

Everything Means Something: The Creative and Destructive Potential of Themes

Kyla Fury & Mike Sennott
EVC Games



- I. Narrative as Game Theory
- II. Picking an Actionable Theme
- III. Supporting a Theme as a Writer
- IV. Coordinating Your Theme With Your Team
- V. Theme Testing and Iteration

Theme (n): What a game is about.

- The Dictionary (attr.)



Story Time:

How the theme of Wintermoor went very wrong





GDC[®]

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21

NEWS

[Home](#) | [Coronavirus](#) | [Video](#) | [World](#) | [US & Canada](#) | [UK](#) | [Business](#) | [Tech](#) | [Science](#) | [Stories](#) | [Live](#)[US & Canada](#)

Toronto van attack: 'Incel' killer Minassian pleads not criminally responsible

GDC[®]

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21



**Historical
Reenactment Club**

**Bodybuilders
Anonymous**

**Society for the
Preservation of
Hoop and Stick**

Sunday Funnies Club

Young Monarchists

**League of Extraordinary
Temperance**

**Future Veterans
of Foreign Wars**

**Reckless
Baking Club**



Knitting Club

Psychic Detectives

**Association of Individuals
Improving Baseball**

Model UN

Fencing Team



Wintermoor's student clubs turned against one another, and began to vanish from the earth.



GDC

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21

“You are more than your club.”



GDC

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21

“You are more than your club.”



“You are more than your club.”



“You are more than your club.”



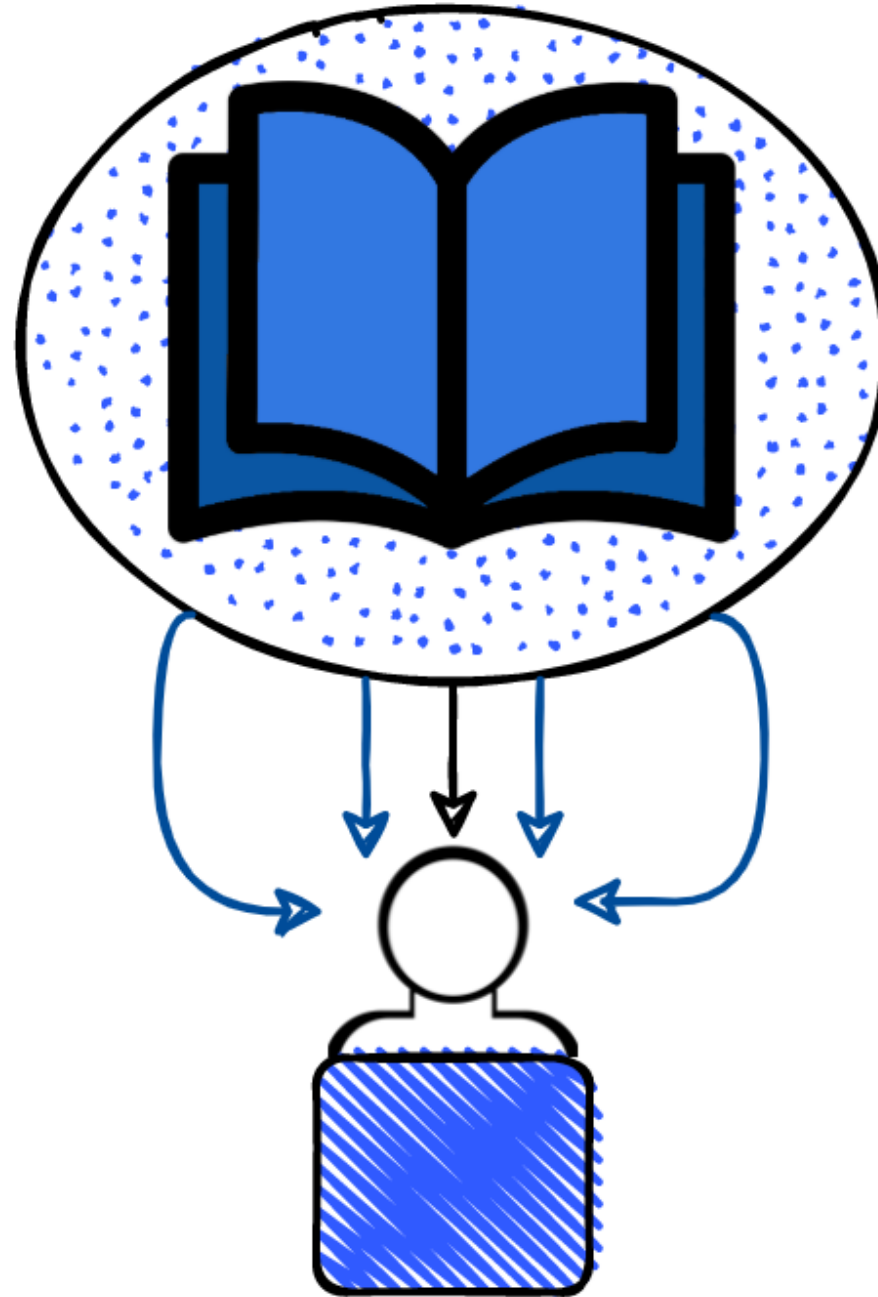
I: Narrative as Game Theory



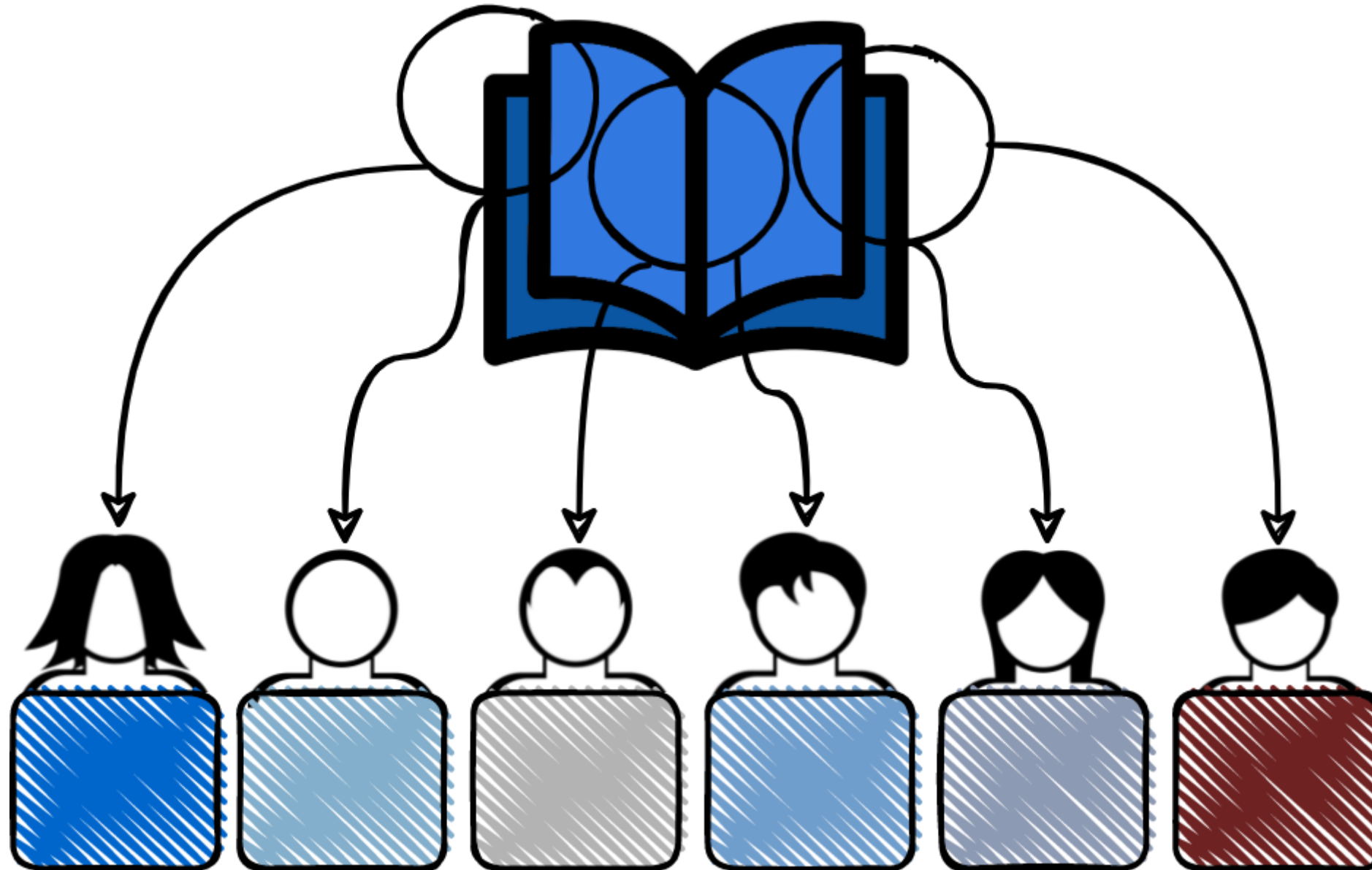
GDC[®]

