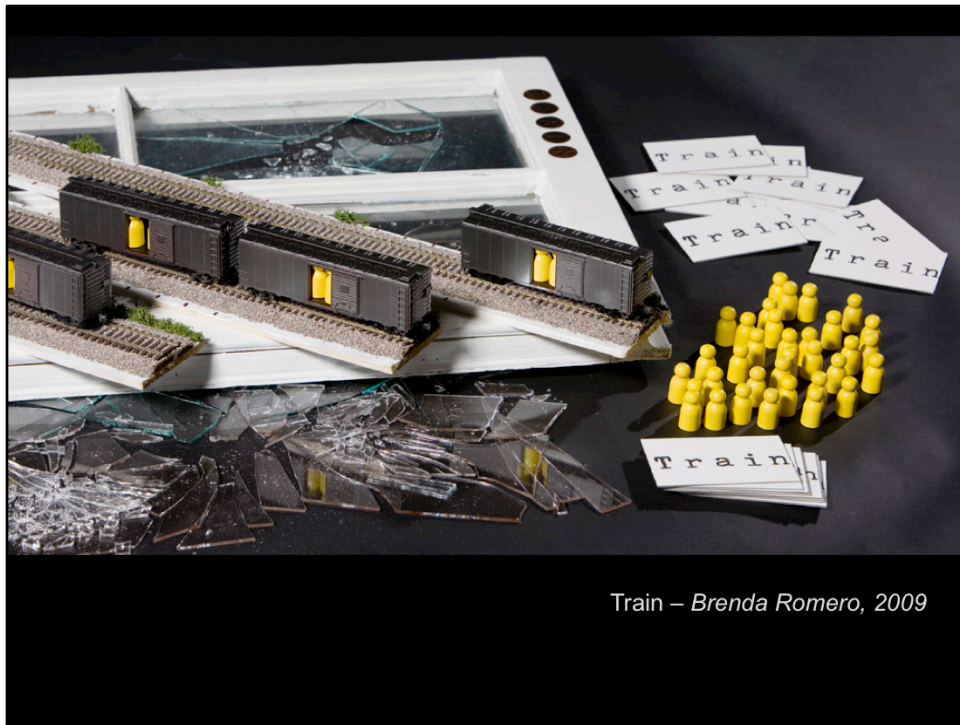


Interactive Storytelling for Indies



I. The Mechanic is the Message

Name of an unfinished series of 6 experimental board games by Brenda Brathwaite



Train – Brenda Romero, 2009

- Transportation game
- Each figure represents 100.000 people
- Figures don't fit well into trains
- Name of destination revealed upon arrival
- Destinations are all names of concentration camps
- After arriving, the player has to play again
- Almost no one aborts the game before finishing, even after finding out about the destinations

Why does this work?



Question to the audience

- Player becomes emotionally invested in the game
- Active participation in the game makes them feel responsible for the fate of the figures
- Once players start thinking of the figures as humans, they treat them differently
- Player experience is primarily about introspection
- Of course the game cheats: It tricks the player by not telling him about destinations upfront. Still the player feels guilty for not noticing what seems obvious in retrospect.



- Bioshock plays the same trick
- Orders given by the game are reasonable within the game mechanics
- But are questionable when viewed under real-world morality standards
- Surprising revelation that forces player to question the mechanics and goals of the game

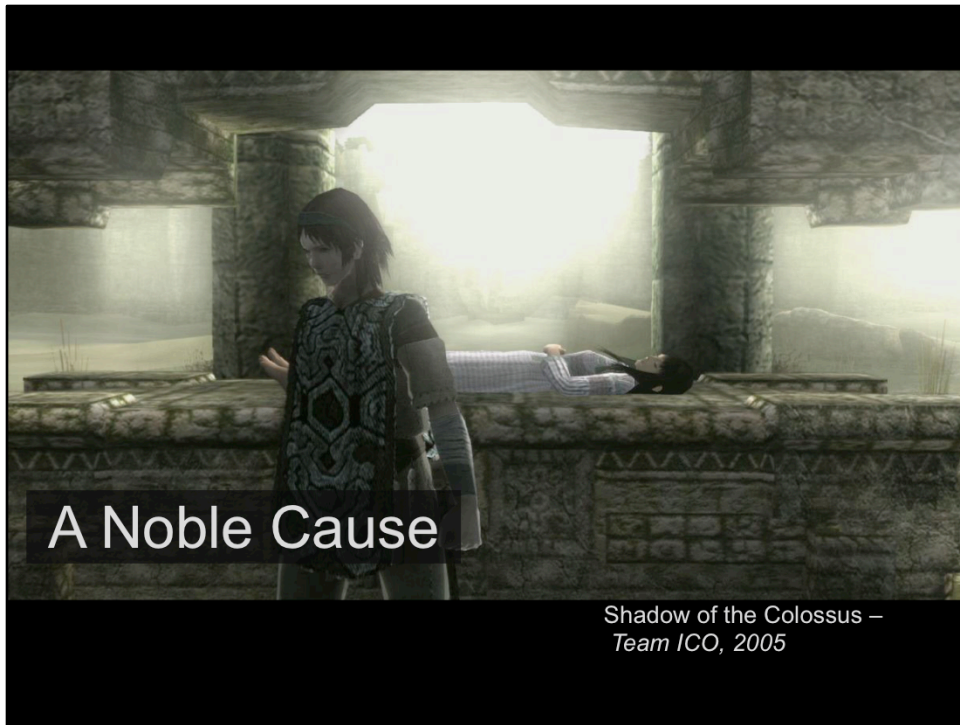
Where have you experienced this?



