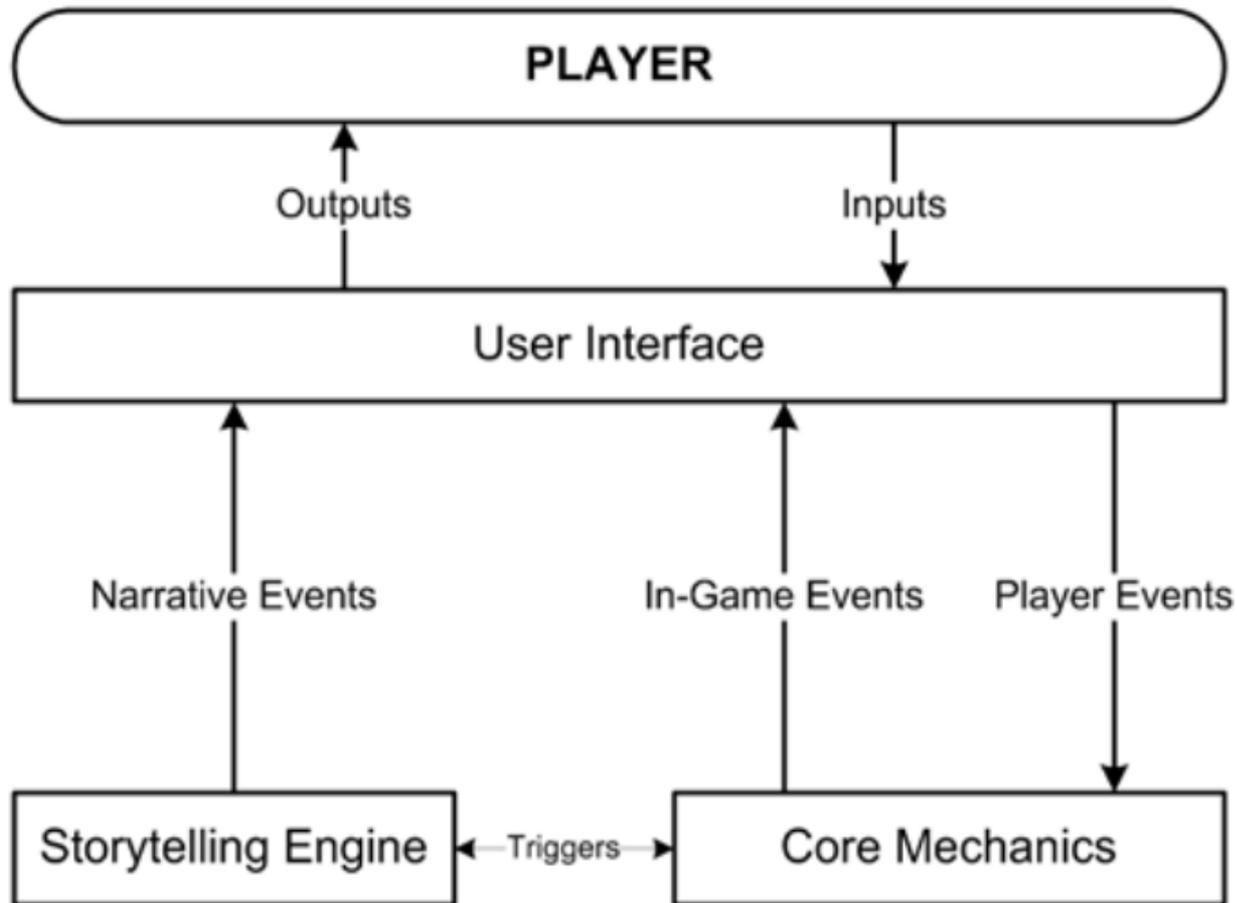
- **Key concepts/vocabulary:**

- A good story must be \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_

and \_\_\_\_\_.

- An *interactive story* has three kinds of events: *player events*, *in-game events* and *narrative events*.
- *Narrative*: passively told to the player by the designer.
  - Can take many forms: cut-scenes, scrolling text, voiceover, conversations with NPCs, ...
  - Must be interruptible
  - Should be balanced with gameplay
  - Should not take control of player's avatar
- *Dramatic tension* (from plot) vs. *gameplay tension* (from challenges)

