My Background

- **Project Director, Obsidian Entertainment**
- **System Designer and Adapter**
- **Occasional Writer**
- **Tabletop RPG and CRPG Player**
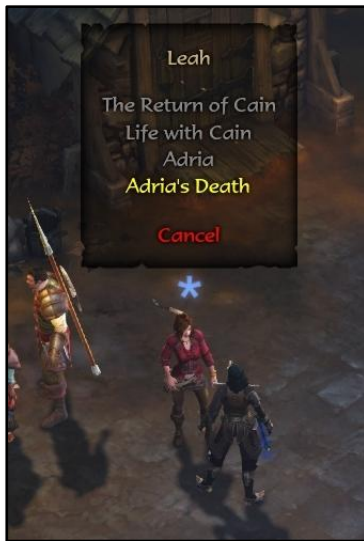- **General Console and PC Gamer**

Dialogue Styles

Linear/Cinematic

Uncharted: Drake's Fortune

Keyword/Subject

Leah

The Return of Cain
Life with Cain
Adria
Adria's Death

Cancel

*

Diablo III

Branching Trees

Fai Dan: Looks like a dozen. Maybe more.

Can I help?
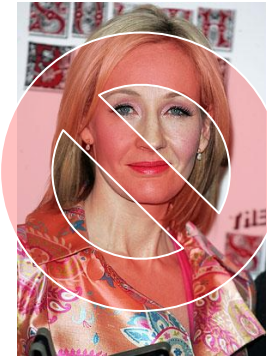What's going on?
Only a dozen?

Mass Effect

Why Use Branching Trees?

- Grant story agency

- Grant *character* agency

- Force tactical / strategic choices
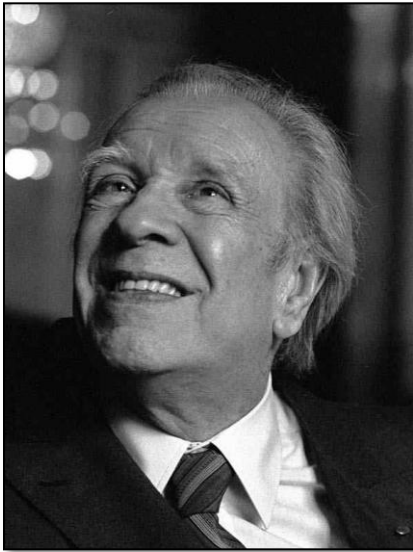
- Reactive narrative content

Choice Planning and Structure, Not Prose

- **Choices inform prose, but...**
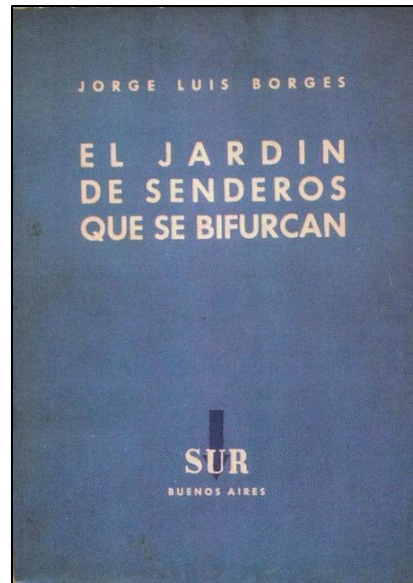- **Choices themselves present problems**
- **Choice is the *reason* for branching**

Dialogue Trees : A Brief History

The Garden of Forking Paths

Borges confronts us with the "pullulating" moment, when we become aware of all the possible choices we might make, all the ways in which we might intersect one another for good or evil.

His imagined Garden of Forking Paths is both a book and a landscape, a book that has the shape of a labyrinth that folds back upon itself in infinite regression.

