

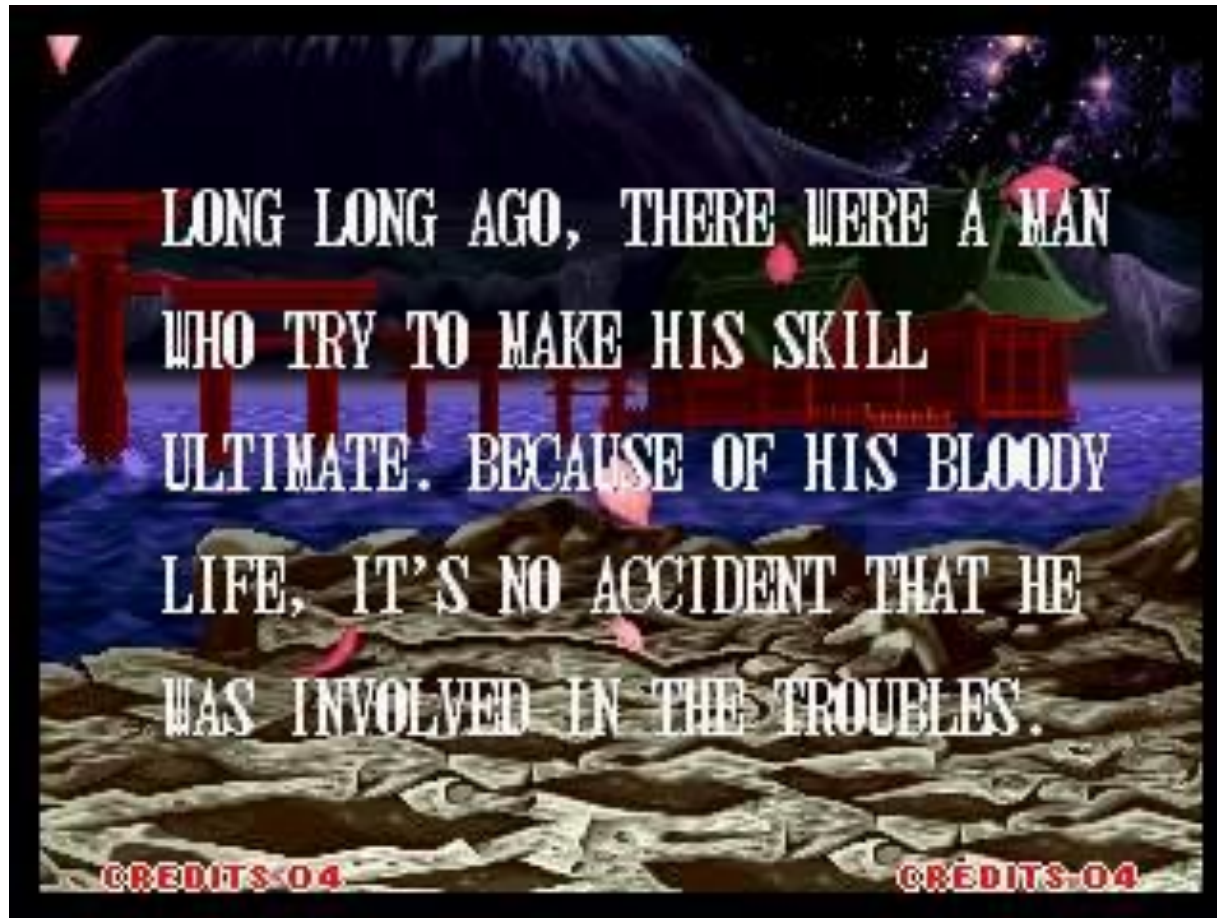


# GAME NARRATIVE

S U M M I T

**GDC**  
Online

Game Developers Conference® Online **October 5-8, 2010** | **Austin, TX**





*"Here's a lockpick. It might be handy if you, the master of unlocking, take it with you."*

*-Barry, **Resident Evil***











# I Don't Want to Know Delivering Exposition in Games

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# About Me



# Who Cares? No One Finishes Games

- ③ Example: Half-Life 2: Episode Two
- ③ Metacritic: 90
- ③ Avg. Completion Time: 6h 53m
- ③ <50% of players reached the final map



