



# NARRATIVE DESIGN DEEP DIVE

Strategies for effective storytelling in mobile games

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DECEMBER  
2022

# OVERVIEW



Key takeaways and strategic considerations when designing narratives

See the [\*Details Document\*](#) for teardowns of all apps cited in this report

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Apps tell stories explicitly through text and implicitly through visuals, sound design, and gameplay. These techniques allow apps to introduce characters and conflicts at any scale, from complex epics to simple, themed levels.

**Every story is built on characters and conflict.** Each character should have a desire that they must overcome obstacles to fulfill. These obstacles define the story's conflict and can take the form of other characters, external forces, or internal struggles. Characters' actions in response to these conflicts become the basis for players' goals.

For example, the player's hero in Diablo Immortal wants to prevent a villain from collecting powerful shards in order to start a war. To achieve this goal, the player must travel the world and defeat bosses to retrieve the shards before the villain gets them.

**Text and cinematics should generally occur in short bursts and be easy to skip.** Unless in-depth story content is a major part of your app, players are probably most interested in short story snippets that provide a little break from gameplay. Keeping scenes and dialogues short and skippable ensures that narratives don't put off players who aren't interested in them.

For players who want more story, you can offer supplemental content, like journals with additional lore, flavor text for heroes and equipment, or external web content.

**Visuals, sound design, and game mechanics are equally important parts of effective storytelling.** These nontextual storytelling techniques allow you to add meaning to players' experiences without interrupting gameplay and can be used either in place of or to complement textual storytelling.

For example, Bingo Blitz conveys its travel narrative with limited text by offering stages based on real-world locations. Each stage has background art, music, and collectible artifacts that are inspired by its location ([image](#)).



**Stories drive revenue indirectly by increasing engagement and retention, and they drive revenue directly through purchasable cosmetics.** Well-crafted stories give players long-term goals and encourage them to keep engaging to see what happens next. Stories also add meaning to purchasable heroes, skins, equipment, and other related content, which makes those items more desirable.

# STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS

Your app's central mechanic is the most important factor to consider when designing your narrative. Stories should complement apps' main mechanics, not complicate or overshadow them.

RPGs, lifestyle apps, and simulation apps are typically best suited for explicit stories due to their long-form, narrative-driven gameplay. These apps use serial release schedules to tell detailed stories over the span of months or years. See [page 11](#) for more information on explicit storytelling and [page 15](#) for serial narratives.

Apps and genres with lite storytelling benefit most from implicit techniques or short episodic stories. This includes PvP-focused genres such as shooters, strategy, sports, and racing, as well as casual genres like casino and puzzle. Written stories in these genres are generally released episodically, can be consumed quickly, and don't require players to keep track of an overarching narrative. See [page 12](#) for more information about implicit storytelling and [page 16](#) for episodic narratives.

Apps aren't limited to just one type of storytelling. For example, all explicit stories should incorporate implicit storytelling techniques in their visual design. Likewise, many apps use lite serial narratives to loosely connect episodic content.

Players should be able to complete main narratives purely through engagement. To prevent players from completing content too quickly, you can incorporate gating mechanics such as energy expenditure and timers between quests. Then, you can sell accelerators to players who are eager to progress in the story.

Selling cosmetics, heroes, equipment, or bonus stories are the best ways to directly monetize narratives. As you introduce new characters in each chapter or episode, you can then sell them as playable heroes and offer character-specific cosmetics ([image](#)). In genres that lack heroes, such as casino and puzzle, you can sell boosts, equipment, or cosmetics based on elements of the story.



# FUNDAMENTALS OF STORYTELLING



Creating compelling plots, characters,  
and scenes

See the [\*Details Document\*](#) for teardowns  
of all apps cited in this report

