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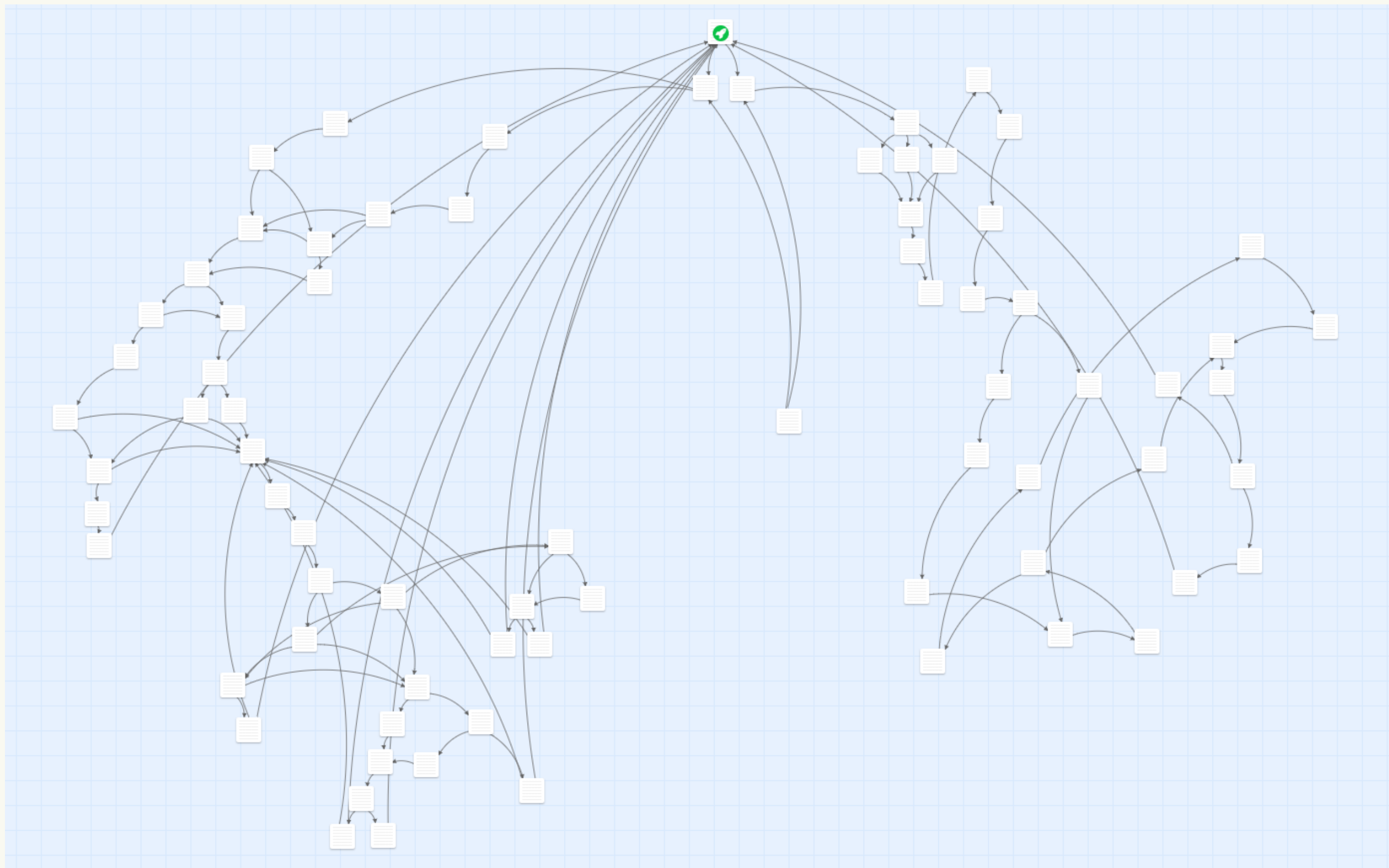
Branching on a Budget: Creating Agency Without Wrecking Scope

with Nessa Cannon
(Independent)

#GDC2024

Hi! I'm Nessa! Here's some stuff I've worked on:





Jagged Bone's Twine map

(yes it looks a little bonkers, yes it was my first game, don't worry about it)

Let's Define Some Stuff!