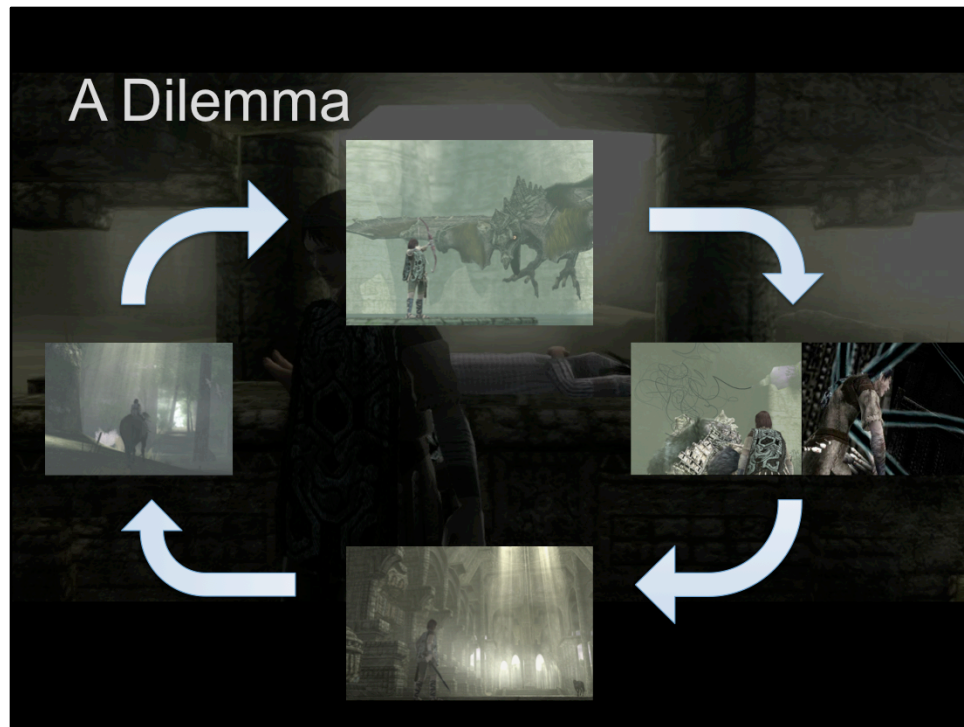
Shadow of the Colossus –
Team ICO, 2005

Maybe the best realization of 'Would you kindly' to date:

- A game about killing 16 boss monsters
- 'Would you kindly' mechanic build in at the core



- Typical game backstory: Kill the giants to save the girl
- Perfectly reasonable within the frame of the game mechanics
- But it's a trap!



- Game repeats the same circle for each of the 16 colossi
- High point and core mechanic are the boss fights (top)
- Long decompression phase in between boss fights to reflect on the morality of the killings (left side)
- Slow build of suspension on the left, rapid dissipation on right
- Circle is tightened as the game progresses: Moral questions become more prominent; Overall mood darkens
- Escalation at the very end; But unlike most other games, not in a plot-twist, but more in a Greek-tragedy style



- Use of classic military shooter tropes in setup
- Scenario continuously turns more bizarre
- Meta commentary on military shooter genre: Games that claim to portray heroic actions often depict the opposite



Use in a game that is not story-driven:

- Morality of swapper mechanic is never questioned until the very end
- Surprising touch to an otherwise streamlined puzzle experience



