

Meaningless Choices and Impractical Advice

(Notes from a *Disco Elysium* writer)

Justin Keenan
Writer, ZA/UM Studio



Instrumental vs Aestheticized Dialogue

1. *Instrumental dialogue* advances the gameplay loop in a clear, directed way.
 - a. Dialogue structures are regularized depending on narrative function (quest giver, area boss, companion, seller, etc).
 - b. Aesthetic qualities are subordinate to narrative function.



GDC[®]

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





Big Marge - HORROR! THIEF! HORRIBLE THIEF! It came in the night. It took the eggs! It scrambled away, fast, fast, fast!



1. *Ask what the thief looked like.*
2. *Ask her where the creature ran off to.*
3. *Take your leave.*







Dalton- "It's more than that, I know it. My dreams were never more than faded memories, but this feels as real and as fresh as the conversation we're having now."

"If it's payment you're concerned about, I still have plenty of weapons from my old adventuring days. They're well-made, and they'll serve you on the battlefield or at a merchant's stall, as you choose."

- 1: "I'll search the catacombs for a sign of Rowyna."
- 2: "You want me to chase a dream?"
- 3: "I have other matters to attend to."
- 4: "Silly old fool. I don't have time for your delusions."



GDC[®]

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

Instrumental vs Aestheticized Dialogue

1. *Aestheticized dialogue* is primarily interesting for its own sake and for the texture it adds to the world or narrative.
 - a. Dialogue structures may be varied or unique.
 - b. Narrative function may be downplayed or submerged.



GDC[®]

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



KIM KITSURAGI – "Theoretically, yes. But we don't have time right now. It's generally: murder investigation first, *then* beach party."

YOU – "Actually, it doesn't have to be a beach. With a boombox like that, I'll bring the party into the streets!"

BIRD'S NEST ROY – "You can play it anywhere you like. And I guess since you're a police officer, no one can arrest you for it."

YOU – "Shopkeep, this Stereo 8 approved machine here..."

BIRD'S NEST ROY – "...is the Harmon Wowshi W02 -- made in Vesper, designed in Seol," he says. "Plays all reel-to-reel formats: 2mm, 8mm, 12mm. It's even got a little radio in there. It'll set you back 12 réal."

1. - "What I really want to know is... could this device come handy in my police work?"
2. - "Are you sure this is all in working order?"
3. - [Locked: ♣ 12.00] "I want to buy that boombox."
4. - **That's all. [Leave.]**



GDC[®]

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

Four Features of Elytic Dialogue

1. Micro-reactivity.
2. Rhetorical approach.
3. Minimal gamification.
4. Radical asymmetry.



GDC[®]

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



Micro -reactivity

The game remembers and responds to seemingly inconsequential player choices.



GDC[®]

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



What a mess! I hope they don't come down here looking for anything; we blew a damn fuse and it's all shut off!

Did I hear a dog? What's your dog's name?

[CONWAY: His name is Homer.]

CONWAY: Her name is Blue.

CONWAY: Just some dog; I don't know his name.



GDC[®]

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



WASHBASIN – On the table you see a bowl of water, a rough soap, and next to it a small hand mirror. A straight razor soaks inside the wash basin.

YOU – Is shaving the right call?

WASHBASIN – The water reflects back a vague image of your face -- nose bulbous and red, hair unkempt, wrinkles lining the eyes and forehead. The 'stache is gigantic.

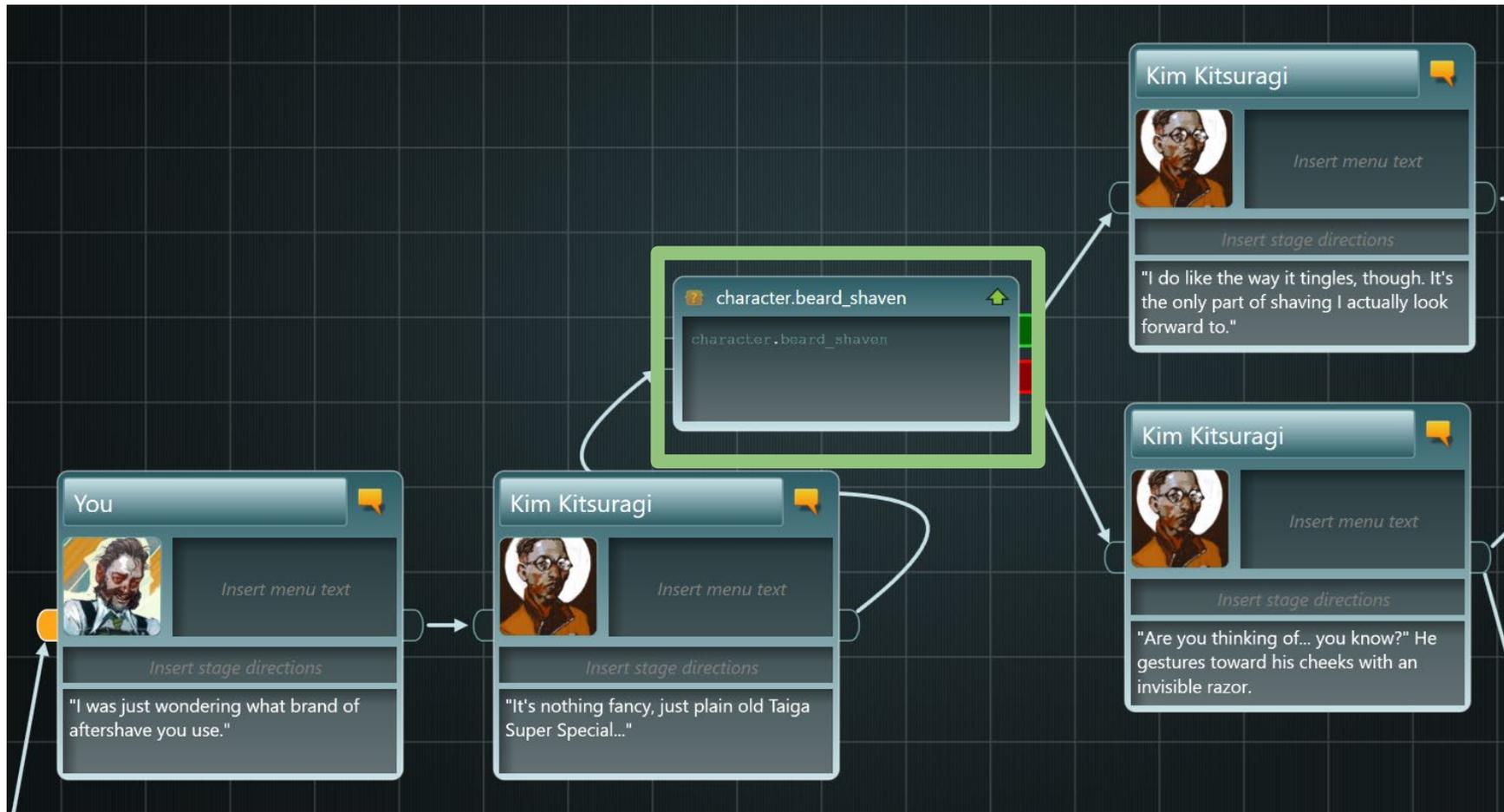
COMPOSURE [Medium: Success] – A fresh start looms ahead. Clean yourself up and be born anew.

1. - **Is shaving the right call?**
2. - [Hand/Eye Coordination - Medium 10] Time to shave. Get these mutton chops off.
3. - **[Leave.]**



GDC[®]

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



Micro -reactivity

The game remembers and responds to seemingly inconsequential player choices.

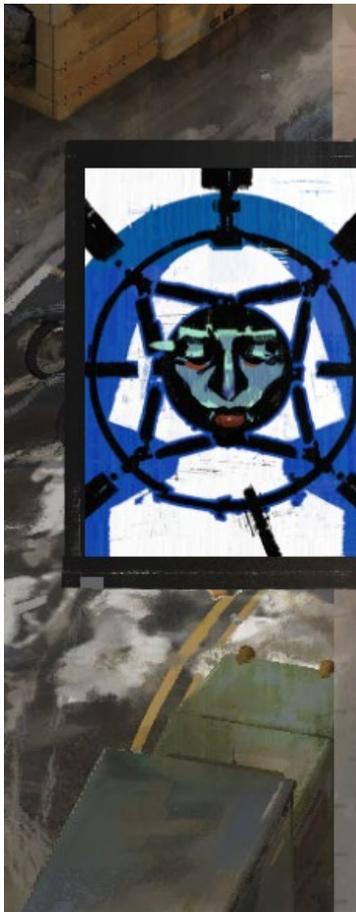
- Endless source of micro-ripples/regrets.
- Requires/causes brain damage.



GDC[®]

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





HORSEBACK ANTENNA – "... Nein, Liebling!"

INTERFACING – The signal is clear, the storm has passed. This is another voice, a live voice, on the other end of this invisible bridge you've established...

NOID – "Try it now."

YOU – "Coalition Warship Archer. This is Lieutenant Du Bois of the RCM. Please acknowledge."

HORSEBACK ANTENNA – ...

COALITION WARSHIP ARCHER – "Lieutenant Du Bois, this is Coalition Warship Archer. We are acknowledging and accepting you."

CONTINUE ▶



GDC[®]

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

Coalition Warship Archer: ""Firewalker, this is Coalition Wars..."

General **Template** Input pins Output pins

Template: Janus Node

Choose template

Open template

Apply color

Janus Node

Open feature

Condition 1

```
jam.warship_said_tequila == true
```

Condition 2

```
jam.warship_said_costeau == true
```

Alternate 1

"Officer Sunset, this is Coalition Warship Archer. We are acknowledging and accepting you."

Alternate 2

"Detective Costeau, this is Coalition Warship Archer. We are acknowledging and accepting you."

Condition 3

```
jam.warship_said_hARRIER == true
```

Condition 4

```
jam.warship_said_firewalker == true
```

Alternate 3

"Lieutenant Du Bois, this is Coalition Warship Archer. We are acknowledging and accepting you."

Alternate 4

"Firewalker, this is Coalition Warship Archer. We are acknowledging and accepting you."



GDC

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

Coalition Warship Archer: ""Firewalker, this is Coalition Wars..."

General **Template** Input pins Output pins

Template: Janus Node Choose template Open template Apply color

Janus Node Open feature

Condition 1
`jam.warship_said_tequila == true`

Condition 2
`jam.warship_said_costeau == true`

Alternate 1
"Officer Sunset, this is Coalition Warship Archer. We are acknowledging and accepting you."

Alternate 2
"Detective Costeau, this is Coalition Warship Archer. We are acknowledging and accepting you."

Condition 3
`jam.warship_said_harrier == true`

Condition 4
`jam.warship_said_firewalker == true`

Alternate 3
"Lieutenant Du Bois, this is Coalition Warship Archer. We are acknowledging and accepting you."

Alternate 4
"Firewalker, this is Coalition Warship Archer. We are acknowledging and accepting you."

62 x 4 = 248

Micro -reactivity

The game remembers and responds to seemingly inconsequential player choices.

- Endless source of micro-ripples/regrets.
- Requires/causes brain damage.



GDC[®]

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



Micro -reactivity

The game remembers and responds to seemingly inconsequential player choices.

- Endless source of micro-ripples/regrets.
- Requires/causes brain damage.
- Feels like mind reading.



GDC[®]

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



Rhetorical approach

Branching dialogue structures are treated as aesthetic objects that can evoke distinct player responses.



GDC[®]

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





"Have you removed the dead body from the tree?"

YOU – "Dead body?"

KIM KITSURAGI – "Mm-hmm."

YOU – "I don't like dead bodies."

KIM KITSURAGI – "Sure. But did you take it down from the tree?"

YOU – "Look man, you know, yeah."

KIM KITSURAGI – "Does that mean the body is no longer in the tree?"

YOU – "Completely."

