

Narrative Design And Player Agency Are Friends



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Vermont Game Developers' Meetup



CHOICE
OF GAMES



Pelgrane Press



A Gaulish officer, no more than a few years older than yourself, approaches you and offers $\{his\}$ sword in surrender. $\{He\}$ addresses you in Gaulish. "I believe you are the officer of the prize party, $\{sir\}$?" $\{he\}$ says.

Do you deign to respond to $\{him\}$ in Gaulish?

*choice

#Yes, anything else would be churlish and unworthy of a $\{gentleman\}$.

*set tact $\%+10$

*set likeability $\%+5$

*set RelationshipVilleneuve $\%+5$

*goto Gaulish

#Yes. $\{He\}$ may not understand my language and it will be useful to open communication with $\{him\}$.

*set intelligence $\%+5$

*goto Gaulish

#No. I may have the opportunity to overhear useful information if the prisoners do not know I speak their language.

Clever. Not particularly honorable, but clever.

*set honor $\%-10$

*set intelligence $\%+10$

*goto Albionish

#No. We defeated them, and we will make them behave on our terms.

*set bloodthirst $\%+10$

*set honor $\%-5$

*set RelationshipVilleneuve $\%-10$

*set tact $\%-10$

Show Stats

A Gaulish officer, no more than a few years older than yourself, approaches you and offers her sword in surrender. She addresses you in Gaulish.

Given your social class, your tutors taught you Gaulish as a matter of course. You understand her perfectly, and can reply with an almost native accent if you choose.

"I believe you are the officer of the prize party, ma'am?" she says.

Do you deign to respond to her in Gaulish?

- Yes, anything else would be churlish and unworthy of a gentlewoman.
- Yes. She may not understand my language and it will be useful to open communication with her.
- No. I may have the opportunity to overhear useful information if the prisoners do not

The Philosophy

Games are the art of choice.

But it can be really hard to balance player choice with the desire to tell a coherent story.

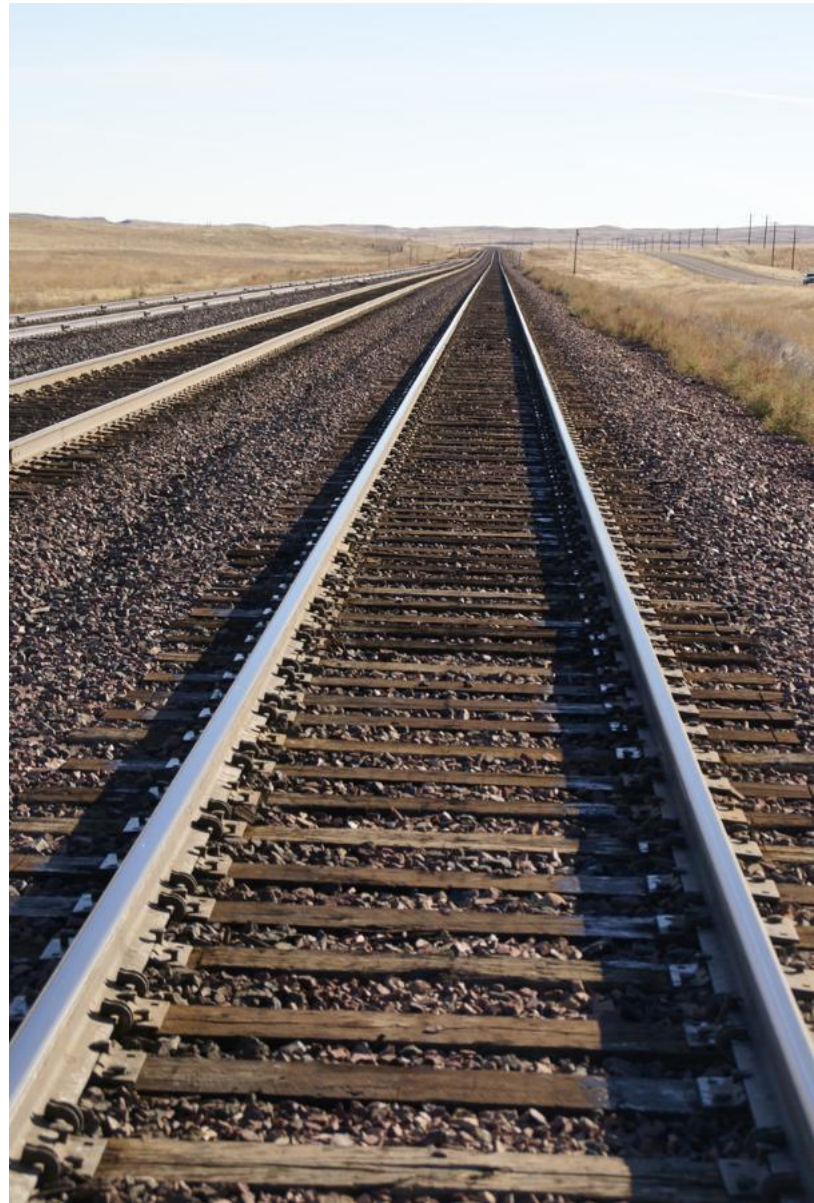
- Narrative Design Panel, Boston Festival of Independent Games, September 2013

“I Don’t Mind
Being Railroaded If
I’m On The Train
To
Awesometown!”

- member of my college LARPing
group

“Oops, I Forgot To
Add The
Interactive”

