Analysing the narrative possibilities of interactive film from a practical perspective

Shiyuan Yang

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Abstract

This thesis, combining an extended essay and a creative project of equivalent length, explores the narrative possibilities of interactive films. It focuses on the potential of alternative plotlines to explore the 'what-if' story in the parallel universes. The thesis begins by examining the structure of interactive digital narratives (IDN), identifying the defining features and qualities of branching structure (Chapter 1 and 2). Key terminology, such as 'branch', 'stratum', and 'vine', is introduced to provide a precise framework for analysis. Through an evaluation of existing examples of IDN and relevant academic studies, the foundational requirements for this project – maintaining complexity and ensuring clarity across branches – are established.

Chapter 3 discusses the design of and reflections from the practical writing component. Two types of narrative nodes are developed: one for generating alternative plots and another for enhancing interactivity. This chapter examines how a third key requirement for the branches – coherence – emerged as the creative process progressed. This insight leads to the implementation of a 'non-merging' branching structure, as well as the creation of a new character archetype – the Scribe. Reflections are organised around three dimensions: information attributes, character development, and new perspectives on fatalism.

Chapter 4 combines insights from critical analysis and practical application, offering a deeper examination of narratology in branching structures. It investigates how the changes in the discourse layer affect the text layer in branching structure. Using Greimas's Actantial model, the chapter examines how the introduction of a 'navigator' into the story reshapes the narrative on a

fundamental level. Additionally, it identifies and explores the unique narrative

tension present in interactive films, created through the interactions between the

characters, navigator, and the author. This chapter offers insights that can inform

future development and creative use of interactive films.

Finally, the creative component, entitled *Author's Note*, demonstrates the

ideas in practice. Altogether, the resulting work not only delivers a script unique

to existing interactive films but also offers analytical tools and structured

guidelines for future exploration in the field of interactive digital narratives. It

serves as both a practical and theoretical contribution to advancing the potential of

interactive films.

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I would like to express my gratitude to the many people who supported me throughout my PhD studies and related research. I am deeply thankful to Dr Neil Archer and Dr David McWilliam for their patience, knowledge, and invaluable guidance.

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1. General Introduction

1.1 Background

In 2018, Netflix released the interactive film *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* as part of the innovative anthology television show *Black Mirror*. The series was first broadcast in 2011, and each episode/film presents a standalone story. *Black Mirror* episodes are mostly set in the near future and focus on how technology changes people's lives (mainly in a negative way). *Bandersnatch* came after five seasons of non-interactive series. *Bandersnatch* attracted attention quickly after it was released due to its association with the *Black Mirror* franchise and the innovative concept of an interactive film. The emergence of Bandersnatch on Netflix has brought interactive film to the forefront of public consciousness. Subsequently, the film's recognition with two Emmy Awards (Outstanding Creative Achievement and Outstanding Television Movie) in 2019 further suggests its quality and impact. Bandersnatch's presence signifies a readiness for the technology of interactive filmmaking and viewing methods. However, modern interactive films are still relatively new and developmental, with much to learn and explore. Drawing insights from video game narratives presents a promising avenue for further exploration and refinement in this evolving field. In this introduction, I am going to examine the history of interactive film, identify key terms in the project, and discuss the differences and similarities among major interactive digital narratives (IDN) forms: video game, interactive digital film, interactive digital fiction). This analysis aims to ensure clarity in the use of terms throughout the project while also providing an understanding of the development of IDN. Additionally, this chapter serves as a foundation for the subsequent discussion of IDN narratives, particularly focusing on interactive films and how the medium's unique features have influenced the storytelling.

In a literal sense, interactive film describes a genre of films that allows people to make decisions and enter different versions of stories. In 1967, *Kinoautomat: One Man and His House*, known to be the first functional interactive film, achieved widespread acclaim (Hales, 2005). As Hales concludes, the director Radúz Činčera presented the world with this film-delivery system, which combines the moderators' activities (introducing each choice) and the use of the two buttons located at the armrest of the cinema seats. There were nine moments where binary options were offered, and people needed to press their buttons, but not all of them would cause a change in the plot. For the delivery system, there were two projectors synchronised together while the audience each made a vote between a 'green' option and a 'red' option. To continue with one of the options, the projectionist simply covered up the lens of one of the projectors, so the outcome of the corresponding choice would play out seamlessly. However, to cooperate with this technical method, the original idea of 32 endings was discarded. Instead, the two parallel story sections ('green' outcome and 'red' outcome) always recombined and merged into one. At the next decision-making point, two more choices would be offered, after which the outcome would be merged again. In this way, the exhibitors only needed to use two projectors throughout the film. In the end, the film was equipped with six pairs of alternative sections and one fixed ending. As Laurel commented (p53, 1993), 'it is rumored that all roads led to Rome... all paths through the movie led to the same ending'.

Interactive television has existed since the 1980s, though its early focus was primarily on tele-voting games and selecting music rather than on storytelling elements. Around the 2000s, there were Finnish interactable television shows like *Akvaario/Aquarium* (Teijo Pellinen, 2000) and *Sydän kierroksella/Accidental*

Lovers (Mika Lumi Tuomola, 2006). The interactivity was achieved through text messages. The software analysed the keywords in the texts and decided how the pre-recorded video and audio clips were presented (Enns, 2021; Ursu et al., 2008). However, this method did not have a significant impact on the plots. As Ursu commented, 'the sequence of events and their outcome remains fixed'. The cases of interactive film and interactive TV shows above share a common limitation: the inability to fully realise an interactive experience due to the presence of a minority of participants who may be outvoted, thus undermining the sense of involvement and control. Furthermore, the narrative plots in all three works are often predetermined and lack significant variation. While the absence of multiple endings is not inherently seen as a negative trait in IDN, this project aims to explore the potential for alternative plotlines. Therefore, it is prudent to broaden the scope of inquiry to include video games and examine their narrative methodologies.

In video games, there is a technique reminiscent of the film and television show industries, which involves using video clips to present the story. Full-motion video (FMV) is a video game narration technique (Perron et al., 2008) which abundantly uses filmed video sequences. It focuses on storytelling and deliberately eschews gameplay elements such as moving, fighting, and exploring. Often, FMV games are released across major video game platforms like Steam, Xbox, Nintendo, and PlayStation. Examples include *The Isle Tide Hotel* (2023), *Late Shift* (2016), *Her Story* (2015). In recent years, with the support of enhanced software/hardware support, FMV games, and by extension, some video games, possess a greater degree of flexibility in expanding storyline options. This allows for the creation of multiple storyline variations after interaction, as well as

offering players a more personalised experience compared to the interactive TV/film cases mentioned previously.

Streaming platforms have brought a change to the delivery method for interactive shows/films. They enable personalised experiences by providing access to corresponding video clips through internet connectivity. Individuals have the autonomy to freely select the content they wish to consume, including the narratives presented in interactive films, rather than being confined to the same broadcasted program shared by thousands of viewers. Streaming platforms are gaining widespread market acceptance and popularity, which means it would be easier for video-based interactive narratives to reach their targeted market. Subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) services like Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Disney+ have been reaching more UK households. According to Broadcasters Audience Research Board's (BARB[1]) survey, the number of UK households with a subscription to any SVOD service was now 18.8 million homes (66%) in 2021. Netflix continues to be the largest single service, with subscriptions for 16.8 million households. With this change, interactive films have become accessible to broader targets within the film-watching market. This option is now available to a wider demographic, in contrast to previous limitations where it was predominantly distributed through video game platforms, primarily appealing to gamers, and required users to download the entire content as software. This evolution presents a significant opportunity for media companies and producers to explore innovative narrative structures and create platform-specific experiences.

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[1] Date collected from: https://www.barb.co.uk/news/barb-releases-establishment-survey-results-for-q2-2021/

The synthesis of technological capabilities and narrative principles from the past decade can open avenues for fresh narrative experiences in the digital landscape.

The key questions of this project are: what are the features of the new media, and what are their implications for screen-based storytelling? Netflix has been working on these directions. From 2017 to 2024, Netflix released twenty-four interactive films/series, which can be read as continuous experimentation with new media narrating. The interactable work includes *Bandersnatch*, categorised as thriller/horror, *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs. the Reverend* (2020) as comedy, *You vs. Wild* (2019) as family (it is about helping a man to survive in the wild), and seven cartoon films/series as children/family. Four of the interactive films were released in 2020. Among the ten series/films, six of them are under 40 minutes in length. All of these are special sequels of existing films/series. Making sequels means that it would automatically attract the audience to watch. It also capitalises on the pre-existing relationships that audiences have with these characters. The observable improvements in user experience include the following enhancements: 1) The interface has become more user-friendly, with options such as remote, touch, or screen interactions replacing traditional methods like texting or phone calls. In *Bandersnatch* (See Fig. 1-1, the white line indicates a countdown.), while the two options appear for people to choose from, the film does not pause. Instead, it will keep going for a maximum of 10 seconds and switch to the following plot when the decision is made. If no button is pressed within the 10-second limit, one of the options will be picked randomly. 2) Plot variations and multiple endings have become common. In the endings of *Bandersnatch*, the protagonist's video game receives varying scores from critics depending on the choices made throughout the narrative. The

game can receive ratings of 0, 2.5, or 5 out of 5 stars, with subtle differences in the details surrounding the game's release and reception. *Choose Love* (2023) has six main endings, involving three potential romantic partners of the protagonist. *The Complex* (2020, Wales Interactive), a story about two scientists dealing with a bioweapon, has eight endings. 3). The interactive nature of these films offers a more personal and private viewing experience, allowing viewers relatively more control over their choices. One might argue that such interactive experiences have long been achievable through video games. However, I have to point out that this discussion pertains specifically to incorporating interactive elements into films or shows on streaming platforms. In this context, the narrative objectives may diverge significantly from those typically associated with video games.
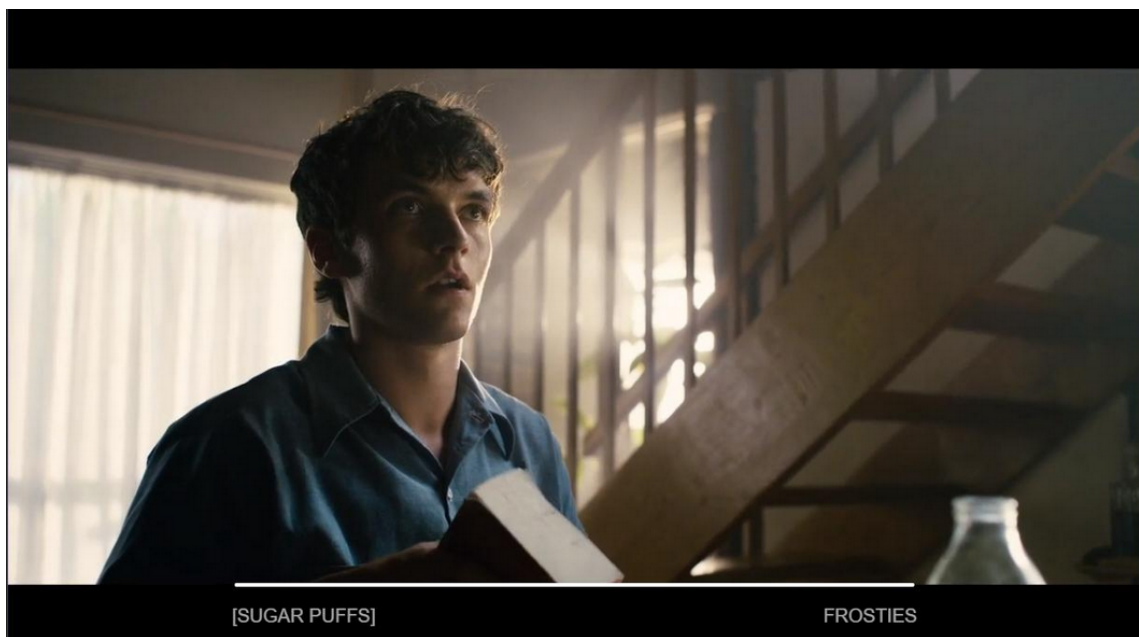
Figure 1-1, Black Mirror: Bandersnatch

Given the current favourable conditions for interactive film, this project seeks to investigate the nuanced changes in narrative dynamics facilitated by the latest iterations of interactive filmmaking. In my research, I will examine the

narrative potential in interactive film. The interactive media potentially offers two basic features to IF. 1) Interactivity expands narratives' information capacity. Plotlines' variations generate extra content. It is different from expanding a film to a TV show series. The additional information in interactive narratives is not arranged in a fixed sequence as in traditional film and television. Rather, it is determined by the audience's choices regarding which portions to engage with or discard. The abundance of information in interactive storytelling is not even a prerequisite for completing the entire story; the plots in different paths exist as potentialities within the narrative or as supplementary elements to the story. Furthermore, the additional narrative capacity generates ambiguity. When an interaction yields two alternative plotlines, both possibilities coexist simultaneously. One trajectory may portray the character's virtuous attributes, while the other depicts their embrace of darker tendencies. Interactive narrative enables the coexistence of contradictory scenarios. This dynamic allows for the exploration of character development, revealing various paths characters take. Whilst it adds the workload for the writer to finish a normal length of film with alternative plotlines, the set of events and characters within can be explored from multiple perspectives and under varied conditions. 2) The interactivity changes the distance between the viewers and the narrative. While the viewers step closer to the story by receiving the power to intervene, their goals are not always aligned with the interests of the protagonists. They are the outsiders who view the world from the protagonists' perspectives. They can also be the 'invisible hand' that changes the characters' fate with either a good or evil intention. That adds tension to the story beyond the traditional storytelling layer. Combining interactivity with films not only requires a shift in the author's approach to plot structure but also

alters the way traditional film audiences engage with the narrative. The differences between narrative goals and interactive methods create a distinct experience compared to video games, as well.

   To study interactive films as a new medium, it is crucial to first examine previous genres and forms of interactive narratives. This provides a broader understanding of the larger framework of interactive storytelling, which later helps in narrowing the focus to interactive film as a unique form within that spectrum.

1.2 Terminology

Films/shows in cinema and television were not the only media that were introducing interactive elements. Interactive storytelling began to gain traction in various other media towards the end of the last century. Around the 1970s, printed interactive fictions (*Choose Your Own Adventure* series) started becoming popular. One of the famous phrases to describe interactive narrative is made by Bantam Books, who named their interactive fiction series 'Choose Your Own Adventure (CYOA)' series, which is categorised under the genre 'gamebook'. *Fighting Fantasy* (Jackson and Livingstone, 1982-1995), a series of choose your own adventure, advertised 'in which YOU become the hero' on the cover. When using books as media to seek interactive narratives, readers will be directed to a new page or section every time they make a choice. The slogan, 'choose your own adventure', grasps a great desire of the readers: decide your adventure, get involved with the story, and become the hero/heroine in the tales. The CYOA books, along with their interactive narrating style, became a phenomenon during the 1980s and 1990s and sold more than 250 million copies between 1979 and

1998. CYOA became the fourth most popular children's series of all time (Cook, 2021). Different to Montfort's (page 71, 2003) speculation that CYOA books are 'likely to have been at least vaguely inspired by actual computer programs, including interactive fiction', Cook emphasises that the CYOA phenomenon is related to the social economic culture context. By the early 1980s, under the influence of neoliberal ideology emphasising individual choice and agency, many Americans began to equate life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness with the freedom to select from a range of options. Books like CYOA provided a low-stake stage with themes involving free choices and responsibility.

Parallel to printed interactive fictions, video games emerged around the same era in the form of personal PCs and arcades. In the text-based computer adventure game *Colossal Cave Adventure* (Crowther, 1976), players move between locations and interact with objects by typing short commands. After decades of development, video games have evolved into the largest form of entertainment and cultural expression (Cerezo-Pizarro et al., 2023; Gough, 2021). Video games often integrate aspects of literature, drama, and cinematography, thereby facilitating multidisciplinary artistic experiences. The proportion of narrative elements can vary in different games. There are games that do not emphasise storytelling. For example, in the shooting game *Player Unknown's Battlegrounds* (2017) and the puzzle game *Human Fall Flat* (2016), there is little storytelling and mostly gameplay (defeating enemies). Narratives in video games can also be rather subtle. In the puzzle game *Unpacking* (2021), the players' goal is to unpack boxes and put them into suitable position in a flat. The owner of the boxes moved eight times from 1997 to 2018, from student accommodation to a rental flat, her old room at her parents', and rental flats again. The owner never

shows up in the game, but by arranging her toys, books, souvenirs, and even presumably her partners' possessions, the players can imagine her life journey. On the other end of the spectrum (gameplay to storytelling), narrative can be very important. People even compare some of the games with films, thanks to the emphasis on storytelling. Games like *Detroit: Become Human* (2018) keep an equal balance between gameplay and storytelling. The story is about the relationship between androids and humans in a near-future world where the androids are enslaved. The central characters consist of three androids who, unbeknownst to each other, must individually navigate decisions within a societal framework of subjugation. As the plots develop, the characters start to face their thoughts and choices regarding equity, 'human' rights, the cost of violence, and the meaning of life. The game also uses relatively more cinematographic language (medium/long shots alternating with close-ups, lighting use, camera angles, etc) to create filmlike images, tone-appropriate soundtracks, and graphically realistic characters. When there is a significant engagement with the narrative and characters of the game, and in some instances, choices that impact the narrative, emotionally stirring, contemplative, and uplifting eudaimonic experiences can be evoked (Daneels et al., 2021). Video games have developed diverse methods for storytelling, whether directly or indirectly.

Within the spectrum of video game genres, FMV games and interactive films share a complex and intertwined relationship. FMV blurs the boundaries between games and films with its relatively high portion of video clips. Starting in the 1980s, developers started to use videos in games to display action rather than vectors or 3D models. In *Night Trap* (1992), the player controls the eight cameras set in different rooms (see Fig. 1-2). They need to switch to different cameras to

monitor everything going on in the house and listen to conversations. The goal of

the game is to determine the potentially dangerous characters by monitoring and

then triggering traps to capture the targets. While *Night Trap* still includes some

extent of gameplay, there are also FMV works that remove all common game

elements. The FMV game *Late Shift* arguably aligns more closely with the

conventional notion of films than that of video games, despite the publisher's

classification as a game[2]. It is easy to explore the story in *Late Shift*, even though

it is presented on a gaming platform: players select between two alternatives,

which can be accomplished through mouse clicks or button presses (see Fig. 1-3).

The decision-making points serve as the sole opportunity to influence the

trajectory of the story; for the remainder of the experience, individuals merely

observe the narrative unfold. FMV games have gradually achieved the initial idea

of interactive film - not in the cinema, but on game consoles/personal computers.

Researchers often interchangeably use the terms 'video games featuring live-

action sequences' and 'interactive films', both of which prioritise narrative

elements while usually lacking in other forms of interaction. The relationship

between FMV games and interactive films can be especially complex and often

lacks a clear distinction (King et al., 2010; Perron et al., 2008; Ven, 2024).