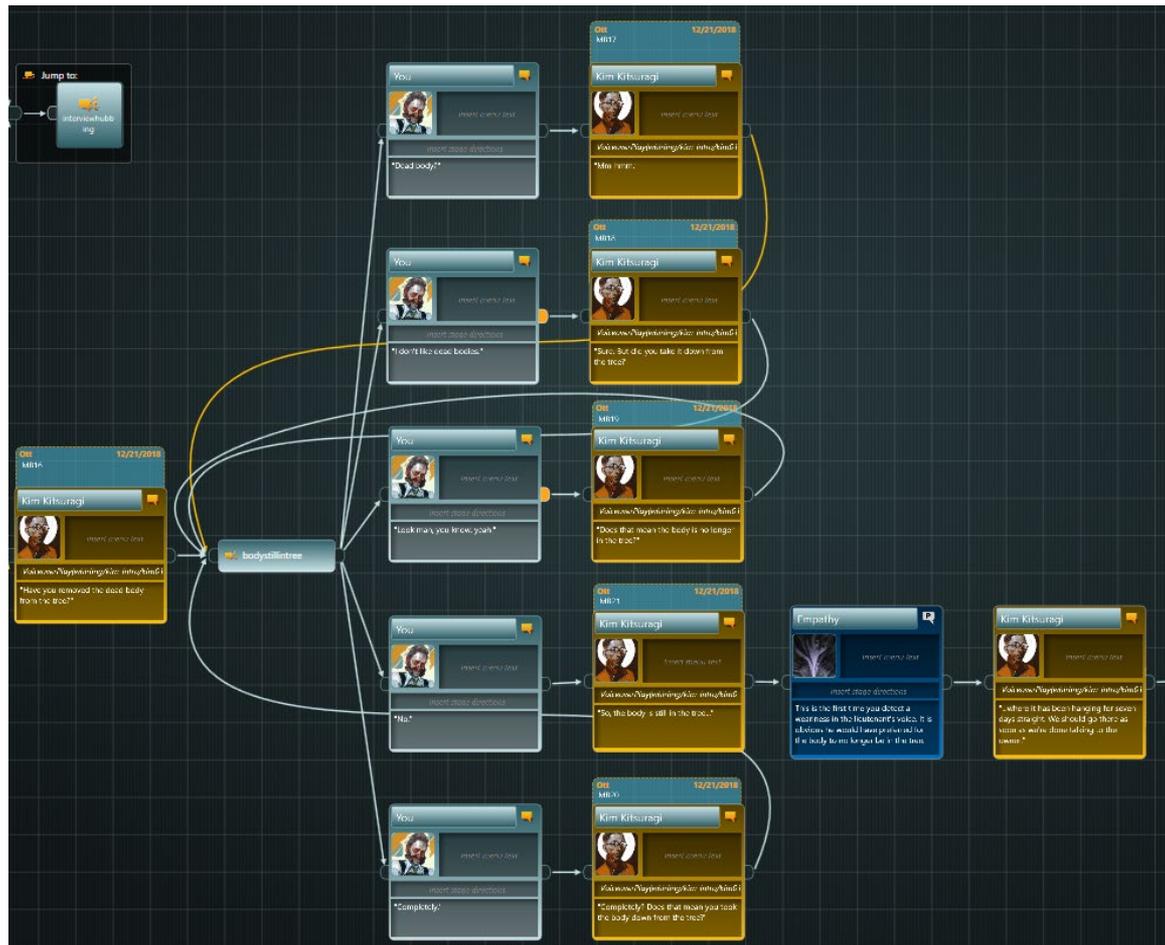
KIM KITSURAGI – "Completely? Does that mean you took the body down from the tree?"

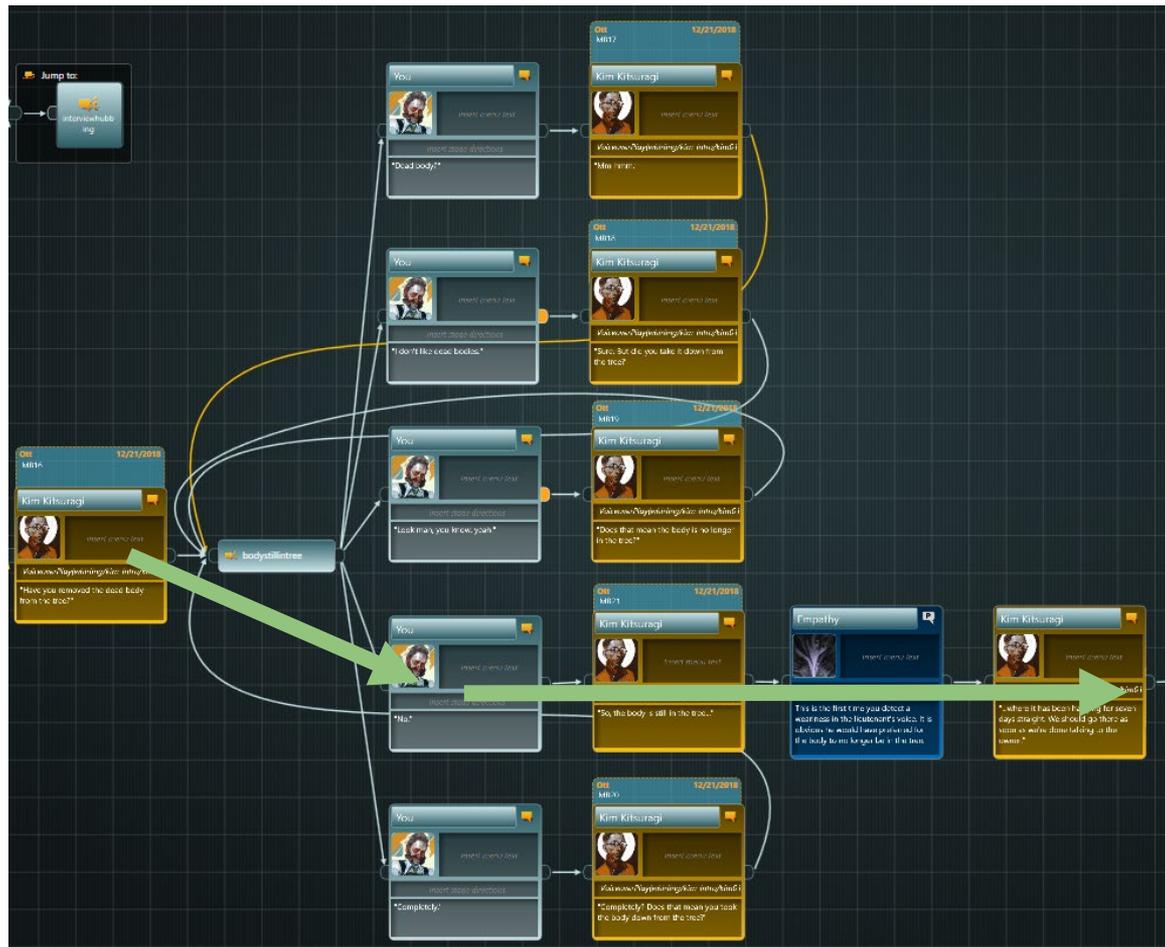
1. - "Dead body?"
2. - "I don't like dead bodies."
3. - "Look man, you know, yeah."
4. - "No."
5. - "Completely."