## Sources:

- ③ [http://www.steampowered.com/status/ep2/ep2\\_stats.php](http://www.steampowered.com/status/ep2/ep2_stats.php)
- ③ Robertson, Margaret: "Stop Wasting My Time and Your Money: Why Your Game Doesn't Need a Story to Be a Hit"

# Solution: Panic!!!

- ⌚ Make Games Shorter
- ⌚ Remove Story
- ⌚ Waste No Time Polishing Later Levels





# On Second Thought...





# Short Attention Spans, High Standards



# Players Are Not a Captive Audience





# The Role of Exposition in Games



# What Exposition Is Not (Limited To)

- ⌚ “Things the Designer Thinks I Should Know”
- ⌚ The Opening Cutscene
- ⌚ The Tutorial
- ⌚ Mission Objectives
- ⌚ Backstory
- ⌚ And also...





# Exposition Is Not Dialogue

*"Damn, those alien bastards are gonna pay for shooting up my ride"*

-Duke Nukem, **Duke Nukem 3D**

*"I knew there was one on board!"*

-Marine (referring to the Master Chief), **Halo**

*"Hey, catch me later, I'll buy you a beer!"*

-Barney, **Half-Life**

*"What, you're going to fight against me? You damn fool."*

-Master-D, **Bionic Commando**

# What Exposition Is

- ⌚ A way of looking at content delivery in games
- ⌚ A tool for maximizing player engagement
- ⌚ An underlying commitment to thoroughness and consistency
- ⌚ Related but not limited to narrative

# A Working Definition

***A game's exposition refers to the deliberate arrangement of its content, including its structure, its systems, and its narrative, in support of the game's experiential goals.***

# Well-Crafted Exposition

- ⌚ Builds immersion
- ⌚ Builds investment
- ⌚ Teaches the player
- ⌚ Is hard to achieve, and requires iteration





# Well-Crafted Exposition, Cont.

- ⌚ Presents an internally consistent gameworld
- ⌚ Ramps elements of play at a deliberate rate
- ⌚ Withholds intriguing new information

*"You do not keep the audience's interest by giving it information, but by withholding information, except that which is absolutely necessary for comprehension."*

-Robert McKee, **Story**

# Well-Crafted Exposition, Cont.

- ⌚ Makes the audience feel smart
  - ⌚ ...by using subtext
  - ⌚ ...by inducing speculation
  - ⌚ ...through the user experience / UI
  - ⌚ ...by withholding unnecessary info