- **Agency**: action or intervention, especially to produce a particular effect
 - **In video games**: a sense the player has that their input matters in the game
- **Input**: y'know... putting stuff in
 - In video games: any time that a player shoots stuff, talks to people, all that
 - We're going to mostly talk about dialogue input
- **Branching**:
 - **In video games**: when there are different outcomes for different player inputs (to wildly varying degrees)



This Talk Contains:

- **THE PROBLEM**

(Narrative or gameplay first? Do we ever really get to choose?)

- **THE ANALYSIS**

(We're going to talk about *Pentiment* for a little bit!!)

- **THE SOLUTION**

(We've got pillars folks. They are inspired by *Pentiment*.)

- **THE TAKEAWAY**

(What can you do within your narrative constraints?)



The Problem: Freelancing is Hard

- Scope, mechanics, and room for narrative is already set in stone by the time writing work can start
- “Gameplay first or narrative first?” I don’t know, we’re all so tired
- We have constraints, just so many constraints



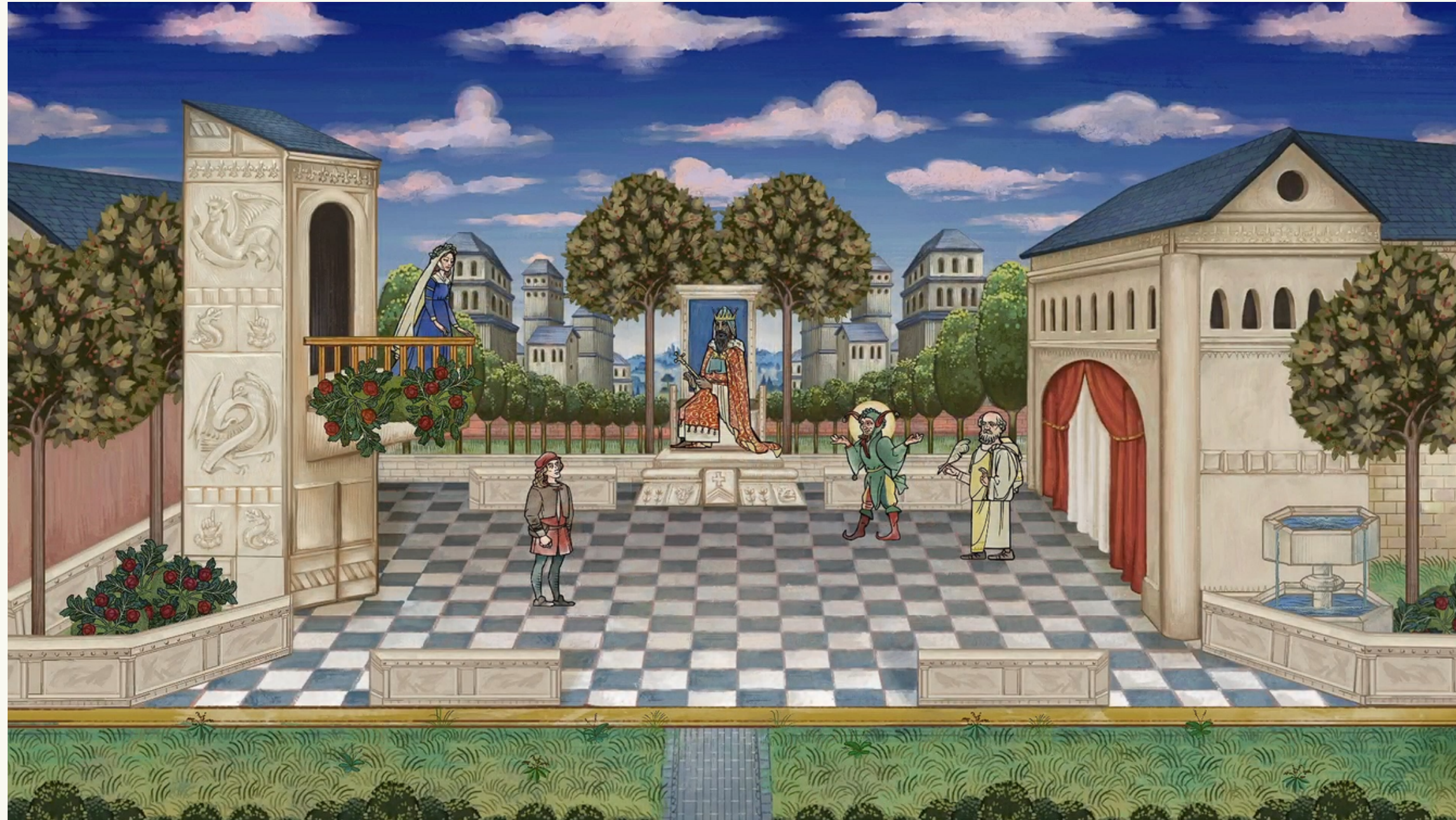
The Problem: How Much Player Input Fits?