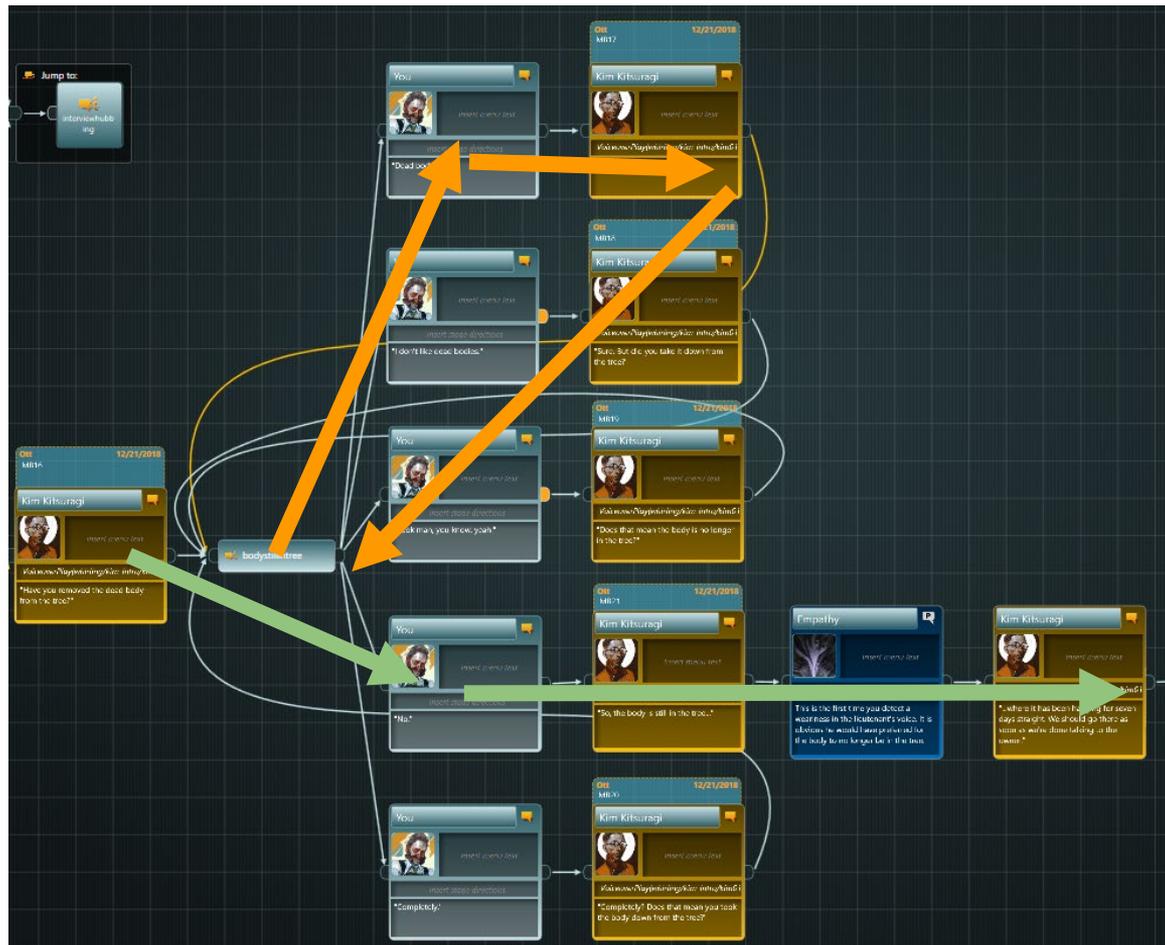


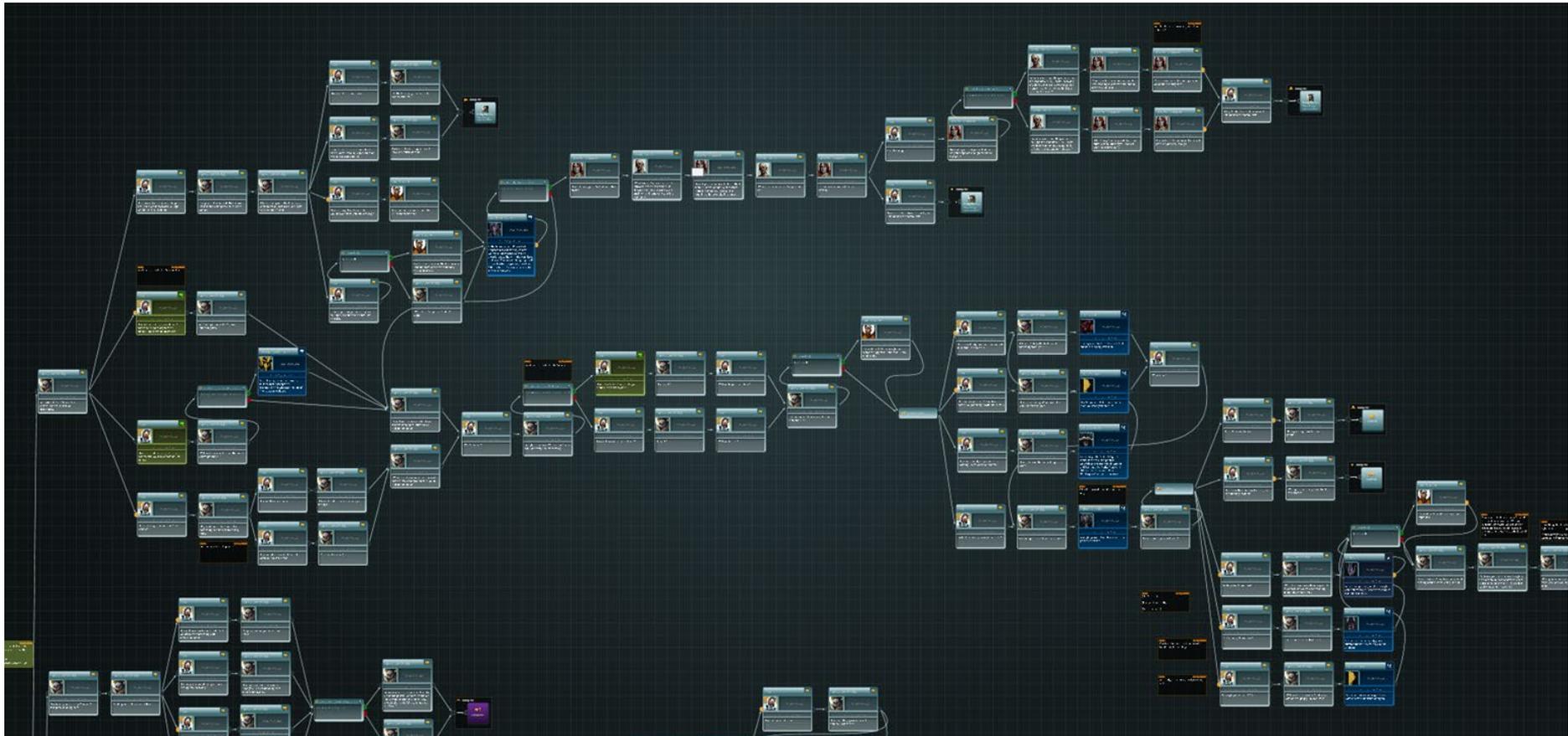
GDC

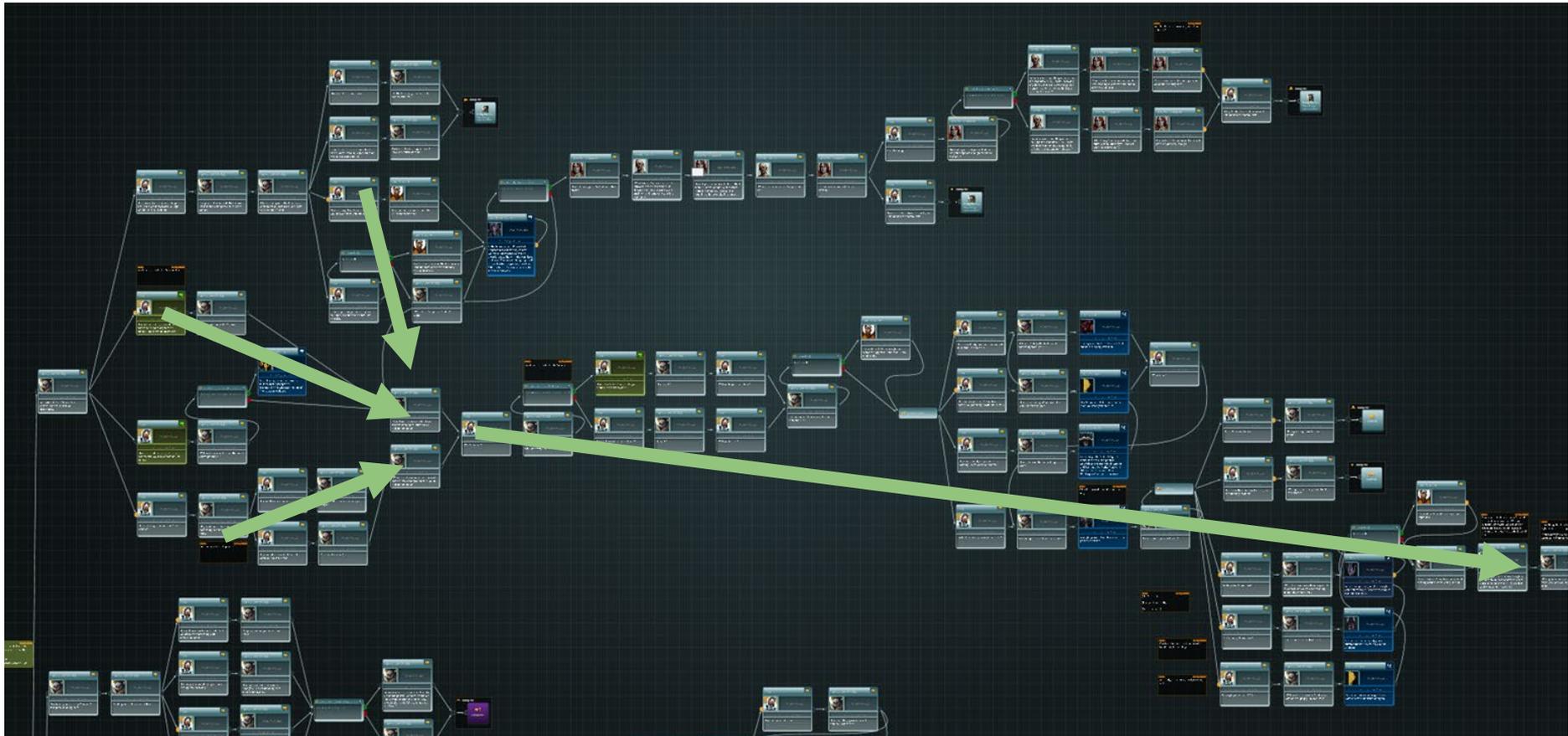
GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21

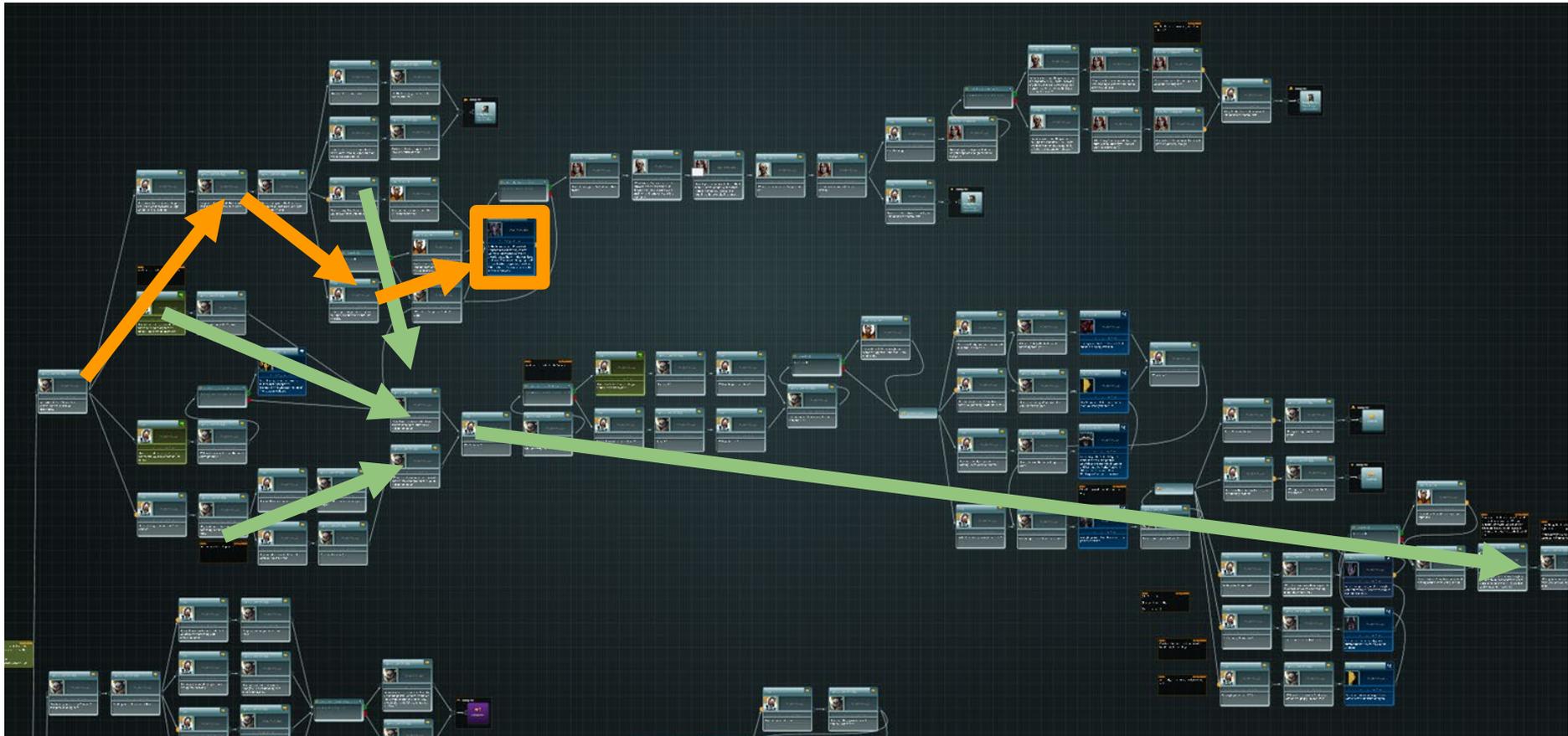


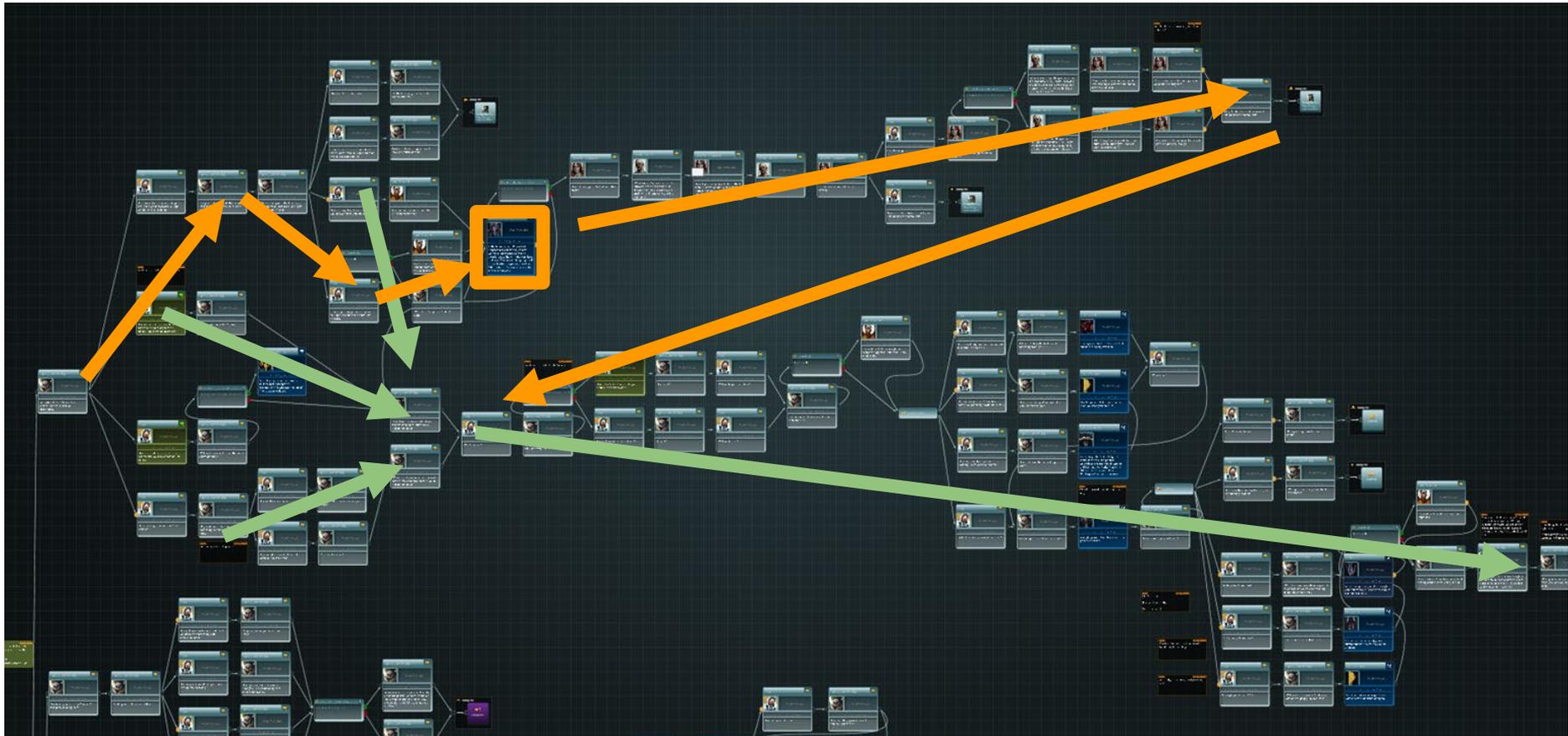












Rhetorical approach

Branching dialogue structures are treated as aesthetic objects that can evoke distinct player responses.