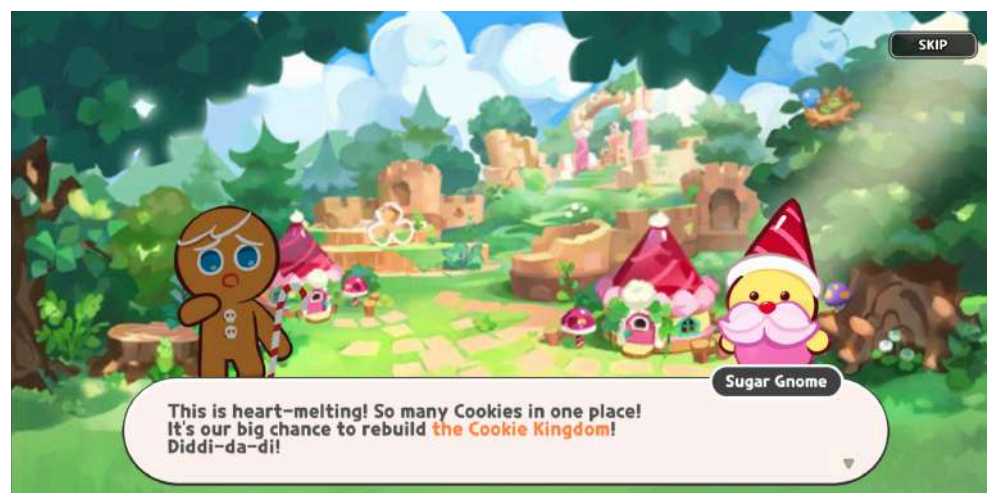
# PLOT STRUCTURE

Stories should be divided into acts that each contain a beginning, middle, and end. The beginning sets up the conflict, the middle complicates it, and the end resolves it.

**Mobile gaming narratives generally use one-, three-, or five-act story structures.** Each story and each act within it should have a beginning, middle, and end. First, the beginning introduces the main characters and sets up the conflict. Then, the middle introduces secondary characters and complicates the conflict. Finally, the end resolves the conflict and, in serial narratives, sets up the next.

**Stories should begin with an inciting incident that forces the protagonist to take action.**

The inciting incident is the event that sets the plot in motion toward the main conflict. In *Cookie Run: Kingdom*, the story begins with the protagonist, GingerBrave, learning about the fallen cookie kingdom. This inspires GingerBrave to rebuild the kingdom ([image](#)).



**Shorter storylines, such as those in small events, can skip or condense the opening act.**

For example, *Candy Crush Soda Saga*'s [Rescue Buddies](#) event starts with Bubblegum Troll—the franchise's main antagonist—kidnapping a gummy bear character that players must free, immediately placing them in the action of the story.

**Key characters and enemies should be introduced before a story's midpoint.** The protagonist should meet new characters who help or hinder them in their journey to resolve the conflict. These characters should also complicate the stakes of the conflict.

**The ending should resolve the story's conflicts.** For one-off stories, these resolutions can be complete and permanent. For ongoing stories, each resolution must set up a conflict for the next act.

In the *Cookie Run: Kingdom* example above, the story's first major conflict ends when GingerBrave and his friends finish rebuilding the cookie castle, but a new conflict arises as they must defend it from enemies.

# CHARACTERS

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Heroes and villains should have goals that set up the story's conflict and flaws that stand in the way of those goals. Strong characters add emotional stakes to your app.

**Characters' goals drive plots forward.** Without characters, a plot is just a set of static circumstances. All characters must have desires that set the story in motion and create emotional stakes for players. These desires are usually external (e.g., renovating a house), but more complex narratives often include internal desires as well (e.g., self-fulfillment). As characters pursue their goals, the obstacles they encounter create the story's conflict.

For example, Homescapes' main character, Austin, initially begins renovating his childhood home to prevent his parents from selling it. After he saves the home, he continues his renovations due to his desire to reconnect with his parents and improve their lives.

**Flaws add depth to characters and make them more relatable to players.** A character's flaws should be one of the internal obstacles that prevent them from achieving their goals. As characters try to resolve the plot's external conflicts, they should also work toward resolving their internal conflicts. Overcoming internal struggles in turn helps characters resolve those external conflicts.

**Compelling villains are just as important as compelling heroes.** Your story is only as interesting as the obstacles that stand in your hero's way. If your app has villains, they should be as deep as the heroes they oppose. That means they need their own goals and flaws that players can relate to. Your villains can be funny, charming, loathsome, or dangerous—just make sure they're not boring.

**Characters should have visuals and mannerisms that demonstrate their personalities and gameplay roles.** Because most apps tell stories in very short bursts, you need to quickly define characters' traits. Unique silhouettes, color palettes, and garments make characters easily identifiable and provide information about them. In written story elements, characters should have distinctive ways of speaking that reflect their personalities.

Piggy GO's playable cartoon characters have simple designs that suit the app's vacation theme and reflect players' goals of visiting different locations to build structures. For example, one character wears a utility vest, fishing hat, and disposable camera ([image](#)).

