

Characterization, Purpose, and Action:

Creating Strong
Characters in Video Games



Jeremy Bernstein

@fajitas

Freelance Writer/Designer

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE™ CHINA

SHANGHAI INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION CENTER

SHANGHAI, CHINA · OCTOBER 19-21, 2014

Hi.

I am a silent
protagonist.

I have no
voice of my
own.

This helps you
empathize
with me.

As I have no
characteristics
of my own...

...you can
imbue me...

...with any
characteristic
you want.

I'm just like
you.

Isn't it great?

We're like
BFFs!









Silent



Cinematic



Open



Linear



Sandbox

Half-Life
Portal/Portal 2
The Room
Bioshock
Dead Space

Uncharted
Gears of War
God of War
Bioshock Infinite
Dead Space 2

Walking Dead

Zelda
Myst

GTA
Batman: Arkham

Fallout
Fable
Elder Scrolls
Dragon Age



Silent



Cinematic



Open



Linear



Sandbox

Half-Life
Portal/Portal 2
The Room
Bioshock
Dead Space

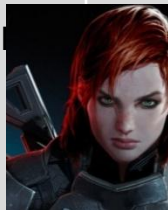


Uncharted
Tears of War
God of War
Bioshock Infinite
Dead Space 2

Walking Dead

Zelda
Myst

GTA
Batman: Arkham



Fallout
Borderlands
Dragon Age

Yes*

* WARNING: Theory may be neither grand nor unifying

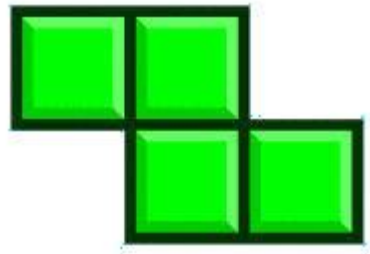
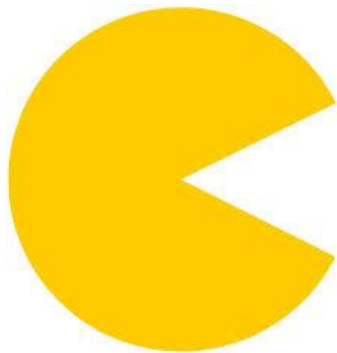
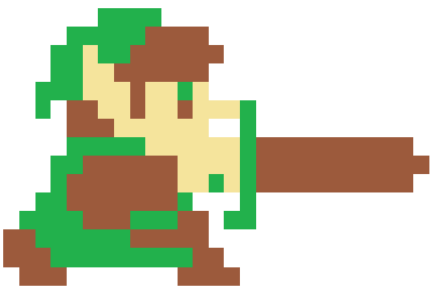






I  THESE
GAMES

Why character?





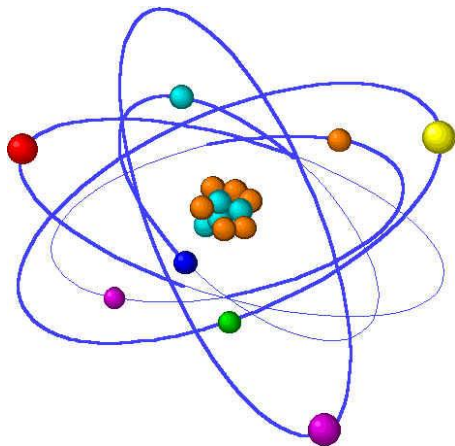


MICROSOFT USER RESEARCH STUDY

	findings summary
<u>finding 1</u>	Players had difficulty tracing game plots from beginning to end (in contrast to other media), often forming only episodic memories for game narrative.
<u>finding 2</u>	Game characters were consistently remembered, though not necessarily for their role in the plot. Instead, characterization appeared memorable.
<u>finding 3</u>	Player recall for gameplay dominated narrative, even for players who self-reported playing games mostly for the story, but narrative provided context for gameplay, even for players who self-reported ignoring story.
<u>finding 4</u>	Participants were perfectly capable of rich thinking about narrative.



Why character?

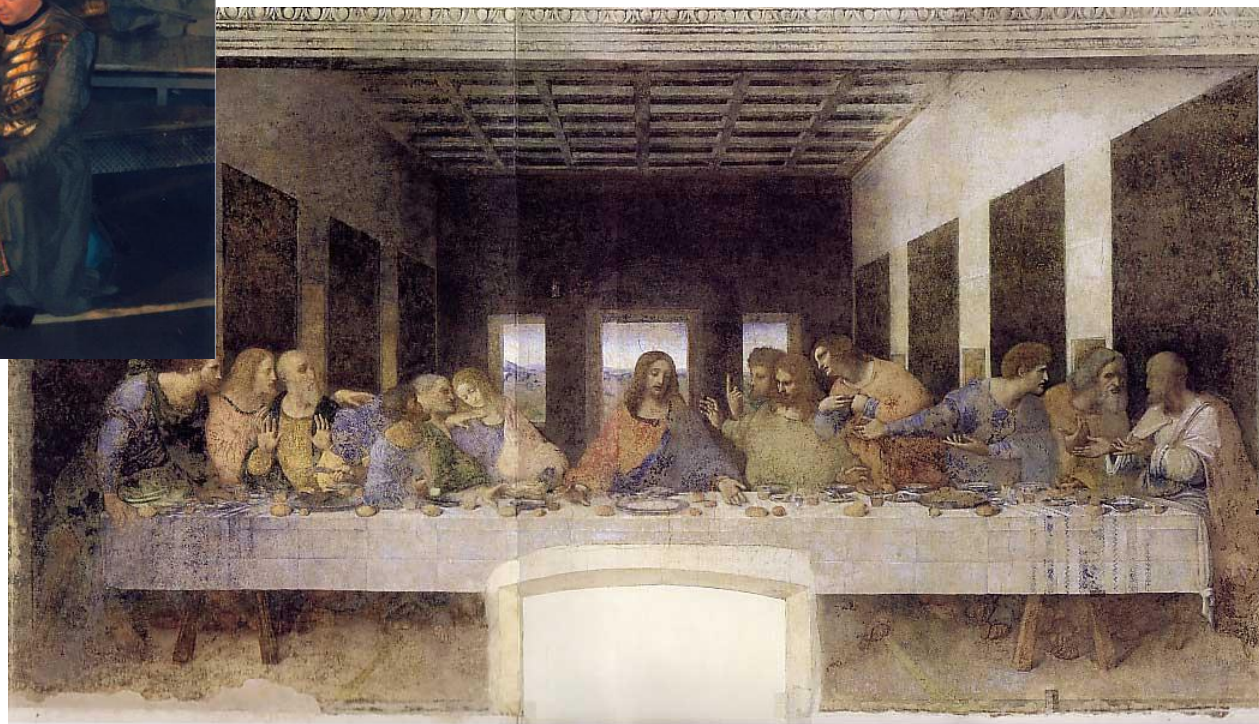


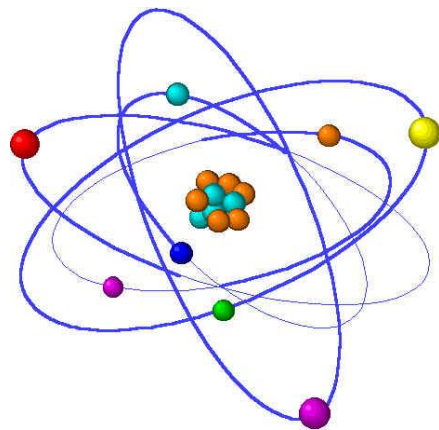
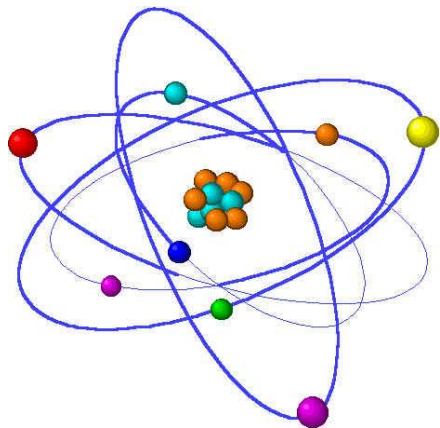
Storytelling Definition

The People In the
Story

Story in games?

Must we?





Story: A Definition

Someone who wants something badly
and is having a hard time getting it.

GABIERCAE

SC  NE

OBSTACLE

OBSTACLE

OBSTACLE

O  VE

Story Arc Definition



Someone who wants something badly
and is having a hard time getting it.