GDC[®]

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



Rhetorical approach

Branching dialogue structures are treated as aesthetic objects that can evoke distinct player responses.

- Nearly impossible to design in advance.
- Extravagant structures have unbelievably bad ROI.



GDC[®]

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



Rhetorical approach

Branching dialogue structures are treated as aesthetic objects that can evoke distinct player responses.

- Nearly impossible to design in advance.
- Extravagant structures have unbelievably bad ROI.
- Advances art of branching dialogue.
- Unbreakable soul-bond between players and characters.



GDC[®]

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



Minimal gamification

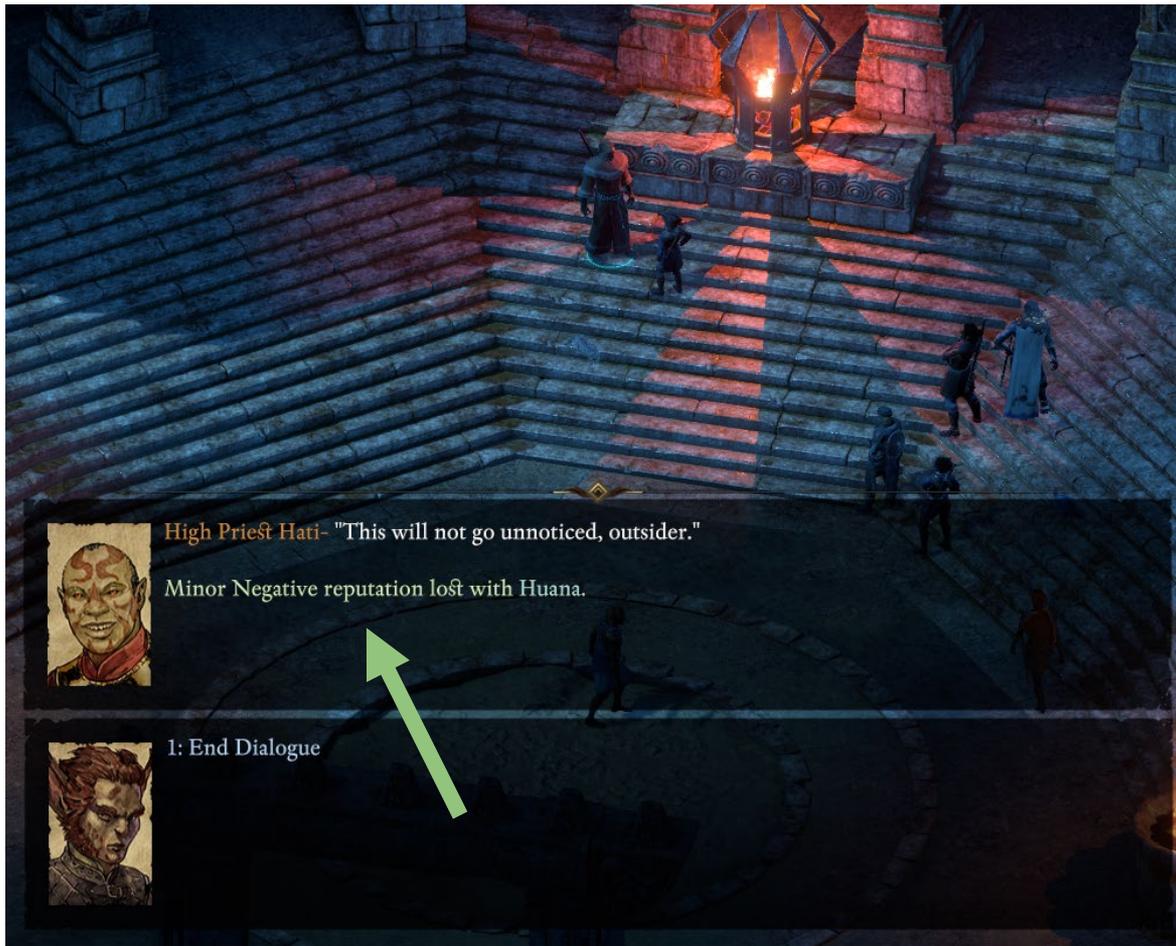
Downplaying or removing elements that reveal a dialogue's narrative or gameplay function.



GDC[®]

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





High Priest Hati- "This will not go unnoticed, outsider."

Minor Negative reputation lost with Huana.



1: End Dialogue



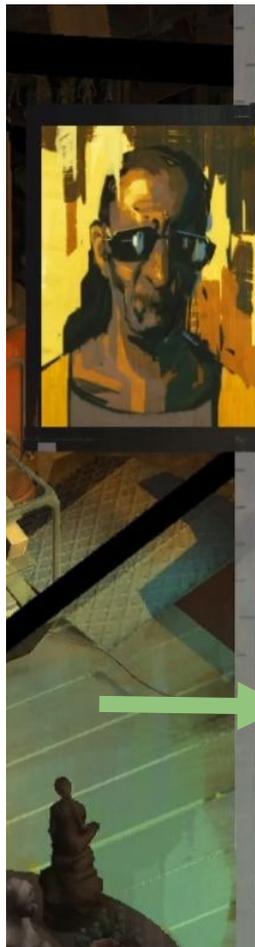


Magister Siwan - You'll find him on the other side of this deck, in the officers' quarters.



1. *You pull at the thing around your neck, futilely. Demand to know why she collared you.*
2. [SCHOLAR] *Muse that by the room's shape, you can tell you're on a Lucian-class frigate. But why?*
3. [NOBLE] *Now that you're up, you'd like to bathe and dine. Tell her to ring for the servants.*
4. *Take your leave.*





insincere, but he prefers being alone with his projector, just watching the movement of light across the walls of the shop.

YOU – "Sorry, I feel like I'm interrupting you."

BIRD'S NEST ROY – "Oh, no, not at all." He flashes a smile. "I guess I haven't had many customers lately, RCM or otherwise."

KIM KITSURAGI – "Who are your customers usually?"

BIRD'S NEST ROY – "All kinds of people come through here... Locals, travellers. People looking for a deal. People looking for a keepsake. People who are terminally bored."

"As you can see... I have a wide selection of goods for everyone to choose from."

1. - (Nod.) "Quite the collection indeed."
2. - (Look around.) "Typical vacuous consumerist objects."
3. - "Honestly, I think some of your selections are..." (Press your finger to your lips) "...more tasteful than others."
4. - "This business plan is all over the place. You should specialize, zoom in, recapitalize."



GDC

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

Minimal gamification

Downplaying or removing elements that reveal a dialogue's narrative or gameplay function.



GDC[®]

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

Minimal gamification

Downplaying or removing elements that reveal a dialogue's narrative or gameplay function.

- Lack of agency indicators.
- Requires careful writing.



GDC[®]

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

Minimal gamification

Downplaying or removing elements that reveal a dialogue's narrative or gameplay function.

- Lack of agency indicators.
- Requires careful writing.
- Players forget it's a game.



GDC[®]

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

Radical asymmetry

Creating dramatically different player experiences based on a player's character expressions.







THINKER

Extremely intelligent. Very bad with people. Knows interesting facts, comes up with original ideas.

5 1 2 4
INT PSY FYS MOT

+ENCYCLOPEDIA



SENSITIVE

Very psychological. A magnetic personality, but unstable. (Might begin to lose his mind.)

1 5 4 2
INT PSY FYS MOT

+INLAND EMPIRE



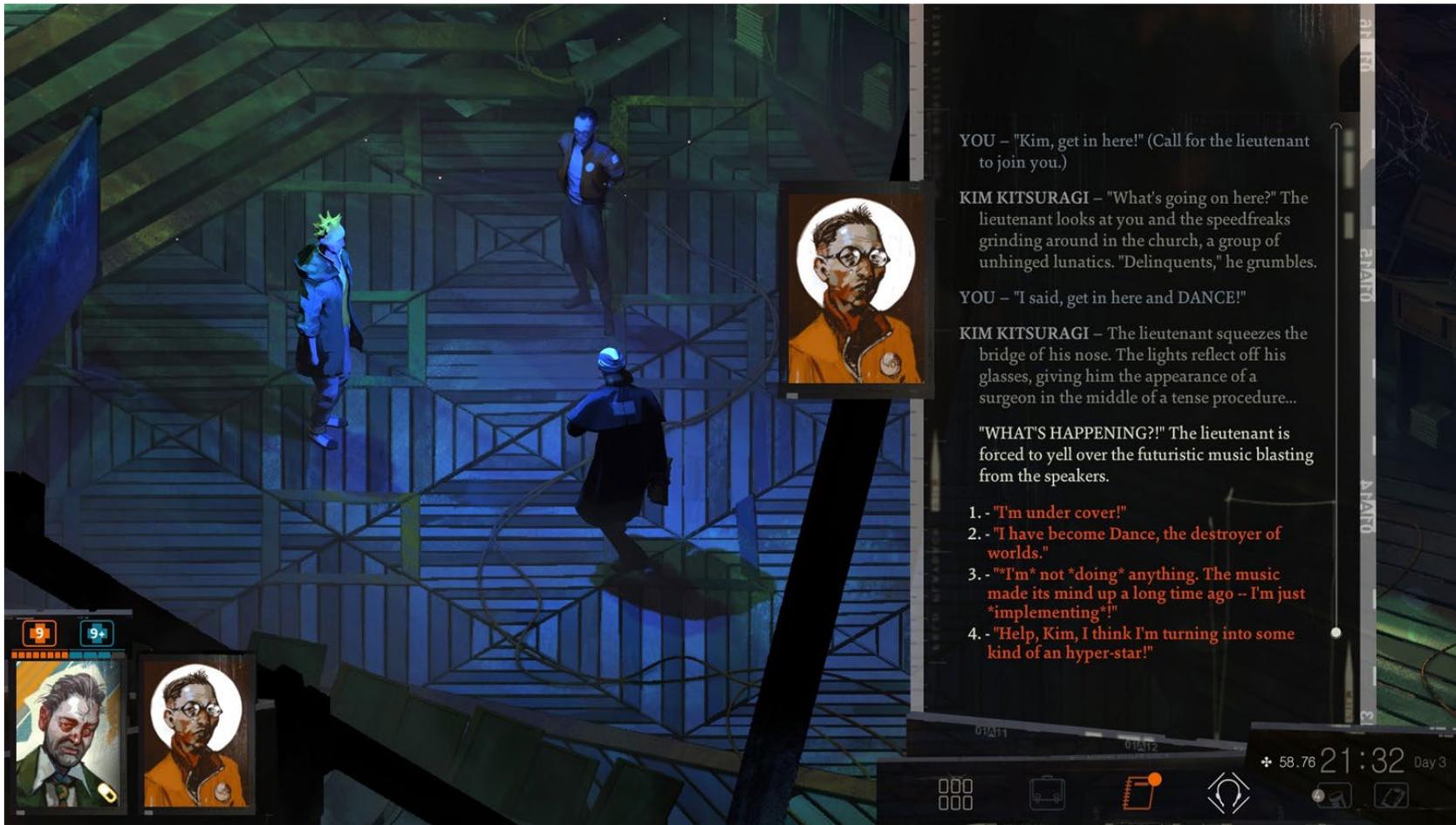
PHYSICAL

Extremely physical. Interacts with the world through his body. Gets things done, but dumb as a rock.

1 2 5 4
INT PSY FYS MOT

+HAND/EYE COORDINATION





YOU - "Kim, get in here!" (Call for the lieutenant to join you.)

KIM KITSURAGI - "What's going on here?" The lieutenant looks at you and the speedfreaks grinding around in the church, a group of unhinged lunatics. "Delinquents," he grumbles.

