Narrative Legos

Building Replayable Narrative Out of Lots of Tiny Pieces

Ken Levine
@iglevine

Who am I?

- Creative Director/Writer
- 19 Years of Linear Narratives.
  - Thief
  - System Shock 2
  - Freedom Force
  - FF vs 3rd Reich
  - BioShock
  - BioShock Infinite

Why Change?

- Didn’t want to keep building “bigger”
- Linear puts boundaries between us and audience.
  - Would you Kindly only works once.
- Love systemic games. Narrative doesn’t lend itself to systems.
- To do something different, back to drawing board.

This is NOT

- A design for a specific game.
- A product pitch.
- A specific development plan.
- An intellectual property.
- If your headlines includes “Levine reveals new game” you’ve written the wrong headline.
- All the “content” is basically ripped off from every other game ever made.

What this is

- It’s my way of contributing to a conversation that I think a lot of smart people are thinking about.

What this is

- It’s my way of contributing to a conversation that I think a lot of smart people are thinking about.
- It’s my initial scratching in the dirt to figure out a way to build player driven replayable narrative gameplay.

What this is

- It’s my way of contributing to a conversation that I think a lot of smart people are thinking about.
- It’s my initial scratching in the dirt to figure out a way to build player driven replayable narrative gameplay.

Open Source Talk

Record it, tweet it, leverage it.

Negatives of Linear Narrative

- Expensive to make.
- Pieces don’t speak to each other.
- Branching exists, but with limited states and interaction.
- Doesn’t fully embrace the unique power of games.
- Not player driven.
- Multiple endings still mean fixed number of player states.
- Can only add ON, not add IN.
- There is good work in this area (Witcher, etc.) but wanted a fundamentally different approach.

The Traditional Approach to AI

- Tech approach has been to simulate a person, not a character.
- Everybody on the planet is bad at that.
- A robust solution lies beyond any technology or creative horizon.
- Overly ambitious can lead to paralysis.

First Steps?

Physics Wasn’t Built in a Day

- 2D circles---rectangles---3D spheres---cylinders---axis-aligned boxes---arbitrary polygonal shapes---ragdolls---cloth---fluid…
- Don’t model everything…model a LIMITED SET OF BELIEVABLE AND IMPACTFUL THINGS.

The Opportunity

- Create a narratively driven wherein:
  - Narrative elements are non-linear and interact with each other.
  - All narrative elements trigger off PLAYER action.
  - Such triggers are generally TRANSPARENT to the player.

Let’s Steal a Design

The Completely Stolen Structures We'll Start With

- Factions Player can Choose Between
- Quests
- Character Growth
- Crafting (weapons, armor, structures, vehicles)
- Non-linear quest structure
- Strong loop between non-combat and combat

Here’s a highly original world concept.

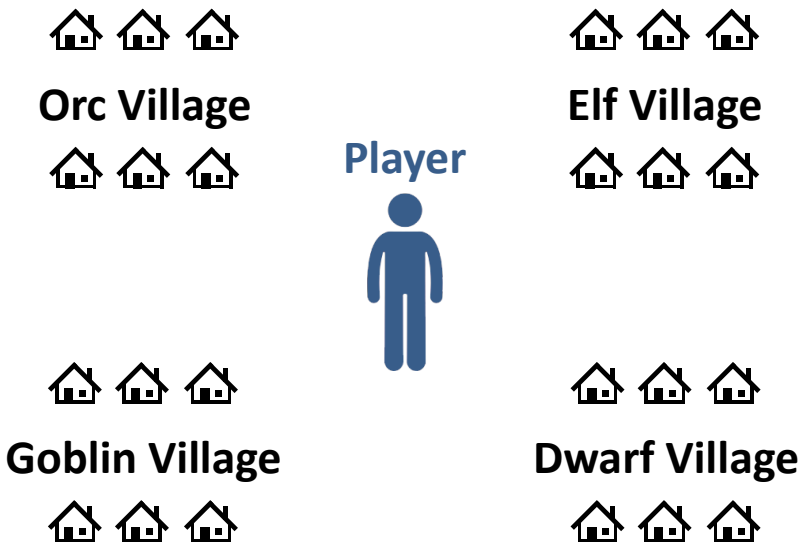
Orc Village

Elf Village

Goblin Village

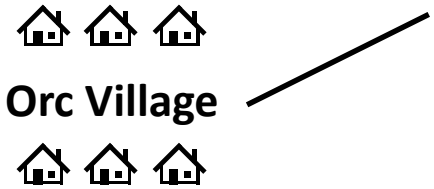
Dwarf Village

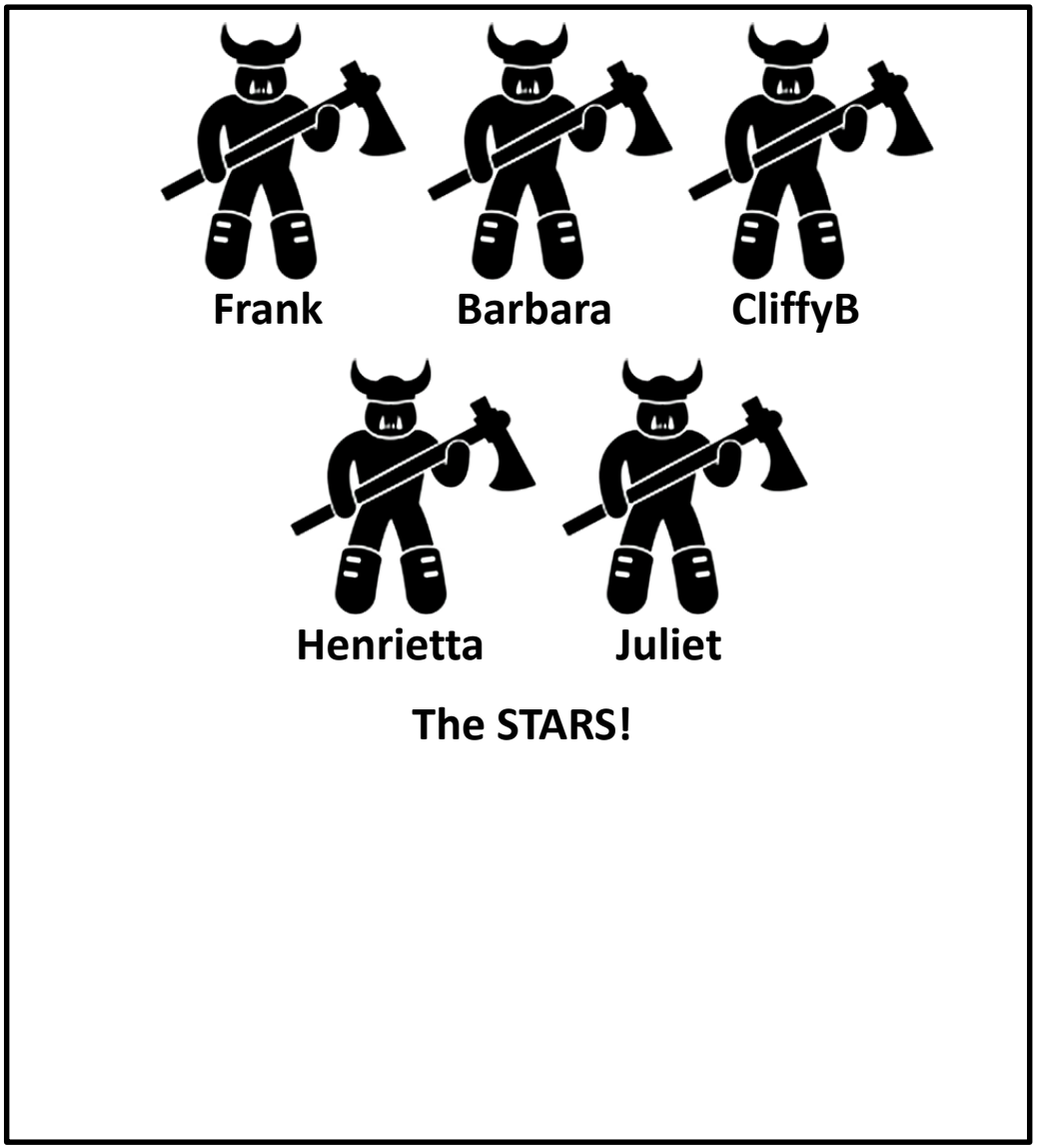
And Then There's YOU



Now the New Stuff

The Stars of Orc Village





What's a Star?

- A Star is an NPC with a set of Passions

Okay, what's a Passion?

Passions Are Not Full Psychological Models

- Tech approach has been to simulate a person, not a character.
- Traditional media narrative models passions, not people.
  - Luke Skywalker – Adventure, father issues, prove himself.
  - Not Luke Skywalker – Vegetarian, tooth decay, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder.

A PASSION is what a STAR cares about relative to the actions of the PLAYER

A PASSION is what a STAR cares about relative to the actions of the PLAYER

PASSIONS are TRANSPARENT to the PLAYER

A PASSION is what a STAR cares about relative to the actions of the PLAYER

PASSIONS are TRANSPARENT to the PLAYER

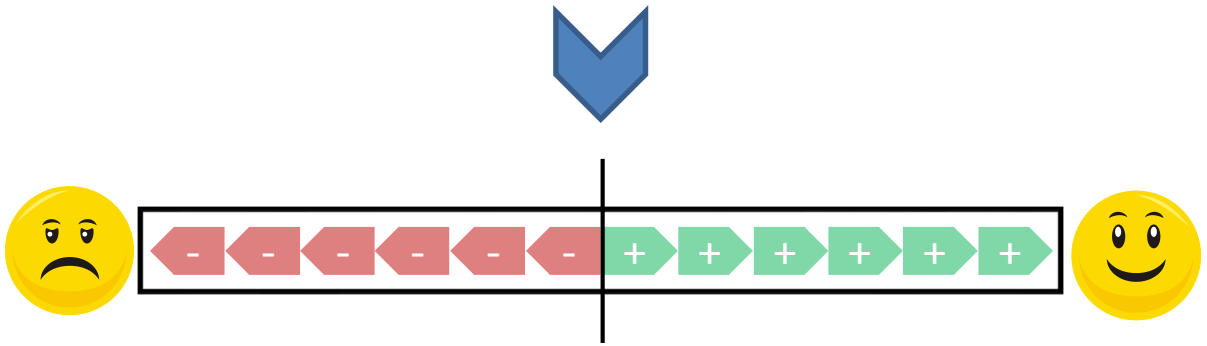
A PASSION must be RESPOND to PLAYER action.

Meet Frank---One of the Stars of the Orc Village

Frank the Orc

Orc village blacksmith

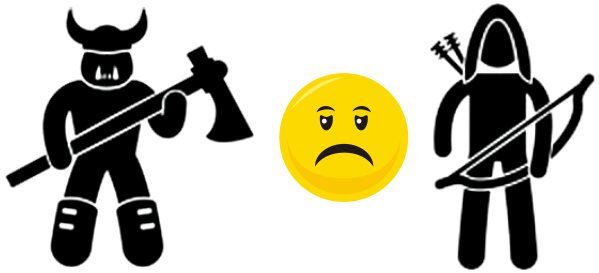
Anatomy of a Passion



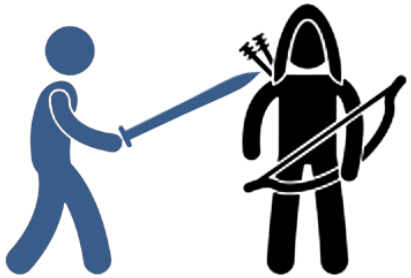
Passion: Hates elves

- Default Passion for most orc Stars: hating elves.
  - Anything bad for elves: + + +
  - Anything good for elves: - - -

Effects of one of Frank's Passions



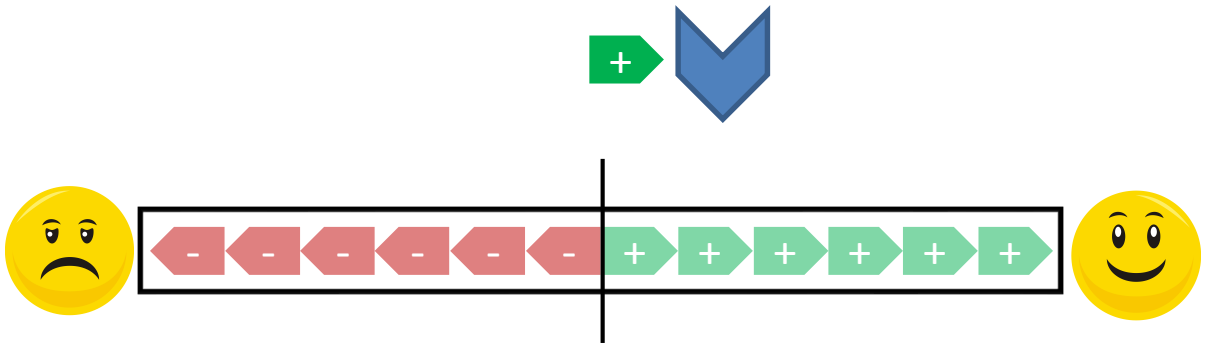
Frank hates elves



Player kills an elf

Frank's approval of Player (re: elves) goes up

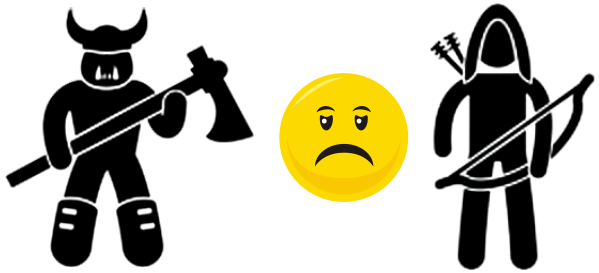
Anatomy of a Passion



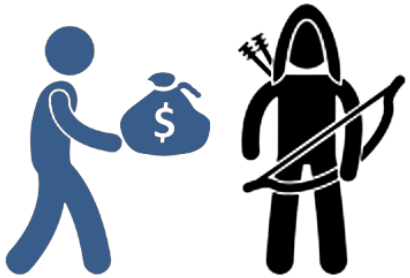
Passion: Hates elves

- Simple.