Character: A Definition



Someone who wants something badly

Character: A Definition



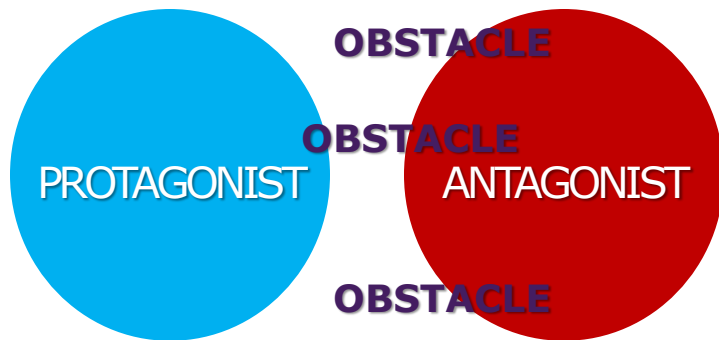
Someone who **WANTS** something badly

Character: A Definition



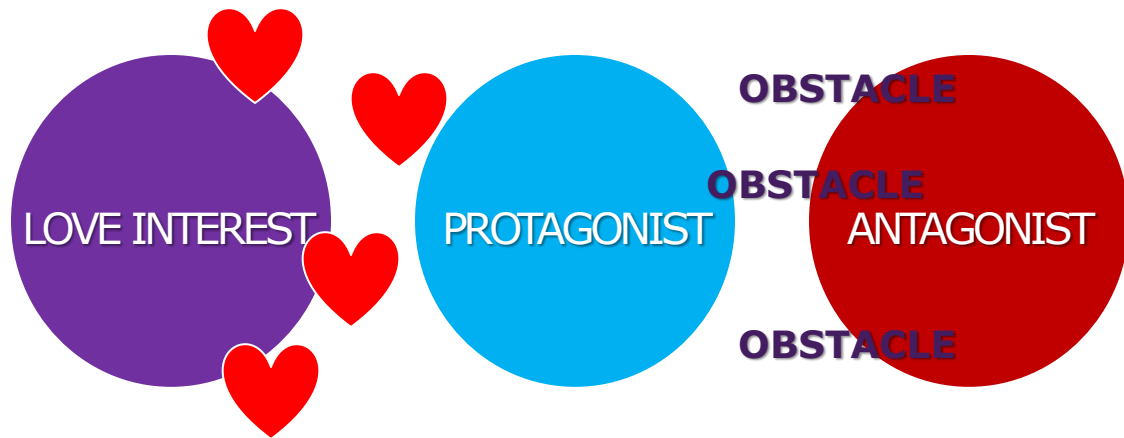
Someone who **WANTS** something badly

Character: A Definition



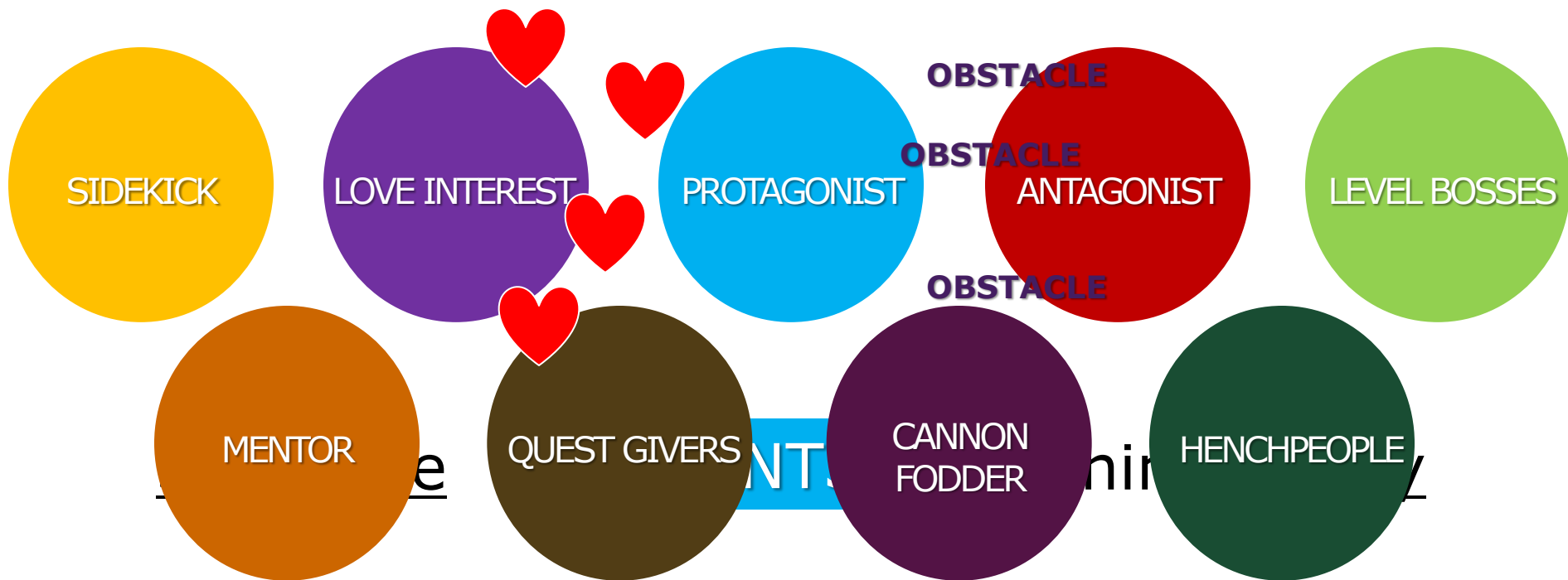
Someone who **WANTS** something badly

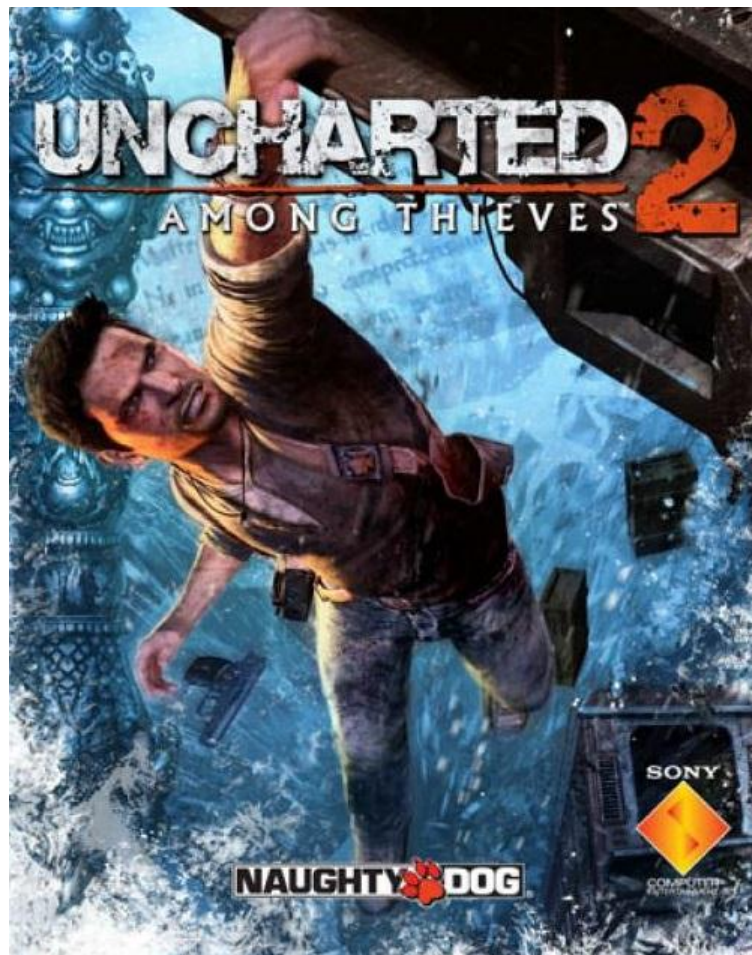
Character: A Definition



Someone who **WANTS** something badly

Character: A Definition







OBSTACLE OBSTACLE
REVENGE
OBSTACLE



OBSTACLE
ELENA
OBSTACLE
OBSTACLE



OBSTACLE
CHLOE
OBSTACLE
OBSTACLE



OBSTACLE OBSTACLE
TREASURE
OBSTACLE



Elements of ACD Definition

What do they **WANT**?

What do they **DO** to get what they want?