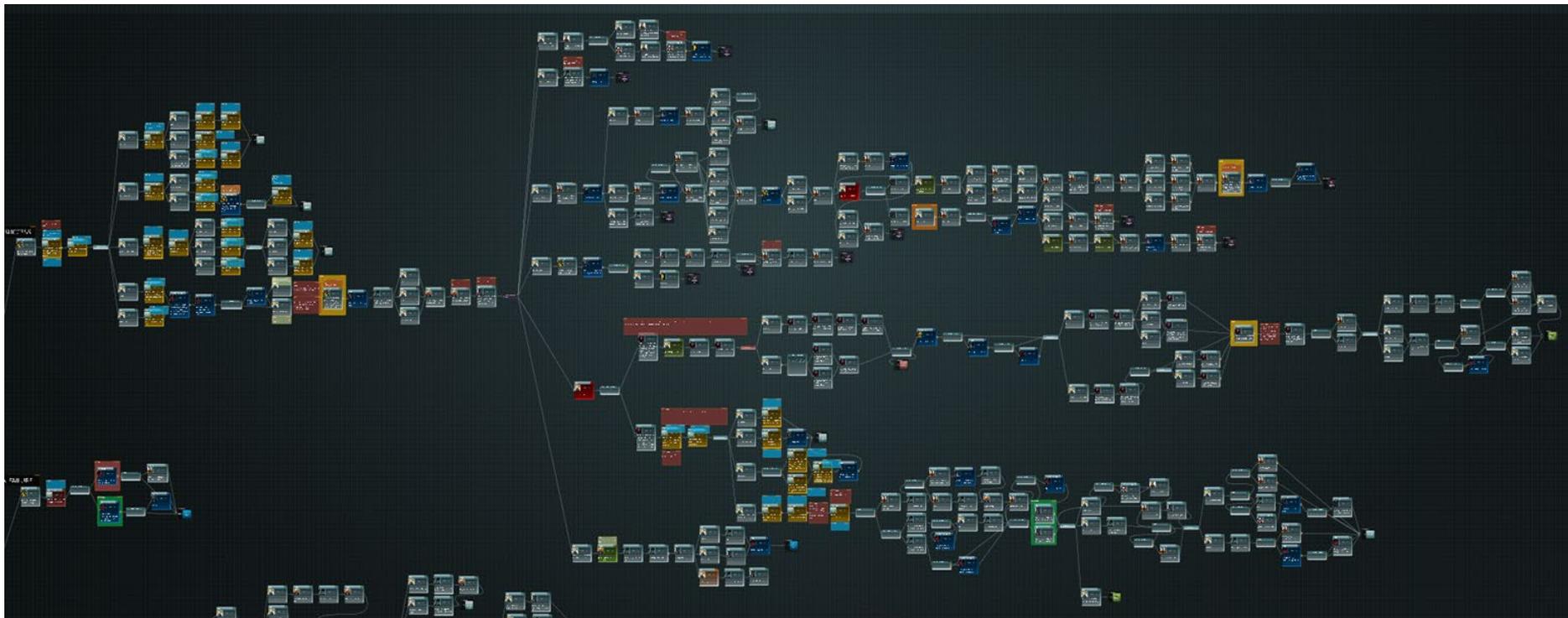
YOU - "I said, get in here and DANCE!"

KIM KITSURAGI - The lieutenant squeezes the bridge of his nose. The lights reflect off his glasses, giving him the appearance of a surgeon in the middle of a tense procedure...

"WHAT'S HAPPENING?!" The lieutenant is forced to yell over the futuristic music blasting from the speakers.

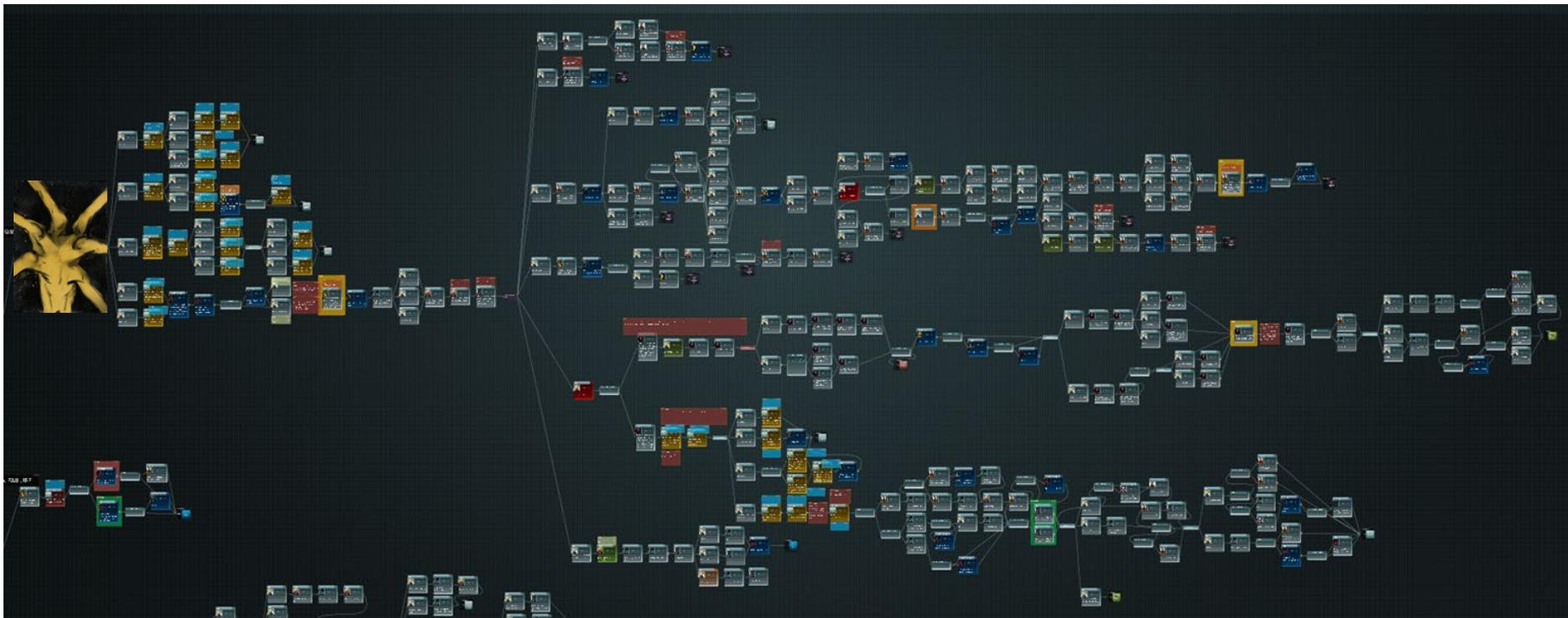
1. - "I'm under cover!"
2. - "I have become Dance, the destroyer of worlds."
3. - "I'm* not *doing* anything. The music made its mind up a long time ago -- I'm just *implementing*!"
4. - "Help, Kim, I think I'm turning into some kind of an hyper-star!"

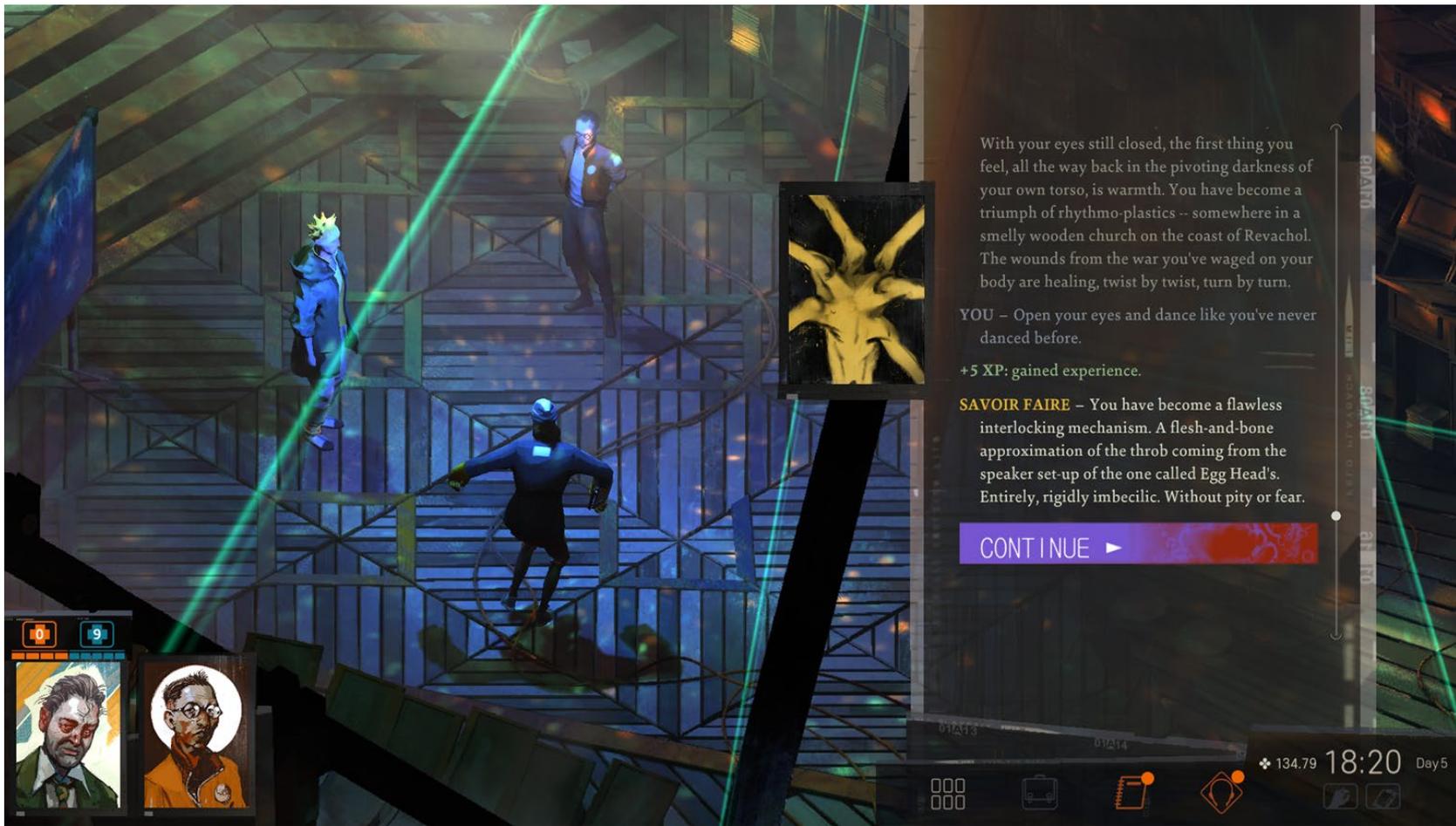




GDC[®]

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





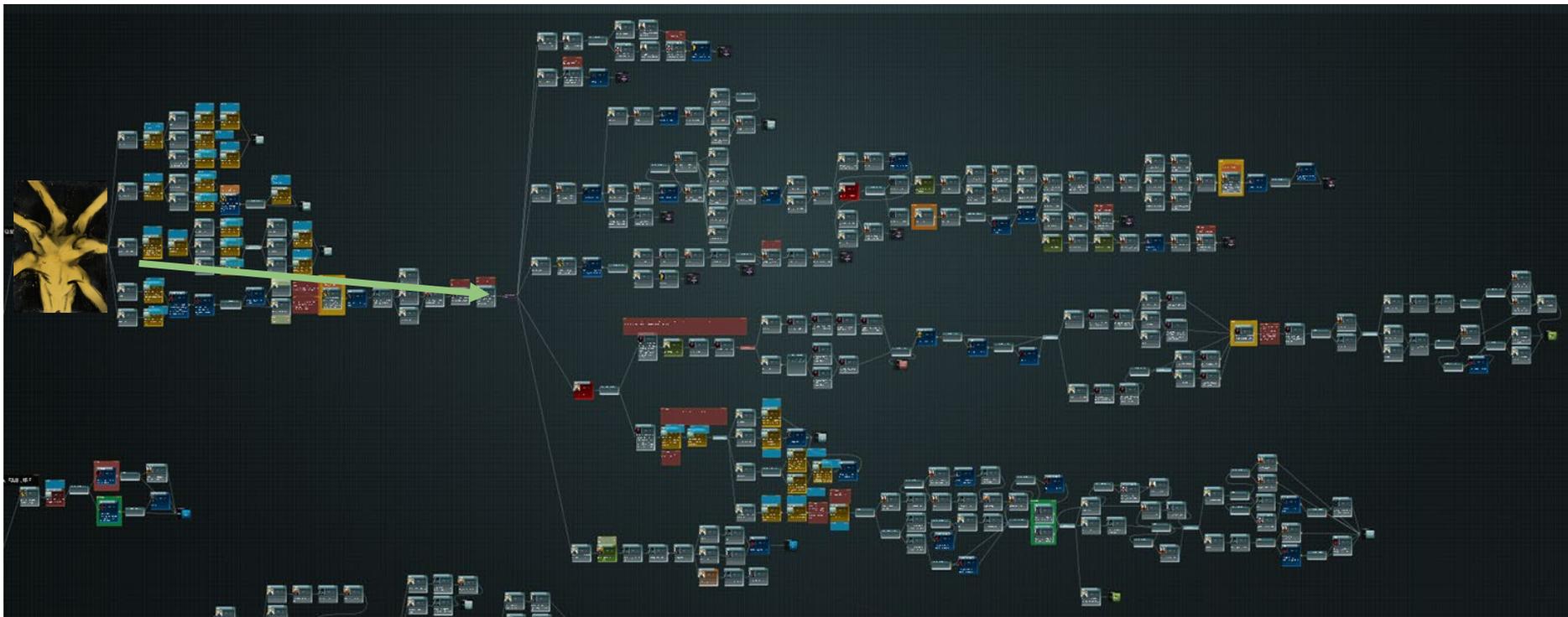
With your eyes still closed, the first thing you feel, all the way back in the pivoting darkness of your own torso, is warmth. You have become a triumph of rhythmoplastics -- somewhere in a smelly wooden church on the coast of Revachol. The wounds from the war you've waged on your body are healing, twist by twist, turn by turn.