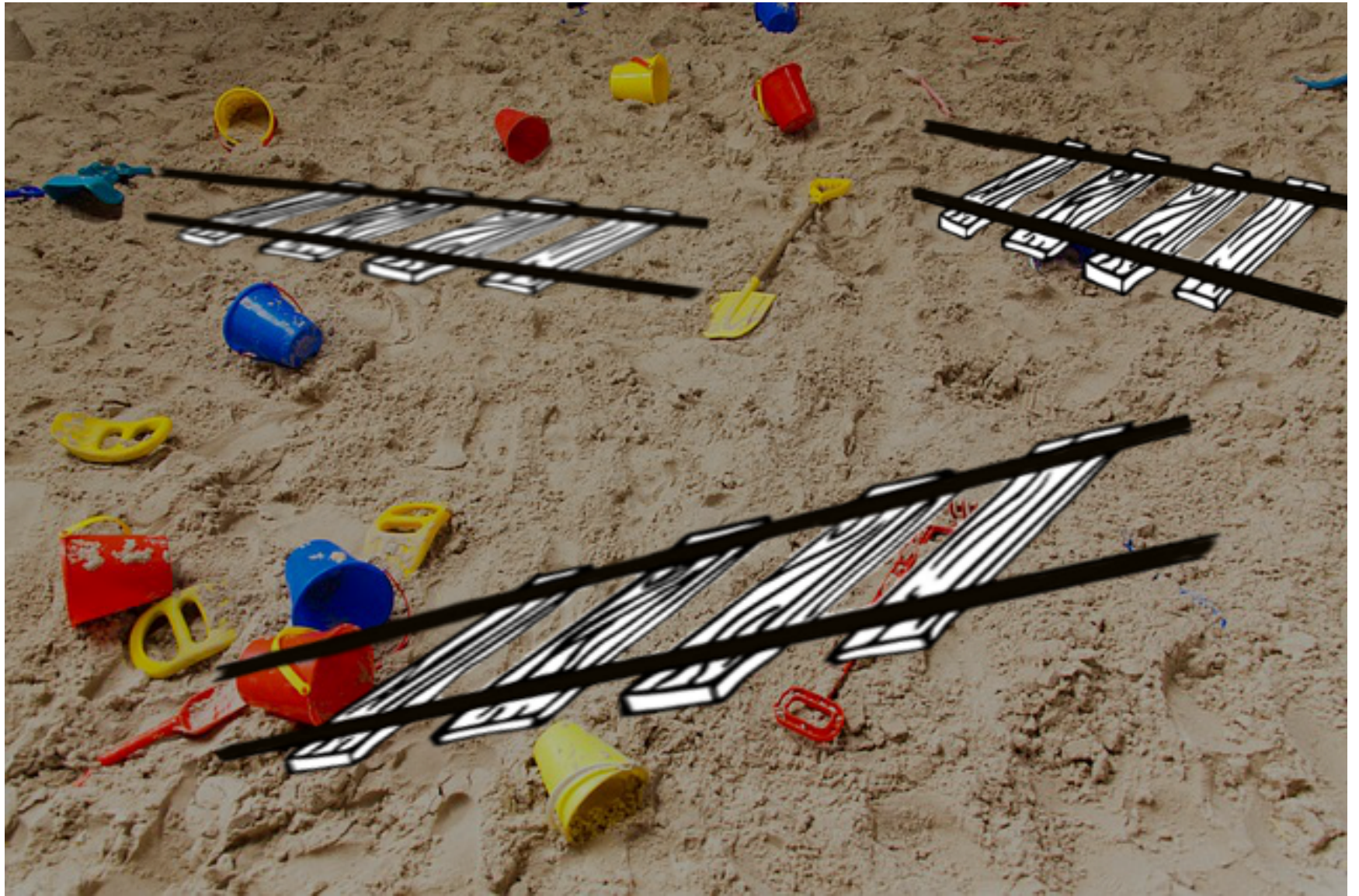
- different person, same LARP

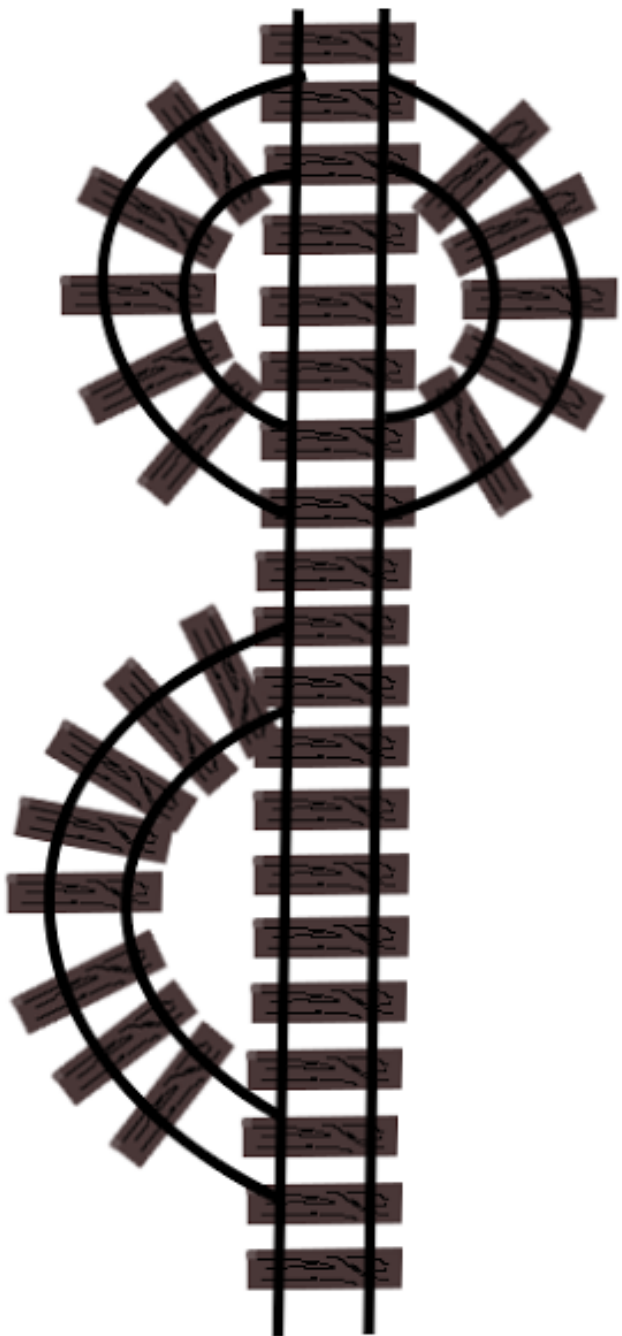




The Works of William Shakespeare



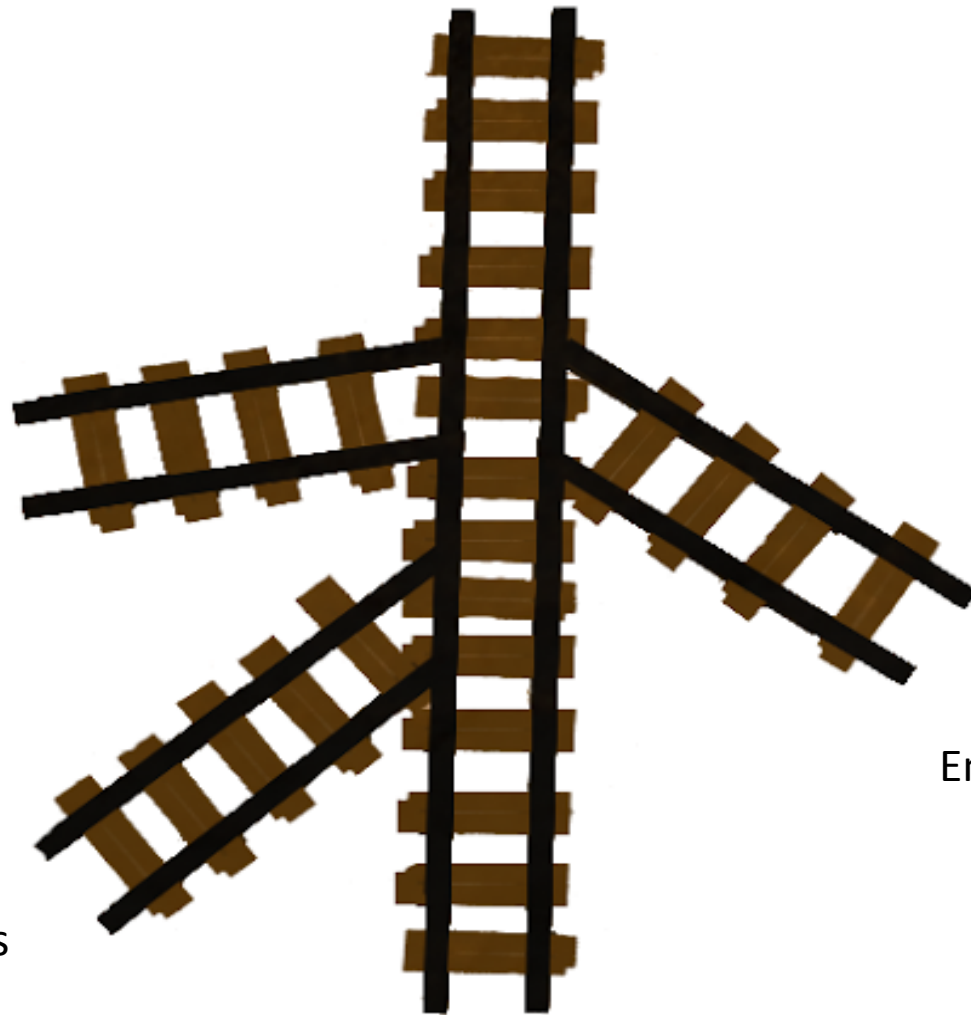






“Partly due to production constraints and partly due to ***the writers' desire to tell a coherent story***, most games like this don't have dozens of varied endings.”

“There's no way...any company would have the resources to make a game that fully accounts for every player decision and branches the story accordingly ***while still hitting the same story beats....***”