**Character customization can drive engagement and spend, especially when it expands on your app's main narratives.** Purchasable heroes and cosmetics are desirable rewards that drive revenue. They can be even more effective when players know more about the characters' personalities and the lore behind them. Customization should, however, align with your app's narrative goals and visual aesthetics.



# SCENES

Scenes are the building blocks of stories. They should contain their own mini-conflicts and introduce players' gameplay goals.

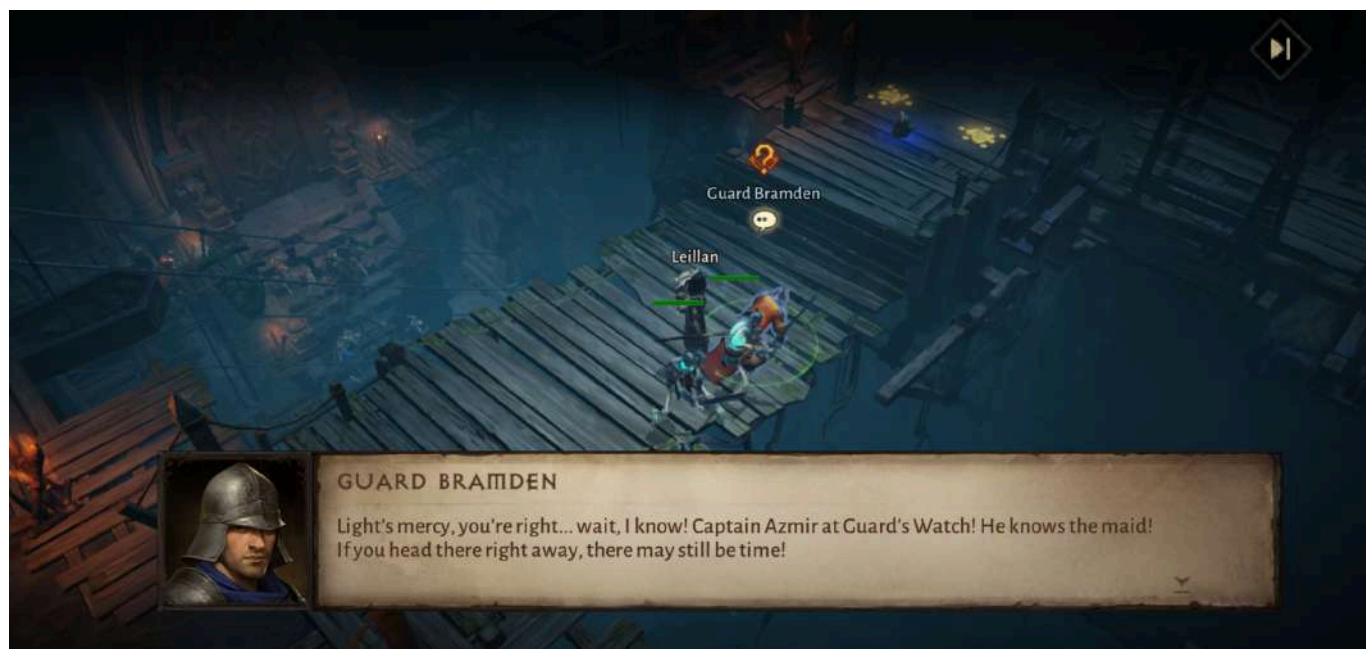
Scenes should begin with the consequences of players' most recent actions and end by setting up the players' next goals. To create new goals, each scene should introduce a small conflict based on an obstacle that characters encounter. Scenes should end with at least a partial resolution to this conflict, like a plan for how the characters are going to overcome the obstacle. This narrative goal becomes the basis for players' next actions.

In episodic narratives, scenes are very brief and focus directly on gameplay goals. In Homescapes, scenes begin when players start a new renovation. Once it's complete, characters comment on the changes, discover a new problem, and suggest a solution. This solution becomes the goal for the player's next renovation task.

In serial narratives, scenes introduce gameplay goals more subtly while emphasizing character development and worldbuilding. Apps with ongoing narratives often have two types of scenes: short dialogues for minor gameplay goals and longer scenes or even full cinematics for major gameplay goals.