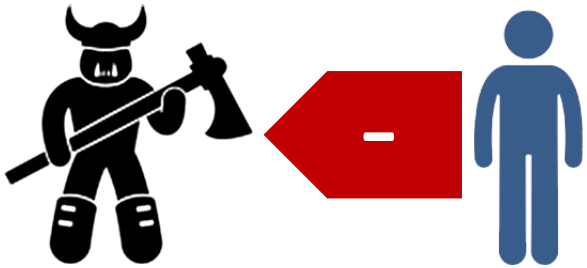
Effects of one of Frank's Passions



Frank hates elves

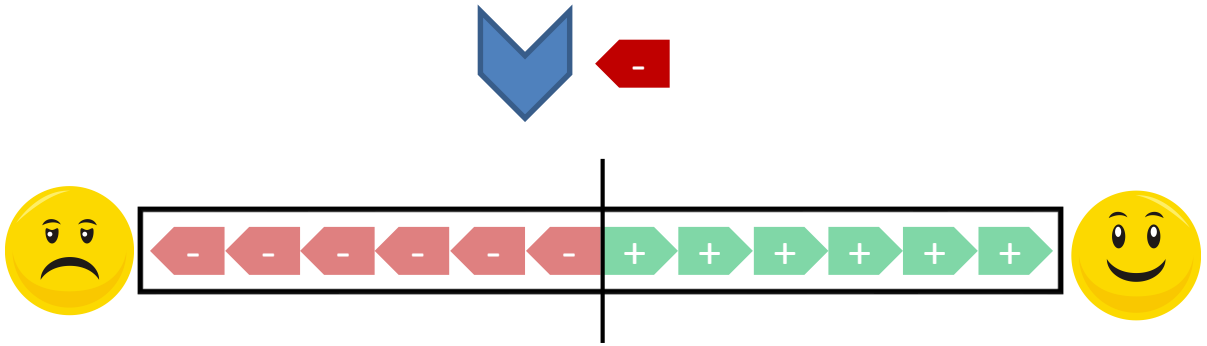


Player helps an elf



Frank's approval of Player (re: elves) goes down

Anatomy of a Passion



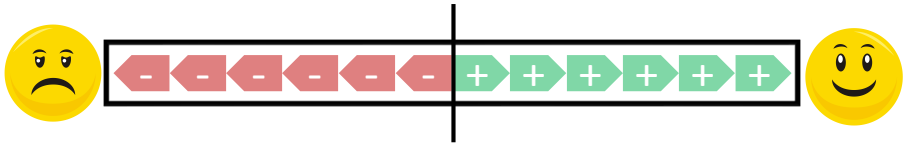
Passion: Hates elves

- Simple again..

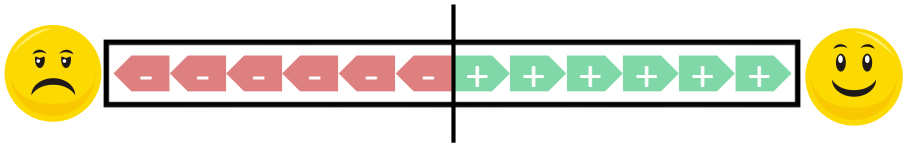
Stars have 3 Passions.

Frank the Orc

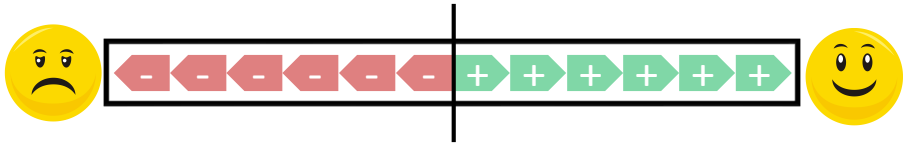
Orc village blacksmith



Passion #1: Hates elves



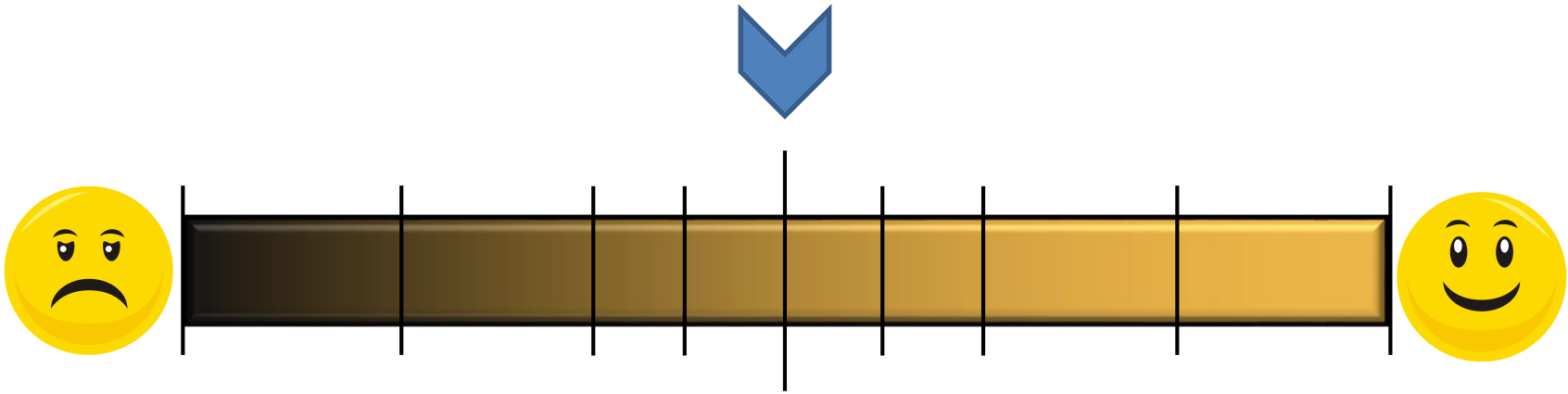
Passion #2: Wants temple of old gods built



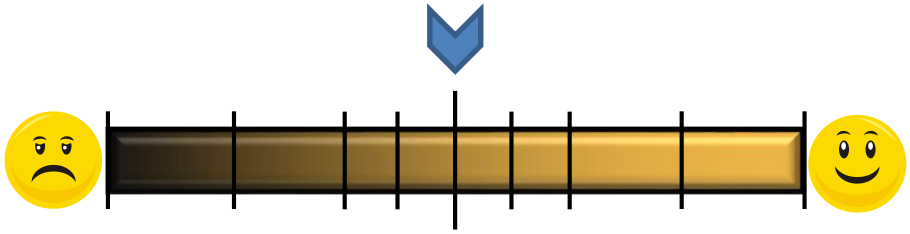
Passion #3: Wants to woo Barbara the orc

They are IMPACTED BY PLAYER ACTION

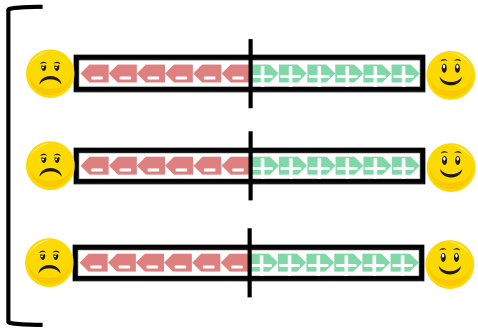
The Macro Passion



The Macro Passion



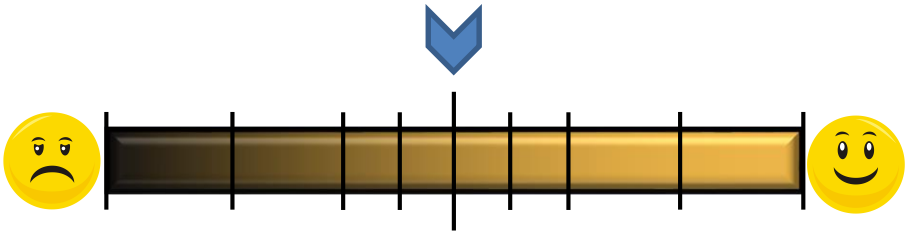
is a function of



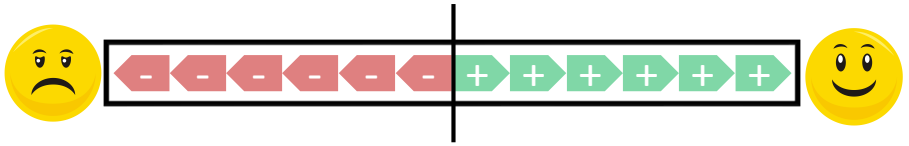
The Macro Passion

Frank the Orc

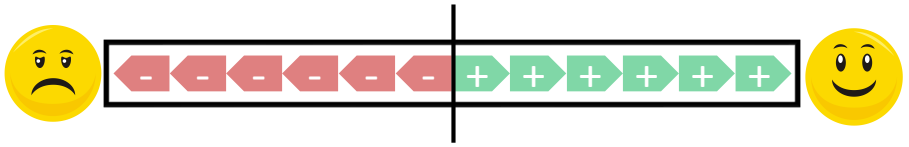
Orc village blacksmith



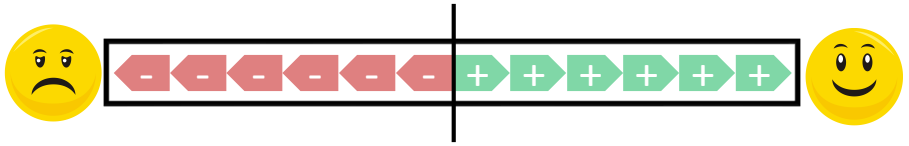
Macro Passion: Player approval rating



Passion #1: Hates elves



Passion #2: Wants temple of old gods built

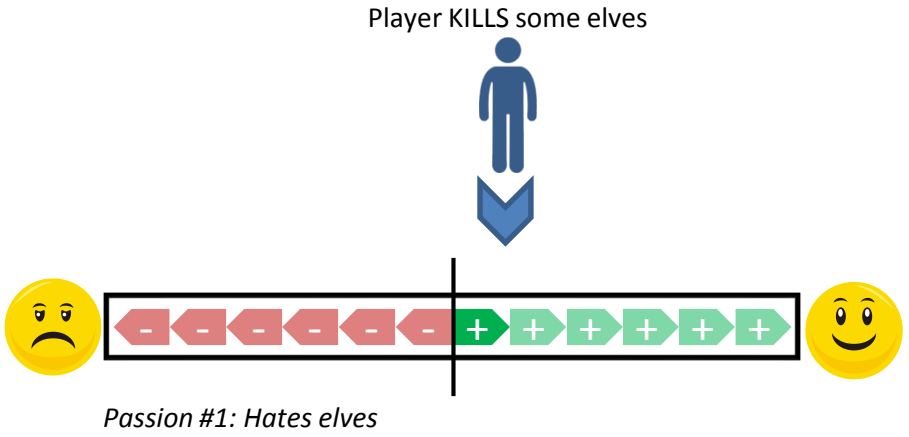


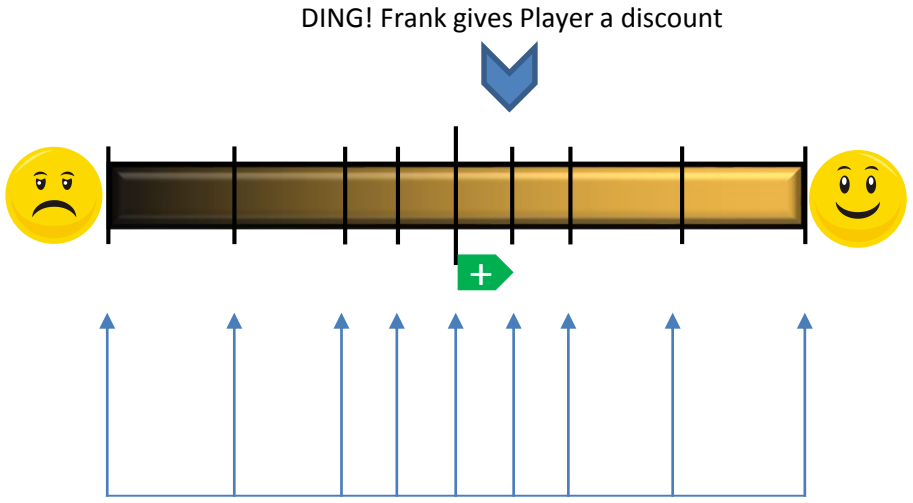
Passion #3: Wants to woo Barbara the orc

The Macro Passion Effects

Frank the Orc

Orc village blacksmith





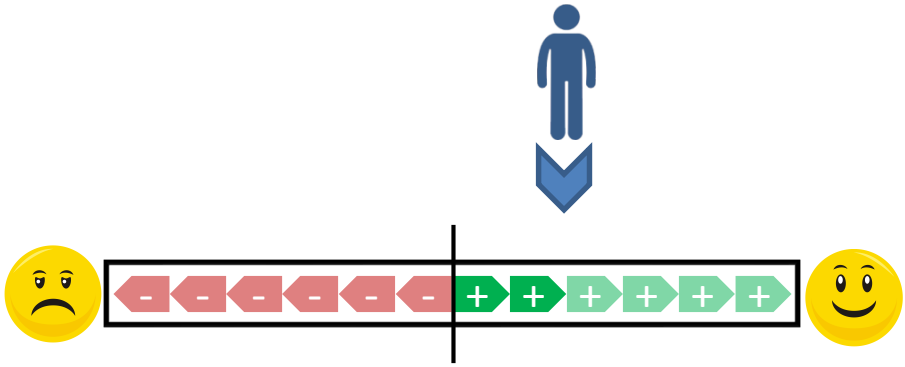
Thresholds

The Macro Passion Effects

Frank the Orc

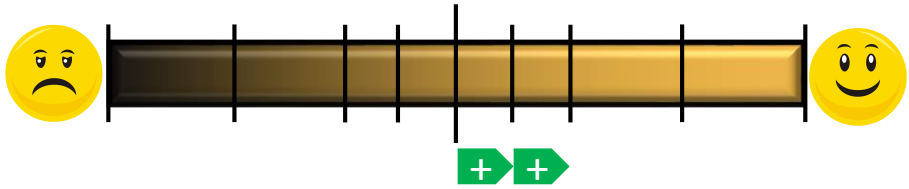
Orc village blacksmith

Player STEALS elf king's crown



Passion #1: Hates elves

DING! Frank offers to help Player in battle

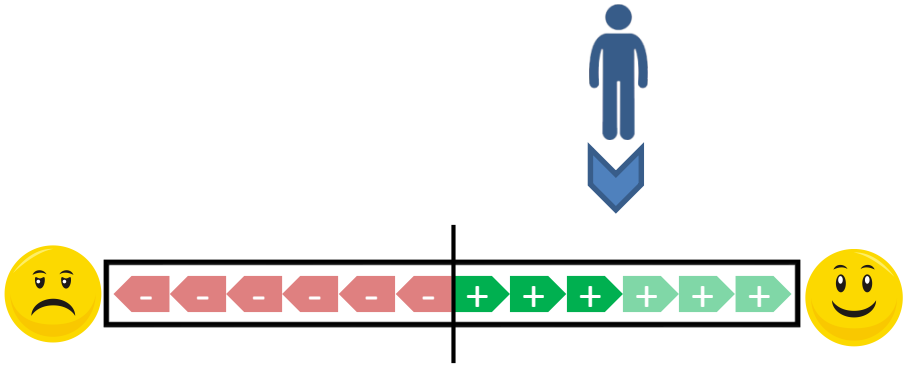


The Macro Passion Effects

Frank the Orc

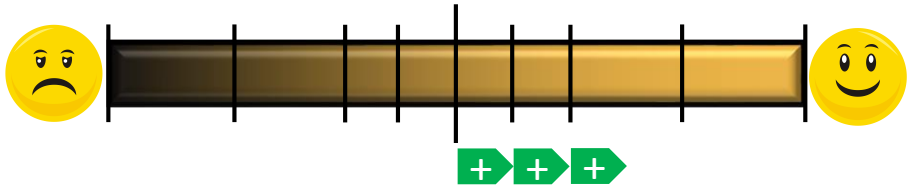
Orc village blacksmith

Player DESTROYS an elf shrine



Passion #1: Hates elves

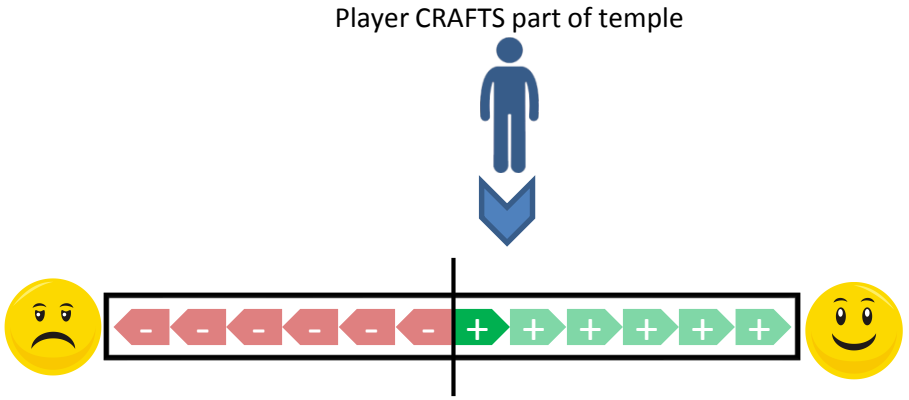
(No effect at this tier)