Ghost town

Empty prairie

I thought there was supposed to be a lake here, but I guess not

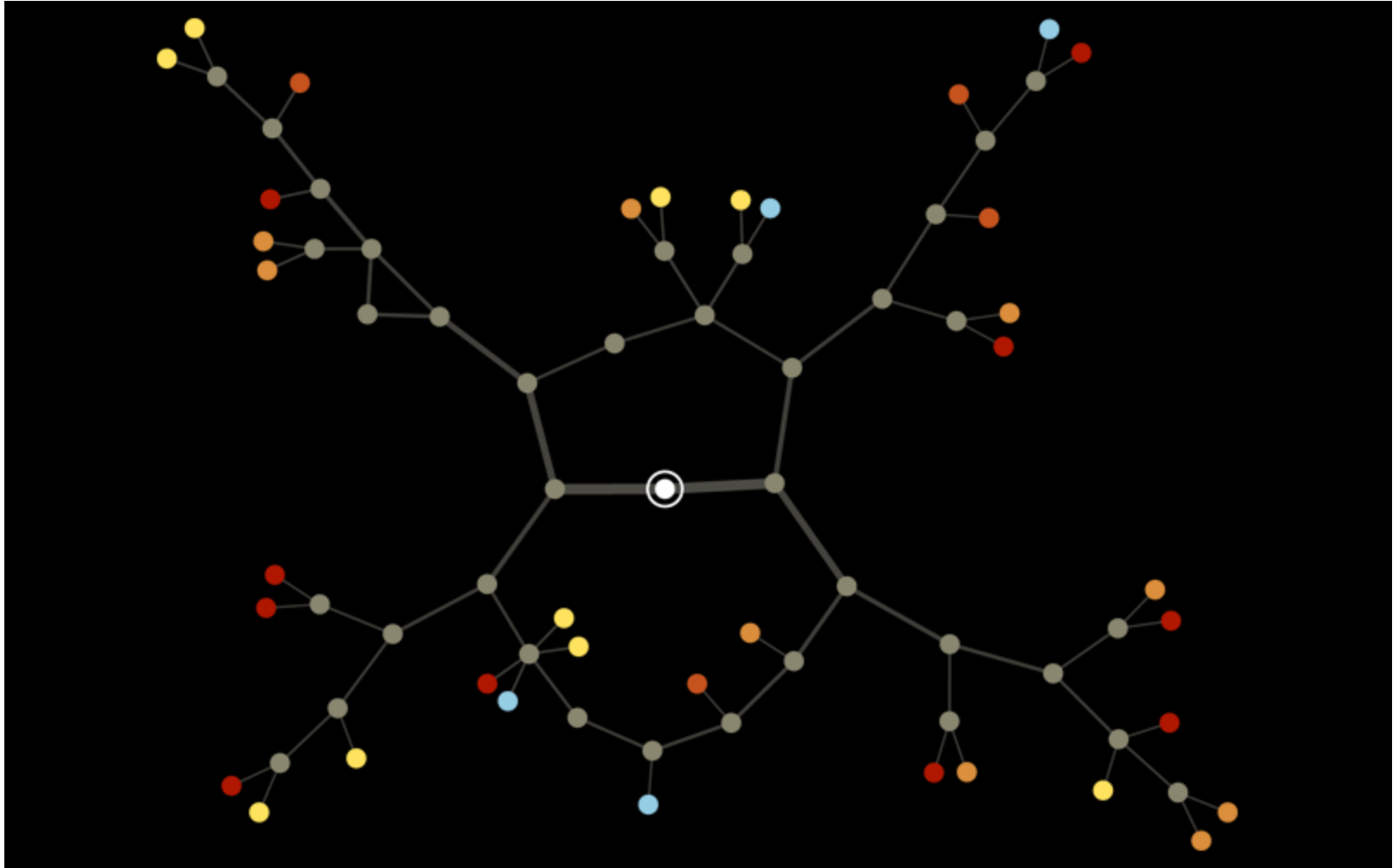
Awesometown

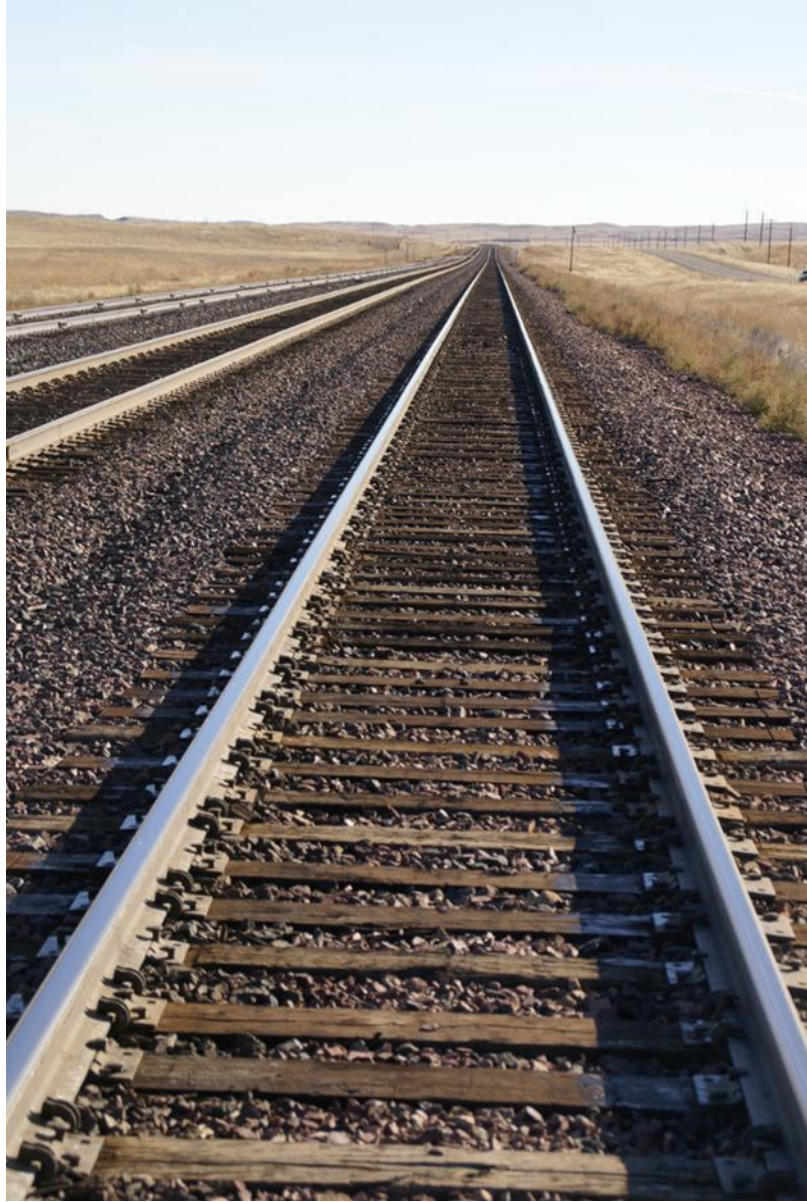


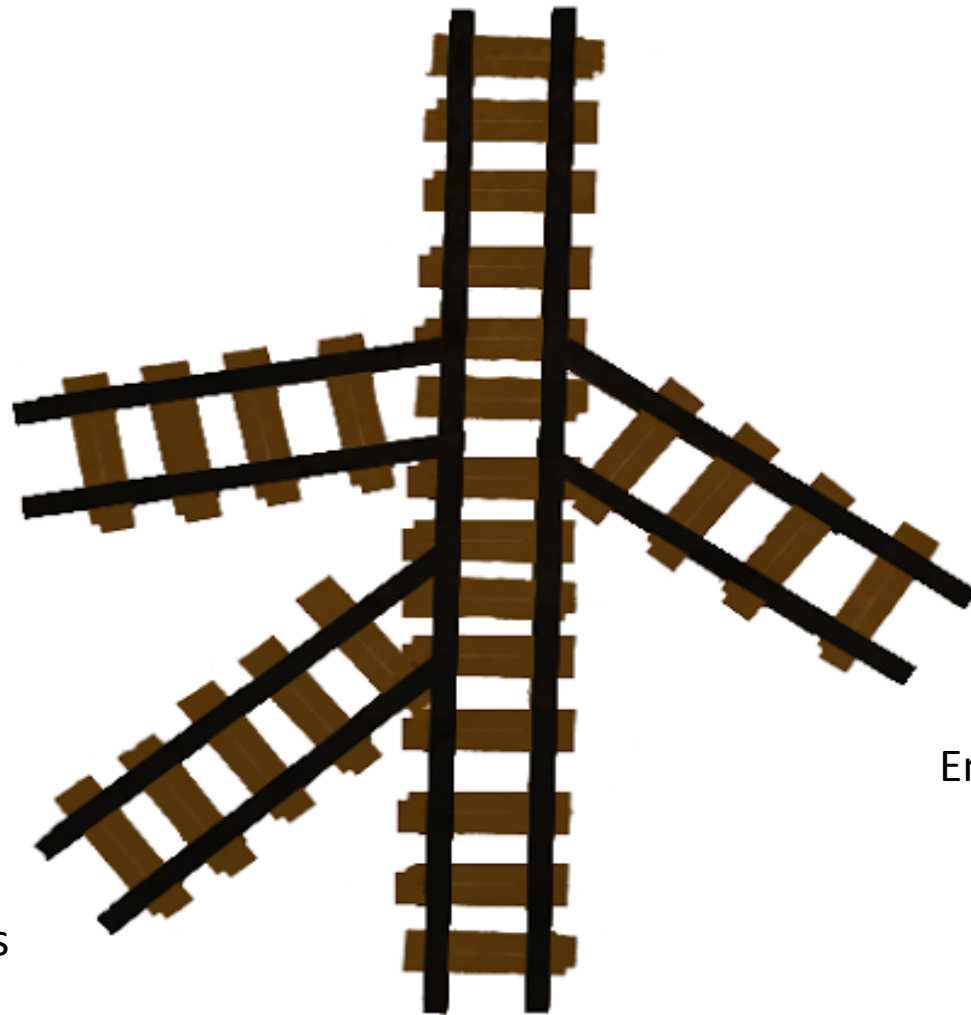
“Let's invent a world where the player gets to go through every emotional journey available.”