PROTAGONIST

ACTION
OBSTACLE

ACTION
OBSTACLE

ACTION
OBSTACLE

WANT

Elements



ACTION

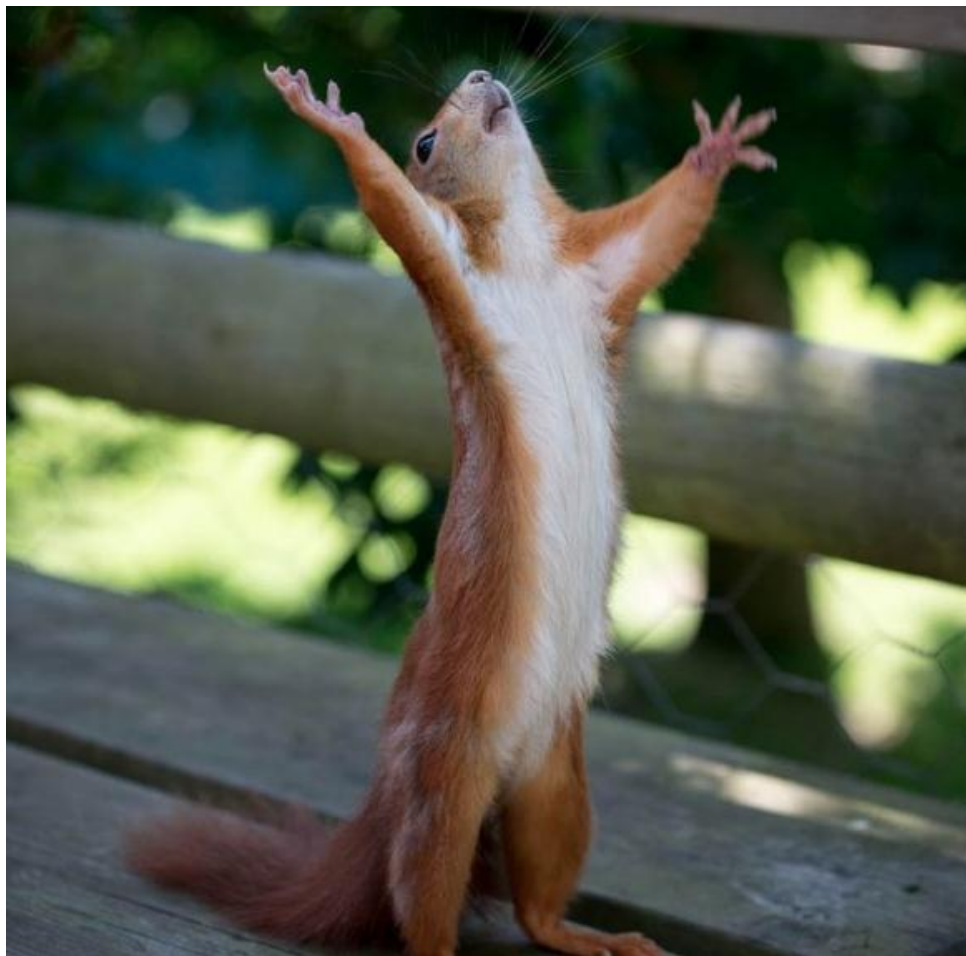
Elements of Character

Character = ACTION

ACTION = Gameplay

then...

CHARACTER = GAMEPLAY





What does he **DO** to get what he wants?

What other people **TELL** him to do.



What does he **DO** to get what he wants?

What other people **TELL** him to do.



Silent PCs



Elements of Character

What do they **WANT**?

What do they **DO** to get what they want?

Elements of Character

APPEARANCE

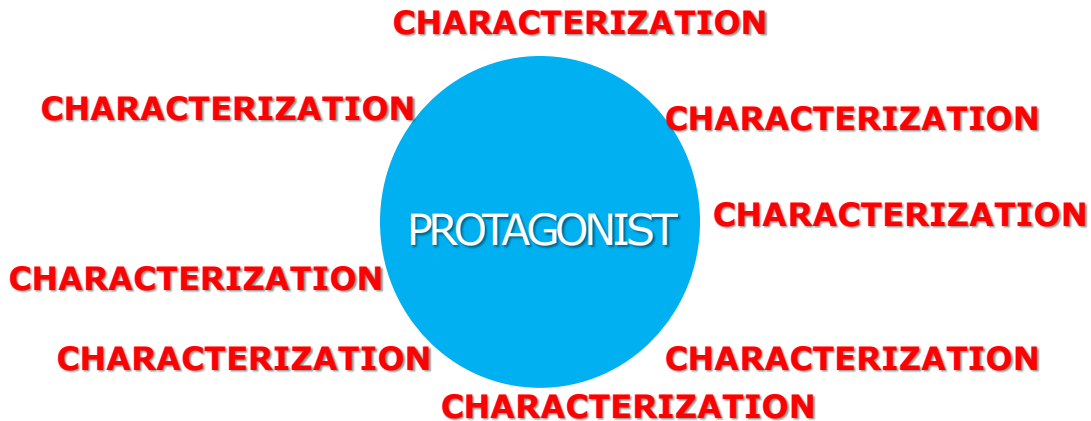
EDUCATION
CHARACTERIZATION
BACKSTORY

FAMILY

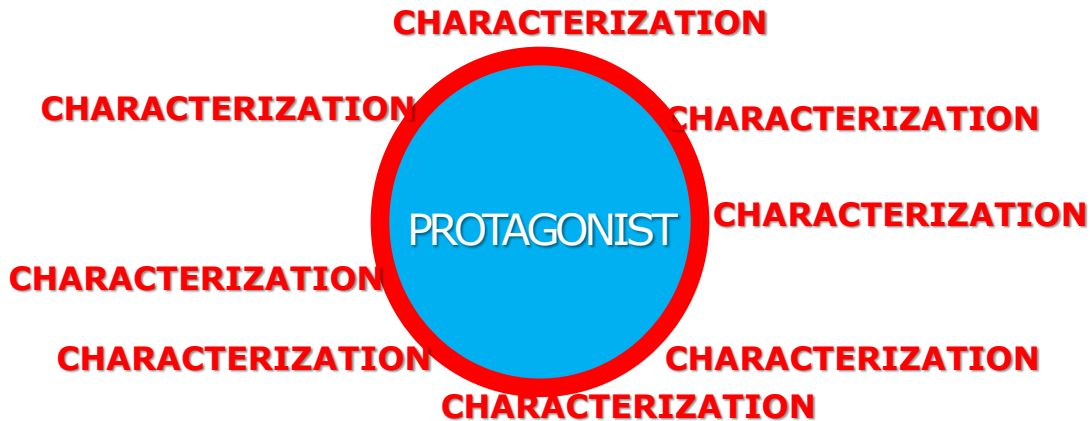
JOB

ATTRIBUTES

Elements of Character



Elements of Character



Elements of Character

ACTION



ACTION

Elements of Character

What do they **WANT**?

What do they **DO** to get what they want?

How do they **SEEM**?



Silent



Cinematic



Open



What they **DO**
(Designer Choice)

Half-Life
Portal/Portal 2
The Room
Bioshock
Dead Space

Uncharted
Gears of War
God of War
Bioshock Infinite
Dead Space 2

Walking Dead



What they **DO**
(Player Choice)

Zelda
Myst

GTA
Batman: Arkham

Fallout
Fable
Elder Scrolls
Dragon Age



How they **SEEM**
(No One's Choice)

How they **SEEM**
(Designer Choice)

How they **SEEM**
(Player Choice)

Portal/Portal 2
The Room
Bioshock
Dead Space

Gears of War
God of War
Bioshock Infinite
Dead Space 2

Zelda
Myst

GTA
Batman: Arkham

Fallout
Fable
Elder Scrolls
Dragon Age

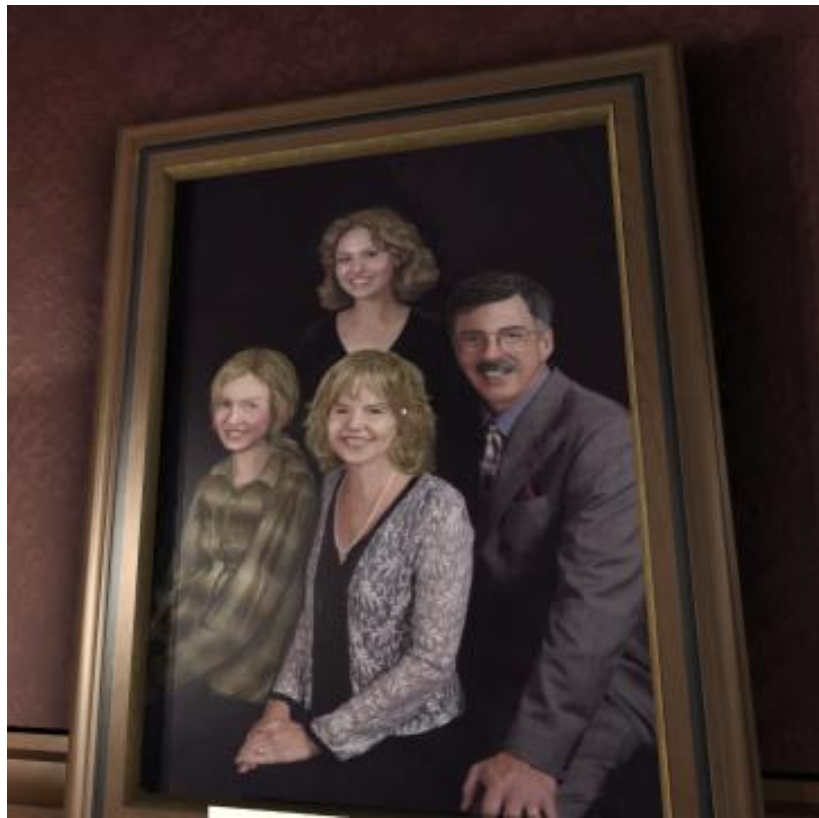


What they **DO**
(Designer Choice)



What they **DO**
(Player Choice)

Gone Home





How they **SEEM**
(No One's Choice)

How they **SEEM**
(Designer Choice)

How they **SEEM**
(Player Choice)

Portal/Portal 2

Gears of War

What they **WANT**
(Designer Choice)

What they **WANT**
(Designer Choice)

What they **WANT**
(Designer Choice)

Dead Space

Dead Space 2

(Mostly)

Zelda
Myst

GTA
Batman: Arkham

Fallout
Fable

What they **WANT**
(Designer Choice)

What they **WANT**
(Designer Choice)

What they **WANT**
(Designer Choice)

(Mostly)

(Mostly)

(Mostly)