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21

The ideal



What actually happens

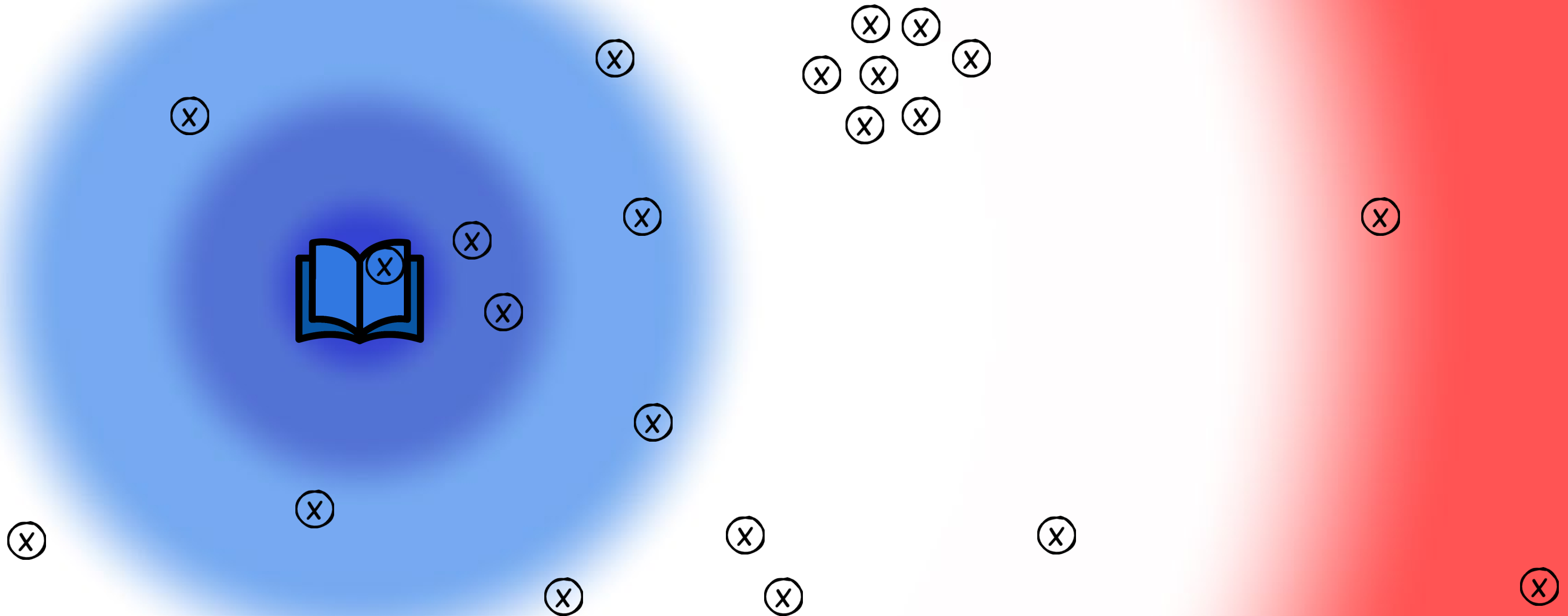


Narrative game theory*

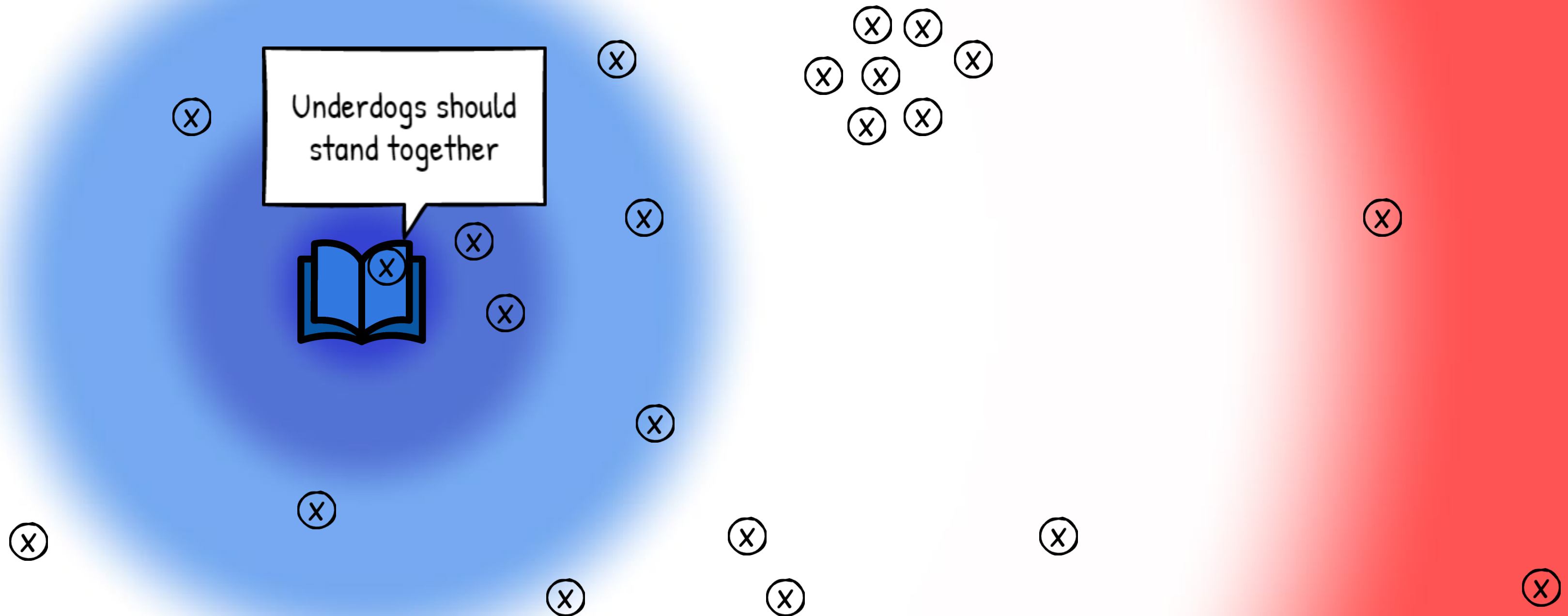


*we are not economists

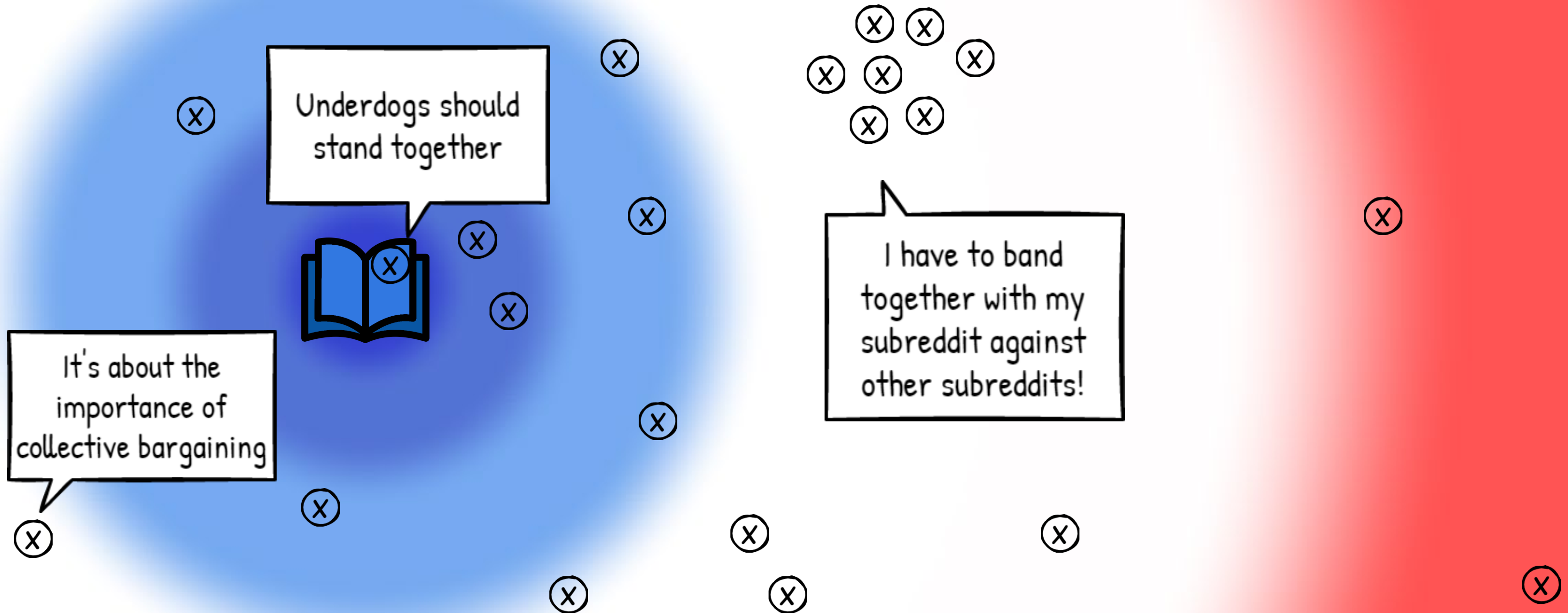
Narrative game theory



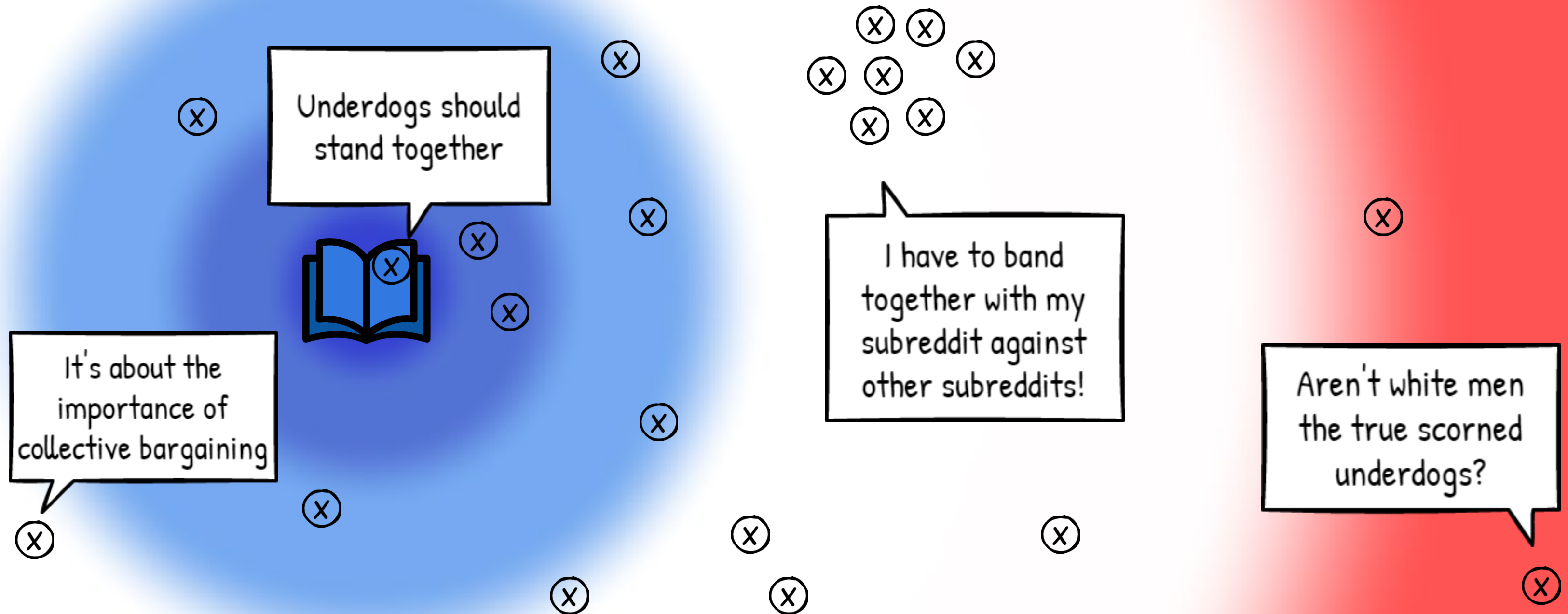
Narrative game theory



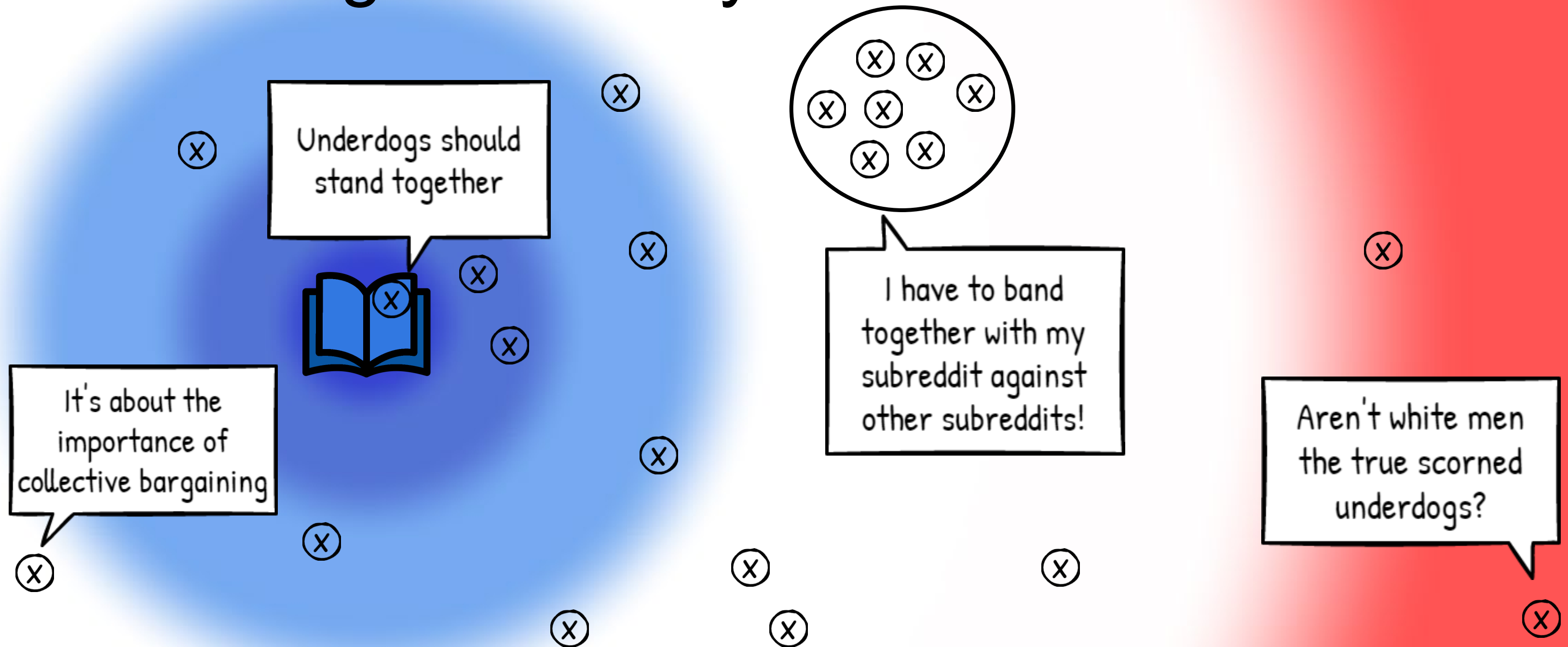
