

Thinking about Player Expression

What can a player express?

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CEDEC 2010

Intro

My name is Doug Church
Designer/Producer, Programming Background

Intro

90's : Built Narrative/ Action/RPG games for PC



Intro

00's : A small part of various Console projects



Recently consulting

- lots of social-game/facebook and Freemium
- People express all sorts of things in News Feed
 - including stuff _about_ games they play
- But game posts are all “I got a new high score” or “I need you to click here to give me stuff!”



- How do we allow more in-game expression?

Expression

“to show, manifest, or reveal”

(dictionary.com)

Example Game Expressions



“I’ve mastered this character”



Well, or “I really haven’t mastered this character”



“I like to kill people with Axes! No, Arrows!”



“This is what I want to look like”

Best Position Choice: RB
 Your mother was a top notch runway model.
 Your father has appeared in numerous commercials.
 Your father has an average IQ.

MY FATHER

Commercial Actor
Cooking
IQ is 99

MY MOTHER

Runway Model
Jogging
IQ is 103

WORLD OF WARCRAFT

Alliance | Horde

Character Name: _____

Accept

Alliance
The Alliance consists of four races: the noble Humans, the advanced dwarves, the intelligent gnomes, and the ingenious elves. Bound by a longing for a brighter future, they fight to ensure order in this war-torn world.

Human
Humans are a young race, and though they are versatile, mastering the art of combat, relationships, and magic with stunning efficiency, the human's valor and optimism have led them to the forefront of the world's greatest kingdoms. In this troubled era of global peril, humanity seeks to redefine its former glory and forge a shining new future.
Strength detection increased.

Warrior
Warriors train constantly and strive for perfection in armed combat. Though they come from all walks of life, they are united by their singular commitment to engage in glorious battle. Many warriors serve as mercenary soldiers, while others become adventurers and danger-seeking fortune hunters. A typical warrior is...

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS ONLINE

Pick your Race and Class

Elf Male

- +2 Dexterity, 0 Constitution
- Eyes are glowing but real, and are better at seeing and seeing
- Immune to magic sleep effects and +2 saving throw bonus against Enchantment spells. Lives in rest sleep, but not when manifesting in a deep trance.
- +2 bonus on Listen, Search and Spot checks. An elf's senses are extremely sensitive.
- Bonus Martial Weapon Proficiency feat: three and profilers with the longsword.

Sorcerer

The sorcerer is the most powerful of the ranged attackers, whose decade of casting spells, study, and possessing more spell books than wizards, the sorcerer also prepares fewer spells than their arcane counterparts. A sorcerer can also repair war-torn characters using magic.

- Lack of armor and combat training makes the sorcerer difficult for solo play.
- Sorcerers have the most...

Untitled Creature

Speed
Strength
Defense
Social
Cuteness
Attack

4530

“How I look – but also what sorts of things I want to do”

CHARACTER



STRENGTH	24	+7
DEXTERITY	18	+4
CONSTITUTION	15	+2
INTELLIGENCE	16	+3
WISDOM	21	+5
CHARISMA	21	+5
VITALITY	291/363	
FORCE	260/324	
DEFENSE	36	
FORTITUDE	20	
REFLEX	21	
WILL	21	

EXPERIENCE:	NEEDED
331891	351000

CLOSE

REVEN
JEDI GUARDIAN 16
JEDI WEAPON MASTER 10



"I want to represent the light side..."

CHARACTER



STRENGTH	24	+7
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CLOSE

REVEN
JEDI GUARDIAN 16
JEDI WEAPON MASTER 10



“... actually, now that I think about it...”



“look at (real life) me”



“I must go and kill everything in my path”



Halo – Warthog Jump
Oblivion - Dominoes Runs
Joust – using Flap button only

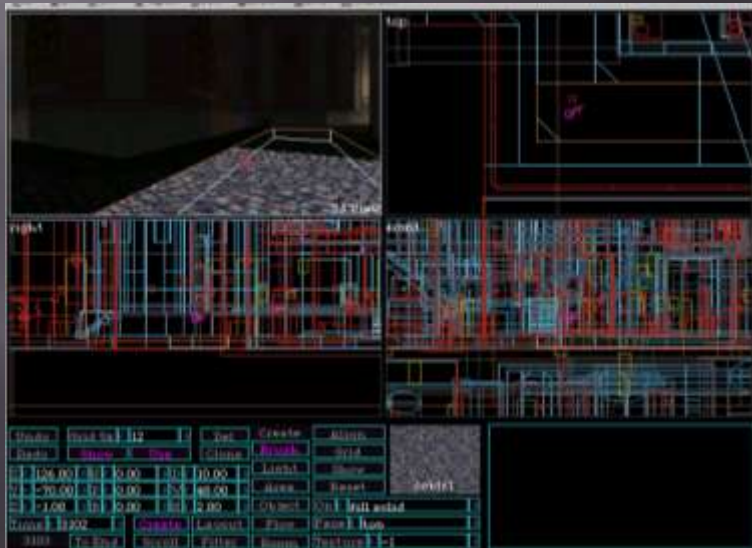
or Pac-man perfect zero
or Pacifist World of Warcraft

And so on

“Watch me subvert or change the rules and systems”



Many character based “mini-stories” can be created or people can manage meters constantly...



“I prefer PvP, or creating maps, or solo play, or...”

Many more, of course

- Car game
 - Clean racing lines or trying to cause crashes
- Shmup
 - Stay in place zen calm or wild dodges and weaves
- Baseball
 - Singles and baserunning, or go for home runs
- MMORPG
 - How (and if) you PvP – your moral code, etc
- etc, etc, etc...

... and of course ...

The ultimate game expression





So...

What sort of expression was there?

Some Types of Expression

- Mastery – I'm expert/better than you (or not)
- Style – Approach to game, or cosmetic aspects
- Meta – around or about the game, not in it

Timing of Expression

- Frequent
 - Tactics – of combat, approach, etc...
- Every so often
 - “Strategy”, character definition and change
- Very rarely
 - What game mode to play, replay chapter or move on
 - What sort of character to play, how do I look?

Mastery

- Mechanical, usually simple, frequent
 - Requires a consistent system to master
 - Combat math, physics, moves and counters
- Often the mastery is “within” the behavior
 - i.e. the design has chosen that you are a killer
 - You simply decide how effectively / what style

Style

- Often this is strategy/ approach to things
 - Pick the lock, knock down the door, bribe, chat
 - Picking a role - Melee, Ranged, Tank, Heal
 - Build defenses or tank rush, all out or step by step
- Or cosmetic elements – how I look and sound
- Not constant activity – Every so often

“Outside” the Game

- “Meta” are the least mechanical
- Timing wise, usually occasional
 - Except in real-world performance games
- Huge variety here – hard to cleanly abstract
 - Subverting the rules, pop culture referencing, video of the player outside game, breaking the game

Context is Key

- You can only express things available in-game
- A cutscene of your family being attacked at start of fighting game doesn't create expression
 - You still punch kick and block
- Player Actions and the Context they are placed in define the maximum expression achievable
- Game reacting to these actions, in context, is also vital if we want the expression to be felt.

