

Creating Compelling Interactive Fiction

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****Disclaimer****

- This talk is specifically geared toward **interactive fiction**, not game writing in general
- However, things addressed in this talk can certainly help with other writing

Agenda

1. Types of Interactive Fiction
2. Pitching with Choice of Games
 - ▶ Eight-Step Process
3. Writing Workflow

But First...

Who am I and why should you listen to me?

- Game dev since 2004
- Worked on 24 games for 17 companies



SABER
INTERACTIVE



But First...

- Full-time, contractor, indie, hiring, lecturer, part-time
- Producer, game designer, writer
- Console, PC, Facebook, licensed IP, educational, text games, military training simulations

But First...

- Game writing:
 - Plot/scene design, cinematics, in-game text, full text games
- Support writing:
 - Publisher pitches, marketing copy, articles/interviews
- Co-founded IGDA Game Writers Special Interest Group Quarterly Newsletter (RIP)

But First...

- *How to Score Your First Game Job*
 - How-to for breaking into the industry
 - Includes specific recommendations per discipline, including writing
 - Paperback & Kindle on Amazon and scoreyourfirstgamejob.com



Types of Interactive Fiction

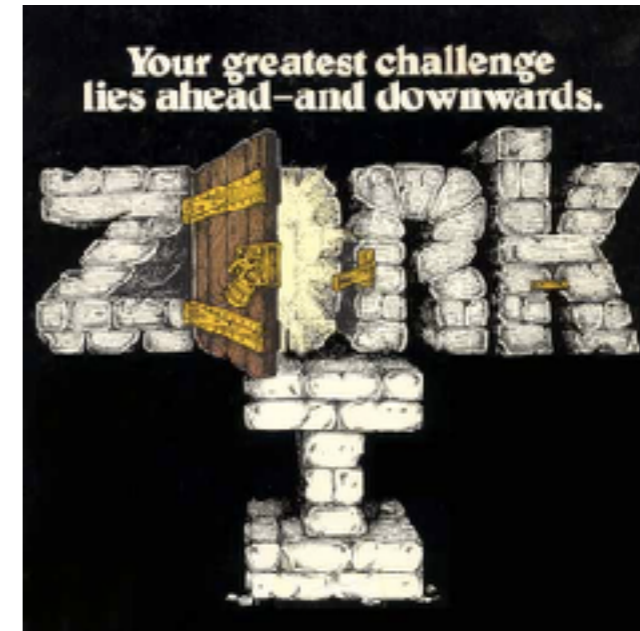
1. **Type Anything**
2. **Hypertext Fiction**
3. **Visual Novel**
4. **Multiple Choice**
5. **Even More**



Types of Interactive Fiction

1. Type Anything

- Relies heavily on a text parser
- Heavily relies on inventory, items, game design puzzles
- Ex. *Zork*



Types of Interactive Fiction

2. Hypertext Fiction

- Click links to progress
- Jump in popularity with the release of Twine
- Heavily relies on exploring the hypertext document
- Gameplay lies in figuring out the order to click links to unlock additional paths
- Ex. *Howling Dogs*

A room of dark metal. Fluorescent lights embedded in the ceiling.

The **activity room** is in the north wall. The **lavatory** entrance, west, next to the **trash disposal** and the **nutrient dispensers**. The **sanity room** is in the east wall.

Her **photograph** is pinned to the side of your bunk. A red LCD reads 367 a few inches over.

Types of Interactive Fiction

3. Visual Novel

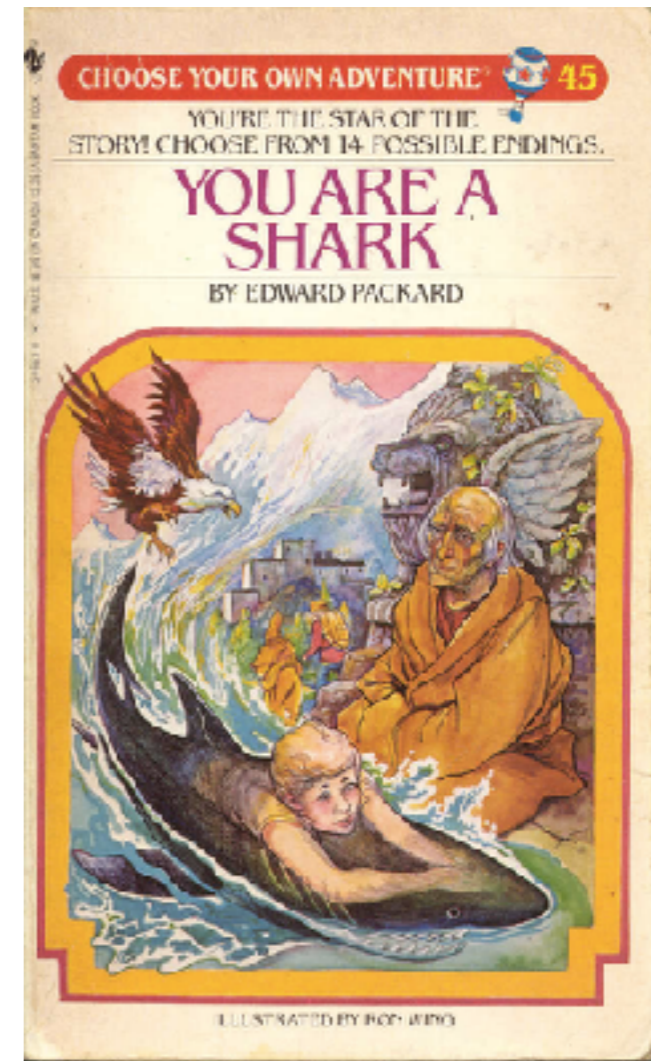
- Story generally always moves forward
- Relies on art assets for worldbuilding
- Tends to focus on romance options, interpersonal relationships
- Heavily relies on character development
- Ex. *Clannad*, *Fate/Stay Night*, *Hatoful Boyfriend*



Types of Interactive Fiction

4. Multiple Choice

- Select one from several options to progress
- Story always moves forward
- Heavily relies on choices/decisions
- Aka Gamebooks
- Ex. Choose Your Own Adventure



Types of Interactive Fiction

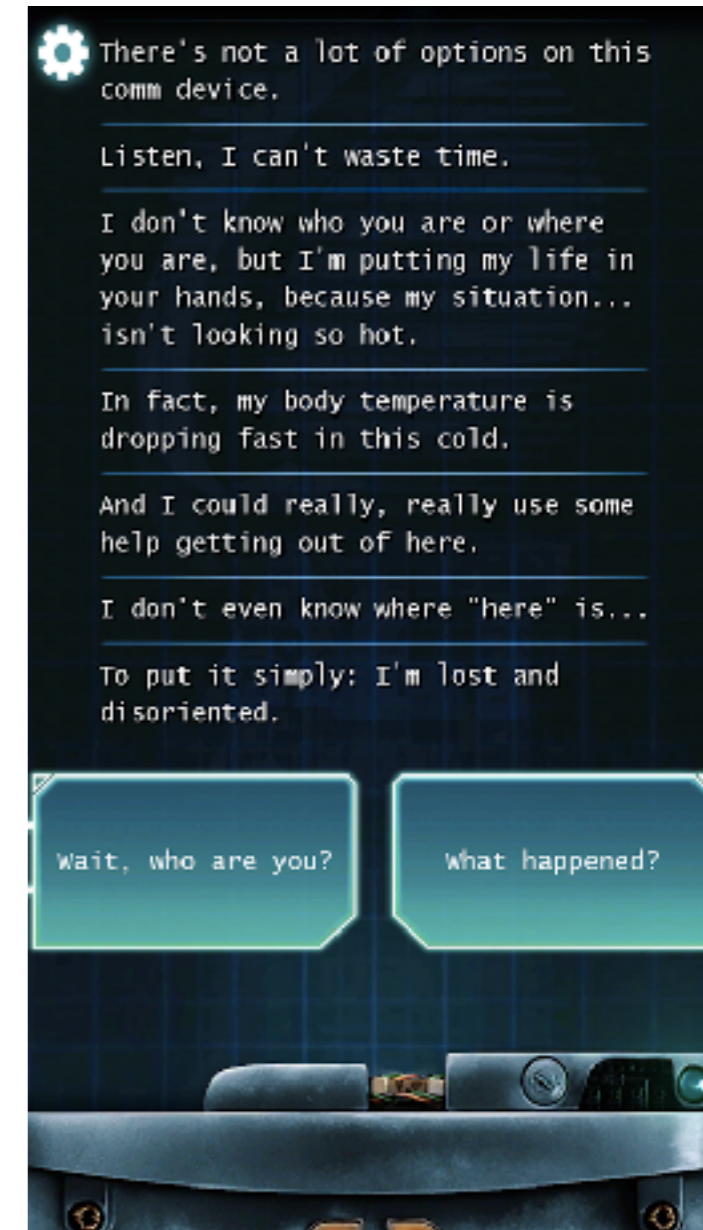
5. Even More

- *Lifeline*: Multiple-choice with real-time texting



- *Her Story*: Search term-based with live monologue performances

- These categories aren't exhaustive, just ideas



Types of Interactive Fiction

1. Type Anything
2. Hypertext Fiction
3. Visual Novel
4. Multiple Choice
5. Even More



Pitching with Choice of Games

- What is Choice of Games?
 - *Purpose: "Produce high-quality, text-based, multiple-choice games"*
- Developer and publisher
- Founded 2010