Narrative game theory



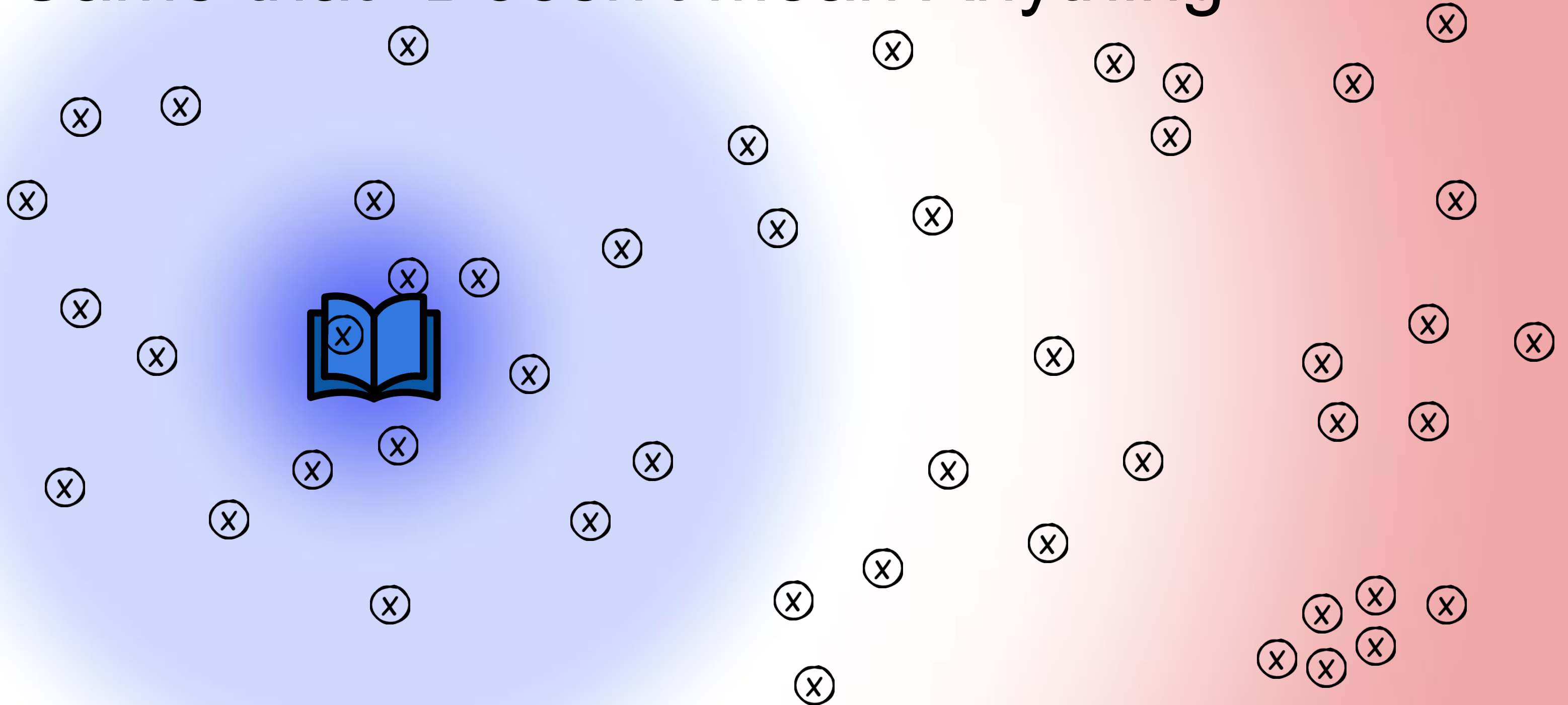
Narrative game theory



Narrative game theory



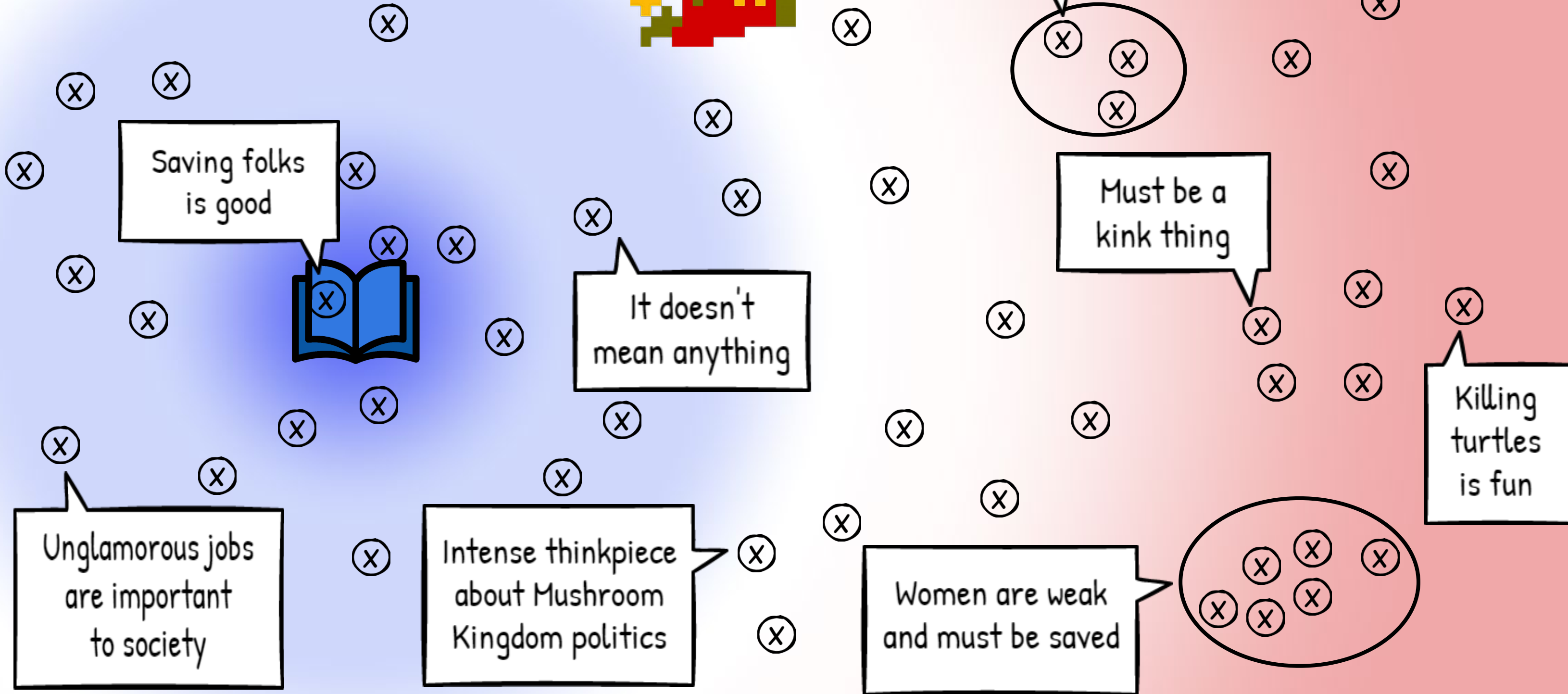
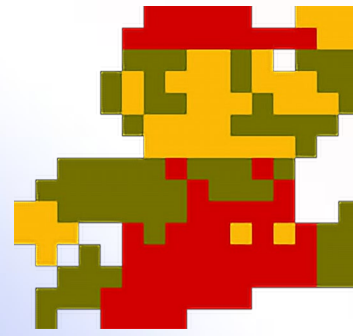
Game that "Doesn't Mean Anything"



GDC[®]

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21

Super Mario Bros



Game theory is empathy*



?

?

?

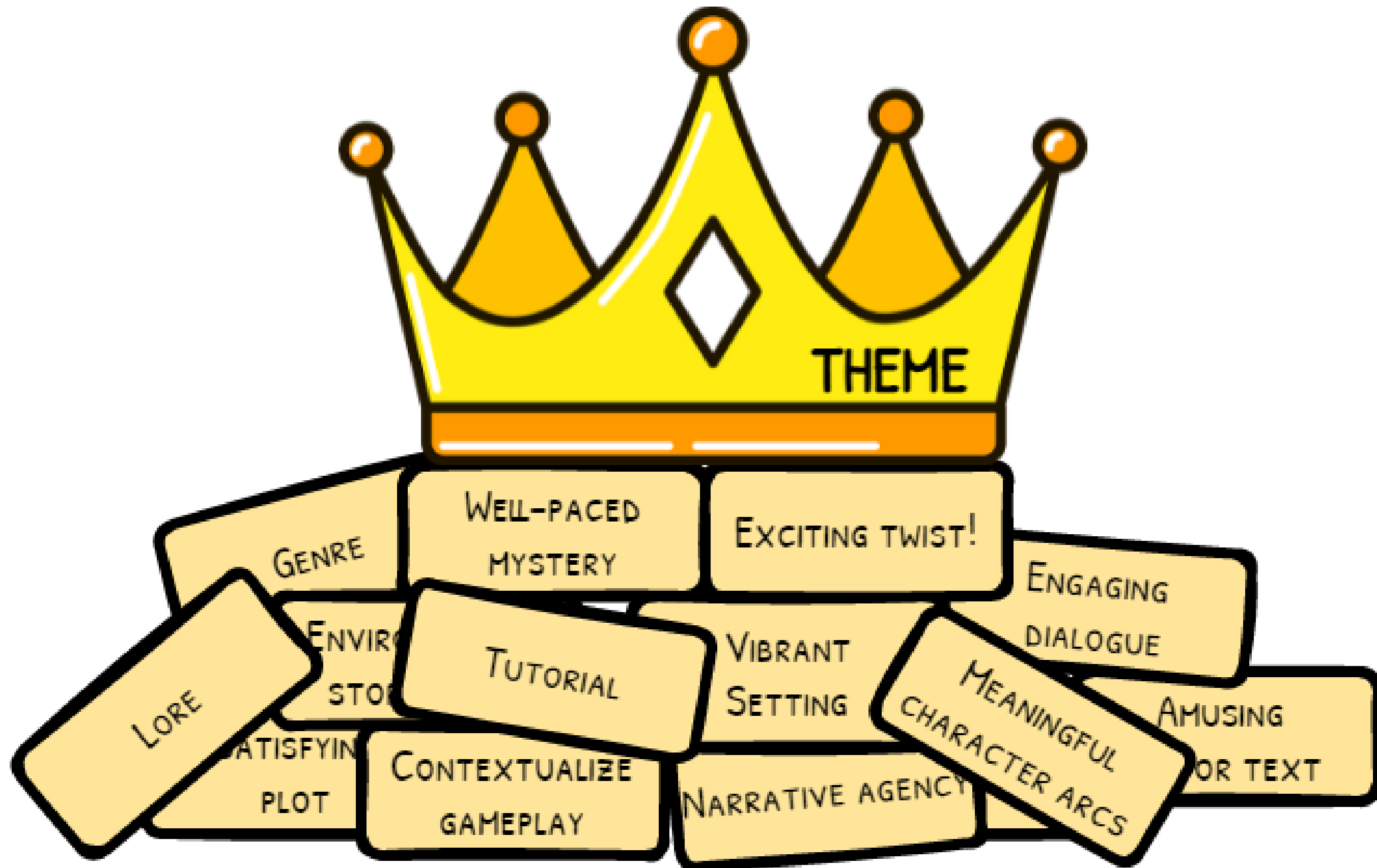
?