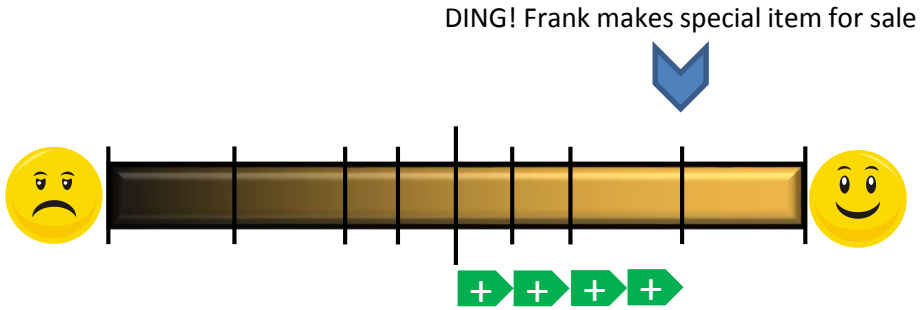


The Macro Passion Effects

Frank the Orc

Orc village blacksmith



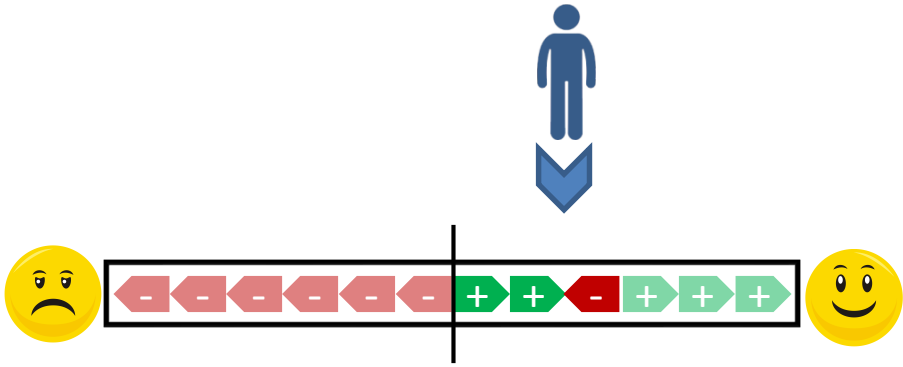


The Macro Passion Effects

Frank the Orc

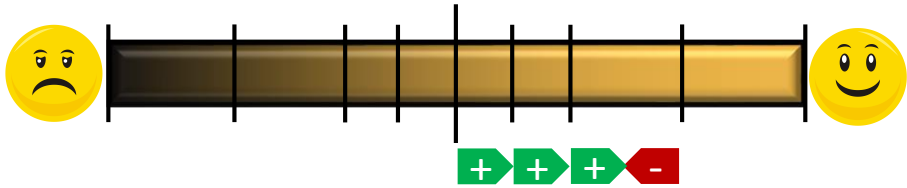
Orc village blacksmith

Player does QUEST for elves



Passion #1: Hates elves

UN-DING! Frank takes special item off shelf

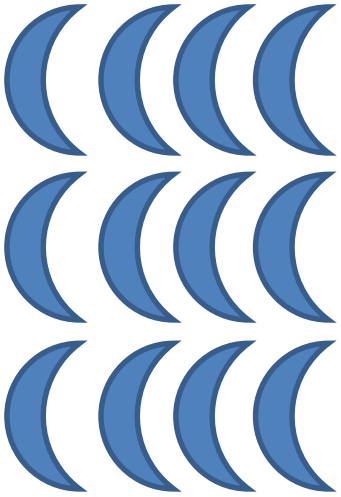


ZERO SUM GAME

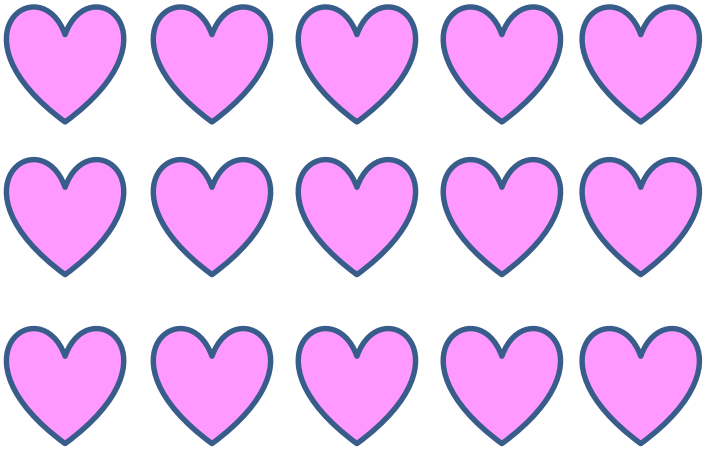
Ken	Pool of 10 Gold	Pierre
10 Gold		0 Gold
0 Gold		10 Gold
3 Gold		7 Gold
6 Gold		5 Gold

Lucky Charms Related NON-ZERO SUM GAME

Ken-
Blue Moon Surplus

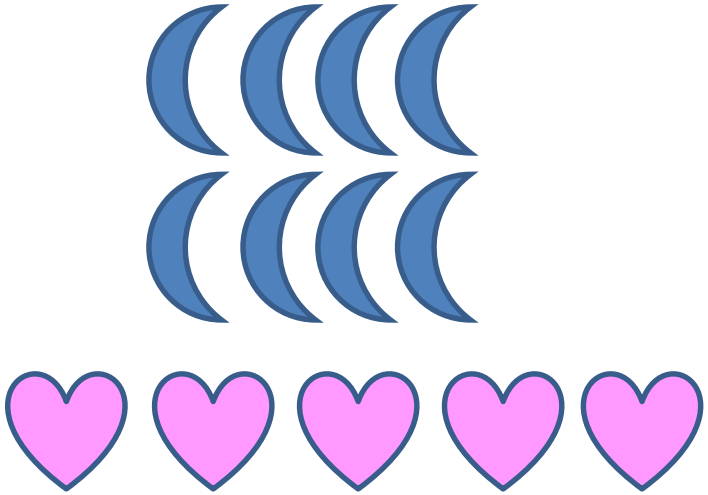


Pierre
Pink Heart Surplus

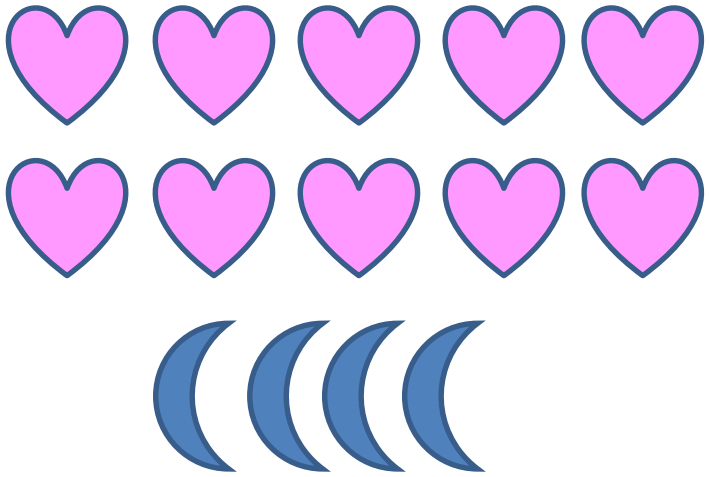


Lucky Charms Related NON-ZERO SUM GAME

Ken-
Balanced Economy



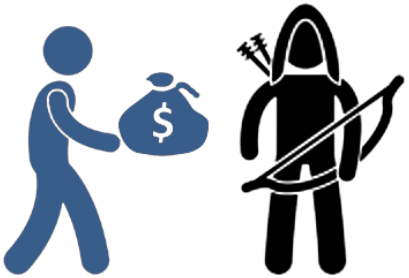
Pierre
Balanced Economy



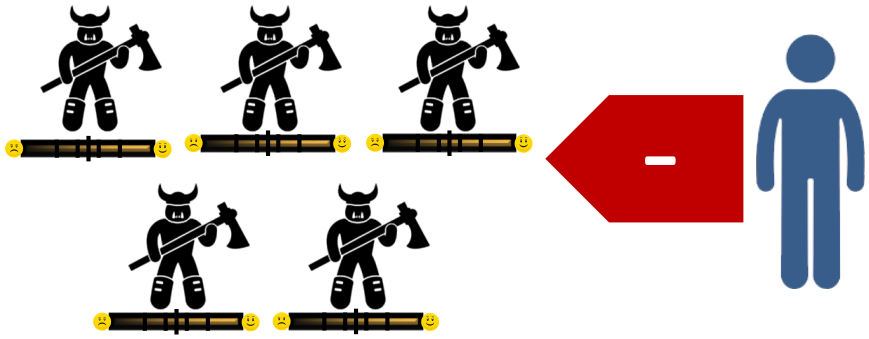
ZERO SUM
MEAN YOU CAN'T
PLEASE EVERYONE

ZERO-SUM GAME Between Villages

Frank and Pete (Stars) hate elves



Player helps Romeo the elf



Orc Stars' approval in general of Player goes down

Zero-Sum Game Between Characters---Same Village

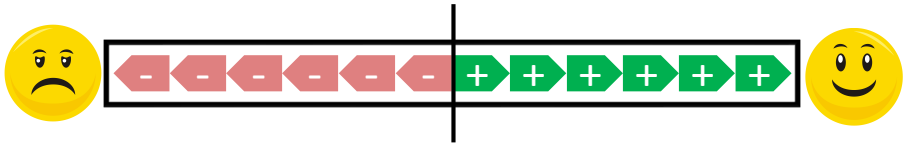
Frank the Orc

Orc village blacksmith

Pete the Orc

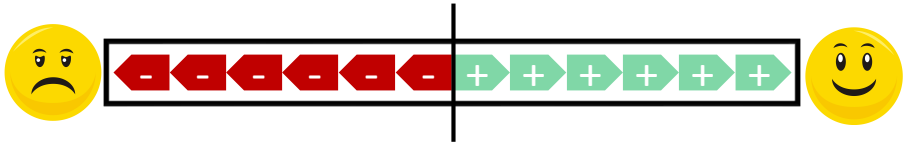
Orc village cleric

Player CRAFTS temple of old gods



Passion #2: Wants temple of old gods built

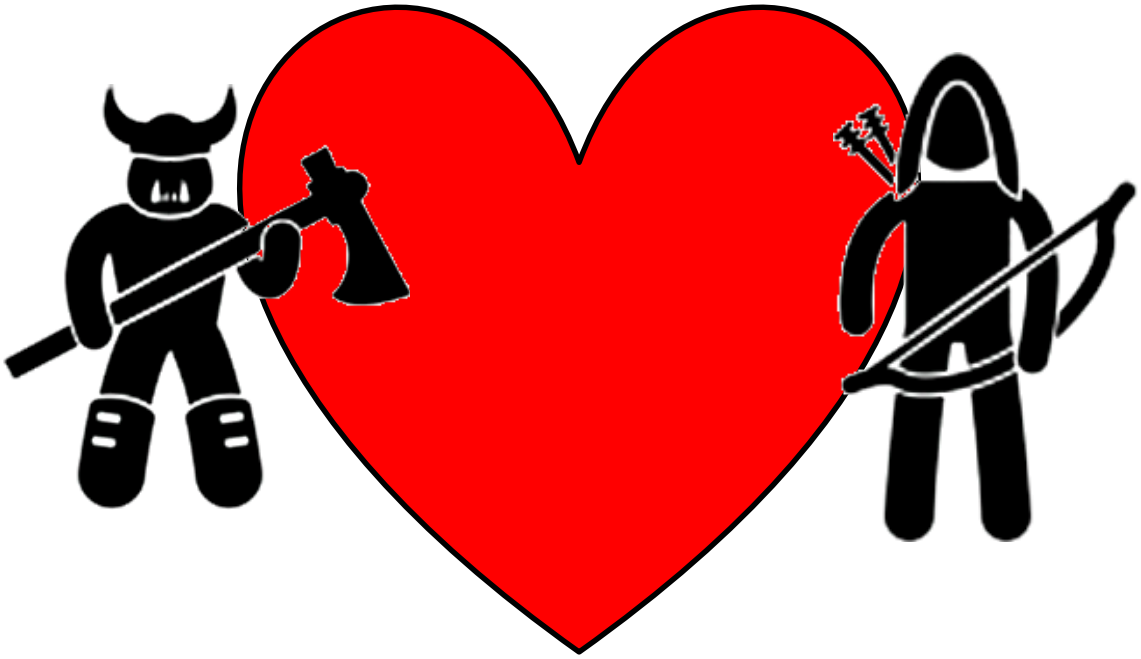
Player CRAFTS temple of old gods



Passion #3: Wants temple of new gods built

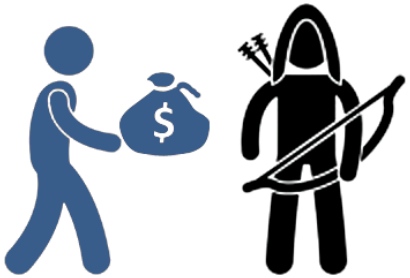
But You're Damned if you do, Damned if you Don't

LET'S TALK ABOUT THE LOVE THAT DARE NOT SPEAK ITS NAME?