# Review from yesterday (continued): The storytelling engine



# Review from yesterday (continued):

## Four forms of stories

- Linear
- Branching
- Foldback
- Emergent

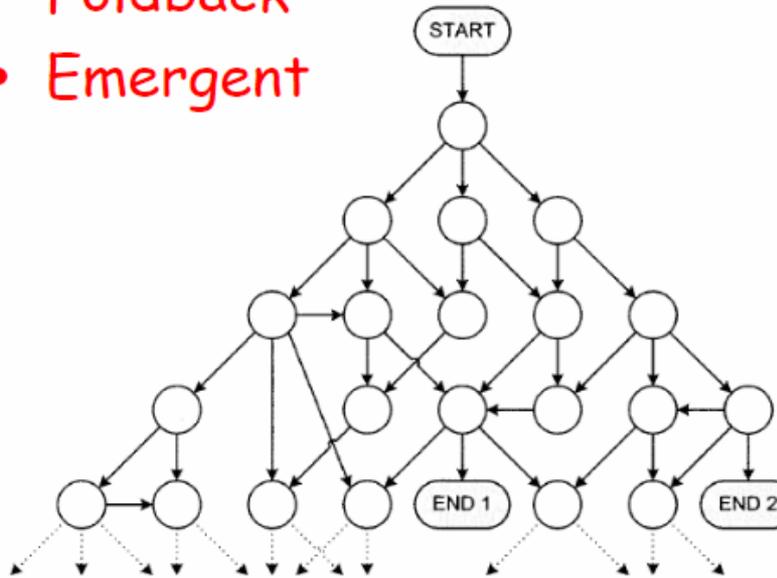


FIGURE 7.3 Part of the structure of a branching story.

**Requirement:** You must make a serious attempt to have a foldback story in your game (so that you can learn this form of storytelling)

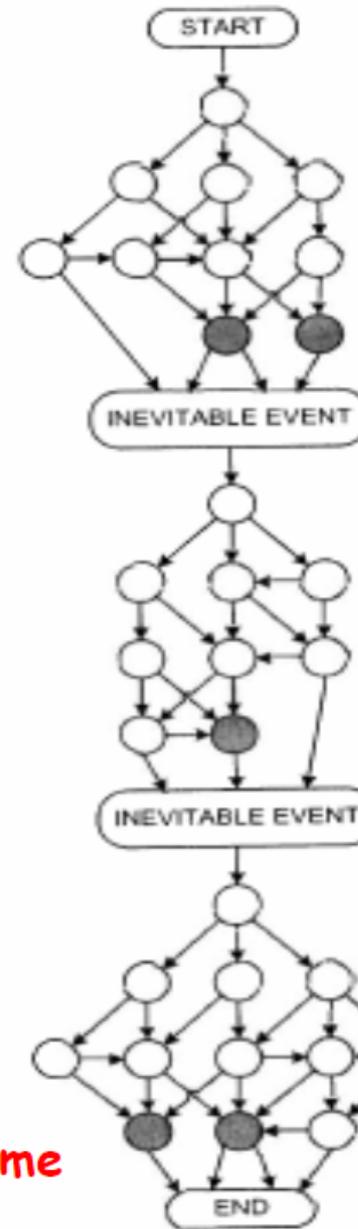


FIGURE 7.4 Simplified structure of a foldback story.

Questions on Storytelling and Narrative so far?

*OK if last block has multiple endings*

# Today:

1. Granularity
2. Mechanisms for advancing the plot
3. Emotion
4. Scripted conversations, Dialog Trees
5. When to write the story
6. Other considerations

## *Story granularity*

- Frequency of presenting narrative to the player
  - Large granularity --> less frequent narrative blocks
  - Small granularity --> more frequent narrative blocks
- No fixed standard; useful more for comparing games ("X has a larger story granularity than Y")
- Warning: The term "granularity" is used in various contexts in the gaming industry

# Mechanisms for advancing the plot:

- When challenges are met or choices made
    - Works well when neither time nor progress thru space affects the plot
  - When the player reaches certain places in her journey
    - Usually combined with meeting a challenge or making a choice
    - Presenting a story as a journey:
      - Automatically provides novelty
      - Allows the player to control the pace
    - If the story is linear but player can return to a place, that may cause problems (because the dramatic event cannot be repeated).
      - Hence many adventure games periodically require the player to pass through **one-way doors**
    - If the story is nonlinear (as is typical in a role-playing game), there need to be **mechanisms to keep the player out of regions whose story is not yet ripe**.
      - For example, the player might need strength X to ...
  - As a drama that progresses with time
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# Emotional Limits of Interactive Stories

- Story needed to arouse complex emotions
- Emotional limits of nonlinear stories
  - Alternate endings might not be the most powerful
  - Designers often create a single ending so players experience emotionally satisfying end
- Emotional limits of avatar-based games
  - Avatar should survive
  - Companions can die