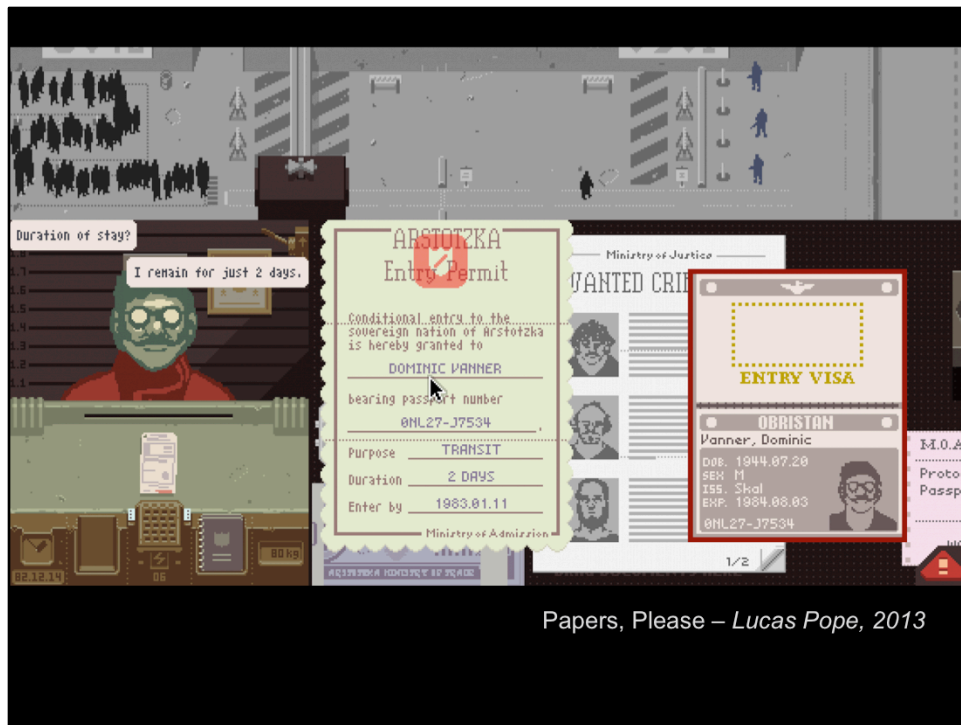
Negative example:

- Revealing twist in Heavy Rain retcons the meaning of scenes that the player previously experienced
- Player is told that figures acted under different motivations than when the player controlled their actions
- Destroys player's emotional commitment to those choices, player does no longer feel responsible
- Undermines core mechanic of 'Would you kindly'



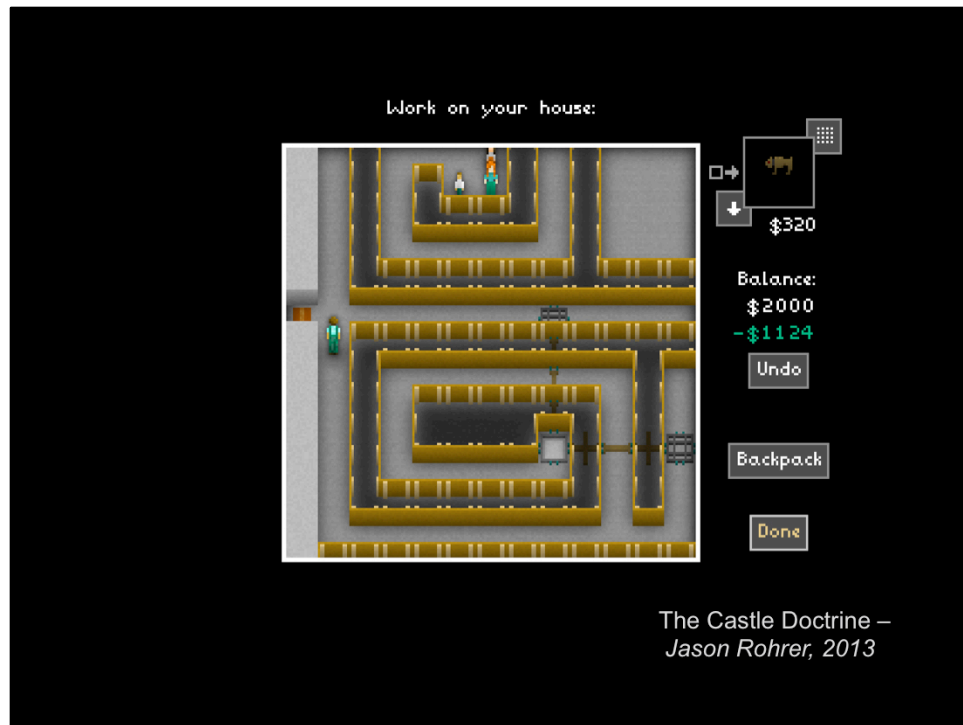
Pitfalls:

- 'Would you kindly' requires game to lie to the player
- Player has to agree on the initial offer
- Tempts writers to build story around a single plot-twist
- Limited to moral choices – an easy target but not the most innovative
- Well-known mechanic; risk of overuse



Examples for 'Mechanic is the Message' outside of 'Would You Kindly'

- Recreates feeling of being a border official
- Time pressure, monotonous, hard to avoid errors
- Leaves small room personal choices (eg. Deliberately accepting a fine for helping people pass the border)
- Consequences employed by game mechanics limited; Important choices happen in the head of the player



- Simulates the build-up of paranoia stimulated by Castle doctrine laws
- Set in a world where everybody robs everybody else
- Impossibility of winning at the core of the mechanic

Do you know of other examples? Do you think this is worth doing? How would you compare this to traditional story-telling?