You can Please Some of the Orcs, some of the time…

Juliet the orc is in LOVE with Romeo

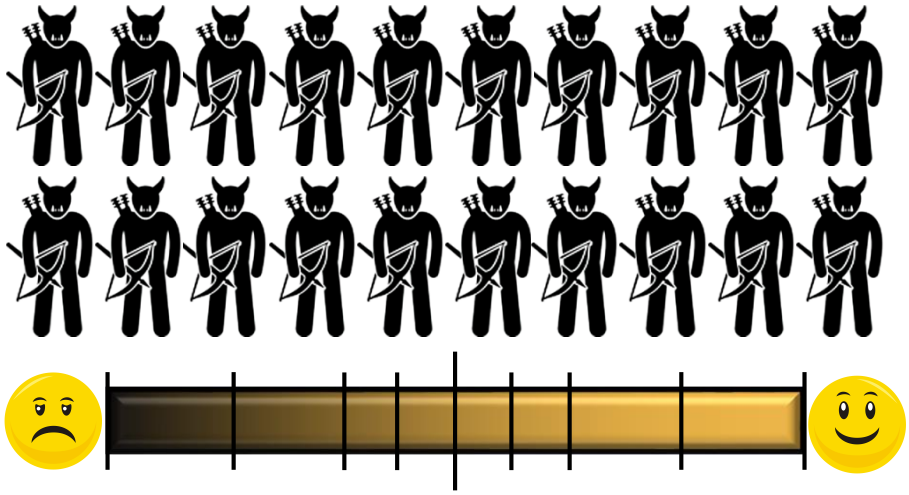


Player helps Romeo

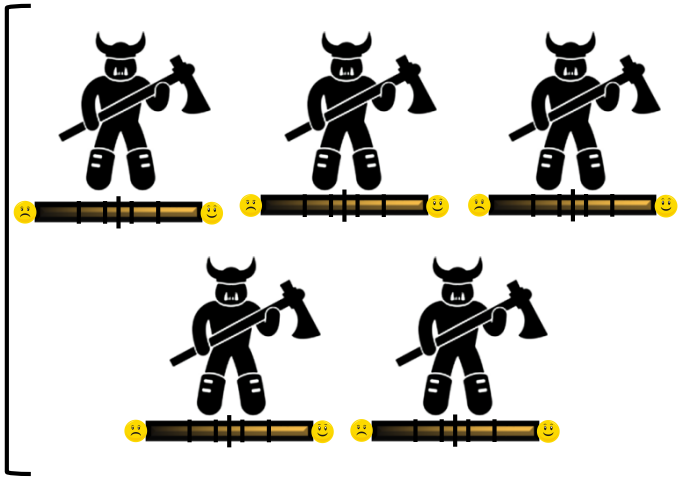
Juliet's approval of Player (re: Romeo) goes up

Only 20 Characters? No, only 20 Stars.

Drone's Macro Passion



is a function of



Guards, Hirelings, Scouts, Spies, Foragers, etc.

Rewards along the Macro line…

Accomplishments:

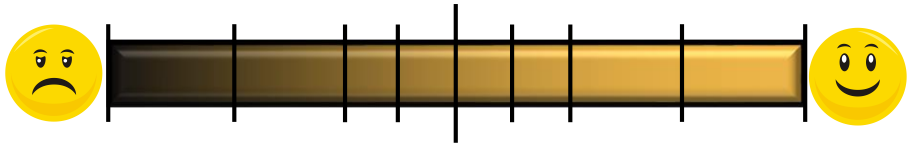
- KILL X
- RESCUE X
- COLLECT resource X
- CRAFT item/building X
- FIND item X
- DESTROY item X
- WORSHIP god X
- ANGER village X
- PLEASE village X
- Mini-games (fishing, etc.)
- Traditional achievements

Rewards:

- Price adjustment
- Combat help
- Resources
- Buff player/buildings
- Gossip (reveals new Passion)
- Loan equipment
- Give equipment
- Support of Drones (hirelings)
- Appearance of new Stars
- Disrupt hostile Stars

Punishments

- Price adjustment (-)
- Ambushes
- Embargoes
- De-Buffs
- Attack Player Buildings
- Hostile Drones
- Gossip (reveals new Passion)



Dramatic Event: Appearance of Unaligned Stars

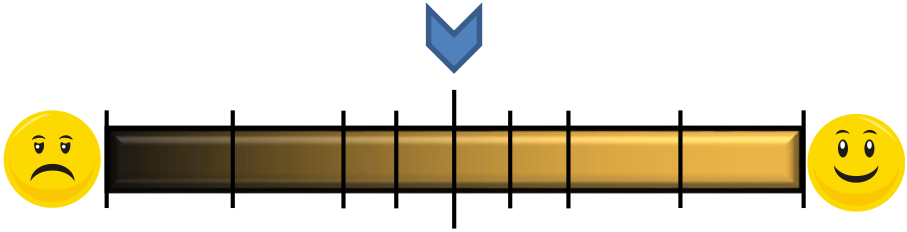
Two orc Stars disapprove of Player

Any three Stars approve of Player

Red dragon appears
to Player

Unaligned Stars

Red Dragon

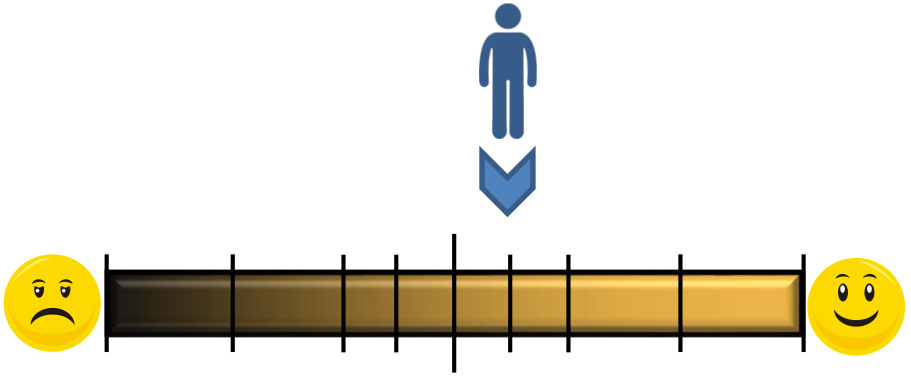


Macro Passion: Loves violent/hates constructive activities

Unaligned Stars

Red Dragon

Player KILLS elves

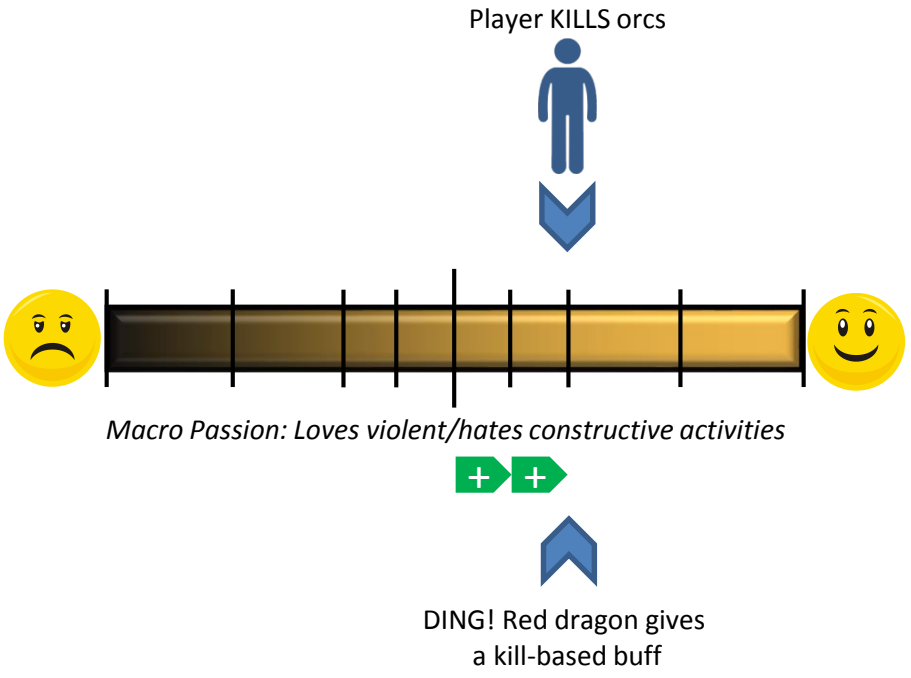


Macro Passion: Loves violent/hates constructive activities

DING! Red dragon shows up
in battle to help

Unaligned Stars

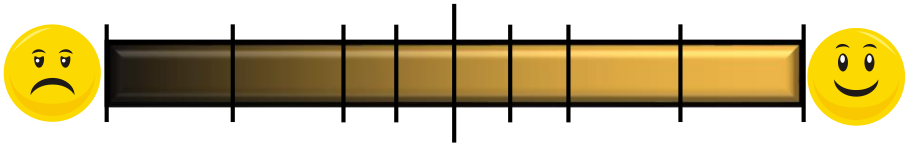
Red Dragon



Unaligned Stars

Red Dragon

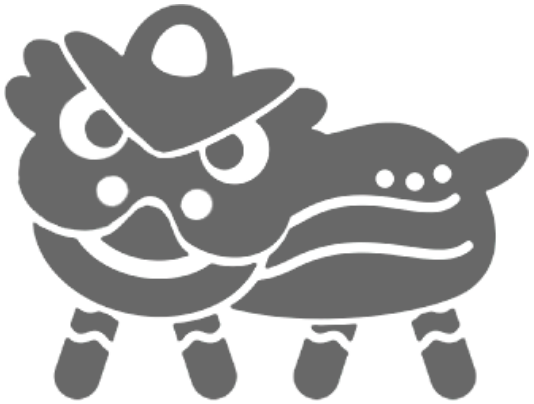
Player STARTS dwarf-goblin war



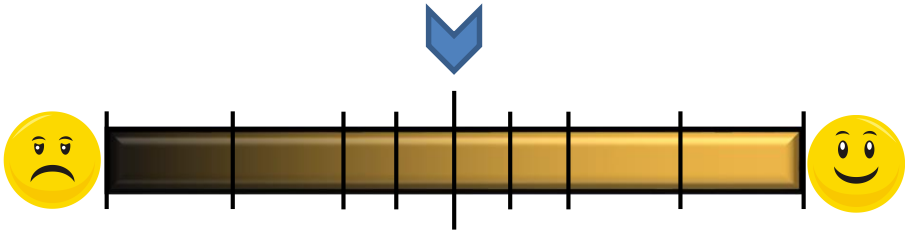
Macro Passion: Loves violent/hates constructive activities

DING! Red dragon offers to destroy building in Player's choice of village (Player still owns action, though)

Unaligned Stars

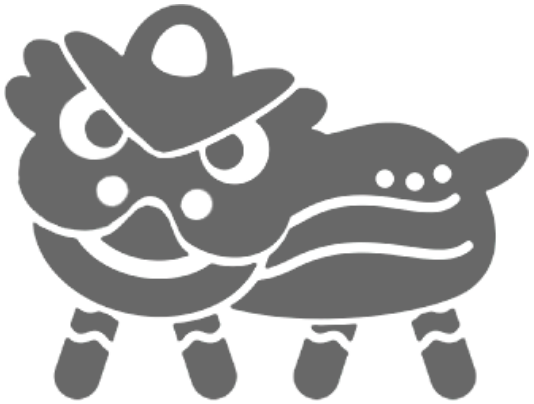


Silver Dragon



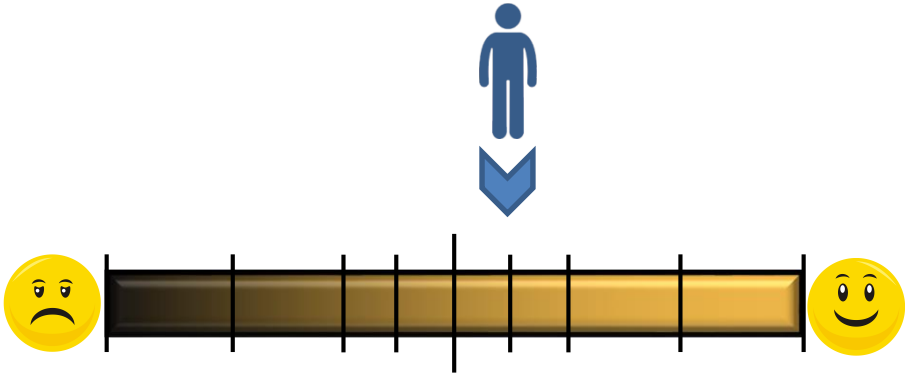
Macro Passion: Loves constructive/hates violent activities

Unaligned Stars



Silver Dragon

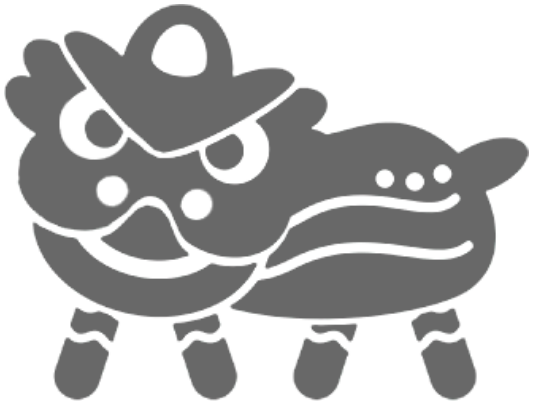
Player CRAFTS field of wheat in orc village



Macro Passion: Loves constructive/hates violent activities

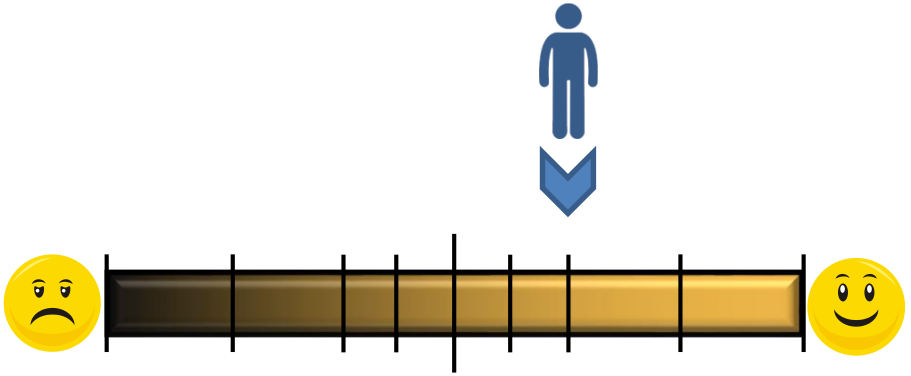
DING! Silver dragon gives
a defensive buff

Unaligned Stars



Silver Dragon

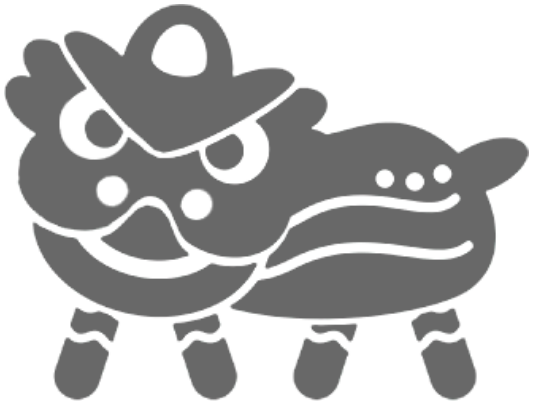
Player CRAFTS hospital in elf village



Macro Passion: Loves constructive/hates violent activities

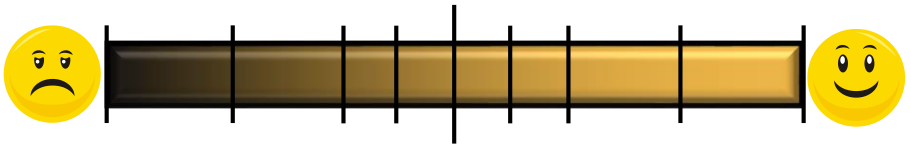
DING! Silver dragon makes new quests available