Pitching with Choice of Games

- What are CoG games like?
 - Multiple choice selections
 - Focus on presenting interesting choices and difficult decisions
 - Build the player character through stat building

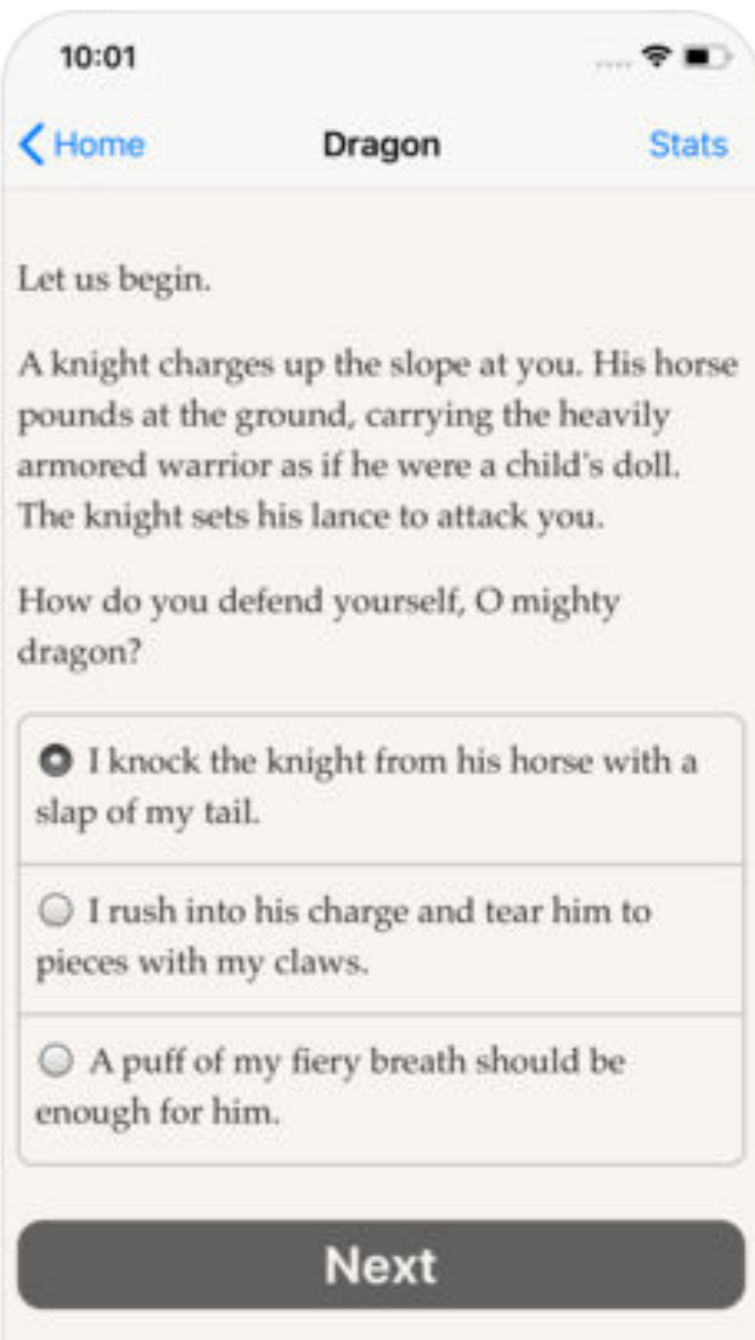


Choice of the Dragon [9+]

Choice of Games LLC

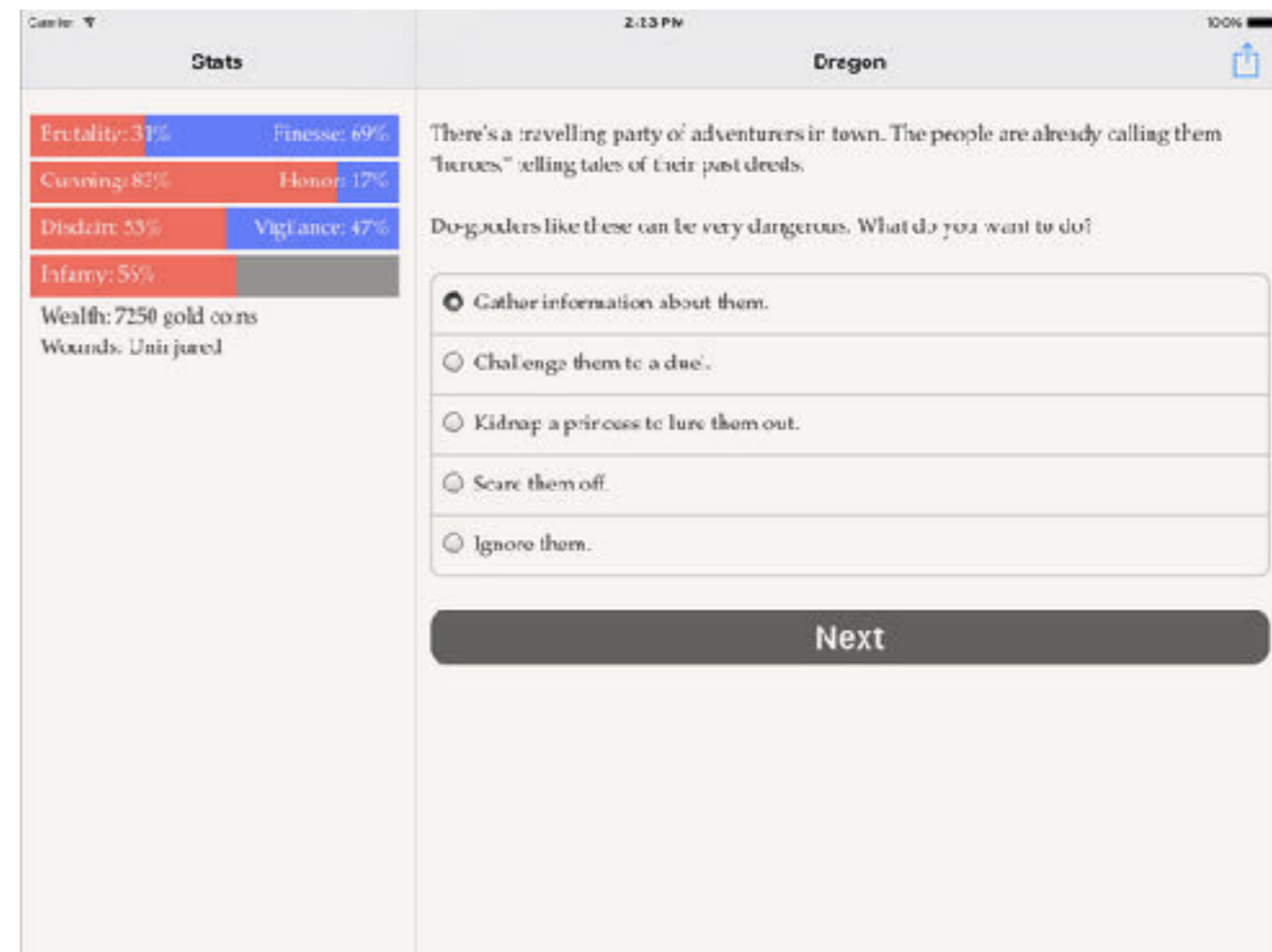
★★★★★ 4.8, 33 Ratings

Free · Offers In-App Purchases



Pitching with Choice of Games

- What are CoG games like?
 - Interacting with NPCs, managing relationships
 - Romance is usually an option



Pitching with Choice of Games

- Note on romance
 - *Choice of Games strives to create and promote inclusive games, in which anyone can play and find themselves, including representation of all genders and sexual orientations.*
<https://forum.choiceofgames.com/faq#equality>



Pitching with Choice of Games

- Publisher Support
 - Distributed across iTunes App Store, Google Play, Steam, Amazon Kindle Fire, Web
 - Created/maintain the ChoiceScript scripting language, designed for non-programmers
 - Can provide editorial, gameplay, marketing, art support

Pitching with Choice of Games

- 8-step Process

1. Getting Introduced
2. Submit a Writing Sample
3. Initial Concepts
4. Prepping for the Pitch
5. Setting Narrative Goals
6. Secondary Variables
7. End States
8. Writing the Pitch

Pitching with Choice of Games

- 8-step Process

1. Getting Introduced

5. Setting Narrative Goals

2. Submit a Writing Sample

6. Secondary Variables

3. Initial Concepts

7. End States

4. Prepping for the Pitch

8. Writing the Pitch

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Step 1: Getting Introduced
 - Three different labels
 - Choice of Games (experienced writers)
 - Heart's Choice (experienced romance writers)
 - Hosted Games (new writers)
 - <https://www.choiceofgames.com/looking-for-writers>

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Choice of Games & Heart's Choice
 - Editorial & art support, advances, royalties, submission process, marketing
 - 25% royalties / \$7,500 advance over milestones (\$5,000 for Heart's Choice)
 - 10% royalties / \$10,000 advance over milestones (CoG only)
- Hosted Games
 - 25% royalties, no submission process
- Financial details available here (and they're legit)
 - <https://www.choiceofgames.com/looking-for-writers>

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Send in your CV
 - If you have enough writing experience, they'll ask for a writing sample
 - If not, you can go for Hosted Games
 - For this talk, continuing with the Choice of Games label

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Step 2: Submit a Writing Sample
 - Anything from written text to full game
 - I sent a small multiple choice side project game
 - **Goal:** Demonstrate ability with interactive narrative

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Step 3: Initial Concepts
 - 3-4 concepts for games based on their guide
 - *A good concept is a one-paragraph summary of a game idea. It communicates genre and theme, says something about what happens in the story, and leaves room for the player to determine what kind of person the protagonist is. Most importantly, it has multiple goals and multiple ways to reach those goals; and communicates the kinds of choices the player will make along the way.*

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Step 3: Initial Concepts
 - 3 areas of focus:
 - **Choices**
 - **Goals**
 - **PC Agency**

Pitching with Choice of Games

1. *It communicates the kinds of choices that the player will make*
 - What kind of personality traits will the player have?
 - What kind of story events will produce interesting choices?