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[2] https://www.walesinteractive.com/lateshift On the official page of *Late Shift* on its developer/publisher website, it is described as "a high-stakes FMV crime thriller," while the title of the page is '*Late Shift* (interactive movie).' This reflects the ambiguity of the definition, as even the developer is uncertain how to classify it.

Figure 1-2, Night Trap (1992)
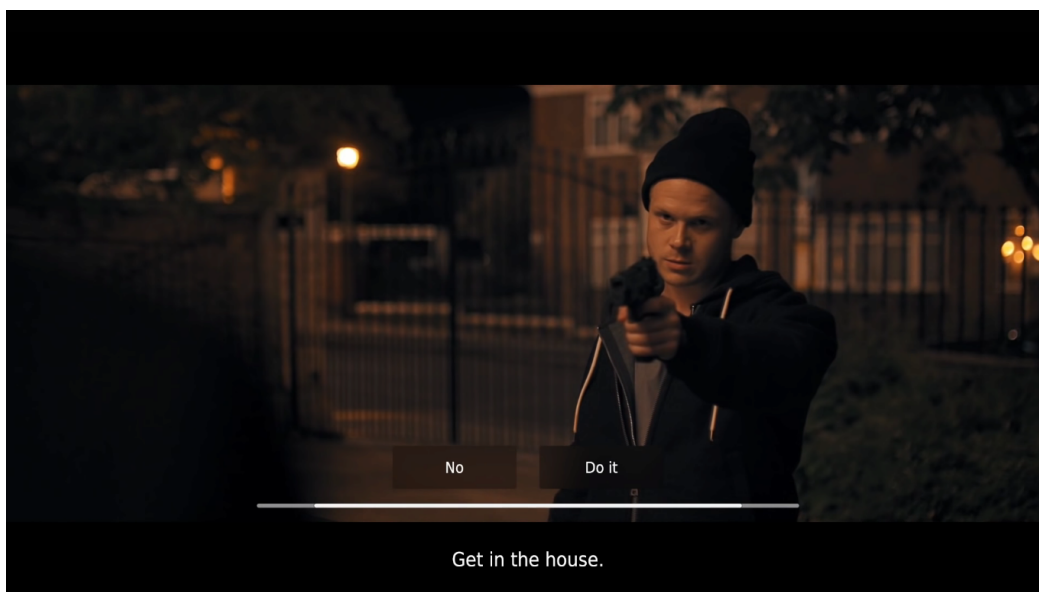
Figure 1-3, Late Shift (2017)

The entangled history between interactive film and video games has led to overlapping terminology, with some works being referred to as both games and interactive films. Despite these overlaps, it is essential to establish clear definitions for this project, which focuses on narrative media with a specific goal and audience in mind. To avoid ambiguity and enhance clarity throughout the discussion, I will define key terms as they apply to the context of this study. These definitions will help distinguish between forms of media while setting a foundation for analysing their narrative structures and target engagement.

Interactive (digital) film is a digital media-based film form that allows people to influence the story with the simplest operating requirement. At the very least, accessibility should be ensured through conventional film-viewing mediums such as television or tablets, with interaction facilitated by ubiquitous tools like remote controls and touch screens. Interactive film is the main subject of this thesis and should be distinguished from the movie-games published on video game platforms and the cinema-based interactive films.

As Koenitz (Page 10, 2023) points out, interactivity brings its distinctive characteristics and possibilities into the narrative medium, which can have significant impacts on the narrative; interactivity in IDN should not be regarded as merely an 'add-on feature'. The experience of 'viewing' an interactive film is different from watching a traditional film or playing a video game. The distinctive experience of interacting with the plot and exploring the uniquely arranged story events lies between what a traditional audience and player would typically expect. Therefore, within the scope of this research, I have coined the term **navigating** to denote the action taken to watch, interact, and explore the interactive film; and **navigator** to refer to the person who is experiencing the interactive film. This is to emphasise those who explore the story alongside film-level directing, cinematography, and other aspects akin to the cinematic experience, such as music, editing, and acting.

Interactive digital narrative (IDN) is a digital media-based narrative form that allows people to influence the story. In my research, it is to describe the narratives which are interactable and solely working on digital devices. Video games, interactive films, and interactive digital fiction use IDN to deliver the stories.

Avatar, a common term used in video games theory, refers to the character who is the representation of the player in simulated environments (Taylor, 2002; Szolin et al., 2023). The player follows the avatar's perspective and gives input orders (which are usually given through keyboards, mouse, and controllers) to control their movement. Avatar is often the protagonist of the story, who primarily influences the story and propels it forward.

1.3 The development of different IDNs

Internet applications under the umbrella term 'Web 2.0' have opened a whole new level of opportunities for people who tell stories or costume stories (Churchill and Barratt-Pugh, 2020). The experience of interactive digital narratives (IDN) related to both the software and hardware systems facilitating the delivery of narratives, as well as the manner in which individuals engage with them (Koenitz, 2015). This constitutes a learning process for both technological advancements and the market's comprehension and standardisation of IDN.

The common materials that are used to interact with include text, video clips, and models (characters, environment, objects). Based on what is used as the main interacting materials, there are respectively three generic IDN forms: digital interactive fictions, interactive films, and video games. The distinctions between these three forms are not always sharply defined, and the three terms are sometimes seen to be interchangeable. On their website, Wales Interactive[3] names their products FMV and interactive movies. Are they films or games? For this thesis, these definitions will be clearly delineated for the sake of research and the accuracy required from a descriptive perspective. As discussed in the last section,

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[3] https://www.walesinteractive.com/games-film

the digital interactive film refers to the visual storytelling medium that combines a sequence of video clips, where the sequence of the clips is programmed and interactable; the digital films contain the minimum level of interaction to keep the storytelling least disturbed; they are released on video streaming platforms, in contrast to video game platforms which cater to different needs. This section discusses the other two IDN forms from two angles: interactive material and narrative structure. Meanwhile, the narrativity in IDN will be examined under various circumstances, such as different narrating goals and media features.

Interactive fiction is generally referred to as the text-based narrative where the readers are offered multiple story branches. By a broader definition, interactive fiction can be disseminated through print books as well as games. In contemporary discourse, the term predominantly applies to digital media, often delineated as 'hypertext' or 'digital literature', with a focus on its digital manifestation (Ciesla, 2019; Pope, 2010; Rettberg, 2015). Hypertext fiction started in the late 1980s and explored the potential of a form where pieces of text are connected through hyperlinks, a tradition that continues until today (Koenitz, page 7, 2023). This form of narrative was a significant part of the early computing experience (e.g. *afternoon, a story*, Joyce, 1987). Works featuring interactive fiction once became the first best-sellers on PCs during the early 1980s (Montfort, 2003, page 2).

Video games have gained the greatest popularity for decades among the three forms of IDN. By contrast, unlike interactive fiction, video games did not start as a medium that featured narratives. When arcade and video games emerged in the 1960s, they did not offer narrative (Kent, 2001). During that period, video games typically emphasised fast-paced action, prioritising reaction time and

competitive gameplay, such as *Pong* (1972), *Pac-Man* (1980), and *Donkey Kong* (1981). Following the introduction of CD-ROM storage media as standard equipment in the late 1980s, the era witnessed a flourishing period for FMV games, such as *Night Trap* (Digital Pictures, 1992), *The 7th Guest* (Trilobyte, 1993), *Phantasmagoria* (Sierra On-Line, 1995). As gaming technology advanced, consumer preferences shifted towards more visually impressive experiences, with games predominantly employing real-time 3D or 2D modelled graphics rendered by the game engine itself. This trend aimed to deliver more interactive and immersive gameplay experiences. However, despite this shift, market interest in narrative-driven experiences remained strong. There were trending games like *Bioshock* (2K Games, 2007), *Mass Effect* (BioWare, 2007), and *Baldur's Gate 3* (Larian Studios, 2023). Generally, in action and shooting genres, stories can be used to offer the reason for the players to fight and take part in battles. There are also video games that heavily rely on drama and emotions, whose developers try to find a balance between their gameplay and stories.

There were critical debates regarding the role of narrative in video games between the late 20th century and the early 2000s. Some researchers believe that in video games, narratives will always take a supporting role instead of being the main purpose. For example, Ince (page 47, 2006) argues that 'gameplay is paramount'. In this argument, Ince suggests that exploration of interactive narrative invariably ties back to the essence of the game—the gameplay—regardless of whether explicitly articulated. Eskelinen (2001) claims that video game narrative is a marketing tool that is undeserving of study, and that it is gameplay that should in fact be studied. Vargas-Iglesias and Navarrete-Cardero (2019) conclude that debates surrounding the ontological essence of video games

revolved around whether they should be examined through a narratological lens (Jenkins, 2004; Murray, 1997; Ryan, 2004) or a ludological[4] perspective (Frasca, 1999; Juul, 2001). In video game design, it is common to include a skip button that allows the players to skip the cutscenes (the video clips for storytelling, which are often inserted in between gameplay segments). In contrast, video game *The Quarry* (2022) offers a different approach. In this game, players have the option to enter a movie mode where the gameplay is automated, and no interaction or gameplay is required during battles or other segments. Then, it becomes more akin to a traditional movie experience, with the game rendering the narrative as a cinematic sequence rather than interactive gameplay. However, instances like *The Quarry* are relatively rare. The prevalent feature of skipping cutscenes rather than gameplay underscores the preference of players for repeated gameplay rather than repeated cutscenes.

Although the prevailing sentiment often prioritises gameplay over narrative in video games, a trend of creating narrative-focused games persists over the years. As Koenitz (page 34, 2023) points out, artists and developers have utilised games as a medium for probing the complexities of the human condition. Despite some viewpoints suggesting that games serve different purposes, there remains a steadfast commitment to storytelling within interactive digital narrative media. Story-focused games, like *Heavy Rain* (2010), *Life is Strange* (2015), *Firewatch* (2016), with complex or unique narrative styles, address personal/social concerns: the emotional turmoil of a parent searching for

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[4] Ludology (from *ludus*, meaning 'game', and *-logia*, meaning 'study') refers to game study. It involves the examination of games, the act of engaging with them, and the players and cultures associated with them.

their missing child, the anxious and lost feeling in adolescence, and the meaning of life after loss and pain.

The IDN offer unique opportunities to explore classic themes such as identity, morality, love, loss, and more. By immersing players in virtual worlds and presenting them with moral dilemmas, emotional narratives, and thought-provoking scenarios, video games provide a platform for individuals to reflect on their own experiences and contemplate fundamental aspects of human existence. When talking about storytelling in video games, Aarseth (2004) argues that 'unlike literature, games are not about the Other', not about relating to characters; instead, video game experiences are about the Self; 'Games focus on self-mastery and exploration of the external world, not exploration of interpersonal relationships (except for multiplayer games)'. In video games, players often assume the role of themselves, sometimes incorporating elements of roleplay to embody the protagonist within the story.

While it's true that video games typically don't employ a narrator to describe the protagonist's inner journey and struggles, it doesn't imply that narrative is ineffective in video games. (Interestingly, *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2019) proves it is still possible to have a narrator who continually articulates the protagonist's emotions and reflections in the second-person point of view, creating its unique style.) Rather, it suggests that traditional narration methods such as inner turmoil may not be the most suitable option within the video game storytelling nature (which is close to 'show, not tell'). This doesn't preclude other narrative techniques from being effective, nor does it imply that video game narratives lack depth compared to traditional narratives. In *Detroit*, the players are put in this hostile environment towards androids while roleplaying as androids.

Together with the avatars, they will have to face hatred and inequity. The avatars gradually realise they want rights and dignity, but violence and rage do not seem to solve problems. As they explore the external world and work on self-mastery (and, more importantly, surviving), the inner turmoil of the androids does not need to be narrated. Fear, anger, a yearning for life, a desire to fight back... These emotions, along with logical thoughts, will manifest on their own. Similarly, in IF, the decision-making power offered to the navigator lets them take a step closer to the story world. While making choices, they will take responsibility for the outcomes as well (for further discussion, see Chapter 4.3).

Interactive film, in this research, refers to a cinematic experience where the navigator can actively intervene in the narrative. 'Film' is the subject, and 'interactive' is the descriptive word. In this context, to make a collection of video media more of an interactive film than a video game, the first condition is that it can be accessed by a standard film-watching method. In the 1960s, interactive film made experiments in cinema. In the 21st century, interactive film mainly experiments on video streaming platforms. However, exceptions exist. For example, *Late Shift* offers film-like watching experiences, but it was released on multiple video game platforms (Xbox One, Nintendo Switch, Steam, etc). The only material in this video game is video clips. There are no interactable objects besides the option boxes in the decision-making scenarios. It leads to the minimum interaction, which is clicking on a box occasionally. From the perspective of the interacting simplicity (no grabbing, running, fighting, etc.), it is plausible for *Late Shift* to function well through the television remote. The fact that *Late Shift* was released on video game platforms potentially restricted its accessibility to a wider audience. This is due to the common expectation of

interactivity in the video games market, which – ironically – may not have aided

in the appreciation of works like *Late Shift*. However, the transition of future IFs

to film/show streaming platforms offers promising prospects for broadening its

audience base.

1.4 The Outline of the Dissertation

The critical component of this thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 serves as

an introduction, providing background information and establishing the

relationship between interactivity and storytelling. Chapter 2 explores different

types of IDN structures and their unique narrative characteristics. It then focuses

on the specific structure relevant to the scope of this project: the branching

narrative structure. This structure introduces alternative plotlines to films while

maintaining a relatively tight sequence of events. Chapter 3 discusses my creative

writing process, explaining the experimental elements of the project's

development and offering reflections on the script itself. After acquiring

theoretical insights and practical experience, Chapter 4 examines the impact of IF

on its works' texts from the perspectives of literature and philosophy. Chapter 5

serves as the conclusion to summarise the findings and discuss implications.

Chapter 1 General Introduction

In Chapter 1, I provide an overview of the development of IDN, including

interactive digital fiction, video games, and interactive films. This chapter also

reviews the key terminologies and concepts to enhance clarity and coherence.

Chapter 2 The Structures in Interactive Digital Narratives

This chapter starts with a review of the existing theories and debates around interactive digital narrative. Then, I explore various existing structural categorisation methods for IDN. This project uses a broad approach to categorising IDN, focusing on general criteria rather than detailed subtypes. The primary factor guiding this categorisation is the influence of interaction on discourse and story. This categorisation is divided into three main categories: string, branching, and pool. Subsequently, I move to case studies of selected works to analyse specifically how branching structure influences IF. Through these case studies, I aim to gain insights into the intricate relationship between narrative structure and interactivity in branching type narrative structure. Furthermore, this chapter investigates the major traits (width, affectiveness, generativeness) associated with the branching structure. By examining these traits, I seek to lay the groundwork for Chapter 3, which focuses on the design of a script tailored for IDN.

Chapter 3 Design of the Practice Writing

In Chapter 3, I explore the creative writing process behind the interactive film *Author's Note*. After explaining the writing tools used, I will examine the film's narrative structure and character design, focusing on the introduction of a new agent character type, Scribe, along with the arrangement of both major and minor branching nodes. Using the theories and insights from Chapter 2 as guidance, I will reflect on the script from two key perspectives: the sequences of events and the multiple endings. Additionally, the reflection will discuss how IDN challenges the notion of fatalism, as branching structures allow fate and outcomes to change based on different choices.

Chapter 4 Interactive Elements' Influence on Narratology

Based on the discussion of the design and objectives of the creative writing component, this chapter moves forward to examine the textual structure in IDN. Using the script from the creative writing component, along with existing works as analytical material, the chapter explores the three layers of narrative structure in IF with branching structure (text layer, branching layer, and discourse layer). Additionally, the Actantial Model by Greimas is employed to analyse the dynamics and tensions between characters in IDN. Furthermore, this chapter investigates the unique tensions within IDN, specifically addressing two key types: the tension between agent characters and the navigator/player, and the tension between the author and the navigator/player. These dual tensions are critical to understanding how interactive narratives reshape traditional storytelling frameworks.

2. The Structures in Interactive Digital Narratives

This chapter analyses how the storytelling method (especially its structure) changes when a story is told with interactive digital media. The discussion is based on theories and existing IDN pieces. The discussions are in preparation for my own creative writing practice. By identifying the traits of IDN structures, this chapter aims to explore analytical tools/strategies (width, generativeness, and promptness) which provide specificity, depth, and nuance to narrative examination. Using these three indicators to comprehensively summarise and evaluate the narrative and interactive capabilities of a specific interactive narrative structure (branching structure), I thereby assess its unique narrative functions.

Section 2.1 *Background* explains the general background of video game narrative and the importance of examining it. Section 2.2 *Interactive Structure Types in IDN* analyses the structure types and components of existing IDNs, aiming to develop frameworks for the creative writing process. Section 2.3 *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* is a case study that seeks to analyse the intricacies of the branching structure inherent in interactive film. Moreover, I will investigate how this branching narrative format cooperates with the narrative theme. Section 2.4 *Nodes and branches* explores deeper into the examination of the traits and factors influencing branching narratives, including width, generativeness, and promptness, respectively referring to 1) the differences of parallel storylines; 2) decision-making nodes' quality of generating parallel storylines; and 3) the connection between decision and the generated outcome. The insights gained will lay the groundwork for the experimental design in the next chapter.

2.1 Background

2.1.1 Storytelling in interactive media

This chapter will examine the structure of IDN, including video game narratives.

Prior to the analysis of video game narratives, it is imperative to look into other

constituent elements within video games, as the essence of a video game extends

beyond narrative alone. While comparing narratives in video games and

traditional storytelling (books, films, play), Ince (page 15-21, 2006) describes

them respectively as interactive and passive. Interactive refers to the common

game nature that needs continual input from the player to affect the status of the

game. Passive refers to the story media that don't need input. Therefore, it is

pertinent to inquire: what contributions does interaction afford to the realm of

video games? Combining with the interface, the interaction in video game creates

functions for entertainment, including social features (in-game voice/text chat),

manipulation and control features (combat skills, resources managing), identity

features (choices on avatar to change their race, sex, attributes), storytelling

device, reward and punishment system (King, 2010). From the fundamental

mechanism perspective, Juul (page 35-36, 2011) proposes six features, including

rules, variable and quantifiable outcome, valorisation of outcome (outcomes are

assigned different values, some positive and some negative), player effort, player

emotionally attached to outcome, and negotiable consequences (referring to its

fictional and entertaining nature, which do not necessarily come with real-life

consequences). It is a common argument that rules are what makes a game a game

(Juul, 2011; Tekinbaş and Zimmerman, 2003). In games, rules dictate the

parameters for advancing towards objectives, offering incentives for actions

aligned with the intended outcome while penalising those that deviate. The

establishment of rules delineates the framework within which players operate, facilitating the formulation of strategic approaches.