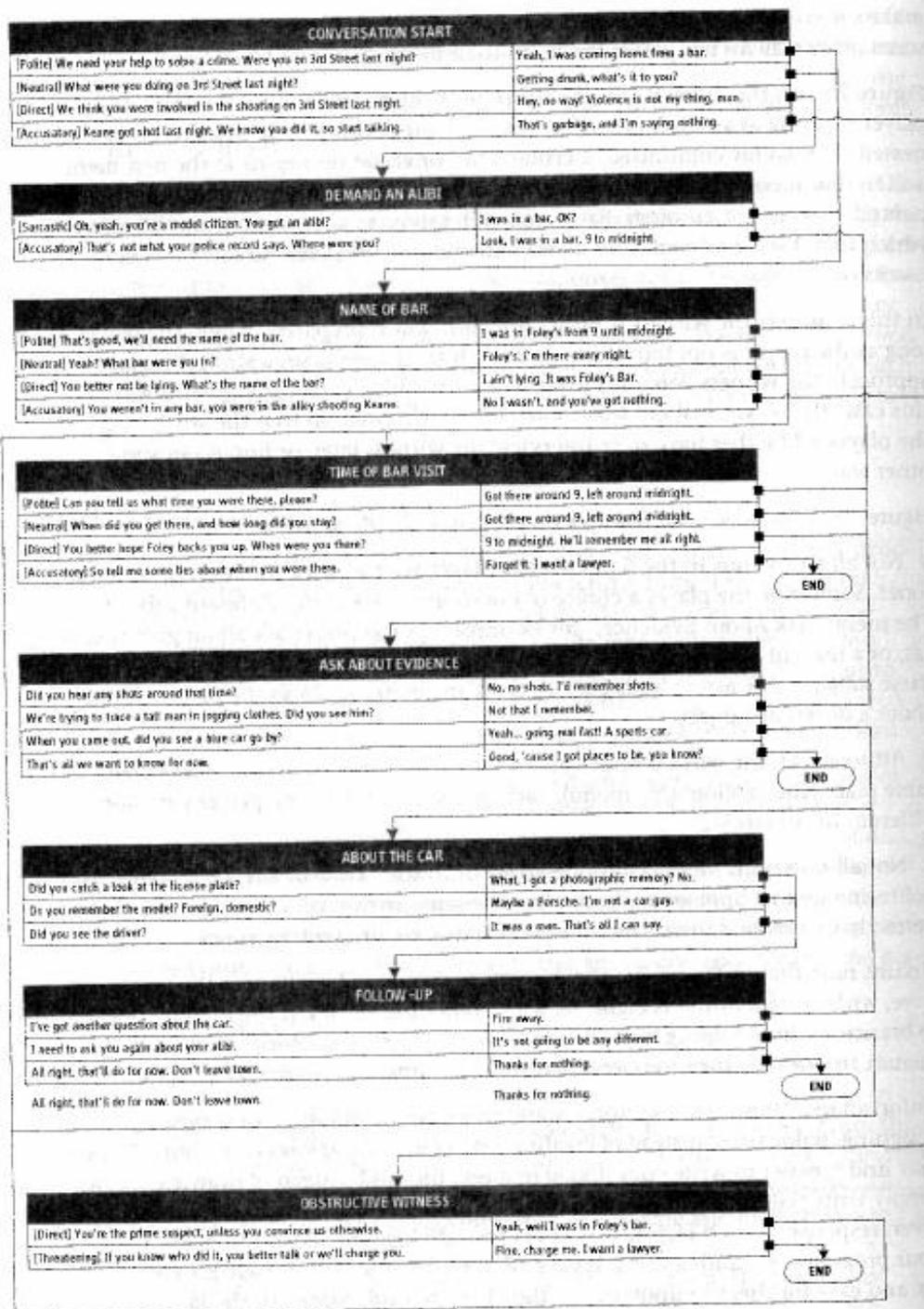
# Scripted Conversations and Dialog Trees

- Use a **dialog tree** to design scripted conversations
- **Better:** devise your **OWN** notation, that you could explain to a programmer
- Allowing choices injects the player's personality and can affect the core mechanics.