- Clive Barker

Designing To The Philosophy







Ghost town

Empty prairie

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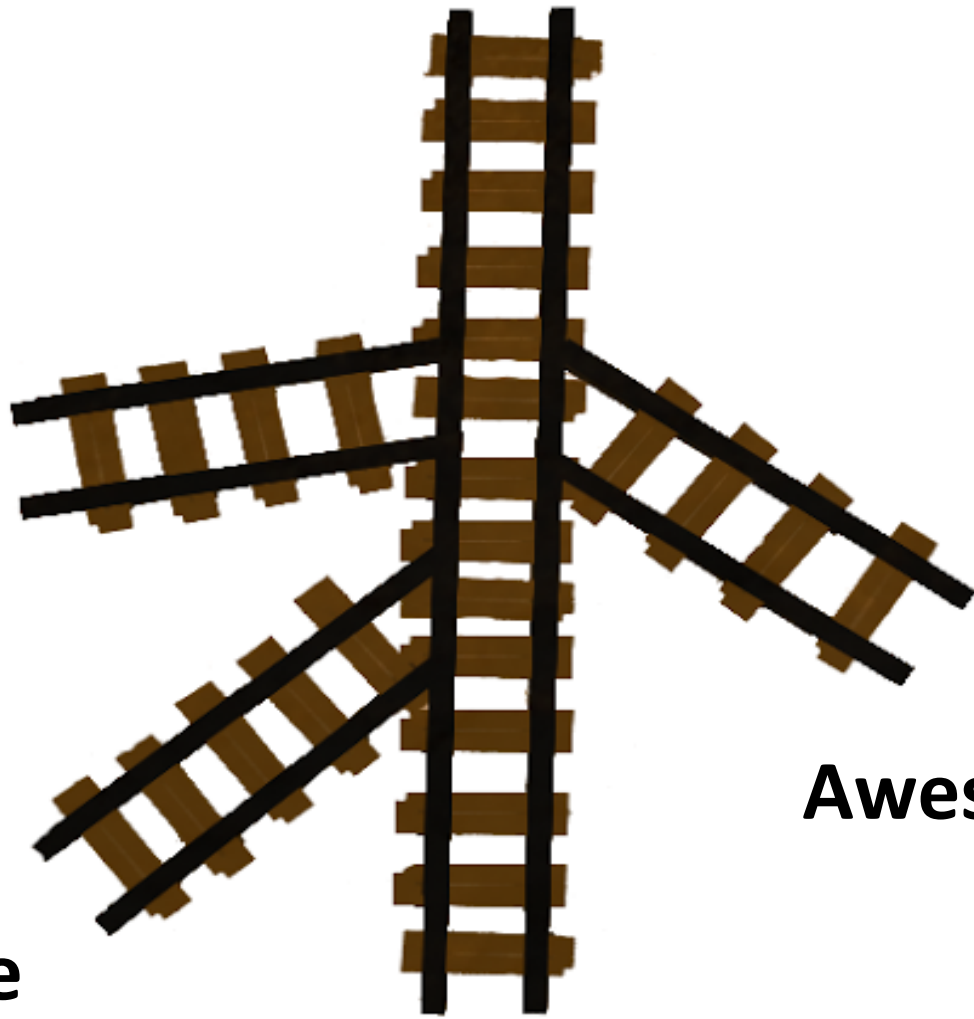
Awesometown