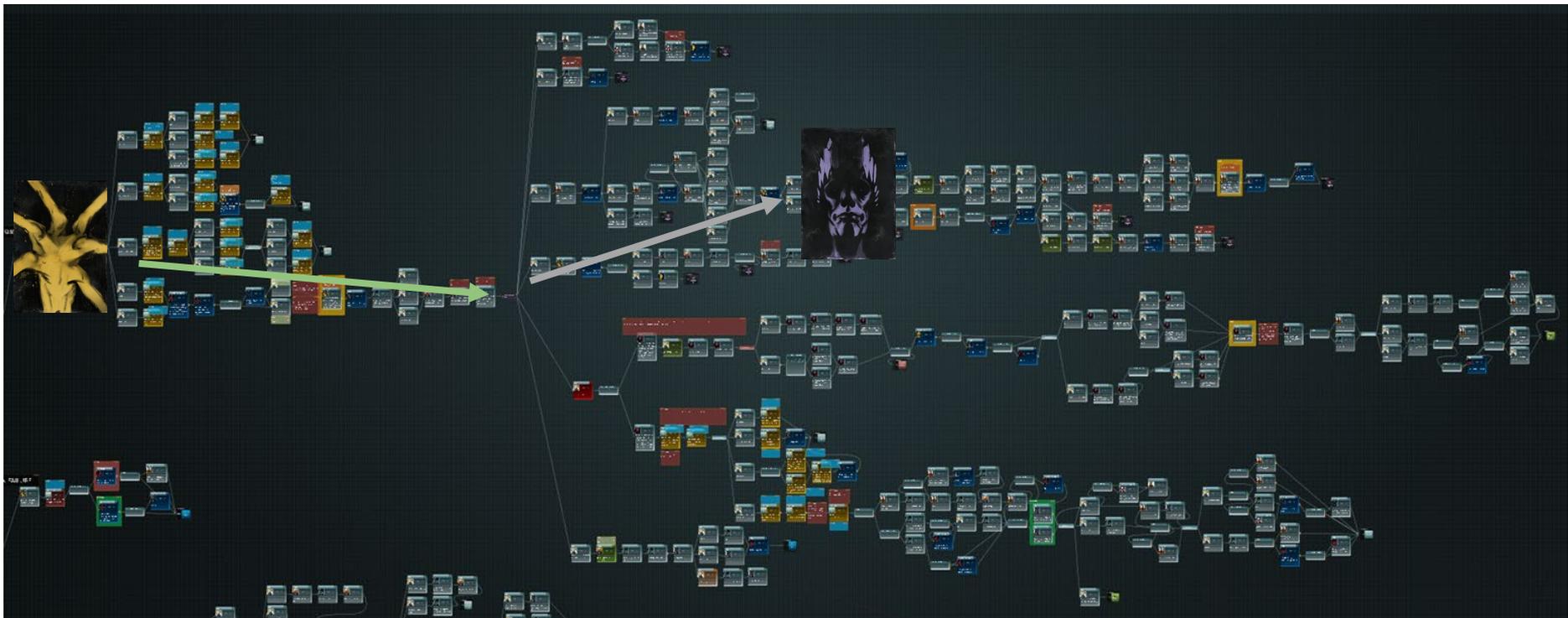
YOU – Open your eyes and dance like you've never danced before.

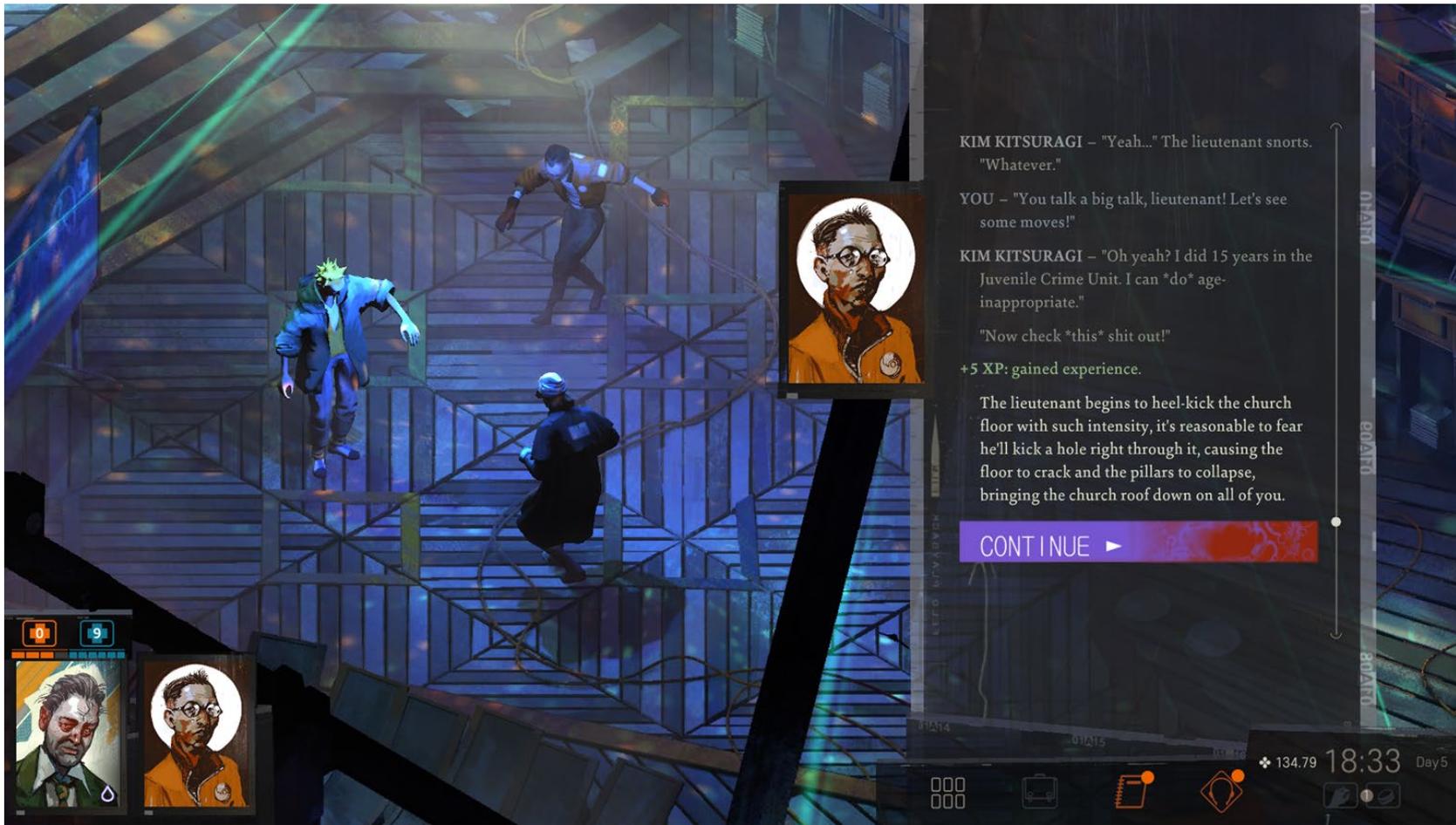
+5 XP: gained experience.

SAVOIR FAIRE – You have become a flawless interlocking mechanism. A flesh-and-bone approximation of the throb coming from the speaker set-up of the one called Egg Head's. Entirely, rigidly imbecilic. Without pity or fear.

CONTINUE ▶







KIM KITSURAGI – "Yeah..." The lieutenant snorts.
"Whatever."

YOU – "You talk a big talk, lieutenant! Let's see
some moves!"

KIM KITSURAGI – "Oh yeah? I did 15 years in the
Juvenile Crime Unit. I can *do* age-
inappropriate."

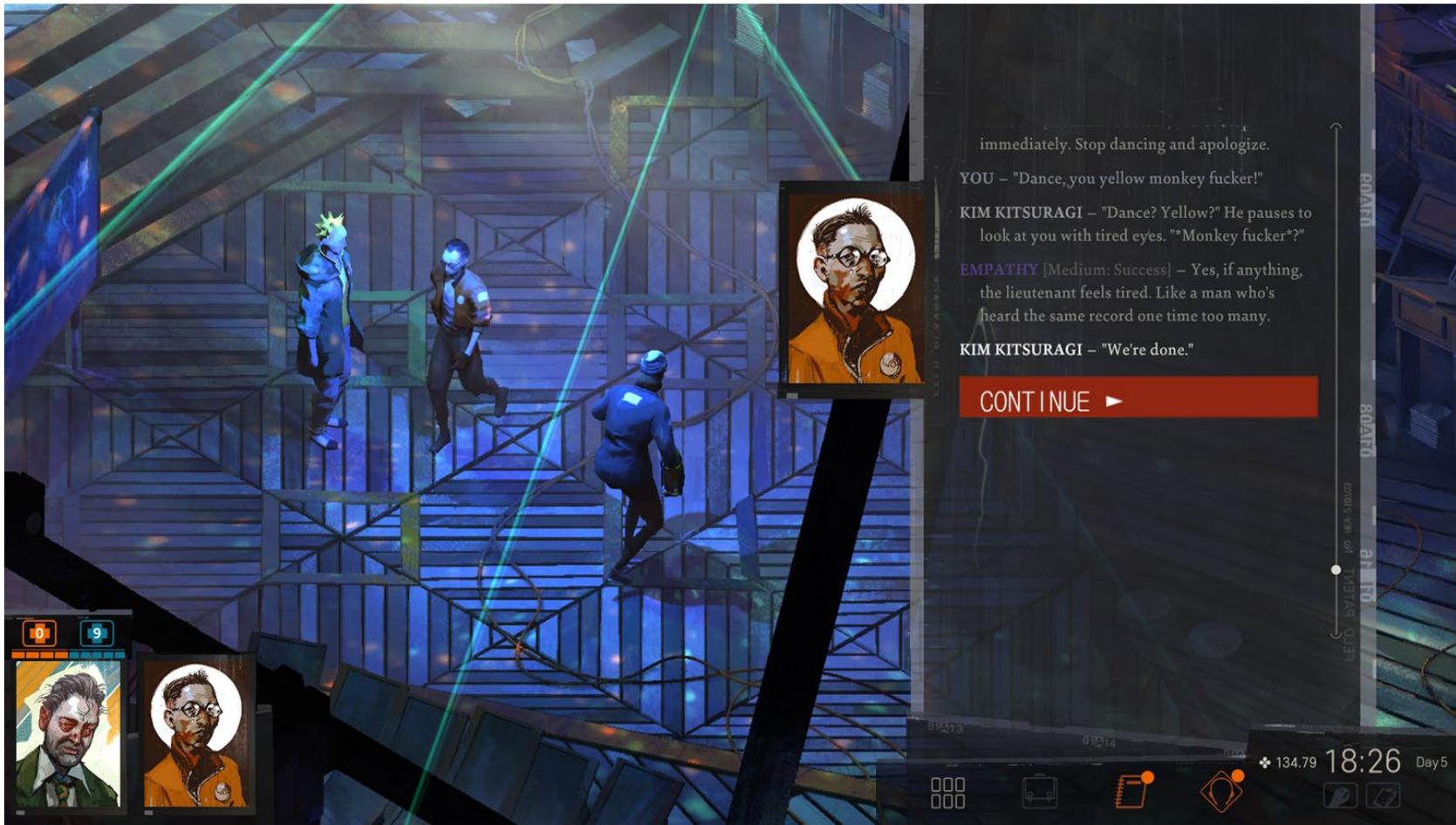
"Now check *this* shit out!"