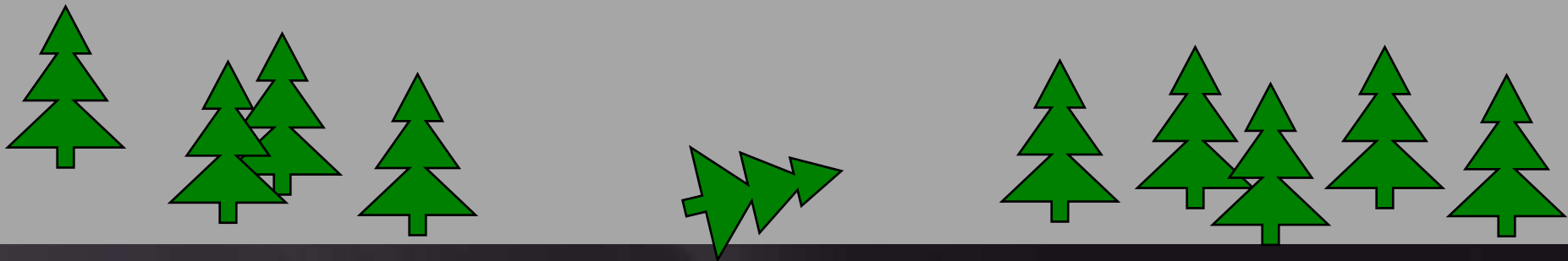
Expression Existentialism

Is it possible to have expression without another human participating?

(as partner/observer/obstacle?)

Can we ever get have true expression “alone”?

I'd say yes.



Need to Focus this Talk

Huge topic, but a short time.

What I care most about

- Merging "Designer authored narrative" w/ "Player authored expression"
 - i.e. the dynamics, key moments, and strong emotional context of traditional authored content
 - Within a game world and context where players can express themselves beyond combat mastery
- Encourage you to think about what game types and player expression you care most about

Narrative and Expression

First some examples

04/19 Tu
After School



> You have established the
Fellow Athletes Social Link
of the **Strength** Arcana!



Persona 4
Dragon Age

Character
Relationships

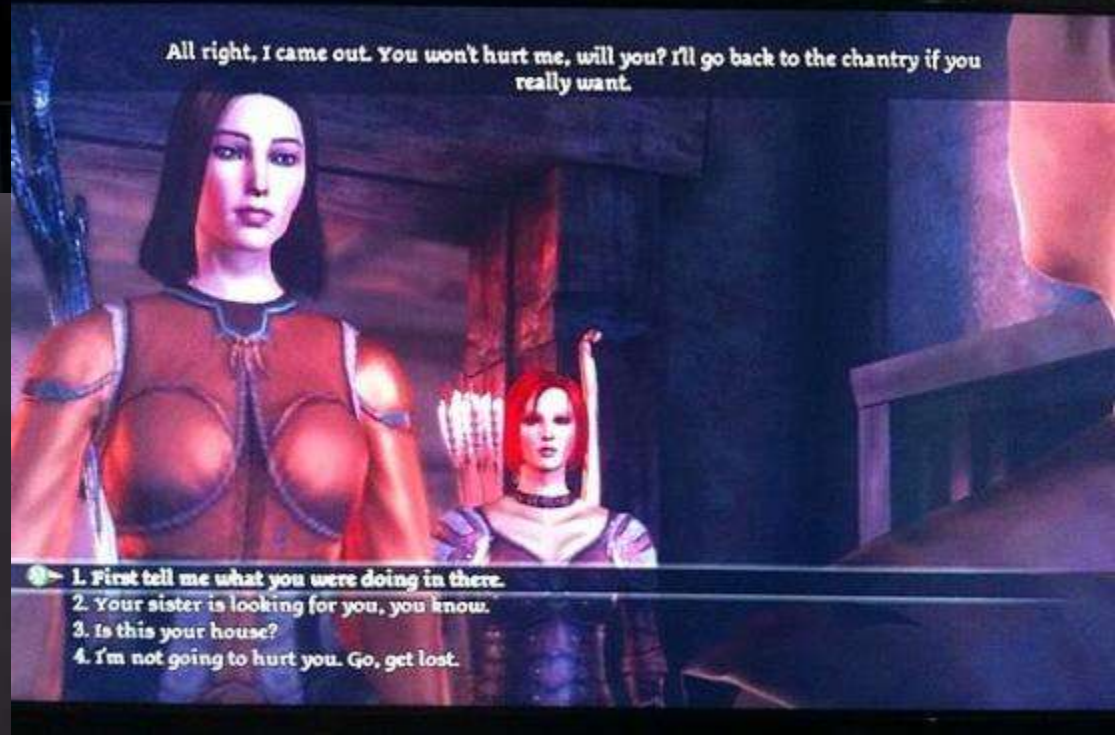


Conversation in Alpha Protocol, Dragon Age



Threaten **T** Investigate **B**
Apologetic **E** **R** **F** **H** **S** **L** **A**
Headslam

All right, I came out. You won't hurt me, will you? I'll go back to the chantry if you really want.