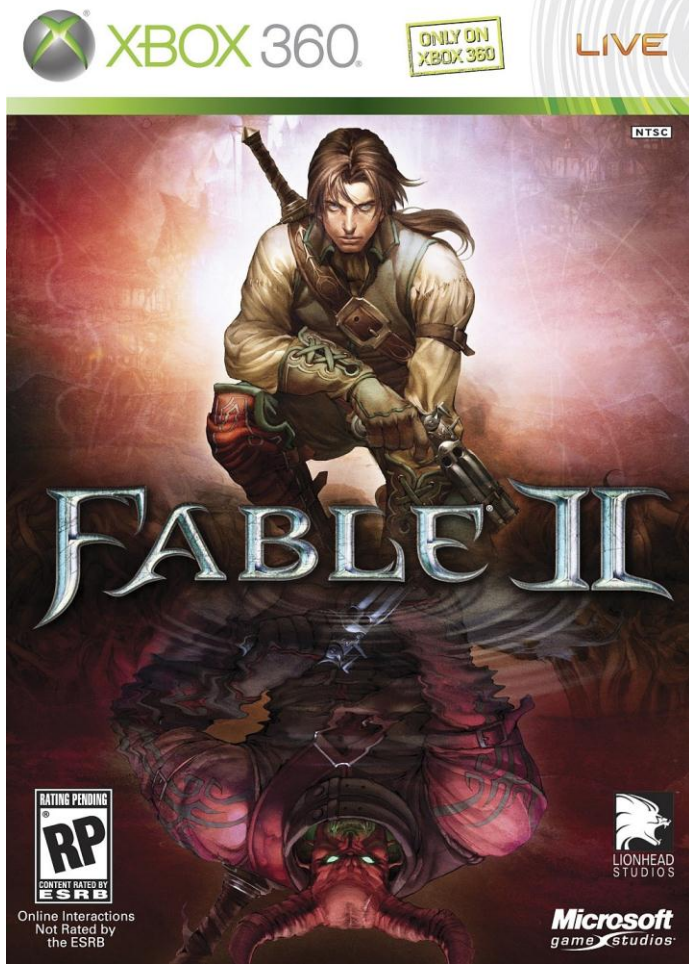
What they **DO**
(Designer Choice)



What they **DO**
(Player Choice)

WANT

- High Level Want
 - Stop Lord Lucien
- Low Level Want
 - Get Married?
 - Get Job?
 - Etc.





What they WANT
(Player Choice)



How they **SEEM**
(No One's Choice)

How they **SEEM**
(Designer Choice)

How they **SEEM**
(Player Choice)

Portal/Portal 2

Gears of War

What they **WANT**
(Designer Choice)

What they **WANT**
(Designer Choice)

What they **WANT**
(Designer Choice)

Dead Space

Dead Space 2

Zelda
Myst

GTA
Batman: Arkham

Fallout
Fable

What they **WANT**
(Designer Choice)

What they **WANT**
(Designer Choice)

What they **WANT**
(Designer Choice)

What they **DO**
(Designer Choice)

What they **DO**
(Player Choice)



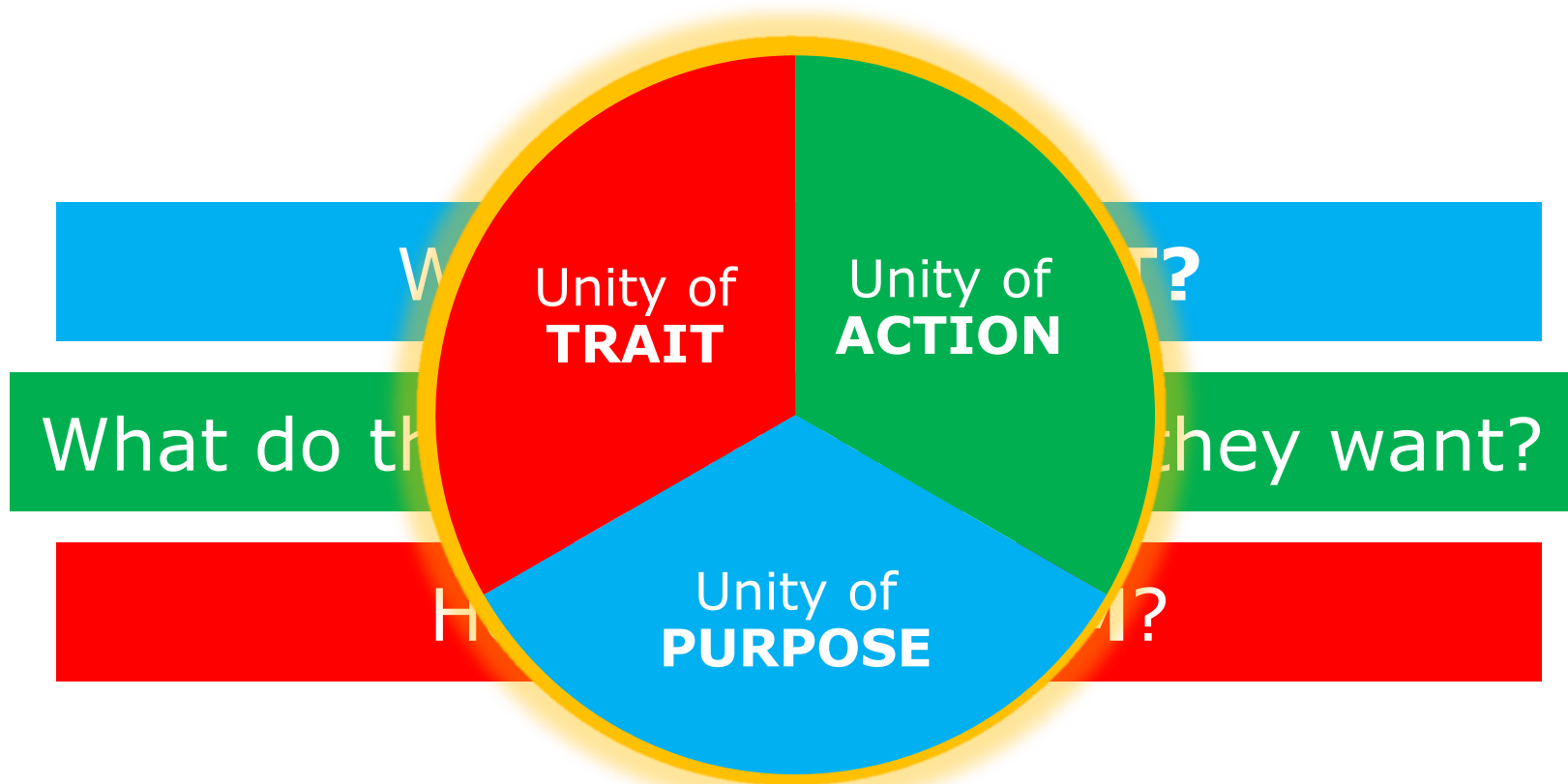


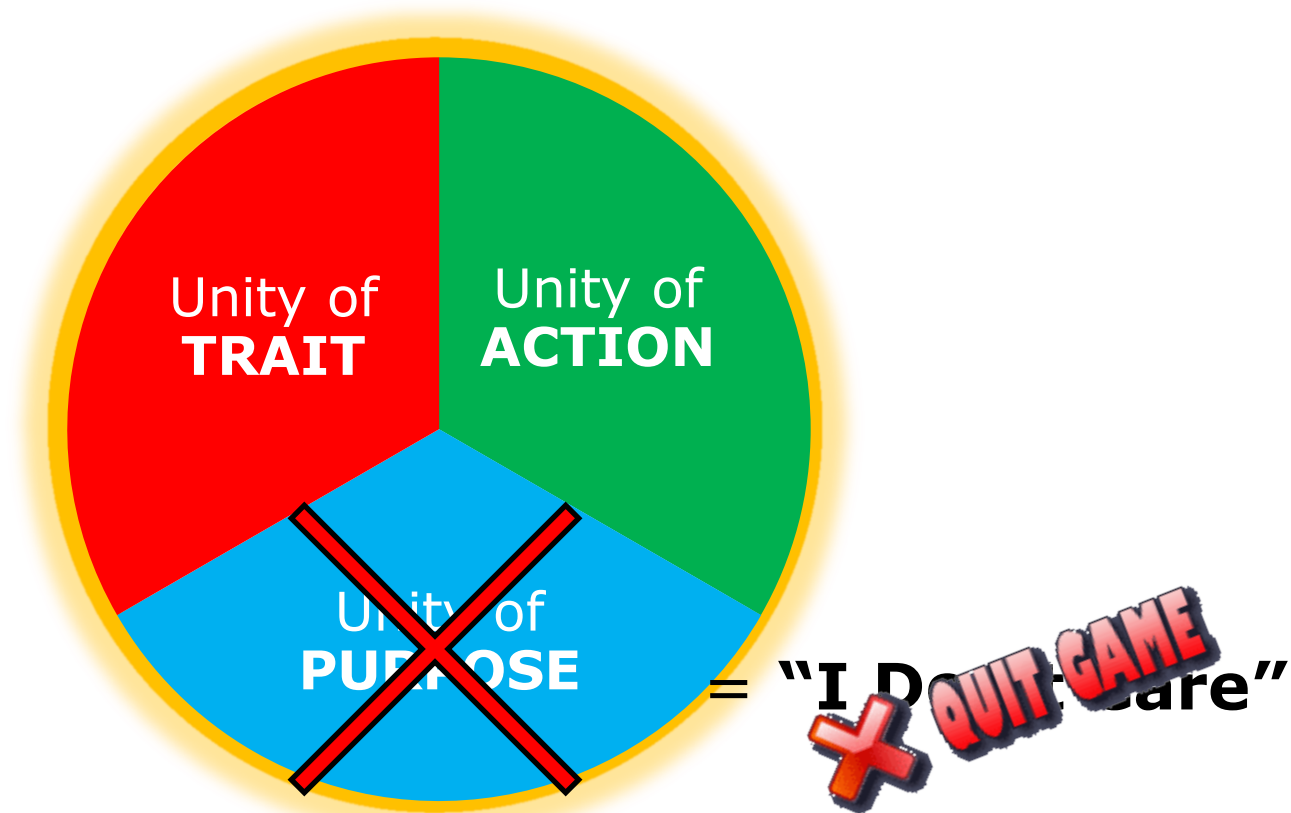


What do they **WANT**?