Holy grail of 'Mechanic is the Message'?

- Press X to cry
- Not the abstract action of the avatar has meaning, but the act of pressing the button on the controller



Other examples?

II. The Illusion of Choice

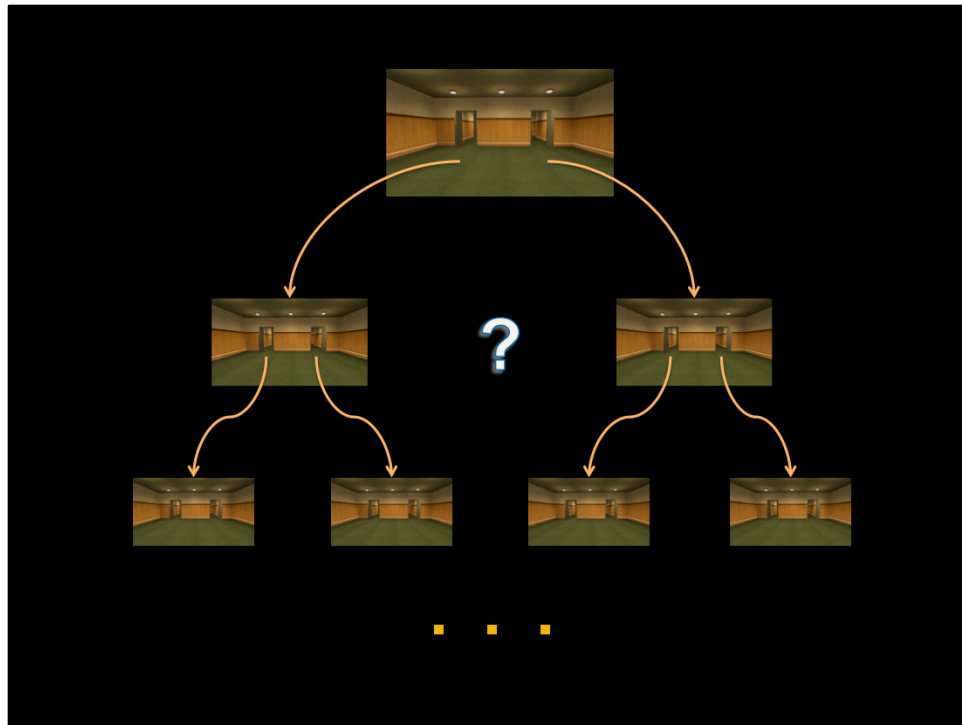
From Extra Credits by James Portnow
Check out their episodes on choice and agency

Core idea:

- Player needs to feel that their choice matters; Even if it does not.
- We only cover 'Illusion of Choice' in Story