Janet H. Murray, "Inventing the Medium" *The New Media Reader* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 3

Jorge Luis Borges

JORGE LUIS BORGES

EL JARDIN
DE SENDEROS
QUE SE BIFURCAN

SUR
BUENOS AIRES

When I Cared About It
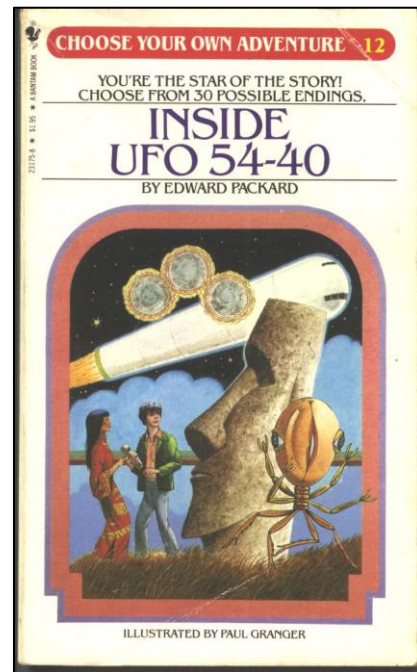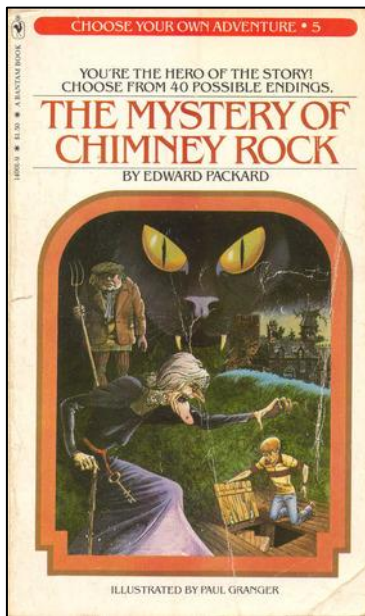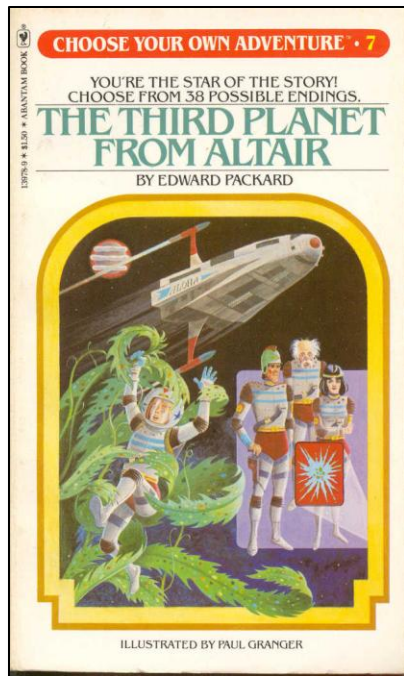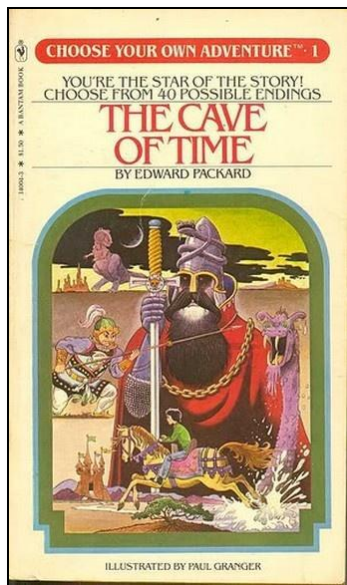
But Also...
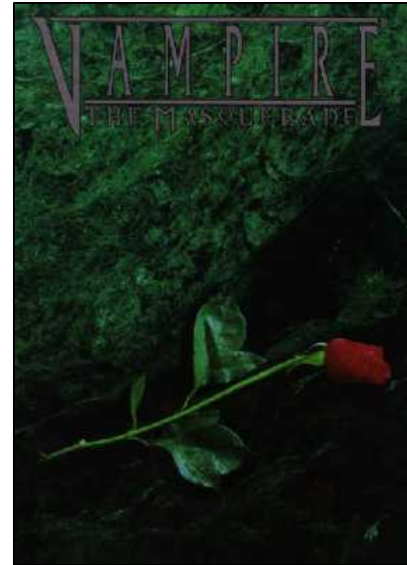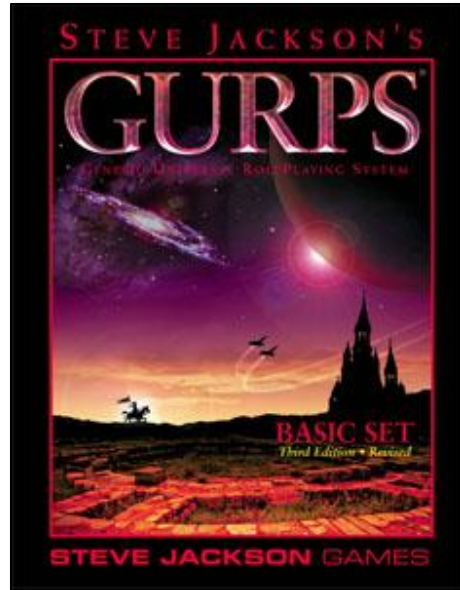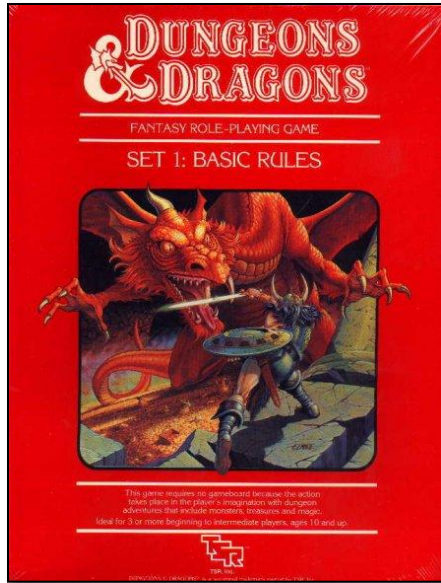
Dialogue Trees in CRPGs