**FIGURE 7.6** A simplified diagram of part of a dialog tree.

**FIGURE 7.5**  
A small dialog tree



## ANOTHER APPROACH

A completely different approach is to think of the conversation mechanism not as something that moves from one menu to another with each response (as in Figure 7.5), but as a flexible list of options to which different exchanges may be added or deleted at different times. In this approach, instead of creating menus of exchanges, you write each exchange separately, as an individual item, and give it its own name or number. Remember that an exchange consists of a player dialog choice and a response from the NPC that the avatar is talking to. After each exchange, instead of drawing arrows leading to a new menu, you would indicate which new exchanges should be added to the current list, and which should be deleted. This way you can easily add certain exchanges that remain in the conversation permanently, without having to document them in each new menu. For example, you can add a "That's all I wanted to know" exchange, which ends the conversation, to the menu at the very beginning, and never delete it no matter what else is said. That would enable the player to end the conversation at any point. Once a subject has been raised for the first time, you could add a "Tell me again about..." exchange to the menu, and until it is deleted, the player could always ask to hear about that subject again.

Here's how the first few lines of the conversation in the sample dialog tree would look using this approach. A conversation-ending dialog option, which was not in Figure 7.5, has been included; it is Exchange 5.

**Beginning Action:** Add exchanges 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 to the menu.

### *Exchange 1:*

**Player:** [Polite] "We need your help to solve a crime. Were you on 3rd Street last night?"

**Response:** "Yeah, I was coming home from a bar."

**Action:** Delete exchanges 1, 2, 3, and 4. Add exchanges 6, 7, 8, and 9.

### *Exchange 2:*

**Player:** [Neutral] "What were you doing on 3rd Street last night?"

**Response:** "Getting drunk, what's it to you?"

**Action:** Delete exchanges 1, 2, 3, and 4. Add exchanges 6, 7, 8, and 9.

### *Exchange 3:*

**Player:** [Direct] "We think you were involved in the shooting on 3rd Street last night."

**Response:** "Hey, no way! Violence is not my thing, man."

**Action:** Delete exchanges 1, 2, 3, and 4. Add exchanges 10 and 11.

### *Exchange 4:*

**Player:** [Accusatory] "Keane got shot last night. We know you did it, so start talking."

**Response:** "That's garbage, and I'm saying nothing."

**Action:** Delete exchanges 1, 2, 3, and 4. Add exchanges 12 and 13.

### *Exchange 5:*

**Player:** "That's all we need. You can go."

**Response:** "About time."

**Action:** END.

### *Exchange 6:*

**Player:** [Polite] "That's good, we'll need the name of the bar."

**Response:** "I was in Foley's from 9 until midnight."

**Action:** Delete exchanges 6, 7, 8, and 9. Add... [exchanges from the "Ask About Evidence" menu].

### *Exchange 7:*

**Player:** [Neutral] "Yeah? What bar were you in?"

**Response:** "Foley's. I'm there every night."

**Action:** Delete exchanges 6, 7, 8, and 9. Add... [exchanges from the "Time of Bar Visit" menu].

### *Exchange 8:*

**Player:** [Direct] "You better not be lying. What's the name of the bar?"

**Response:** "I ain't lying. It was Foley's Bar."

**Action:** Delete exchanges 6, 7, 8, and 9. Add... [exchanges from the "Time of Bar Visit" menu].

### *Exchange 9:*

**Player:** [Accusatory] "You weren't in any bar, you were in the alley shooting Keane."

**Response:** "No I wasn't, and you've got nothing."

**Action:** Delete exchanges 6, 7, 8, and 9. Add exchanges 12 and 13.

### *Exchange 10:*

**Player:** [Sarcastic] "Oh, yeah, you're a model citizen. You got an alibi?"

**Response:** "I was in

a bar, OK?"

**Action:** Delete exchanges 10 and 11. Add exchanges 6, 7, 8, and 9.

### *Exchange 11:*

**Player:** [Accusatory] "That's not what your police record says. Where were you?"

**Response:** "Look, I was in a bar. 9 to midnight."

**Action:** Delete exchanges 10 and 11. Add... [exchanges from the "Ask About Evidence" menu].

### *Exchange 12:*

**Player:** [Direct] "You're the prime suspect, unless you convince us otherwise."

**Response:** "Yeah, well I was in Foley's bar."

**Action:** Delete exchanges 12 and 13. Add... [exchanges from the "Time of Bar Visit" menu].

### *Exchange 13:*

**Player:** [Threatening] "If you know who did it, you better talk or we'll charge you."

**Response:** "Fine, charge me. I want a lawyer."

**Action:** END.

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# When to Write the Story

- Make a list of episodes or levels during the concept stage
- Write the story during the elaboration stage

Iterative process that takes place in conjunction with level design:

- Large granularity between levels
- Small granularity as you design the levels

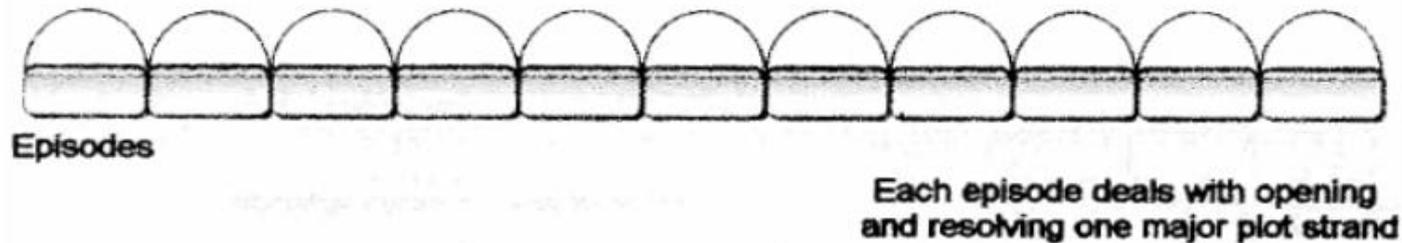
Avoid Frustrated Author Syndrome:

- Give the player things to DO
- Parcel out narrative in reasonably sized blocks

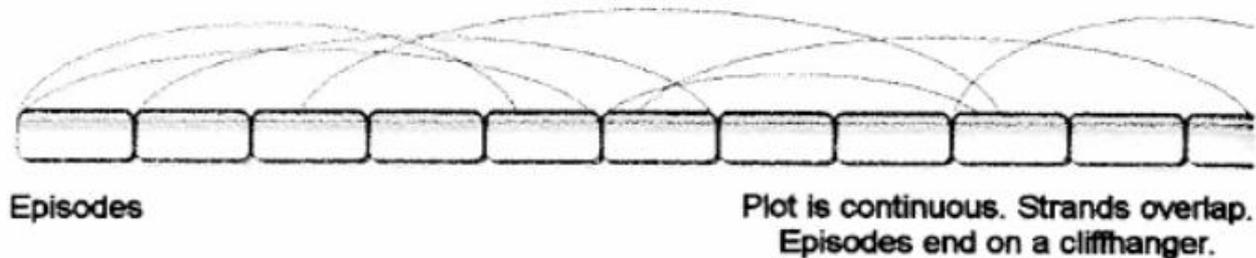
**COMMANDMENT:** Be a Game Designer, Not a Filmmaker

Don't design a game to show off your skills as a film director or an author. Design a game to entertain by giving the player things to do. Always give the player more gameplay than narration. The player, not the story, is the star of the show.

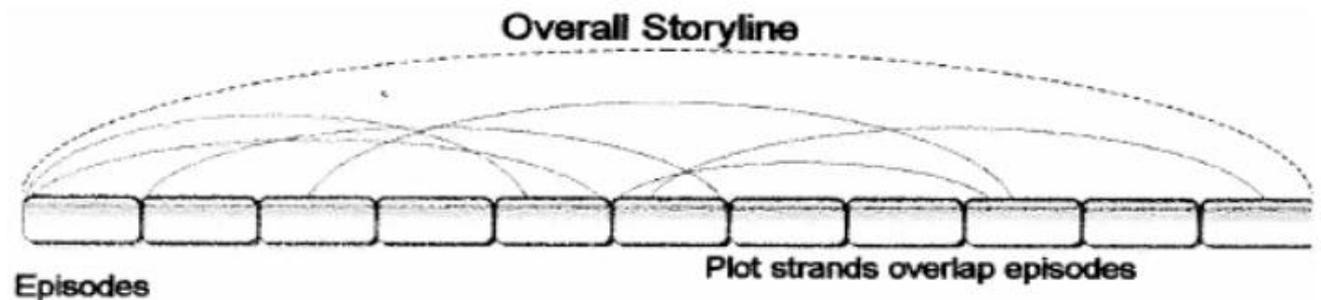
## Episodic games - see text for details



**FIGURE 7.7** An example of unlimited series structure.



**FIGURE 7.8** An example of serial structure.



**FIGURE 7.9** An example of a limited series.

## Summary for Chapter 7, Storytelling and Narrative

- Why put stories in games?
- Key concepts: player, in-game and narrative events
- Storytelling engine
- Types of stories: linear, branching, foldback, emergent
- Granularity
- Mechanisms for advancing the plot:
  - challenges/choices
  - journey (along with challenges/choices)
  - drama (over time)
- Emotion
- Scripted conversations, Dialog Trees
  - Invent your own notation for conversations
- When to write the story
- Episodic stories, Other considerations

Questions on  
Storytelling and  
Narrative?