What can tight, self-contained branching dialogue accomplish?

(spoiler alert: lots of very cool stuff that you should utilize)

The Analysis: Let's Talk About Pentiment



this whole talk pitch was a ruse!! I just wanted to talk about Pentiment, and you all fell for it!!

The Analysis: *Pentiment* is Very Good

- *Pentiment* is an adventure role-playing game developed by Obsidian that came out in 2022
- *Pentiment* has consequential branches, character classes, lots of dialogue input and other kinds of input, the good stuff
- Sometimes Andreas gets bummed out and pictures a labyrinth in his mind to cope with it (like we all do, surely)



The Analysis: Pentiment is Very Good (pt. 2)



I think about this dialogue prompt at least once every single day

The Analysis: Pentiment is Very Good (pt. 3)



The Solution: Branching is a Spectrum (... Right?)



WRONG



The Solution: Branching is a Spectrum (But Not How You Think)



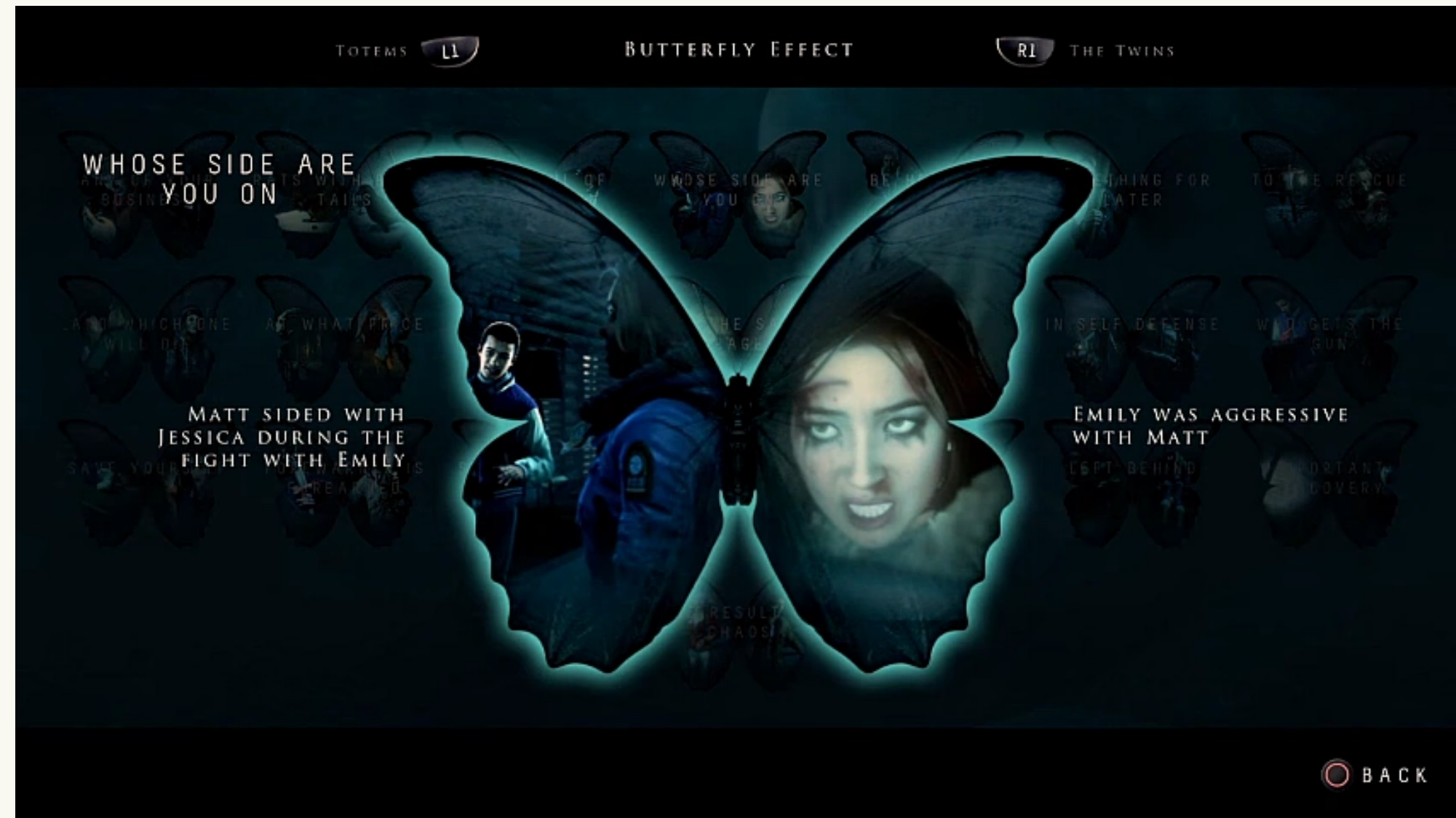
The Solution: The Three Pillars of Choice