Rules governing gameplay and those governing narrative constructs sometimes align with each other, and it is usually the ideal situation. *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* (2019, FromSoftware) is an action-adventure game that tells a story about a shinobi known as Wolf. His goal is to take revenge on a samurai clan that imprisoned him and kidnapped his lord. He meets one enemy after the other. The narrative elucidates the backgrounds and characteristics of both the protagonist and antagonists, furnishing motives and instilling suspense, thereby enriching the player's engagement with the gameplay experience. However, in the first boss fight in the game against a character named Genichiro Ashina, the linear story only leads in one direction: Ashina kidnaps Wolf's lord and cuts off Wolf's arm. Since the story is preset, the battle against the boss is unwinnable. Compared to powerful Ashina, Wolf is constrained by limited resources and a small health bar. The battle requires impeccable timing and familiarity with the combat buttons. Still, the player has a chance to win by executing a precise sequence of attacks and managing to evade any damage. Once they deplete Ashina's bar to zero and 'defeat' him, a cut-scene kicks in. A knife will suddenly strike from behind a wall and distract Wolf, giving Ashina the chance to cut off Wolf's arm and kidnap his lord regardless. A common rule, 'reduce boss's health to zero, hero will win and gain rewards', is broken here. The narrative in Sekiro needs the protagonist's descent into adversity followed by a subsequent resurgence, a trajectory mirrored in gameplay through the implementation of unwinnable combat scenarios. Conversely, there are instances where the narrative is changed to align with the goals of gameplay. For instance, in *Detroit: Become Human*

(2018), a dedicated chapter is allocated to familiarise players with the game's controls and interactive elements. In Fig. 2-1, the player follows the arrows with the controllers to wash the dish. The story in this chapter is relatively slow and mundane: a typical day for a humanoid robot doing house tasks such as washing dishes, vacuuming, and taking out the trash. During the analysis of video game narratives, it is crucial to consider the underlying intent behind certain narrative decisions: are they primarily intended to enhance gameplay, or are they driven by the needs of the story? Adopting a multidimensional perspective facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the narrative dynamics.

Figure 2-1, Detroit: Become Human (2018)

There are various types of interactions in video games, some of which tend to have relatively low influence on how the story unfolds, like battling, puzzle-solving, and environment exploring. During these types of interactions, the story progresses when the player meets certain set requirements (win the battle or solve the puzzle). There are also other types of interaction that can have a bigger impact on storytelling. A common method is through the dialogues. During the conversation with non-playable characters (NPC), the player is offered to pick one

option from multiple choices. Sometimes. The choice they make will directly affect the narration, and each of the options leads to different outcomes. The inputs can result in different events and/or affect character relationships. Hence, it necessitates individuals to engage in more abstract thinking facing the decision-making nodes, especially when comparing it to the straightforward goal-oriented actions involved in gameplay control, such as defeating a boss, collecting resources, or exploring the environment.

The freedom to interact with the environment and characters varies in different games. The games can achieve great freedom for players to interact with everything: environment, resources, and tools. However, the interactivity in the action doesn't automatically lead to interactivity in stories. *Super Mario Odyssey* (2017) offers various gameplay possibilities (shapeshifting, obtaining different superpowers, puzzle solving, chasing, etc.) while it tells a simple linear story. Mario travels through kingdoms in his airship. In the end, he catches up with his enemy, Bowser, and rescues Princess Peach. Meanwhile, games with simple interactive methods can tell a delicate and unique way. Using *Unpacking* as an example, the player simply takes out items from moving boxes and arranges them in empty flats. The environment of the new flat and the items in the boxes imply what the protagonist has been doing. Even though we never see her in the game, we still accompany her as she goes to university, has a relationship and breaks up, moves back to her childhood home, tries to live independently in a shabby flat, and, in the end, moves in a spacious new house with a loving partner. There is an item that can be hard to find placement for: her graduation certificate when she is unpacking in her boyfriend's flat. The certificate is a final puzzle to finish the flat. Players may first try to put the certificate around the house, on the table, on the

living room wall, or even on the bathroom wall. But each attempt will be denied by a red frame in the game and a beep notification. The only correct place for that certificate is under the bed. That is the first message sent to the player: the boyfriend in the story does not give the protagonist permission to decorate the wall in their shared flat, even if it is for one piece of the certificate. Later, the protagonist moves back to her parents' house, where she can arrange her items freely. But there are still restrictions: the photos of her and the ex-boyfriend cannot be displayed at the bedside, on the table or anywhere visible. After another move, the photos are not in the boxes anymore. The next flat is a shabby old flat with rusty handles and peeled-off paint. In the final round, the protagonist's new home is spacious with plenty of room for her various hobbies and decorations. We can assume the story is about the experiences of human growth, letting go, and gaining valuable experiences. In the earlier stage, the protagonist needs to hide items, either because of her partner's wish or because she does not want to see things that make her unhappy. As she grows up, she moves on, disposes of old pictures of the ex-partner, and displays others as she wishes. Simply by designing items used by the protagonist in each move and arranging the placement for the items, a story of 'growing up' has been told. The story, though brief, includes a few key twists and rich details without needing to directly present the protagonist to the player.

Action role-play games like the *Dark Souls* series (2011-2018, FromSoftware) and *Elden Ring* (2022, FromSoftware) have relatively more complex stories. In *Elden Ring*, the story begins with the recall of the Tarnished – exiles who were banished to the outside world. As one of the Tarnished, the player sets off on their journey to seek the shards of the shattered Elden Ring. The game

depicts a story with distinctive characters who love, hate, or lie to each other.

Murder, conspiracy, betrayal – many of these plot elements do not rely on

cutscenes. Instead, they depend on the player's interpretation of limited and

cryptic dialogue to infer the stories that had happened here. The players can enjoy

the game with little effort in tracking the stories. They can spend more time on

things like battling, collecting items, and upgrading weapons, which normally do

not push the plots forward. Between each major battle, players can gain more

information by having conversations with non-playable characters and reading

descriptions of the items. The conversations sometimes acknowledge the player's

in-game progress (congratulations on defeating a boss, disagreement about how

you have finished the mission). Some can also provide background stories and

character motivations (the description of a weapon revealing the dark history of its

owner or a character explaining that he needs revenge for her family). In

FromSoftware games, the combat system is intricately designed for complexity,

while character interactions often feature dialogue prompts where players simply

select 'continue' to progress the conversation. *Elden Ring*'s story is complex and

full of details that can be accessed by various interactive methods. However, the

interaction methods do not always make an impact on how the story unfolds.

Interactive digital narratives generally cover the stories with interactive

elements, which may involve interactions with objects, characters, or the

environment. However, it's important to note that not all interactions necessarily

result in a change to the story itself. What is an interaction at the story level? In

the house chore chapter in *Detroit*, the player can choose to clean the dishes or

talk to the little girl first. The order of certain events will not change the following

plots. To further examine this, I will use the concept of *story* and *discourse*. They

are the two basic components in narrative, also known as content and expression, *praxis* and *mythos*, *fabula* and *syuzhet* (Aristotle, n.d.; Erlich, 1965; Chatman, 1978). Chatman concludes that *story* refers to the basic existence (character, settings) and the events (happening and actions). The content might be hidden, implied, and even distorted by the texts. Meanwhile, *discourse* refers to the means by which the content is expressed, which includes substance (cinematic, verbal, manga, etc.) and form (structure of narrative transmission) (page 22-9). In the dramatic structure, the sequence of narrative events is arranged to express what is happening. The statements might be unreliable. The author could lie, the narrator could lie, and the characters could lie. However, the chain of statements is fixed when the story is told through a non-interactable medium. In interactive media, the events' positions are no longer fixed, and the navigator/reader/player can decide how to unfold the story. In games like *Elden Ring*, talking to different characters will lead you to know their respective story. Who to talk to and in what order depend on the player. In this way, interactive media adds a dimension to discourse structure. Set aside the unreliability of the narration, in IDN, the input from the navigator/reader/player interferes with the events and changes the event sequence to some degree. The common events-arranging devices include repetition (if the requirements to move to the next event are not reached), early dead-end (if people choose certain options or fail to pass the challenge), and alternative event threads (when there are two or more parallel plotlines to choose from). How do the interactions on discourse level and story level function? Is one of them better than the other in the specific scenario? How do they serve the overall narrative purpose? That is what we are going to discuss in this chapter during the analysis of IDN structures.

Compared to the interacting methods in video games, the interaction required during interactive film is rather simple. In interactive films, the direct control over characters (manipulating their movement or combat) is reduced to nearly zero. In the interactive film *Late Shift* (2016), the navigator does not take control of the protagonist in terms of their mobility. Instead, the options focus on the response to the events (whether to let the guest borrow the key to an expensive car that does not belong to her) and the protagonist's tone in the dialogues (whether to talk calmly or angrily while facing threats). During the fighting scenes, there are strategic choices rather than mobile control over the character. When some criminals try to kidnap the protagonist, the options are to surrender or run away. When the protagonist is forced to join the robbery team, facing the robber who tries to take down the guard, the navigator has two options: grab the trolley to stop the auction house staff from escaping, or stand by. The two options only lead to a small detail in the robbery: whether the protagonist stops the trolley or not. The robbery will succeed no matter what. Action scenes in Late Shift are entirely conveyed through video clips, unlike common games where gameplay (using keys to control the character to jump, block, and different attack moves) affects the outcome. There is minimal gameplay involved, ensuring that interactivity is serving the story rather than dictating its direction.

In the process of my creative writing project, after setting up the initial story, designing the structure was the first obstacle I faced from the scriptwriter's perspective. The structural composition encompasses established methodologies within classic (non-interactive) narrative construction, such as narrative pacing (the speed at which stories unfold), strategic implementation of foreshadowing devices, integration of expository sequences with dynamic action sequences,

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among other techniques. It also involves designing the interactive structure, which maps out the locations of the decision-making nodes (*should I let the navigator make the decision for the character at this moment?*), the content of the decisions (*what are the options specifically?*), the consequences after each decision (*if the navigator chooses A/B, what happens? Would it make sense?*), the frequency of the nodes (*would these be enough nodes for this event?*). These specific questions will be inspected in Chapter 3. To engage with practical application, a preliminary investigation into the structural components and distinctive features of this IDN is imperative, which is the goal of Chapter 2.

2.1.2 Introduction

2.2 The interactive structure types in IDN examines the previous theories about interactive structure. In this section, based on the relationship between dramatic and interactive structure, as well as narrating intention, I discuss three basic structure types in IDN: string, pool, and branch structure. **String structure** describes the narratives with a fixed event sequence. Most of the interactions take place through environment exploring, which merely affects how the story unfolds. **Pool structure** describes the narratives that offer event units as a set or multiple sets. In each set, people can choose the preferred order and amount of the event units to view. Compared to the string structure, the discourses in the pool structure often do not give a cue to let people know when the story is finished. **Branching structure** describes narratives with decision-making nodes that generate alternative plotlines. In the alternative plotlines, the parallel events tend to contradict each other. For example, if Path A is about a character who chooses to go to the left at an intersection, then Path B tends to lead them to the right. I have

identified the branching narrative structure to be the most appropriate for my creative writing project, for it holds a level of sequences in the narrative as well as allowing the interactivity.

2.3 A Case Study on Black Mirror: Bandersnatch takes Netflix's interactive film as an

example to examine the dynamics between the interactive structure and story content. *Bandersnatch* is about a young man doubting whether he has free will. The decision-making nodes create multiple plotlines and five main endings with variations. The parallel plotlines keep looping back to hint that he is watched by some sort of being in a higher dimension (the navigator of Netflix). I will discuss how the film uses the structure to add challenge for the protagonist/navigator while they explore the philosophy of free will.

2.4 Nodes and branches brings out three scales (width, promptness, effectiveness) to help analyse the branching structure. The **width** of the story tree describes the complexity of the interactive structure in general, which is decided by the promptness, and/or the generativeness of each node. The **promptness** is to measure if the film responds with different plotlines right away after a decision has been made at a node. Sometimes, a decision in the early node can affect which ending we have, while some other nodes can lead you to the results right away. The **generativeness** refers to the impact that is made by the decisions. A lower generative node leads to parallel plotlines that are very similar to each other. The results that come from a node with higher generativeness will lead to plotlines

with great differences. The above concepts are necessary for my creative writing process, offering me tools to shape the branches.

2.2 Interactive structure types in IDN

When discussing interactivity types in digital media, Marie-Laure Ryan (2006, page 107-20) identifies two key factors for categorizing interactivity: Internal vs. External Interactivity and Exploratory vs. Ontological Interactivity. The distinction between internal and external interactivity concerns whether the medium includes an agent that represents the 'user'. In contrast, exploratory versus ontological interactivity differentiates between two modes of engagement. In the exploratory mode, users navigate the display, but their actions neither create fictional history nor alter the plot – they have no impact on the destiny of the virtual world. In the ontological mode, by contrast, user decisions influence the progression of the virtual world's history, leading to multiple branching paths. Most video games and interactive films discussed in this project fall into the category of internal ontological interactivity, incorporating varying degrees of avatar freedom, interactable materials, and diverse narrative structures that shape how story events are connected. Chapter 1 defines interactive film by establishing its minimum level of interactivity and specifying its interactable materials, which primarily consist of video clips. With these distinctive media characteristics in mind, this chapter examines the structural aspects of IDNs and analyse the works of video games and interactive films. By examining the shared characteristics and differences between interactive films and video games, I aim to gain insights into the narrative strategies and interactive mechanics employed in specifically interactive films

The interactive structure in this chapter describes how narratives respond when interactions occur and how the interactable narrative segments link to each other. The prevalent methods through which individuals can influence the narratives in IDN include leading to minor changes (affecting the wording in the dialogues), leading to major changes (affecting the relationship among characters, affecting plots and endings), and choosing the events (affecting the order of the events). The relations among the story segments can be flexible in interactive media. Careful deliberation and strategic planning on the part of the game designer are essential for determining the interconnections among these units within the narrative framework. As Ryan describes this: 'if the player's choices are too broad, there will be no guarantee of narrative coherence; if the choices are too narrow, the game will be boring' (2006, page 196). IDN presents unique challenges that traditional narratives have never encountered, necessitating careful consideration and adjustment.

Interactive structure has been discussed by many researchers who offer various categorising methods. Game designer Steve Ince (2006, pp. 49-52) suggests there are six types of structures in video game narratives, dividing gameplay and narrative discourse into linear and non-linear respectively. Ince's six structure types include: 1) linear story, 2) linear story, non-linear gameplay, 3) branching story and gameplay, 4) parallel story and gameplay, 5) linear gameplay, player-influenced story, 6) controlled branching story and gameplay. Structure 1 (linear story) describes the games with a linear story and linear gameplay, which means that 'the route the player takes to get through each level of the game is pre-determined and fixed' (p. 49). The narrative of the puzzle game *Rusty Lake* (2015) is an example of a linear story. In *Rusty Lake*, the player needs to solve different

puzzles and unlock some memories. The required activity to solve the puzzles is fixed with no variations. In contrast, Structure 2 (linear story, non-linear gameplay) describes games that allow various routes to completion but still offer fixed storylines. Ince also analyses four structure types of branching stories (stories with more than one possibility) with different types of gameplays as variations. Ince's sorting method is based on two factors: the freedom in exploring the story and the freedom in the gameplay (environment exploring, battling, etc). By contrast, Marie-Laure Ryan (2015) solely focuses on narratives' characteristics and identifies ten interactive structure types: the vector (with optional side branches), the complete graph, the network, the tree, the database, the maze, the flowchart, the hidden story, the braided plot (or the house with many windows), and action space (pp. 165-176). Unlike Ince, who considers how gameplay and discourse vary in responding to players' input, Ryan emphasises how the discourse events connect to each other. The vector structure preserves the linearity of its temporal sequence and its causal structure. Sometimes, it might offer optional side branches, but in view of the full picture, 'there is no other choice than moving forward' (p. 165). The complete graph describes 'the structure where every node is linked to every other node. (p. 166).' This type grants people great freedom to explore among the events. Ryan also takes the media/genre/substance into consideration when categorising the structures. For example, both network and maze structure (see Fig. 2-2) describe the structure where the paths between each event are relatively dispersed and flexible, which allows multiple routes and circuits. The two main differences between them are 1) the network is for literary hypertexts while the maze is characteristic of adventure and shooter games, and 2) the network does not have more than one exit while the maze does. A possible

risk of this sorting system is that the IDN is constantly developing, and it would be hard to make an exhaustive list of structure types and variations, not to mention that some IDN work might contain more than one structure.
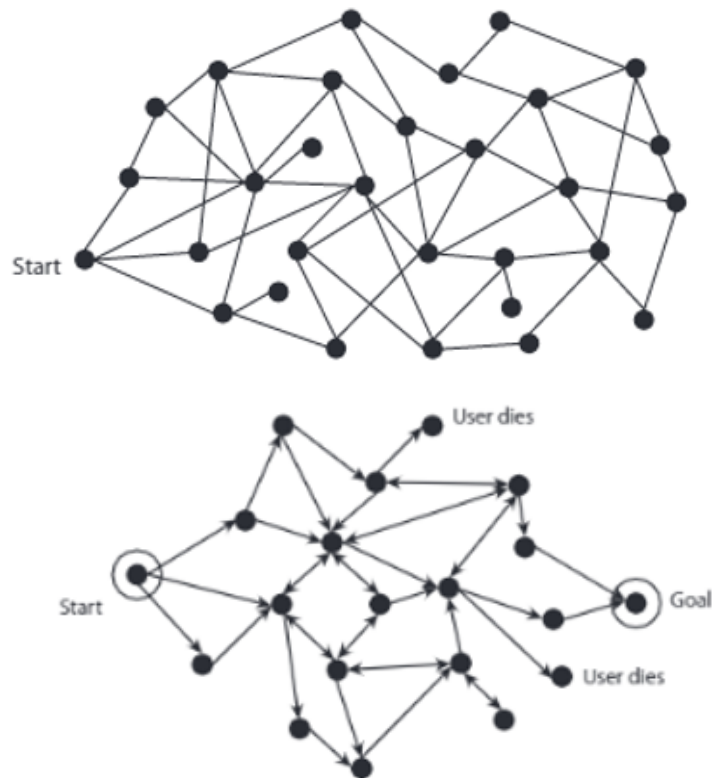
Figure 2-2 The network (above) and the maze (below) (Ryan, 2015)

There are sorting methods that are more general and focus on the narrative. Mark Meadows (2002) suggests three main structures for IDN, based on how strongly the dramatic arc is maintained (see Fig. 2-3):

1. *Nodal: a series of noninteractive events, interrupted by points of interactivity.*

2. *Modulated: still supports the dramatic arc, this time to a lesser degree.*

3. *Open structure: resembles the road map. The dramatic arc is completely abandoned. It offers high freedom for people to explore.*

Similarly, Thabet (2003) examines four basic models for video game narrative structures: string of pearls, branching storylines, amusement park, and building blocks. The former three structures resemble Meadows's models, and the building blocks refers to the video games with relatively open worlds with little pre-written scripts, where the stories that players experience mostly depend on how they explore the game.
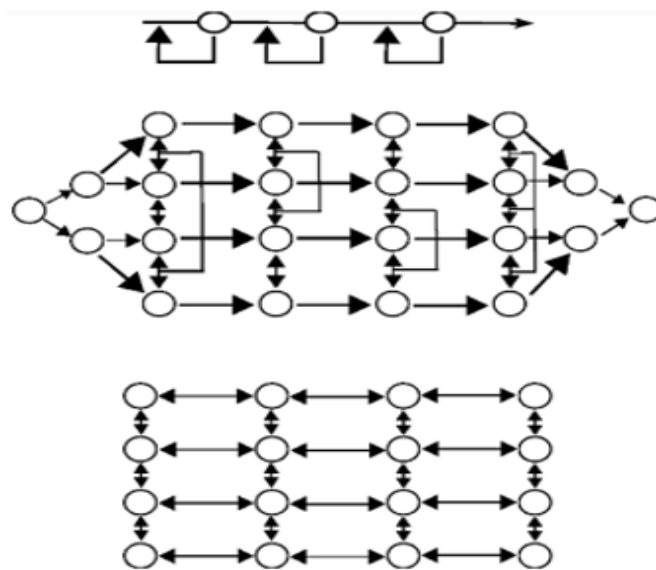
Figure 2-3 From above to below: nodal, modulated, open structure (Meadows, 2003)

My research focus entails an analytical examination from the perspective of creators and offers preliminary suggestions for IDN writers (especially IF writers) in selecting an appropriate structure for their work. In response to these specific requirements, I have introduced a basic method of classifying the structure, which includes three basic structure types: string, pool, and branching (similar to meadows and Thabet's sorting system):

String: the events are lined up in a single thread.