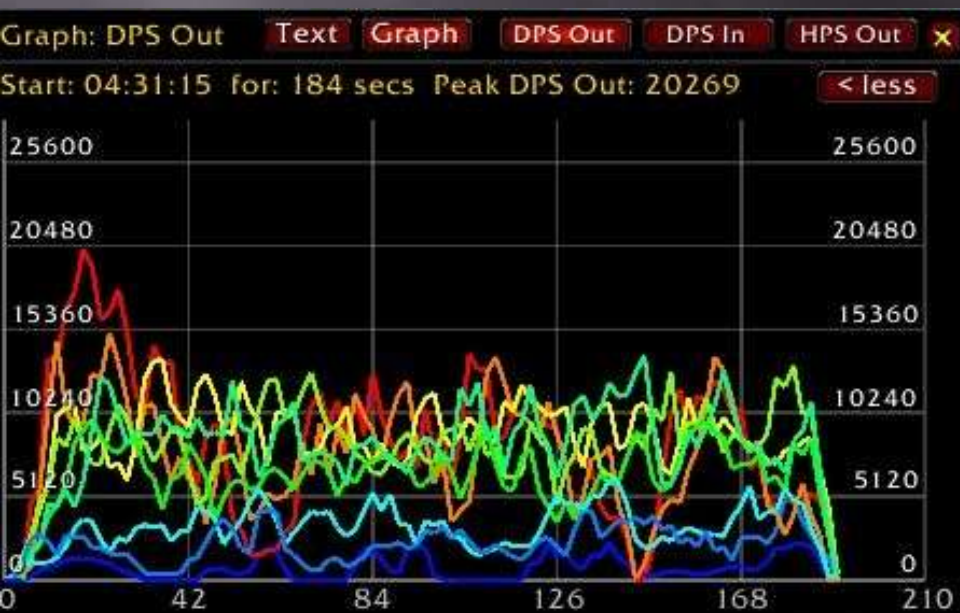
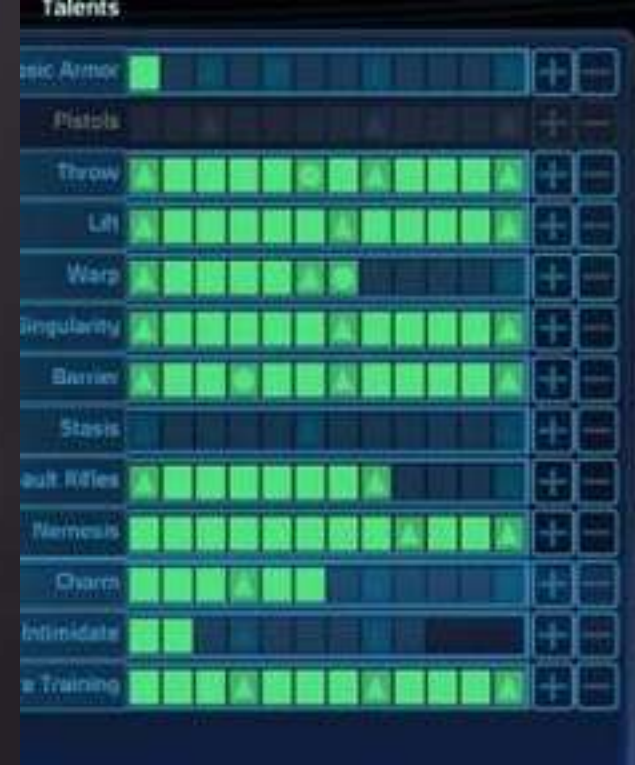
- 1. First tell me what you were doing in there.
- 2. Your sister is looking for you, you know.
- 3. Is this your house?
- 4. I'm not going to hurt you. Go, get lost.



Diablo and
 Demon Souls
 Inventory

Mass Effect Char

WoW recap addon
 DPS chart



Heavy Rain Thought/Actions



And of course

- Many Many Many Cutscenes
 - I'm sure you can all think of many games with them
 - Though – maybe not much of what happened...
- No matter how well directed and emotional
 - There is only one player expression during cutscenes

Pause

Return to Game

Options

Save

Load

Skip Cinematic

Select 
Back 

Charts of Expression

Combat/Action Game Expressions

Fists
or ?
Sword

Level Up!
Dual-Wield?
Or 2-Handed

Left or
Right ?



Paths
Rejoin

Smash door?
or Find Key?

Attack
Attack
Block
Attack
Eat Food

Attack
Block
Attack

Dodge
Attack

Eat Food

Attack
Attack

Attack
Block
Attack

Block
Attack
Block
Attack

Attack
Dodge
Eat Food

Attack
Attack

WATCH CUTSCENE
(of thinking, flirting, etc)

- Consistent and Complete control of combat behaviors
- Occasional choices of combat or movement tactics
- All other actions are in cutscenes/out of your control

“Adventure” Game Expressions

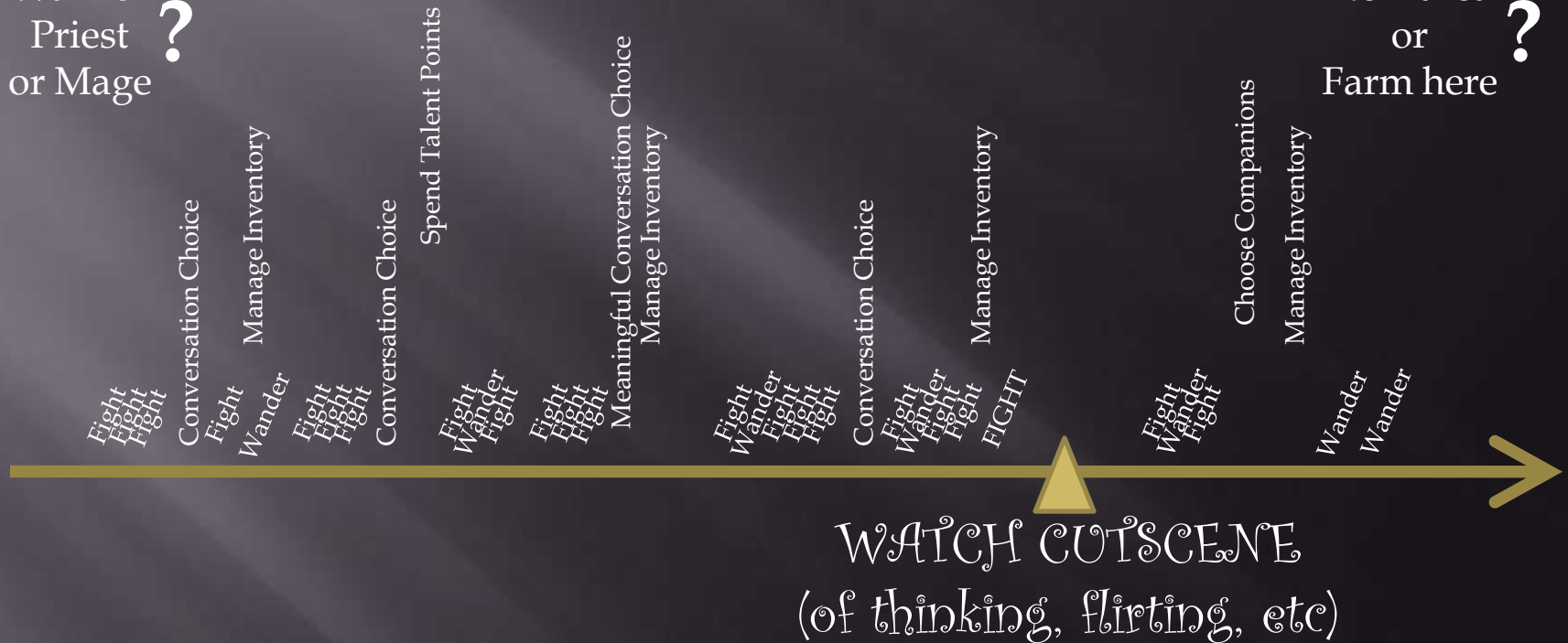


Wide range of things to do, but only when script allows them
You get to do a lot of things, but express almost nothing
You focus on figuring out the designers intent, not your own

Traditional RPG Expressions

Warrior
Priest ?
or Mage

New area
or ?
Farm here



Full control of stat/ability/item management – very deep
Tactics work to decide how to combine skills/approach fights
Conversation/etc is occasionally meaningful, usually not

Reminder: what we saw

- How you fight – what weapons, what style
- Who you are, mechanically and often visually
- What you say – sometimes with consequences
- Often - you simply fight wave after wave of foe to get to next prewritten bit of story
 - The Game Designer owns narrative expression
 - The player owns the expression of fighting



But what is the Fantasy we are hoping to Provide?