**Awesomeville
Heights**

**Lake
Awesome**

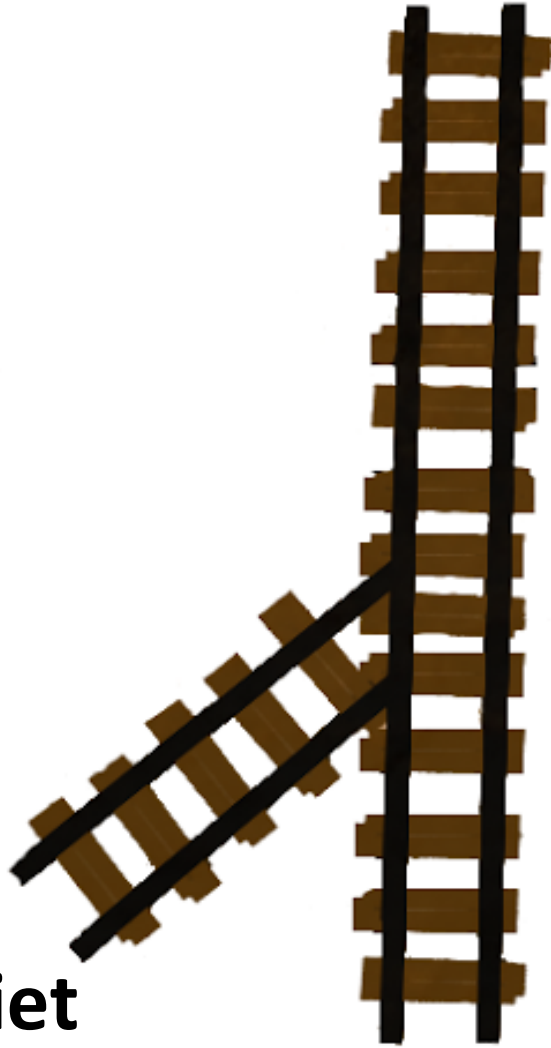
Awesometown

Awesomeville

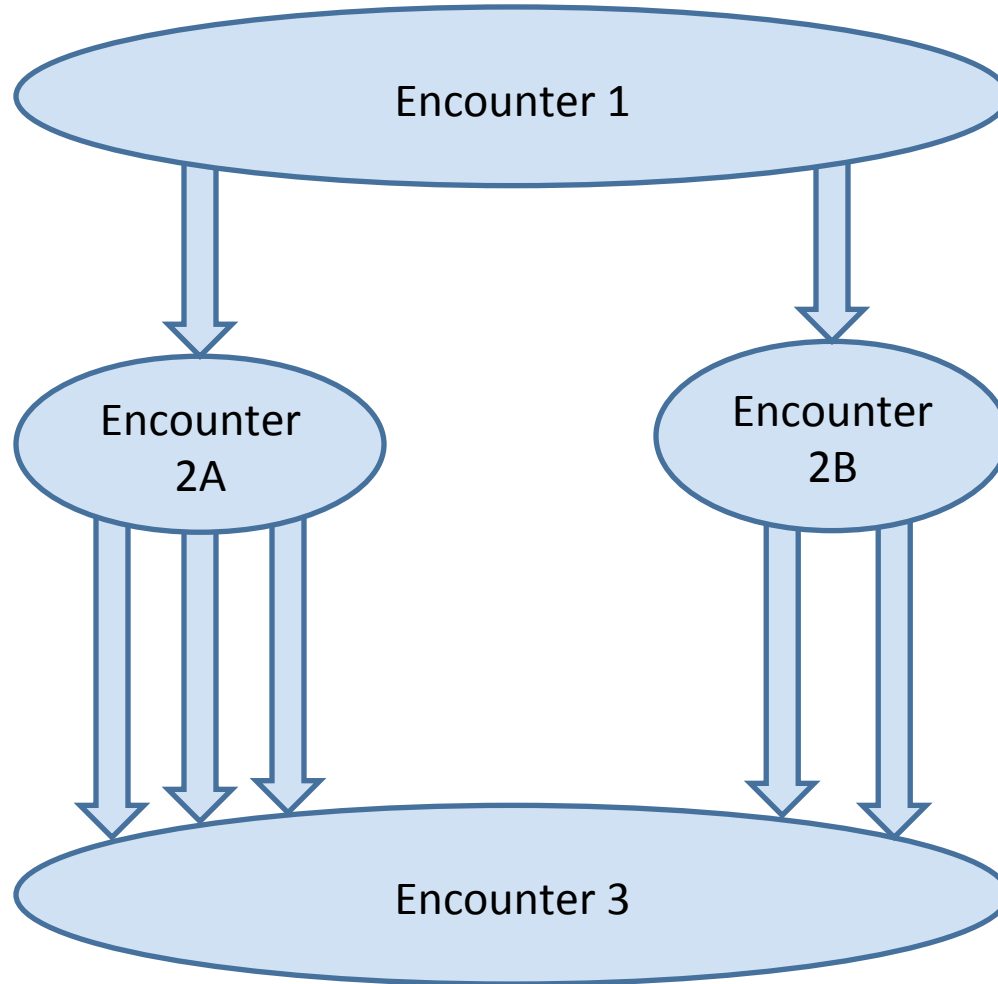




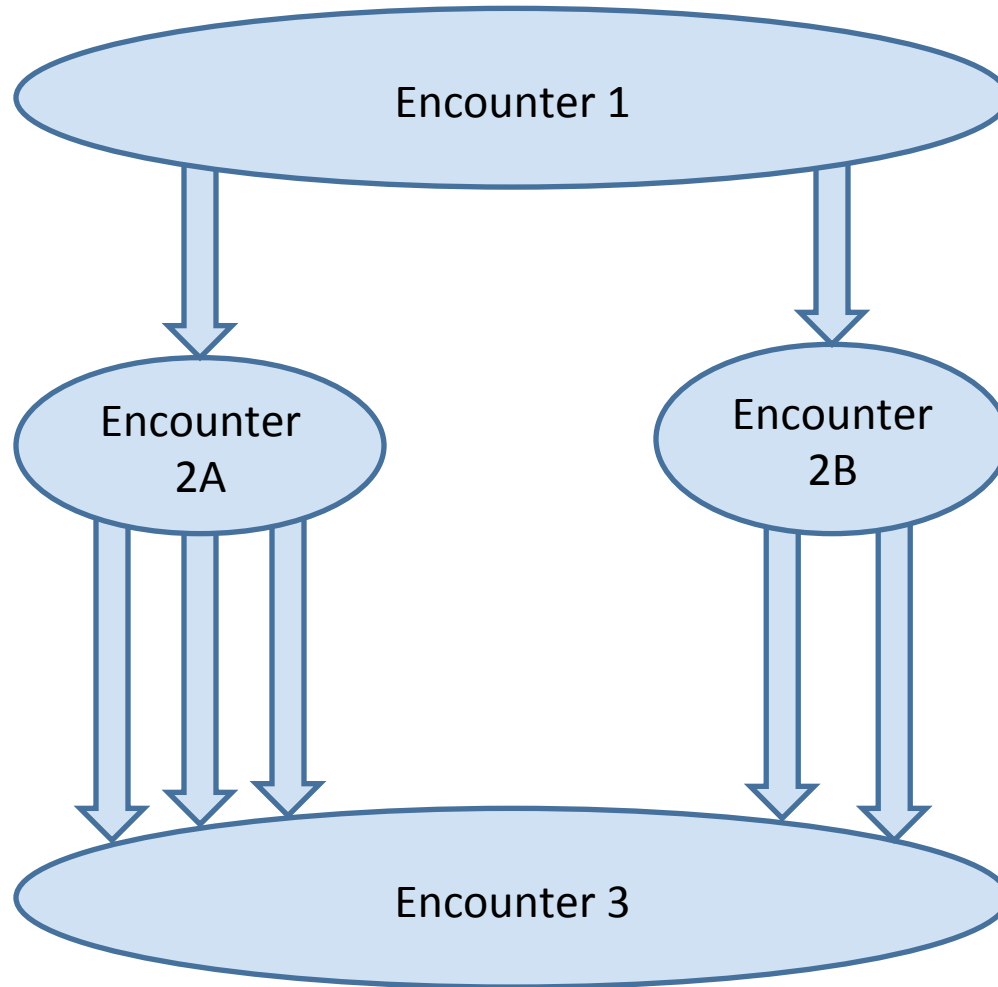
Romeo and Juliet



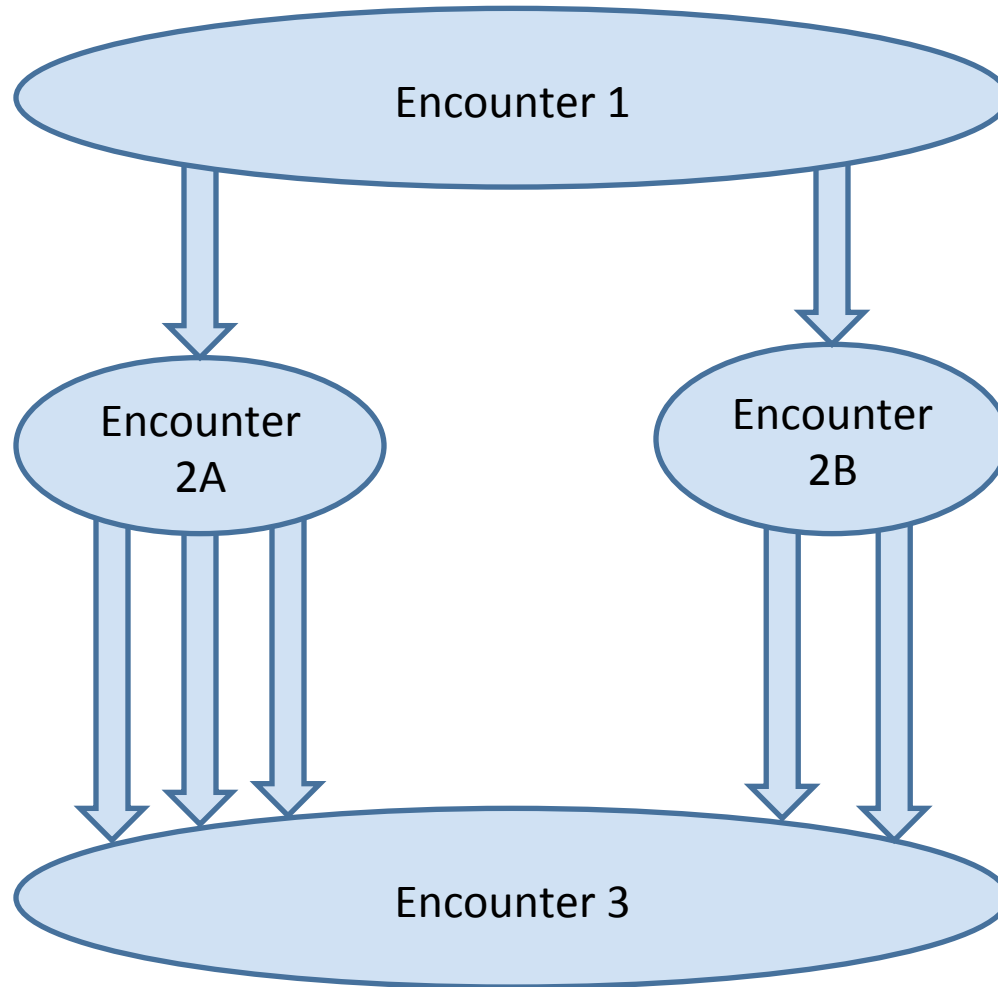
Much Ado About Nothing



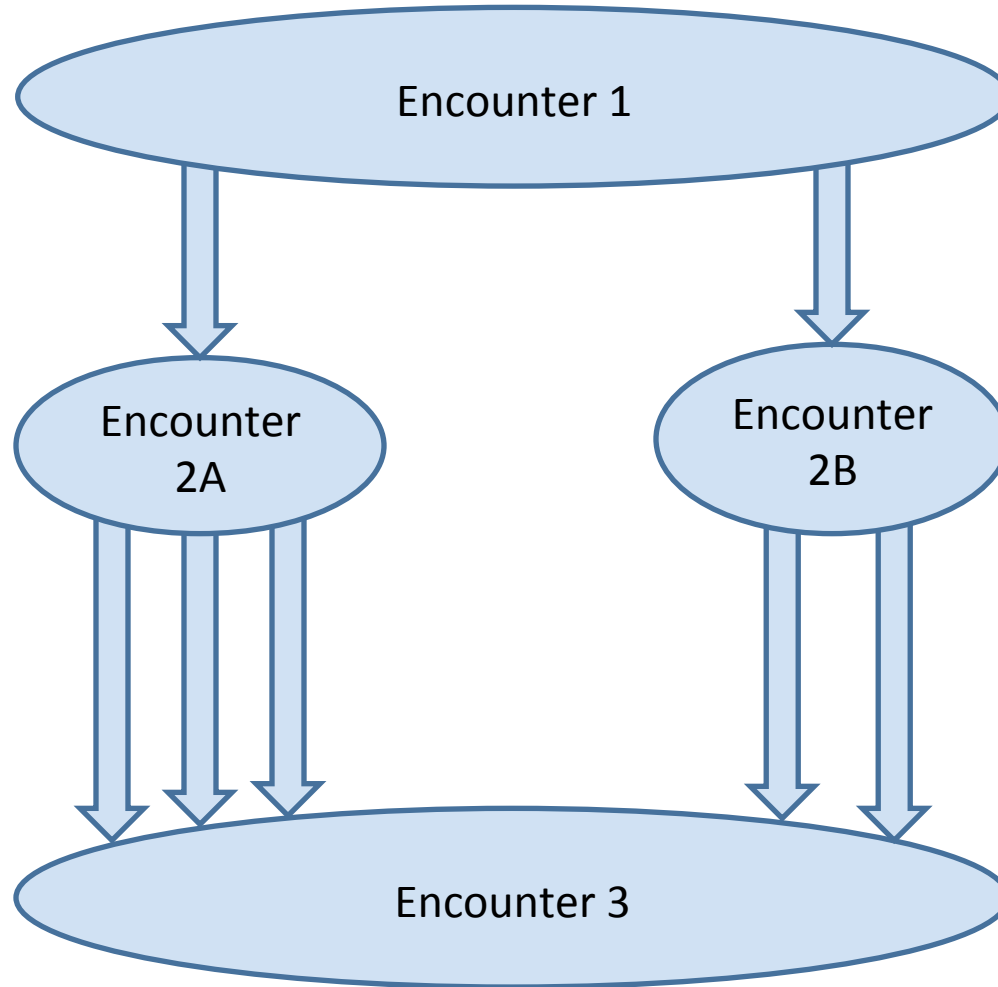
“Oh my God, they’re sending me to kill
my true love”



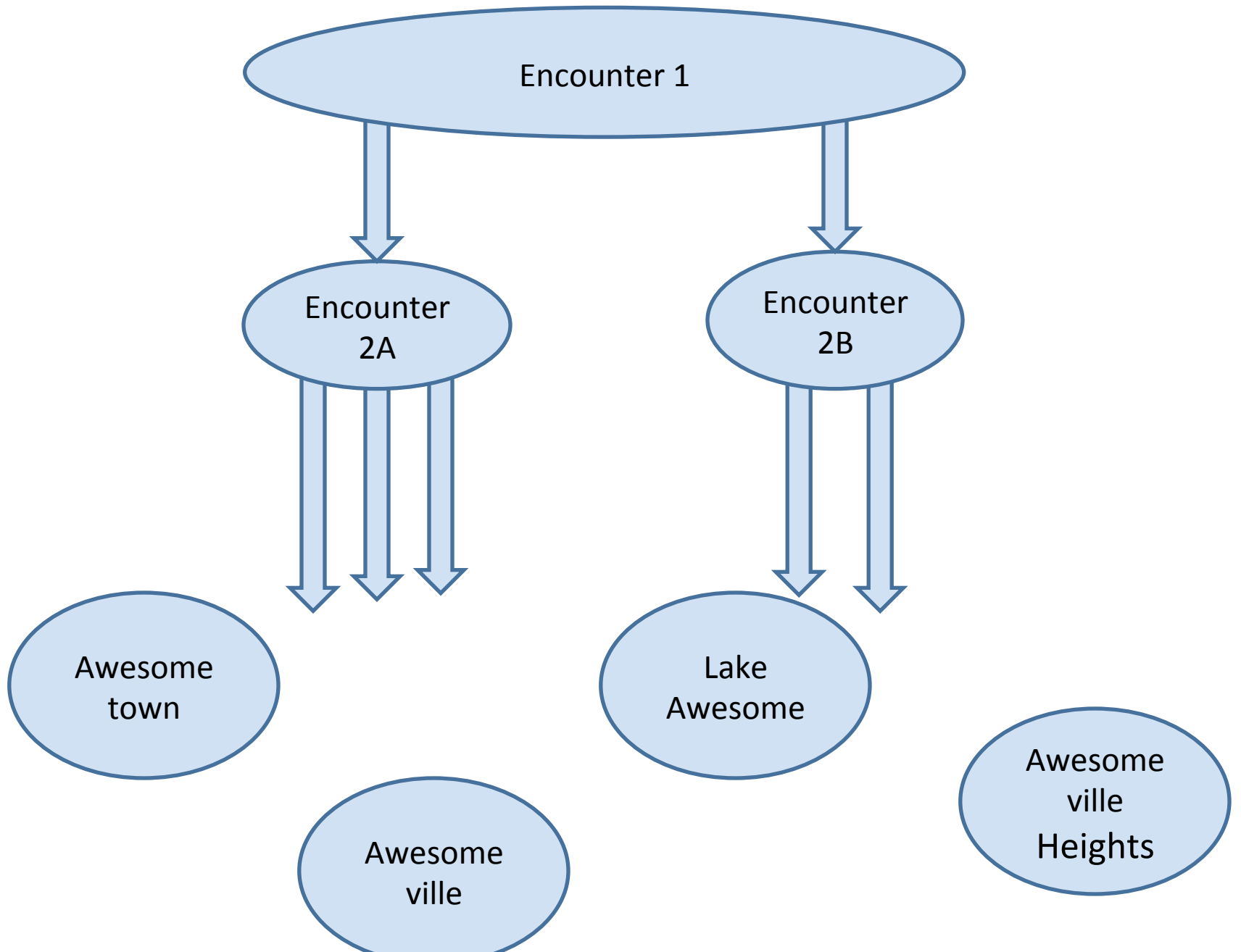
“For the good of my country, I must kill someone who could have been my friend”



“My years of training have come down to this moment, facing off against a captain just as skilled”



“I’ll get that _____ if it’s the last thing I do”



“Every story has its chapters
and each chapter will be defined
by what’s before and what comes after”

– Mary Chapin Carpenter



Nuts and Bolts

1. Figure Out Where You're Going

“Let’s lay some train track randomly on a prairie and then try to build awesome towns at the endpoints.”