Pool: the events are not lined up in a single thread, but the events are not usually exclusive. (All events can exist in one storyline.)

Branching: the events are not lined up in a single thread, and some of the events contain contradictory content. (Not all events can logically coexist in one storyline. For example, there will be event A, where a character is murdered, and event B, where she survives in that scenario. The contradictory events in branching structure create alternative 'facts', which is only true in the respective branches).

The dividing lines among the three structures are blurry. It should be noted that the analysis here is not for taxonomy or classification. Rather, the three structure types are listed to compare their general narrating effects, aiming to inspire and shape the initial stages of IDN writing. In the later section, I will analyse the structures along with their narrating inclinations: how the structure affects the plots, and how the former creator used these kinds of structures. The string structure benefits traditional non-interactive stories due to the minimised space for the discourses to expand. The pool structure works well with puzzling stories, because the little unit of stories with relatively weak relations scatter around in the environment. The structure can also help add details to the fictional world. However, with this structure type, while people can be free to change the *discourses,* this does not add alternative universes where events/actions turn out differently. The branching structure with the parallel plotlines supports the creation of alternative universes. Here, the creators present contradictory events/actions in different branches, which lead to variations of the *story*.

2.2.1 String structure

In the string structure narrative type, the events form a single thread. The interaction can cause brief variations on limited discourse parts (usually changing the dialogues and/or actions), but the overall story remains the same. A hasty ending that leaves many problems unsolved (dead-ends) is a common outcome in string structure decision-making as well. Saltzman (2000) describes it as the string of pearls. Meadows names it as nodal structure. Ince simply uses the phrase 'linear story with/without non-linear gameplay' (2006). String structure can be often seen in adventure games, puzzle games, and shooting games. In between the events in the story, the players have a certain degree of freedom to explore and interact with the environment (e.g., moving objects, entering buildings, obtaining tools) and non-playable characters (e.g., fighting, talking). The interaction taking place inside one story segment affects little of the story in the next segment. The interaction relies more on the gameplay in video games, or activities responding to text commands in an interactive digital fiction. Leaving the interaction aside, the story in string structure can be very similar to fixed narratives in traditional media since they both have linear narration sequences. However, despite the similarity, the string structure narrative type still has the traits of IDN, which offers the navigators experiences that are different from traditional narratives.
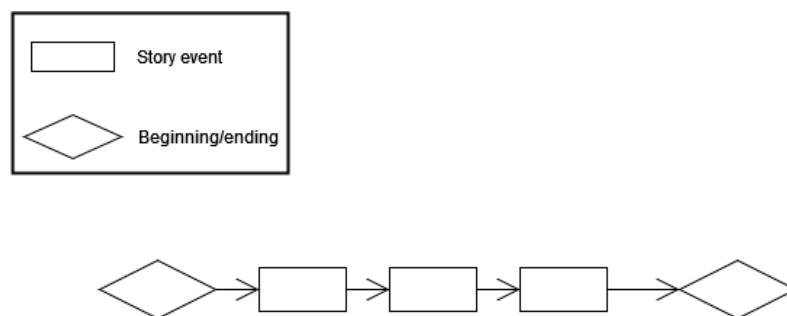
Figure 2-4 String structure

The adventure game *Little Nightmare* (2017) can be taken as an illustrative example because it has a storyline that fits in the above characterisations of the string structure narrative type. The event sequence does not change, and the goal is straightforward: survive. The main character, Six (a kid), finds herself waking up on a ship that is full of cruel, monster-like adults. The player controls Six to explore the ship, solve puzzles, and sneak by the adults. The interaction is rather simple: running, jumping, holding/grabbing. In a ship that represents gluttony, the adults mainly cook, eat, or lock the little kids up like livestock. As the intense escape journey approaches its end, Six starts to feel intense hunger as well. At a later point of the game, when she curls into a ball due to starvation, the players will lose control and can only watch her grab the nearest thing to eat. Firstly, it is a rat. Then, Six eats one of the Nomes – the only friendly creatures on this ship. In the later chapter, after Six escapes the ship, the players get to play a nameless boy who also tries to run away but through a different route. In this chapter, the boy gets to know more about the Nomes – the easily-startled, faceless little creatures. To get past the puzzles in this chapter, the boy needs to gain the trust of the Nomes. The player controls the boy to find and hug the Nomes one by one. Then, the Nomes will follow him around and help him by pushing heavy stuff, carrying coal, etc. However, even after solving all the puzzles, the boy does not get to escape from the ship as Six has done. Instead, he is captured and knocked out. After he wakes up again, he has become a faceless, fragile Nome. The players will recognise that the boy is walking in a similar area to the one Six has run through, which is close to the outside. After the boy-Nome enters a particular room, the cut-scene will be triggered. A familiar face shows up. Six walks in. It is the same cutscene from the last chapter, where starved Six has abruptly eaten a Nome.

However, this time, the players are aligned with the Nome's perspective. The players have gone through dangerous adventures as Six, and they have also befriended Nomes as the nameless boy. But neither of them can escape their fate. Six has lost her humanity, and the boy has lost his life. The fixed event sequence tells the story in a non-chronological order, creating a loop in the dramatic structure. The traditional narrating techniques mislead us about the character's identity and the time that the actions take place in. The dramatic structure and interactive structure cooperate to tell a seemingly simple story. The only thing supporting Six/the player in keeping going is the urge to survive. Six dies and wakes up over and over again. The apparent motivation (survival) and simple gameplay logic build towards the plot twist, letting us know that the theme is not just about surviving.

In *Little Nightmares*, the power of IDN comes from 1) the arrangement of the gameplay and the cutscenes, and 2) the interaction to enhance the player's connection with the characters. 1) Arrangement. From a purely narrative perspective, this story employs a simple device: deception regarding the chronological order of events: it begins with the lost little girl Six waking up from a dark, damp indoor space and going on her journey (escaping from evil adults). It evolves into her tragic descent, ending with the death of a Nome. Subsequently, the narrative pivots to a nameless boy's adventure as the starting point, who is also in the human form, creating a parallel and similar path as Six. Then, it leads to the formation of fleeting friendships with harmless little Nomes. Later, the boy is turned into a Nome and murdered while trying to help Six. The precise timing of each event in the story of Six and the boy is uncertain, but they did not happen in a chronological order. The moment when Six, the protagonist, kills the Nome

(boy) near the end of her journey serves as the anchor and pivotal juncture that intertwines the two stories. When assuming the roles of the brave Six and the compassionate boy, players undertake actions that are inherently positive and just. Particularly with Six, the character with whom the narrative commences, her diminutive stature juxtaposed with the towering, oppressive environments and the greedy, unpleasant, titan-like adults underscores her vulnerability and isolation. However, the cut-scenes, conversely, reveal the darker aspects of Six. During the cut-scenes, players are stripped of their ability to control the character, severing their emotional connection with Six. This sudden revelation of Six's darker aspects leaves players emotionally and physically disengaged, as she no longer responds to their commands. The deliberate arrangement of emotions and the growing distance between player and character align to evoke a sense of emotional turmoil. The gameplay and cutscenes are meticulously crafted with distinct narrative tones, spanning from positivity to negativity, from hope to despair, and from a sense of control to an inevitable downfall.

2) Interaction. What would be different if the story in *Little Nightmares* were told completely with pre-recorded video instead of a combination of gameplay and cutscenes? Would individuals experience the story differently as an audience compared to players of the game? The research in video game psychology suggests that the answer is no. The interactive elements add an additional layer to the IDN: **embodiment**. In video games, avatars serve as representations of human participants within a simulated environment, navigating based on player input to engage with the virtual world. With keys/buttons assigned to movements like walk, run, jump, turn, and even more specific movements like low attack, jump attack, and block, the avatar can perform

complex movements following the players' input. The term embodiment is used to describe the sense that something is part of one's body (Vignemont, 2011). The renowned rubber hand illusion experiments illustrate how individuals can induce the perception that a prosthetic rubber hand is a part of their own body through multisensory interactions (Botvinick and Cohen, 1998). Researchers have expanded the concept of embodiment from the physical rubber hand to include the virtual hand, investigating whether participants report and exhibit behaviours indicative of perceiving the virtual arm as a constituent of their own body (IJsselsteijn et al., 2006; Yuan and Steed, 2010). Furthermore, this inquiry extends to exploring how video game players experience a sense of embodiment over their avatars, perceiving the virtual body as an extension of their own self (Lankoski, 2016). Enhanced avatar embodiment can result from a high level of game control (Fribourg et al., 2020). Klevjer (2012) describes the process as the avatars in video games 'transport' our body into screen space. The movements of our fingers are being swallowed by screen space. This relocation of the players' bodily self-awareness from the immediate reality to the digital space helps the players be the characters and feel the characters' emotions (Pallavicini et al., 2020; Bellini, 2022). When we play as Six, we not only navigate the challenges alongside her but also experience them as her. We share in her fear when confronted by titan-like enemies, work through puzzles together, and rejoice in her small victories. As Gee (2003) describes, the players think and feel as the video game characters, embodied in the choices and actions as they play. In this way, in video games, the players can experience different perspectives through a projective identity, integrating both cognitive and emotional empathy (Henriksen, 2017).

Similarly, in *Life is Strange* (video game, 2015, Square Enix), we embark on a journey through the town alongside the protagonist, Max, forging friendships with people in the town and listening to their complaints and greetings, understanding their individual traits, personalities, and life challenges. Max also learns about her childhood friend Chole's troubled upbringing and tries to help Chole's missing friend. Players witness Max's guilt over moving out of the town and leaving Chloe behind in the past, and they also observe Max's gradual development of romantic feelings for Chloe. For the most part of the game, players' decisions will not affect how the story unfolds. However, the player listens to the characters' problems and excitement, learns about their lives and befriends them. Max has the opportunity to save Kate from school bullying and Alyssa from several accidents (saving them or not does not affect the main plot). Max is also helped by their friend Warren and town residents Daivd and Samuel when she faces troubles and violence. String structures in interactive narratives offer something unique compared to non-interactive stories: even though the sequence of events remains fixed, players experience being recipients of the characters' kindness. When it reaches the end, however, Max must make a difficult decision, choosing to save her hometown from a disastrous tornado, or to save her best friend/lover's life. The player can choose either way, but not both. 'Save the town' and 'Save the lover/friend' – the interactive choice itself is shocking, but the preceding linear narrative sets the stage for it. It portrays the kindness of the townspeople and the tumultuous love between Max and her girlfriend, so that the choice is no longer just a casual assumption or concept, but rather linked to the faces and memories of the characters involved.

String structure does not offer much freedom for people to interact on either story level or discord level. But it is unarguable IDN, as the players have 'transformed' into the screen and lived in the story world, which is enough to differentiate itself from the traditional narrative. Because the story and discourse do not change much in the string structure narratives, games have a lot of room for all sorts of interaction. This structure can be seen in many video games that emphasise gameplay. This structure also benefits games with complex stories like *Life is Strange* and Alan Wake 2 (2023, Remedy Entertainment). Max in *Life is Strange* can rewind time. The protagonist in *Alan Wake 2* is stuck in a place outside reality where no concept of time exists. The string conveys complex story content in a clear and straightforward manner. The fixed event positions offer a steady skeleton for the narration, especially in situations involving gameplay/environment exploration. The story unfolds in a coherent way for the player to follow.

2.2.2 Pool structure

The pool consists of a collection of event units (see Fig. 2-5). Each event unit can last from minutes to hours long, and there tends not to be a mandatory order for players/navigators to go through them. Typically, the story units within a pool structure do not contradict each other; for instance, a character who is alive in one quest will not suddenly be deceased in another. As a result, all the story units within the pool coexist within a unified world. The pool structure type can be commonly seen in video games, where the players can choose to go through the units in any order they like. In games with expansive worlds and abundant content (*Horizon* series, 2017-2023; *Death Stranding*, 2019; *Cyberpunk 2077*, 2020),

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players are presented with numerous side quests to explore and engage with. These side quests, varying in duration from mere minutes to hours, are usually independent of each other. They can be regarded as individual story units with different lengths. In *Death Stranding*, players control avatar Sam Bridges, a courier navigating a post-apocalyptic world where major cities have lost communication and transportation, resulting in isolation. Sam's role serves as a vital connection between isolated communities and the outside world. In the Director's Cut version of the game released in 2021, players are tasked with delivering over 600 cargoes, with 85 of them being mandatory and directly related to the main plot. The remaining cargo deliveries are optional and not required to progress through the main storyline. Among the option cargo delivery quests, players encounter a diverse array of items ranging from daily essentials (pizza, beer, medicine) to weather data, antique artefacts, precious pre-apocalypse photographs, and even newlyweds' dinnerware. Order #397 is a delivery request from an elderly man known as the First Prepper, requiring a Medication Collection. The First Prepper is a reclusive person who relies on these special deliveries for survival. Situated in a remote and challenging location, reaching him poses significant obstacles. Additionally, the First Prepper's demeanour may not be the most welcoming, and the rewards for completing his deliveries are minimal. However, the gravity of the situation lies in the fact that without the medication, the First Prepper's life is at stake. Despite the lack of tangible rewards and no penalties for skipping this delivery, players may undertake it out of altruism and a sense of human decency. The collection of these small story units constructs a rich and multidimensional worldview.
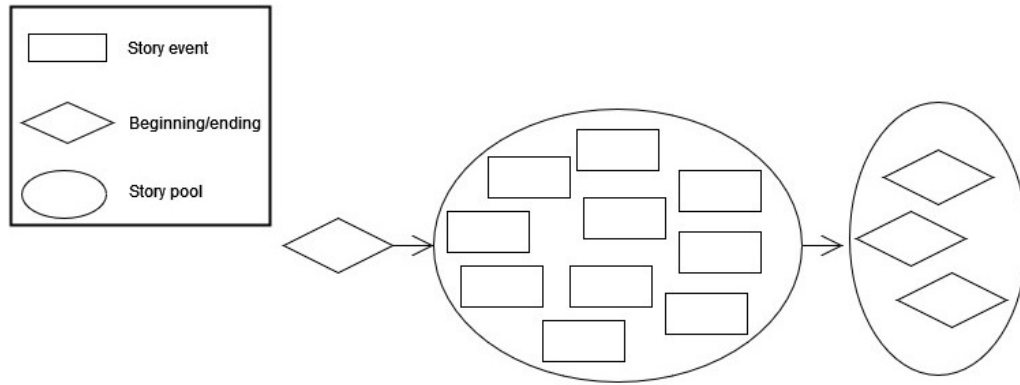
Figure 2-5 Pool structure

With the side quests structured as a pool of options and the main quests following a fixed sequence, the narrative framework can be conceptualised as a hybrid of pool and string structure. This structure style, prevalent in game narratives, combines a main story discourse with an unchanging order and side quests that can be selected or ignored in any order. The main storyline provides major story events and ensures the integrity of the overarching narrative, while side quests offer flexibility and rich details. Restrictions on accessing certain story units can be implemented to differentiate stages. These restrictions may include location-based locks, where stories and quests are only available upon entering specific cities, or less overt requirements, such as triggering quests when a character reaches a certain level of friendship. Additionally, prerequisites for accessing certain quests are often tied to the progression of the main questline, with some quests unlocking only after reaching certain chapters or defeating specific bosses.

In pool structure, the story units can also manifest as video clips, as exemplified in games such as *Her Story* (2015)*, Telling Lies* (2019), and *Immortality* (2022) by Sam Barlow. These games revolve around detective

themes. The overarching objective is akin to assembling a jigsaw puzzle: players

piece together the fragments of the discourse, striving to uncover the truth behind

the events depicted. In *Telling Lies*, among the options available for players to

choose from, there are 169 pieces of prerecorded video clips. Completing a single

playthrough of the entire game typically takes approximately 4 hours. To

thoroughly explore and uncover all the details within the narrative, players may

spend around 10 hours[5] delving into the pool of story units and putting the whole

picture together. The story is about the death of an FBI agent David. The game

imitates a desktop, and the player needs to explore the documents through

different files. The mission is to investigate the mysterious death of David. The

player will find instructions as a PDF document on the desktop, telling them to

open the special search engine. Instead of webpages or texts, the search engine

results are video clips where the recorded people's dialogue contains the

keywords that you just put in. When the player types any word, for example,

'love', the search engine will present the videos where the word 'love' was

spoken. The video clips are material collected by the FBI, mostly collected from

recorded video calls and footage from secret cameras. The story in the video clips

starts with the main character, David, an FBI agent, beginning a new case.