- Dialogue choices can provide:
 - Consequences
 - Thematic importance
 - Character insight and input



The Solution: Consequences

- Multiple endings, repercussions, relationship building, etc.
- **Pros:** fun to write and explore, pleasing to players
- **Cons:** so much money and time and crunch and we're all so tired sometimes



The Solution: Theme

- Choices that are not consequential but speak to what you want the player to take away from the game
- **Pros:** shores up your narrative and how it resonates, makes themes more applicable to each individual player
- **Cons:** risk coming across as preachy if overdone, can flounder if not supported



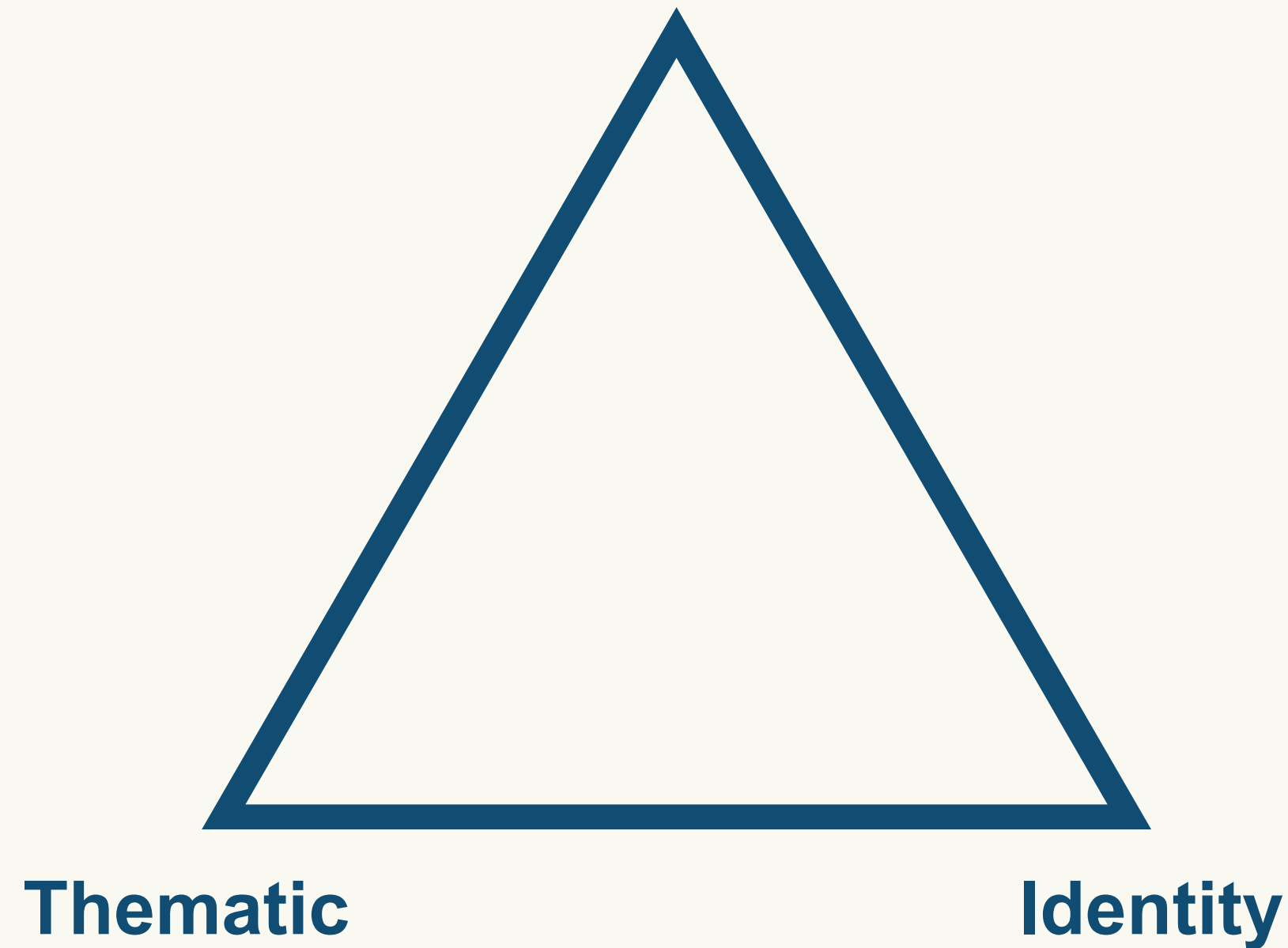
The Solution: Character Definition

- Dialogue choices/player input that further defines the player character
- **Pros:** helps the player decide how they want to interact with the world you've created, can create a sense of connection
- **Cons:** none. This is a good option and we should do it more often



The Solution: I Made A Triangle

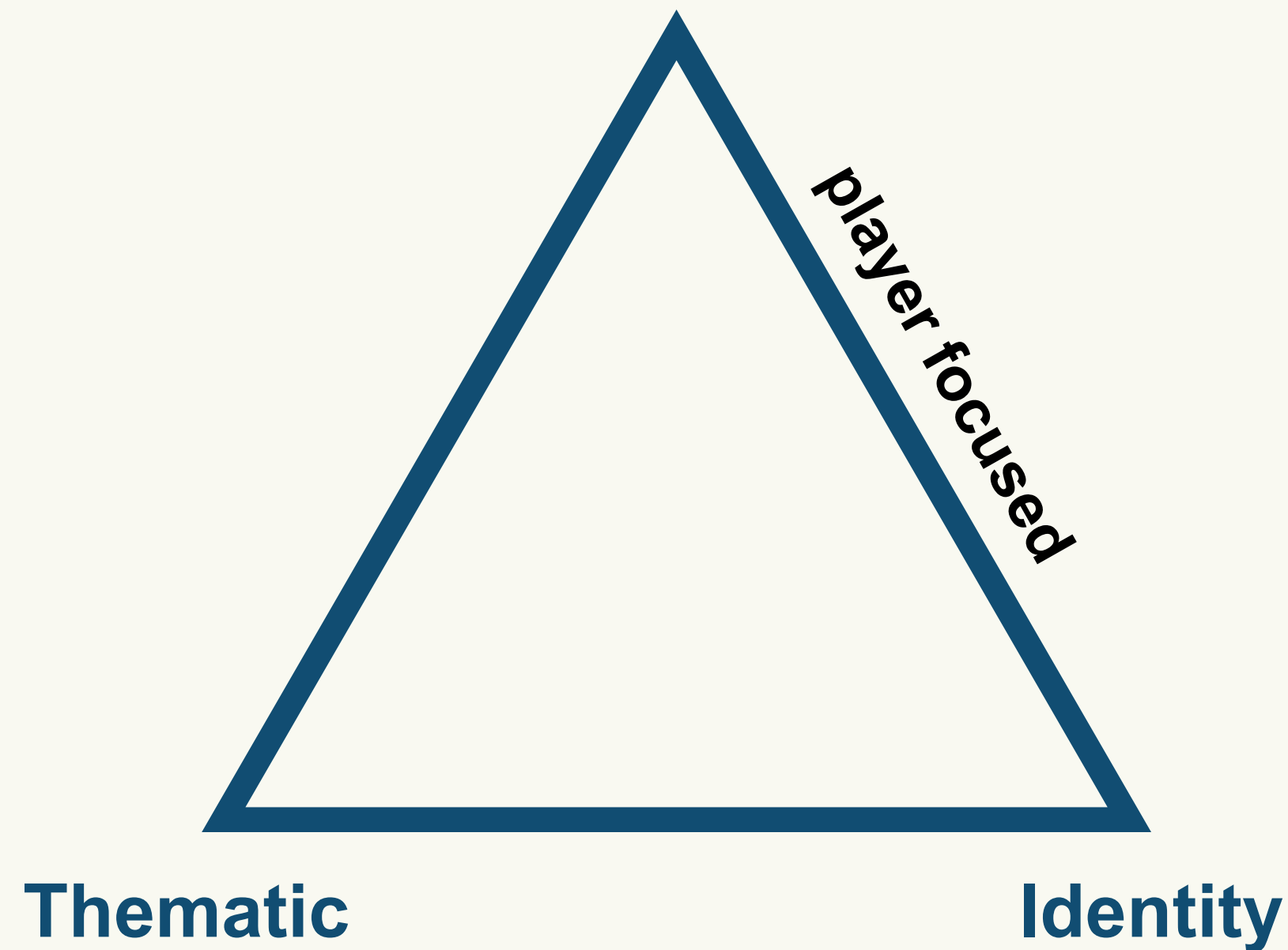
The Branching Spectrum (tm)
Consequential