*we are not economists



GDC[®]

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21



GDC[®]

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21

II: Picking an Actionable Theme



GDC[®]

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21

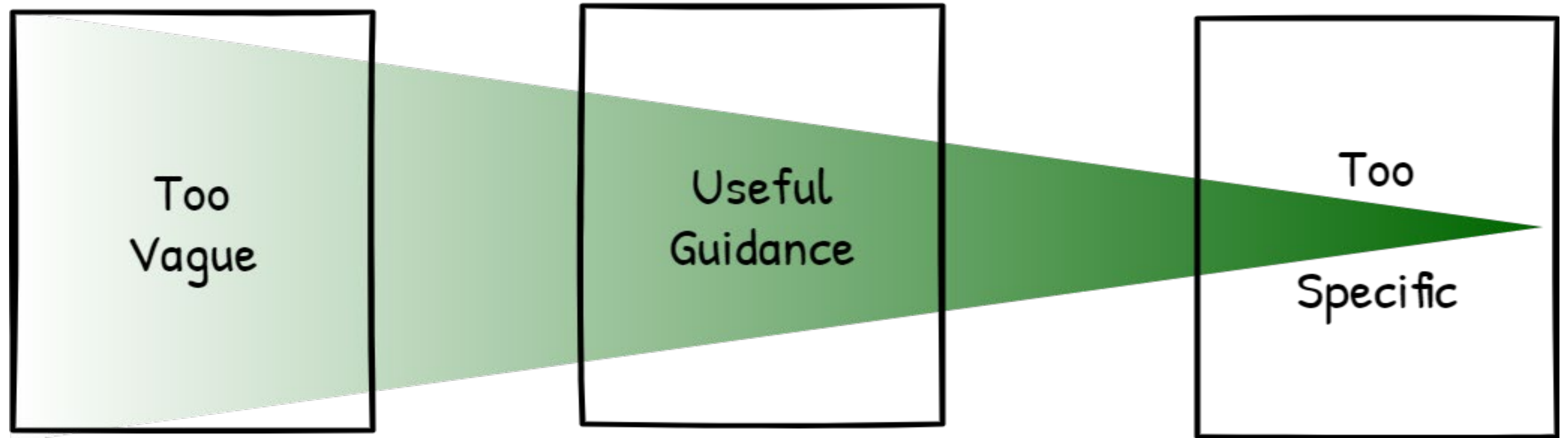
Theme



Moral
Solution

Tone

Scoping a theme



"Humanity"

"Everyone sees
themselves as
the hero"

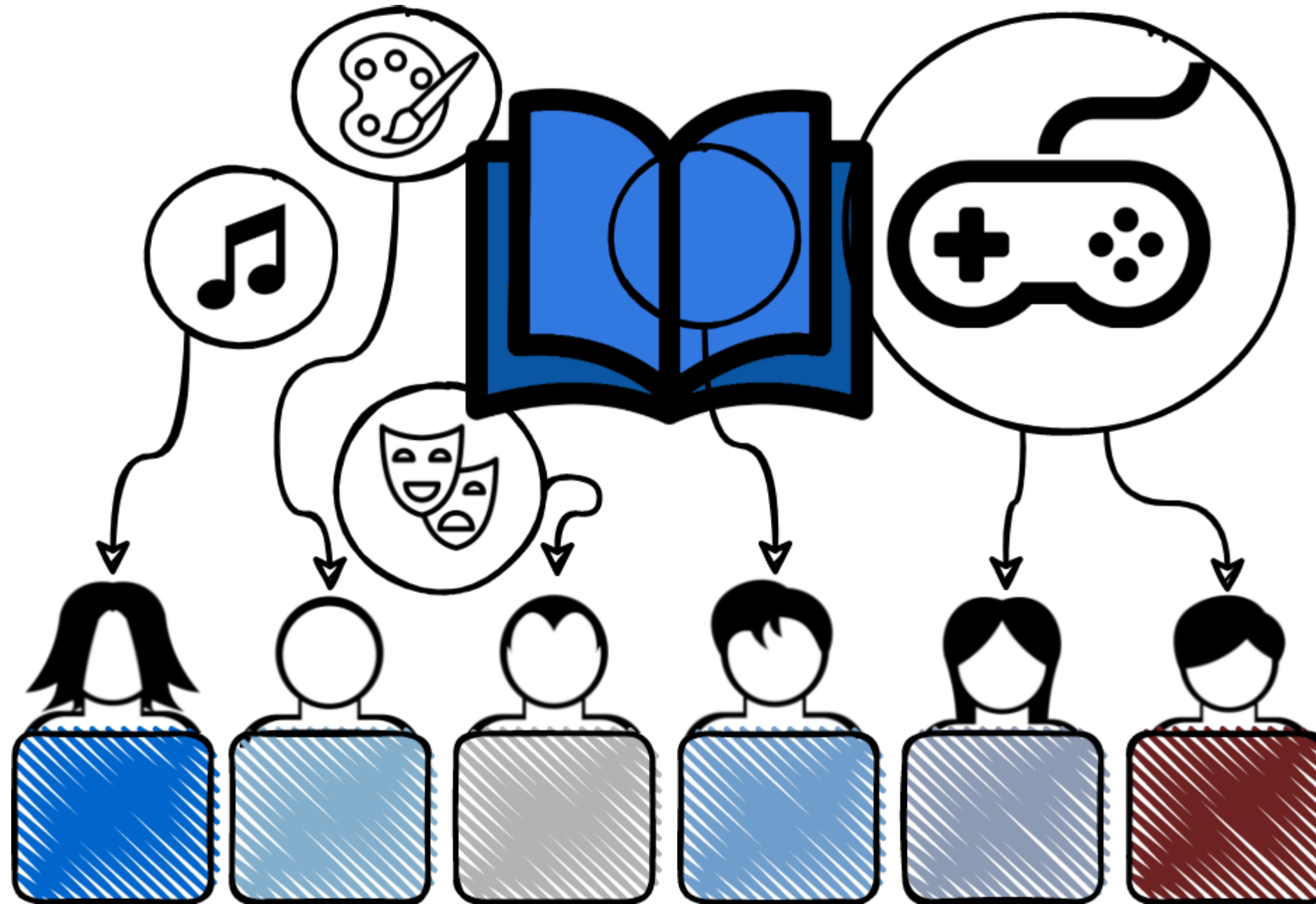
"The mistakes
George W. Bush
made in office"



GDC[®]

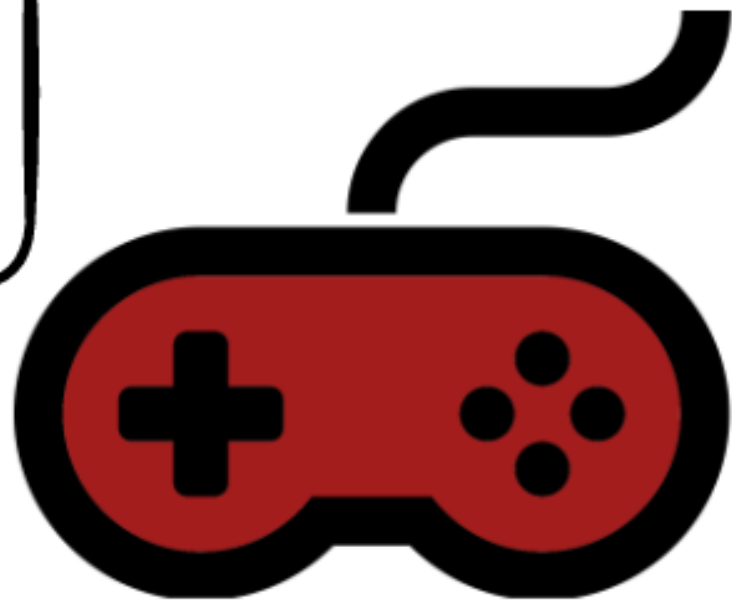
GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21