(Although the discourse might not start from the very beginning. The order of the

video clips depends on the players' input). David is about to go undercover and

join an activist group to stop their protesting plans against an energy company. In

the video clips, the people who interact with David include his wife, daughter,

boss, an activist young woman, and a sex cam performer. David has four personas

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[5] Data from https://howlongtobeat.com/game/68273
The website aggregates data from user-submitted playthrough times, offering insights
into the average duration of various games.

in these video clips. He is a caring but busy husband, a rakish employee, a sweet boyfriend, and a grumpy customer. He changes his behaviour depending on who he is talking to. There are three different stories that go side by side: domestic drama, spy and seducer, and obsessive drama. In the pool structure type of games, the players change the order of the story events. Especially in *Telling Lies*, when the player finishes uncovering all the puzzle pieces and establishes the full picture, the story is rather linear. Using video clips as the main material to interact with (put in keywords, get respective video clips) is not a common method. The player cannot explore the world in a 3D space, and they are not the protagonist, not even an active character inside the story. The player's avatar has minimum information: an investigator trying to understand what happened to David. This approach offers players a unique experience, as they do not assume the role of a predefined character with a specific background (Wood, 2017). Instead, they embody a persona close to themselves, driven solely by curiosity to uncover the truth, devoid of any vested interests or attachments. In a broader context, when media allows for the presentation of items in a list with the freedom for individuals to select any order, it is often referred to as a "database," and the pool structure in IDN falls under this category. Databases offer a view of the world that is characterised by disorder, whereas traditional narratives establish a cause-and-effect trajectory of events, presenting a more structured perspective (Manovich, 1999). Manovich also suggests that 'every filmmaker engages with the database-narrative problem' during the filmmaking process, as they work with raw, unorganised material that needs to be selected and arranged into a discourse structure. The pool structure mirrors the natural experience of how people perceive the world, which often appears without a clear order or instruction. This

narrative format offers a distinctive storytelling style that reflects the complexities and nuances of real-life experiences.

From a production standpoint, *Telling Lies* closely resembles a film, lacking traditional gameplay elements like combat or the embodiment of a specific playable character. The acting, cinematography, and overall filming process align closely with the standards of the filmmaking industry. However, for those accustomed to consuming stories primarily through television, the requirement to "type keywords" to uncover additional video clips presents a barrier to entry. Engaging with the story using a television remote or mobile device without a physical keyboard can be challenging. In 2023, with the release of *Immortality* by Sam Barlow, a game featuring a similar pool structure, the interaction method was altered to emphasise tapping on objects or character faces to reveal relevant videos instead of typing words. This adjustment made it easier for people to navigate the experience, particularly on platforms more accustomed to traditional video viewing. Immortality also became available on Netflix, but the pool structure's required interface couldn't be replicated within Netflix's own software. As a result, Netflix users will have to download the game's separate app, whose size is 12 GB. It poses a significant barrier to seamless user experience, especially considering that typical Netflix shows require only 6 hours per GB of storage[6]. Thus far, there hasn't been a seamless solution for transitioning pool structure narratives to television formats.

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[6] https://help.netflix.com/en/node/87

2.2.3 Branching structure

In the pool structure type, the navigators/players are relatively free to go through the events in their preferred order. By contrast, in a branching structure narrative type, the discourse remains rather stable, as the events' positions are fixed on threads. The interaction happens at the nodes, where the players/navigators are offered options, and the respective story events are presented based on the players/navigators' choices. Another trait of the branching structure type is that the parallel branches tend to conflict with each other, which is different from string and pool structure. The options at the nodes tend to be mutually exclusive: obey or disobey; take the pill or flush it away, etc. In this way, IDNs generate alternative universes where the protagonist can enter different life paths. This structure type lets the interactivity during the storytelling reach the *story* level, whilst the pool structure works more with the *discourse*. The interaction in pool structure is mainly about rearranging the sequence of event units. *Telling Lies* can be reformed into a linear film, but with a branching structure, it would make a paradoxical story. The protagonist would first go north, and then the time would rewind to a few minutes earlier, meaning they are back to the beginning as if nothing has happened and go south this time. The alternative branches add story versions, which differentiates it from the pool structure. With branching structure, interactive films and video games create multiple possibilities for the characters. In *Late Shift* (2016, interactive film), *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2018, interactive film), and *Detroit: Become Human* (2018, video game), navigators/players can affect the characters' fate and even their personalities.
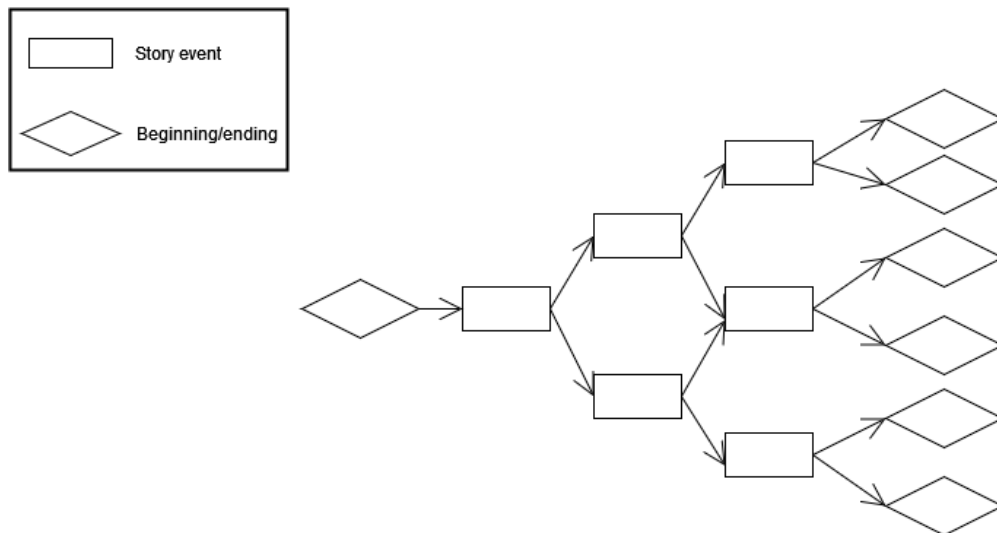
Figure 2-6 Branching structure

In branching structure, the interactivity on the *story* level offers alternative life for the characters. In non-interactive media, as much as the character can express their will to challenge their fate, voluntarily pay the cost, and face the unforeseeable risk - their fates have been fixed at the final, accepted draft. This is not to say that the characters in interactive media can pick infinite versions for their endings, but at least their fates are not totally decided until the navigator makes the decision. Branching structure also offer more discourse space, which carries more information to build a more detailed story. The information can be delivered in various branches. In *Late Shift*, there are background settings about the cruel gangsters who have corrupted some police officers. This information is only delivered in certain branches. If the navigator chooses to hide from everyone, including the police, the plot will lead in a relatively peaceful direction. The protagonist will not end up in the police station and get transferred to the gangsters by the police. He will also avoid being tortured by the gangsters. The parallel branches let the navigator see the different possibilities of the story, and they also have room to fit in details like the above without slowing down the narrating pace. On the other hand, it would also add work for the creators, as they

have to fill in the branches with more information. It might lead to a longer creation period for interactive films than the non-interactive ones.

In a branching structure, questions are posed at decision-making nodes, often in binary form. For instance, in *Late Shift*, there is a question of whether to ask for help from the police or not. Each choice, yes or no, leads to different outcomes. There are no inherently right or wrong events. However, the chosen choice is perceived as the real outcome, while the unchosen one represents an 'if I had...' plotline. Here are terms that introduced in this project to describe the position and function of story units within the branching structure.

Branch: A branch denotes an individual story unit that diverges from a node based on a specific decision or action taken by the characters. In *Late Shift*, if the protagonist Matt chooses to ask for help from the police, he will find himself in trouble with corrupt law enforcement officers. This is a branch. If Matt decides to hide from the police, he experiences a relatively peaceful night, albeit still being chased by gangsters, with less risk of facing severe torture.

Stratum: The term 'stratum' refers to the collective branches that form a layer of narrative juxtaposition. This term is used to analyse events in the story that place characters in similar situations after making different choices. By examining the contrast between these branches, analysts can explore how choices influence subsequent events and character development.

Vine: A 'vine' refers to a sequence of story units that form a complete narrative discourse, typically known as a "playthrough" in video game terms. A vine is a recognised, finished discourse, even though there may be other alternative story units available that are unused.

In branching structure narratives, the critiques and appreciation reviews work on the narrative arc within a vine, examining the protagonist's life changes and unfolding events; they can also explore the disparities between various vines. The alternative plotlines allow characters to experience different lives and developments, showcasing diverse facets of their personalities. In *Detroit*, we can see that the protagonist, Connor (robot), has different relationships with Hank (human police officer). In different vines, Connor can become friends with Hank or kill Hank during combat. In the friendly approach, Hank displays a nicer demeanour and shares personal details with Connor. In another vine, Connor obeys orders and suppresses all emotions. In this vine, there is a possibility for Hank to lose hope in humanity and kill himself during a Russian roulette game. Each vine offers unique details and information that cannot be fully revealed within a single playthrough due to the characters' different positions and choices. The players will not see how Hank acts when he fully trusts Connor in the vine where Connor acts emotionlessly, and they will not witness Hank's despair in the vine where Hank and Connor have a deep bond. At the end of the game, the company (Cyberlife), which creates android robots, attempts to manipulate Connor, using him as a pawn in their schemes. In the vines where Connor has friends who are also leaders within the revolutionaries, he is coerced by Cyberlife into assassinating the leader. Subsequently, players engage in a brief gameplay segment where Connor seeks to locate a backdoor in his programming to resist the company's control. If successful, he regains his agency and defiantly puts back his gun at the last moment. Alternatively, in the vines where Connor is the sole leader of the revolution (other characters have died in the earlier chapters), he will also hear from Cyberlife when he is giving a speech to his kind. Cyberlife states that

the revolution's organisation is now under their control because they can control Connor anytime. Upon successfully finding the backdoor, Connor, after a brief internal struggle, ultimately chooses to take his own life. The unexpected conversation with Cyberlife occurs during a gathering of androids, where they assemble to celebrate their wakening and hear their leader assert their fundamental rights and dignity. The alternative events at this stratum make up the contrast: 1) Connor puts down his gun, refraining from harming his friends, because he trusts that they will help him fight against Cyberlife's hack. 2) Connor draws his gun and ends his life, recognising that as the sole leader, he cannot trust himself and lacks anyone to monitor his unstable condition. Removing himself from the situation is deemed the safer option. The branches in this stratum deliver different tones: one is hopeful and relieving, and one is self-sacrifice to protect androids' hope (no humans pawns inside the revolutionaries' leadership). Even though contradictory to each other, both branches are believable and contribute to different sides of the story world. In the traditional media, when writers face similar situations, they will have to choose one to be the truth. It is different in IDN with branching structure, where contradictory truth can be allowed in the story in different vines. Within this structure, characters transcend the human experience in reality – there are no alternatives or 'what-if's in the real world.

Branching structure also contributes to character building. Markus, one of the protagonists of *Detroit: Become Human*, an android (robot) fighting to claim his basic rights, leads a revolution in the story. The players will constantly choose how much violence Markus uses in bringing about the revolution. Should he give the order to destroy shops that sell androids, his own kind? Should he and his followers damage everything in the street as a protest? Should he shoot the police

officer? Should he destroy security guards (robots) who get in his way? The player can give different answers. In the end, when the final protest happens, two extreme endings of the many are: they peacefully protest and are accepted by the public, or it results in a massive shooting, and everyone dies. After doing multiple playthroughs, players can make so many choices for Markus, and it leads to a complex image of Markus. In one storyline, he would try his best to save his injured friend. In another, he could simply shoot the friend in the head to prevent him from being captured and leaking information to the police. The different images of Markus create a comparison, showing the different sides of him. Markus is capable of being cruel and showing mercy. The decisions made by the player create a certain image of him in the current vine, and this image is not fixed. When the player is ready to go through another vine, Markus' fate will reset. He will return to that caretaker android in the beginning, capable of doing many things, yet nothing has been decided. The characters in branching structure explore varied paths and venture down the roads which they once contemplated but ultimately diverge from. In this way, interactive media creates a story experience that goes beyond reality. It's not about crafting bizarre or surrealistic images or discourses, but rather about enriching the depicted reality with intricate details and multiple sides of humanity that ordinary media cannot achieve.

      In this section, I analysed the three general IDN structures and their respective narrative specialities and advantages. String structure, with its fixed discourse, is well-suited for complex plots, while interaction enhances embodiment, allowing players to feel connected to the characters and their experiences. Pool structure provides a flexible approach, allowing players/navigators to choose story segments freely and thereby breaking away

from the constraints of traditional, fixed discourse. This offers greater freedom for individuals to engage with the story on their own terms. Branching structure maintains discourse integrity within a vine by controlled arrangement of nodes and branches, while also allowing for changes at the story level. This structure generates 'alternative truths' when characters make different decisions, showcasing their development as they choose to enhance different desires or personality aspects. Branching structure also requires minimal interaction, which is beneficial as it avoids distractions for the navigator.

This project aims to explore the influence of 'alternative truths' on narratives within branching structures. In the upcoming section, I will use the first interactive film on Netflix, *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*, as a case study to investigate its utilisation of branching structure to serve the theme of the film, and how it addresses the alternative realities in the film. Through an examination of the practical application of branching structure in film media, this study will analyse the strengths of *Bandersnatch* and explore potential avenues for further refinement.

2.3 *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*

There have been video games that closely resemble film productions, predominantly utilising pre-recorded videos and offering interactive options only to progress to the next video clip, instead of traditional gameplay mechanics (*Late Shift*, 2018, CtrlMovie and Wales Interactive; *The Complex*, 2020, Wales Interactive; *Five Dates*, 2020, Wales Interactive);
there have also been short interactive films released on a video streaming platform (*Puss in Book: Trapped in an Epic Tale*, 2017, Netflix, 35 min; *Stretch*

Armstrong: The Breakout, 2018, Netflix, 30 min). However, *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* stands out as the first interactive film on a streaming platform to feature a full-length film experience, equipped with smooth and simple interacting method. This makes *Bandersnatch* a benchmark for interactive film. The interactive structure in *Bandersnatch*'s discourse fits the description of branching structure in the earlier section. The decision-making nodes in *Bandersnatch* create parallel plotlines which are mutually exclusive to each other. There are 312 minutes in total of video clips, according to the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC). Navigators need about 90 minutes to get through-the story and reach at least one ending (Strause, 2018); the shortest vine is 40 around minutes (Roettgers, 2018), the official minimum length of a feature film.

While multi-ending and length are offered, the interacting method required to enjoy *Bandersnatch* is kept very simple. To navigate the story when accessed via television, the navigators only need to press three buttons on the television remote: left, right, and confirm/ok/select (depending on the remote). On tablets, smartphones, or computers, the interaction method is touching/clicking the preferred option on the screen or using a mouse/trackpad. The simple methods help navigators avoid splitting the attention to perform interactive actions. At the decision nodes, there are always two options. The option can direct various actions, from what music to listen to what words Stefan (the focalising character) says to his boss. If no choices are made within 10 seconds, the default choice will be picked, and the story will proceed. This kind of interaction method can be seen in all Netflix's interactive films and a few interactive films released on Steam. The story in *Bandersnatch* is set in 1984, about a video game developer, Stefan Butler (Fionn Whitehead), trying to turn an interactive novel into a computer game.

However, as Stefan attempts to focus on his career, obstacles (such as his parents'

secrets, an existential crisis, and a conspiracy) derail his focus. In the film,

Stefan's game will always get rated by critics as a mark of the end of the story.

The results can be 0, 2.5, and 5 out of 5 stars, plus an ending where he could not

get to finish making the game. Each decision-making node generates two

branches (except for one node which generates three branches): some evolve into

separate plotlines, while others quickly merge back into one. The decision-making

nodes, branches, and alternative truths create a maze for both the protagonist and

the navigator. *Bandersnatch* does not provide a branching map. Whether

intentional or not, the lack of guidance contributes to the puzzling tone. The

intricate maze serves the theme of discussing free will and enhance the grim and

unsettling atmosphere that only this specific media can deliver.

Information capacity

Bandersnatch has different themed events for its various story branches. Through

different decisions, the navigator can find various events: Stefan's dad seems to be

involved to a secret government programme, Stefan's childhood trauma (the loss

of mother at a young age), Stefan's doubt on freewill, Stefan's pursuit of a career

in the videogame industry, and his mental health. Overwhelmed by numerous

issues, Stefan barely has time to dedicate to coding for his game. As Elnahla

(2019) concludes, shortly after a few choices on breakfast and music, 'almost

every other decision the viewer has to make affects the storyline drastically,

covering themes of authorial control, government conspiracies, homicide, suicide,

paranoia, madness, fate, free will, and failure/success'. The branching structure

helps bring many elements into the story, condensing over five hours of material

into a single film. The navigator has the option to explore deeper into Stefan's story or simply exit the film after completing one vine. However, some have argued that the film's structural design causes problems for the navigators. Roth and Koenitz (2019) state that having many parallel storylines bears the risk of harming the impact of each single one. As outlined in their report, according to data gathered from their study questionnaire, participants noted that 'After three or so different endings I thought I finished the story enough times. Playing over and over just to see different endings makes one specific storyline less unique...'. While the writers gain more narrating space among the branches, this can also lead to a loss of focus due to the overwhelming abundance of information. Each decision point may branch off into distinct themes such as paranoia, conspiracy, or homicide, which can fragment the coherence of the narrative. What starts as a lengthy, interconnected story can instead become disjointed, breaking into isolated narrative units. Kyle Turner (2019) describes the film '[as] a maze, an unending journey that feels like bumping into dead ends, a series of challenges without guidance'. For example, in different branches, Stefan finds himself yelling at a computer screen, jumping off a balcony, killing his father, and intruding into reality where he fights with his therapist and falls into the film making set of *Bandersnatch*). For these scenes, there is no foreshadowing in the earlier stages and no explanation later. The maze-like structure and even the confusion caused by it contribute to the atmosphere of the story.

The abundance of information and the resulting confusion may be viewed in different ways or considered controversial. However, it undeniably paves the way for a new direction for IF. *Late Shift* revolves around a crime story involving a stolen piece of expensive china with outcomes that vary from who survives and

who not. Similarly, *Kimmy vs. the Reverend* centres on a plot involving a book found in Kimmy's old bag and a hidden underground bunker designed for kidnapping. Kimmy and her friends' main goal is to investigate the bunker. In contrast, *Bandersnatch* explores multiple aspects of its main character, Stefan, while many IF concentrate on a singular incident. Furthermore, it explores deeper into the complexities of character development and thematic exploration. This innovative approach allows for a more nuanced examination of the protagonist's psyche, as opposed to merely resolving a single plot point.