# Three Types of Exposition in Games

⌚ **Structural**

⌚ **Systemic**

⌚ **Narrative**



# Structural Exposition

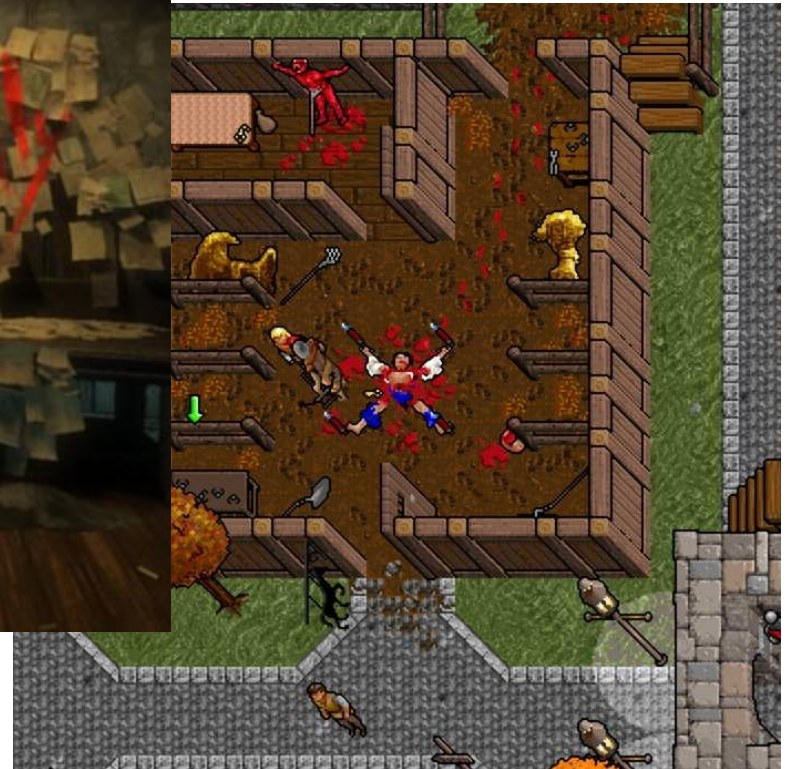




# Systemic Exposition

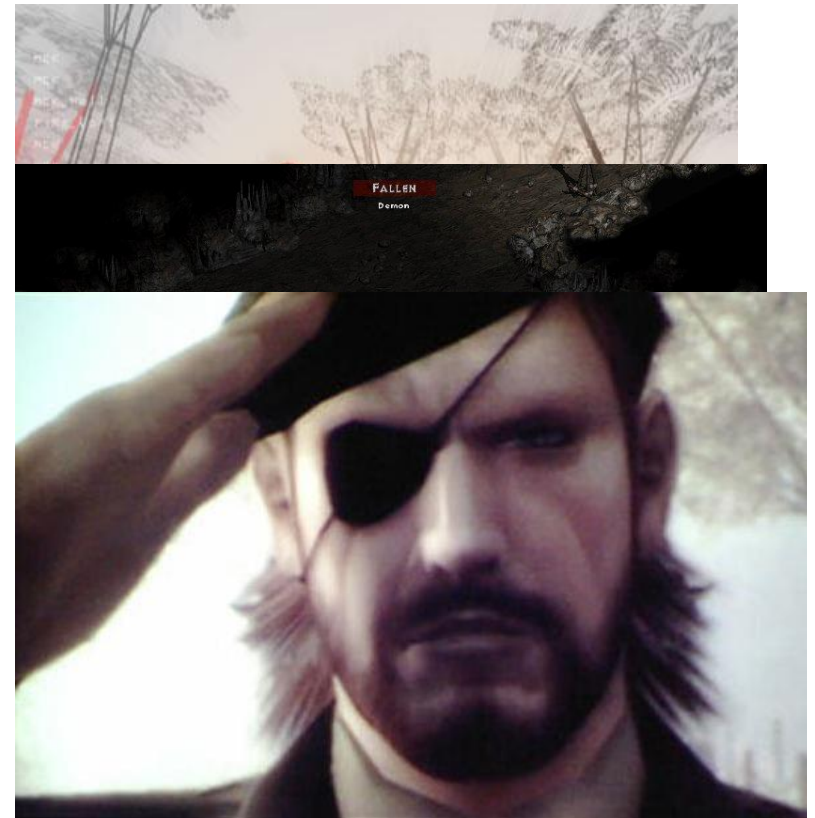
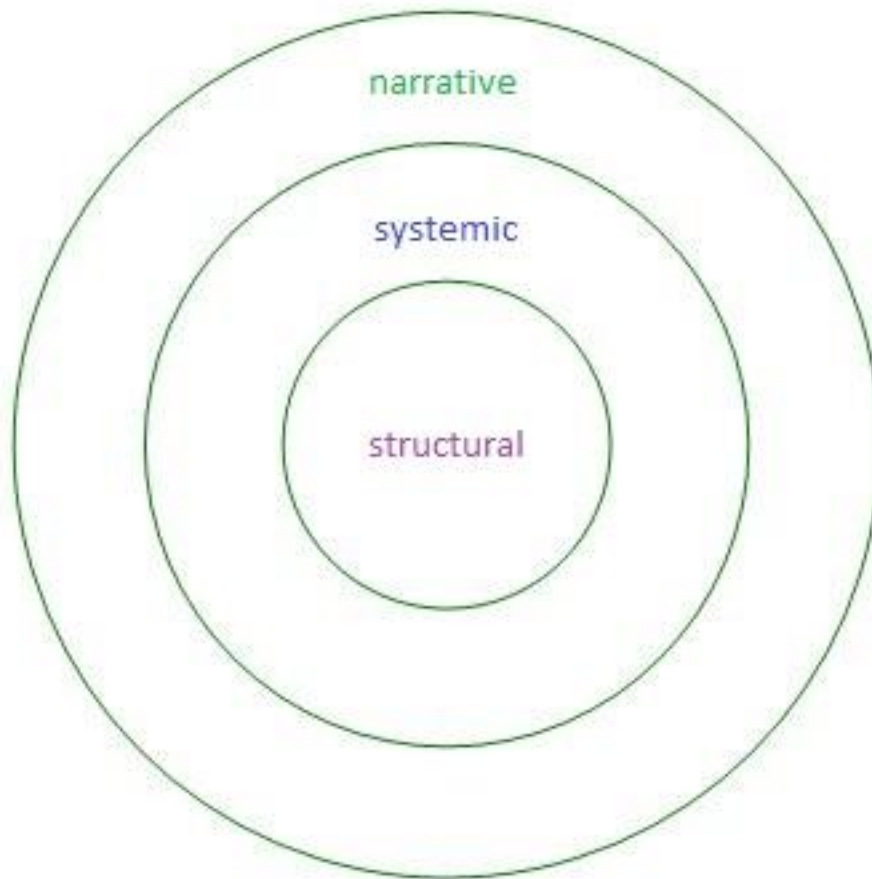