Fallout
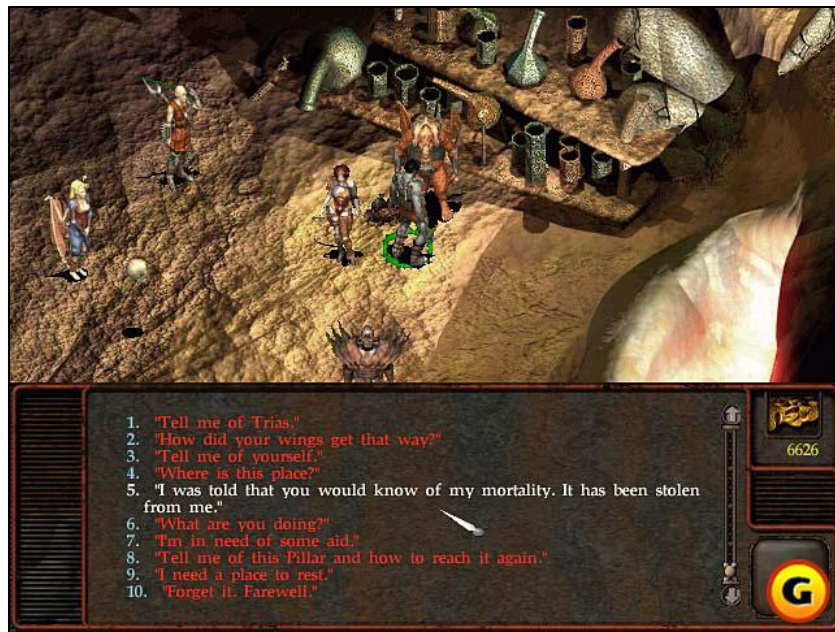
Planescape: Torment

Dialogue Trees in CRPGs *Today*

Mass Effect 2

Alpha Protocol

Changes have been primarily aesthetic, not structural.
Persistent structural flaws suggest a lack of analysis.

Ahhh... Crap. We did it, too.