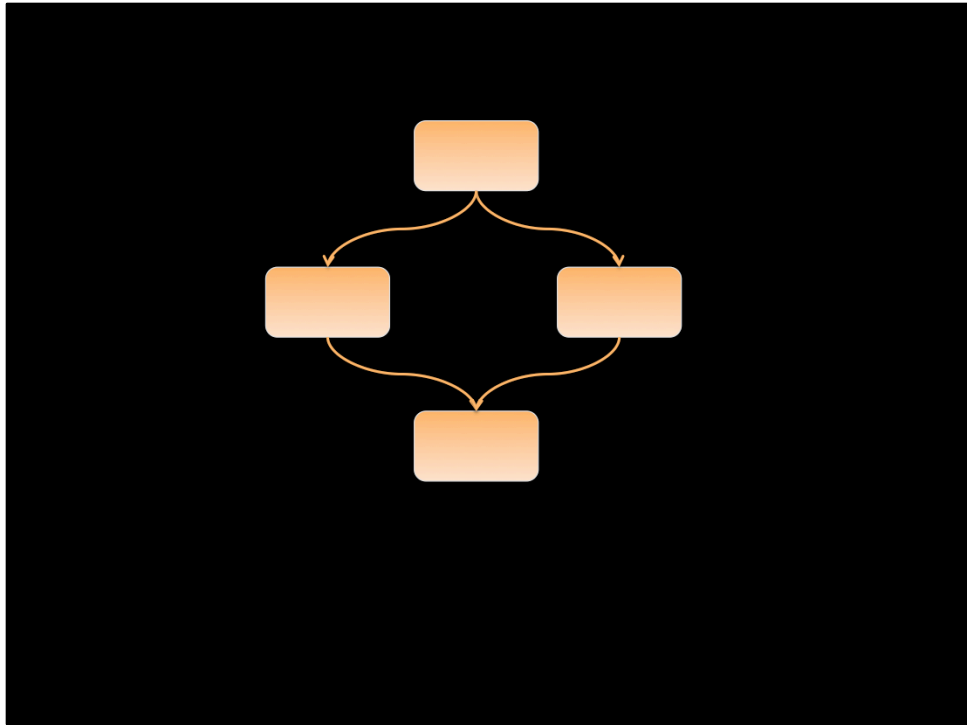


Choice:
- You have to pick

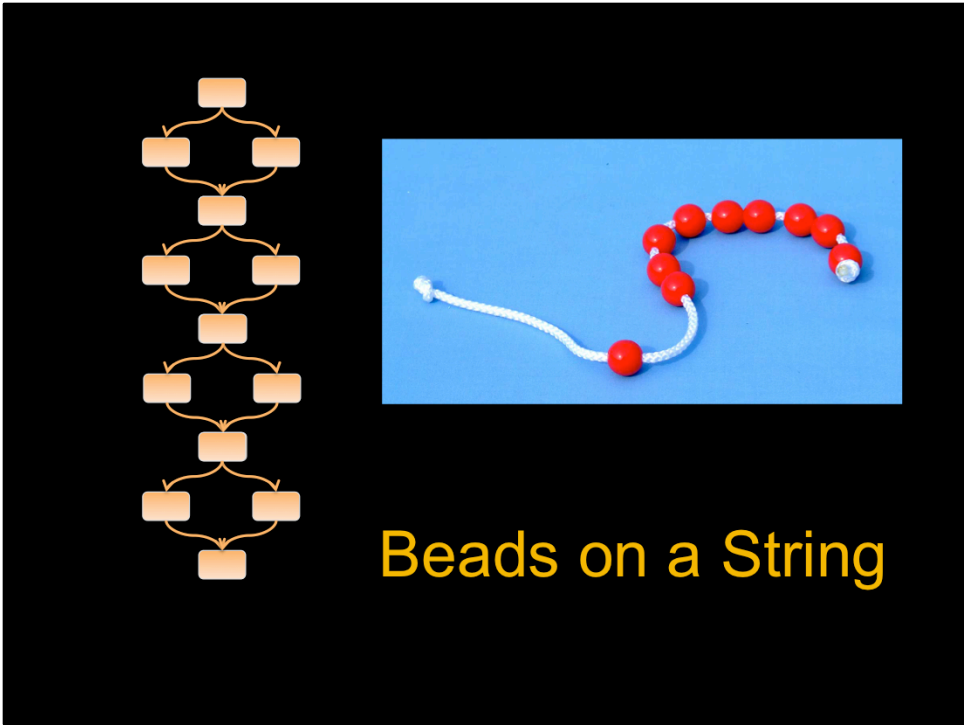


Problem:

- Demand for content grows exponentially
- Most players will only experience one path
- Some genres make exploring the choice tree a core mechanic (japanese visual novel games)



Solution: Bring them together



Real-world trees are usually more complex



Clementine will remember that.

Spoilers: But she probably won't.

But you still get the feeling of agency.

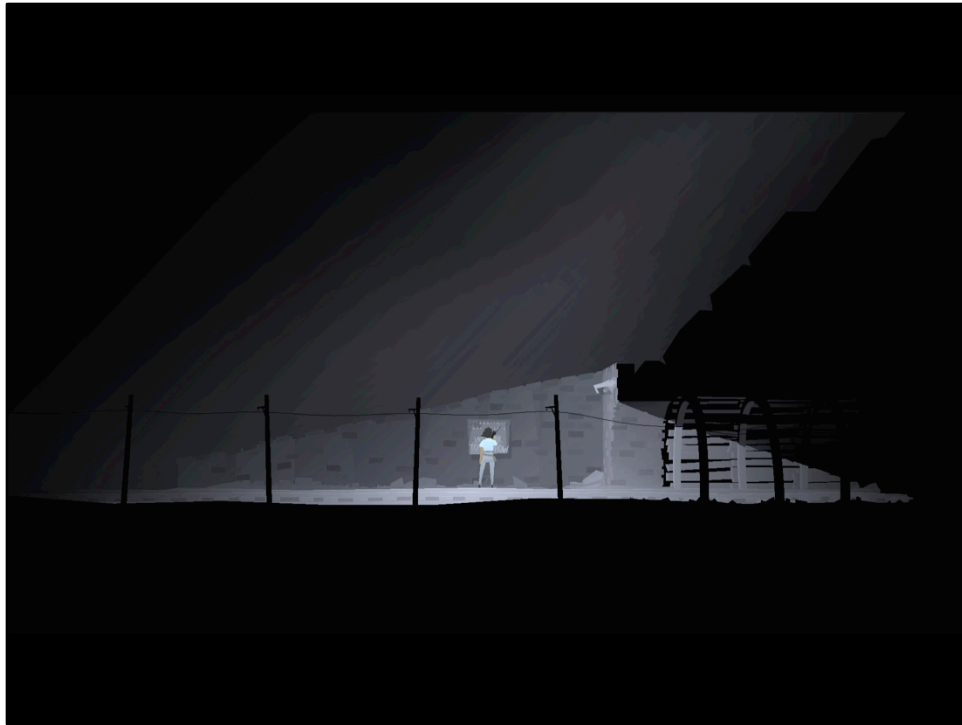


Kentucky Route Zero –
Cardboard Computer, 2013

The concept taken to the extreme.