Pitching with Choice of Games

- *Undercover Agent: "Can you depend on your computer hacking skills to get you out of a tight spot or will you be counting on your brawn? Would you rather sneak where you shouldn't be found or bluff your way in with pure charisma and charm?"*
- *Runt of the Litter: "Where will you hide your new hatchling? Are you skilled enough to hunt its food or smart enough to steal it? Which of the Gryphon Keeper trainees can you trust? Where will you and your gryphon learn to fight or fly? How will you shape the young gryphon's mind?"*



Undercover Agent!
Secret Agent Adventure
Choice of Games LLC
★★★★☆ 3.5, 8 Ratings
\$3.99

Pitching with Choice of Games

2. *It includes multiple goals*

- Should always have a few different goals going on simultaneously
- Choosing between which ones to pursue creates dramatic tension, makes for good choices/a good story
- Don't just have a single win/lose condition - that streamlines everything toward meeting that one goal, waters down the choices

Pitching with Choice of Games

- *Cannonfire Concerto: "Amuse the populace for free or play the courts and concert halls of Europe, spend your nights practicing or spin the roulette wheels till dawn... Short on cash to fund your lavish lifestyle? Pick up an extra paycheck by working as a spy, or giving a private performance to a friendly Count or Countess."*



Hollywood Visionary
Make the movie of your dreams
Choice of Games LLC
★★★★★ 4.8, 12 Ratings
\$4.99

- *Hollywood Visionary: "Pick a genre, find a writer, cast stars, coordinate publicity stunts, put out fires... all while trying to manage your love life in 1950s Hollywood. Can a harried indie producer still get the script girl (or best boy)?"*

Pitching with Choice of Games

3. *It leaves room for the player to determine the protagonist's gender, orientation, and personality.*
 - Don't assume the main character will be a man
 - Better for audience building, more fair to all types of people, also forces more thought in thinking out scenarios
 - A nice constraint to keep in mind when writing

Pitching with Choice of Games

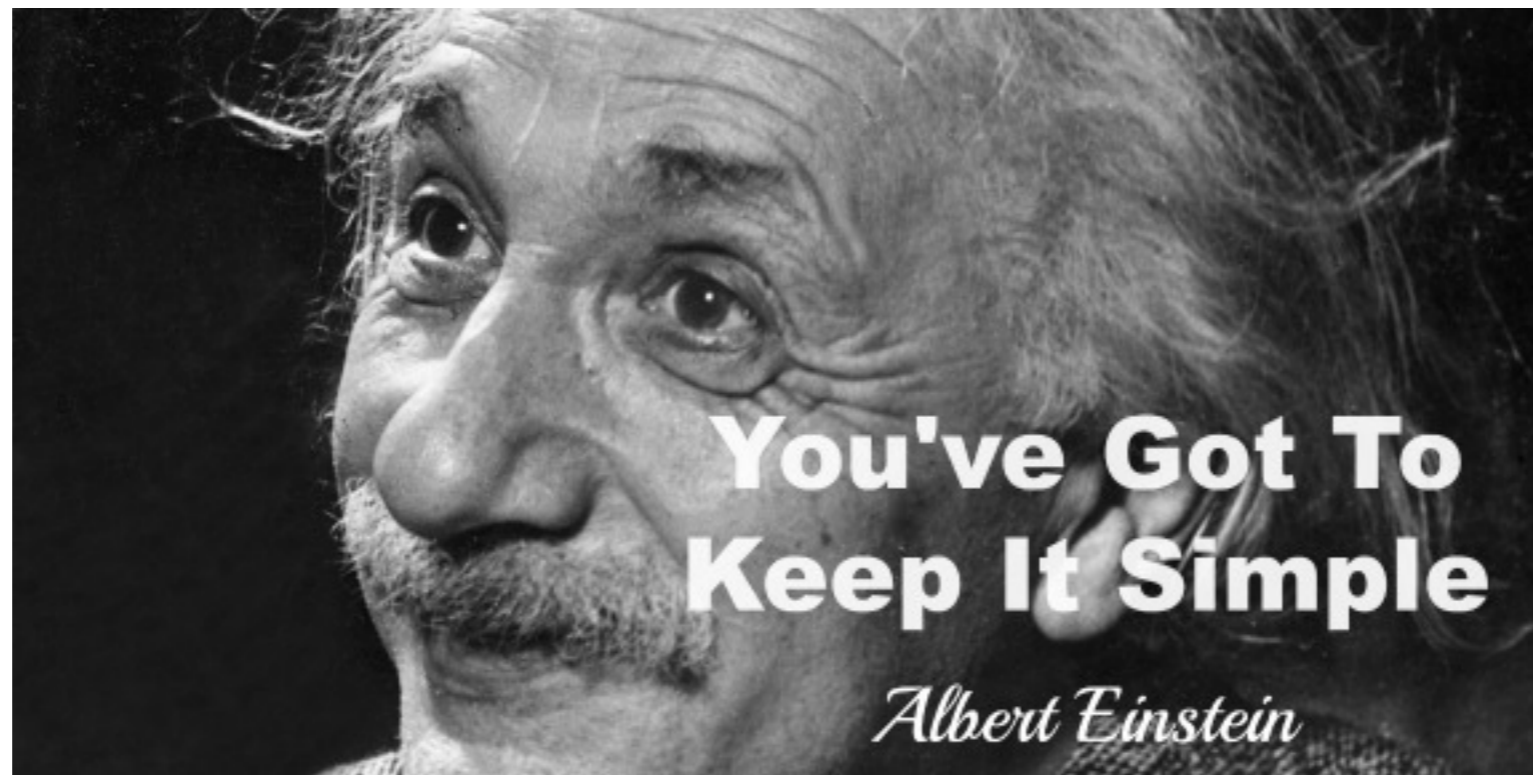
- Additional details: *Don't split the story*
 - Make sure that your major choices don't turn the game into two entirely different games
 - For example: "Do you accept the new king as your liege, or do you flee to the woods to start a rebellion against him?"
 - Those are two entirely different stories that would be nearly impossible to fit into the same game

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Additional details: *Do think about replayability*
 - We (CoG) want our games to be able to be played many times over, and we want the fun to come from exploring different paths
 - Therefore, your game should not focus on finding a single Right Answer (as is the case in murder mysteries, puzzle-oriented games, etc)
 - Instead, create multiple potential paths and multiple satisfying endings

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Additional details: *Do keep your genre relatively simple*
- We've found that players respond especially well to genres that are familiar and easily communicated



Pitching with Choice of Games

- Additional details: *Do create a story that lets the main character be powerful*
- Our (CoG) experience has shown that games with powerful main characters and big events do better than slice-of-life stories

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Sample concept: *Psy High 2: High Summer*



Psy High 12+
Teenage supernatural mystery!
Choice of Games LLC
★★★★★ 4.5, 24 Ratings
\$5.00

- After your eventful junior year at Kingsport High, you're looking forward to summer vacation - and to making some money as a counselor at a summer camp. But of course, it won't be that easy. Your clairvoyance has detected something strange living in the woods. Is it a threat? A friend? A source of power? That's up to you - and it's also up to you to decide what to do about it. Oh, and you also need to take care of the campers in your charge, think about how you're going to use this job to help you apply for college next year, and figure out how you feel about the person you're dating...or maybe realize that you're falling for someone new.

Pitching with Choice of Games



The Last Monster Master
Interactive fantasy novel
Choice of Games LLC
\$3.99

- Sample concept: *The Last Monster Master*
 - Out in the country, far away from the chaos and prying eyes of the city, live the monster masters. These skilled workers are responsible for raising all kinds of beasts – from fierce guardians for abandoned treasure hordes, to stealthy attack nymphs for private security details, to gentle giants who help build the structural wonders of the world. The life of a monster master is tough, but rewarding. How you choose to raise your brood will affect not only their temperament, but their job prospects once they graduate and leave the estate. Will you strive to raise valiant and noble beasts? Or will your choices see them become demons, a plague on the outside world? Should wildlings attack the estate, will they help you, or betray you at a moment's notice? As master of the monsters, the choice is yours.