# Narrative Exposition



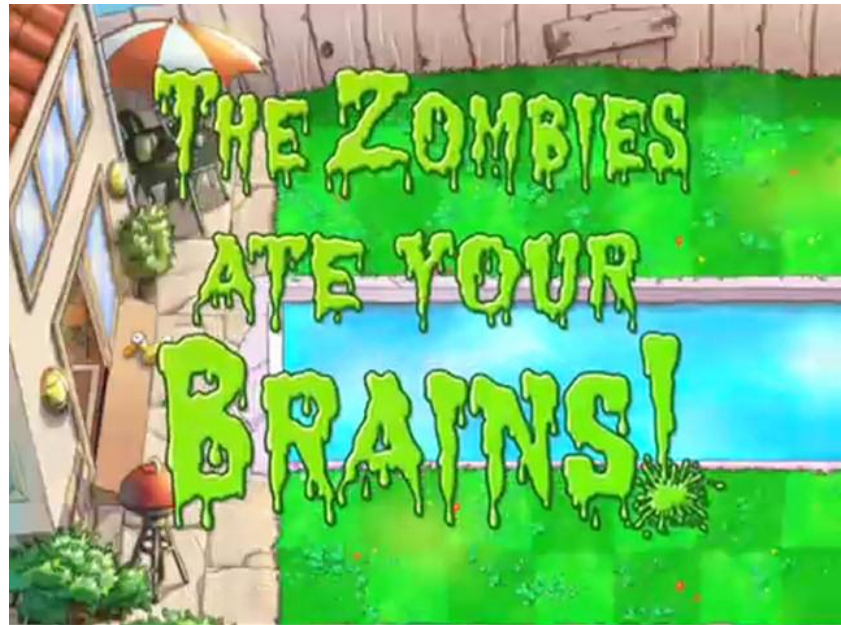


# Three Types of Exposition in Games



# Example Case: Plants Vs. Zombies

- ⌚ No real story
- ⌚ One-button gameplay
- ⌚ No player character
- ⌚ Silly theme





# Plants Vs. Zombies, Cont.

## ⦿ Structural exposition

Simple ramp through tutorialized stages

New gameplay twists introduced every few stages

New minigames introduced every few stages

Player choice introduced at a comfortable pace



# Plants Vs. Zombies, Cont.

## ⌚ Systemic exposition

New plant types introduced each stage

New enemy types introduced every few stages



# Plants Vs. Zombies, Cont.

## ⌚ Narrative exposition

Crazy Dave

Day/night cycle

Sense of escalation





# Applying Principles of Exposition





# Bastion Narrative Design Goals

- ⊕ Story should not interrupt play
- ⊕ No dependencies on rich presentation
- ⊕ Take advantage of the medium

Hence...