Fighting is part of it – but we really want to put you in midst of a Drama

Applying Expression to Narrative

- The die-rolling combat resolution part of the drama the computers are very good at
- The dramatic response, human behavior and surprise twists part, they are very bad at

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But...
Computers are what we
have

And, despite the Emotion Engine,
computers improvising drama wont be
happening anytime soon

We've mostly done the obvious

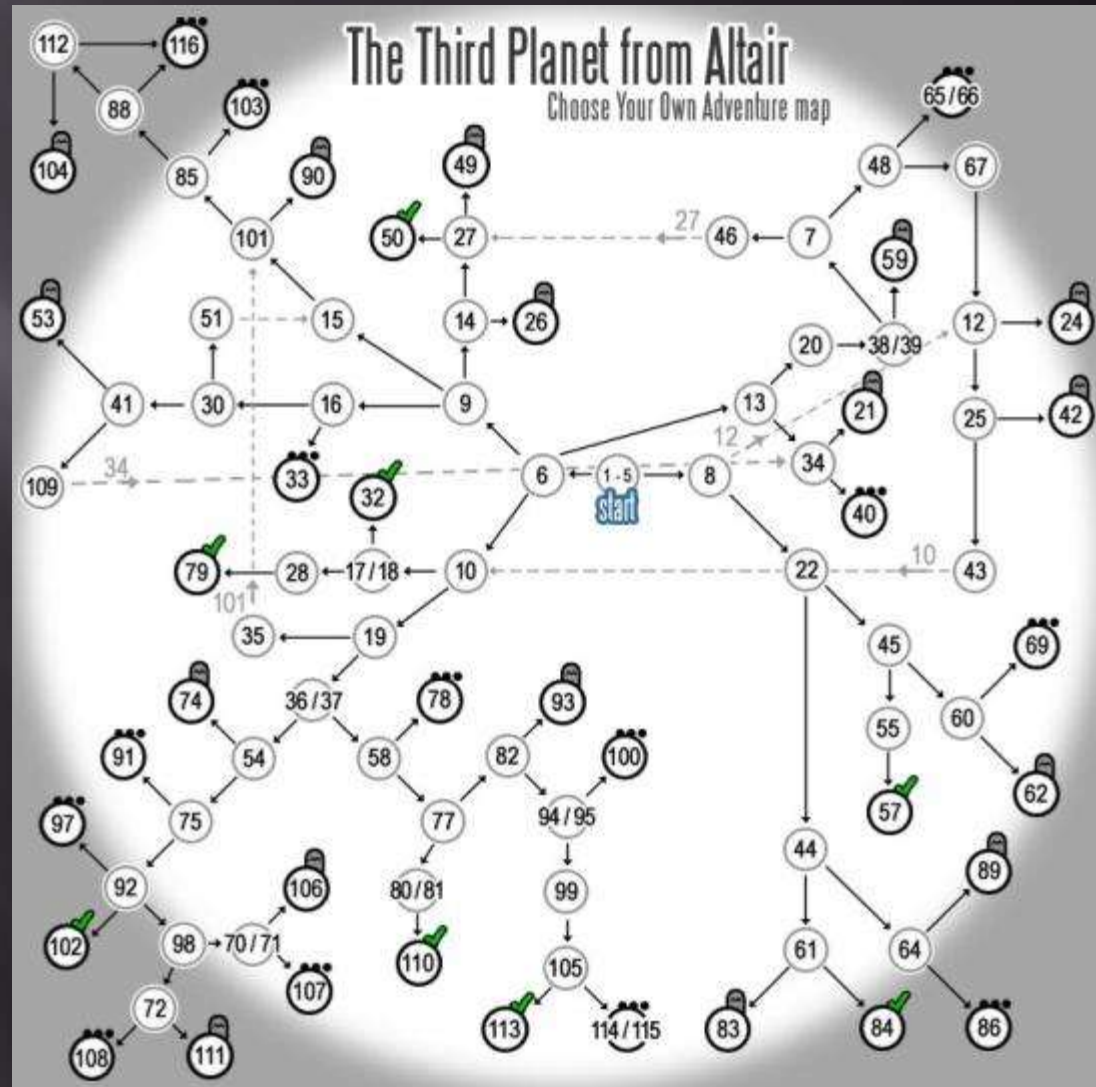
Dungeons and
Dragons had dice,
SO....



So do we

- Choose Your own Adventure brought narrative choice without a human, sort of...