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Step 4: Prepping for the Pitch
 - Three areas to focus on:
 - Narrative Goals
 - Secondary Variables
 - End States

Pitching with Choice of Games

- *What is a narrative goal?*
 - The narrative goals should be independent, discrete, concrete, and likely-conflicting things achievable during the last 15% of your game
 - Basically, the possible things that the player is trying to achieve
 - Should not be sequential - can happen out of order

Pitching with Choice of Games

- *What are secondary variables?*
 - Variables that describe the player character's progress toward a goal
 - Ex. If romancing someone is a goal, your relationship with them would be a secondary variable

Pitching with Choice of Games

- *What are end states?*
 - How a narrative goal resolves
 - Typically tracked in 5 ways:
 - Success
 - Partial success
 - Status quo ante (nothing changes)
 - Partial failure
 - Failure

Pitching with Choice of Games

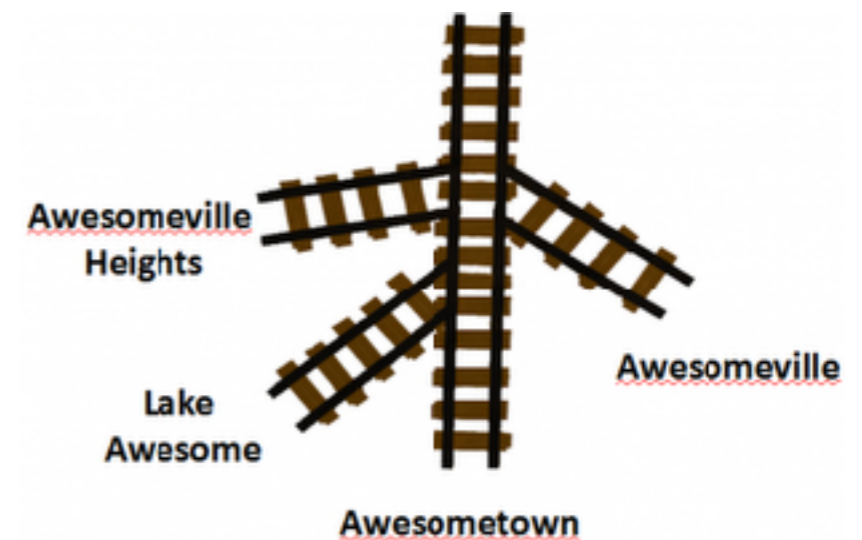
- *What are end states?*
 - Goal: Save the prisoner from being executed
 - Success: Rescuing him
 - Partial success: Rescuing him but he gets injured
 - Status quo ante: He stays imprisoned
 - Partial failure: A different enemy captures him
 - Failure: He is executed

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Step 5: Setting Narrative Goals
 - At a macro level, the conclusion of a story does an outside portion of the work in making sense of a narrative
 - The ending informs and contextualizes what came before
 - Therefore, it's important that in an interactive novel to be very conscious of where the narrative is headed

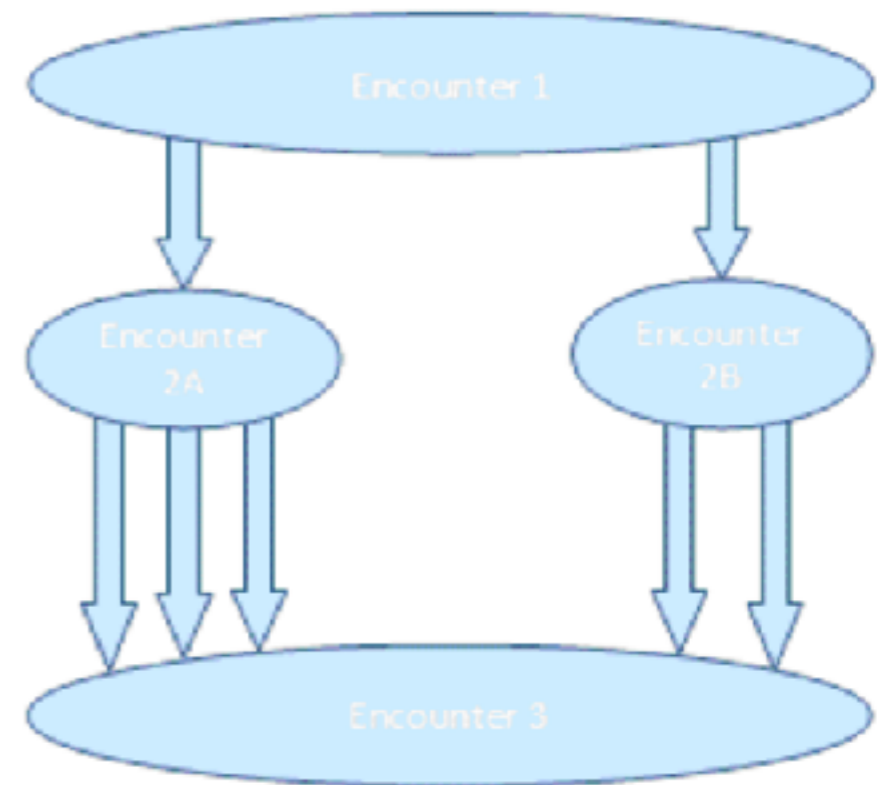
Pitching with Choice of Games

- Heather Albano, an early CoG author, discusses the power of an ending to structure the rest of the story in this essay about the concept of the branching railroad:
 - *Designing your game as a branching railroad does not mean allowing the player to do whatever they like and branching the story accordingly.*
 - *"It (designing your game as a branching railroad) means allowing the player to go through multiple (not infinite, but not singular) distinct and satisfying emotional journeys based on their choices."*



Pitching with Choice of Games

- Meaning, no clearly bad and clearly better choices - every choice should be one that has the option to be at least interesting, if not compelling
- Have branching paths recombine, with added significance from where the branches took the player
- <http://gamewriting.org/2016/01/balancing-narrative-design-and-player-agency-part-two/>



Pitching with Choice of Games

- The first step is to identify the Narrative Goals of your game
 - Aim for at least six, of which one is presumably romance
 - Preferably, these Narrative Goals should be articulated in the form of a Victory Event (success)

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Ex: "Get rich" isn't a great narrative goal, as it's not discrete
 - "Acquire ten million dollars" is discrete, as it's a specific amount that a player can achieve or fail to achieve
- "Defeat Voldemort" is less specific than, say, "Destroy the seven horcruxes"
- "Prepare for the end of the world" is not concrete in the same way that "stockpile enough food to last your community for three years" is

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Importance of the NG: *The game is driven by the pursuit of Narrative Goals that are tracked with Secondary Variables and result in the End States for that goals*
- *These narrative goals should not be sequential, nor a sequence of obstacles*
- *The point is to force the player to choose between the goals, not complete each one (to varying degrees of success) in order*

Pitching with Choice of Games

- *It is important, therefore, to have a lot of goals that will appeal to a lot of players*
- Think about how you were trained to take standardized tests: eliminate the obviously wrong answers and then make an educated guess between what remains
- We (CoG) want you to make that difficult if not impossible for the reader: we want the player to be unable to "eliminate" one of the options, because every answer is equally appealing
- Being able to eliminate one of options (ignore one of the goals) drains the tension from the game

Pitching with Choice of Games

- *One helpful metaphor for these Narrative Goals is your first semester at college*
- *During your first year of college, a student will have a large number of Narrative Goals: the four classes that they have to pass; their work-study job; their social life; the school play; the sports team; personal maintenance, like laundry, sleeping, eating, and exercising; and, potentially, romance*
- *At various points, they have to choose between objectives, because there simply isn't enough time to do everything*

Pitching with Choice of Games

- *Do they want to stay up late and study for English, or do they need to spend extra time in the Chemistry lab? Do they go to play rehearsal, or do they go to their Math professor's office hours for help understanding a proof?*
- *While there may be synergies and some shared amount of priorities between the Narrative Goals (theater may help with English; you have to get Bs in your classes in order to keep your financial aid), these Goals are very much not correlated: doing well in History won't help your team win the big game.*

Pitching with Choice of Games

- *Once you have identified your game's Narrative Goals, the End States should be fairly easy to articulate*
- *End States are the different formal conditions that a Narrative Goal can end in*
- *For example, a grade in a class is easily understood in these terms: if your score in English is anywhere between 90 and 100, you get an "A" in the class; 80-89, a "B"; etc.*