The Problem: Choice Conflict

Doing (Saying) the "Right Thing" conflicts with being the "Right Character"
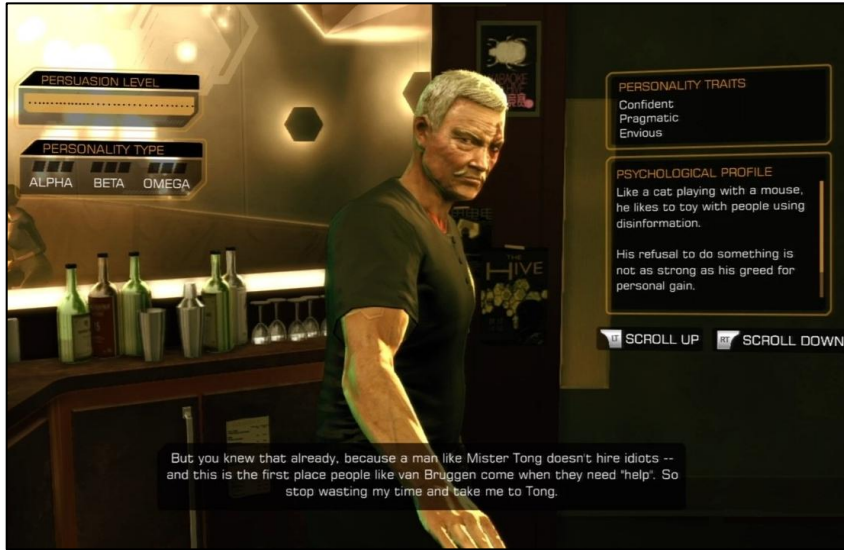
Deus Ex: Human Revolution
Social Boss Battles

Fallout: New Vegas
Skill, SPECIAL, and Perk Checks

Doing (Saying) the "Right Thing" conflicts with being the "Right Character"

"What's the right character?"

Any character that falls within our supported range of expression.

We are making a...

GAME!

Not a puzzle...

Not a movie...

Not a book...

The Assertion: Planning Avoids Choice Conflict

When all ways are "validated ways" and a clear response / reactivity spectrum are consistently reinforced in the narrative, player benefits and character roles align.

Types of Choices

Player / Character Expression

Narrative Goals

A Systemic Approach

1) **Consider Types of Choices**

2) **Define Player / Character Expression**

3) **Establish Your Narrative Goals**

4) **Get Some Perspective**

5) **Write Prose**

Step 1: Consider Types of Choices

- Provide Tactical Choices
- Provide Strategic Choices
- Forecast Consequences
- Validate All Options to Avoid "Win" / "Loss"

Choice Architecture

"Choice architects must choose something. You have to meddle. For example, you can't design a neutral building. There is no such thing. A building must have doors, elevators, restrooms. All of these details influence choices people make."