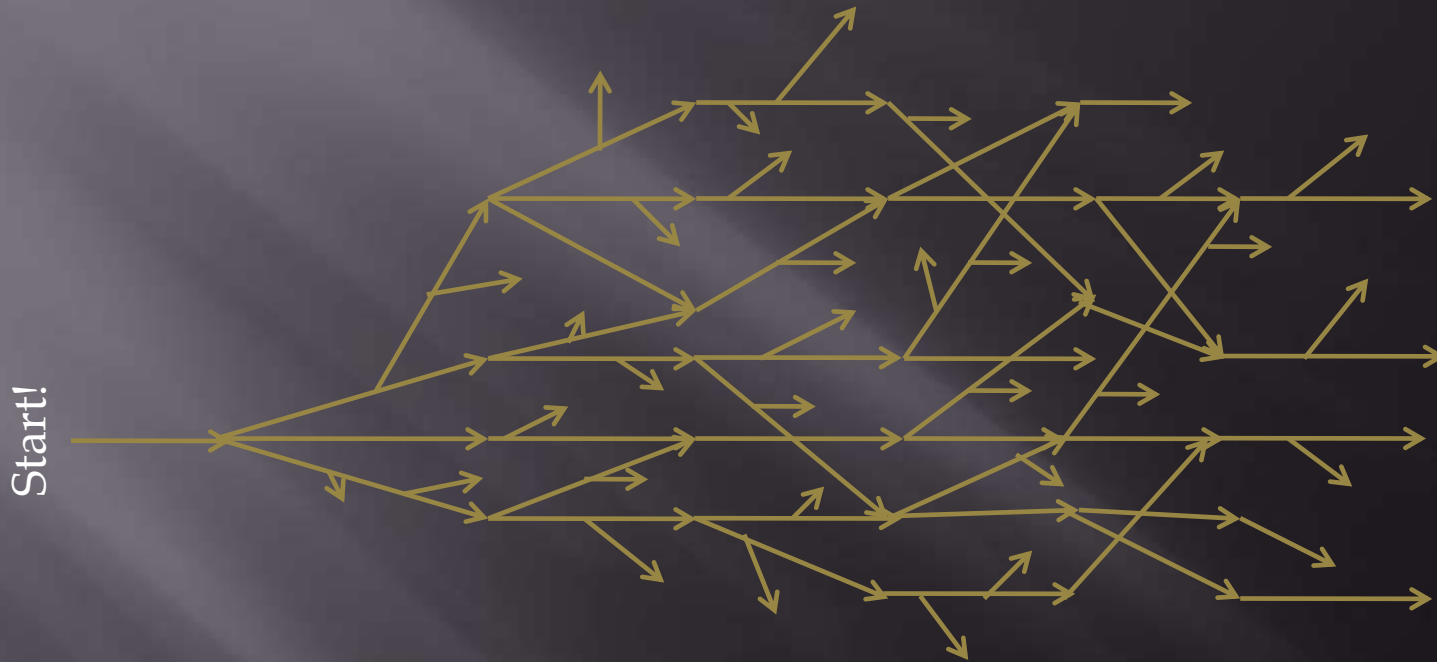
so we emulated that approach



So what do we build?

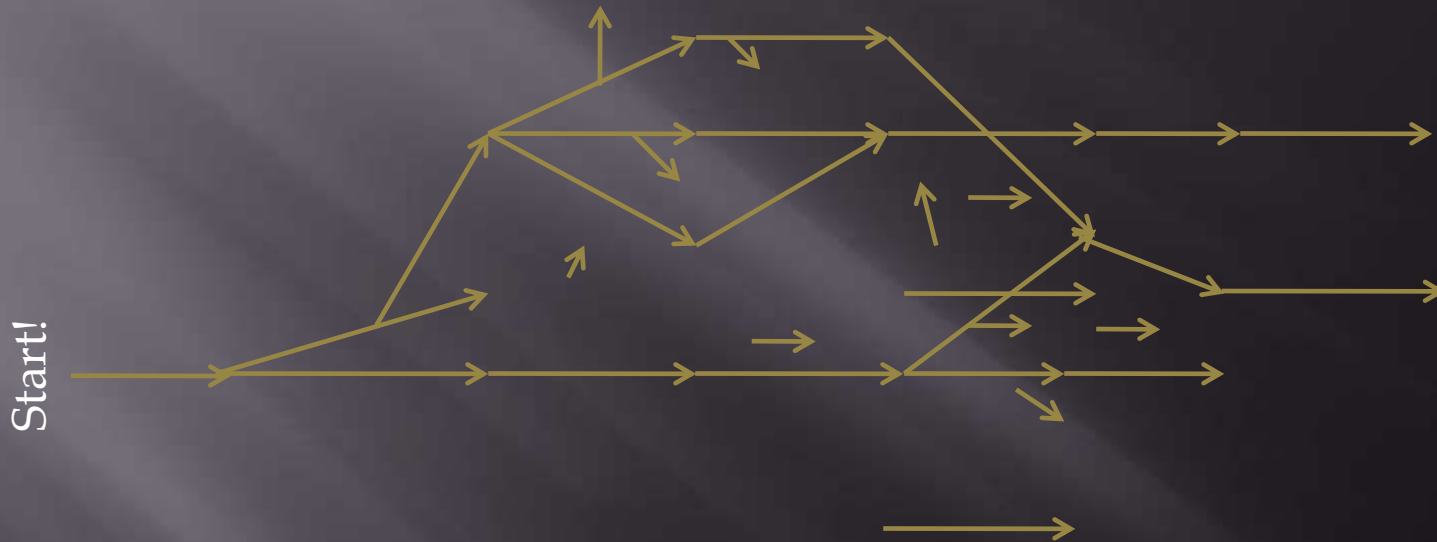
- We use die rolls (from stats and equipment) to moderate progress through...
- A mostly linear, sometimes branching, pre-authored story
- There are two main approaches
 - Super Branching – Choose your own adventure x100
 - Local-only expression – lots of short diversions

Super Branching...



Except way more complicated, with way more deadends and loopbacks

Super Branching...



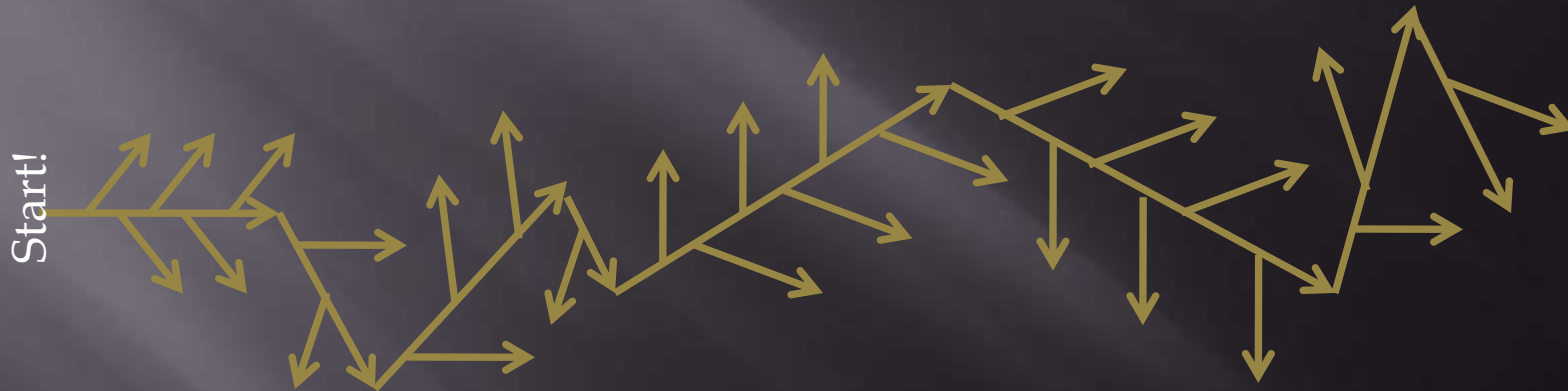
And rarely do you actually manage to build everything you hoped to

Or local-only expression



Lots of little things to do, but none of them matter to overall direction
And they don't tie together - no continuity or connection

Note: Doesn't mean story feels linear to the player



The writer can force all sorts of interesting story twists and turns
The player, however, has no meaningful impact on any of it