Pitching with Choice of Games

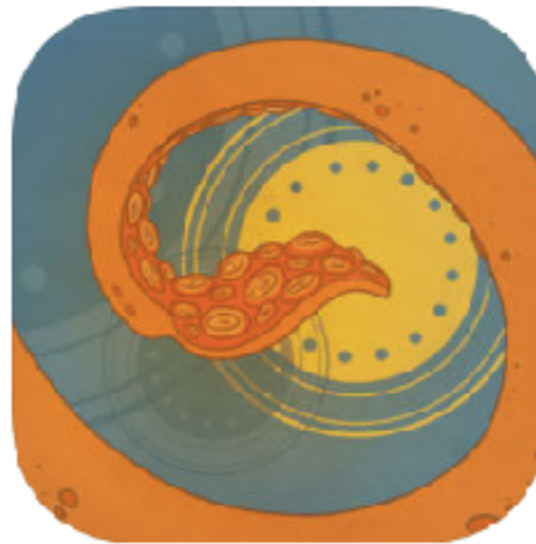
- *In the long run, it doesn't matter if you got a 90 or a 100*
- *What matters is that you got an A*
- *A, B, C, D, and F are the End States of your English class, and the specific score was the Secondary Variable that determined it*
- *However, a good Narrative Goal wouldn't just be a score like this. Rather, the Narrative Goal would be "be selected as the TA for next semester," which goes to the best student in the class.*

Pitching with Choice of Games

- *Then, the Victory Event is getting selected as the TA because you got the A, but the other letter grades would be the different End States*

Pitching with Choice of Games

- The Sea Eternal *does an excellent job of presenting multiple Narrative Goals to the player by the mid-game.*



The Sea Eternal 9+

Immortality demands sacrifices

Choice of Games LLC

★★★★☆ 3.7, 29 Ratings

Free · Offers In-App Purchases

Here is a sample list of goals the player can pursue:

1. *Help Flynn become a merperson/transition to Faye.*
2. *Help TAL become a merperson.*
3. *Resolve the war between the squid and the whales.*
4. *End merfolk immortality.*

Pitching with Choice of Games

- *The Sea Eternal* does an excellent job of presenting multiple Narrative Goals to the player by the mid-game. Here is a sample list of goals the avatar can pursue:
 5. *Become human again and flee to land.*
 6. *Free the merfolk from the Whales.*
 7. *Protect the merfolk from the Squid.*
 8. *Free Cinza/defend her at trial.*
 9. *Be in a relationship with Flynn/Faye, TAL, Arraia, Estre, or Cinza.*

Pitching with Choice of Games

- *Those are nine distinct goals for the PC. A great way to present these as End States would be:*
 1. *Help Flynn become a merperson/transition to Faye.*
 - *Flynn/Faye: turned to a merperson/still human; returned to land; with Tephra/with the PC/single.*
 2. *Help TAL become a merperson.*
 - *TAL: turned into a merperson; with the PC/single; fled to land with the PC/without the PC; dead.*
 3. *Resolve the war between the squid and the whales.*
 - *Whale/Squid Alliance: Forced concessions from the whales before defending them; peace between the Squid and the Whales; destroyed the Whale Alliance in favor of the Squid; status quo ante.*

Pitching with Choice of Games

- *Those are nine distinct goals for the PC. A great way to present these as End States would be:*
 4. *End merfolk immortality.*
 - *Merfolk Immortality: preserved/ended.*
 5. *Become human again and flee to land.*
 - *PC becomes human/stays merfolk*
 6. *Free the merfolk from the Whales.*
 - *Merfolk freed/merfolk further oppressed; status quo ante*

Pitching with Choice of Games

- *Those are nine distinct goals for the PC. A great way to present these as End States would be:*
 7. *Protect the merfolk from the Squid.*
 - *City of Glass: Successfully defended; Damaged; Destroyed.*
 8. *Free Cinza/defend her at trial.*
 - *Cinza: freed and joined in defense of the city; freed and fled to land (w/ or w/o PC); defended at trial; abandoned.*
 9. *Be in a relationship with Flynn/Faye, TAL, Arraia, Estre, or Cinza.*
 - *PC (not previously covered under Faye-Flynn or TAL): restored as a Sea Shepherd; fled to land with Cinza/Arraia/Estre; become human again; stayed in the city to be in a relationship with Cinza/Arraia/Estre.*

Pitching with Choice of Games

- *Those are nine different "things" that can have different conditions at the end of the game*
- *When taken in conjunction, they produce a vast matrix of possible endings composed of the outcomes of each Narrative Goal*
- *Lots of simultaneous goals, forces player to prioritize*

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Step 6: Secondary Variables
 - Once you have articulated at least 6 narrative goals, they'll ask for the secondary variables that contribute toward those goals
 - Shouldn't resemble a "score"

Pitching with Choice of Games

- A score is an open-ended, non-concrete measure of success
- A score may compel replays (because you want to beat your prior scores), but pursuit of a score is not a narrative goal
- While beating your score in a twitch game may compel replays, most people won't be compelled to replay a narrative game for that reason

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Ex. If you have "Wealth" or "Respect" or "Rank" or some other Goal Variable as an end-in-itself, you're falling back on the game-design element of a score
- If there's a reason that you need money (to pay for surgery for your mother) or respect (so you can win the mayoral race), then the Narrative Goal is "paying for your mother's surgery" or "winning the mayoral race," not "get as much money as possible" or "earn as much respect as possible."
- Secondary Variables should **measure progress towards the Victory Event**, rather than being a goal for their own sake.

Pitching with Choice of Games

- The easiest way to handle the pursuit of a Narrative Goal is to have (at least) one Secondary Variable that tracks the PC's progress in the pursuit of each goal
- Ex. *The Sea Eternal*: \$rel_faye: if your relationship with Faye is low, there's no way you're going to end up in a relationship with her

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Similarly, if your $\$rel_squid$ is low, when you come to the Squid either with an offer of peace from the Whales or with the offer of forming an alliance between the Squid and the Merfolk against the Whales, they would reject you
- If you've been killing squid willy-nilly throughout the game, it stands to reason that they would reject your overtures at the end-game

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Ex. In a police procedural, if you've failed to crack any cases, you're going to get a resounding "no" if you ask for a promotion at the end of the game
- Tracking the number of cases solved would be a Secondary Variable, while the Narrative Goal is "get promoted."
- OTOH if you've consistently put your marriage first, you may not get a promotion in the department and the mob boss might get away, but you could have a meaningful reconciliation with your spouse

Pitching with Choice of Games

- It should be relatively easy for a reader to achieve one of the Victory Events
- However, because the reader will (hopefully) want to achieve more than one of them, tension should arise as they have to make decisions between them
- College: "I want to pass all my classes, not get fired from work-study, and star in the play. What do I have to give up? Romance, and sometimes I go to class stinky because I don't really have time for laundry. Even then, I still got a C in Physics, because I just ended up prioritizing other things."

Pitching with Choice of Games

- You will probably have at least one Secondary Variable per Narrative Goal, sometimes more
- Therefore, if you have less than **six** Secondary Variables, you should consider if your Narrative Goals are sufficiently de-correlated

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Secondary Variables have a larger definition than just measuring progress towards Narrative Goals
- They can also measure negative events (like \$wounds) or represent statements about the condition of the game-world at large
- Ex. *Curse of the Black Cat* has \$alert, which increases when you fail at being sneaky
- When \$alert is too high, bad things start to happen, interfering with the theft of the jewel



Thieves' Gambit: Black Cat

An interactive diamond heist

Choice of Games LLC

★★★★☆ 4.3, 15 Ratings

\$9.99

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Ex. In a cop drama, you could have something like "infractions," representing how many times you've been reprimanded by your lieutenant
- Negative Secondary Variables are a great way to defer failure, so that the game doesn't end prematurely
- Takeaway: Your pitch may have more Secondary Variables than initially defined during the concepting process

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Step 7: End States
 - Once you have the secondary variables figured out, the last prep step is to hash out the end states
 - Success (Victory Event)
 - Partial success
 - Status quo ante
 - Partial failure
 - Failure

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Can have a few variations for partial success/failures, depending on the context
- Ex. Courtroom trial
 - You win the case, but your client can't pay you
 - You get the charges reduced, but your client still goes to jail

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Developing End States should be fun, since you're mainly extrapolating the logical end results from your narrative goals
- Clarifying them in the pitch can help catch End States that hint at underlying problems in the story
- Usually problems of excessive complexity (too many branches, too many variables, etc)

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Step 8: The Pitch
 - Title
 - One paragraph summary
 - List of major characters, including a line about why each of them is interesting and how they figure in the story

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Step 8: The Pitch
 - List of important stats
 - At least **five** Primary Stats (personality traits or skills)
 - At least **three** Secondary Stats: (goals)
 - Aka Secondary Variables
 - Other important stats: relationships, money, etc.

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Step 8: The Pitch
 - Ordered list of 8-12 chapters. Each chapter should have:
 - A summary of what happens in that chapter
 - 1-2 examples of important choices/decisions that take place in that chapter, including the results of each option
 - 1-2 examples of important stat tests that take place during that chapter, including the results of both success and failure in the test. (For example: "If you have high Confidence you can close the deal, which increases your Reputation; otherwise you fail and your Reputation decreases.")