Consider the affordances of the game

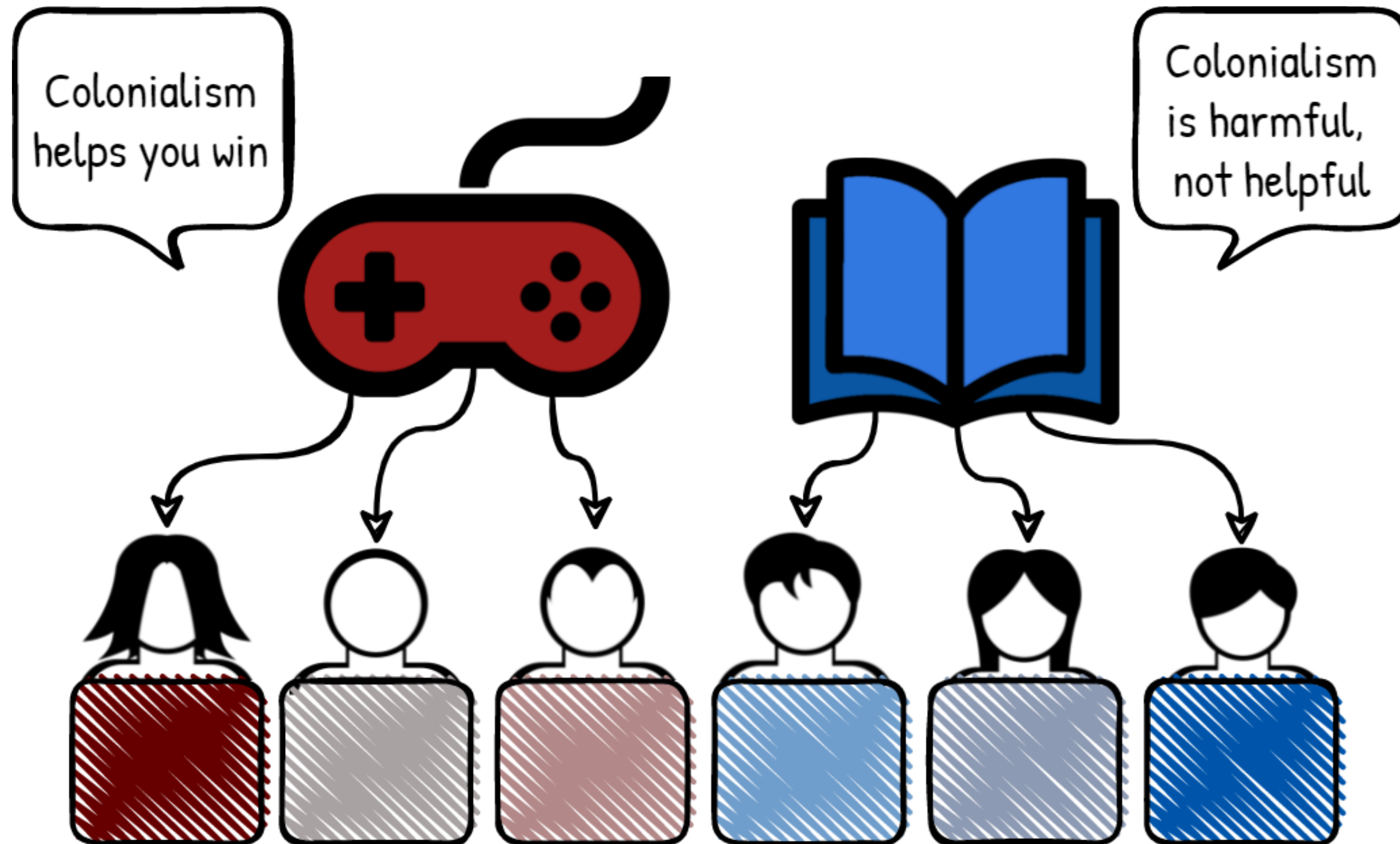


A theoretical 4x

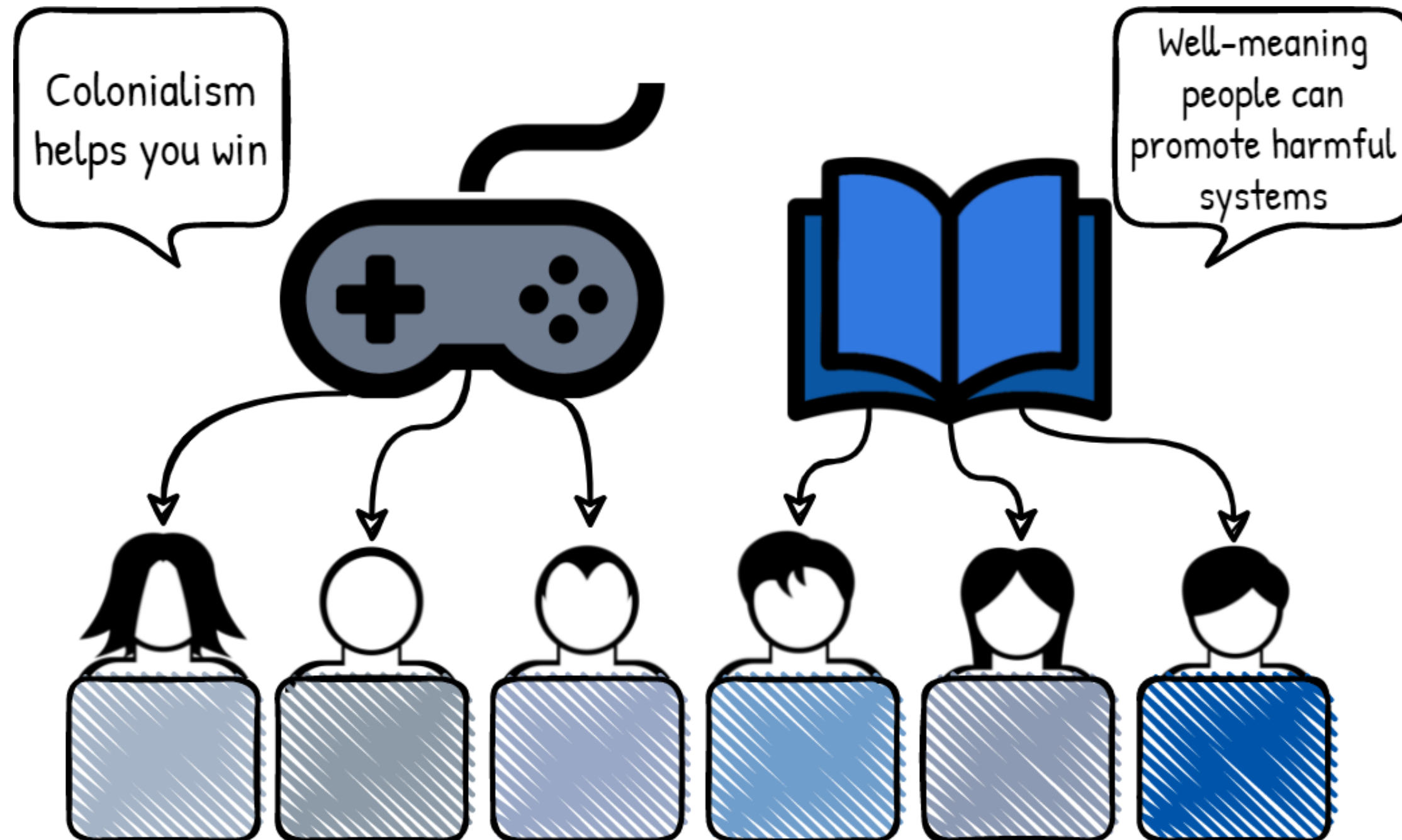
Colonialism
helps you win



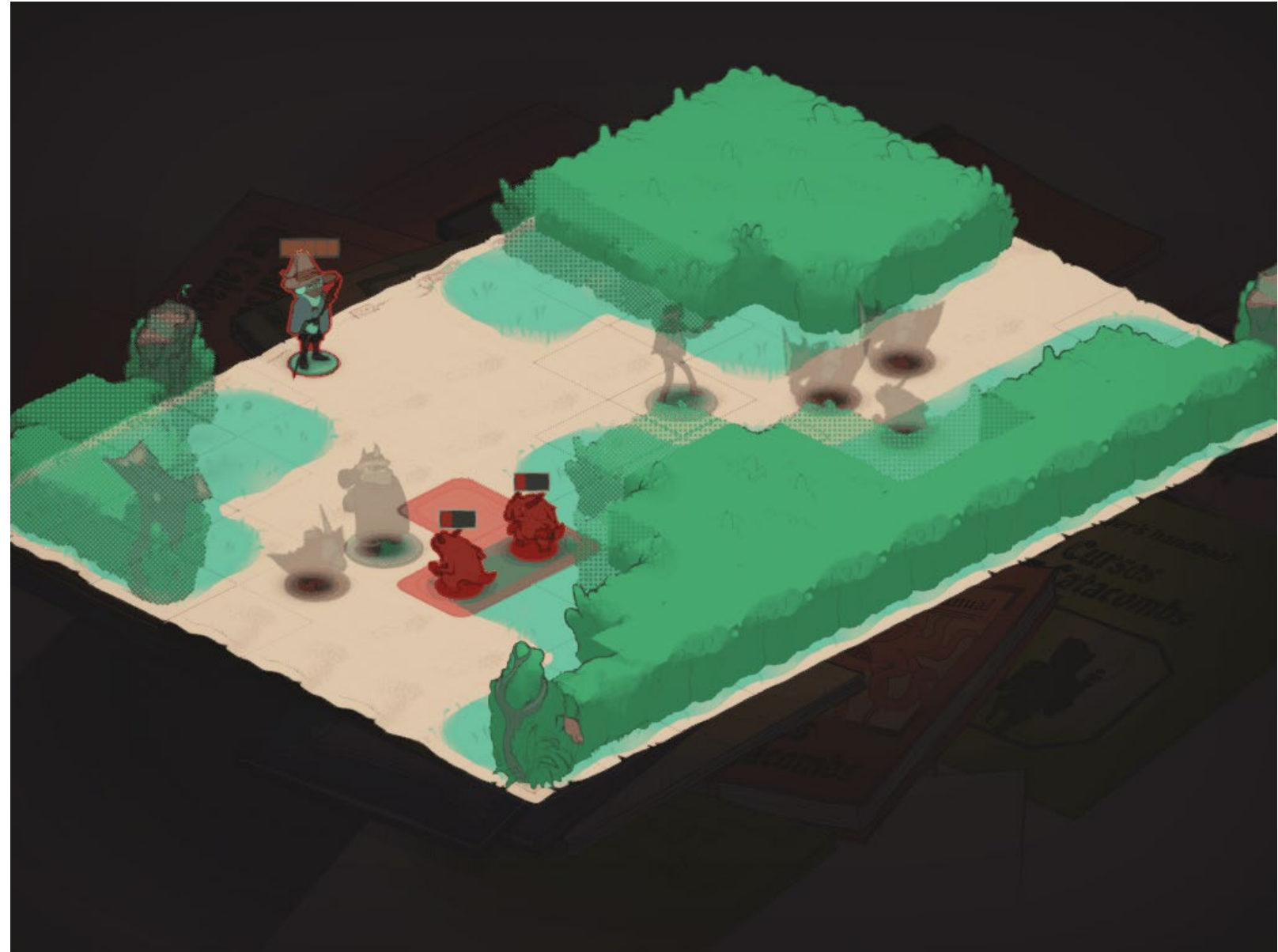
Theme: Colonialism is bad



Theme: What makes expansionism happen?