These methods do work

- And many compelling (and fun) games have been built using them, and will continue to be
- But I believe that
 - ... we are reaching the limits of scale
 - ... even as is, using them with an understanding of when they support or harm expression will help
 - ... we can, with work, eventually do much more

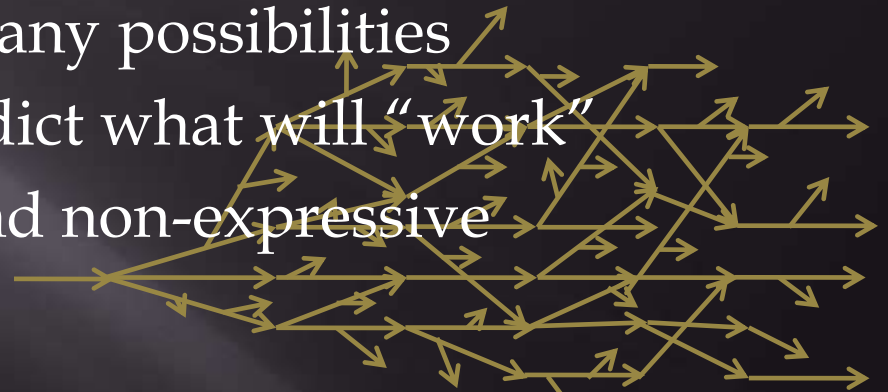
What do these give us?

- Branching provides some player expression

- But we cant support many possibilities

- Hard for player to predict what will “work”

- Thus often arbitrary and non-expressive



- Local only gives the designer full story control

- But we lose player expressiveness and meaning

- Feeling isn't expression!



Expression

“Show, Manifest, or Reveal”

- Prewritten story is rarely **player** expression
 - The **Author** expresses a lot
 - Player expresses “Must kill foes!” or “Move on!”
- Branches and choices aren’t always expression
 - If you don’t have consistent tools, hard to express
 - Left or Right doorway isn’t manifesting much
 - Trying things till you find way through isn’t either

Feelings

- Feelings aren't necessarily expressive
 - Scaring you doesn't give you expression
 - Books and movies **make** a viewer feel things
 - Imposing a feeling is not enabling expression
- The question isn't "Can a game make you cry"
 - Of course it can, play a very sad cutscene
- Can player's own behaviors make them cry?

Making yourself cry

- Need to take actions that have results
 - That you feel responsible for
 - Need choice beyond “keep killing” or “stop playing”
- Requires more contexts and capabilities
 - So we can attach meaning to more than kill choices
 - Need consistency of tools, so players can plan action

Some games do some of this

- In Conversation style, small-scale branching
 - Mass Effect, Dragon Age, Alpha Protocol, Fable
 - Sandbox games: GTA, Red Dead Redemption, etc
 - Persona's "Social Links", for instance
 - Heavy Rain – very branch-y, but cool contexts
- Conversation/menus used for most of this
 - Or who you kill in "good/evil" type worlds
- Some games use kill choices as moral status
 - KoToR, Demon's Souls, Ultima IV

Common Development Issues

- Adding backstory depth, and cutscenes, to give more meaning to the players situation
 - Good for storytelling, but isn't going to add expression unless you add context and actions
- Adding many one-shot optional sidequests
 - The expression is often “im a completeist”, no more

Reality is

- Computers are what we have!
- We aren't going to be able to keep scaling up
 - This isn't a CPU/Silicon issue, it is an authoring, content creation, and branch complexity issue
- Need to
 - ... be more clever with the tools we have
 - ... carefully choose where we want to provide expression, and where we don't



Approach I'd Take

For what it is worth...

Basic Idea

- We don't want "Branches" – we want flavor
- Not trying to create an "interactive story" – rather a canvas for an expressive player
- i.e. Ok to have same events – we want them to feel different based on what you do/express
- Ok to limit players, pick a few areas for expression and support them

Basic Implementation

- Core designer authored narrative
 - Few hard branches – overall flow of story is fixed
- Then layer in several themes/ characters
 - These are small branching stories
 - Overlaid on the main plot
 - They provide “expression accents” in main plot
 - i.e. they change feel of main plot events
- Season to Taste!