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Step 8: The Pitch
 - List of End States

Pitching with Choice of Games

- We'll focus on **Stats** and **Choices**, the most important things to get right

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Primary and Secondary stats are what drive the game. In the most basic terms, here's how it works:
 1. Primary stats get adjusted in early choices
 2. Primary stats get tested in later choices
 3. Success or failure in these tests adjusts Secondary stats accordingly
 4. Secondary stats get tested near the end of the game to determine End States

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Primary Stats are personality traits and skills. They rise and fall as the result of players' choices
- There should be at least **five** Primary Stats. Make sure that your stats are sufficiently distinguished from each other
- For instance, if you had both Strength and Athletics as Primary Stats, they would overlap with each other

Pitching with Choice of Games

- At least one Primary Stat should be an **Opposed Pair**: two contrasting qualities that represent opposed aspects of the PC's personality
 - Ex. Generous/Selfish
- It's even better to have more than one Opposed Pair; that will allow you to have much more nuance in the kinds of choices and characters that you build
- Mechanically, when one stat in an Opposed Pair rises, the other one automatically falls

Pitching with Choice of Games

- It may be tempting to make one of those opposed-pair stats Good/Evil
- Don't do it!
- First, we (CoG) like our games to be more nuanced than that
- Second, if there's a Good/Evil binary, then it's too easy for choices to fall into that same binary

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Some examples of good Primary Stats
 - Strength
 - Leadership
 - Diplomacy
 - Generous/Selfish
 - Obedient/Rebellious
 - Spontaneous/Deliberate

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Secondary Stats represent what's at stake
- These can be goals (i.e., things that the PC wants); they can be things that the PC is trying to avoid; or they can represent the way the PC relates to the wider world
- They (usually) rise and fall as the result of tests of Primary Stats

Pitching with Choice of Games

- There should be at least **three** Secondary Stats; preferably more
- It's OK to have a few straight-up "scores" as Secondary Stats, but they shouldn't all be scores
- Instead, they should track the PC's progress towards their goals

Pitching with Choice of Games

- College metaphor:
 - You're taking many different classes / there are many goals.
 - Each class is graded separately / each secondary stat measures a different thing, and each operates independently of the others.
 - Your natural interests and talents might mean that some classes are easier for you than others / the PC's primary stats may make it easier for them to advance towards some goals than others

Pitching with Choice of Games

- College metaphor:
 - You care more about some classes than others, so you may work harder at the ones you like / the PC can choose which goals matter to them
 - If you're in a club or a sport, that gives you less time to do your homework / the PC will have to make difficult and interesting choices about which goals to pursue, because they can't pursue them all

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Secondary stats can also be Opposed Pairs

- *Choice of the Rock Star*: Commercial/Indie: what kind of sound does your music have?



Choice of the Rock Star

Rock to the top of the charts!

Choice of Games LLC

★★★★☆ 3.6, 18 Ratings

Free • Offers In-App Purchases

- *Choice of the Pirate*: Privateer/Pirate: how loyal are you to each of these ideologies?
- *Slammed*: Favor/Heat: are the fans on your side, or do they view you as a villain?

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Creating good choices
 - A good choice should have **balance, intentionality,** and **consequences**

Pitching with Choice of Games

- **Balance**

- No option should be objectively better or worse than the others
- For example, if someone walked up to you and said, “what do you want? A million dollars, a sandwich, or a puppy?”; most people would choose the million dollars
- With the million dollars, they can buy a sandwich and a puppy, and still hire a limo to ride home in. That is a clearly unbalanced choice.

Pitching with Choice of Games

- **Balance**

- Most cases of imbalance in choices are less obvious, of course. Here are some other ways to maintain balance:
 - When a choice adjusts a stat, make sure that each option adjusts the same kind of stat (ie, Tool stat vs Goal stat), and by roughly the same amount

Pitching with Choice of Games

- **Balance**

- Make sure that there are no hidden benefits or hidden penalties in choices
- For instance, if you let the PC choose whether their favored weapon is a bow, sword, or mace, don't later decide that only the sword can slay the dragon. That makes one of the choices right and the others wrong, and that's unbalanced.
- (It also goes against the principle of intentionality: the PC can't make an informed decision for this choice because they don't know the potential results of their actions.)

Pitching with Choice of Games

- **Balance**

- Make sure that there is no single way to optimize your choices or “win” the game: eg, “always choose your best stat” or “always choose the diplomatic option.”

Pitching with Choice of Games

- **Intentionality**

- The player should always have enough information before a choice to know why they might want to pick each option, and what the potential results of their choice might be
- A standard (and frustrating!) practice in old choose-a-path gamebooks was to offer the options "Go right" or "Go left" without any more information about what was in each direction
- Plus, one of those directions usually led to falling off a cliff. Don't do this!

Pitching with Choice of Games

- **Intentionality**

- Instead:

- Indicate the relative risk of different options before the player chooses
- Indicate (or imply) which stats might be useful in each option

Pitching with Choice of Games

- **Consequences**

- The player's decisions should have real effects on the outcome of the story
- Each option should lead to a meaningfully different result
- The player's choices should be recorded through adjustments in stats, so that those stats can be called on later

Pitching with Choice of Games

- **Consequences**

- There should never be an option for the PC to do nothing, or to ask an NPC to make the decision instead
- Note: This does not mean that there can never be an option for the PC to say no. It means that the PC should always be the one making decisions
- So, instead of an option that says "I do nothing," have an option that says "I stay quiet so that he doesn't know what I'm thinking," or "I rest so that I can save my energy," or "I decline, because I don't want to spend time with those people."

Pitching with Choice of Games

- **Consequences**

- The player's decision should never be undone, and there should never be an option that turns out to be impossible
- True Story: One of the CoG editors was trying to sort out some issues with the IRS. The IRS website said "contact us by phone or mail." The editor called the phone number, and got a recording that said, "Contact us by mail only." This was incredibly frustrating.
- Don't be the IRS! Make all options real.

Pitching with Choice of Games

- A good choice has at least three options, all of which are positive actions
- There should be no “yes/no” choices
- The two major types of choices are **Establishing** and **Testing**

Pitching with Choice of Games

- **Establishing Choices**

- Choices that establish the PC's personality and stats should show a clear correspondence between each option and the stat being adjusted.
- Here's an example from *Merc Life in the Magic City* (still in development)

Pitching with Choice of Games

- “The PC is on the phone with a recruiter who’s asking them about their past employment history, and why they’ve chosen the jobs that they have. They can reply:
 - I pick lucrative jobs because my time and skills are valuable. (+Money, +Professional)
 - I pick lucrative jobs because my communication abilities and rapport are valuable. (+Money, +Empathetic)
 - I like to feel accomplished. I choose jobs that test and build my skills (+Rep, +Professional)
 - I look for a positive team dynamic; it’s important to feel comfortable with coworkers (+Rep, +Empathetic)”

Pitching with Choice of Games

- **Testing Choices**

- These are choices that test the PC's stats in response to a challenging situation

- Testing Choices should not have "right" or "wrong" answers, just equally interesting approaches to the same situation

- Here's an example from *The Hero of Kendrickstone*



The Hero of Kendrickstone

Interactive fantasy novel

Choice of Games LLC

★★★★☆ 4.2, 13 Ratings

\$5.99

Pitching with Choice of Games

- When the PC is ambushed by the bandits on the road, they have the choice of how to respond:
 - By engaging the bandits in physical combat. (Prowess check)
 - By attempting to sneak around the ambush. (Subterfuge check)
 - By attempting to shield themselves with magic. (Will check)
 - By trying to talk the bandits down. (Eloquence check)

Pitching with Choice of Games

- These are the defaults for a Testing Choice:
 - Each option checks a different stat
 - Each option offers an equal chance of success
 - No option is inherently better or worse than the others
 - No success or failure condition is inherently better or worse than the others

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Last notes: Dealing with common problems
 - **Binary Choices**
 - “Yes/No” choices; this is one of the most frequent mistakes
 - Every choice should have at least three active options
 - **Passive Options**
 - Problem: The PC can choose to do nothing, or asks an NPC to make the decision for them.
 - Solution: The PC should always be the one taking action.

Pitching with Choice of Games

- **Unbalanced Stats Problem**

- One stat gets used much more frequently than the others, or is much more important to determining the End States of the game than the others
- Solution: Try to make sure that each stat can be equally useful. If you find yourself using one stat much more than the others, or discover that one stat never gets used at all, you may need to come up with a new stat or two.

Pitching with Choice of Games

- **"Gotcha!"**
 - A choice has negative consequences, either immediate or delayed, that the player can't possibly anticipate.
 - Solution: Always make sure that the player has enough information to make an educated choice, and that there aren't too many hidden rewards or penalties for making specific choices.

Pitching with Choice of Games

- **No Way Out**

- Problem: Regardless of what the PC does or chooses, the same result happens. This is frustrating because the player's choices don't matter.
- Solution: Avoid the temptation to set up a dramatic scenario where the PC fights back from the brink of defeat by writing a story where it's certain that the PC will be defeated! We (CoG) always want our players' choices to matter.

Pitching with Choice of Games

- **Repeated Choices**

- Problem: Too many choices boil down to the same set of options (for instance: Do you respond angrily, diplomatically, or fearfully?) This happens when authors call on the same set of stats too often; we sometimes call it the “four-point trap” because it repeats the same four options.
- Solution: If you find yourself falling into this pattern, try adding another stat or two, and/or try building choices that adjust or test two stats at once. That will help you make more varied and nuanced choices.