Unaligned Stars



Silver Dragon

Player PREVENTS dwarf-goblin war



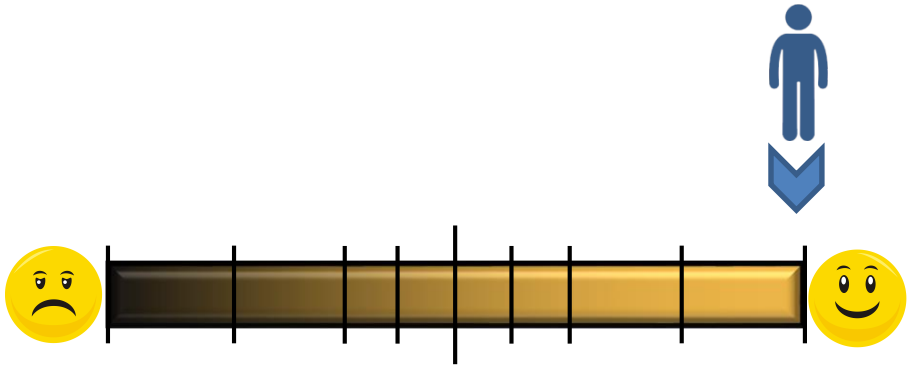
Macro Passion: Loves constructive/hates violent activities

DING! Silver dragon offers to give buff to Player's choice of village (Player still owns action, though)

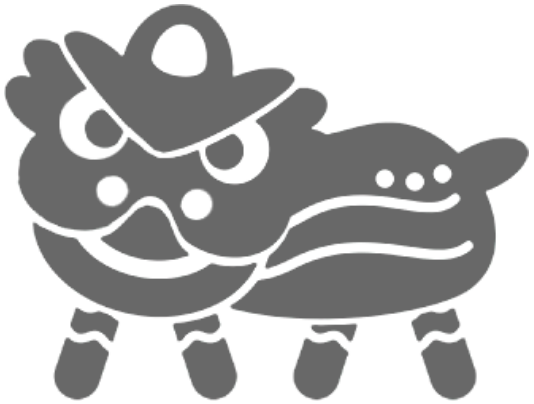
Zero-Sum Game Between Dragons

Red Dragon

Player STARTS dwarf-goblin war

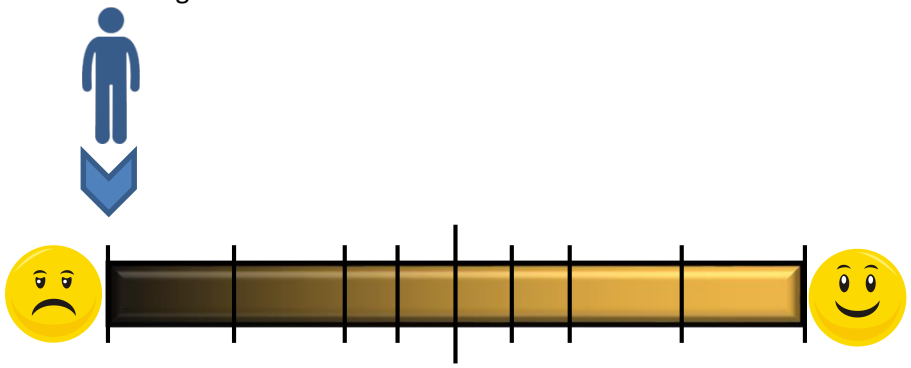


Macro Passion: Loves violent/hates constructive activities



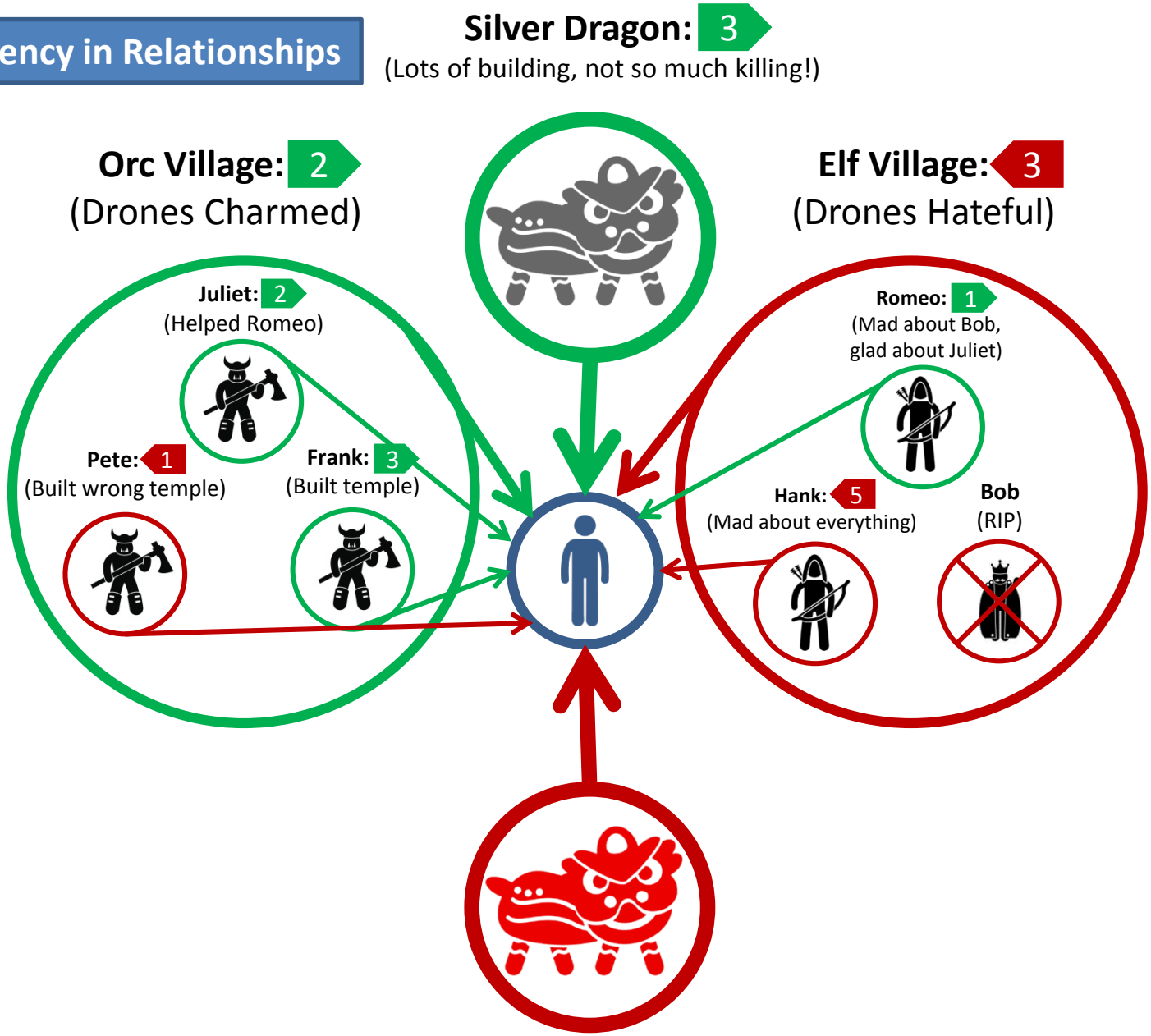
Silver Dragon

Player STARTS dwarf-goblin war

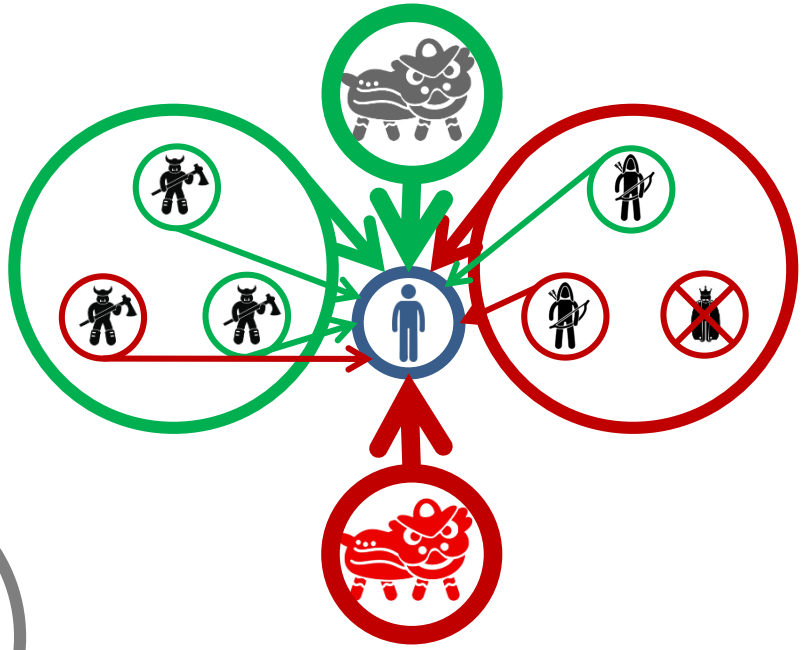


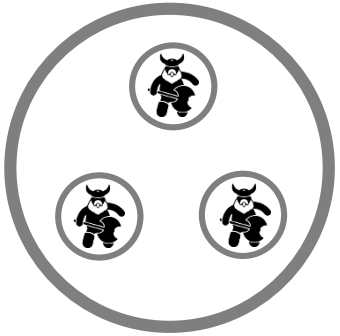
Macro Passion: Loves constructive/hates violent activities

Transparency in Relationships

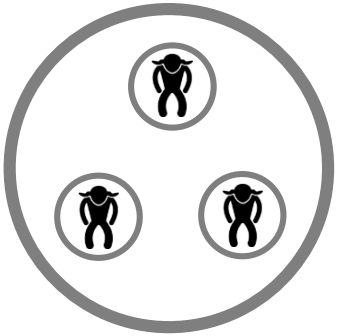


What Happens When We Add?



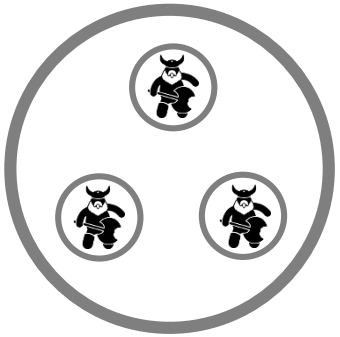


DWARVES!

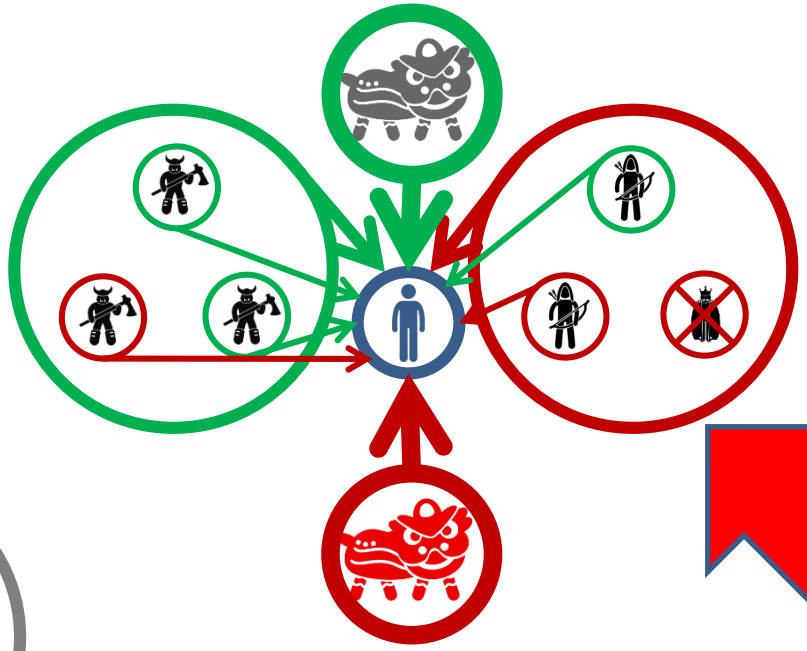


GOBLINS!

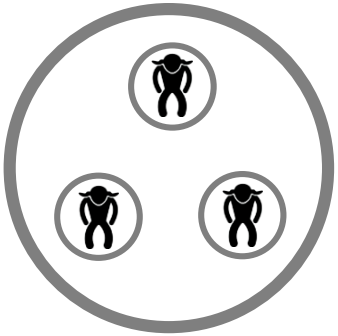
Or Somebody EVERYONE HATES?



DWARVES!

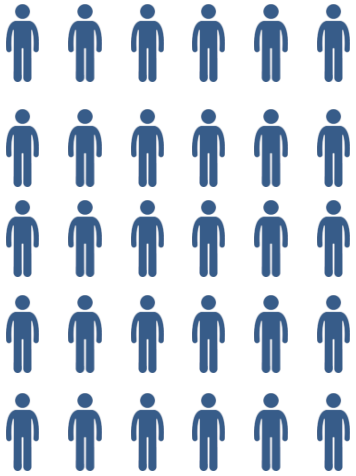


BRAINS?



GOBLINS!