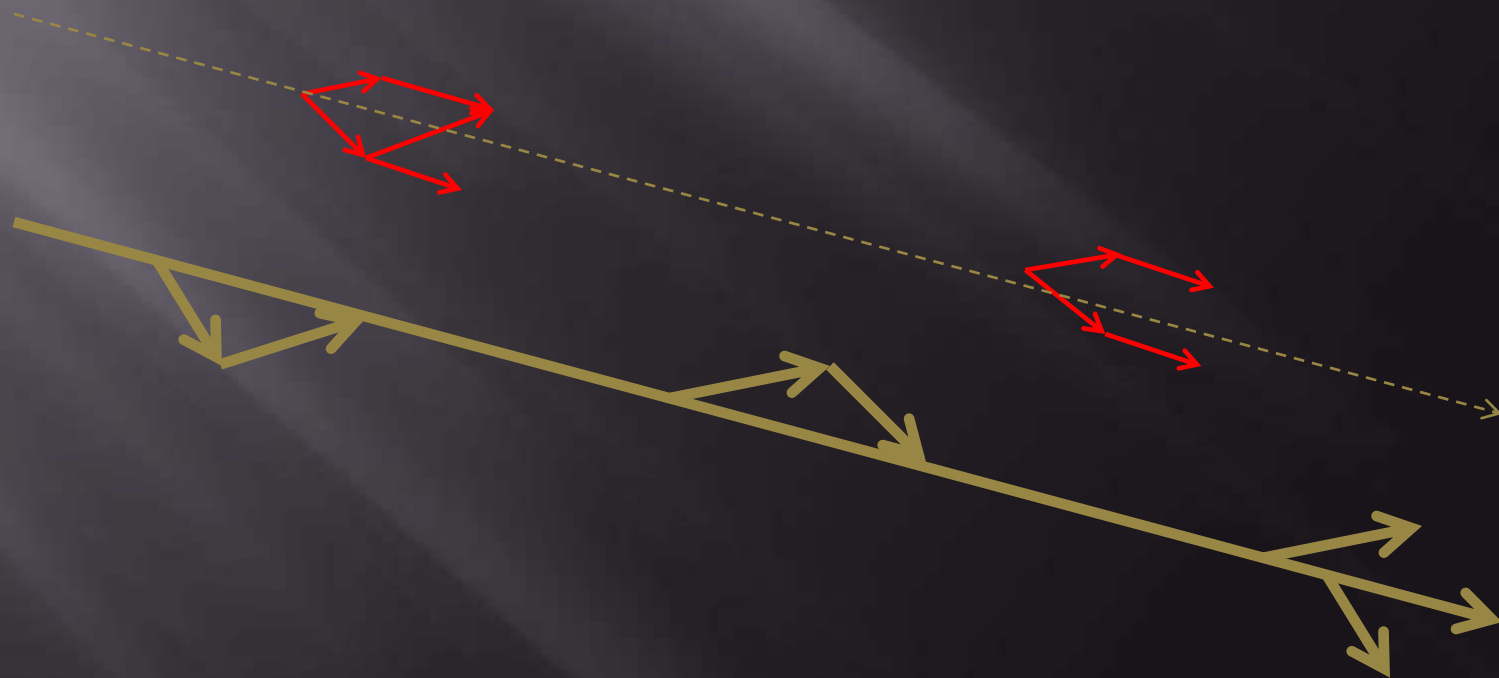
Hoped for Result

- A core story full of dramatic/exciting events
- Player expression that impacts the tone and feel of the story – gives them ownership
- By making the expression “accents” – not core story branching – scaling problem not as bad
- By carefully considering each expression layer, we can make them meaningful
 - And support them with context and game actions