Diablo Immortal shows relatively long scenes and cinematics when players enter new areas or finish key quests. These scenes provide character development and worldbuilding while laying the foundation for the story's next stage. For minor quests, Diablo Immortal uses smaller scenes that set up players' goals but still develop characters through mannerisms and side plots ([image](#)).

UI designs and character animations can supplement written scenes. As an alternative to animations, you can also use small design touches to enhance written scenes. For example, Asphalt 9: Legends' [Drive Syndicate Undercover Ops](#) includes dialogues designed to look like a [security agency's computer system](#).



# STORYTELLING TECHNIQUES



Telling effective stories through text,  
visuals, and sound design

See the [Details Document](#) for teardowns  
of all apps cited in this report

# EXPLICIT STORYTELLING

Explicit storytelling occurs through text, dialogue, and cutscenes. To maintain the pace of gameplay, explicit storytelling should happen in short bursts and be closely integrated with players' gameplay goals. Long story segments should be skippable.

Stories should begin by quickly introducing the characters, setting, and conflict, then move promptly into gameplay. At the beginning of *Raid: Shadow Legends* and *Cookie Run: Kingdom*, players gain control of powerful story characters in a dramatic battle. When the battle ends and the conflict has been established, players are scaled down to their starting levels.



This approach gives players an exciting introduction to the app as well as a preview of their future progression ([image](#)).

**Cutscenes are another option for quickly introducing narratives.** *Genshin Impact* begins with a [cinematic](#) that pauses midway for the player to choose their character. After players choose, the visuals and voice-over continue, establishing the main character, antagonist, and conflict within two minutes.

**The players' gameplay goals should represent steps in the story.** Whenever characters encounter a new conflict, players should be given tasks that help resolve it. Gameplay designers and narrative designers should collaborate to create plot points that can support important mechanics and vice versa.

In *Identity V*, the main character is a detective who can [directly experience scenes from the past](#). The series of battles that he investigates in the main storyline are reenacted by players via PvP matches, the app's core gameplay mechanic.

**Optional lore–like flavor text on items and heroes or supplemental web content–is an unobtrusive way to add more story content for players who want it.** Some cards in *Magic: The Gathering Arena* contain flavor text with lore about locations and characters. Players can also view character bios in the [avatar selection menu](#) and can find more substantial lore on the [Magic: The Gathering website](#).

# IMPLICIT STORYTELLING

Implicit storytelling occurs passively through visuals, sound design, and game mechanics. Implicit storytelling can benefit apps across markets because it adds meaning to gameplay without requiring more effort from players.

**Visuals and sound design quickly tell stories and convey players' goals without text.**

Visual themes can be applied to every part of your app, including UI, level design, and hazards.

Slot machines offer many great examples of effective themes. Cash Frenzy's [Fox Heist](#) slot machine uses a background, frame, symbols, characters, and music to tell a story about cartoon foxes pulling off heists ([image](#)).



Music and sound effects should also align with your app's theme. Strategy app Rise of Kingdoms does this especially well. Each of the app's civilizations has its own [musical theme](#) inspired by its culture and history.

**In the absence of text, exaggerated representations of characters and obstacles help clearly convey the conflict.** This is especially important because players will be viewing your app on a small screen.

For example, Royal Match has [match-3 mini-games](#) where players have to save a character by completing a timed level. As time ticks down, a cartoonish hazard, such as a fire-breathing dragon or an incoming train, gets closer to the character. The character reacts by breathing heavily, shaking, and frantically looking between the player and the danger.

**Offering different playstyles allows players to shape their own narrative through gameplay.** Base building, a common component of 4X strategy apps like Rise of Kingdoms, is an example of a mechanic that allows players to express themselves through their choices. Players can decide what to name their base, where to place their buildings, what upgrades to prioritize, and more. Although these kinds of choices usually don't contribute to explicit storytelling, they let players personalize their own role within the app.

# INTERACTIVE STORYTELLING

Interactive storytelling allows players to influence the narrative's direction through dialogue or gameplay choices. Players' choices should have a clear impact on the story but don't need to radically alter it.

**Players should be given frequent choices that produce short-term changes in dialogue but don't have long-term consequences.** These minor choices allow you to offer players many opportunities to interact with the story without requiring you to design elaborate, branching narratives.

For example, a player could choose to be either friendly, rude, or flirty to a character, who responds accordingly in the next dialogue but doesn't alter the rest of the story.