What do they **DO** to get what they want?

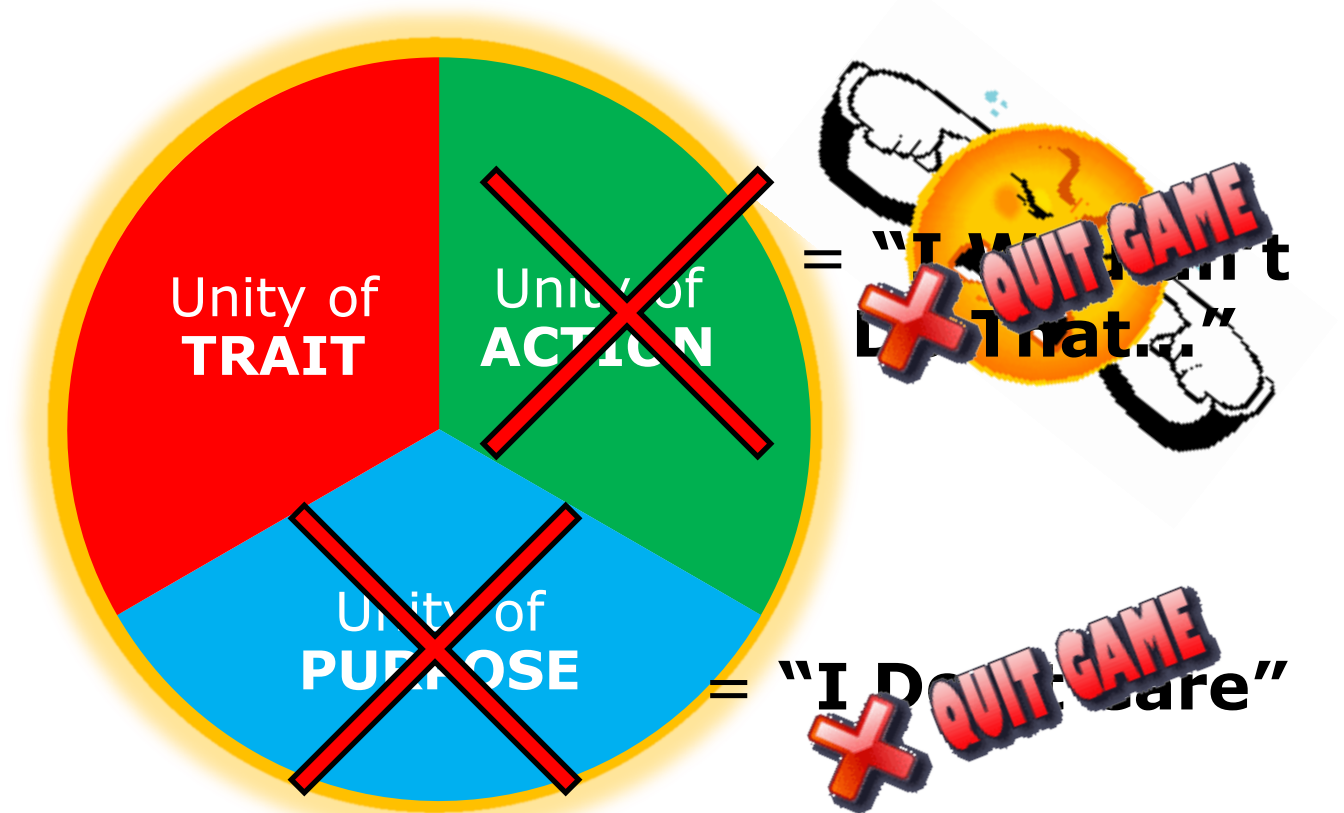
How do they **SEEM**?