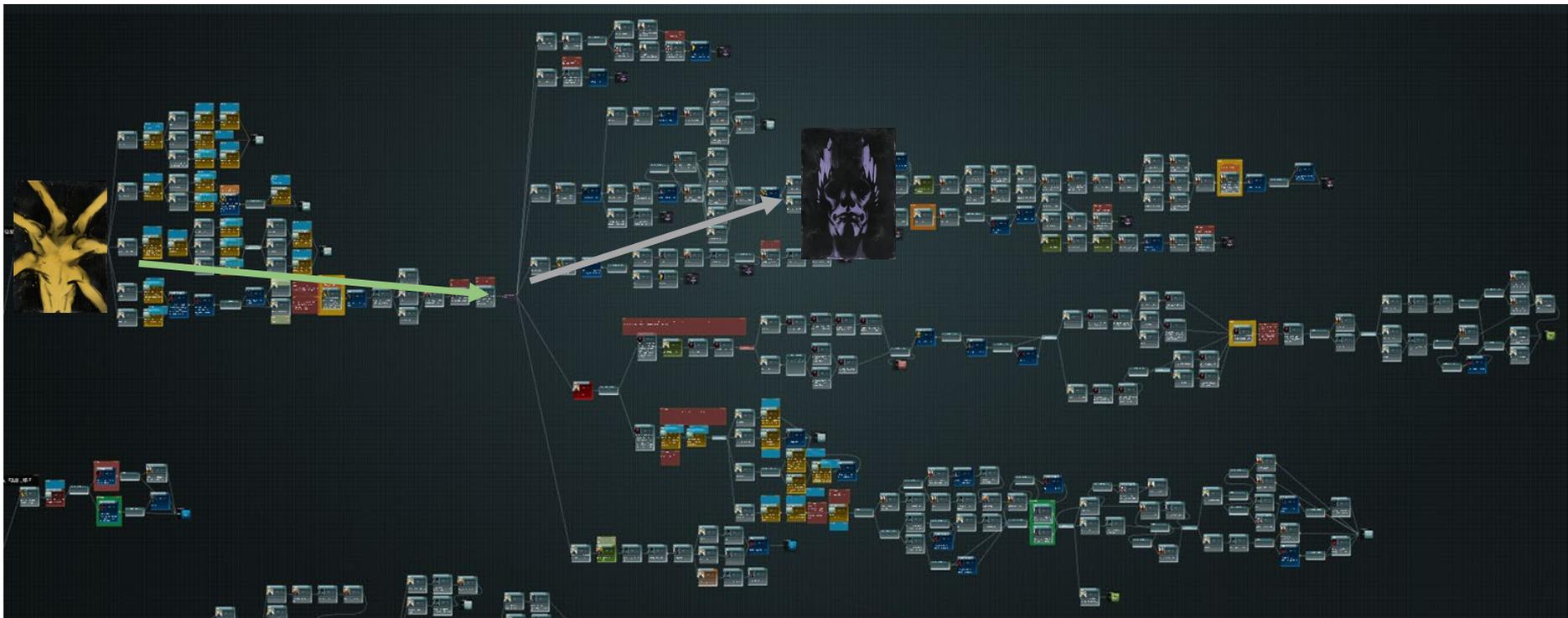
+5 XP: gained experience.

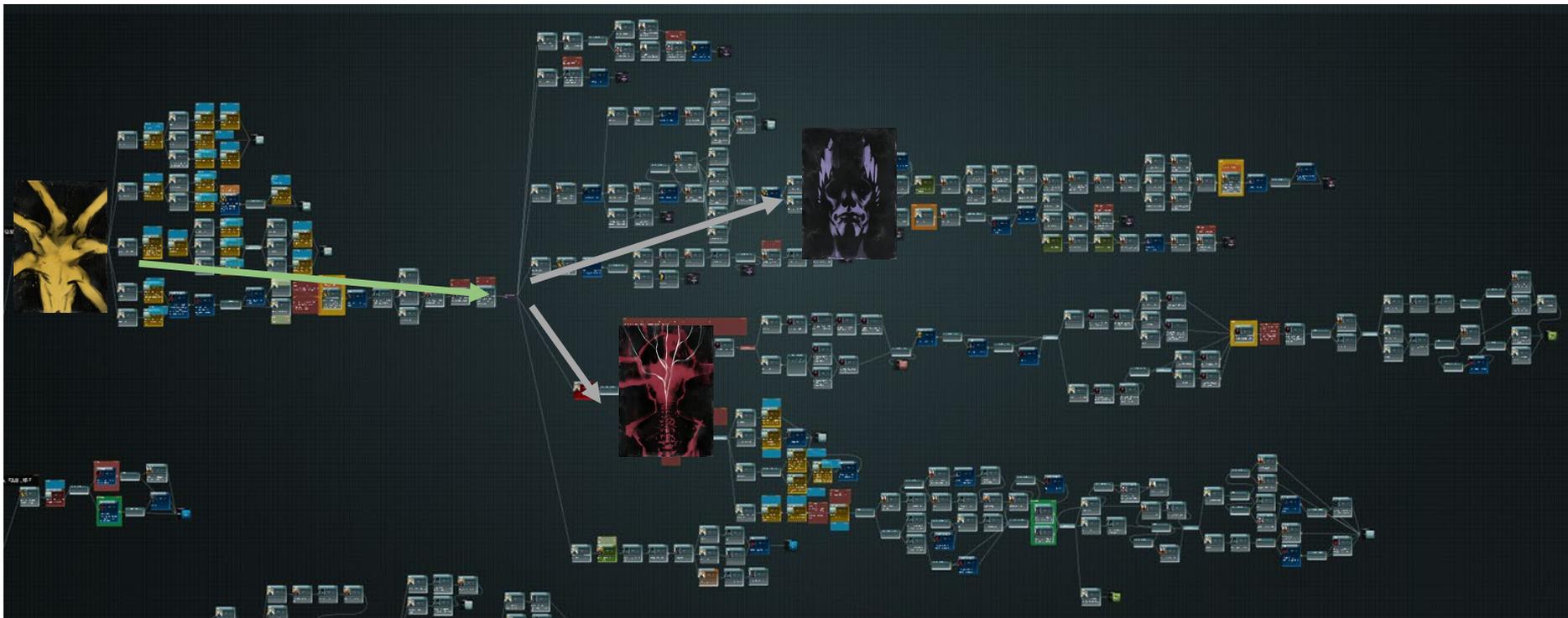
The lieutenant begins to heel-kick the church
floor with such intensity, it's reasonable to fear
he'll kick a hole right through it, causing the
floor to crack and the pillars to collapse,
bringing the church roof down on all of you.

CONTINUE ▶











You're gripped by panic, alongside a dizzying feeling of déjà vu. Then everything goes silent.

YOU – What's happening to me?

SPINAL CORD – Not sure, but it's definitely not a normal dance-floor experience. There's something seriously wrong with you, brah.

YOU – What happens next?

SPINAL CORD – You'll lay here in complete darkness for a while, far away from everything and everyone.

Then consciousness will slowly begin to return. It won't be fun.

But you already know -- it rarely is.

CONTINUE ▶





NOID – "Here we go again!!!"

EGG HEAD – "Hard core fills the air!"

ANDRE – "The sound above my hair!"

SHIVERS [Challenging: Success] – On the coast of the Martinaise Inlet, in a small weather-beaten stave church built 380 years ago by settlers from the Occident, most likely to guard against an anomaly at its centre, an officer of the RCM is contorting his body into idiotically rigid shapes, as he invents the future of dance music... It's the *hardest* anyone has ever danced.

YOU – What is this strange feeling I keep having?
This cold... even now.

SHIVERS – I AM LA REVACHOLIÈRE.

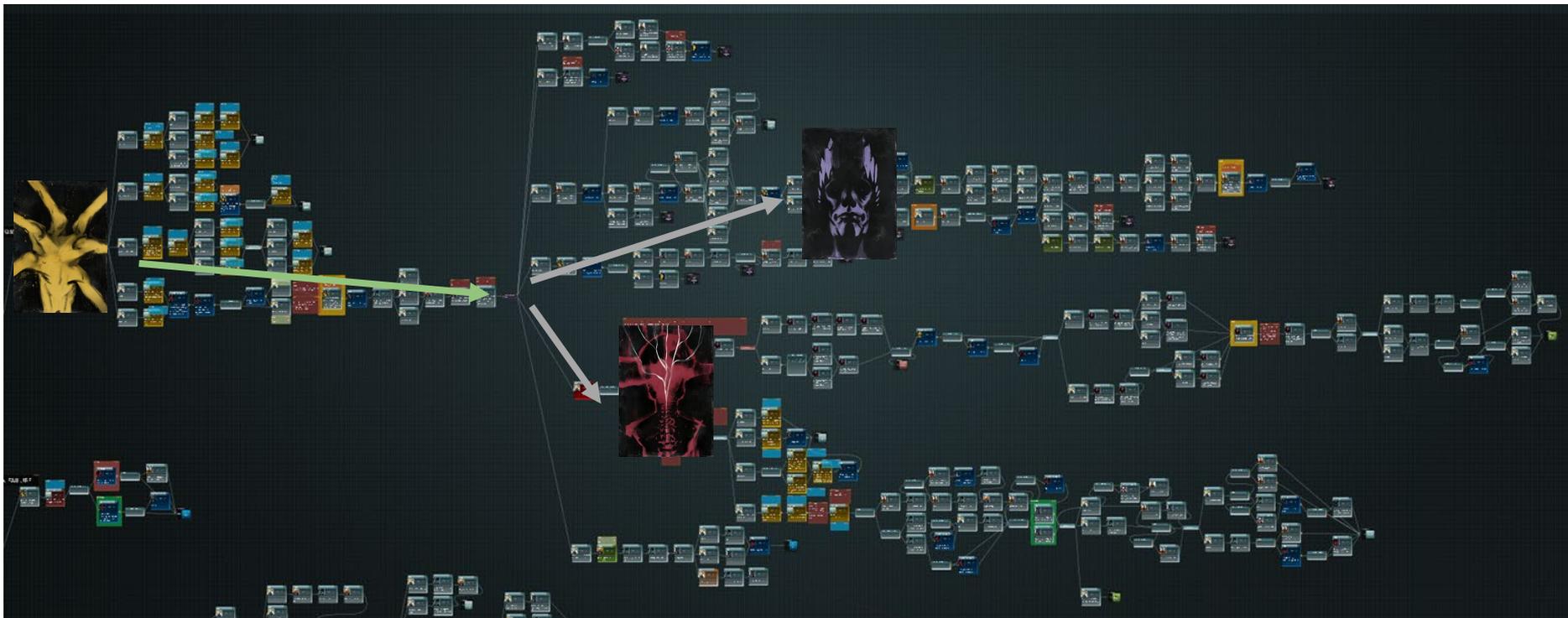
CONTINUE ►

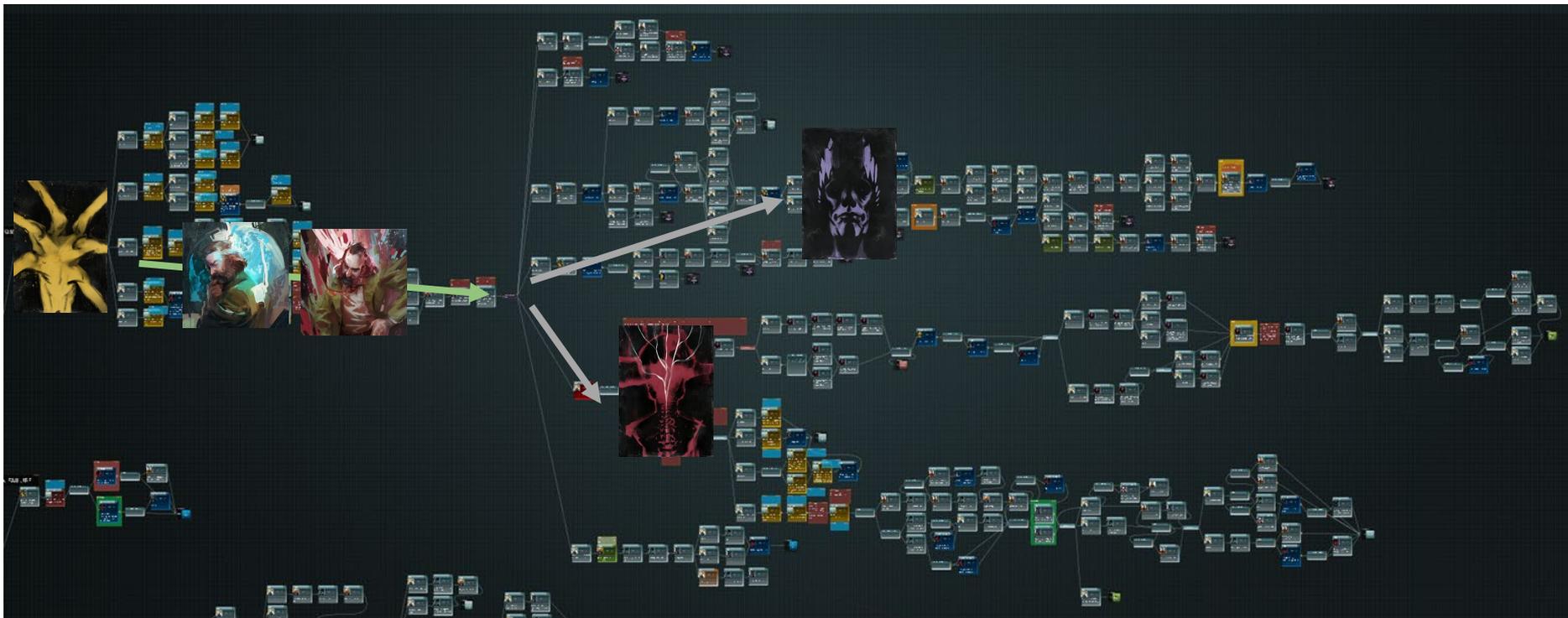


Radical asymmetry

Creating dramatically different player experiences based on a player's character expressions.