The Solution: I Made A Triangle

The Branching Spectrum (tm)

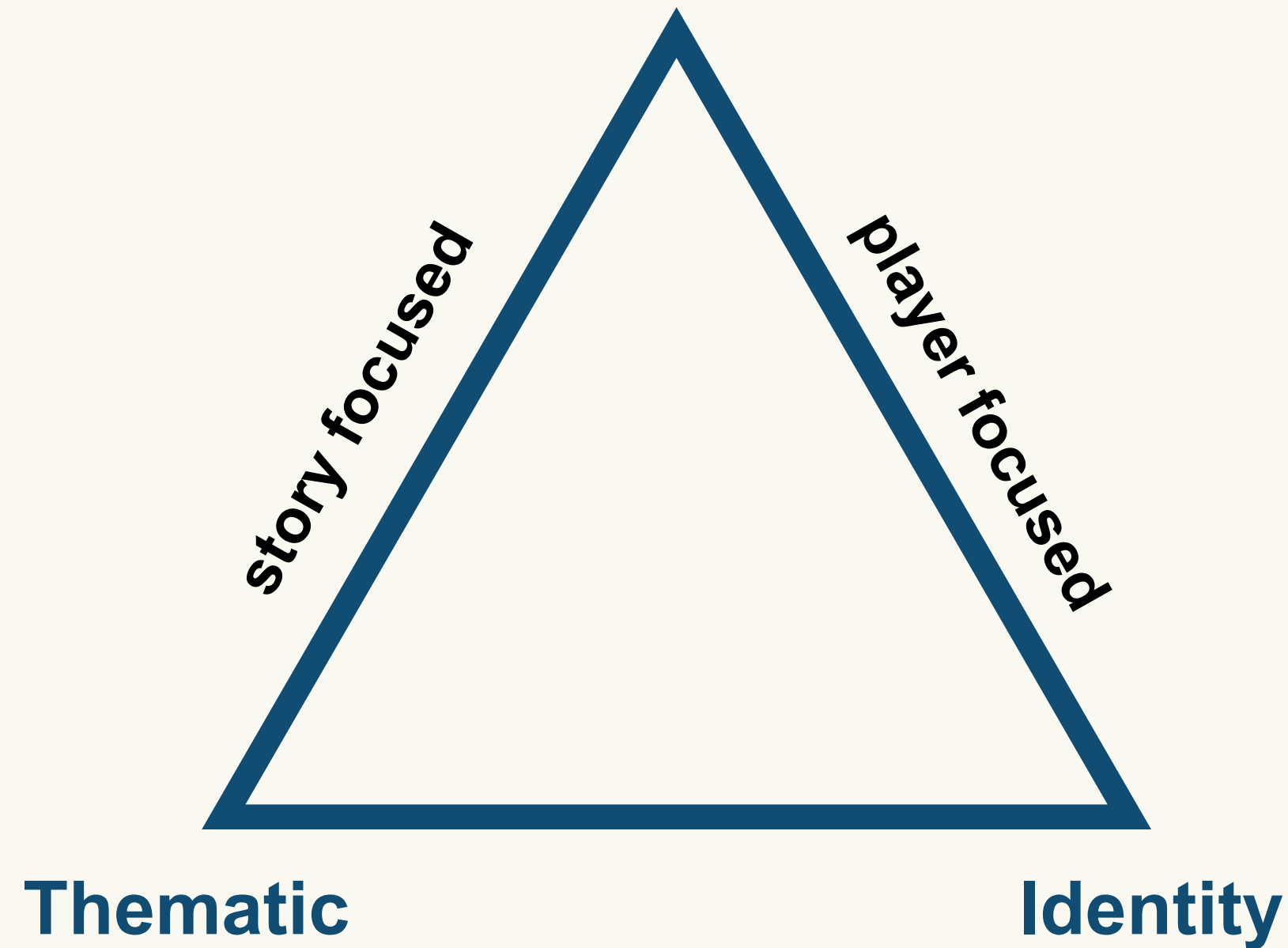
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The Solution: I Made A Triangle