A maze built by nodes and branches

Stefan's colleague Colin Ritman (Will Poulter) tells Stefan, 'You're just a puppet. You are not in control.' The comment ties the scattered events together. Choosing a cereal. Choose music. Choose ways to disclose the meaning of the world. But they do not seem to make a difference. Unlike the stories in *Late Shift*, where there are optimistic branches, the parallel lines in *Bandersnatch* always have a dark tone. The plots consistently culminate in death and failure. Among the six main endings, three involve Stefan murdering his father. One ending depicts Stefan jumping out of a balcony to his death. Another ending reveals that Stefan discovers he is an actor on a film set, breaking the fourth wall by letting the character acknowledge the fictional nature of the story. In yet another ending, Stefan revisits his childhood and decides to accompany his mother on the train that later meets with an accident, resulting in both of their deaths in the past. The suspense built up in the film lacks closure. Was Stefan's father really monitoring Stefan's life and manipulating his memories and traumas, as Stefan suspected? What else does Colin know about this world, and why does he know so much? Is

there a solution to the fact that the characters' free will is usurped by an external force – the navigator of the film? These unresolved elements leave room for speculation and interpretation, enhancing the ambiguous tone of the film. At the film's beginning, Stefan states that his goal is to make a successful game. If the navigator is determined to help Stefan with his video game dream, they will find the only ending where Stefan's game gets a 5-star is the one where he murders his father and chops up the body. Only the most disturbing and violent path leads to the success of his game.

When the navigator has the chance to 'communicate' with Stefan, they have three options: 'Netflix', 'P.A.C.S' (a government conspiracy that his dad is possibly involved in), and an unexplained symbol[7] (Fig. 2-7). In the latter two branches, Stefan will murder his dad. The options here do not directly indicate the consequences. After seeing the symbol possibly referring to 'one plot splits into two', Stefan claims 'I'm not in control' and murders his dad. But who is in control? It cannot be the navigators, as they did not order Stefan to murder. When Stefan is trying to fight against the 'exterior power' and not attack his father, there is a 'back off' option, which serves no effect but quickly loops back to the 'kill dad' branch. The navigator cannot save the tragedy by making choices because a happy ending has never been written and filmed.

Figure 2-7 Bandersnatch (2018)

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[7] The symbol appears in an earlier *Black Mirror* episode, *White Bear*. It can also be explained as a node leads to two branches in branching structure.

The puzzling loops and the loss of meaning has been addressed by Colin in the earlier part of the film. During their acid trip and subsequent spiritual moment, Colin delivers a lengthy speech that appears to be both nonsensical and yet strangely profound:

> *People think there's one reality, but there's loads of*
>
> *them, all snaking off, like roots. And what we do on one path*
>
> *affects what happens on the other paths. Time is a construct.*
>
> *People think you can't go back and change things, but you*
>
> *can… When you make a decision, you think it's you doing it,*
>
> *but it's not. It's the spirit out there that's connected to our*
>
> *world that decides what we do, and we just have to go along*
>
> *for the ride… There's a cosmic flowchart that dictates where*
>
> *you can and where you can't go… how one path ends is*
>
> *immaterial. It's how our decisions along the path affect the*
>
> *whole that matters, do you believe me?*

Colin's words express at least two pieces of information: 1) bad endings are not important as people can go back to do it over again; 2) it acknowledges the alternative truths in other branches. However, the positivity in Colin's idea does not take place in the following plots. Even though Stefan can 'go back and change things', he does not achieve a peaceful life in reality. There is always death and jail. Collin acknowledges that there are choices leading to alternative paths, but he doesn't comment on the significance of the choices. None of the choices matters; Stefan always ends up in jail (if not falling out to a film set or dying as a child with his mother) and has no clear control over his video game project. *Bandersnatch* utilises alternative paths to undermine the protagonist's (and, by

65

extension, the navigators') efforts by leading all paths to failure, lack of freedom, confusion, or a combination of these outcomes. This synergy between theme and interactive media features in *Bandersnatch* cannot be replicated in traditional non-interactive media.

In *Bandersnatch*, the narrative expands in multiple directions, exploring a variety of themes and topics. While this branching structure offers the potential for deep exploration, it is ultimately overshadowed by the central theme: the illusion of choice. This dominant theme may reduce the appeal of the multiple narrative threads, as the player's sense of agency is diminished by the overarching message that their choices are not as impactful as they seem. Kolhoff and Nack (2019) describe the story as having 'arbitrary choices and a lack of meaningful consequences', which they argue may undermine the film's ability to engage its navigator effectively. Roth and Koenitz (2019) also note that in their questionnaire assessing user experiences with *Bandersnatch*, many participants reported a decline in interest due to confusion caused by the looping narrative branches. This disorientation, combined with the difficulty of identifying the 'real' ending, led to frustration for some navigators. This feedback reflects the potential drawbacks of overly intricate interactive structures. The abundance of choices, while it intends to evoke feelings of being lost or powerless as part of the narrative, can instead lead to navigator's frustration.

After the case study of *Bandersnatch*, I aimed to focus on the balance between the complexity and clarity in my own scriptwriting. While the multiplicity of topics present in *Bandersnatch* is retained in my script, I made two major changes when adapting the choices. **First**, one vine should be seen as a finished piece with more vines as supplement. Although *Bandersnatch* creates a

unique maze-like experience, the feeling of 'lost in a maze' only becomes clearer as multiple pessimistic endings have been explored. Just like Colin says, 'how one path ends is immaterial. It's how our decision along the path affects the whole that matters.' While I agree that the collection of branches can create contrasts to enhance narrative power (seeing one vine's happiness turn to despair in another; seeing a good person in one vine become despicable in another), I also believe that a single vine should suffice to convey a traditional sense of thematic experience, unlike the maze-like experience offered by *Bandersnatch* that take collective efforts of vines. **Second**, I choose to enhance the diverged paths, rather than merge them. In my creative writing project, the vines where the protagonist chooses different ideologies will have endings that fit the respective efforts the protagonists have made. Applying this concept to the writing process, this means ensuring that the nodes in branching structure have a tangible impact, with the consequences between cause and effect clearly presented. By doing so, the interactive structure not only allows for multiple narrative directions but also ensures that each choice feels meaningful to the navigator. In IF with branching structure, nodes play a crucial role in shaping the narrative and significantly influence how the audience experiences the film. As the most interactive elements occur at nodes, they not only construct the overall narrative flow but also determine how these decisions drive the story in different directions. The next section continues with a detailed analysis of nodes and branches to assist my narrative goals.

2.4 Nodes and branches

Nodes expand to branches in different ways. Some decisions lead to clear outcomes right away. Some decisions influence the story in a long-term way. In IF, nodes are where most of the interaction happens, if not all. The nodes in interactive films connect branches, forming a unique structure that would otherwise follow a linear, straightforward progression in traditional non-interactive films. The measurements for how the nodes affect the story are important, especially for the writers who need to map out the initial structure of the narratives. During the writing process of my creative component, I constantly faced the questions of where to set the decision nodes, how many nodes to use, and how much the plots would be affected by each node. In this section, I will introduce three scales to describe the basic factors occurring in the branching structure of IDN. To describe these unique traits in branching structure, I suggest three scales to help the designing process: the **width** of the story tree and the corresponding traits (**generativeness** and **promptness**) to each decision.

The **width** of the story tree describes the number of the branches in the same stratum. In a branching structure, the story often starts with a fixed beginning, but after multiple choices are made, more variations will appear. When he discusses the similar structures, Steve Ince (2006) claims that the practicalities make it impossible to create as the number of the branches can rise rapidly. The expanding of the branches brings a challenge to the character-building. When the tree branch has a relatively great width, the characters can have different possible fates for the player/navigator/reader to choose from. For example, if the choices in an interactive story have moral inclinations (in each node, the character can become a bit more noble or vile), the vine of always positive and vine of always

negative will grow apart quickly. After some nodes, there would be two versions of the character at the end of the spectrum, where one is a saint and the other a demon. In video games, dividing a whole story into multiple chapters is a common way to prevent the number of parallel branches from becoming too high, like *Detroit: Become Human*. It takes around 12 hours to complete *Detroit: Become Human*, which could be more if one wants to try more than one vine. The story is divided into thirty-two chapters. It can be hard to keep developing all branches. At the end of each chapter, there are often one to six endings, while each chapter always starts with one beginning, despite the fact that there are variant elements in the previous endings. Despite the various outcomes from previous chapters, these variants don't immediately affect the storyline. In the first chapter, involving the deviant android kidnapping a child, several variations can occur in the late stage: the deviant might shoot Connor, Connor might shoot the deviant, the deviant could fall from the building with the girl, or the sniper could kill the deviant. Connor might die with the little girl, or he might save her but die himself. However, regardless of these variations, in subsequent chapters, Connor always returns because he has memory backups, and whether or not he succeeds in saving the girl does not affect his ability to continue with his tasks. This reflects a common technique in IDN: outcomes are given meaning, but alternatives are occasionally closed off to maintain a focused narrative direction. For interactive films, the strategy can be similar. We can see the branches from early nodes quickly merge back to one, and only the nodes in the later stage lead to more spread plots (Fig. 2-9, 2-10). Handling multiple branches can be challenging, but it is not impossible. The creative writing project aims to utilise the branching

structure's function (alternative truth) sooner by expanding the width of the tree

from the earlier nodes (see more discussion in Chapter 3).
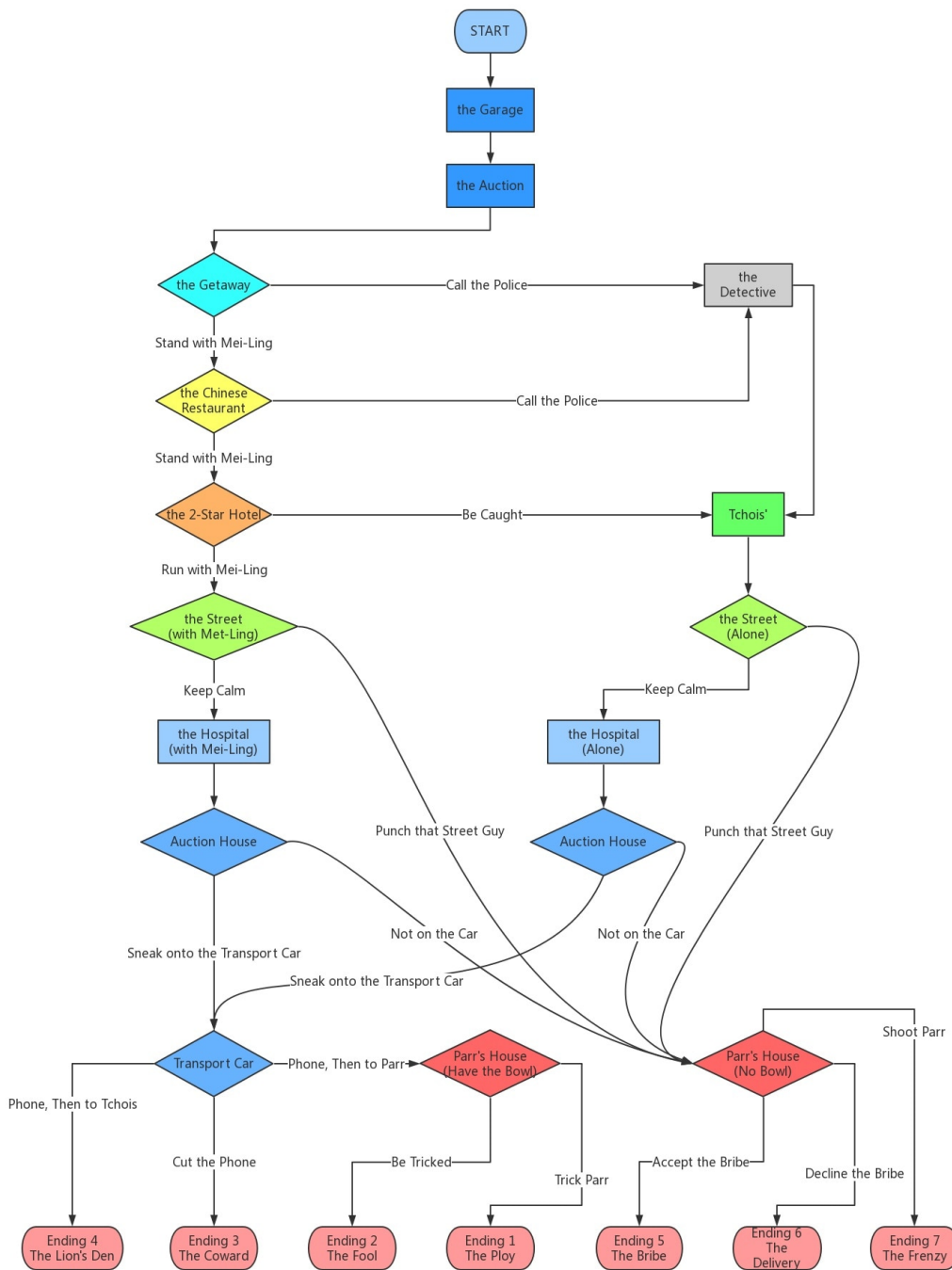
Figure 2-8 Branching map of Late Shift (Koshino, 2017)
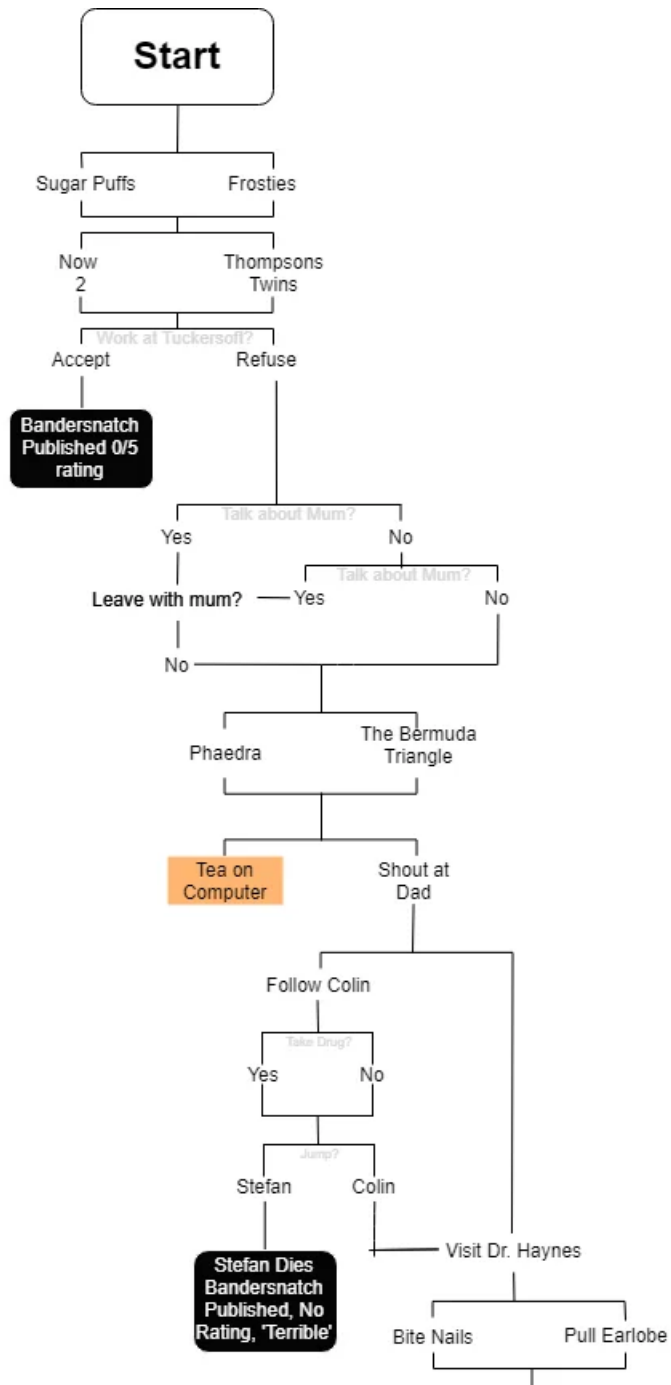
Figure 2-9 Branching map of Bandersnatch (Louisthebomb, 2018)(upper half)

Take Meds | Flush Meds

Bandersnatch Published, No one dead. 0/5 rating

Destroy Computer

Hit Desk

Pick up Family photo | Pick up book

UFD PAX PAC TOY

Leave with mum?

No | Yes

Stephan Dies

Netflix

Stephan refuses and cry's out 'Who's controlling me?'

Tea over Computer

Destroy Computer

Back off dad | Kill dad

Chop up body

Bury Body

On the Second Loop 'Get Rabbit' becomes an option

Netflix

Try to explain | Tell him more

Back off dad | Kill dad

Tea over Computer | Destroy Computer

Try to explain | Stop the conversation

Bury Body | Chop up body

Get Rabbit from Dad

Bandersnatch Released 5/5, Reviewed in the Future

Yes | F**k Yeah!

P.A.C.S | TOY

Leap out of window | Fight her

Finish Game today?

20541 | Any Number

Yes | No

Yes | No

Mike?

Thakur (Dog) visit

The Train Ending

Loops back to 'Follow Colin'

Jail, No bandersnatch

Jail, 2.5/5 Stars

Kitty visits

Where's Colin

Hardest Ending, Roll's Credits

No Idea | He Jumped

Jail, No bandersnatch

Figure 2-10 Branching map of Bandersnatch (Louisthebomb, 2018)(lower half)

The concept of generativeness and promptness proved a helpful framework for further analysis of the width. They describe how nodes and branches connect. 1) **Generativeness**. A generative node will create branches which will not merge back to one. When a choice only changes a few objects in the scene and does not produce more branches further, it can be seen as less generative. In *Late Shift*, there are options not shown in the flowchart above ('stop

her bidding at the auction or not', 'agree to join the robbery or not'). They do not substantially affect the story but only change the presented conversations. In contrast, the option 'call the police or not' leads to two paths, which offer different story events. However, all the endings are still reachable at this point, despite the fact that the plots have branched out. After the robbery, the story can be concluded as two major plotlines (see Fig. 2-8): the cooperate line (on the left) and the disobey line (on the right). When the navigator chooses to believe the robber, May-Ling, they will enter the cooperate line, and vice versa. There are a few events where players can swap to the opposite lines. This way, the film controls the number of branches available and maintains the importance of the choices. The navigators will still encounter choices that affect the stories and multiple endings. In *Bandersnatch,* there is a more drastic option, where the navigator chooses to let the protagonist pick up a book about coding or pick up a family photo. If the navigator chooses the book, the branch that spreads out from this node will eventually lead to some exclusive endings that can only be accessed if one has chosen 'book' and vice versa. In *Detroit*, decisions made for Markus can affect another character (Kara)'s fate. When Markus keeps the revolution more peaceful, at the end of Kara's plotline, the officer at the border will let her get away to Canada even though she is not human. When Markus leads a violent revolution in the earlier chapter, Kara and her friends will be reported by the officer in this scene. There are more ways to get across the border, including getting on a dinghy and stealing someone else's tickets. The variations of her fate contrast with each other. It will create added experiences for players who play the game more than once, but for those who just finish the game once, the story is still complete. The method used in *Late Shift* leaves people certain level of chance to

regret and choose an opposite attitude until a late stage (although not completely free to access all endings). However, this approach also diminishes the significance of the consequences of the choices made. Differently, IDN with more generative nodes will create abundant information and plotlines, allowing the character to venture further into different life directions. Generally, a more generative node is more desirable, but the context of the story should also be taken into account (choosing the flavour of the coffee is less likely to make the protagonist's fate change drastically).