Richard Thaler. 56th Annual Management Conference. Chicago Marriot Hotel. Chicago. May 16, 2008.
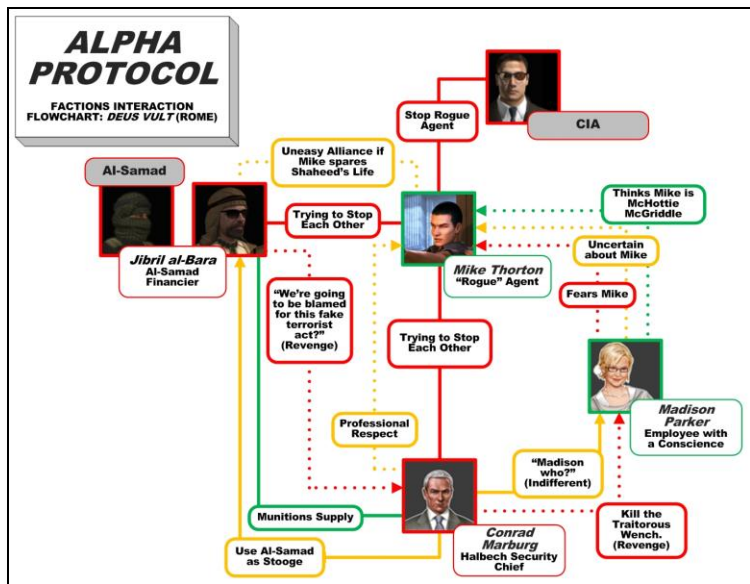
Tactical — Node by Node
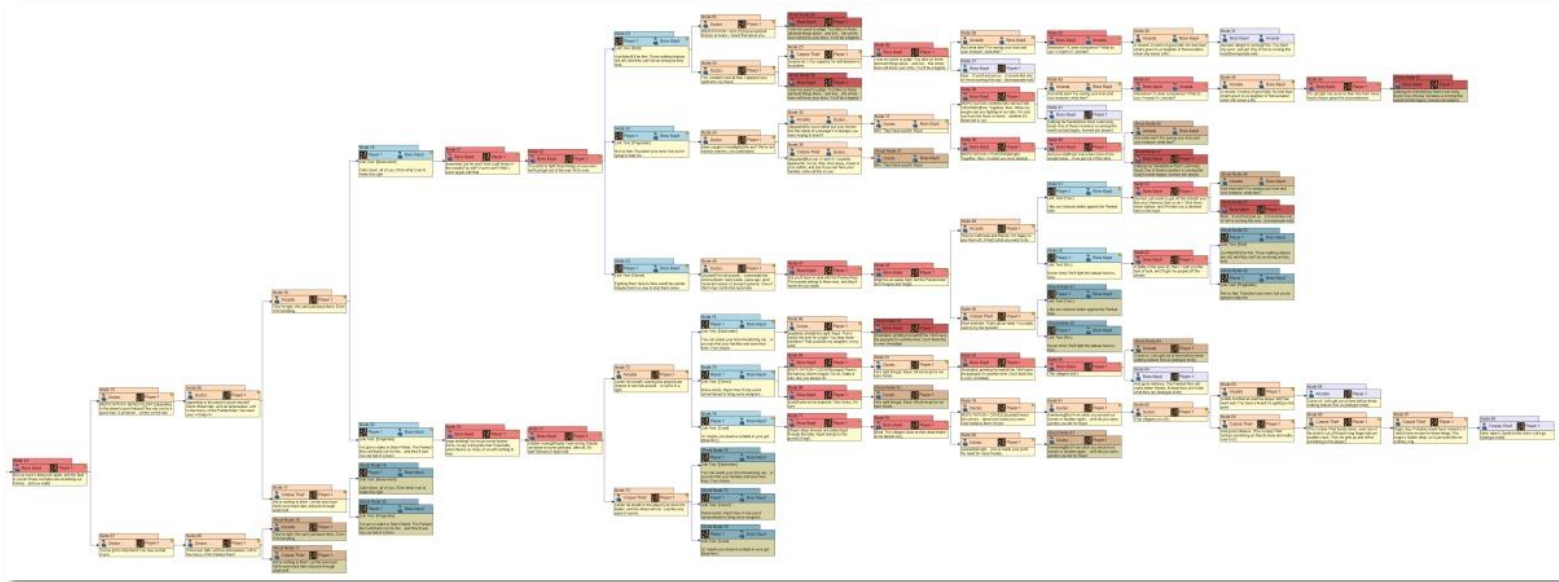
Making decisions to affect short-term outcomes.

Immediate, scripted responses.

Strategic – Long-Term Outcome

Alpha Protocol – Reputation
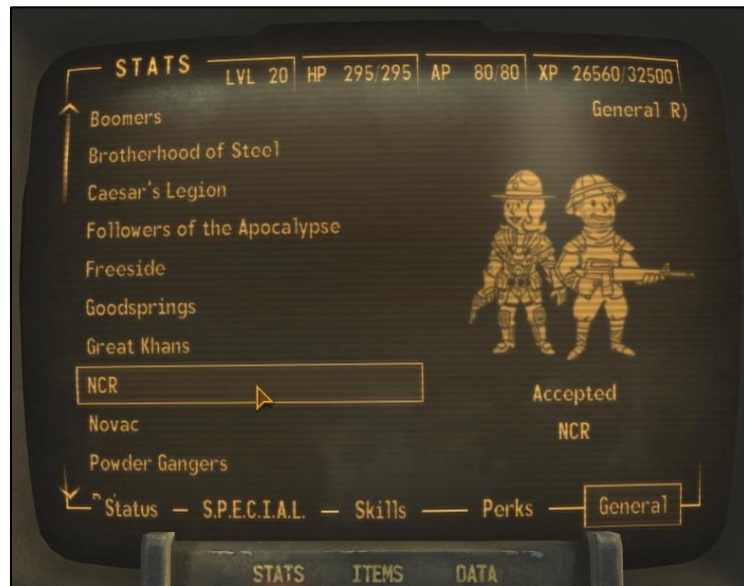
Fallout: New Vegas - Reputation

Small or Non-Scripted Responses - Indirect Reaction Systems

Forecasting Consequences

- **Intrigue the player, but inform them**
- **Surprise the player, but don't anger them**
- **Differentiate consequences**
- **Lace consequences with sacrifices**
- **Push / pull conflict = agony = good**

Validating Options with Choice and Consequence

Threaten (Y)   (B) Investigate
Apologetic (X)   (A)
Headslam

Alpha Protocol - Grigori

... vs. Choice and *No* Consequence

... vs. Win and Loss

Fiend

[Speech 64] I'm carrying Jet, Psycho, and other favors. And I don't deliver to the help.