**When offering choices with long-term consequences, make sure you clearly convey the stakes to the player.** In the

Choices: Stories You Play story Wake the Dead, players encounter "Hard Choices" at pivotal moments every few chapters. Hard choices are always distinguished by unique symbols and UI pop-ups that let players know their decision will have a significant effect on the story ([image](#)).

**Premium choices with desirable outcomes are the main way to monetize interactive stories.** These outcomes should be relevant to the story but not essential for the plot to progress. Some examples are romance dialogues, additional worldbuilding, and scenes that focus on a side character.

To further motivate spend, you can offer exclusive scenes as a reward for making multiple purchases throughout a story. Some stories in Choices: Stories You Play offer bonus epilogue scenes to players who unlock all of a certain type of premium choice. These scenes usually serve as a sneak peak of the story's sequel.

**Premium choices should be clearly more desirable than free options, and their desirability should increase with their price point.** For example, premium options may give characters opportunities to get closer to a love interest or succeed in their career. The contrasting free options may result in characters insulting a love interest or embarrassing themselves. When offering multiple premium choices, make sure the most expensive option is clearly the most desirable.



# APPLYING STORIES IN LIVE OPS



Implementing narratives across event  
and feature releases

See the [Details Document](#) for teardowns  
of all apps cited in this report

# SERIAL NARRATIVES

Serial narratives are the overarching narratives that make up an app's main storyline. These narratives, which are most common in the core and casual markets, should introduce new content with each chapter but should never come to a final resolution.

**Chapters should never completely resolve the main conflict.** Each part of the story should resolve some smaller conflict, but significant progress should be thwarted by obstacles that create new conflicts for future chapters.

At the end of Genshin Impact's first chapter, players encounter their character's sibling, who they have been seeking since the app's opening cutscene. During this meeting, it is revealed that the sibling is allied with one of the narrative's main antagonist groups—effectively resolving the first chapter's conflict while simultaneously setting up the next.

**Introducing new characters, locations, and mechanics in each chapter keeps content fresh and offers opportunities for monetization.** In Harry Potter: Hogwarts Mystery, players gain access to new content with each in-game year they complete at Hogwarts. This content includes new classes, characters, areas of the castle, and gameplay mechanics such as dating ([image](#)).



In addition to providing fresh experiences for players, new content is also a great way to drive spend by releasing purchasable heroes, equipment, and resources in each chapter.

**Avoid putting your main narrative behind a paywall.** Making players pay to advance your main story may increase short-term spend, but it may also frustrate players. If players lose track of what's happening in the story because they didn't buy premium content, they may be less motivated to continue playing.

**Because players may skip scenes, it's useful to let them revisit story content so they don't get lost.** For example, Harry Potter: Hogwarts Mystery's [memory system](#) allows players to replay scenes and read summaries of past adventures. Other approaches include quest logs that briefly summarize players' goals and their context in the story.

# EPISODIC NARRATIVES

Episodic narratives are one-off stories that usually come to a clear conclusion. In apps with overarching serial narratives, episodic narratives should be distinct from the main storyline.

**Episodic content should have a simple narrative arc with one major conflict.** Some plotlines may span multiple episodes, but they should not drastically change the world or characters.

In each of Homescapes' episodes, characters have a clear goal, such as winning a cooking competition or writing a news article. To achieve this goal, the player renovates relevant locations. Multi-episode plotlines, like a romance between characters, still fit within this basic structure.

**In apps with larger narratives, episodic side plots can flesh out the world and characters.** These types of supplemental episodes are a good way to give players a break between major story chapters. They also allow narrative designers to add depth to side characters or expand upon minor aspects of the game world.

Genshin Impact explores its characters and minor lore in its story quests and world quests. While the former focus on one of the various playable characters, the latter tell brief stories tied to different locations in the open world ([image](#)).



**Episodic narratives are a great way to implement novel mechanics or seasonal themes that don't easily fit the main narrative.** Because episodic stories have a definite end point, they can include gameplay that might not have the depth or balance to be sustainable in the long term. For example, Identity V's Breath of Madness event features a dodgeball game mode with mechanics that are distinct from its main survival PvP gameplay.

Events centered around major holidays, particularly Thanksgiving and Christmas, are major revenue drivers. To fit the holiday theme and encourage participation, seasonal events should also offer episodic stories with large amounts of free rewards. For more information about holiday events, see our [Live Ops Toolkit](#).



*"Every story I create, creates me. I write to create myself."*

– Octavia Butler

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