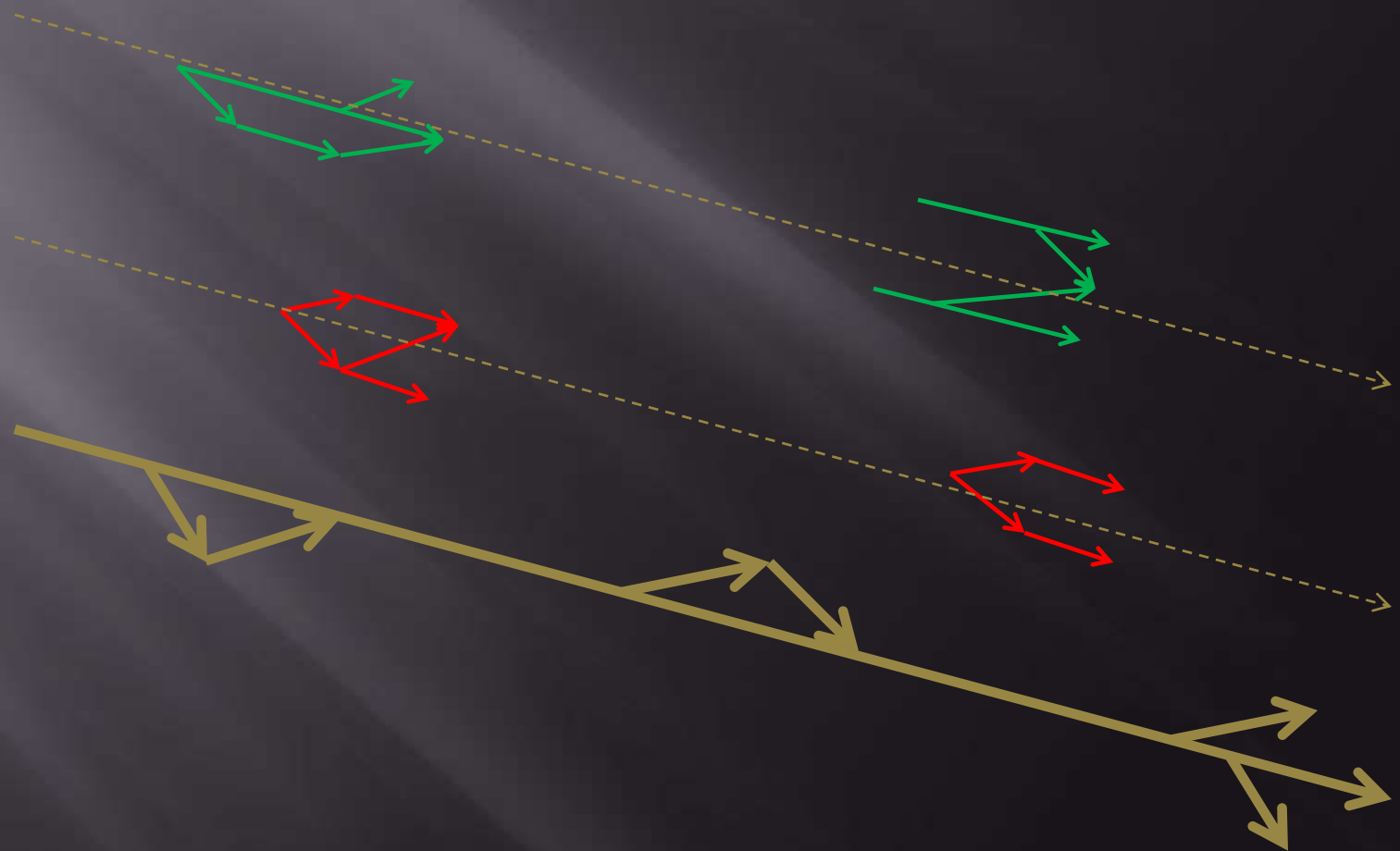
Start with basic story flow



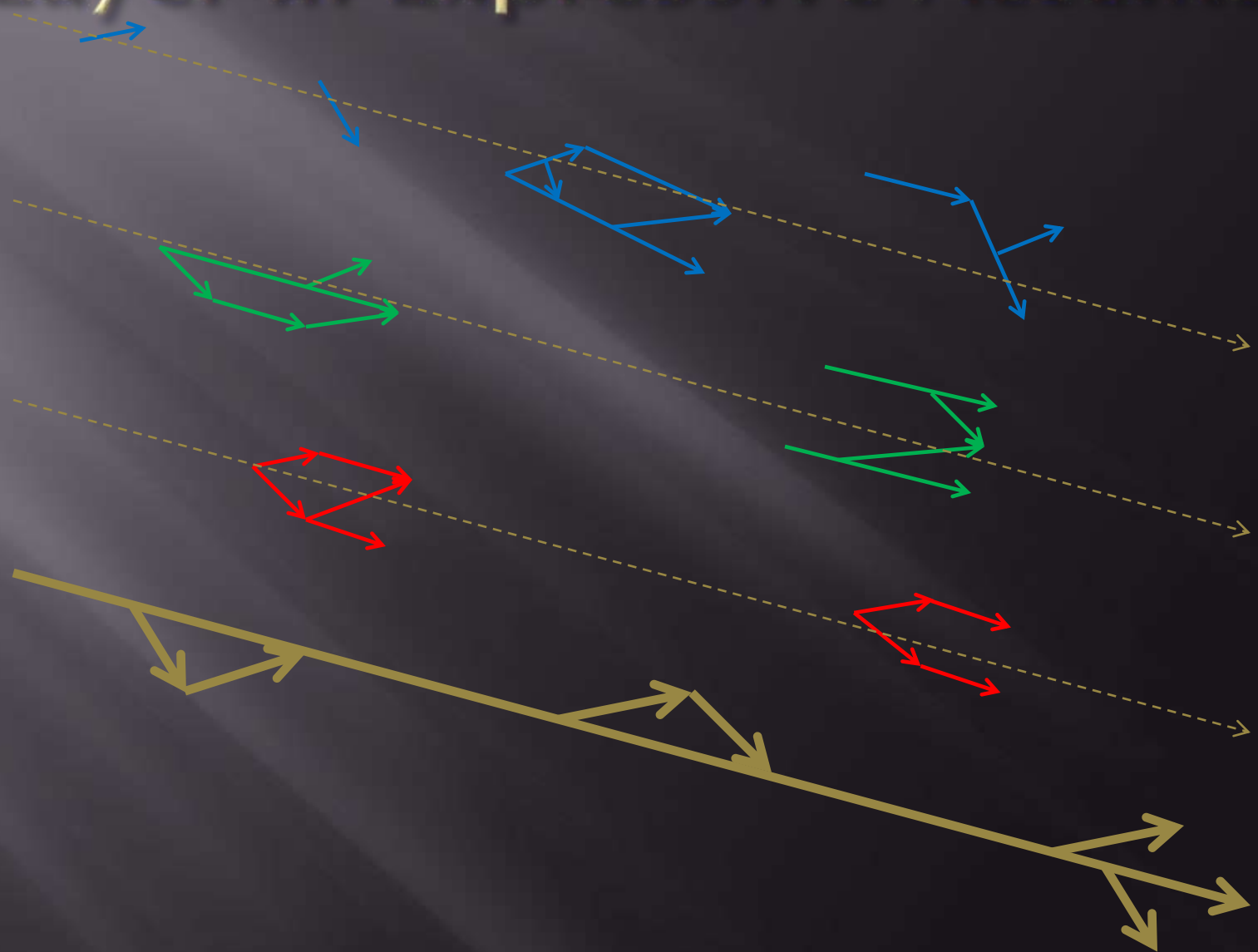
Layer in Expressive Accents



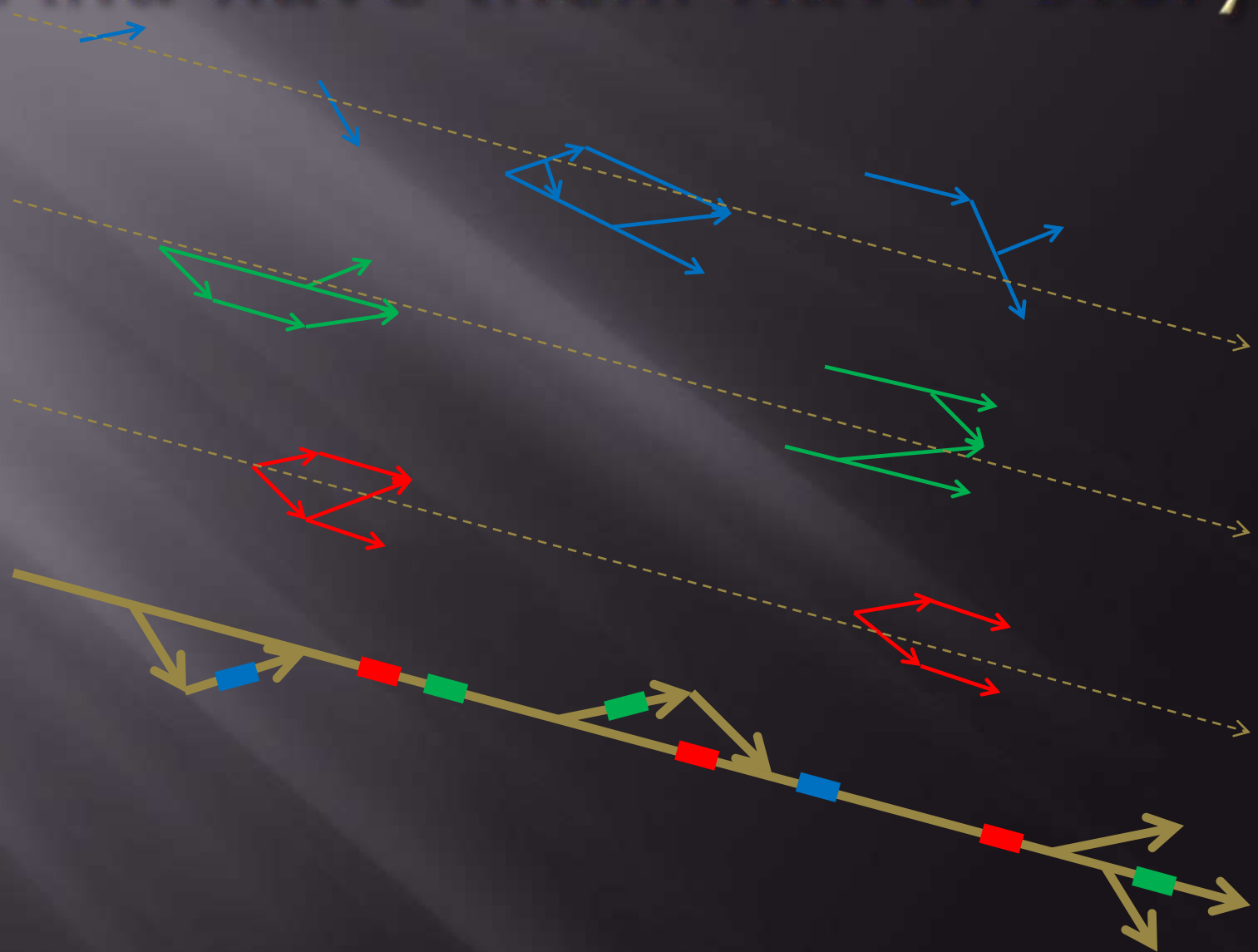
Layer in Expressive Accents



Layer in Expressive Accents



And have them flavor story



That was –an- approach

- Not –the- approach
- There are no doubt many others
- As discussed, are games basically doing this
- Key is to consider/plan/build game around it

- Again, encourage you to think about how you'd approach your own preferred expression
 - Multiplayer – rely on other players, not computer?
 - Sims/Little Big Planet – focus on purer creation?

Conclusion

Why do I Care?

- I'd like to see more player expression in narrative style games
- Hopefully this talk provided some useful ways to think about that idea and approaches
- Things are moving forward, but slowly
- I'd encourage all of you to consider providing more expression capabilities in your games!

Books and Film place the author “On Stage” –
expressing thoughts and hopes to a crowd

In games, the designer starts on stage, and sets it
up – then gets off and invites the player up

Too often, all we let them say is “Kick, Punch”
I’d like to see us allow players to say much more

The End

thanks