Let's see how tough you are.

Isn't this Vault 3, home of the Fiends?
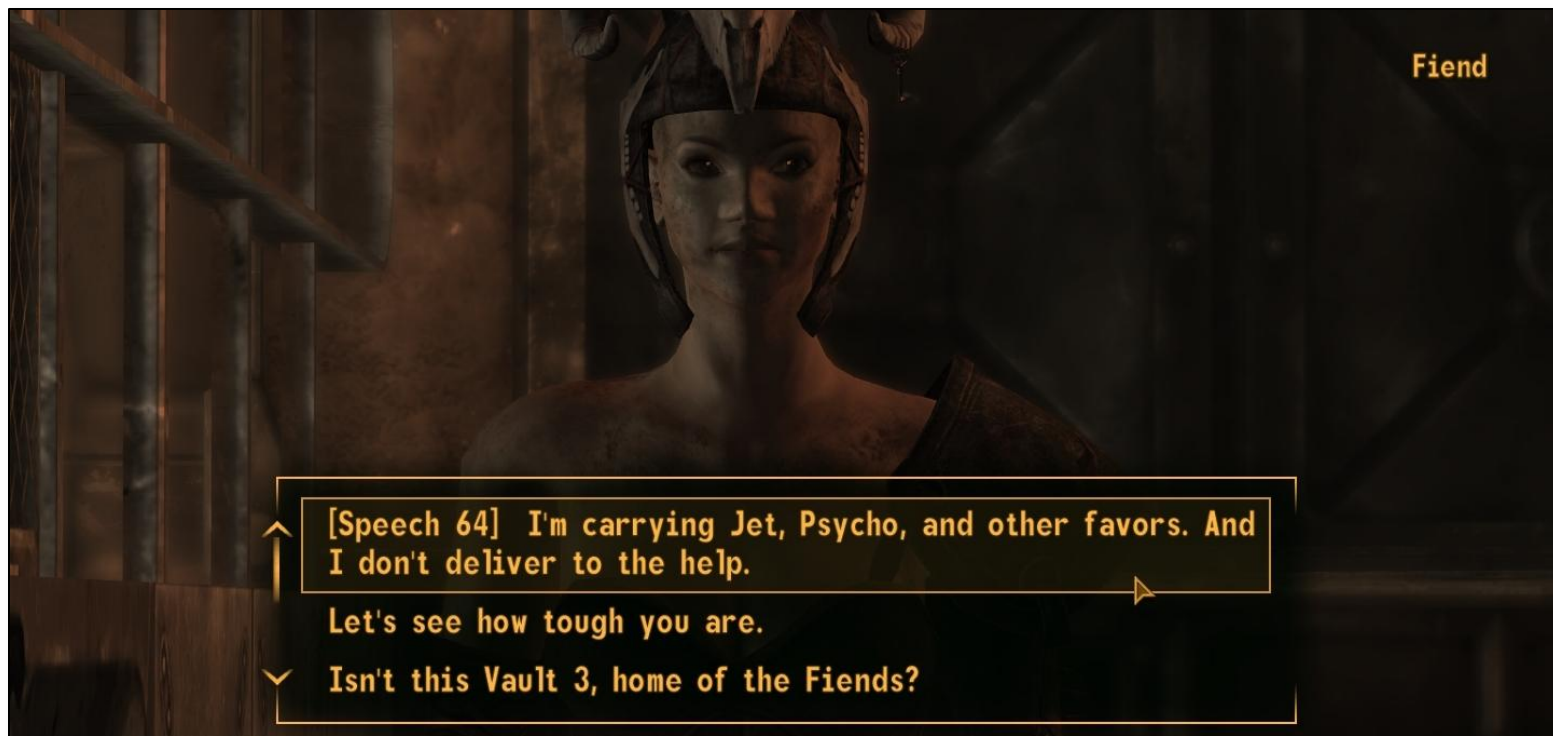
Choice X-TREEEEEEEEMES