2) **Promptness**. Nodes with high promptness lead to immediate sequence, and the connection is relatively clear. In *Bandersnatch*, after the navigators choose between 'book' and 'family photo', the film responds with different plotlines right away. In the storyline of 'book', the protagonist gets into an argument with his computer. In the storyline of 'family photo', he wakes up in the middle of the night and sneaks into his father's study. In the earlier stage of the film, there is a node where the navigator needs to decide whether the protagonist should accept the offer to work in the video game company or not. If one chooses 'yes', it leads directly to an anticlimactic ending where the protagonist's dream fails, and the story stops without any further actions. Choosing 'no', on the other hand, leads us to the rest of the film. This is another scenario of high promptness, where one of the options leads the navigators to an ending right away. In some video games (*Until Dawn*, 2015; *Detroit*, 2018), there is a scale/meter, 'relationship stat', which is influenced by the players' choices. The relationship stat is a low promptness method to unfold the story. To have a good/bad relationship with some characters, the players often need to keep choosing certain options that please/displease the characters in a series of nodes. Whether an option will raise

or reduce the stat is often unmarked, but there are always clues in the previous plots. In *Detroit: Become Human*, when the players have made enough sympathetic options towards other androids as Connor, Hank will believe that Connor has a 'soul' like a human. In this branch, Hank will not shoot Connor. If the hidden friendship stats between Hank and Connor are not enough, Hank will shoot at this scene. Small decisions previous to this scene together decide Hank's action in this scene. Often, players can see a symbol indicate the friendship between characters rise or drop when they make a decision, but they do not know when the stat will affect the plot and how. In video games, players are used to the complexity of the world and numerous stat systems (character skill stat, weapon stat, charisma stat, etc.). There are also quest records that help players keep track of the events. Conversely, the medium of film maintains a continuous flow. In contrast to video games, where pausing and accessing a menu to review the current status is commonplace, films do not afford such breaks and lack a menu interface for reference. For navigators to interactive film, at least at this stage, nodes that delay the consequences may cause confusion. However, when considering the context of the story, it's not always the case that significant consequences will immediately follow a decision being made. Therefore, after a node with less promptness, some brief cue that indicates the direction of this branch might help the navigator comprehend the causality.

Generativeness and promptness measure the effect of each decision-making node, offering a clear scale to examine the way plots unfold from the nodes. The width is to describe the branches in the discourse in general. The concept width offers a view of the horizontal contrasts among the branches. The defined terms and language assist me in maintaining logical thinking during the

writing process. The design of my creative writing practice (*Author's Note*) revolves around three key factors, with an emphasis on practical application in specific situations: '*considering the pace of the discourse and the content of the story, is this suitable to insert a decision-making node, therefore splitting the plotline into two?*', '*what alternative plotlines can be taking place from this node?*', and '*how will the character's decision make an impact (in what way, how fast shall we see the outcome, how do the alternative plotlines reflect on the character's personalities)?*' After each node, the narrative branches into sequences of events, temporarily returning to a more traditional linear structure, but that does not mean the consequence is no longer affected by the choice. As analysed in this section, the nodes need promptness and generativeness to maintain clarity and complexity. The way branches are generated, placed, and influenced by character choices decide how the navigator experiences the story. Identifying and refining the qualities of nodes plays a critical role in the writing process.

2.5 Conclusion

The video game industry is often viewed as mature, yet the theory around game narratives continues to evolve. The existing theoretical frameworks face constant challenges for both analysis and creation, such as applying models from other fields without necessary adaptations, using conventions that do not align with the design vision, and facing the vagueness of categories (Koenitz and Eladhari, 2023). These challenges will likely persist when translating the narrative experiences of video games into IF. As I have discussed in Chapter 1, while IF and games share certain similarities, they ultimately have different narrative goals and

target audiences, requiring tailored approaches. Therefore, it is important to examine theories for the specific purpose of this project, which is to explore the narrative potential of IF.

In section 2.2, I discuss three common structure types in IDN from a purely narrative perspective, minimising the influence of gameplay and competitive elements. This analysis serves as the foundation for further examination of interactive films, offering valuable insights into their narrative construction and interactive mechanics. I focus on the branching structure, establishing key terms like branches, vines and stratum for accurate analysis in the creative writing and reflecting section. Additionally, I identify the comparison among the vines as the narrative potential to explore within this project. The existence of multiple 'truths' and distinct character development is a unique feature of this medium, specifically enabled by the branching narrative structure. This structure allows for diverse outcomes and alternative character arcs that are dependent on the player's choices, which can only be fully realised through this interactive format. By offering various paths and endings, it not only deepens character complexity but also provides extra perspectives, something traditional linear narratives cannot easily replicate.

In section 2.3, I present *Bandersnatch* as a case study, analysing information capacity and node-theme collaboration in *Bandersnatch*. The case study provides insights that inspired my work, allowing me to identify areas for improvement and apply these findings to my own project. First, in my creative writing piece, one vine would be seen as a compete work, with alternative paths as supplement. Second, I aim to enhance the diverged paths in the branching structure.

Section 2.4 investigates the importance of nodes in branching structure, which play a crucial role in both controlling the broader scope of an interactive film and influencing its finer details. In IF, the focus is placed on the nodes as are where the most interaction happens. To measure the effectiveness of interaction in these films, three key factors can be considered. **Generativeness** measures the impact of the nodes. This refers to how much the choices made at the nodes influence the subsequent sequences of events. **Promptness** affects the clarity of Cause and Effect. This measures how effectively the film shows the connection between a decision and its outcomes. **Width** reflects the overall contribution of nodes and vines. This evaluates how much the alternative storylines contribute to the narrative. The strength of the comparison among the alternative plotlines depends on how wide the branching tree is.

This analytical approach enables us to identify strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for improvement, ultimately enhancing the quality of interactive storytelling in the evolving media landscape. After discussing the structure of IDN and their adaptability to suit interactive film, as well as exploring the measures of assessing the structure, the next step is to apply the knowledge to practice writing. In the following chapter, I will use this theoretical framework in the scriptwriting process, aiming to utilise the branching structure's expanded narrative space. The goal is to present storylines that unfold in distinct ways, highlighting the complexity of the characters. At the same time, I will focus on maintaining a balance between clarity and complexity to ensure the narrative remains coherent and engaging across its multiple paths.

3. Design of the Practice Writing

This chapter provides an analysis of the practice-based writing process, including both explanation and reflection. The primary objective is to apply the theoretical concepts discussed in Chapter 2 to practical writing, thereby demonstrating their utility beyond theoretical discourse. Section 3.1 discusses the preparation and prior writing experiments conducted before the completion of the final script. Section 3.2 explains the fundamental writing tools and reading guides essential for the creative writing piece. Section 3.3 discusses the structural design, including major and minor nodes; it also introduces a newly developed character type (Scribe), which serves an important role in the creative writing component. Finally, Section 3.4 reflects on the writing materials in terms of its two unique traits: the vines and the endings.

3.1 Introduction

My creative writing practice started from several preliminary writing experiments that are not included in this thesis. Although these initial experiments did not become part of the main project, they were instrumental in guiding the initial research direction. One of the writing exercises, *The Choice*, is set in a small Chinese town. The story starts with a 'murder' committed by a family member of Lis. The whole family gathers in the old house, forming a family court and deciding how to deal with the husband (Zhao Li), who claims that he has accidentally caused his wife's death. Through different testimonies, we gradually find out that people have completely different views on the husband. Some relatives believe he is a good man and husband. Some suspect he is a cheater. Some even accuse him of being an abuser. At the end of the story, depending on the materials that the navigator has collected, the family court will either report

the wife's suspicious death to the police or convince the police that the death of the wife was an accident. The narrative method is similar to the method used in *Her Story* and *Telling lies*: listing out the evidence and letting the navigator decide what the truth is for them. One of the major differences between *The Choice* and *Telling Lies,* however, is the use of the branching structure instead of the pool structure. As explained before, the branching structure will create parallel plotlines. The navigator follows one vine for it to be what truly has happened, whilst the other vines become merely a 'what-if' hypothesis. Another unique feature of *The Choice* is its greater emphasis on subjective perspectives of events, including personal memories, in contrast to *Telling Lies*'s approach, which utilises video recordings to depict the events. The goal was to build a story resembling *Rashomon* (Kurosawa, 1950) with contradictory interpretations of a tragic event: the more one navigates the different versions of testimony, the less certain one feels about their judgment. The testimonies regarding the crime and the suspect from various family members cover a significant timespan, as individuals recount their memories to inform the navigator about Zhao Li. These testimonies span various locations and events, offering differing perspectives on the same individual based on the relationships and interactions with the respective Zhao. The navigator will receive both accidental and intentional contradictory information (due to lying, biased perspectives, miscommunication and bad memories). The husband's identity is thus reconstructed from the collective memories of others, resulting in diverse interpretations of his actions. Consequently, the composite image of him as perceived by others may exceed the image which he has of himself.

The first insight gained during the writing experiment was the necessity for descriptive terms to accurately characterise the features of branching structure, which led me to identify the three traits: generativeness, promptness, and width (see Chapter 2.4). Specific questions that never arose during the writing of traditional stories continually emerged: what kind of branches will this decision node generate? How soon can we see the consequences, immediately, after a few dialogues, or after a few events? (An impactful decision is often desirable, but the consequences cannot always play out at the same moment. If the outcome is not prompt enough, there will be a risk of an unclear connection between the cause and effect around the node.) Should the branches return to one? How many events and what lengths of timespan should be put between two nodes? There's no single guidebook or universal solution for storytelling choices, as each branch/node has its unique context and demands. The specific questions encountered during the practice prompted further exploration of the branching structure (see next section) and led to the identification of the three traits discussed in Chapter 2. The terms serve a dual purpose: they provide practical guidelines for writers aiming to navigate and construct narratives within this genre, and they offer critics a robust framework for evaluating and interpreting these works. By establishing a clear and nuanced vocabulary, we can enhance the precision and depth of both the creative and analytical processes, thereby fostering a more comprehensive understanding of the genre's unique characteristics and potential.

The test writing has identified certain limitations of the structure within the context of my study, though these may vary in different scenarios. There is an abundance of materials sourced from memories and opinions. It imbues the narrative with a tone akin to subjective idealism, a philosophical view that

prioritises the mind over material objects. It holds that while individuals experience material things, their existence depends on the perceiving mind and is thus nothing more than a perception. In my earlier story, this concept is reflected through multiple perspectives, leading to the existence of multiple 'truths', each shaped by the perception of different characters. This framework emphasises that what is considered 'real' can vary according to each individual's subjective experience. In this experimental writing, the focus of the story gradually turned to depict the character Zhao Li and left the original goal (solving the case) to the side. In this fictional world devoid of objective evidence, especially the security cameras. The witnesses and persons involved are also unreliable as they have their own interests. Each action in the past ('Did he yell at his children at that party?') became a debatable opinion instead of a fact. The story pushes personal perspectives to the extreme by letting the navigator choose which witness to believe. The more you listen to one character's version of the truth, the more prone you are to take their side. There are also characters who insist on one thing in one vine and change their testimony in another. While this design is feasible and thematically intriguing, it is against the balance between clarity and complexity, which is the focus of this research. Due to the story's theme of lying and subjective views of reality, ambiguity becomes unavoidable. This does not imply that a 'lying' theme can't work within a branching structure, but at the current stage of interactive film development—where both creators and navigators are still familiarising themselves with the medium's capabilities—clarity should take precedence. Prioritising a more straightforward narrative approach would help guide people through the complexities of the branching structure more effectively.

With the support of the theoretical analysis from earlier chapters, I have shifted the theme of my creative writing component from one centred on family dynamics and memories in a rural village in China to one focused on whistleblowing in a modern UK city. This shift in setting and theme introduces concepts more familiar to a Western audience, including the tension between individualism and authority figures, the moral conflict between altruism and self-interest, and the question of wealth distribution in society. As a result, the narrative moves away from introspective questions like 'What is real?' towards more concrete concerns such as 'What is happening?' The focus is now on public actions and their broader societal implications, rather than personal or family disputes. The writing experiment provided practical experience and prompted a change in direction, ultimately leading to the final work, *Author's Note*. The story centres on a company that discovers its product is toxic and decides to hide this information from the public. Olivia, an employee who uncovers the secret, faces a difficult choice: either become a whistleblower - risking her career and financial stability for an uncertain period - or remain silent. Her friend Josh, a journalist, takes an aggressive stance on the case. Elaine, an author without a direct interest in the matter, witnesses and documents the entire saga. The film's first act revolves around whether to expose the secret, while the second act explores the consequences of the choices. The final script took a step closer to realism compared to the initial writing experiment, aiming to explore the function of parallel plotlines in a branching system with refined nodal systems.

The creative writing component includes eight vines; each can be viewed as a complete film. The sample is presented in two formats: detailed outlines and selected sections as fully developed scripts. All eight vines are presented in

detailed outlines. Among the eight vines, four vines (each consisting of four branches) and one extra branch are also provided as completed scripts. This approach was taken instead of producing the version of a complete IF script, which would exceed both the time and word count limitations of this project. The goal of the project emphasises on the structure of IF, especially its clarity and complexity. The outline highlights the fundamental architecture and storytelling strategy, providing a concentrated view of how the story is constructed and unfolds, how the choices unfold to different paths, and how the characters lean to their different personal traits. After that, the finished script offers a clear representation of specific characters and events.

3.2 Writing tools

1) Software use

I chose to write the script using Word instead of Twine (or other common writing tools for IDN) for several reasons. First, the text itself does not require complex interactions, making Word a more suitable and efficient tool for this task. Second, the script is intended to be printed, especially if it is adapted into a film. Therefore, using Word, which is designed for creating and formatting documents, ensures ease of printing and formatting consistency. Each section can be quickly accessed from the navigation panel, which is available under the 'View' menu.

2) Node type and colour coding

In IDN, when describing a choice that generates multiple outcomes, a key question would be 'does this choice affect the ending?'. The choice in IDN will

always affect the game/film to some degree, even if it is string structure – in that case, a decision will normally cause differences on merely some dialogues.

As discussed in the previous chapter, from a theoretical standpoint, the decision nodes will be more effective if they have higher generativeness and promptness. These theoretical considerations serve as guidelines for the practical writing. To be more specific and straightforward in the node-designing process, I divided the nodes in my script into two types: major nodes and minor nodes. **Minor nodes**, as described above, affect the story to the minimum degree and do not bear branching responsibilities. They can be seen as decoys to maintain interactivity. The outcome of a choice made in minor node will immediately play out; the two outcomes (mostly they only have differences on a few dialogues) after a minor node will merge into one quickly. **Major nodes** generate alternative branches, each containing a chain of sequences of significant events (events that change the plots and/or affect the characters). This kind of node makes an impact on the narrative's direction.

The script design focuses on the examination of the major nodes' functions and the way they are presented. The major nodes generate and connect all the branches in this script. Each node can lead to two branches, which are assigned to a name format like '0-1-1-2'. Each '-' symbol represents a node, and the number following it represents the decision made at that node. Each branch can be quickly accessed using the 'Navigation' panel in Microsoft Word. It is worth noting that although this project focuses on the script, I envision the final film production incorporating visual indicators to mark significant choices. For example, a butterfly mark was used in *Until Dawn* to highlight impactful decisions. This

approach enhances clarity, ensuring that the navigators understand when their choices carry meaningful consequences.

On the other hand, the minor nodes in this script do not alter the storyline and are purposefully designed to remain distinct from the major nodes. In video games, similar decisions are not unusual, as they serve to maintain player engagement and interaction without influencing the main plot. While minor interactions of this kind have been extensively discussed in the context of gaming, their role in IF remains underexplored. This project adheres to the convention of incorporating the non-story-changing type of choices into the narrative framework but does not examine deeply into their dynamics, as such analysis falls outside the project's scope. Importantly, this approach is not intended to diminish or dismiss the value of minor node decisions. Instead, the focus is placed on major nodes, which act as important waypoints that drive structural changes in the narrative.

The minor nodes create only brief diversions in the story, which soon return to the main narrative. These segments are presented with orange-coloured texts to clearly mark their beginnings and ends. Additionally, a special formatting style, distinct from standard scriptwriting conventions, is used to emphasize these diversions (see example below).

(Page 201-2)

Choose:

1) Ask what's going on

ELAINE. What's going on?

OLIVIA. It's something about work.

ELAINE. Anything I can help with?

OLIVIA. I don't think you can. I think I'm fucked.

ELAINE. Ok. You don't want to talk about it. But at least give me a ride?

2) Change the subject

ELAINE. Sure. How's Mia doing?

OLIVIA. She's fine.

ELAINE. Is she still skateboarding?

OLIVIA. Yeah. Not as much as before. Last semester in high school. You know.

Elaine can tell Olivia is really bothered by something.

ELAINE. Look like you're the person facing final year exams. Give me a ride, will you?

3.3 Structure and character design

3.3.1 Major node

In classical narrative structure, only major events form the chain or framework of contingency, while minor events follow a different structural logic (Chatman, 1978). Chatman conceptualises this distinction through kernels and satellites: kernels are the pivotal plot points that drive the story forward, whereas satellites are minor events that can be omitted without disrupting the overall narrative logic. This differentiation between event types can be observed in IDN with branching structure as well. Furthermore, certain key events not only support the sequence and coherence of the story but also actively shape how the narrative unfolds. While studying agency in video games, Roth (2012) introduced the terms local and global to describe the player's perceptions of sense of control. Local agency refers to the player's ability to act within a specific scene and environment, while global agency encompasses the player's influence over the broader narrative, including its progression and ending. It is commonly acknowledged that events hold different hierarchical significance within a narrative. In my project, minor

nodes only produce short-term dialogue variations, whereas major decision nodes are defined as those that generate two branches with significantly different events. What is more, I introduce a further constraint on the conditions that qualify a major node as major: the branches created by the major nodes do not merge back into one later.