The vast majority of choices have no consequence on the game itself.

But they change our perception of the game world.



We meet Shannon for the first time in this mine. We know nothing about here yet.

(SHANNON speaks into the large brick cell phone held up to her ear.)

SHANNON: It's two-hundred dollars for two weeks.

SHANNON: Yeah, it kind of *is* an emergency.

SHANNON: No, it's fine, I'll figure it out.

PHONE: (*Inaudible*).

SHANNON: That's true.

SHANNON: I guess he can't kick me out for another week or two.

SHANNON: But can I trust him not to just change the locks?

PHONE: (*Inaudible*).

SHANNON: Yes, and I appreciate that, but —

SHANNON: Ok, you're right.

SHANNON: Just ... nevermind. I have to go. Sorry.

PHONE: (*Inaudible*).

SHANNON: Ok. I'll talk to you tomorrow. Love you.

SHANNON: Forget it. Bye.

Experiment: Read through the dialog and pick your choices. Who is Shannon to you?

Our choices in this dialog form the exposition for that character:

- Who is she talking to? Why is she in that mine?
- Is she running from something? Is she in danger? Is she in a relationship?
- Lack of voice acting helps forcing the player to make their own decisions



The Entertainment –
Cardboard Computer, 2013

Minimal form of interaction: The Entertainment



- Player controls head movement only
- Stage directions for the player are available but player is free to ignore them
- Besides: How do you do pantomime when all you can do is move your head?
- Well, you might still do full-body pantomime even if the game does not require it
- Childlike approach to play: Act of playing is about pretending and role-play

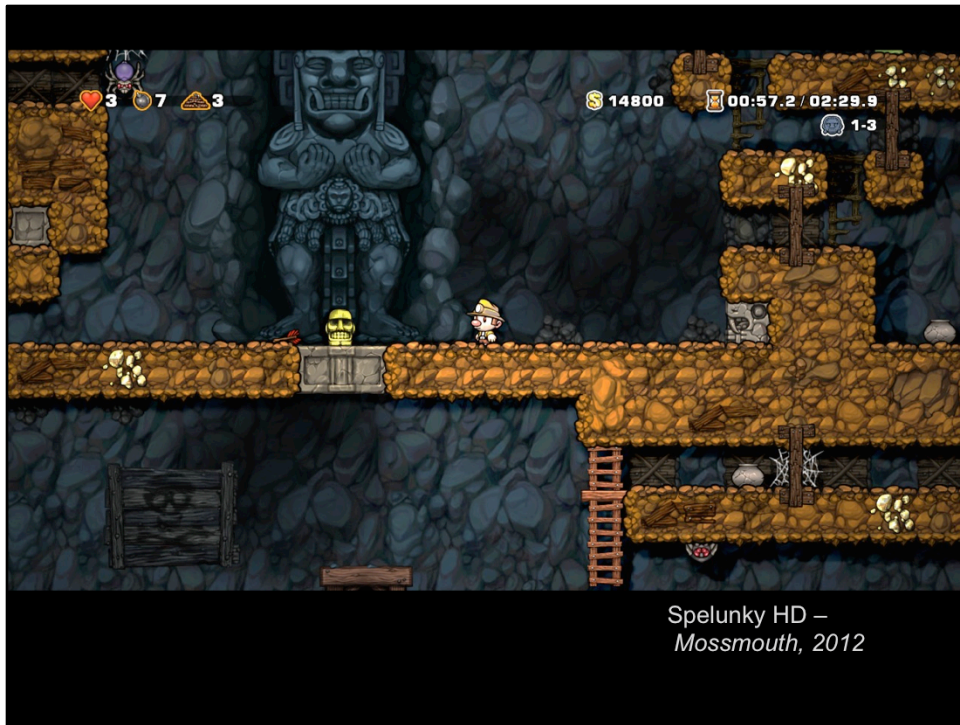
Is this too far? Is there still a choice if the game does not care at all?

III. Emergent Gameplay

When independent game mechanics form new, often unexpected effects

Allows non-story driven games to tell a story

Popular for sandbox games (GTA, Farm Simulator, Garry's Mod) and roguelikes



Emergence in Spelunky:

Mechanic: Idol Trap



Picking up the idol triggers trap

Rock rampages through a large part of the level and cannot be stopped

Exact effects of triggering the trap often unclear to the player when deciding whether to take the idol