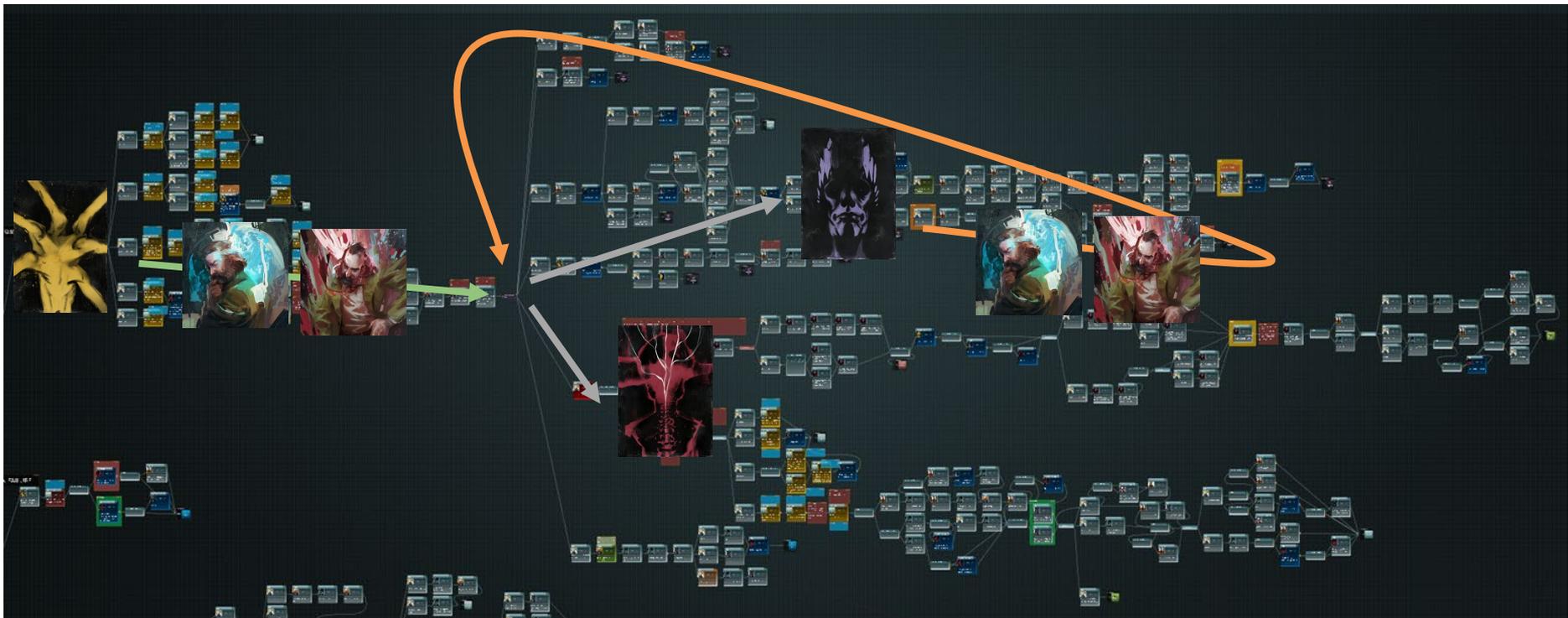
- Massive design challenge.
- Some players won't feel validated.

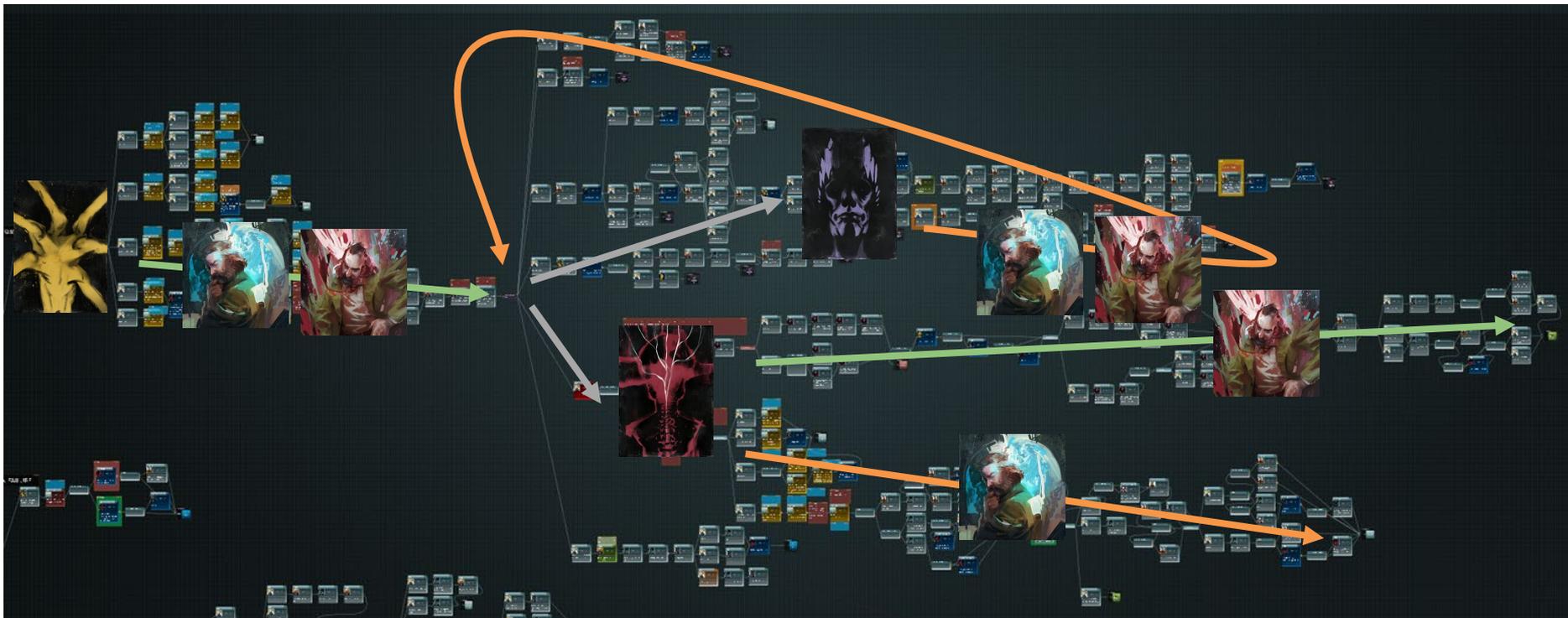


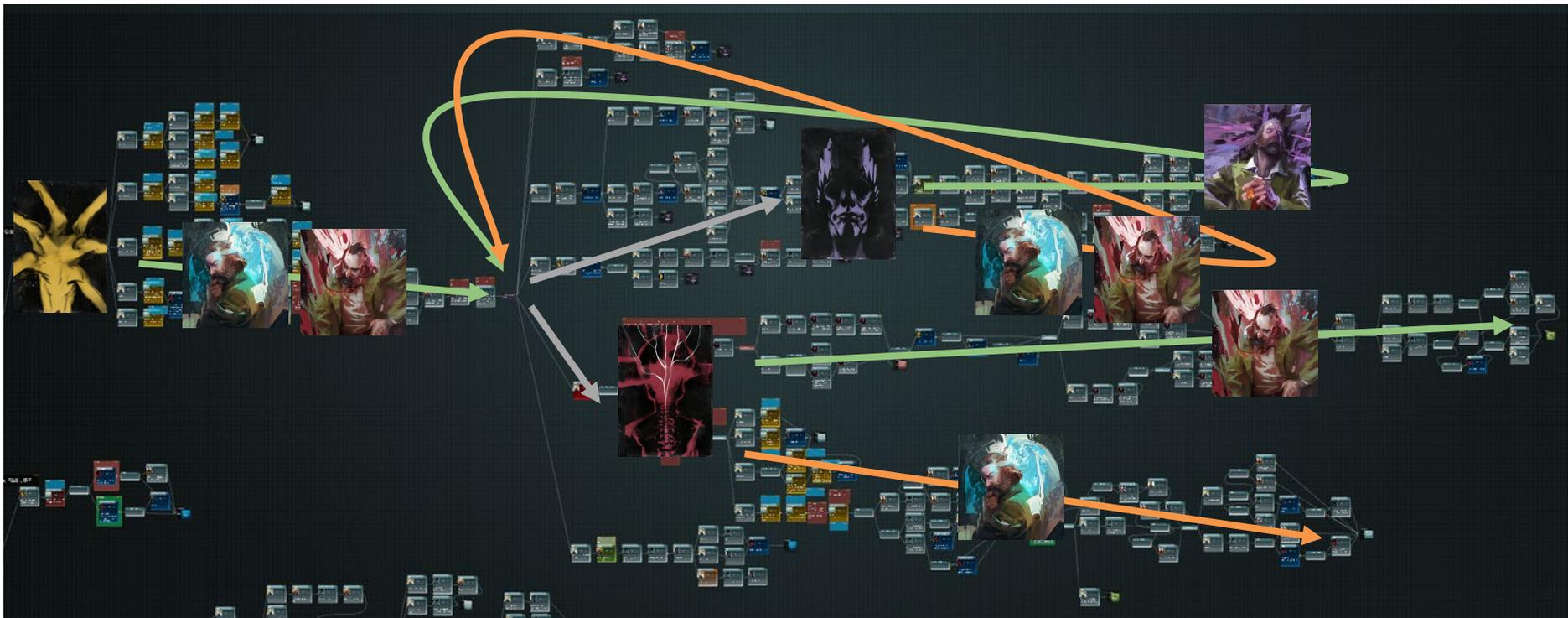


GDC[®]

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







Easy to start scene.
Likely to damage
relationship with Kim,
but experience
transcendent visions.



Difficult to start scene.
Likely to convince Kim
to dance and experience
transcendent visions.



East to start scene.
Likely to damage
relationship with Kim
and pass out from
dehydration.



Also possible to
convince Kim to dance
but pass out from
dehydration. Players
may also skip either red
check.



GDC[®]

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

Radical asymmetry

Creating dramatically different player experiences based on a player's character expressions.

- Massive design challenge.
- Some players won't feel validated.



GDC[®]

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



Radical asymmetry

Creating dramatically different player experiences based on a player's character expressions.

- Massive design challenge.
- Some players won't feel validated.
- Accurate reflection of reality.
- Seemingly infinite replay opportunity.



GDC[®]

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



Parting thoughts

1. Integrating more sophisticated dialogue systems with more complex gameplay loops.
 - a. How can players to define/build their own gameplay loops dialogue?*



GDC[®]

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

Parting thoughts

1. Integrating more sophisticated dialogue systems with more complex gameplay loops.
 - a. How can players to define/build their own gameplay loops dialogue?*
2. Further developing the aesthetics of branching dialogue structures.
 - a. What other structures are out there? What states can they*



GDC[®]

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



Thank you

justin@zaumstudio.com



GDC[®]

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