SPAWNED BY CONFLUENCE OF MACRO PASSIONS:



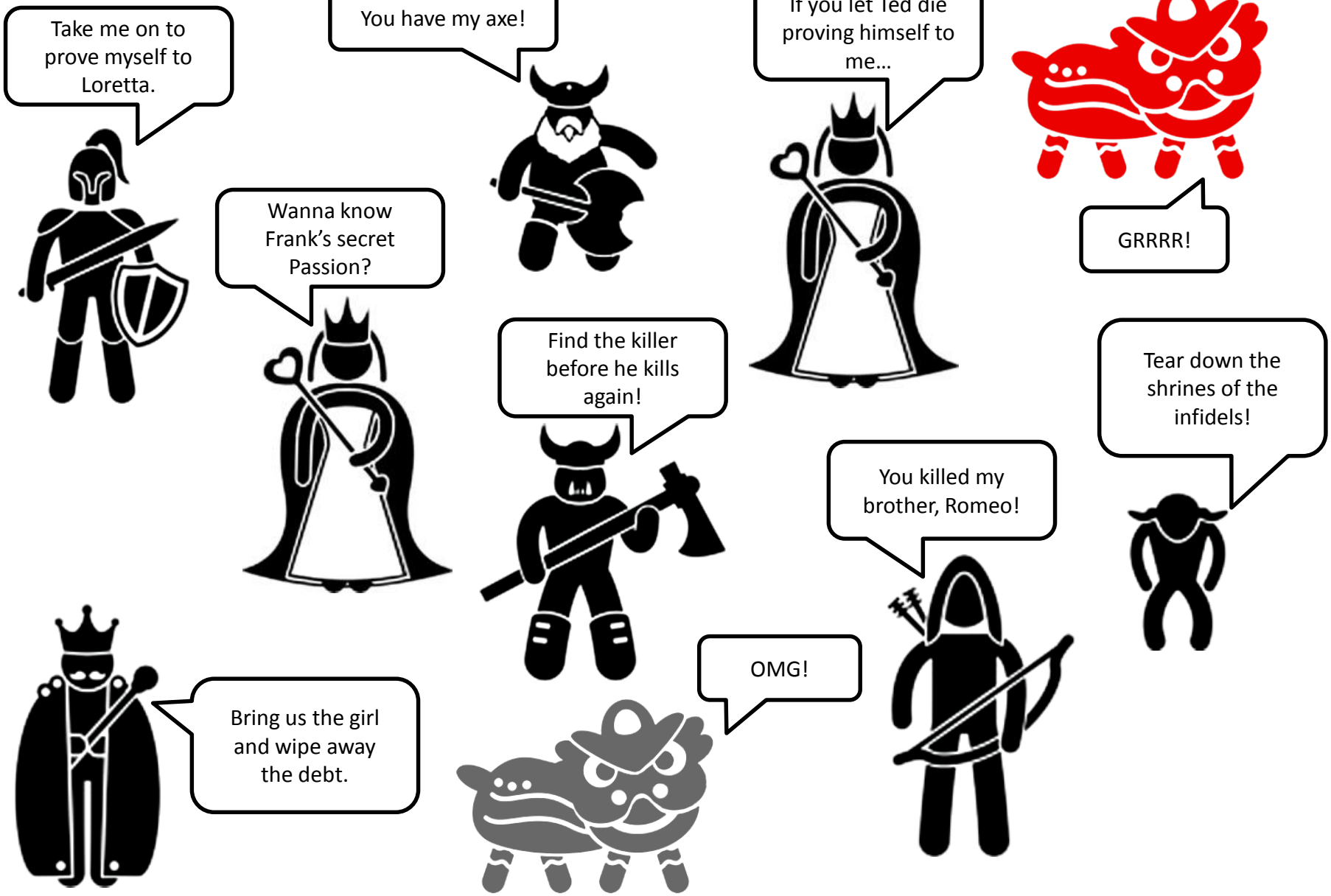
Wait a Minute...

Wasn’t this a talk about narrative?

Yes.
But REPLAYABLE Narrative
first needs a system to:

- Build a web of nearly infinite relationship states.
- And to allow changes in those states to “fire off” professionally created and crafted content.

Passion Thresholds Cause Pro-Written and -Recorded Animated Content to Trigger



Detailed Example

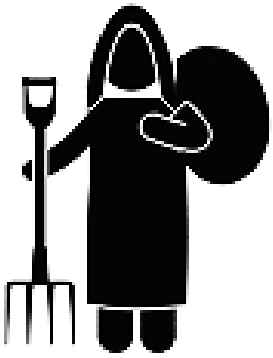
Betty

Veronica

“The Triangle”

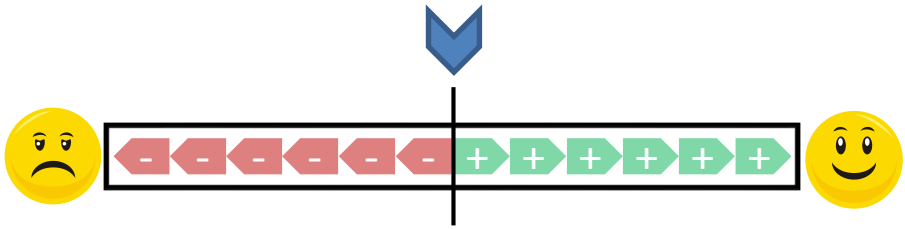
Veronica the Elf

Elf princess

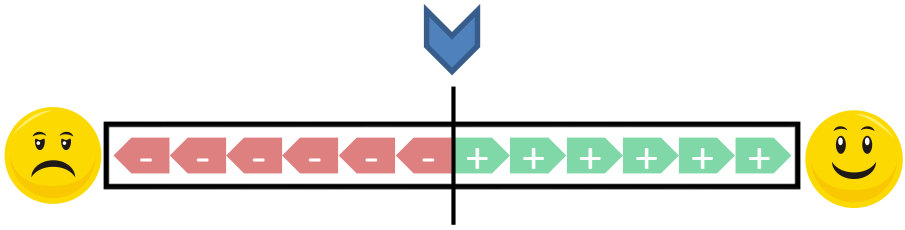


Betty the Dwarf

Dwarf Village Farmer



Passion #1:Looking for Marriage

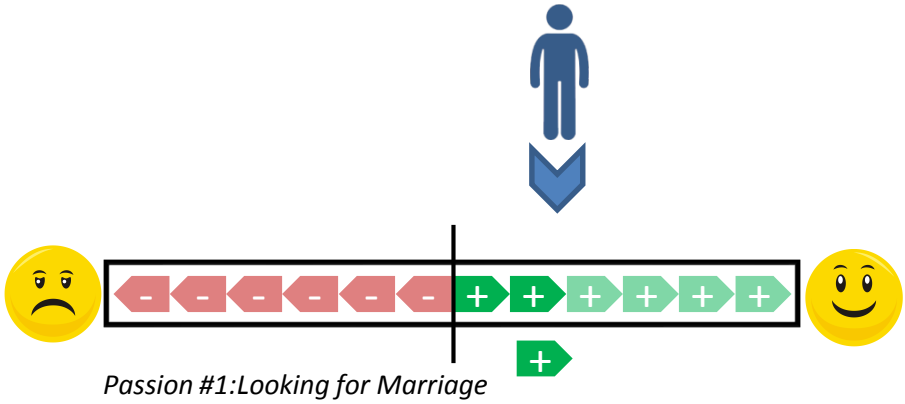


Passion #1:Looking for Marriage

Veronica the Elf

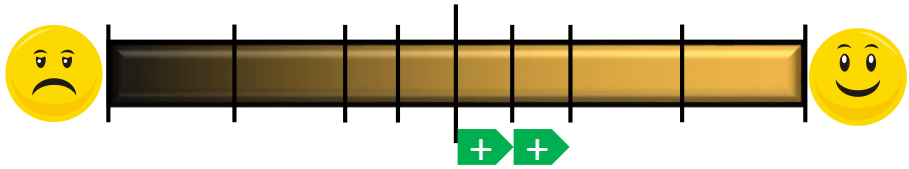
Elf princess

Player travels and MEETS Veronica's parents



Passion #1:Looking for Marriage

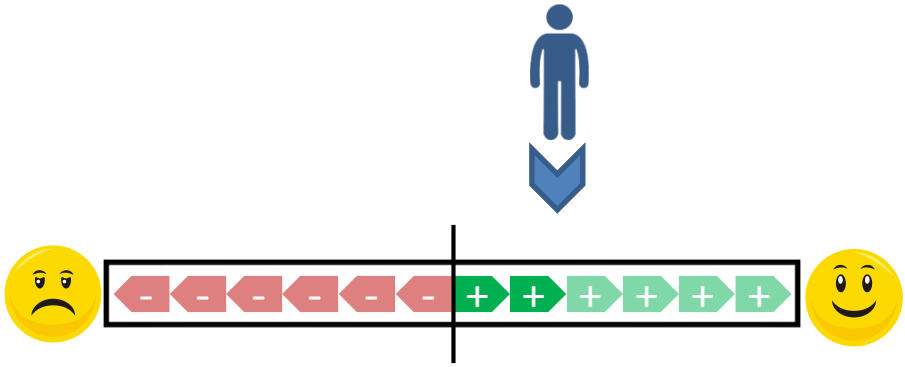
DING! Veronica gives Player
+10 mithril sword



Betty the Dwarf

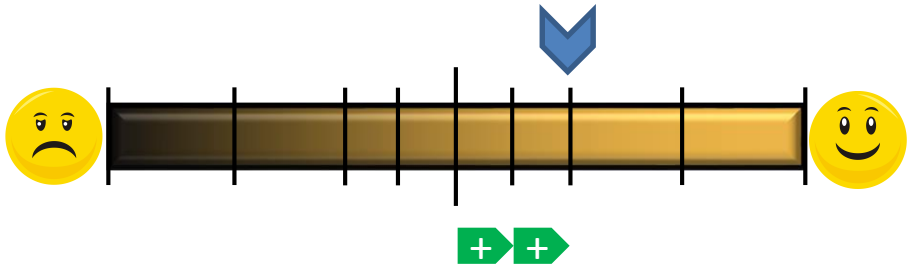
Dwarf Village Farmer

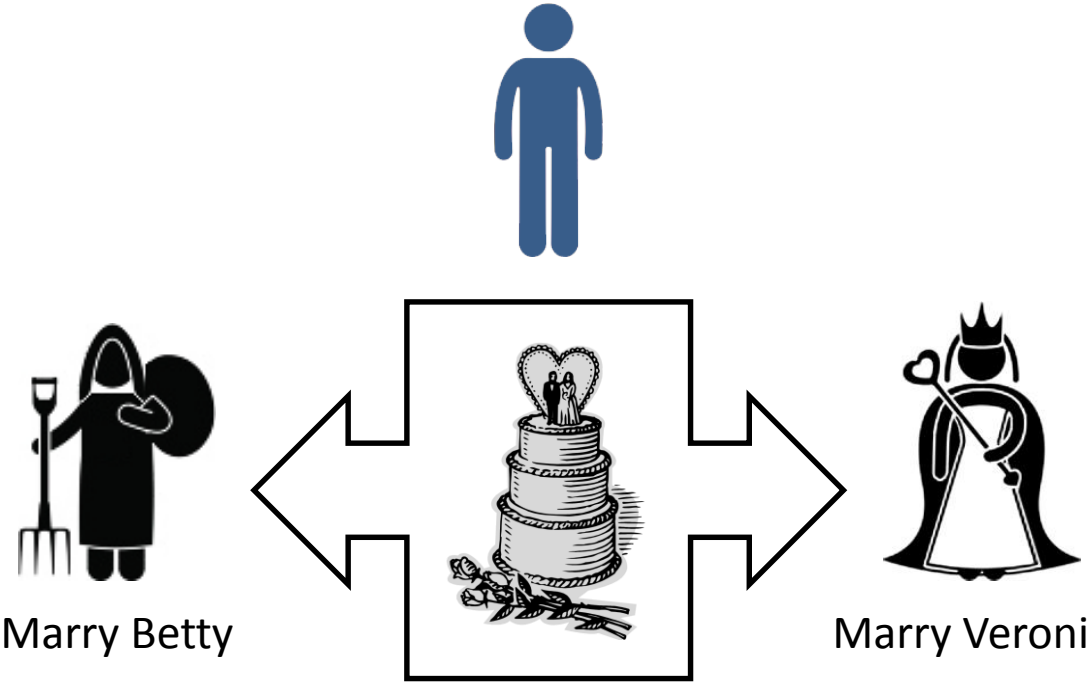
Player CRAFTS Betty a house



Passion #1:Looking for Marriage

DING! Betty gives Player +10 approval throughout elf village





Marry Betty

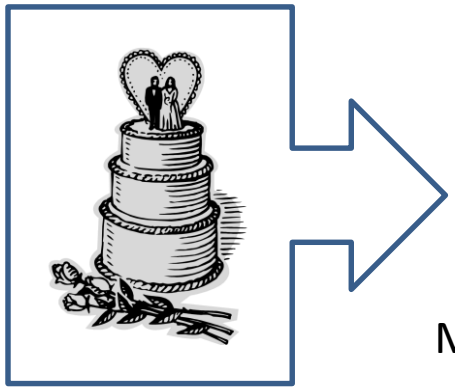
Marry Veronica

Crafting Benefits (Dwarf)

Combat Benefits (Elf)

Marry Betty

(Crafting Benefits (Dwarf))



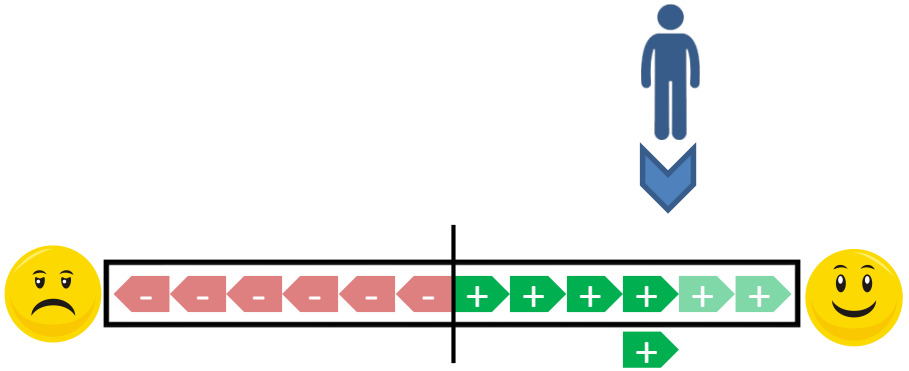
Marry Veronica

(Combat Benefits (Elf))

Veronica the Elf

Elf princess

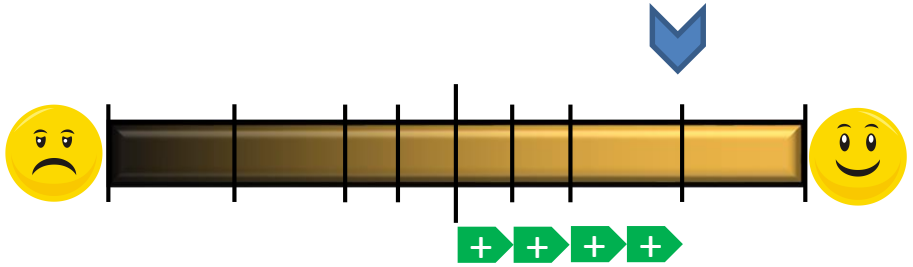
Player CRAFTS Veronica an enchanted garden



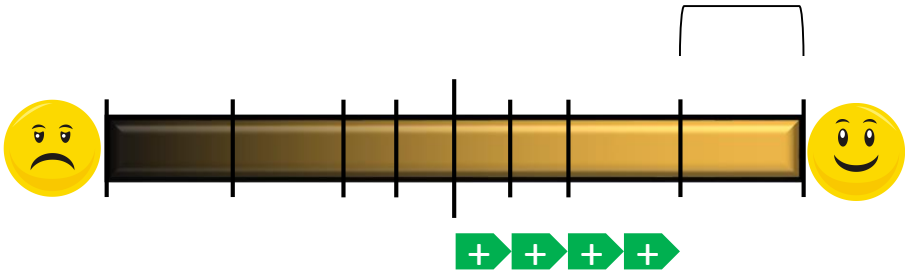
Passion #1:Looking for Marriage

DING! Veronica proposes to Player

Unlocks wedding quest



Wedding quest
Craft tuxedo
Craft chapel
Priest's Macro Bar Threshold
Find Ring in Dungeon