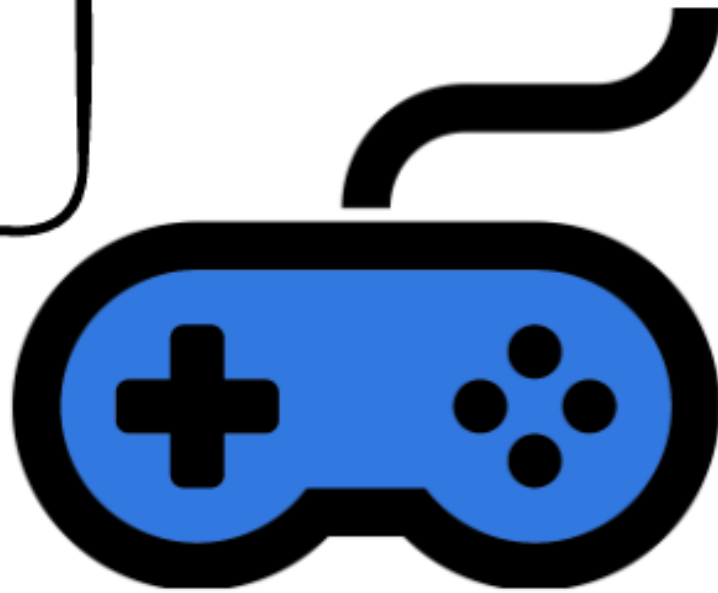


Case Study: Wintermoor



Positive affordances of the gameplay

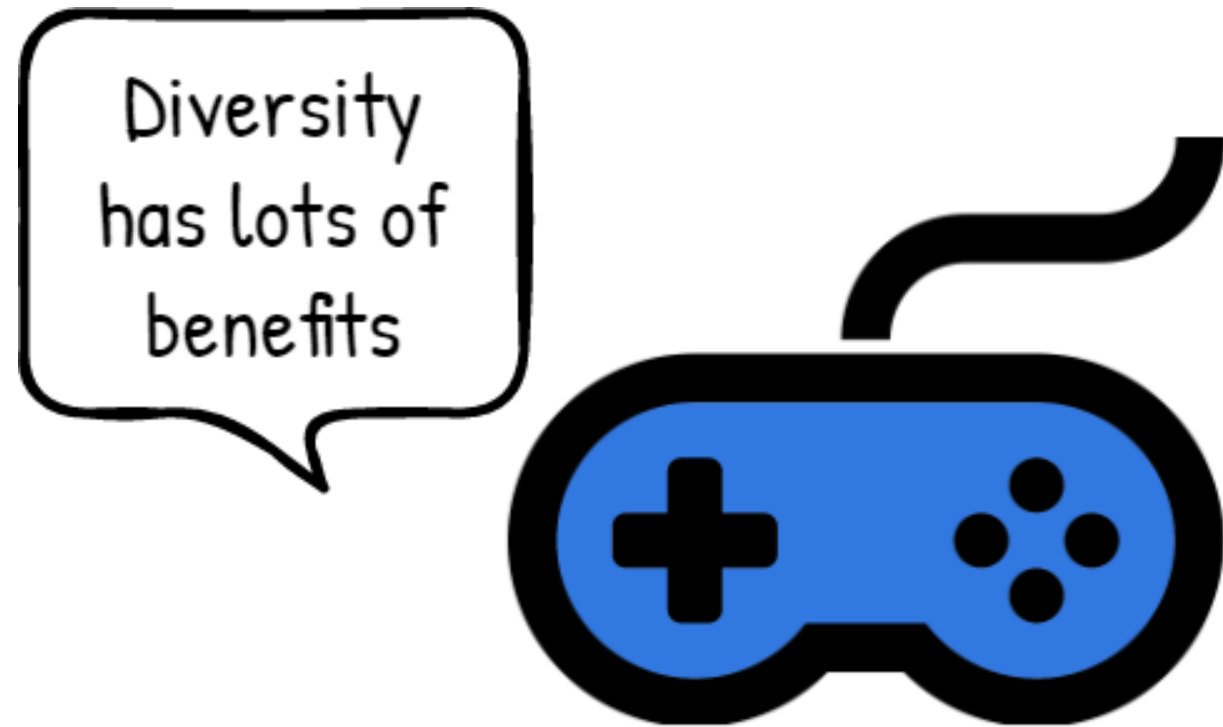
Thinking through
problems is
important



Imagination
and creativity
are rewarded

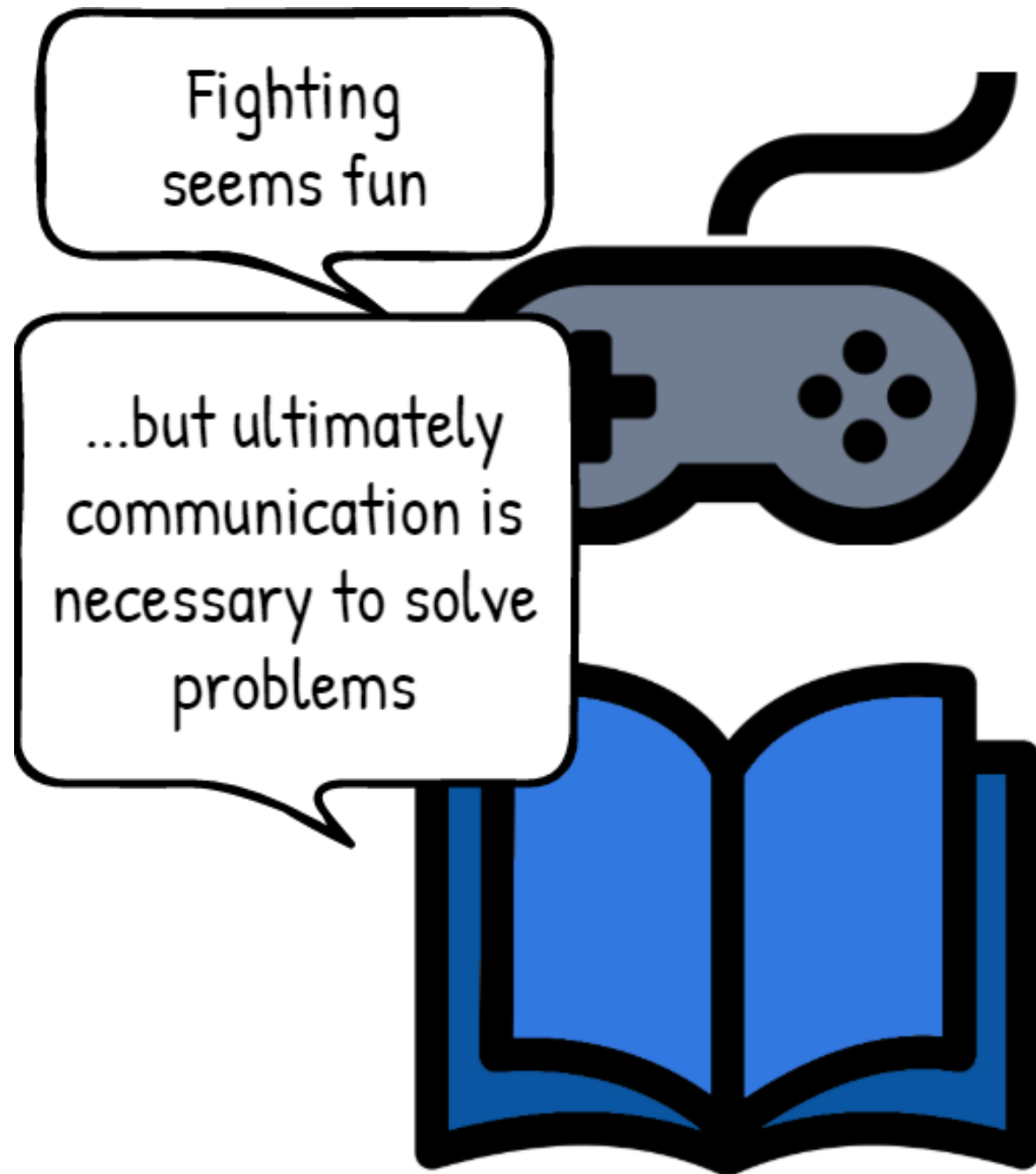


Positive affordances of the gameplay



III: Supporting a Theme as a Writer

Contextualizing gameplay





Theme as a razor



Ch. 1	Ch. 2	Ch. 3	Ch. 4	Ch. 5	Ch. 6	Ch. 7	Ch. 8	Ch. 9	Ch. 10	Ch. 11
-------	-------	-------	-------	-------	-------	-------	-------	-------	--------	--------

We need to fight
the other clubs.

Wait, we need
to communicate
with the other
clubs instead!



GDC[®]

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21

Ch. 1

Ch. 2

Ch. 3

Ch. 4

Ch. 5

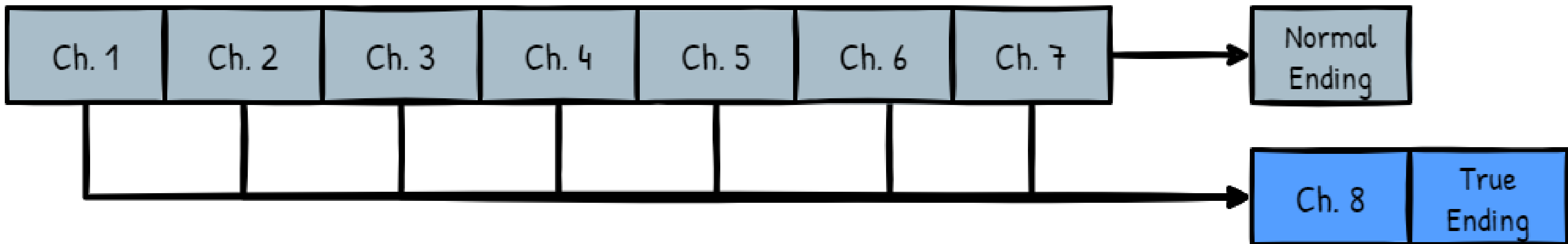
Ch. 6

Ch. 7

Ch. 8

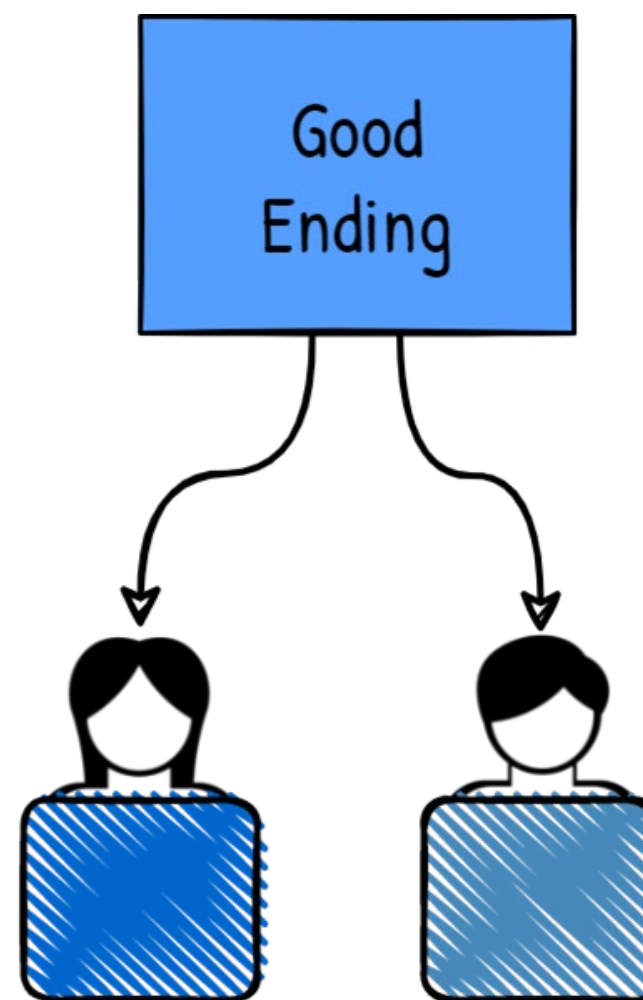
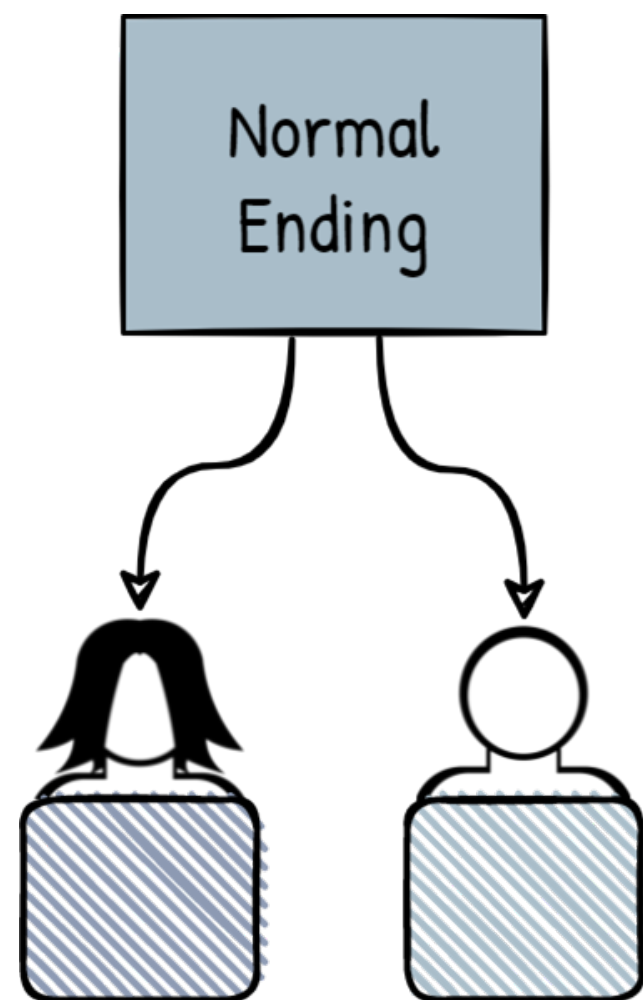
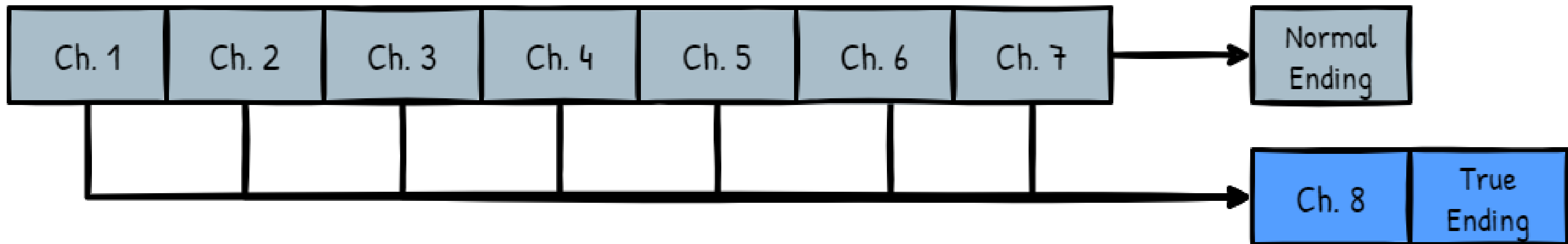
We need
to fight
the
other
clubs.