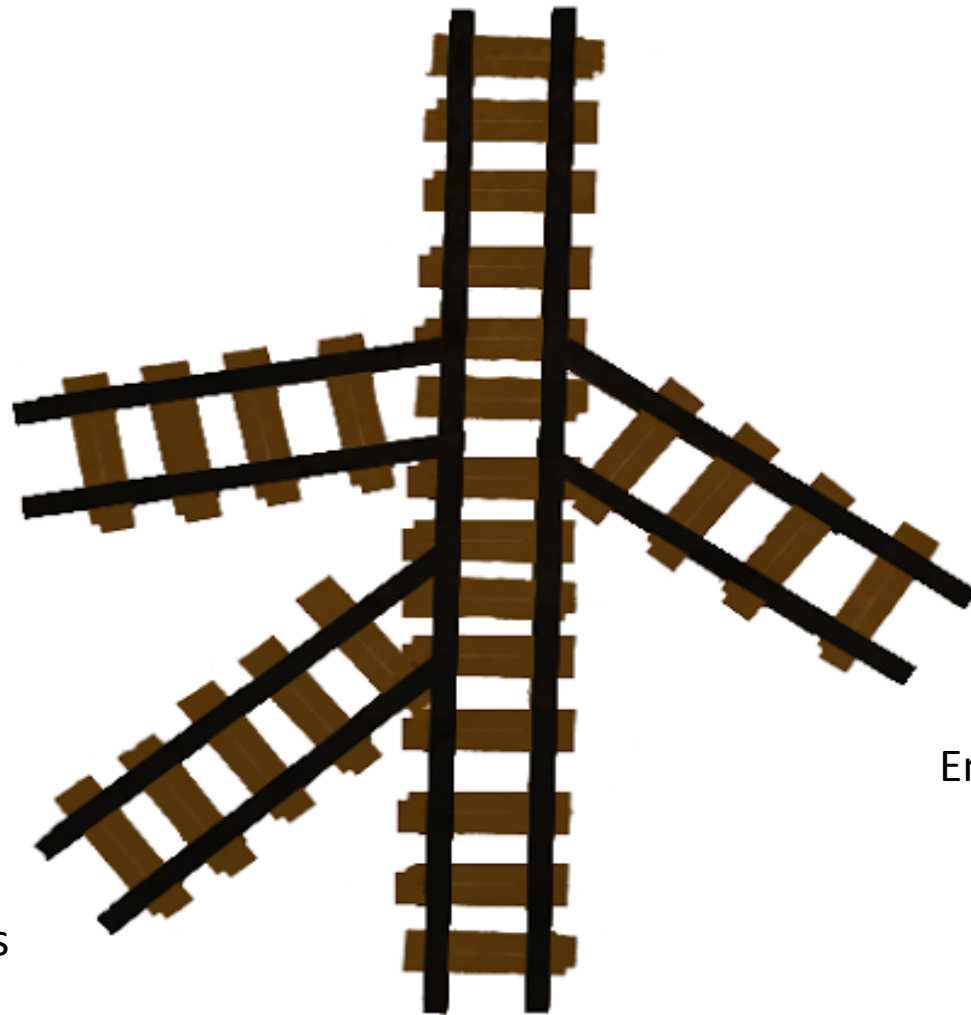
- nobody, ever

2. Work From The End Backward

3. Write Three Or Four Arcs

Seriously, three or four.

Not one, not twenty.

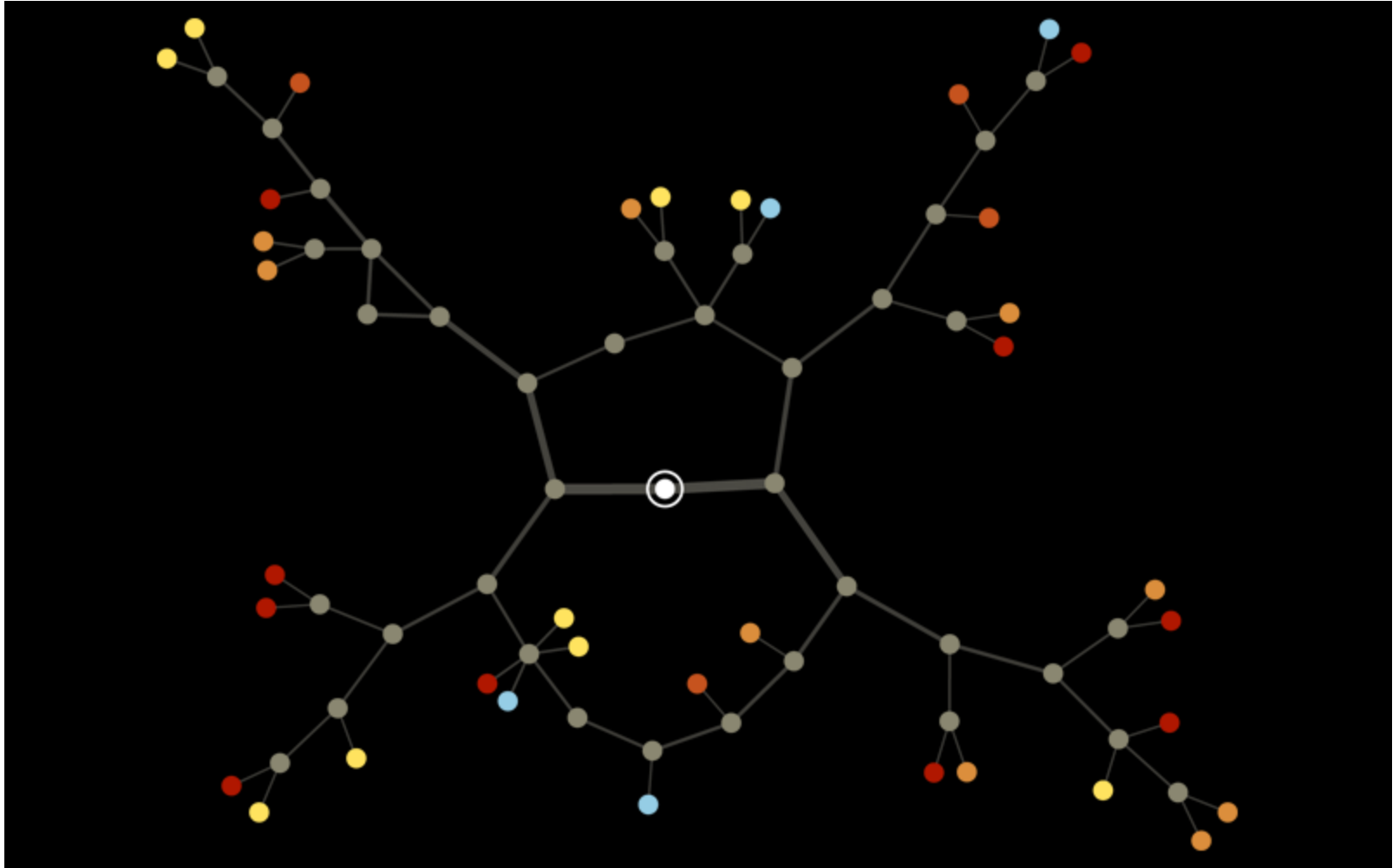


Ghost town

Empty prairie

I thought there was
supposed to be a
lake here, but I
guess not

Awesometown



4. Divide Arcs Into Scenes.

- I met a Gaulish officer
- I treated him kindly
- We met again years later
- He remembered my kindness
- We fought off bandits together
- Now I am ordered to kill him

- I met a Gaulish officer
- I treated him badly
- We met again years later
- He insulted me and shamed me in front of a crowd
- We fought a duel, but both of us lived
- Now I am ordered to kill him

5. Divide Scenes Into Choices.

Track A (to Awesometown)	Track B (to Awesomeville)	
I met a Gaulish officer	I met a Gaulish officer	
I treated him well	I treated him badly	Choice
We met again and he remembered my kindness	We met again and he insulted and shamed me	Consequences of choice
We fought off bandits together	We fought a duel, but both of us lived	Consequences of choice
Now I am ordered to kill him	Now I am ordered to kill him	

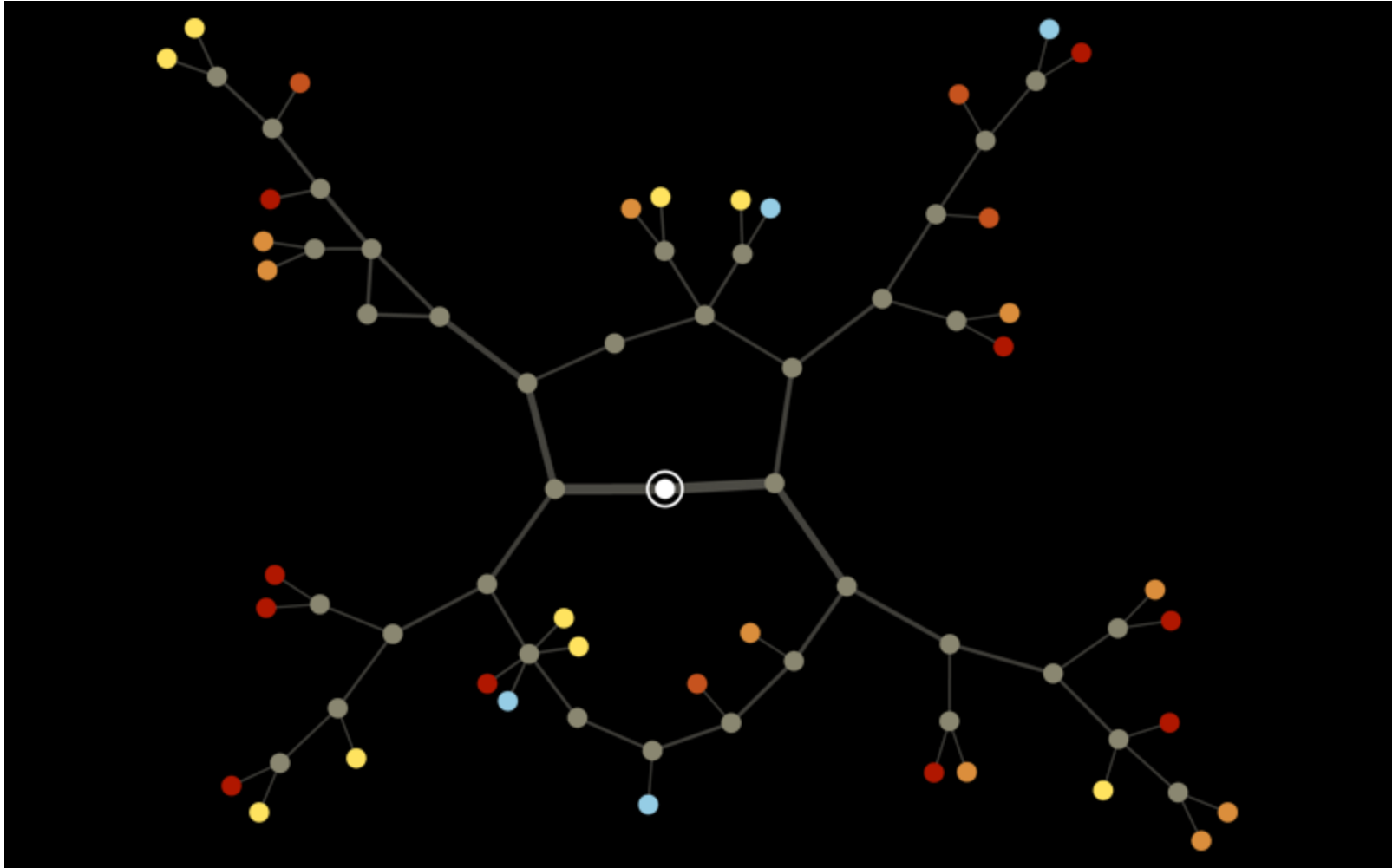
6. Let The Player Make Those Choices.