Pitching with Choice of Games

- **Building the Party**

- Problem: An ensemble cast, where the player can choose the members
- This introduces an unmanageable level of complexity, because you have to write every scene in multiple ways to take into account the different number and assortment of characters that might be present

Pitching with Choice of Games

- **Building the Party**

- For instance, we struggled with this in *Choice of the Rock Star*. Are there three, four, five, six, or seven people in the band? Are the four people a guitar, bass, singer, and keyboard? Two guitars, keyboard, and horn? Two singers, bass, keyboard? Etc. etc. etc.
- Solution: If at all possible, have a fixed number of people in each scene. Trust us!

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Step 6: Writing Workflow
 - Once you're through the pitch process, it's time to start actually writing the damn thing
 - Lots of different workflows and tools
 - Tricky thing is keeping track of the high-level progression, characters and stats
 - Luckily doing all the pitch prep work helps with this

Pitching with Choice of Games

- CoG forum thread keeping track of different tool/workflow options

Tool Name	Site	Used For	Platforms	Cost	Free Version Available?
Chat Mapper	chatmapper.com 22	Dialog/Flowcharts	PC	\$35/Month	Yes
draw.io	draw.io 21	Dialog/Flowcharts	Web-Based	\$0	Yes
Twine	twinery.org 17	Dialog/Flowcharts/ Outlines	Web/PC/ Mac/Linux	\$0	Yes
Notability	gingerlabs.com 10	Outlines	Mac/iOS	\$10 (one-time)	No
Liquid Story Binder	blackobelisksoftware.com 15	Outlines/Writing	PC	\$45.95 (one-time)	30-Day Trial
CSIDE	choicescriptside.github.io 20	Outlines/Writing	Web/PC/ Mac	\$0	Yes
Nuclino	nuclino.com 21	Worldbuilding	Web/PC/ Mac/Linux	\$5-\$10/ month	Yes
World Anvil	worldanvil.com 24	Worldbuilding	Web-Based	\$0	Yes

- <http://bit.ly/GDEX-2018-IF-Workflow-Tools>

Pitching with Choice of Games

- My workflow for *The Last Monster Master* used Chat Mapper (PC-only), tool specifically for writing branching dialog for games
- Did a series of 6 passes through each chapter, using the chapter outlines from the pitch as a starting point
- Chat Mapper lets you add a color to each dialog node, which helps when going through each pass so you can make sure you didn't miss any nodes
<http://bit.ly/GDEX-2018-IF-Workflow-Tools>

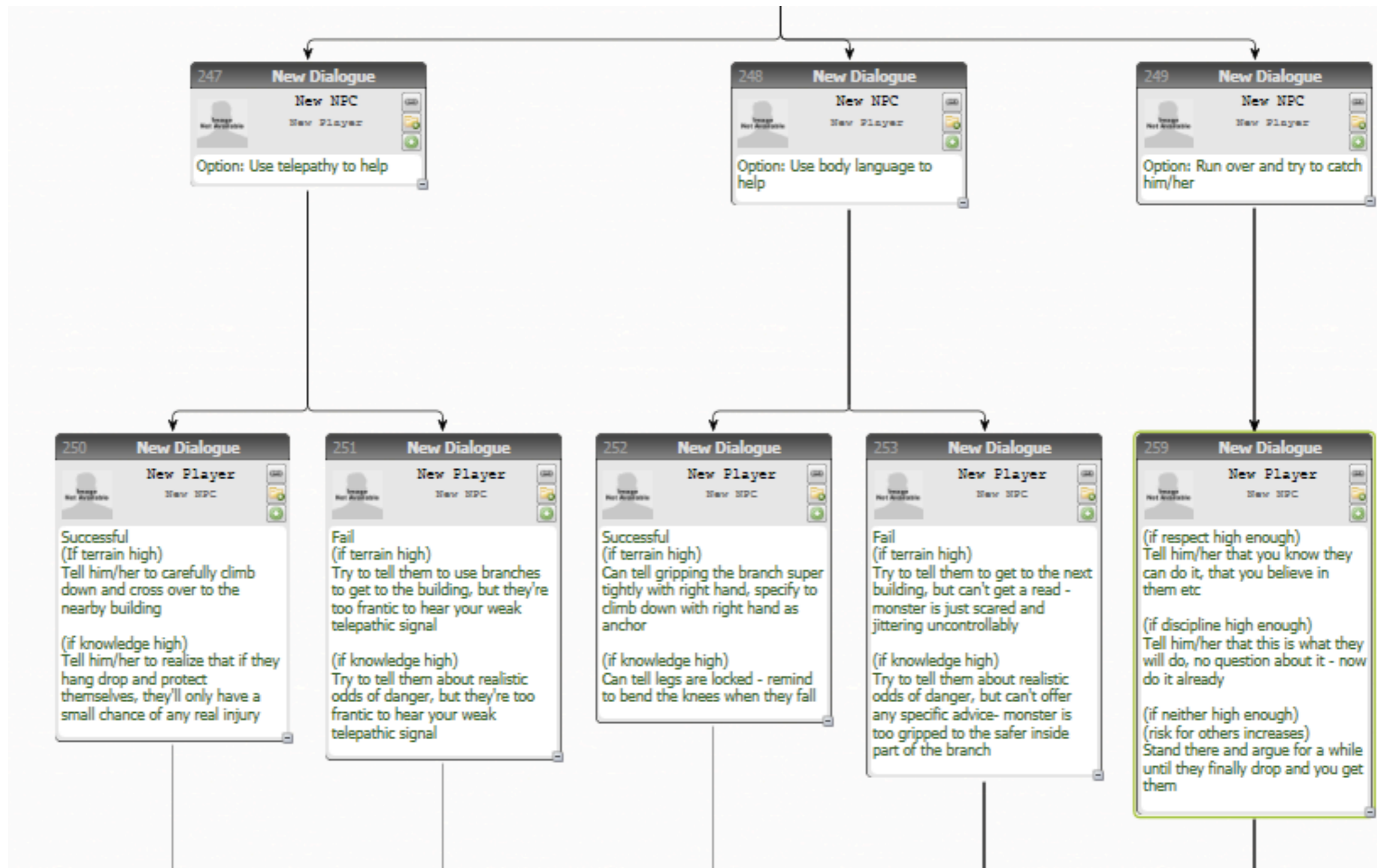
Pitching with Choice of Games

- Pass 1: Stub Text
 - The first pass is all about laying down the structure for how the chapter will play out
 - Instead of writing any actual dialog or descriptions, use stub dialog as placeholders to indicate who will say what and when they'll say it, and what the player's options will be
 - If there are different branches depending on stat values or other conditions, indicate the stat in question and describe the options in plain English. Don't worry about writing any game logic yet; that'll come later.

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Pass 1: Stub Text
 - Avoid excessive revisions (or any, if you can help it) – its main purpose is to get the high-level structure of the chapter down into a readable format. When you're done here, you'll have a first draft of a roadmap for everything that comes next.
 - In the following sequence from *The Last Monster Master*, one of the player's monsters is stuck in a tree during an attack. The player must choose to use their Telepathy or Body Language detection skills to help the monster withstand the attack, or to run over and help directly.

Pitching with Choice of Games



Pitching with Choice of Games

- Pass 2: Stub Text Revision (Yellow)
 - Focus only on revising the structure you just created
 - Looking only at the placement of things - don't worry about misspellings or anything related to the text, since everything you've written will be replaced in revisions
 - You're primarily looking for choices or option branches that don't make sense or are inconsistent with the story, edge cases that can lead to problems later, and dead ends that don't link back to the main narrative flow