Spelunky HD –
Mossmouth, 2012

Mechanic: Angry Shopkeeper



Shopkeeper goes on a killing spree as soon as his shop is damaged

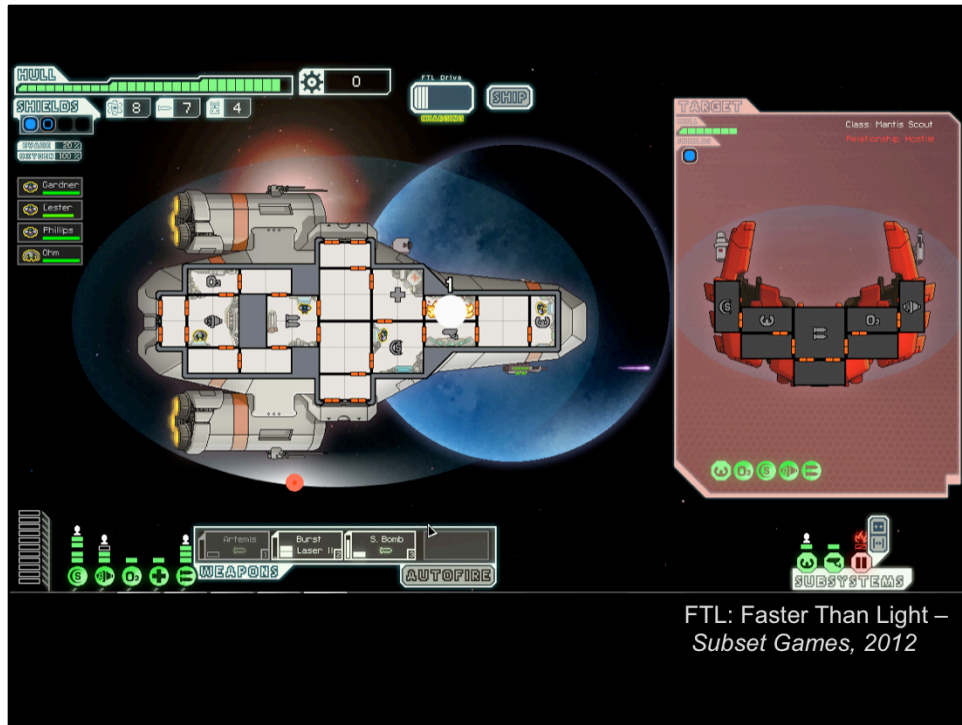


What is going to happen?

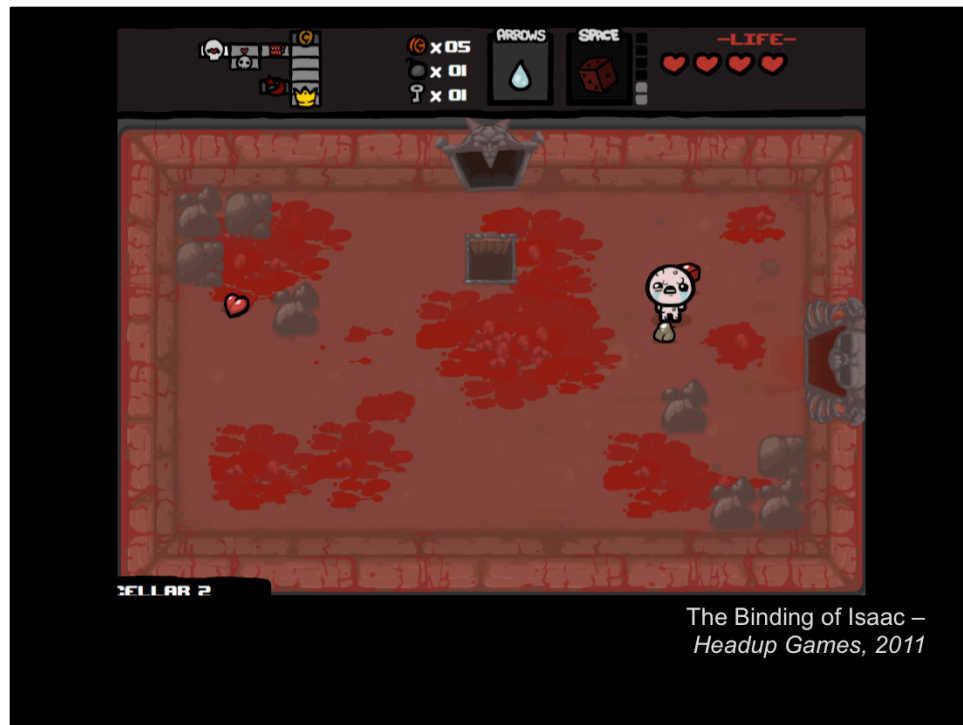


Two orthogonal mechanics interact and tell a story:
I took the idol and got killed by a shopkeeper

The game did not code this effect explicitly; It emerges from the two mechanics.



Different ship equipments enforce different playing styles



The Binding of Isaac –
Headup Games, 2011

Different power-ups enforce different playing styles.