We need to work together
with the other clubs -
but how can we reach them
and end the fighting?



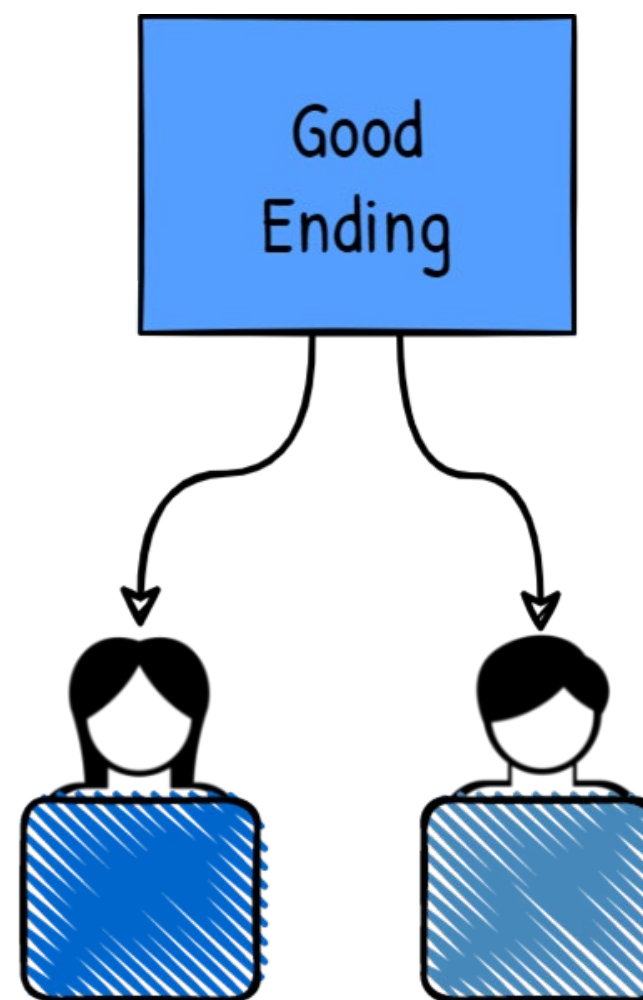
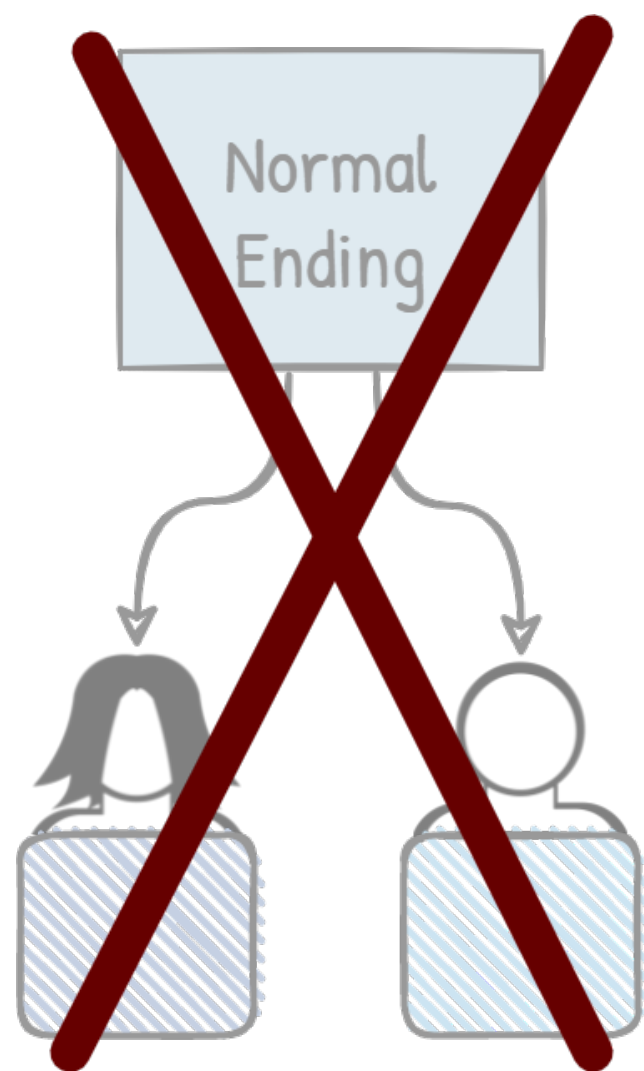
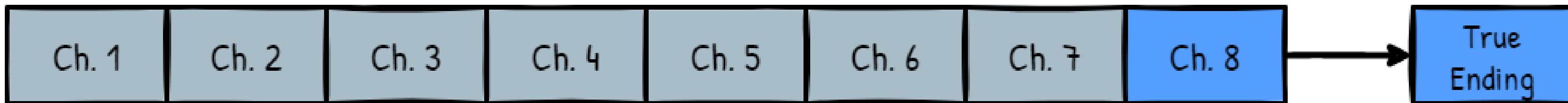
GDC[®]

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21



GDC[®]

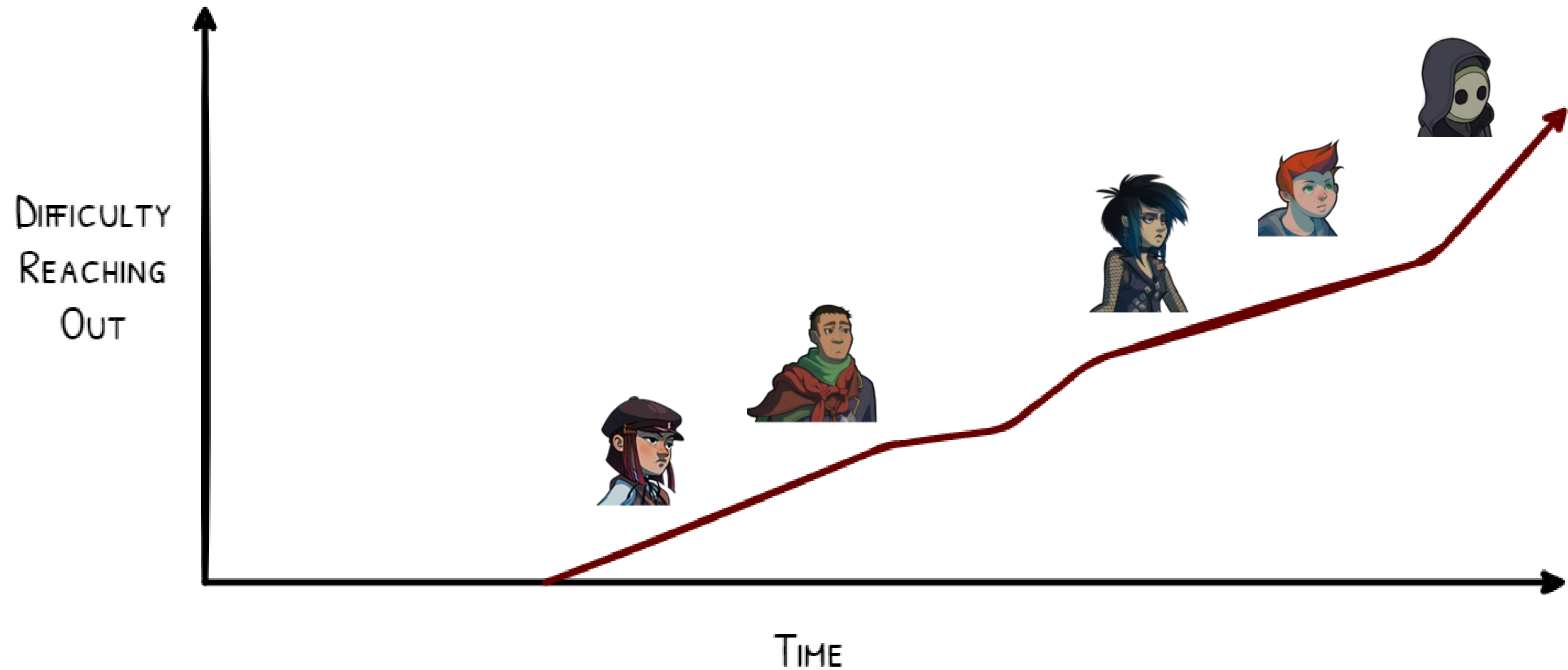
GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21



GDC[®]

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21

Ch. 1	Ch. 2	Ch. 3	Ch. 4	Ch. 5	Ch. 6	Ch. 7	Ch. 8
-------	-------	-------	-------	-------	-------	-------	-------



Tough decisions: Theme vs. Tone



Cozy:
Coffeeshop AUs



Not Cozy:
Casual Racism

Tough decisions: Addressing serious issues



GDC

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21

IV: Communicating the Theme

“You are more than your club”

Themes FAQ

- Alicia's thematic conflict: She feels that inclusivity is important, but will she find the strength to stand up for it against increasing obstacles?
- Colin's thematic conflict: He feels threatened by the Tactics Club expanding, feeling that his comfort zone changing beyond recognition would be as bad as losing it.
- The Tactics Club actually *is* under threat from outsiders who seem malicious, making Alicia's decision to reach out to opponents a brave one.
- Alicia wanting to write C&C is synecdochal for the conflict between her and Colin.
- Illemauzar is a straight-up evil being who feeds on loss of identity. Its motivations aren't shaded beyond expanding its reach and destroying humans' identities.
- The Clubless Club doesn't knowingly serve the demon, but they bring about the destruction of other groups because they feel those groups are against them.
- The Clubless are not zombies without wills, but rather zealots who have been made to feel like "not having an identity and being hated because of it" is their only remaining identity.
- The Principal is earnestly searching for the Ultimate Club with a strong enough identity to contain the demon, because he knows he can't suppress it for much longer. Also, his desperation and the demon feeding off him have made him a weird dude.