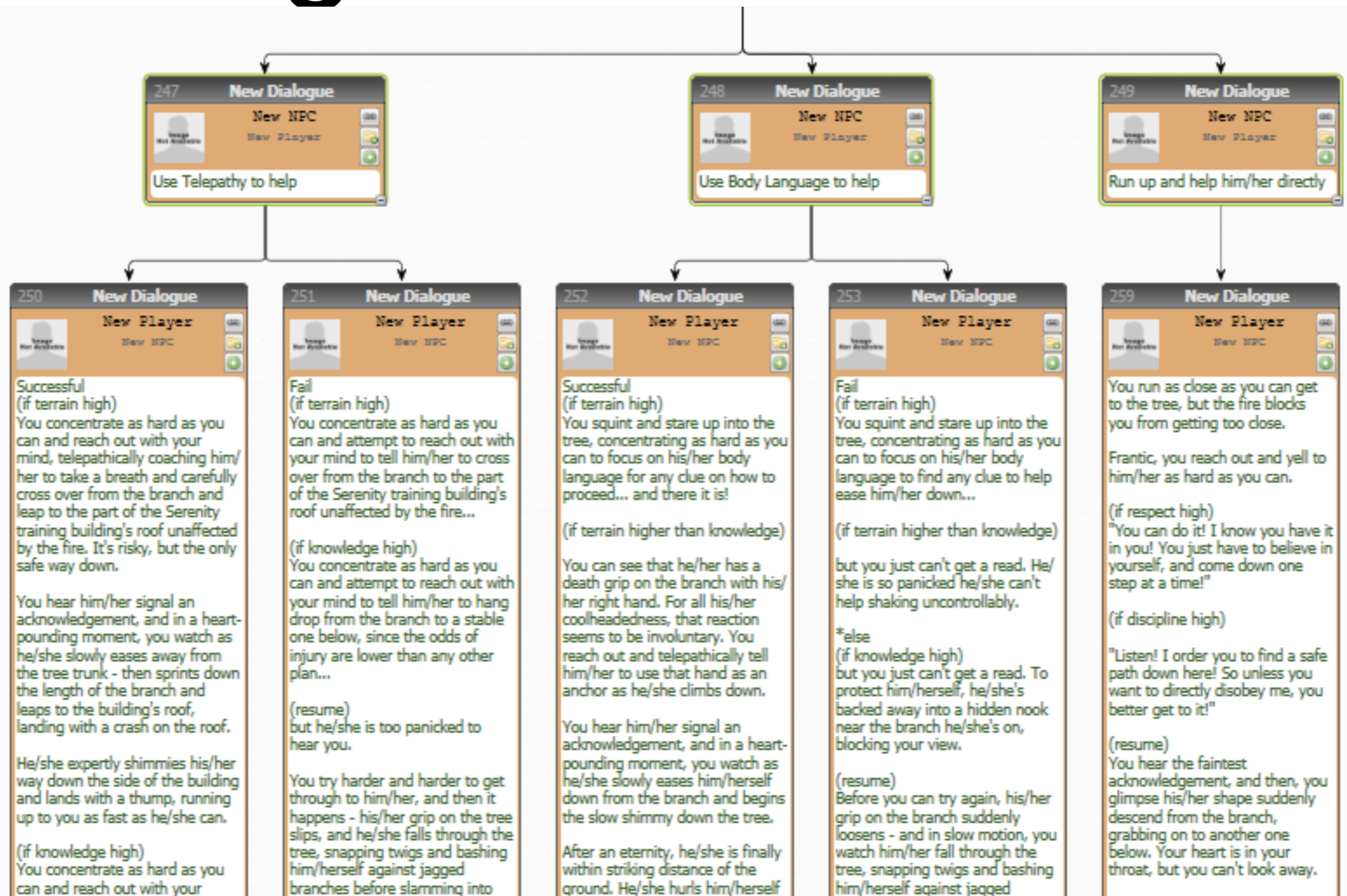
Pitching with Choice of Games

- Pass 2: Stub Text Revision (Yellow)
 - Secondarily, you're making sure that the structure so far makes use of all of the player stats or ability options you've planned to use in this chapter
 - If it turns out that you haven't implemented as many as you would've liked, make a conscious decision to either amend your original plan, create new sequences or options that use these stats or make a note to utilize the forgotten stats in future chapters

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Pass 3: First-Pass Text (Orange)
 - With the structure organized and refined, now it's time to write the actual text the player will see
 - This is a fairly straightforward pass, but just as before, maintaining your focus is key
 - Don't worry about setting values for variables, structuring transitions, or anything else that isn't pure writing
 - And just like most pure writing, this is both the most fun and the most time-intensive (worst) part

Pitching with Choice of Games



Pitching with Choice of Games

- Pass 4: Text Revision (Purple)
 - Time to start editing
 - Read through the first-pass text you just wrote with a merciless eye
 - Everything related to the text itself is fair game - spelling, grammar, incorrect references to characters or places, tighter word choices, etc.

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Pass 5: Variables (Blue)
 - The structure is nailed down and the text is looking tight
 - Find all places where variables are invoked, specifically anywhere where player stats are modified or referenced in order to determine outcomes
 - You'll refine the values later in revisions, gameplay balancing and playtesting
 - For now, set a baseline for where you think values need to be

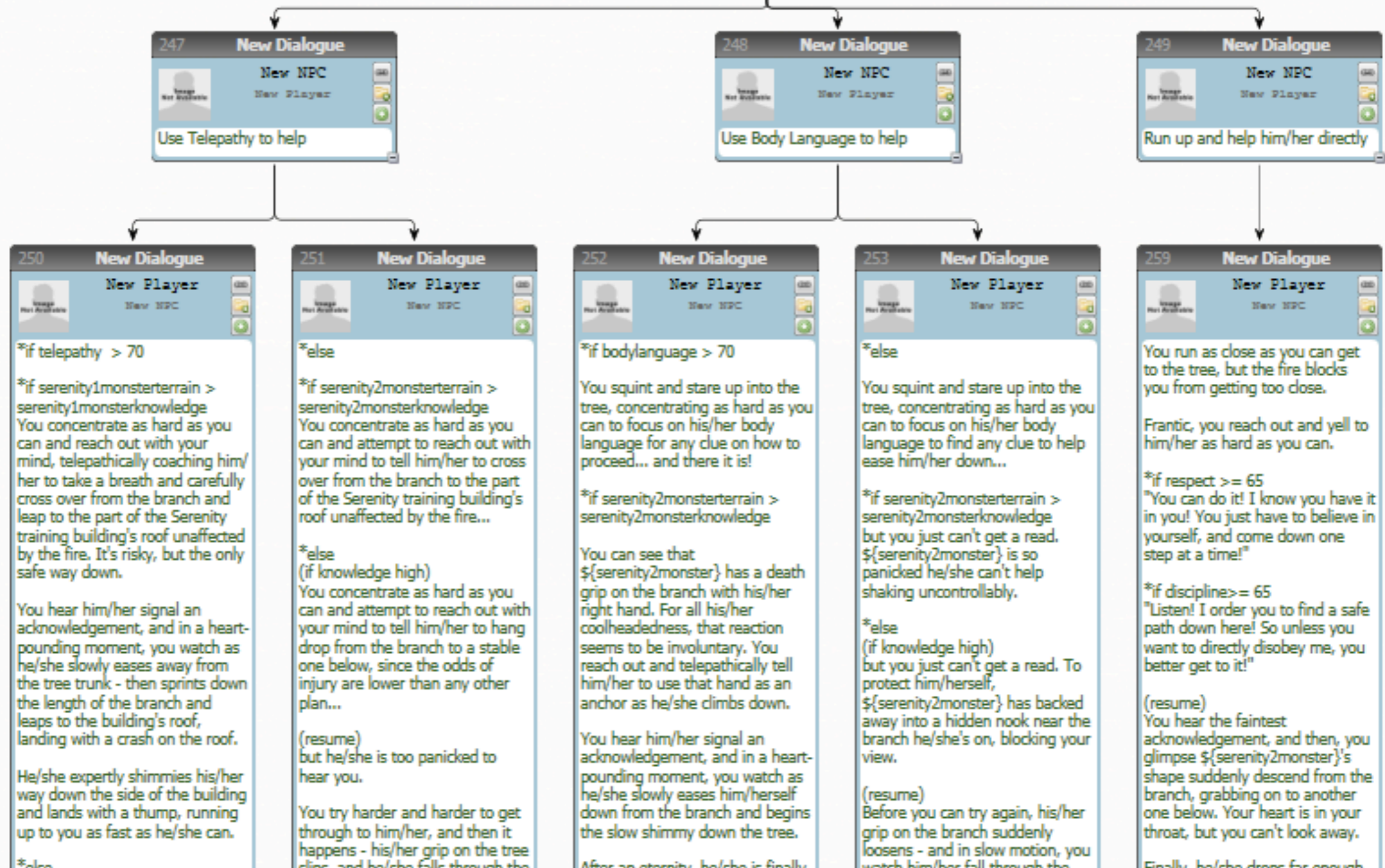
Pitching with Choice of Games

- Pass 5: Variables (Blue)
 - Keep an external reference document for how much of a given stat is required per chapter or before significant events to help with consistency
 - For example, if the player's Strength stat must be at least 45 for them to kick a wooden door down in Chapter 4, it's logical to require somewhere around 65 Strength to knock down a metal door in Chapter 6 (i.e., the requirement should go up)

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- Pass 5: Variables (Blue)
 - Doing this in a dedicated pass helps enforce good internal consistency for stat checks, which will help with across-the-board adjustments to values later

Pitching with Choice of Games



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- Pass 6: Export and Logic (Green)
 - Finally, you need to bring your (almost) finished chapter into the development tool you're using to make the game itself
 - Fortunately, Chat Mapper exports to XML, JSON, Excel, and Rich Text formats, giving you plenty of options to work with
 - For *The Last Monster Master*, however, I simply went through each text node and copied it into my ChoiceScript file, adjusting for formatting and segment transitions as needed

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Pass 6: Export and Logic (Green)
 - If you're also writing the actual game logic that happens behind the scenes, you'll need to start scripting this as you bring the text into the game
 - Fortunately, since you've already resolved the questions of what needs to happen when and where, each scripting task is handily decoupled from the content for pure problem solving

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Writing Workflow Notes
 - Depending how technical you can get, you can also use Lua to script the dialog progressions in Chat Mapper itself, which is a neat way to play through the game while still in Chat Mapper
 - However since you'll need to bring everything into ChoiceScript anyway, might as well just do it then and avoid having to do the work twice
 - ChoiceScript also has test tools which run through all possible outcomes and option combos, which is great for finding edge cases that leave you without any options so you can go fix them

Pitching with Choice of Games

- Part 6: Resources
 - All links in this talk, plus the slides
 - benserviss.com/talks/

The End

Thanks GDEX!

Slides at benserviss.com/talks

Choice of Games: choiceofgames.com

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