- ⊕ Reactive Narrator
- ⊕ VO lines short, don't repeat
- ⊕ No breaking the fourth wall
- ⊕ Deep backstory



# Testing for Well Crafted Exposition

- ③ 10 techniques
- ③ Use them in any combination in any order
- ③ Use them during pre-production and production
- ③ ...But don't wait too long
- ③ Not all techniques apply to all types of games

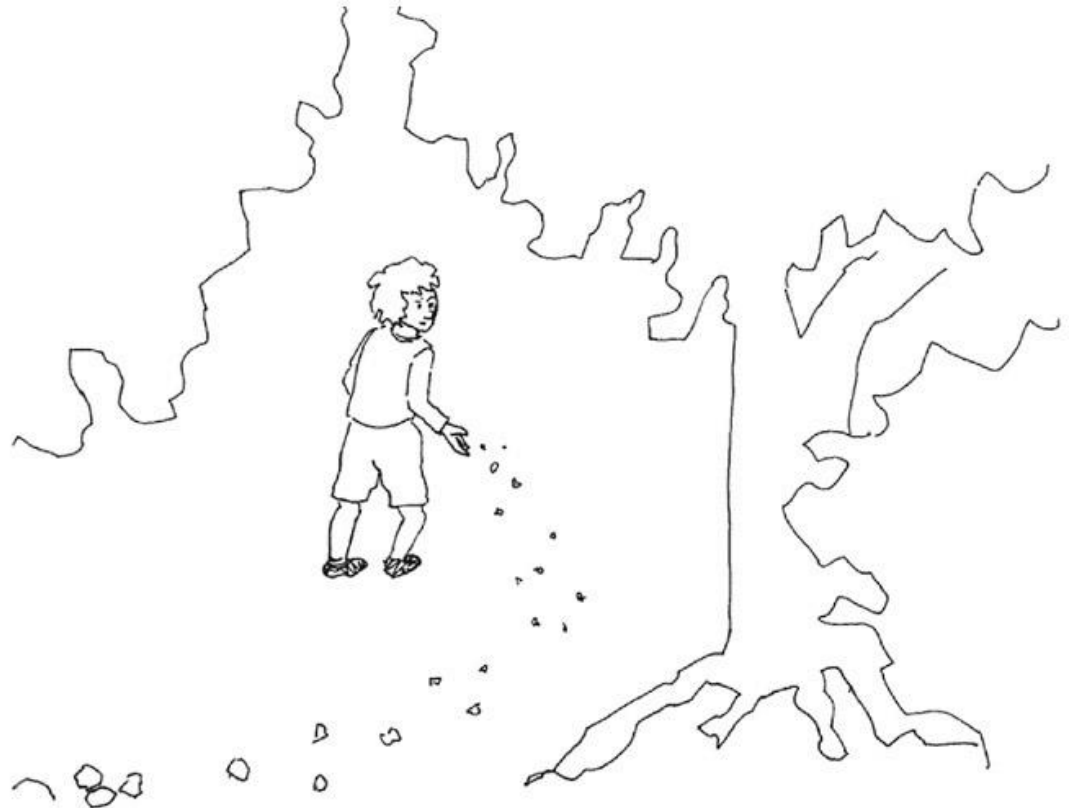
# Testing for Well Crafted Exposition

## 1. Check for an Even Coating



# Testing for Well Crafted Exposition

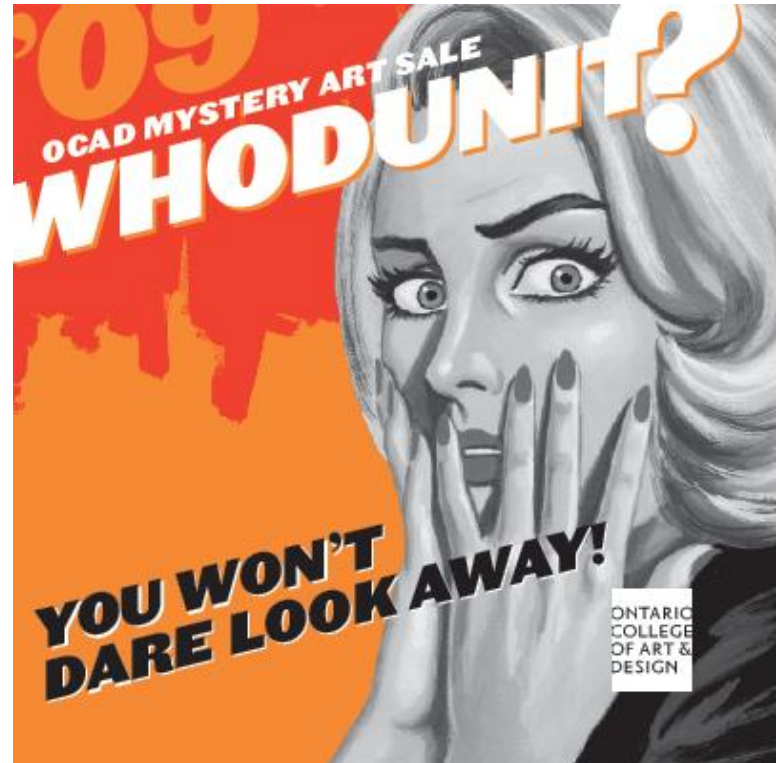
## 2. The Breadcrumb Trail Test





# Testing for Well Crafted Exposition

## 3. Why Isn't Your Game Suspenseful?



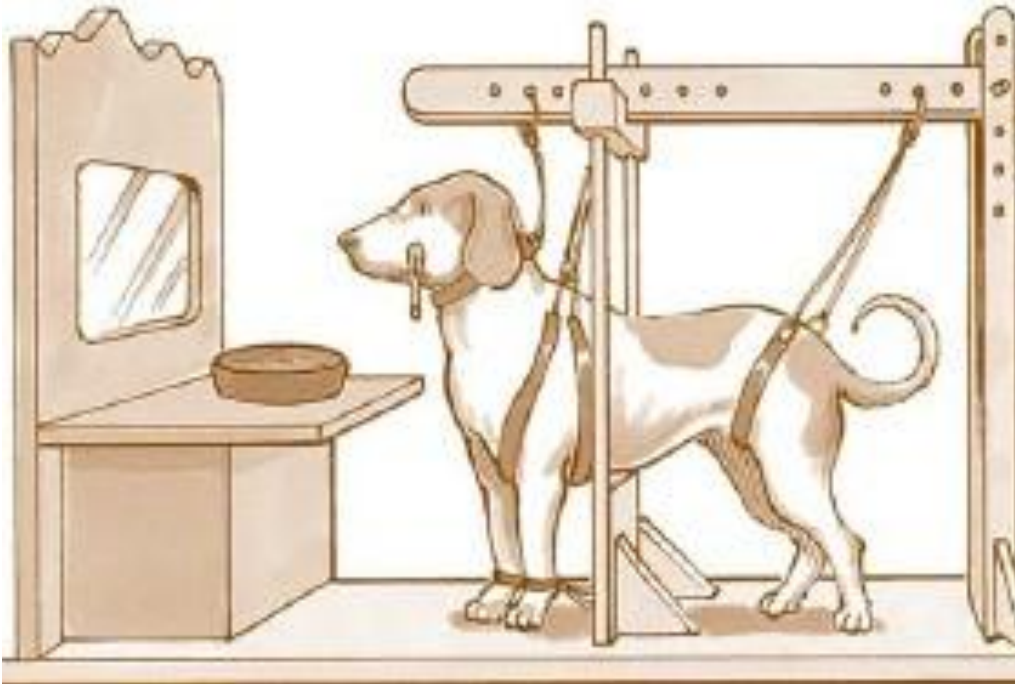
# Testing for Well Crafted Exposition

## 4. Get Inside the Player's Head



# Testing for Well Crafted Exposition

## 5. Confirm Your Expository Reward Loops



# Testing for Well Crafted Exposition

6. Are You Reinforcing, or Repeating?





# Testing for Well Crafted Exposition

## 7. Account for Different Levels of Engagement



# Testing for Well Crafted Exposition

## 8. Do You Know Where Your Story Is Going?



# Testing for Well Crafted Exposition

## 9. Are You Using Every Part of the Buffalo?



# Testing for Well Crafted Exposition

## 10. Make Sure the Chopping Block is Well Fed





# The End / To Be Continued



# Questions?



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