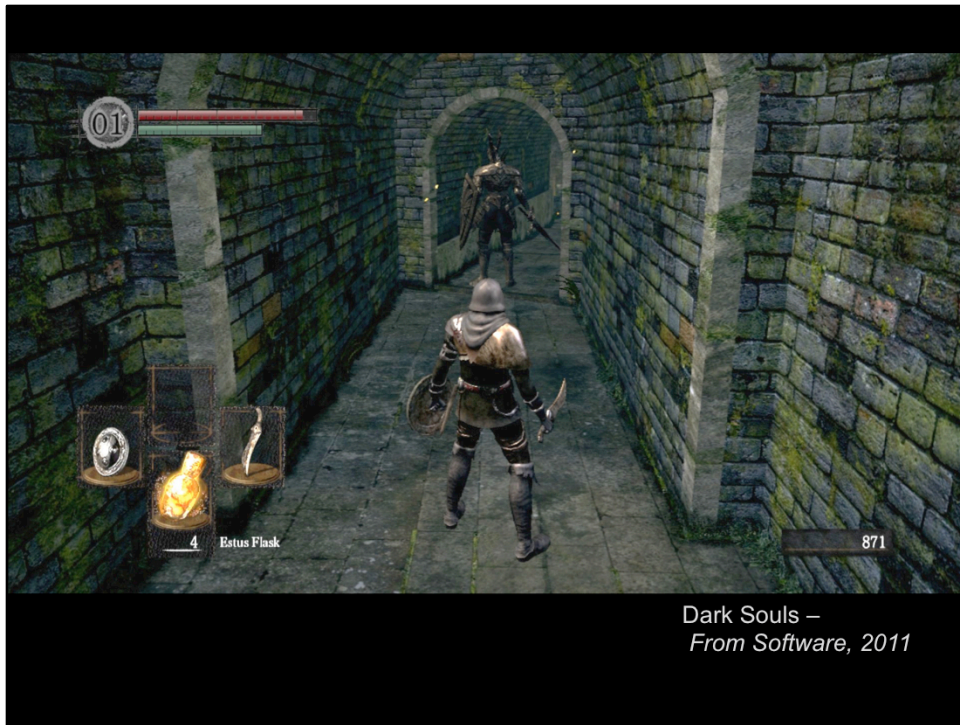
Most power-ups are depicted as mutilations of Isaac; Player advances by torturing Isaac



Journey –
That Game Company, 2012

Story-telling through emergence has huge potential in Multiplayer

Who you travel with has a large impact on how you experience Journey



Dark Souls –
From Software, 2011

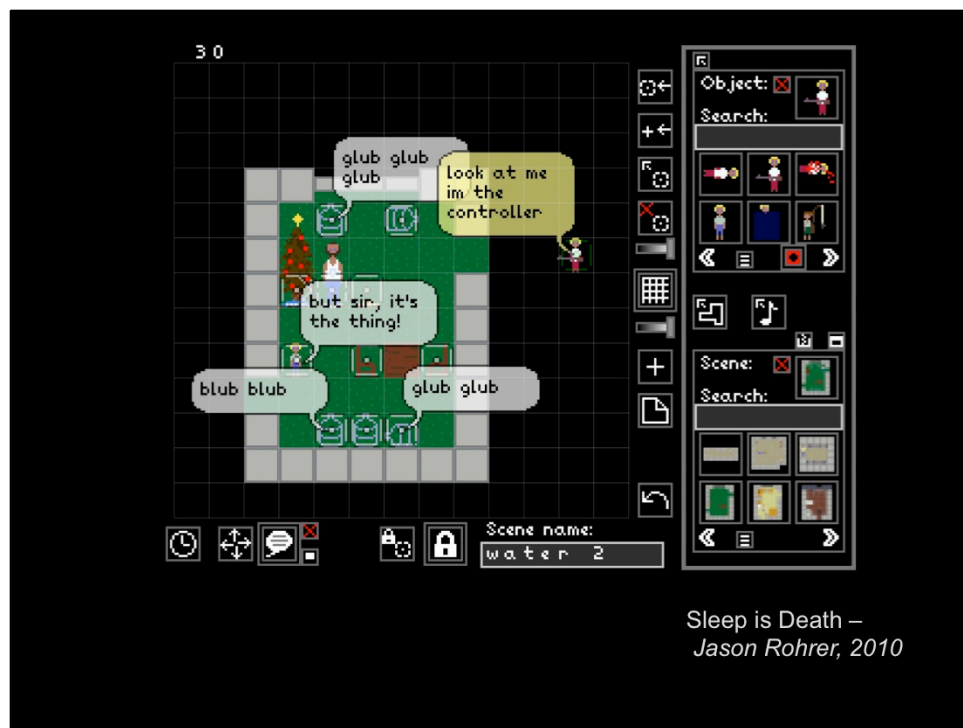
Other player's notes affect your actions

Should you attack this guy even though he looks dangerous? What if you found a note here that said *I did it.*?



Collaborative Storytelling:

One player plays a point'n'click adventure game



Sleep is Death –
Jason Rohrer, 2010

The other writes the reactions to the player's actions in real-time