Veronica the Elf

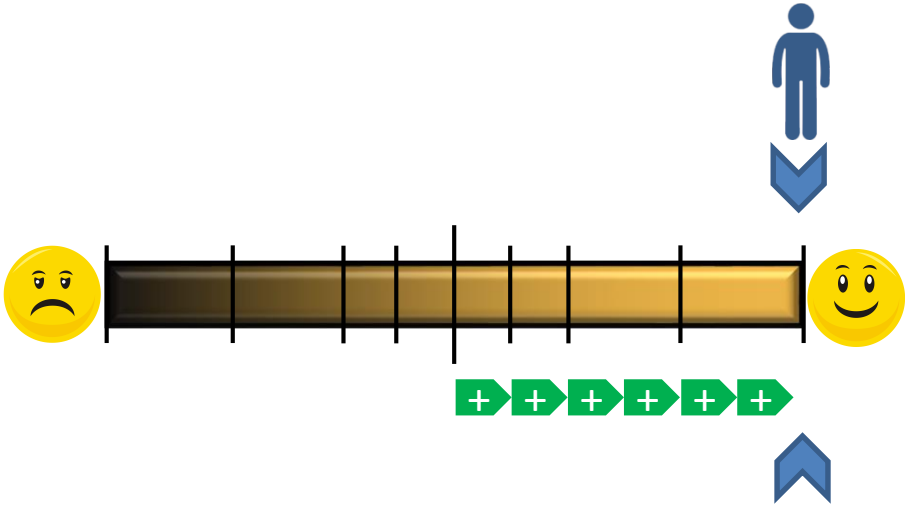
Elf princess

Happily Ever After

Veronica the Elf

Elf princess

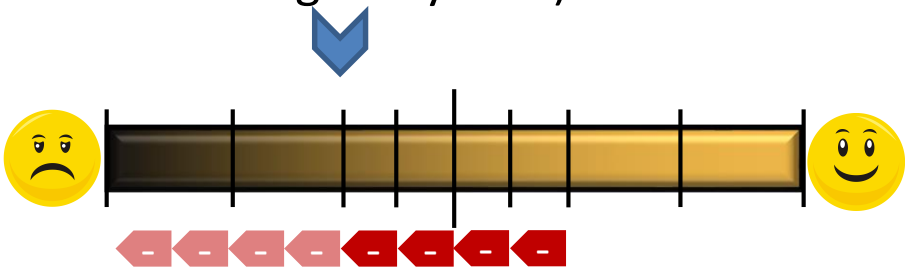
Completes Quest MARRIES Veronica

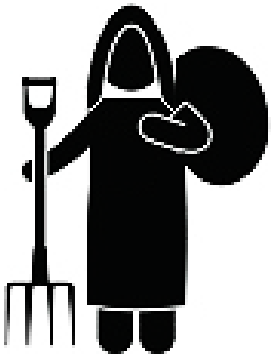


DING! Veronica gives Player
combat buff,
1,000 gold, and Family Castle

I Feel like I'm losing Him

Un-Ding! Betty removes Buff from player that Benefitted All Passion Interactions with Dwarves (from when player was leading Betty on…)



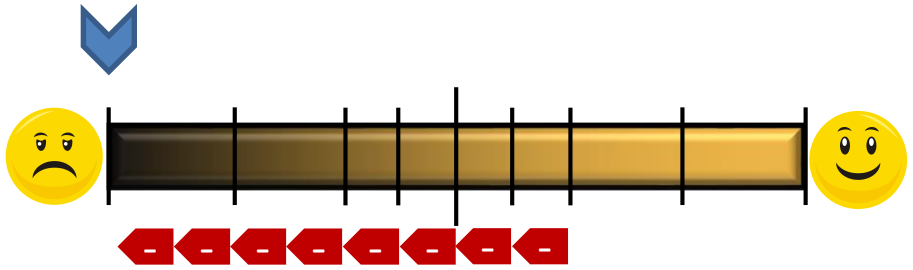


Betty the Dwarf

Dwarf Village Farmer

A Woman Scorned

UN-DING! Player can no longer craft crops in Dwarf village

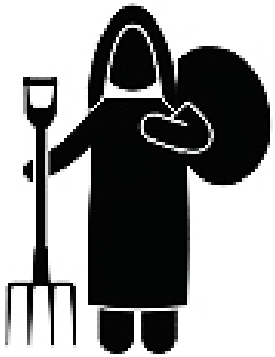


Betty the Dwarf

Dwarf Village Farmer

Here's the thing….

Personality wise, the player much preferred the character of Betty and wanted to spend more time with her questing, interacting….



Betty the Dwarf

Dwarf Village Farmer

But Veronica's castle is really awesome and yields better tools for the player's class/strategy.

Veronica the Elf

Elf princess

With Good Writing, player should have to make physical gain vs. emotional fulfillment decisions.

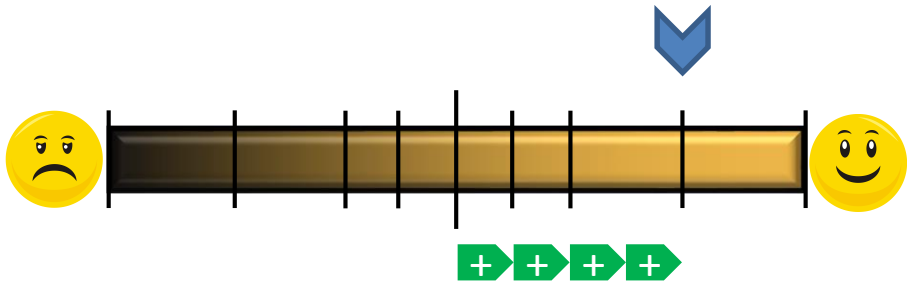
Which leads to false friends, leading others on, betrayal, reconciliation.

But driven by YOU.

Still Waters Run Deep

- Hidden Passions are NOT TRANSPARENT at first.
- They are resource which the Player can work to reveal (getting to know someone).

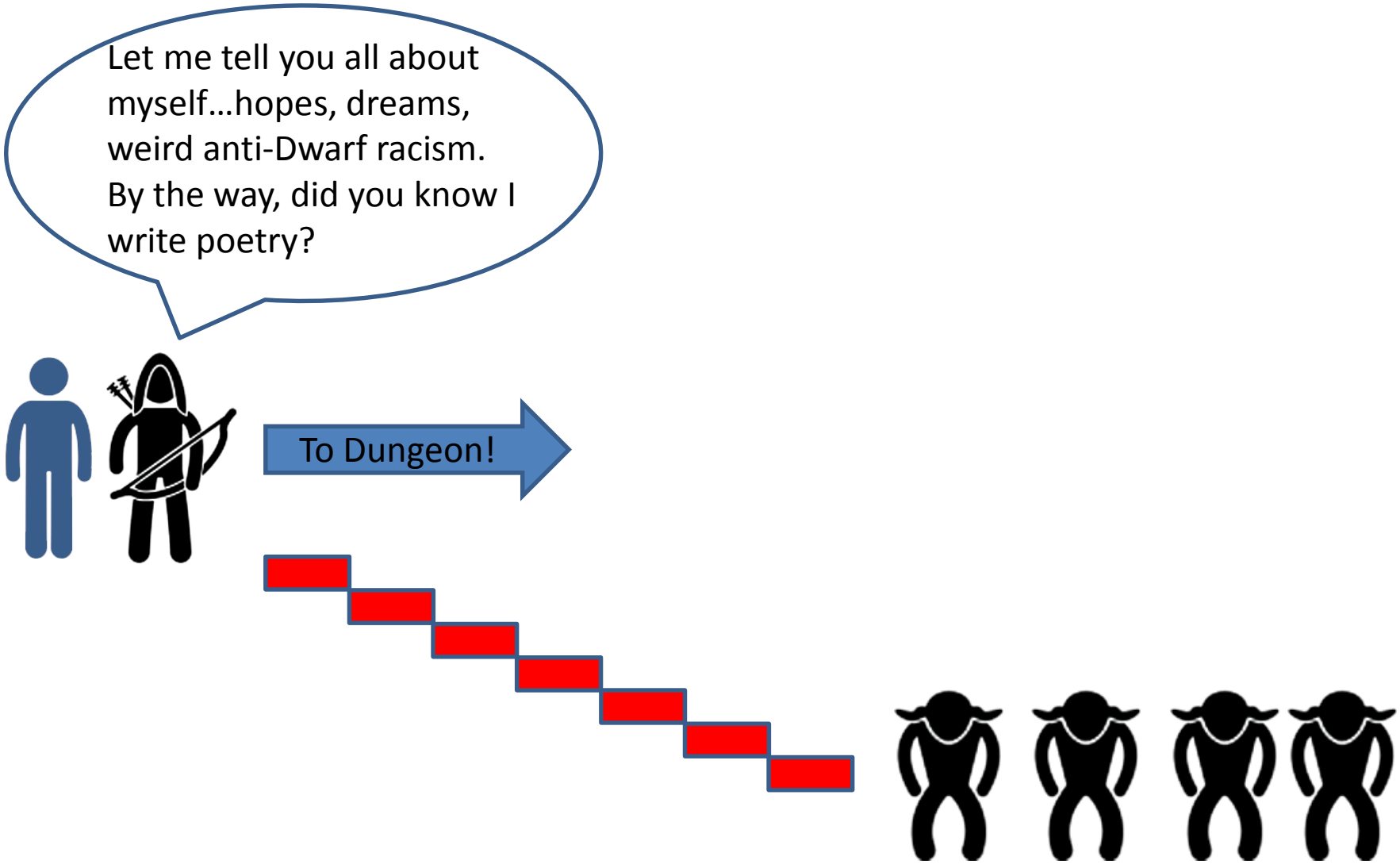
DING! Romeo
invites Player
to go on a quest



Romeo the Elf

Elf prince

Romeo's Player Approval Prompts Him to Reveal His Hidden Passion

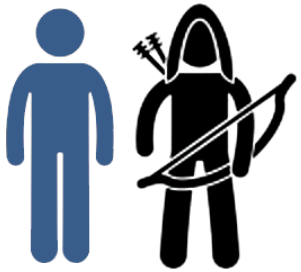


Romeo's Player Approval Prompts Him to Reveal His Hidden Passion

Killing all of these goblins together has cemented our friendship.

I feel as if I can reveal my secret PASSION:

I am in love with Juliet the orc!

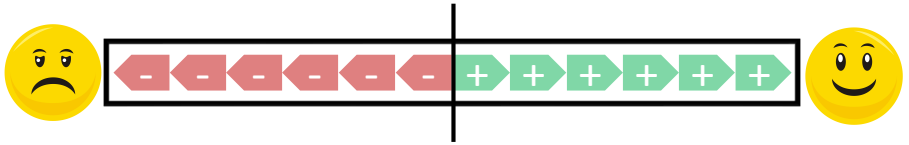


Uh-Oh…I spent a LOT of time beating up the orcs. Where should my loyalities lie?

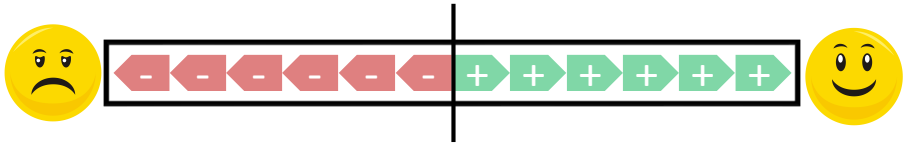
Ripples in the Pond

Romeo the Elf

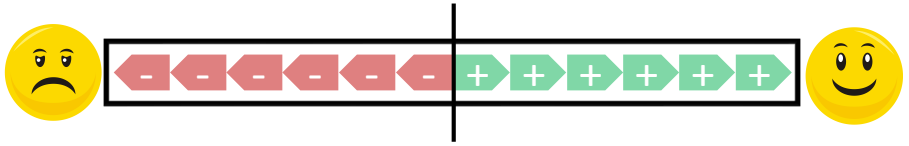
Elf prince



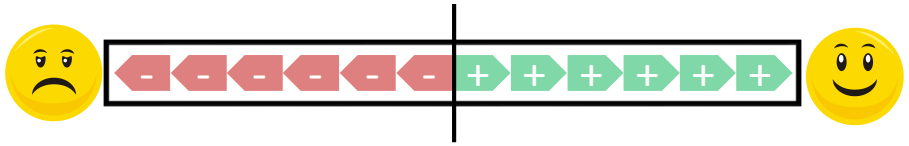
Passion #1: Hates orcs



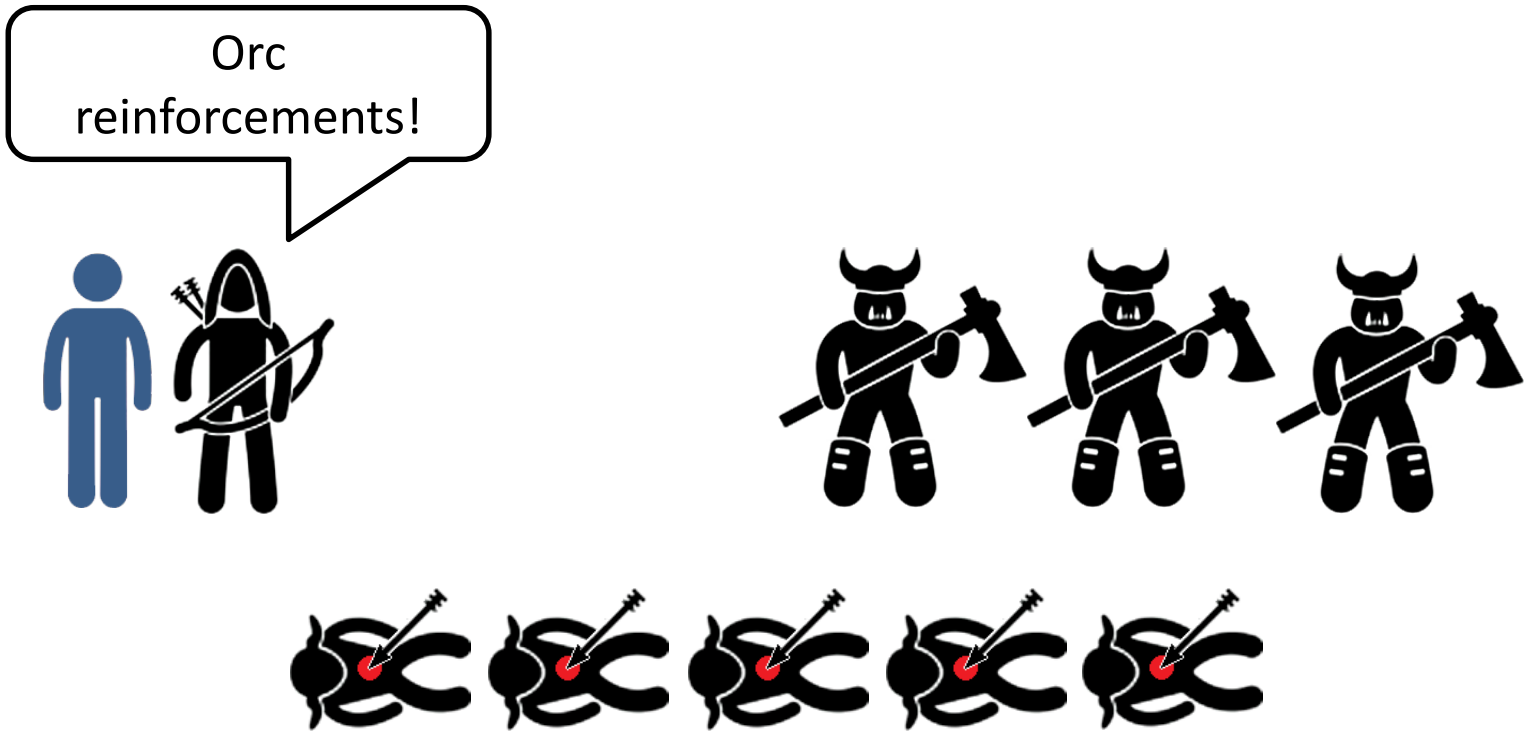
Passion #2: Wants to find his brother's killer



Passion #3: Wants to keep outsiders out of the elf forest



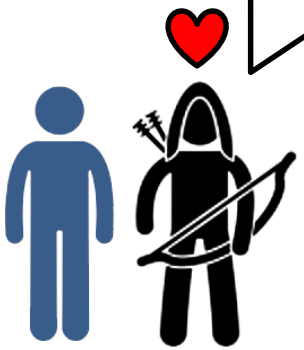
Passion #4: Loves Juliet the orc


Orc
reinforcements!