Dragon Age





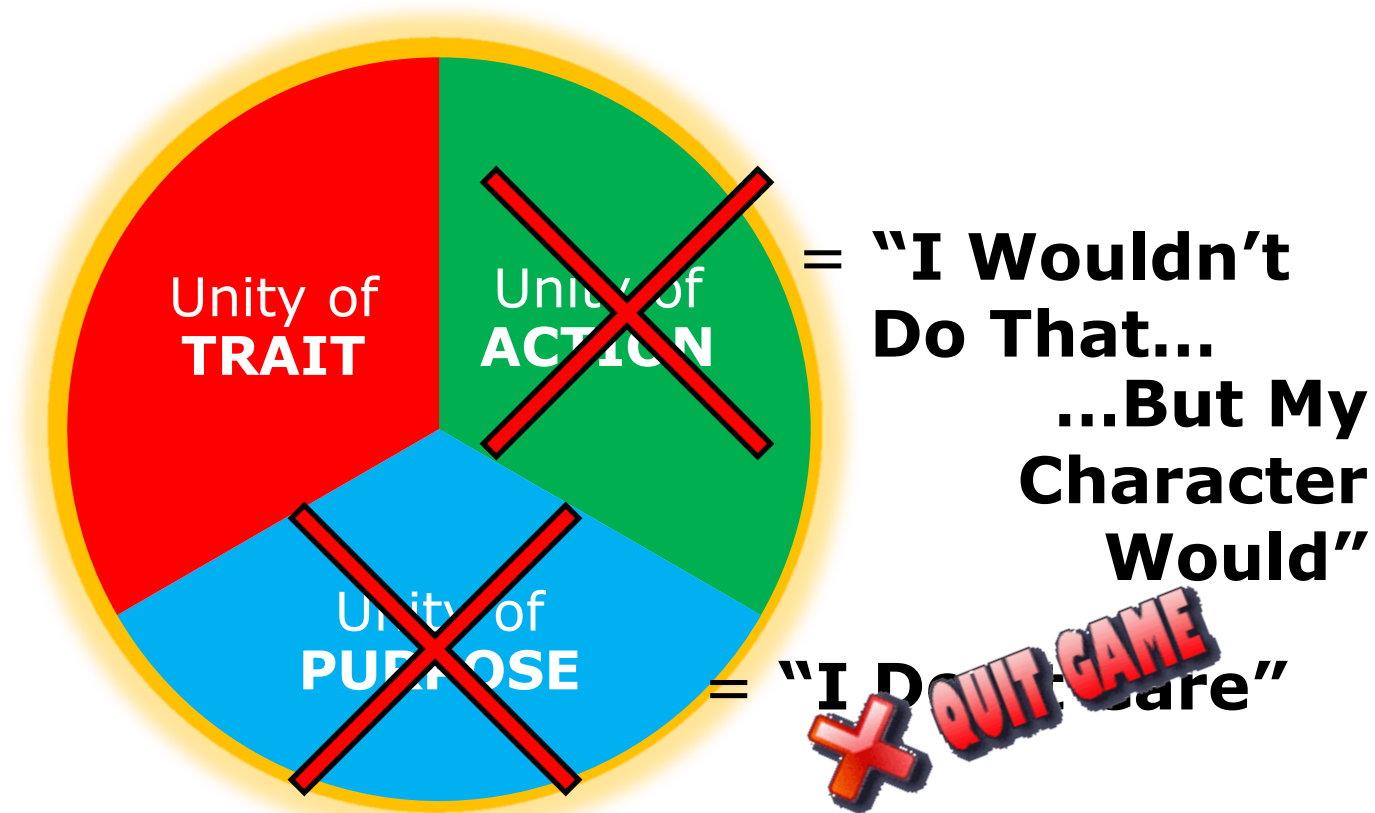


Portal vs. Portal 2

Unity of
ACTION



~~Unity of
ACTION~~





Unity of
ACTION

~~Punch
Dudes in
Face~~

~~Jump off
Buildings~~

~~Dress
Like Bat~~

~~Save Up
Past 10~~

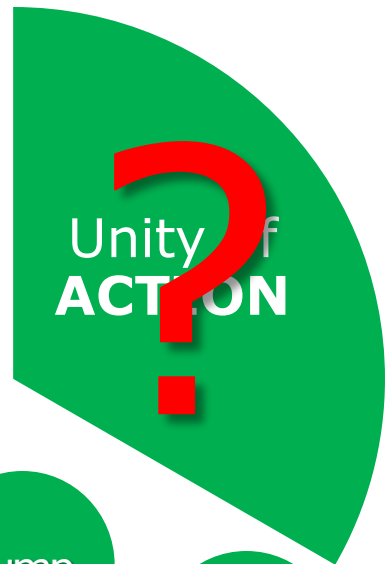


Punch
Dudes in
Face

Jump off
Buildings

Dress
Like Bat

Stay Up
Past 10





Murder
Spree

Unity of
ACTION

Murder
Spree

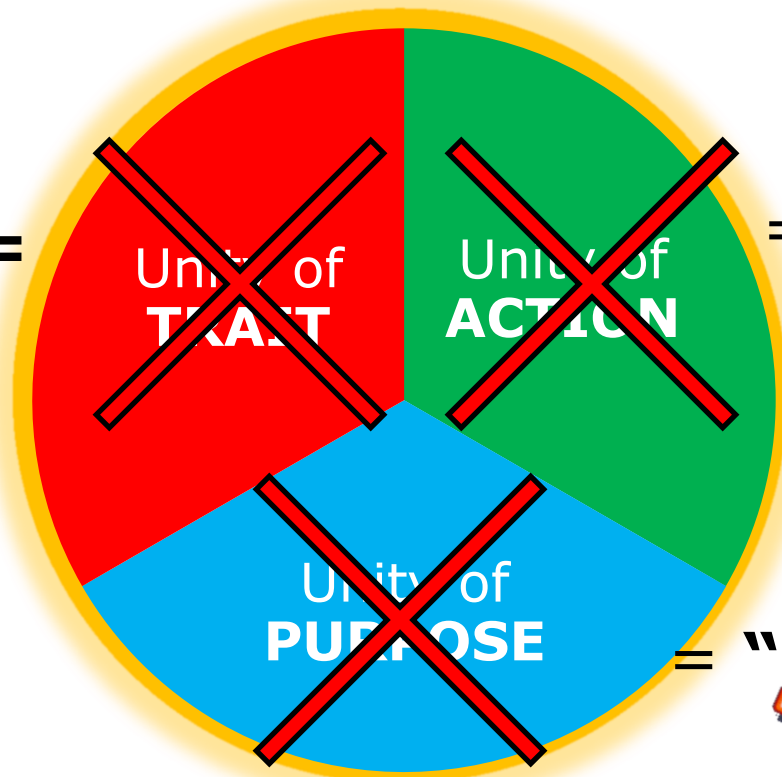
Murder
Spree

Murder
Spree

Murder
Spree

Murder
Spree

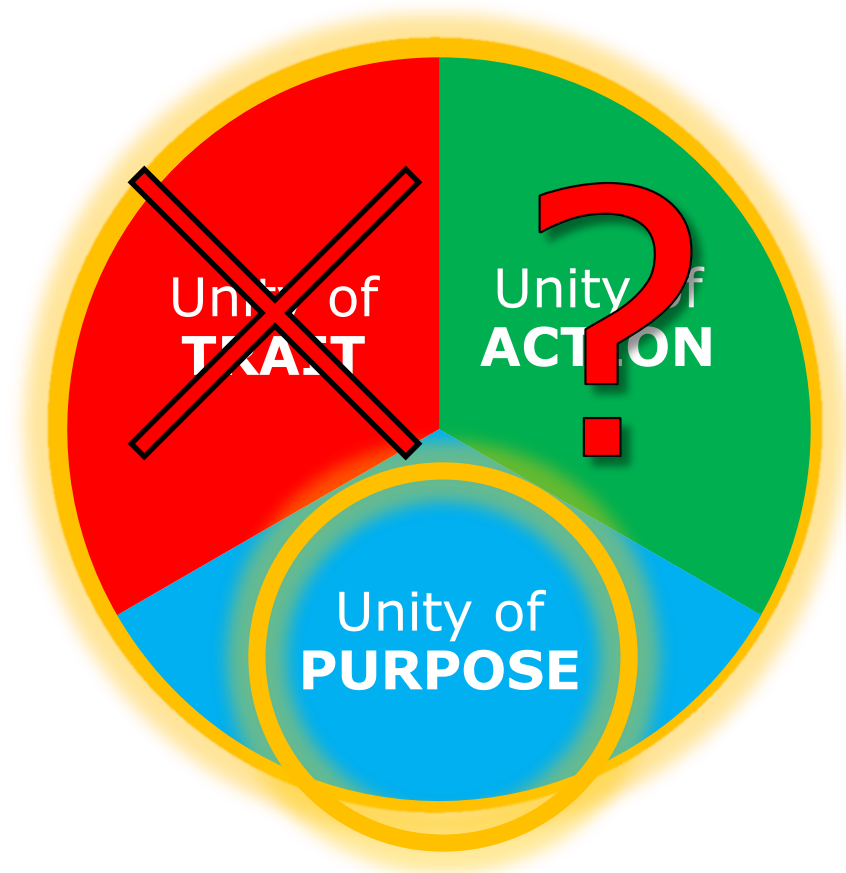
“No Big Deal” =



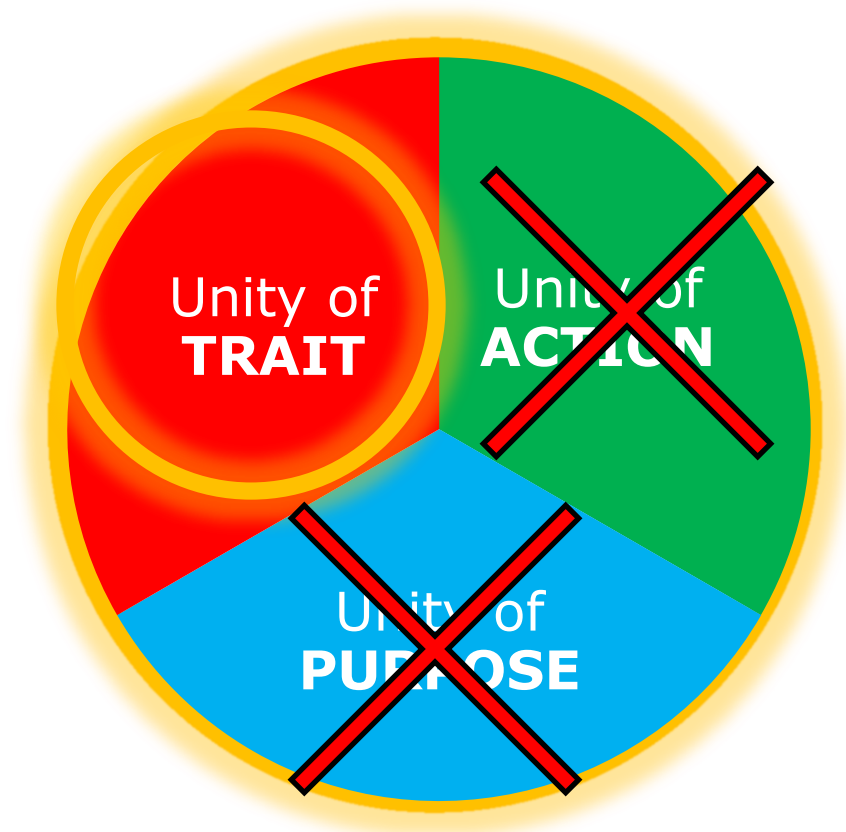
**= “I WOULD NOT
QUIT GAME?”**

= “I DO NOT CARE”