7. Show The Player The
Consequence Of Their Choices.

8. Craft All Other Scenes To Be
Arc-Agnostic.

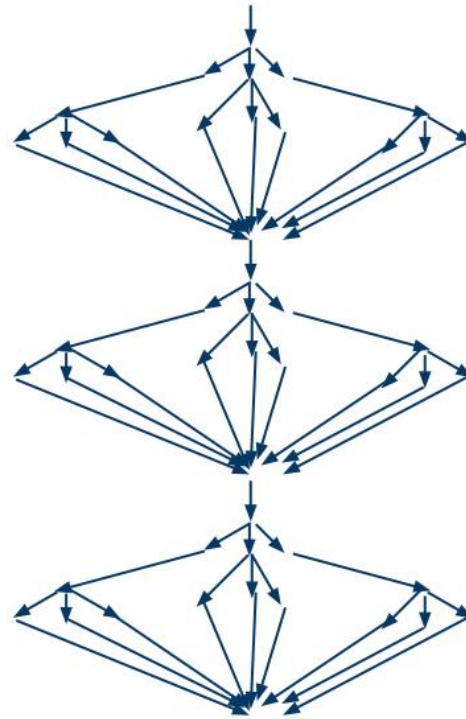
Track A (to Awesometown)	Track B (to Awesomeville)	Designer Action Item
I met a Gaulish officer	I met a Gaulish officer	Write one scene...
I treated him well	I treated him badly	...that ends with a player choice.
We met again and he remembered my kindness	We met again and he insulted and shamed me	Write two versions of this scene that show the consequences of player choice.
We fought off bandits together	We fought a duel, but both of us lived	Write two versions of this scene that show the consequences of player choice.
Now I am ordered to kill him	Now I am ordered to kill him	Write one scene that the player will interpret differently depending on

9. Instead Of Designing A Huge Branching Tree...



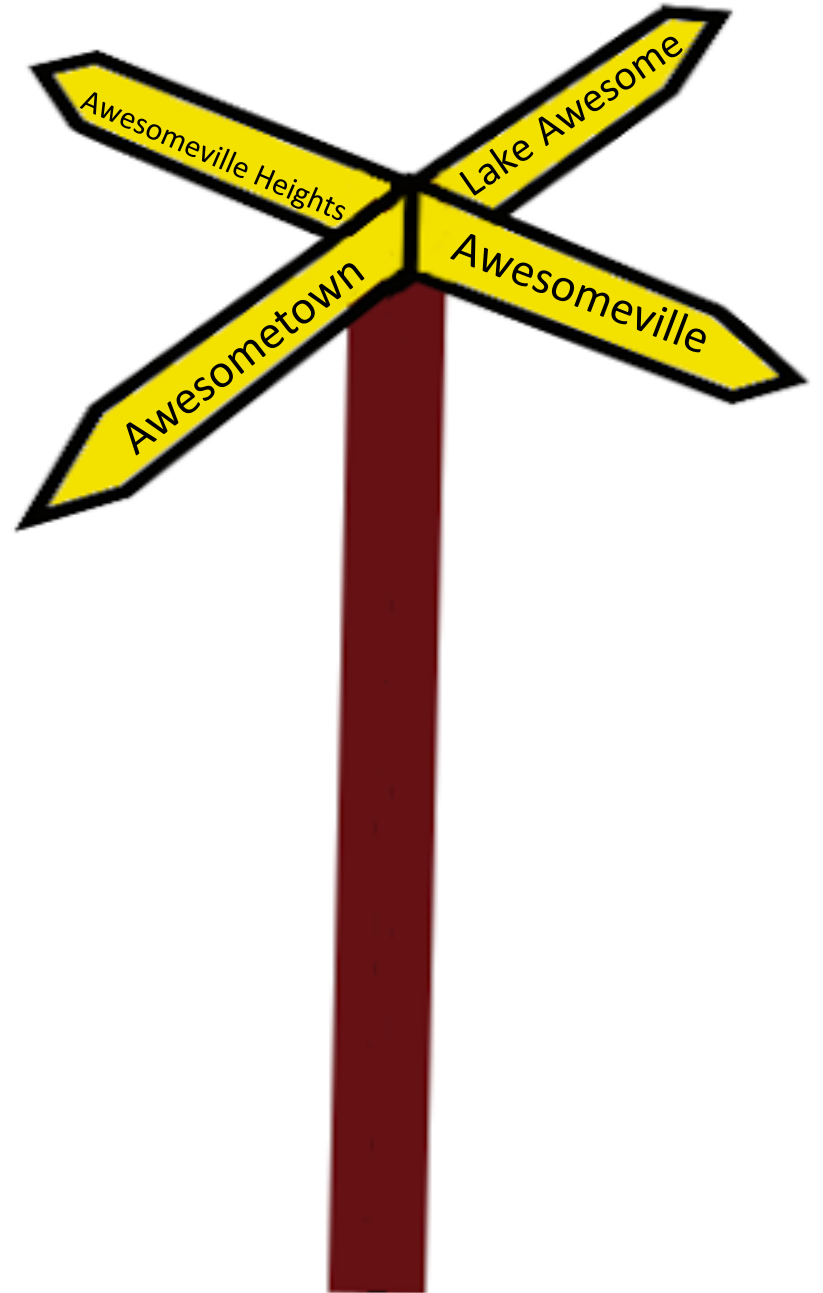
7. ... Remember Variables And
Design A Sequence Of Stacked
Bushes.

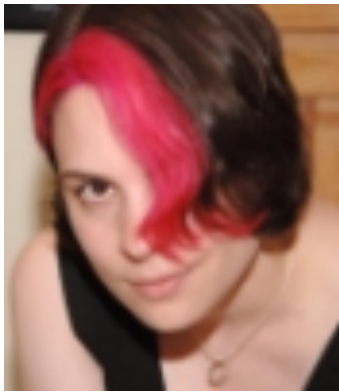
Instead of a branching tree, write stacked bushes



10. Stacked Bushes Are Easier If You Use A Sliding Scale Instead of Boolean Variables.

1. Figure out where you're going.
2. Work from the end backward.
3. Write 3 or 4 arcs.
4. Divide arcs into scenes.
5. Divide scenes into choices.
6. Let the player make those choices.
7. Show the player the consequences of their choices.
8. Craft all other scenes to be arc-agnostic.
9. Instead of designing a huge branching tree, remember variables and design stacked bushes.
10. Stacked bushes are easier if you use a sliding scale instead of boolean variables.





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