The Branching Spectrum (tm)

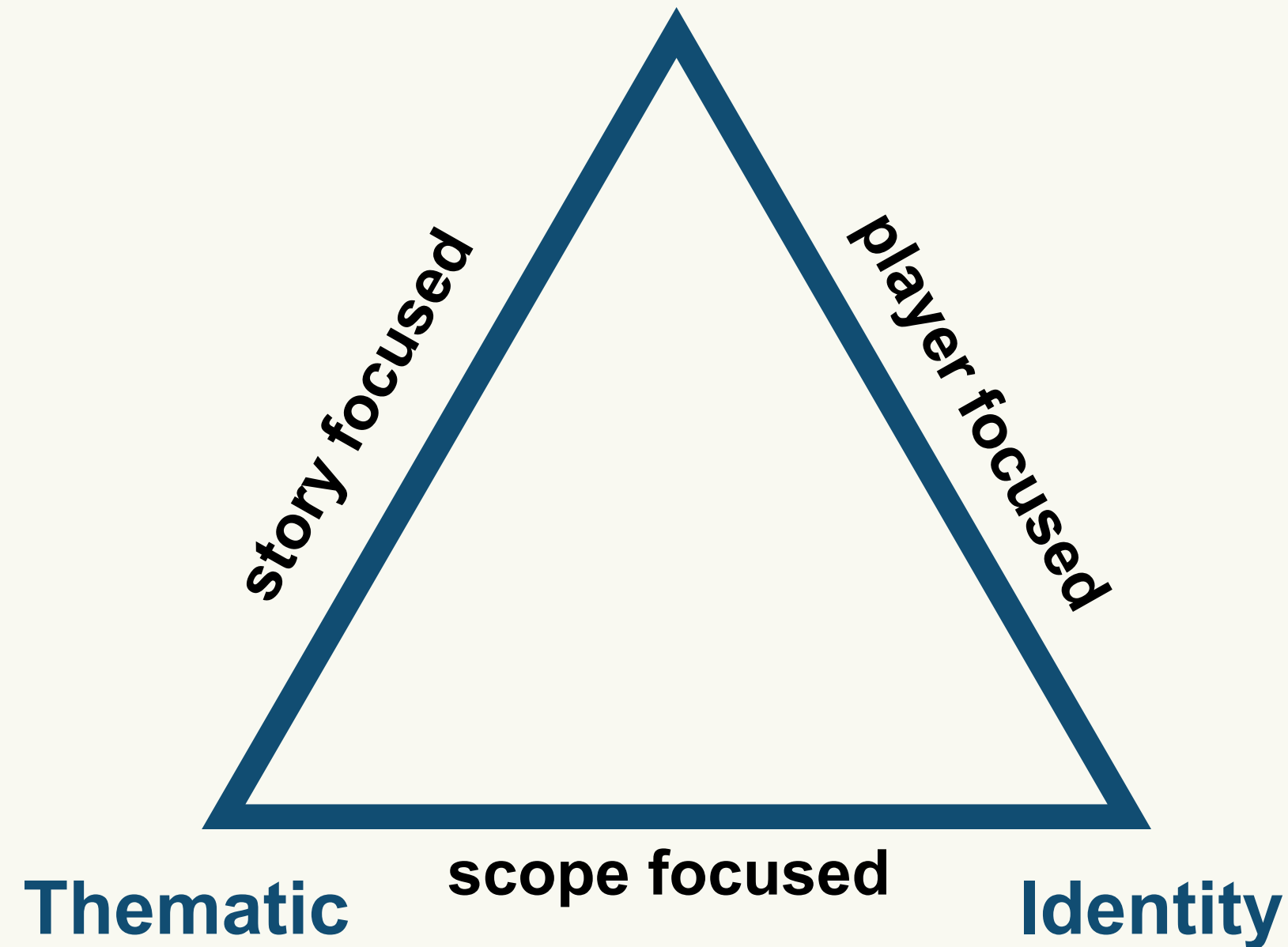
Consequential



The Solution: I Made A Triangle

The Branching Spectrum (tm)