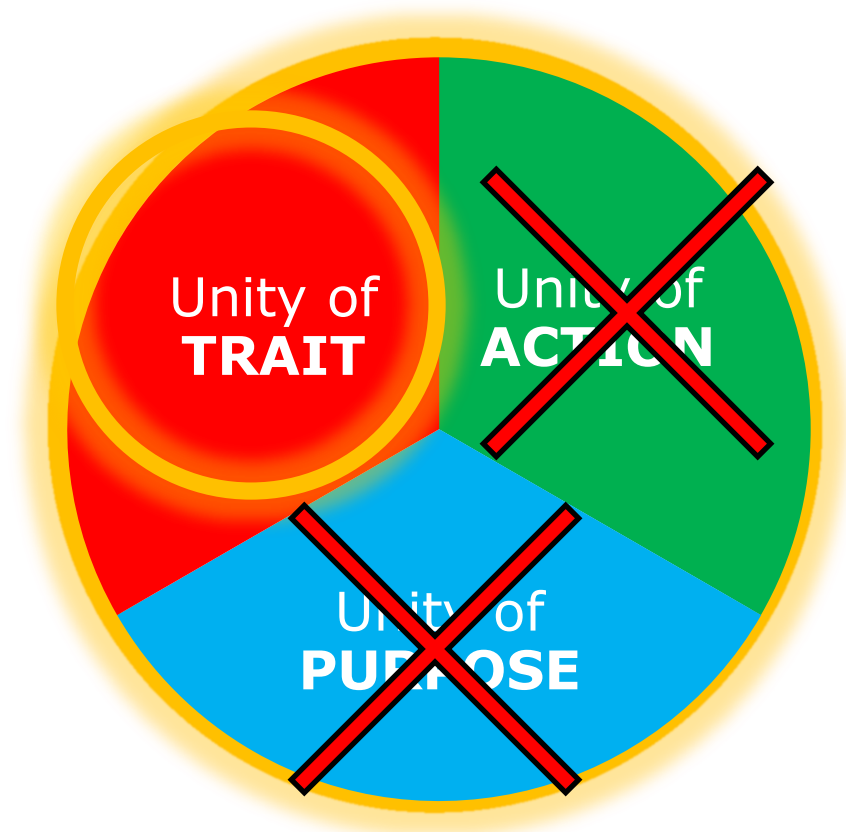




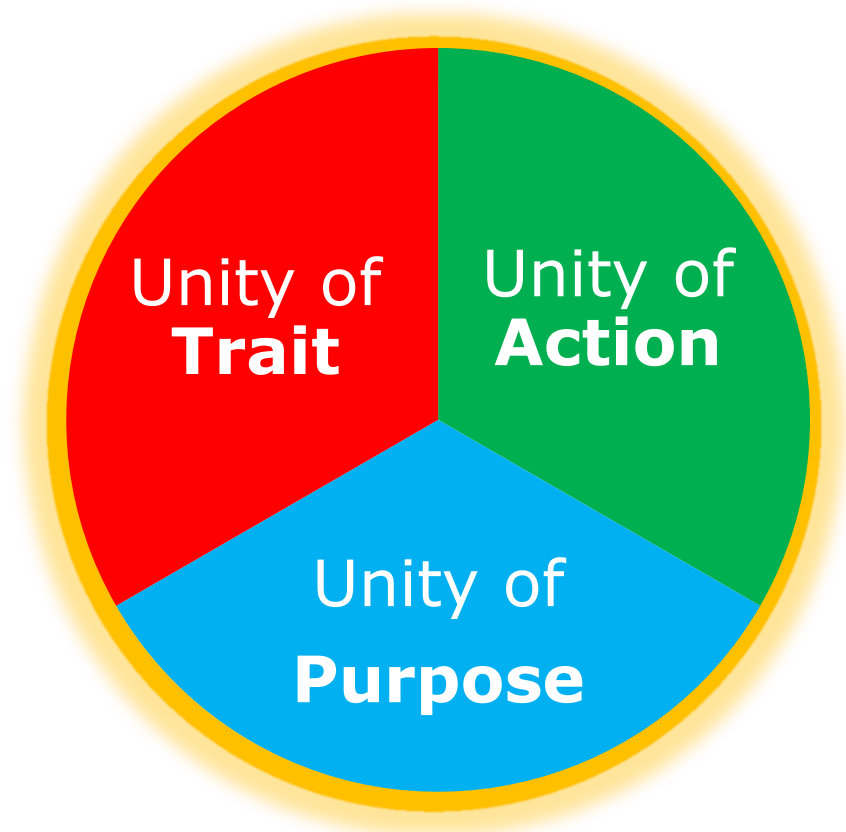




“We’re not so different, you and I...”







Establishing Unity of Trait



Open

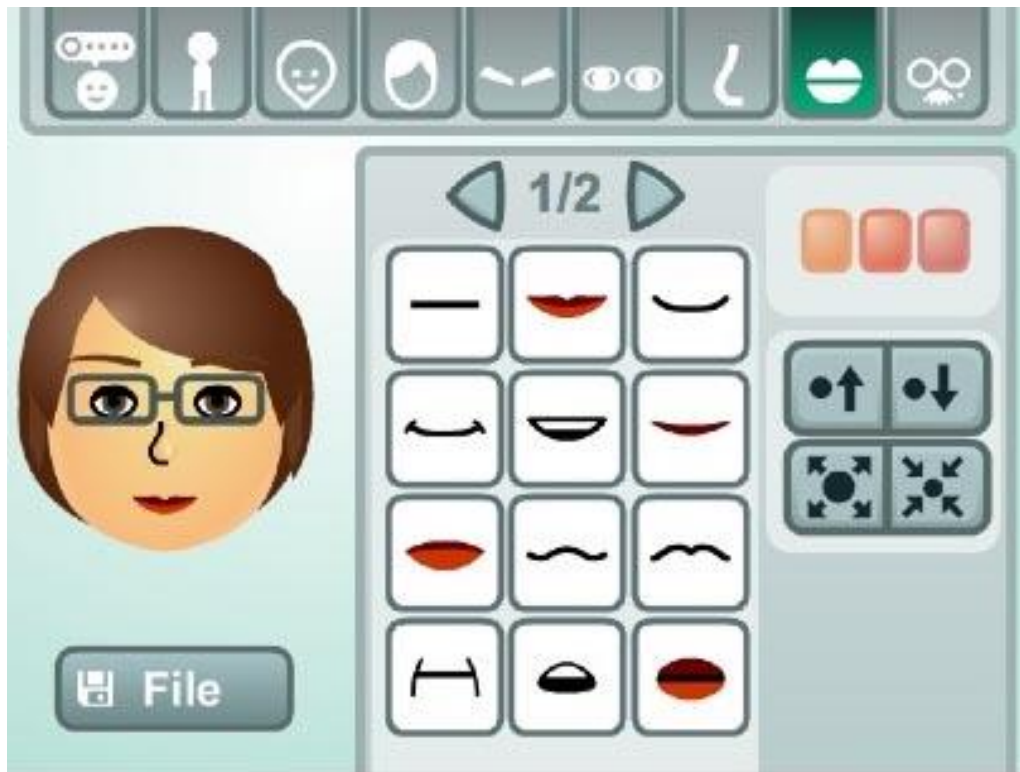


Establishing Unity of Trait



Open

Establishing Unity of Trait



Open

Establishing Unity of Action



Linear



Sandbox

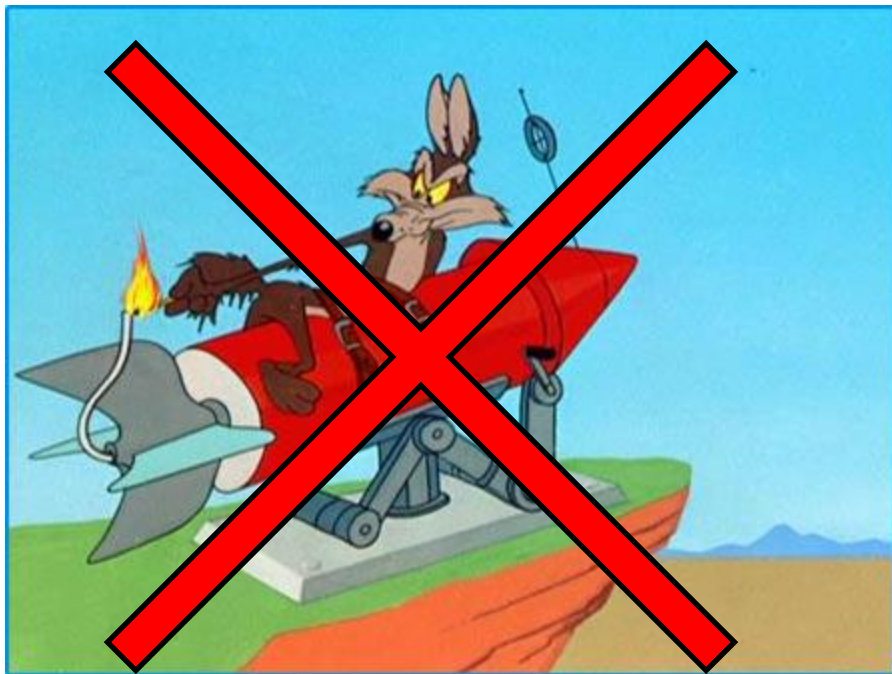
What Would I Do?