Sophie's Choice

Jesus / Hitler

Choice Agony

Orestes

Antigone

Not Spice Agony

Step 2: Define Player / Character Expression

- **Define Response / Reactivity Scope**
- **Establish Character Prototypes**
- **Create a Range of Impacts**

Scope of Responses and Reactivity

- **Good and Evil? Shades of Grey? "Stance"-oriented? Other?**

- **Direct (Scripted) and Indirect Reactivity Mechanics (e.g. Influence, Reputation, etc.)**

Fallout: New Vegas Scope and Range
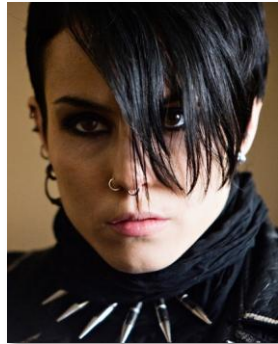
- **Large Scope of Responses**
- **Anything Goes, at any Scale (Kill Everyone)**

- **Reverse-Triple-Cross Capable!**
- **Lots of scripted reactivity**
- **Reputation as Indirect Reactivity System**

Prototypes: Character Templates

- **Starting Point for Players' Character Concept**
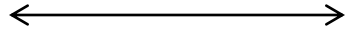- **Help Define and Reinforce Scope and Range**
- **Can be Used for More than Dialogue "Voice"**

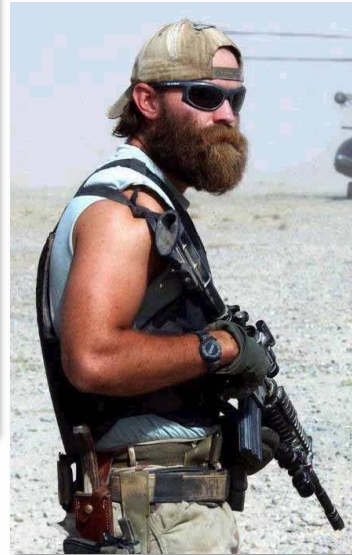# Fallout: New Vegas Prototypes... ?

The Man With No Name

Alice

Mad Max

That Beard Guy?

Doomsday Tattoo Lady

Create a Range of Impacts

- **Choices should have impact**
- **Indirect reaction systems count, too**
- **Narrative / emotional impact is the important scale**

Fallout: New Vegas Impacts

Fallout: New Vegas
Archimedes II
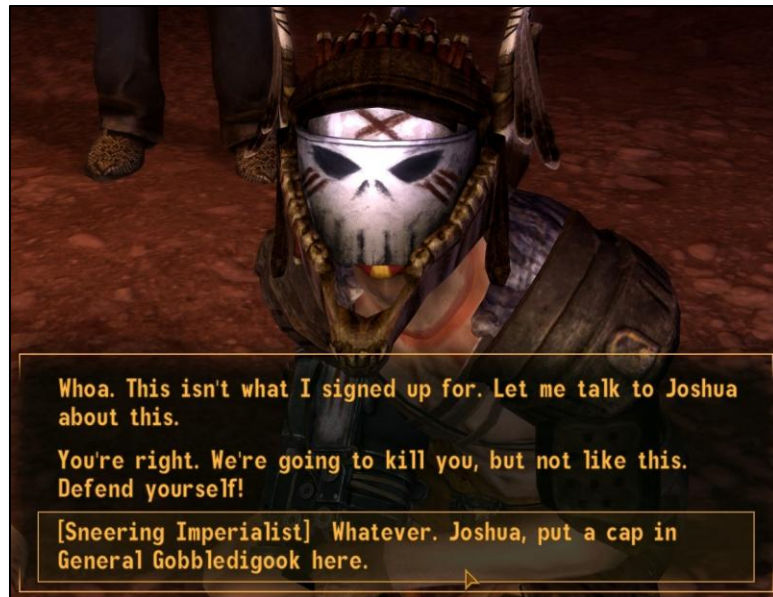
Fallout: New Vegas - Honest Hearts
Salt-Upon-Wounds

Alpha Protocol Scope & Prototypes

Response and Reactivity Scope:
- **Professional / Suave / Aggressive+**
- **Heavily Scripted Reactivity**
- **Reputation – Indirect Reaction System**