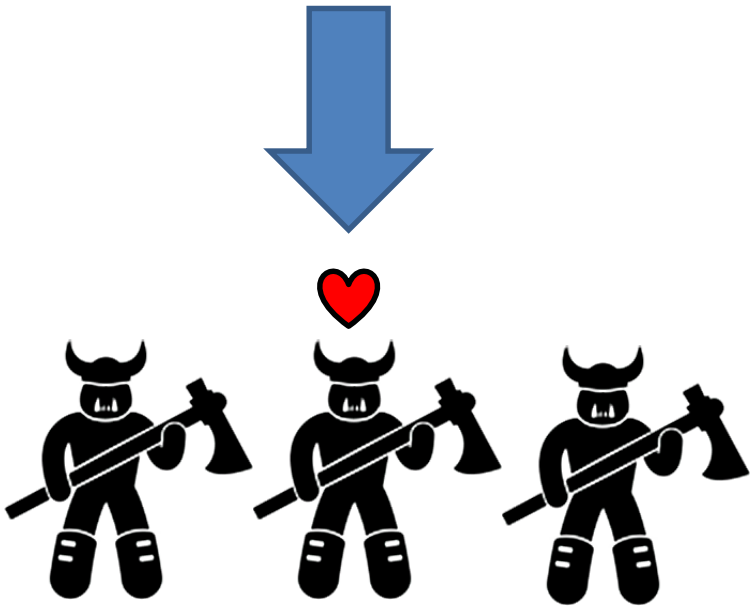
Romeo's Hidden Passion Affects the Quest

Passion #4: Loves Juliet the orc

Gasp! One of those orcs is Juliet, my secret love! Please, make sure she isn't harmed in the battle!

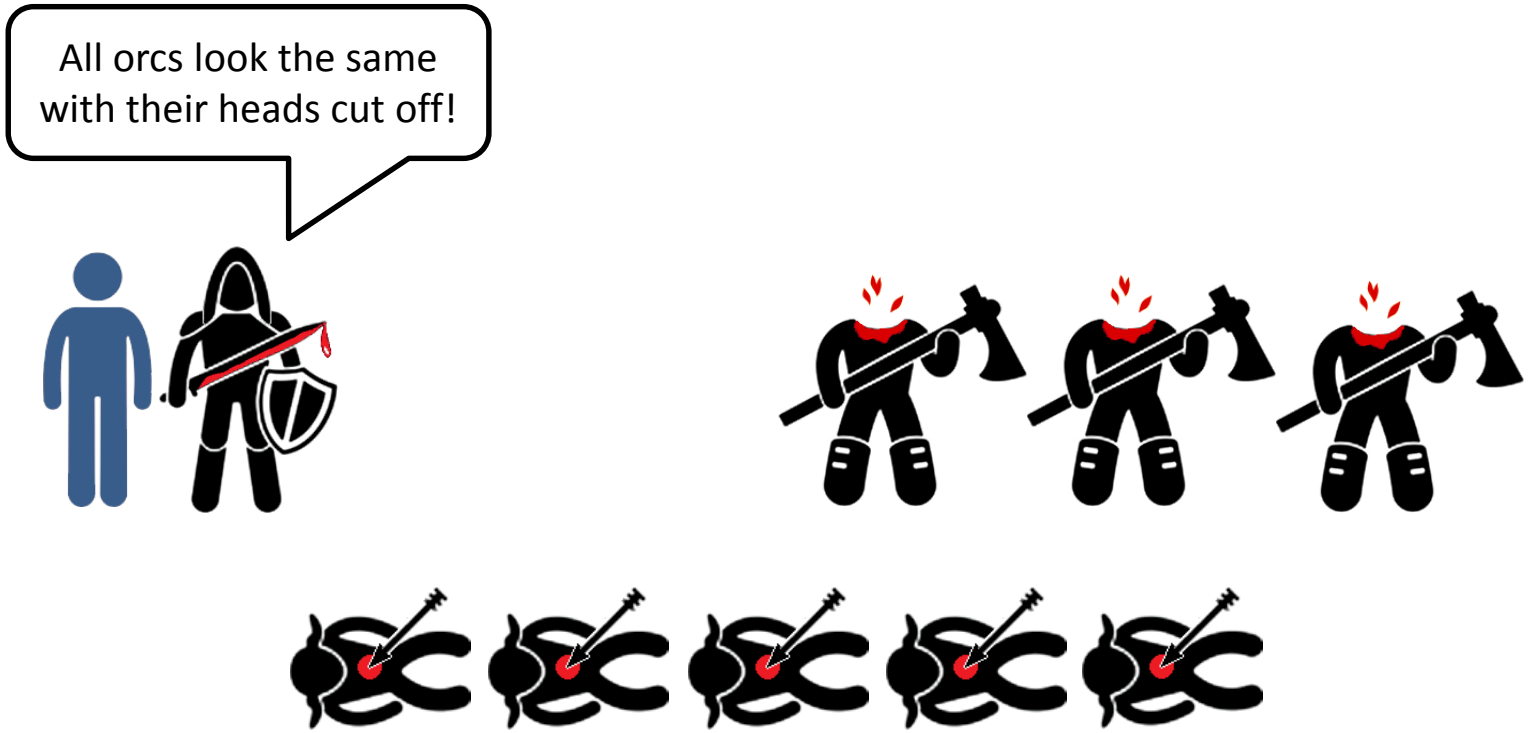


JULIET!



...Compared to a Star Without That Passion

Passion #1: Make orcs dead



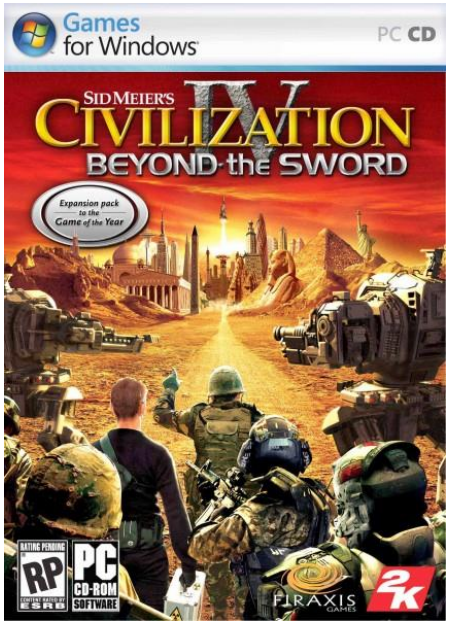
REPLAYABILITY

Add IN, Not ON

ADD ON

≠

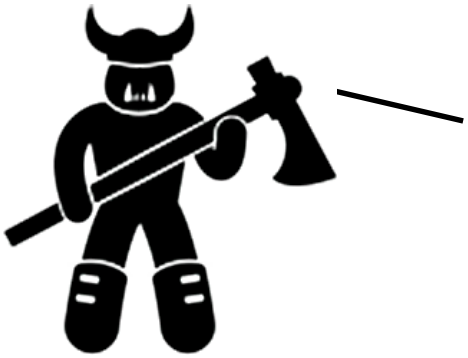
ADD IN



Ways to Encourage Replay

1. Player choice: Support different factions/Stars.
2. Player choice: Support the same factions/Stars to different extents.
3. New Passion make-ups drawn at random. NPCs are the same people, but their focus has changed.

Playthrough #1

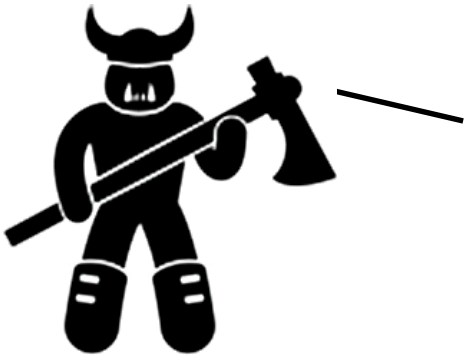


Frank the Orc

Orc village blacksmith

- Hates anyone who serves the silver dragon
- *Hates elves*
- Hates violence
- Secretly loves Juliet the orc
- Secretly loves Romeo the elf
- Wants pieces of the cat's eye medallion
- *Wants temple of old gods built*
- Wants flags of old gods to remain in their holy places
- *Wants to woo Barbara the orc*
- Wants peace between the dwarves and goblins
- Wants to put all other blacksmiths out of business
- Wants to rule the orc village

Playthrough #2



Frank the Orc

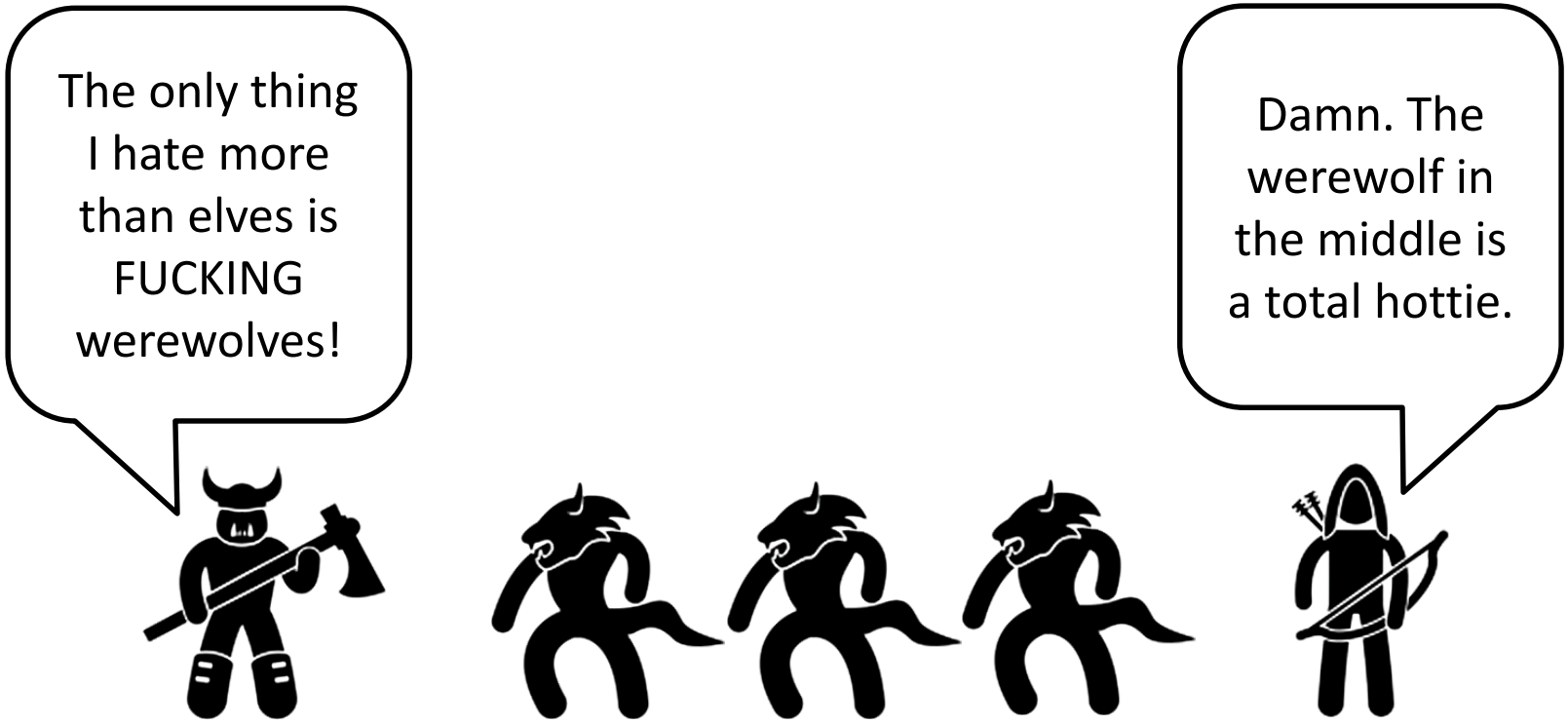
Orc village blacksmith

- Hates anyone who serves the silver dragon
- *Hates elves*
- Hates violence
- Secretly loves Juliet the orc
- *Secretly loves Romeo the elf*
- *Wants pieces of the cat's eye medallion*
- Wants temple of old gods built
- Wants flags of old gods to remain in their holy places
- Wants to woo Barbara the orc
- Wants peace between the dwarves and goblins
- Wants to put all other blacksmiths out of business
- Wants to rule the orc village

Ways to Encourage Replay

1. Player choice: Support different factions/Stars.
2. Player choice: Support the same factions/Stars to different extents.
3. New Passion make-ups drawn at random.
4. New Stars, Passions, quests, etc. available over time.

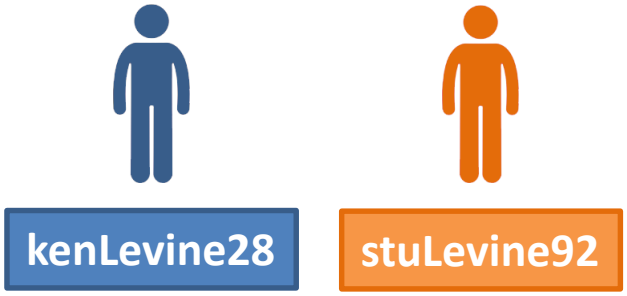
New Content ADDS IN to Game



Ways to Encourage Replay

1. Player choice: Support different factions/Stars.
2. Player choice: Support the same factions/Stars to different extents.
3. New Passion make-ups drawn at random.
4. New Stars, Passions, quests, etc. introduced over time (add-in content).
5. Co-op multiplayer?

Multiplayer



Multiplayer

Romeo the elf sends elves to attack kenLevine28 because he hates him!

Help me, Stu!

kenLevine28

stuLevine92

Multiplayer

Romeo the elf sends elves to attack kenLevine28 because he hates him!

Help me, Stu!

kenLevine28

I love my brother IRL. But I value my relationships with the elves more...

stuLevine92

Multiplayer

Romeo the elf sends elves to attack kenLevine28 because he hates him!

(Shuffles off mortal coil)

kenLevine28

S'up elves? Tell Romeo I'll see him later!

stuLevine92

Yup, that’s all I got.