Establishing Unity of Action



Sandbox

Establishing Unity of Action



Unity of
Purpose



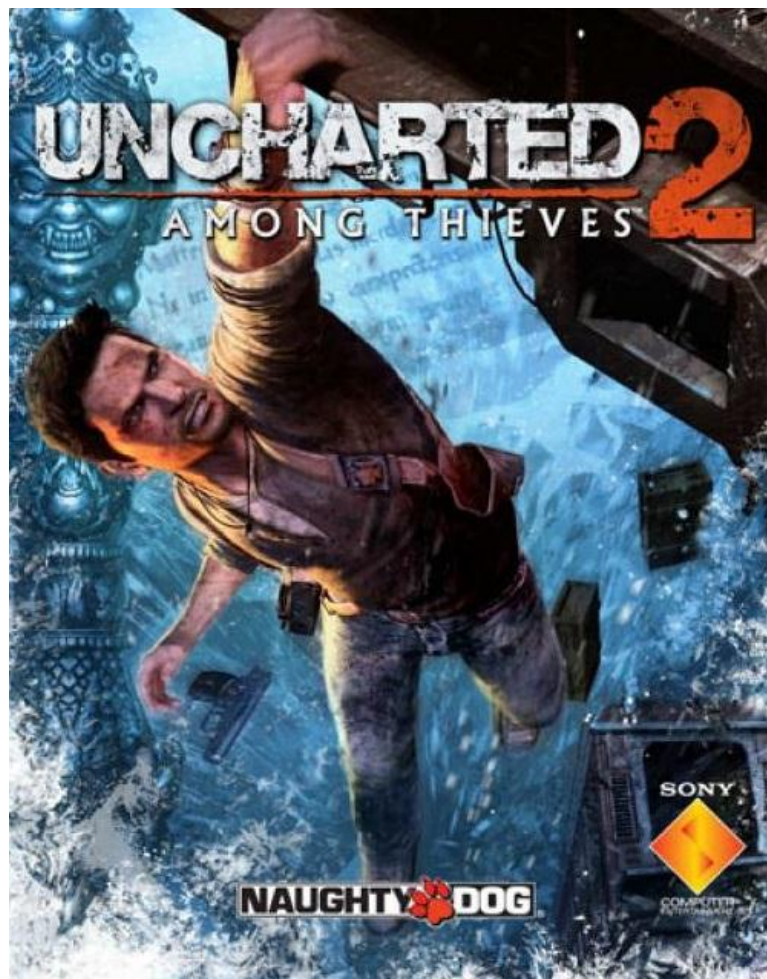
Unity of
ACTION

Unity of
PURPOSE



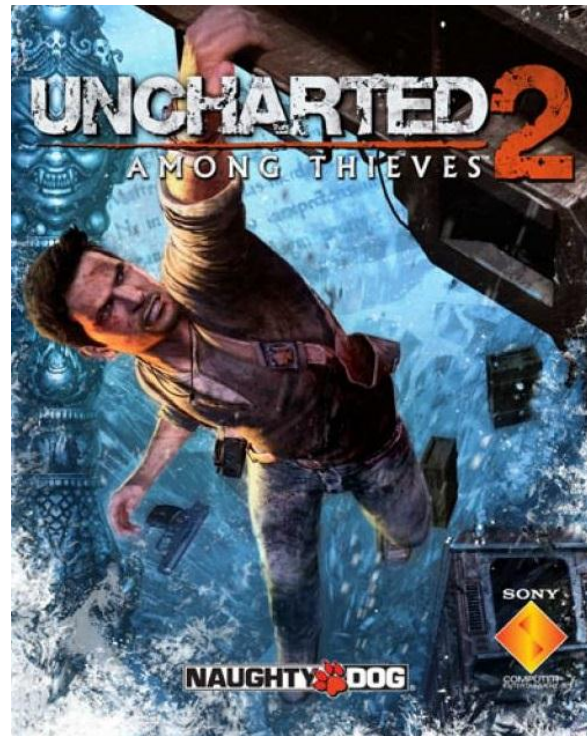
Establishing Unity of Purpose

Someone who **WANTS** something badly



Uncharted 2: Unity of Purpose

- “What’s going on?”



Uncharted 2: Unity of Purpose

- Sharing is Caring
 - Shared Thought
 - Shared Mystery/Secret
 - Shared Emotion
 - Shared Choices
 - Shared Experiences

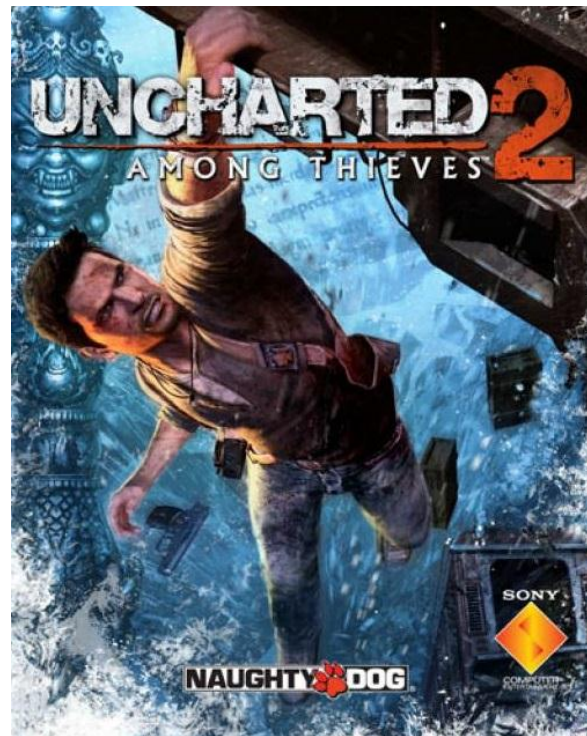


Heavy Rain



Uncharted 2: Unity of Purpose

- “What’s going on?”
- “That’s my blood...”



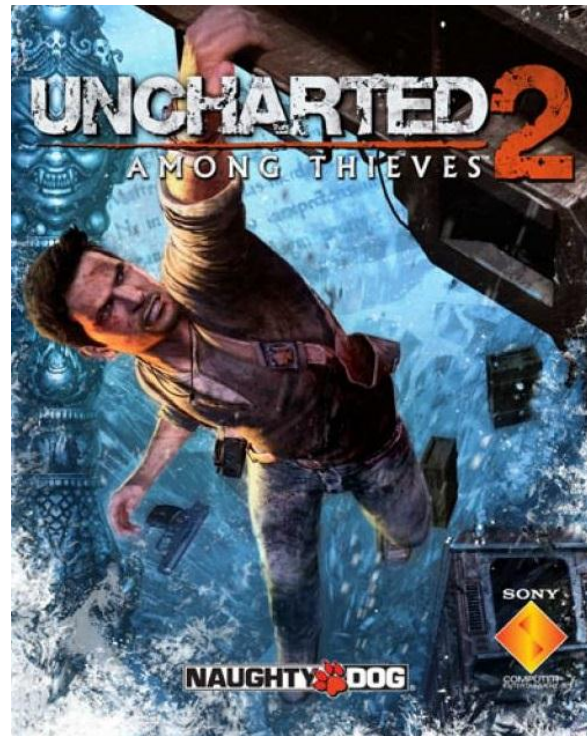
Uncharted 2: Unity of Purpose

- Likeable
 - Underdog
 - Funny
 - Noble
 - Sympathetic

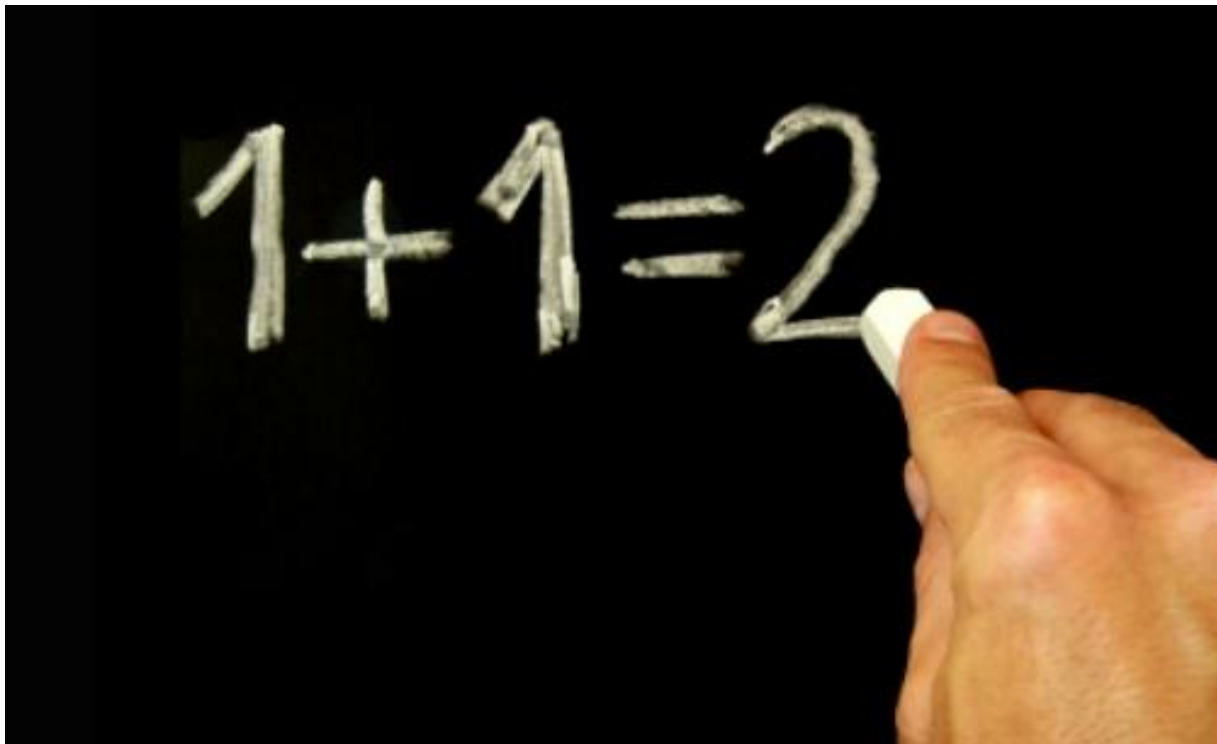


Uncharted 2: Unity of Purpose

- "What's going on?"
- "That's my blood..."
- Surprise! Uh-oh!
- Thud! Ow!
- "Ha, ha.... Ah, crap"
- Elemental Want



Establishing Unity of Purpose



Establishing Unity of Purpose

Someone who **WANTS** something badly





Questions?

jnbernstein@gmail.com

@fajitas on Twitter

www.jnbernstein.com