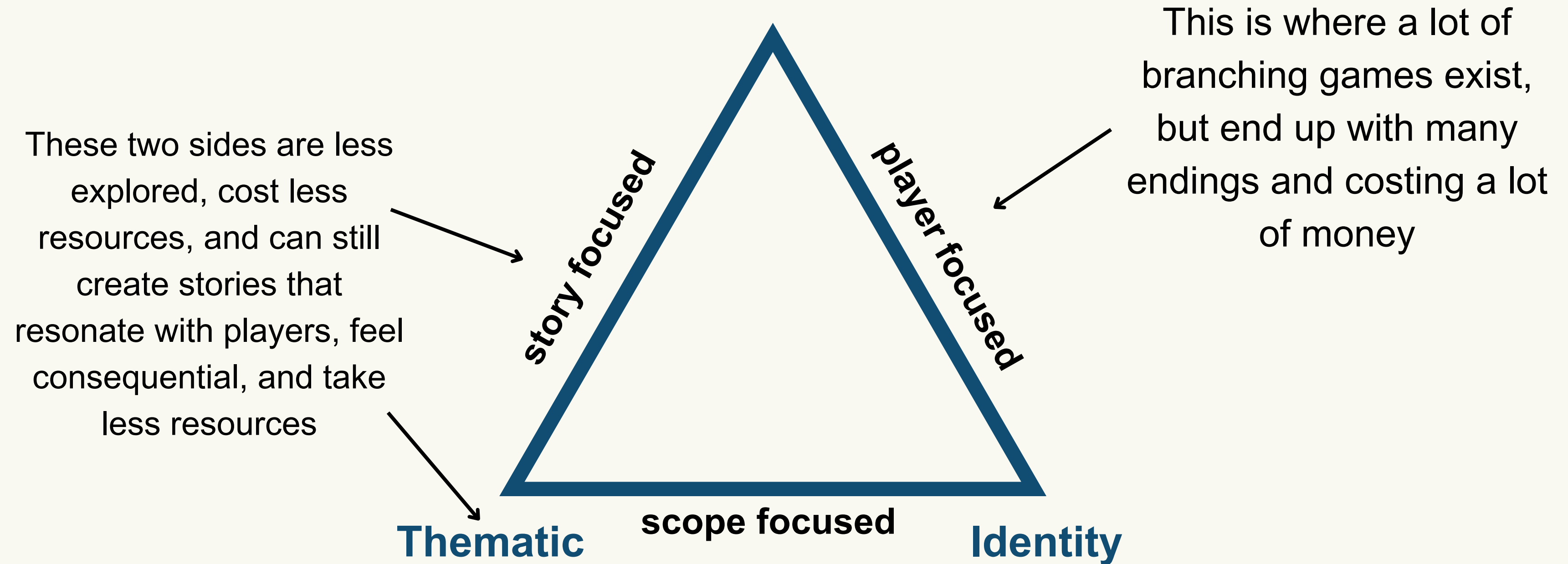
Consequential



The Solution: I Made A Triangle

The Branching Spectrum (tm)

Consequential



The Takeaway: What Do We Do With All This?

- There are options when scope, time, and budget is limited
- Creating choices in the interest of your story's themes and the player's connection with your characters is still agency
- Choices that only serve consequences risk feeling hollow, frustrating, or confusing
- You can accomplish more than you think in a mostly-linear story if you know your themes, characters, and audience well
- Pacing is everything



Works Cited & Further Reading

Pentiment. 2022. PC [Video Game]. Irvine, CA: Obsidian Entertainment.

Until Dawn. 2015. PS4 [Video Game]. Guildford, UK: Supermassive Games.

Fallout 3. 2008. Xbox 360 [Video Game]. Rockville, MD: Bethesda Game Studios.

Star Trucker. 2024. TBD [Video Game]. Monster and Monster, Raw Fury.

Further reading:

Sam Kabo Ashwell's Standard Patterns in Choice-Based Games

Clara F-V's Taxonomy of Narrative Choices

Emily Short's Interactive Storytelling Blog

Bye! Thanks for coming! :)



My dog, Ougi, who heard this talk first

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I'm available for narrative work
and consulting!