Prototypes:
- **Jason Bourne**
- **James Bond**
- **Jack Bauer**

Step 3: Establish Narrative Goals

- **Fuse Information and Emotional Content**
- **Separate Critical and Optional Information**
- **Outline Your Narrative Branching**

Information and Emotional Content

NO THX
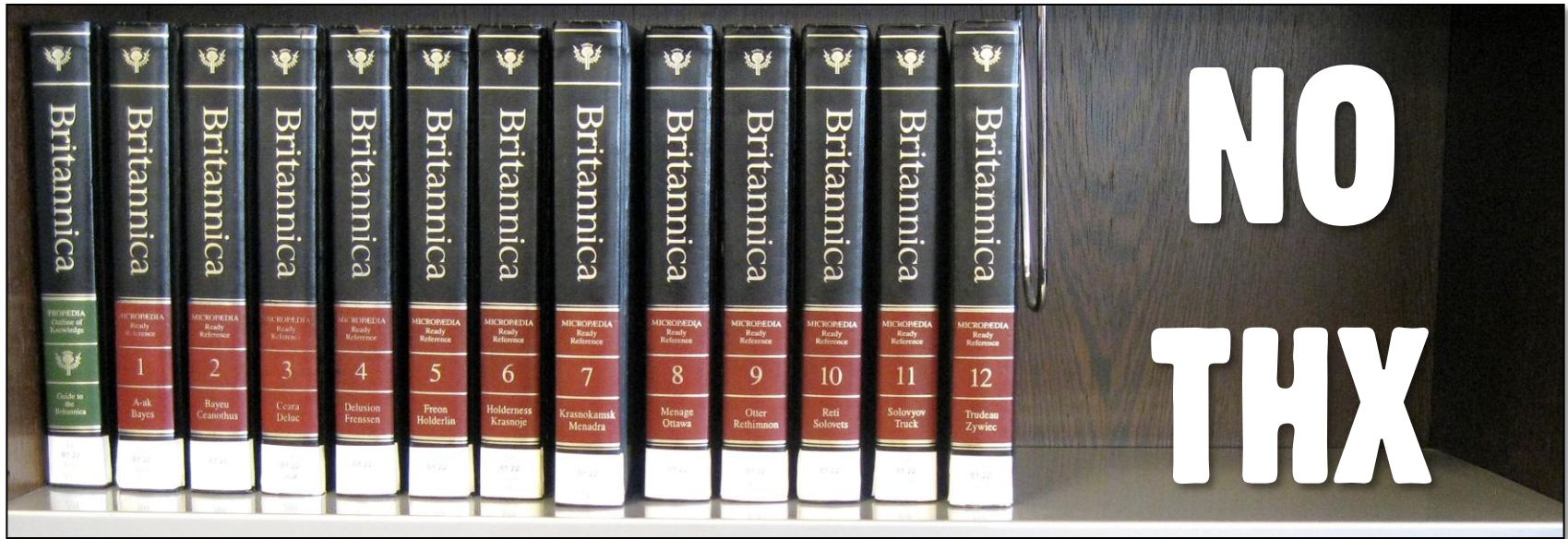
(don't separate these two things)

Critical vs. Optional Information

- **Few players want information dumps in dialogue**
- **Most players like understanding what's going on**
- **Hints and hanging references are exposition, too**

(Bioshock owns)

Narrative Branching

- **Guarantee Critical Information**

- **Isolate Reactivity**

- **Generally, More Branching is Better Than Bigger Branches**

Fallout: New Vegas – They Went That-A-Way

- **Steps are informational, independent**
- **Localized reactivity**
- **Critical information *is* the next step**
- **Supplemental info seasoning**
- **Player freedom = huge (kill everyone)**

Step 4: Get Some Perspective

- **Satisfactory Choices? – Well, are they?**

- **Role-Playing vs. Benefit – Is there a conflict? If so what kinds?**

- **Critical and Optional Narrative – Is the player getting everything he or she needs?**

Step 5: Write Prose

- **Don't blow it.**

In Conclusion...

- *You* are choice architects. Planning required.

- RPG players want "*good*" choices.

- Designer and player goals may be in conflict.

- You must resolve those conflicts or consciously *accept* the conflicts they present.

Questions and Comments

Special Thanks:

The Fallout: New Vegas Team

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