Theme

Our story thematically plays off of common early-80's narratives about underdog groups, like *Revenge of the Nerds*, with their "the oppressed little guys are the true heroes" themes.

Colin, the leader of Tactics Club, represents that narrative -- he sees himself as an underdog hero, who will take on the world with his two close friends, Alicia and Jacob.

Alicia, the player character, is allowed to create a new narrative, which responds to the present-day problems caused by powerful adult children who still cast themselves as the put-upon underdogs.

Alicia can turn the Tactics Club into an inclusive group, bringing in members of defeated clubs, using C&C as a socializing tool that lets featured players work through their problems.

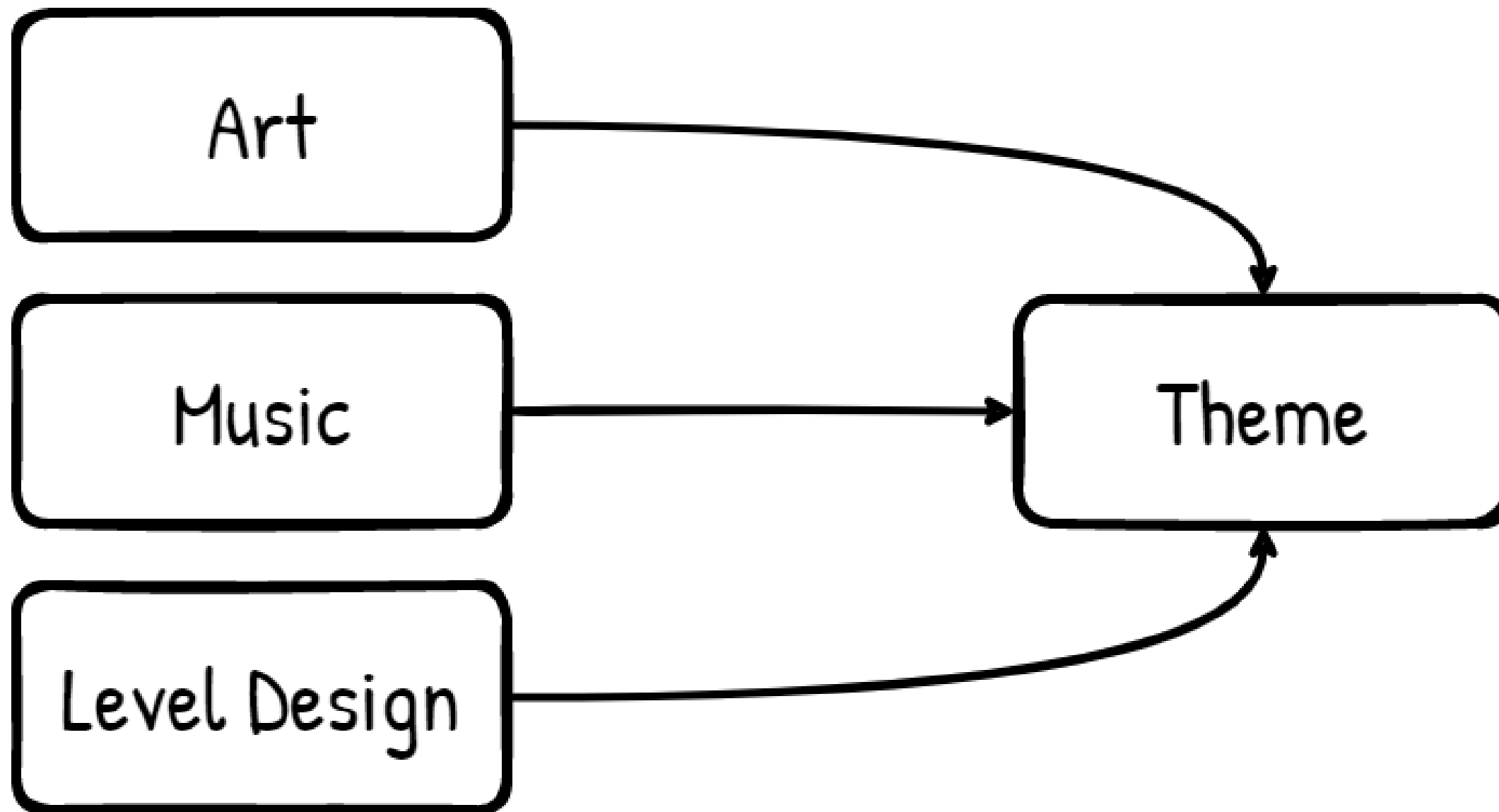
Supporting your classmates by inviting them in to play C&C will cause the player to lose their friendship with Colin, but will stop them from buying into the same us-vs-them mentality that Colin represents, which otherwise leads them to join the demonic Clubless Club.



GDC[®]

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21

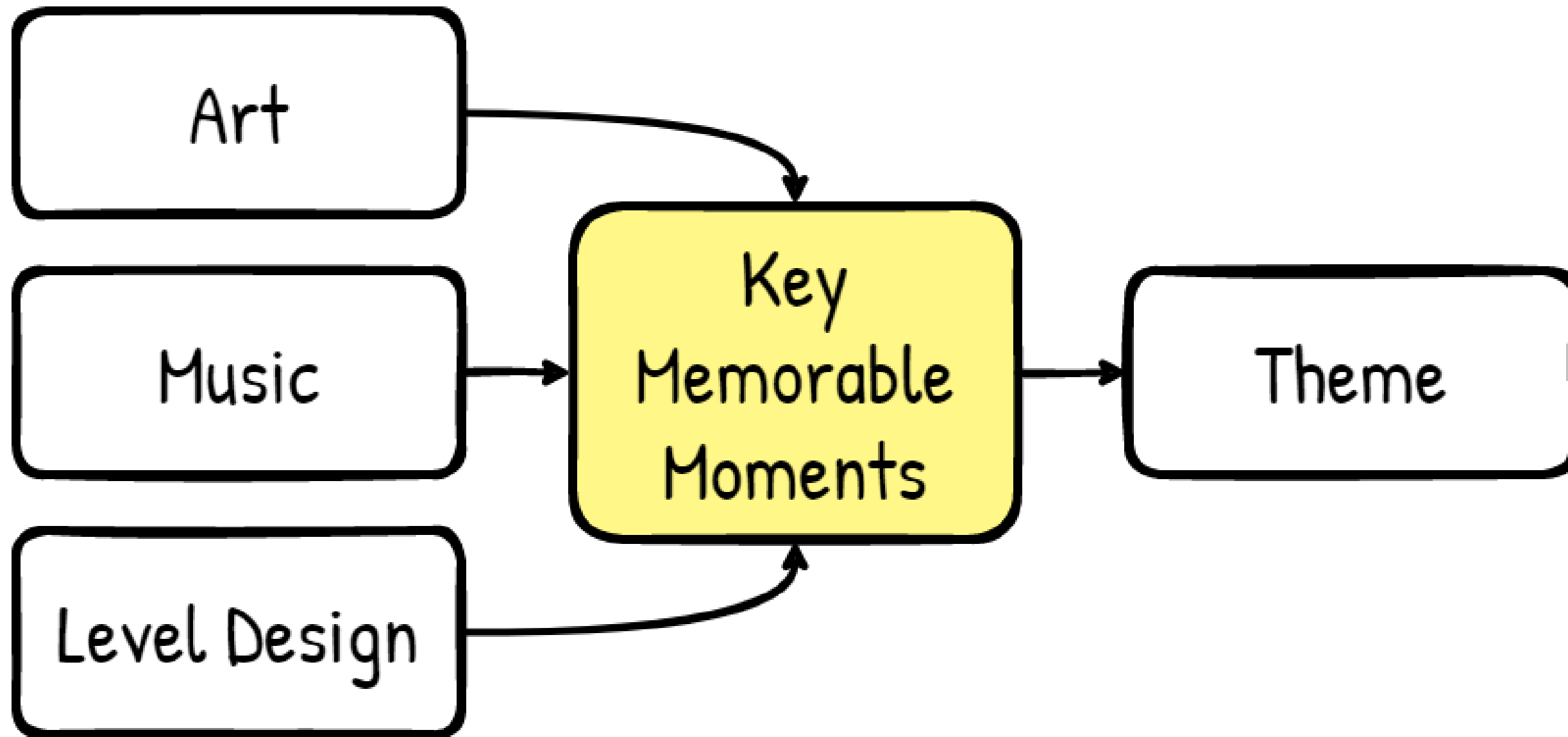
Contributions from other disciplines



GDC[®]

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21

Contributions from other disciplines



GDC[®]

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21

Key Moment: Art



GDC[®]

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21

Key Moment: Art



Key Moment: Combat Design



GDC

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21

Scheduling Around Key Moments

43		10/20/2019		
			Final Pass on Early Chapter content for First round of Loc	5
			Quests review & polish	6
			Ch 5 - AI - Polish	4
			Ch 6 - SC - Polish	4
			<i>Misc - Incl. Process Feedback from Full Script/Game reviews</i>	4
44	MS 3 - Beta 2 Build	10/27/2019		
			Localization Commentary	5
			Reboot Conference	20
			Total Hours for sprint	48
45	SUBMIT FIRST ROUND TO LOC	11/3/2019		
			Ch 7 - CC - Review	10
			Ch 7 - CC - Polish	10
			Epilogue review & polish	6
			Spying Bonus Pass	6
			Battle Barx final review	4
46	MS 4 - Plan of Action / Mock Review Feedback	11/10/2019		
			<i>Process Feedback from Full Script/Game reviews</i>	10
			Review Tips of the Day	2
			Total Hours for sprint	48



GDC[®]

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21

V: Iterating on the Theme

Feedback



?

?

?

?



GDC[®]

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21

Narrative Playtesting



GDC[®]

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21

Challenges for longer games

WINTERMOOR CHAPTER 1

CAST

SCENE 1 - VOICEOVER INTRODUCTION

SCENE 2 - ALICIA'S ROOM

SCENE 3 - INTRO TO THE CLUBROOM

SCENE 4 - FINDING JACOB

SCENE 5 - FINDING COLIN

SCENE 6 - RETURNING TO PLAY C&C

SCENE 7 - THE ANNOUNCEMENT

SCENE 8 - PRESENTING THE HEELS

SCENE 9 - THE LAST C&C FIGHT

SCENE 10 - LET THE TOURNAMENT BEGIN

SCENE 11 - THE YOUNG MONARCHISTS

SCENE 12 - THE FIRST VICTORY

SCENE 13 - AN OMINOUS DREAM

CAST



Alicia



Anjaya - Alicia's C&C Character



Colin



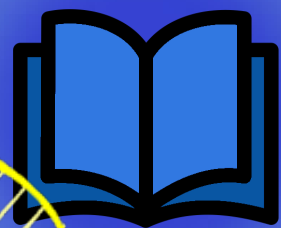
Eodwald - Colin's C&C Character



GDC[®]

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21

Diversity



Backgrounds
similar to yours

Backgrounds
different to
yours



GDC[®]

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21

Diversity Reading

QUIETHOUSE EDITING

[HOME](#) [EDITING & OTHER SERVICES](#) [BETA READERS](#) [JUNIOR BETA READERS \(KIDS\)](#) [DIVERSITY READERS](#) [CONTACT](#)



Diversity Readers
(aka Sensitivity Readers)

In Summary:

- I. Maximize potential for correct interpretations
- II. Pick an actionable theme
- III. Let theme guide narrative decisions
- IV. Communicate with your team
- V. Seek diverse feedback



@Kyla_Go



mike.sennott@gmail.com



GDC[®]

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21