In the existing works, it is common to see branches merge back. In the branching maps of *Late Shift* and *Bandersnatch* (see Fig. 2-8, 2-9, 2-10), we can see that the branches keep merging back until the ending stage. In *Late Shift*, in the earlier stage of the story, the navigator must choose between following May or calling the police after a car crash. Calling the police will lead to a series of events involving a mafia run by the Tchois family. However, if the navigator chooses to follow May, they will later be offered another opportunity to call the police, which will then lead to the Tchois branch. The alternative branches do have different details and important information to help solve the case. However, despite diversions in the earlier plot, most endings remain accessible near the conclusion of the story. In other words, the story is what I would call 'forgiving' of choices, as it does not deny access to endings based on earlier choices. The structure can be summarised in the following diagram (see Fig. 3-1). The branch in the middle of stratum 3 can be accessed from either the left or right branch from stratum 2. Even if the navigator has chosen the left branch in stratum 2, they are still able to achieve three out of four branches in stratum 4.
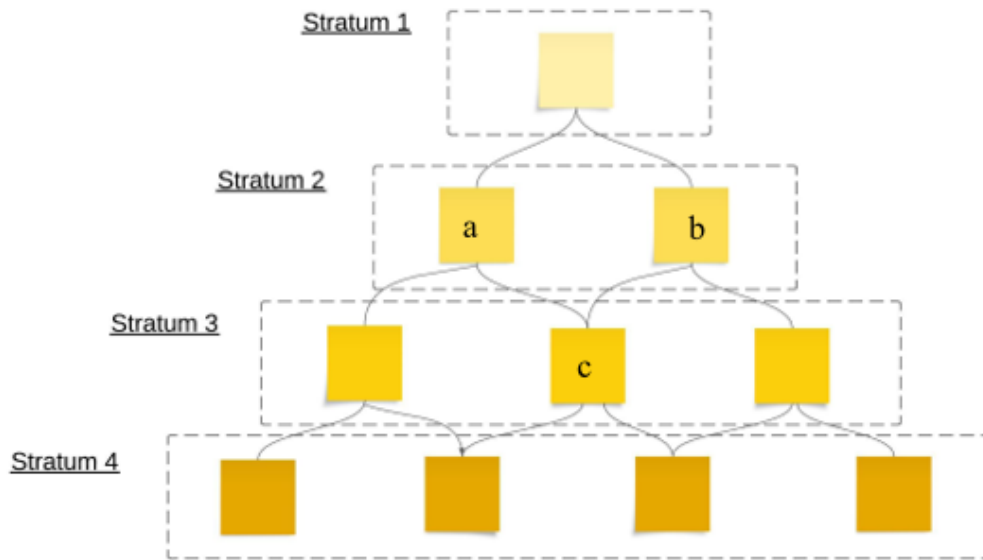
Figure 3-1

A 'forgiving design' approach seen in many IDN, including interactive films. In a branching story, the narrative unfolds in multiple directions, and the total number of possible branch combinations increases exponentially beyond a certain point, which can be described as the 'combinatorial explosion' (Stern, 2008). Such potential requirement of story variations is a common concern (Stern, 2008; Ince, 2006, page 51). From both a budgetary perspective and the workload of the writing team, a high number of alternatives is best avoided. As mentioned in the previous chapter, merging some plotlines is a common strategy for controlling their number. However, through scriptwriting practice, I have identified potential drawbacks to this convention. The standard expectation of merging diverging branches later in the narrative imposes constraints on character development within those branches. Since the branches are designed to converge, the plots cannot feature significant physical or psychological changes or major event disparities. Otherwise, it would lead to inconsistency when the two branches recombine. This limitation undermines the value of alternative plots.

In the early writing stage, following the convention of merging branches, I built the structure based on Figure 3-1 with the common 'forgiving' style of structure. After the node where Olivia decides whether to be the whistleblower or not, there are two branches generated in the second stratum: a) 'Whistle-blowing branch'. Olivia decides to expose the toxic product, and she goes through an effort to steal the report, being mentally prepared for the upcoming challenge. b) 'Self-preserving branch': Olivia backs down and chooses financial stability. Josh keeps on with their old plan without her. The two branches in stratum 2 generate three branches in stratum 3. Branch c will be accessed by both the branches upstream. The problem occurs as branch a and b contain different versions of Olivia. In the *Whistle-blowing branch*, Olivia is working with Josh to push their whistleblowing plan forward. In contrast, in the *Self-preserving branch*, Josh and Olivia drift apart because of Olivia's choice. In one branch, Elaine chooses to accompany Olivia, which leads to her losing the opportunity to hand in her story in time. In another branch, Elaine chooses to stay and work on her project, and the podcast accepts her work later. In the *Whistle-blowing branch*, Olivia will be fired by her company after the news of the toxic paint story is aired, while she still works for Koss in the *Self-preserving branch*. If the branch in the third stratum is accessible to both the *Whistle-blowing* and *Self-preserving* branch, then the story in it will have to be ambiguous enough to not mention any of the conflicting details. Further, branches merging back into the main narrative can render earlier events less meaningful. It is crucial that events are acknowledged when relevant and have a tangible impact on the characters.

Using the plot In *Bandersnatch* as an example of unacknowledged choices, the protagonist Stefan has two choices at one point: either to follow an

acquaintance, Colin, spend time with him, and possibly watch Colin jumping out of the building to his death, or to skip that branch by choosing not to follow Colin. The two routes lead to the same video clip: Stefan does not feel in control and has a conversation with a therapist. In this arrangement, Stefan shows the same level of distress whether he has seen a man dying in front of him or not. However, Stefan is not the type of character who lacks sympathy or shows no emotional turmoil when witnessing people die in front of him. This arrangement merely highlights that the peculiar plot developments are driven by interactive media mechanisms rather than serving the narrative itself, which breaks the immersion. Regardless of whether Colin dies at this point in the story, he will not reappear for the majority of the film. He will only reappear at the very end of the vines, where he has not died. In this way, if the branches merge back, we must be vague or even avoid addressing the fact that characters may have been influenced differently in separate branches.

When the model allows branches (especially the branches with long and impactful events) to merge back, it can retain vertical linearity and make more plots accessible. However, this comes at the expense of further and more specific plot development for each individual choice. In the earlier stage of script writing, after the two options ((a) Olivia becomes the whistle-blower, and (b) Olivia chooses to keep her job), some consequences are unclear to serve the future merging. For example, in the old script, there was a 'second chance' for the navigator to choose to become a whistle-blower after they have gone to the 'keeping job' branch (branch b). As explained and as we see in *Bandersnatch*, merging back and forgiving the navigator's earlier choice is common in existing works. However, if we look into the strict details, 'merging back' to an earlier

option in this case is never logically possible – a period of time has passed. In branch a, Olivia works with Josh to get the lab report. In branch b, she tells Josh to leave her alone. After the two branches merge into one, will Josh be more relieved about having Olivia back, or angrier for her brief betrayal? Or, maybe he will have no reaction at all because, in one branch, Olivia has fought alongside him all the way through.

Olivia steals the lab report from the company in branch a. The operation takes place in a day with special event and a series of accidents.

(Page 242-45)

People in the department sing the Happy Birthday song. Emma looks very happy.

> EMMA
>
> Don't forget to join us in pub after work. First round
> on me!

> MAN 1
>
> Congratulations on the new house.

> EMMA
>
> I can finally live by myself. I can't wait. I'll have
> room for dogs. I always wanted dogs.

Olivia gets a slice of cake and walks to Luke's office. She grimaces when she hears about the dogs.

When passes Katie's desk, Olivia notices Katie's handbag is placed on the floor behind her.

Katie is taking a call.

Olivia approaches her quietly.

> KATIE
>
> No way. She said that? What a sociopath. I love
> it! Remember that time she nicked all the bog rolls
> in the toilets from that pub – yeah, both men and
> women toilets – AFTER they banned her for
> nicking their pint glasses?

Olivia takes a lipstick from Katie's bag and cautiously walks away.

…

Later, Luke leaves his office hurriedly. Olivia sneaks back. The door is not locked. The office has glass wall. But nobody in the open plan office is looking at her direction.

She reaches to the drawers. There is no red notebook there. As she rummages through the desk, footsteps approach. Olivia squats down.

The door opens. Luke stops in front of Olivia.

> LUKE
>
> What else can I help you with?

> OLIVIA
>
> I found this on the floor. Is it… yours?

Olivia stands up, holding the lipstick she steals from Katie's bag. Luke recognises the lipstick and becomes visibly nervous.

> LUKE
>
> Yes. No. I mean, I know who it belongs- may
>
> belongs to. I have seen a few people in my office
>
> today. Could be one of theirs. I'll take it. Thanks.

Luke takes the lipstick. He sits down at his desk.

> LUKE
>
> Ugh. I forgot that I need to get acquainted with this
>
> document. Can you go upstairs to tell them that I'll
>
> be there in 10 minutes? Just a small delay. And, take
>
> this.

Luke gives Olivia a big binder that contains the sample of different colours and patterns for tiles and paints.

INT. MEETING ROOM, UPSTAIRS. CONTINUOUS.

Olivia walks in the room. She puts down the binder.

> OLIVIA
>
> Mr. Chambers will be a bit late. 10 minutes, he said.

MAN 2 in the back whispers to the woman next to him.

> MAN 2

Told you. He wouldn't have read the important document

that has been tagged for 3 weeks.

The woman next to him hands over 5-pound note to Man 2.

Olivia moves the documents a little. The red notebook is under the pile.

People in the meeting room don't pay much attention to Olivia's behaviour. She opens the notebook.

There are doodles that draw colleagues as ugly goblins. Swear words like 'fuck this shit'. The most used pages (softer and more wrinkles) are the ones with ID and passwords.

There is a sign on the wall, 'No Photography'.

There is no one looking. Olivia takes out her phone and films the three pages with account names and passwords.

For branch b, if Olivia changes her mind and decides to work with Josh again. It will be a different day for her to steal the lab report. Two branches will not lead to the same consequential branch. Will Elaine get the Podcast opportunity in both branches? Are we going to use the same video clips for the 'stealing lab report' scene? It will be on a different day, so there is no birthday celebration. And more importantly, will the secretary be sitting on the same seat for Olivia to steal her lipstick?

There are many similar questions in IDN when branches have been merged. They always get away because they are considered inherent traits of the medium. No one questions why the avatar can be repeatedly 'revived' throughout the game. They are killed over and over again, but they always reappear at the spawn or checkpoint as if nothing just happened. In contrast, films operate under a different philosophy, where audiences are encouraged to scrutinise every detail. Consequently, it is essential to be particularly careful with logic for set design, cinematography, and dialogue. Even if certain details are not explicitly stated, it is

crucial to imply that the characters understand what has happened and do not possess two sets of memories due to the branch merging.

   To address this issue, I divide the nodes in my script into two types: major nodes and minor nodes. Major nodes are specifically assigned with the responsibility to push the plots forward towards different directions, displaying the outcomes of the choices that have been made. I have created a different model (figure 3.2) in which the different paths do not entangle with each other. Without the need to be merged back, each branch will be assigned with a clear and specific narrative goal (the outcome of 'choice X' only), instead of trying to show the consequences of two branches at the same time (the outcome of 'choice X' and 'choice Y'). If the navigator chooses to encourage Olivia to take the whistleblowing role (branch 0-1), Olivia will need to find a way to gain the important inside report regarding ChromaGlow to prove her accusations. At the end of this branch, a major node ('Pass the information from a government official to Olivia or not?') leads to two branches. Both involve the use of the lab report Olivia has obtained. Neither of the branches can be accessed if the navigator has chosen to be indifferent to Olivia's problem. When the navigator chooses to not encourage Olivia, Olivia will step back. The plot follows Josh, who tries to find a way to deal with their conscience. At the end of branch 0-2, a major node ('Give Josh the documents or not?') leads to two branches with the context of Josh fighting on his own. The following branches can be reached if the navigator has chosen branch 0-1. When there is no need to arrange the plots to rejoin down the vine, the consequences can be more psychologically plausible and coherent. Characters can be more affected by the events in the previous branches. In different branches, there will be room for deep character development to a

specific direction regarding the early choice. Olivia in branch 0-1-1 shows more

resilience. She has a better relationship with Josh, thanks to the events they have

been through together. In branch 0-2-1, she and Josh barely talk.
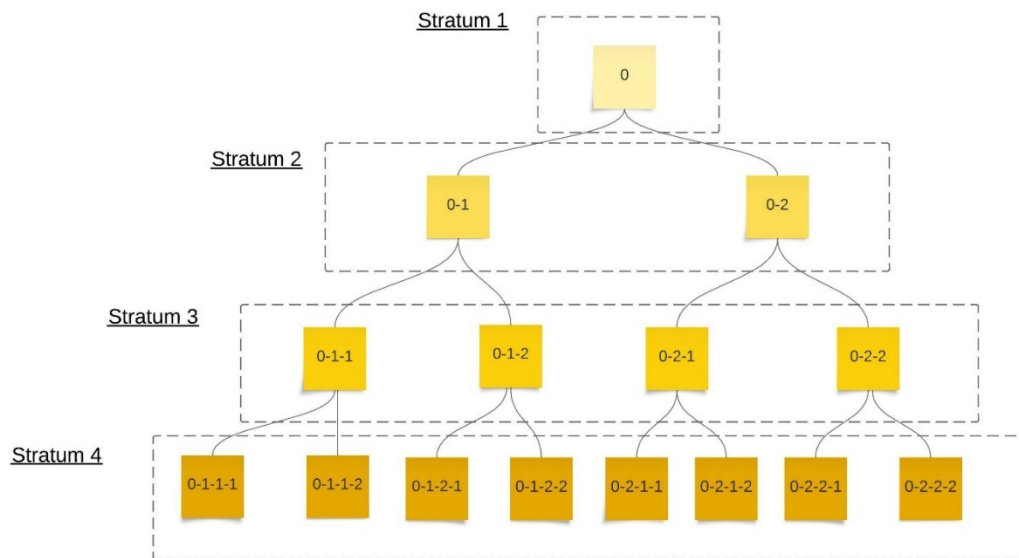
Figure 3-2

In branch 0-1-2, When Murray sends his assistant to negotiate a

compromise, Josh shows his provocative side, knowing they have the lab report as

leverage and that Olivia is prepared to testify.

(Page 292)

OLIVIA (V.O.)

That's why you're more reliable than Josh.

ELAINE

What happened?

OLIVIA (V.O.)

Is the guy named Dylan? I saw him earlier, outside

of the Robin building. Josh told him off. Well, I

didn't stop him doing that anyways.

(Page 302)

DYLAN

Yes. The information regarding the barracks is under the protection of OSA. It would be for the best if the information related to the barrack buildings remain undisclosed.

                    JOSH

A law Thatcher made to shut the public up when they want to talk about things they shouldn't.

                    DYLAN

I see you understand it well. We shouldn't bring Bourlon to the public's attention. It risks national security.

                    JOSH

In what way?

                    DYLAN

We can't say.

                    JOSH

Isn't that convenient?

By contrast, he is more cautious and beaten down in branch 0-2-1. In this vine, without any solid evidence to back up his claims, Josh faces a tough battle just to get anyone to listen.

(Page 342)

Josh signs and picks up the call.

                    JOSH

Hi, boss. I'm sorry. I'm not feeling well. Can I take a sick day today?

Josh hangs up and gets out of the bed. He looks messy but not ill. There are empty bottles piled up in the kitchen and living room. He has toast for his breakfast after feeding his dachshund first. The dog is eager to play, but Josh is not in the mood.

He scrolls through his contact while looking at a sheet. There are a dozen names that has been crossed out.

He receives an email. It's from Laura Omissi: <u>I'm sorry, Josh. Without credible source, we can't…</u>

Josh doesn't open that email. He cross Omissi's name off.

The contrast between these two states of mind is more than just facing different characters. The comparisons are supported by the parallel structure. In branch 0-1-2, Josh has solid evidence and a source, which gives him leverage and an ability to negotiate, or even refuse compromise, with government figures. In branch 0-2-1, however, he lacks this critical support, making him desperate for any audience at all. This narrative structure delivers the juxtaposition of power and powerlessness within the same character, showing how context and resources shape his attitude and mental state. The distinct comparison cannot be achieved if the two branches merge back into one.

To further utilise the alternative plotline nature of branching structure, the branches in *Author's Note* have been guided by opposite sets of values/ideas, creating a counterpoint contrast. The independent branches have room for elaboration on these possibilities. Different ideas lead the characters to various sides of society in stratum 3.

(0-1-1) *Hero*: Elaine does not inform Olivia about the government official Dylan. Olivia proceeds to expose everything. However, people associate her whistleblowing with a failed military operation without solid proof. Olivia experiences cyberbullying, being doxed, and physically attacked to the point of nearly dying before she is finally recognised as the hero for exposing the dark secrets of Koss and revealing massive health risks to the public.

(0-1-2) *Party at Murray's*: Elaine informs Olivia about Dylan. Dylan invites Olivia and her friends to a meeting. Dylan tries to reach a compromise. The extravagant private party held by the higher official's son shows a glimpse of upper-class life, which provokes different feelings on the part of Elaine and her friends.

(0-2-1) *Pawn*: Josh is finally approached by a journalist Rachel after being denied by many news media outlets due to not having a reliable source. Later, it turns out that she is interested in using the information to attack government official Murray and does not care about the case itself. Josh finds out the victims are in a bad financial state, counting on an empty promise of reimbursing money. He tempts to make the news published, even if it means he has to fabricate some 'facts' to get Rachel's help.

(0-2-2) *Revenge*: Josh gets in contact with some former residents/workers who have had close, long-time contact with Koss Group. Getting to know the people who are suffering, Josh becomes more and more aggressive. Later, with a constructor Mathew, he plans to murder Koss Group's CEO Moreau. They succeed in killing Moreau, but they don't plan to stop there. They plan to murder high government official Murray as well.

This project emphasises internal coherence of individual vines. It also aims to enhance the contrasts and distinctions between parallel narratives. These are achieved by adding the narrative impacts of nodal choices and contrast among vines: lengthy non-merging branches. Dividing the film into four stratums, each branch has enough space to provide a relatively complex chain of events. Exploring forward with the values behind the choices made at the major nodes,

these branches stem from options with opposing ideas. They create a symmetrical structure characterised by counterpoint and mutual resonance. With the first three stratums roughly corresponding to the classic three-act structure and the fourth comprising the endings, the pacing adheres to traditional film writing norms.

Compared to the previously discussed work, the structure used in Figure 3.2 exhibits three features: 1) **Complexity**. The quality of the branches and nodes is valued more than the quantity. With the longer branches providing room to develop the chain of effects, each branch has its unique theme, tone, and chain of events. Along with the events, the characters' goals and beliefs shift over time. All of which can only be unpacked in a sufficient narrative space. 2) **Clarity**. The creative writing component has emphasised the design of major nodes and the minor nodes in the early writing stage. With the cause (the node) and effect (the following branch) clearly connected, I aim to direct the navigators' focus towards experiencing the sequence of events as they unfold, rather than trying to untangle a tangled narrative structure. 3) **Coherency**. The creative writing component removes the 'forgiving branching style' even though they have been commonly used in IF and video game narratives. Without the restraint, the parallel branches are allowed to develop separate ways to a bigger degree.

Through the careful balancing of three critical elements, Complexity, clarity, and coherency, the current story structure design has been achieved. In reviewing existing works, it became evident that achieving complexity often comes at the expense of clarity and coherency, and vice versa. The creative writing component of the project has managed to achieve an improved state among the three. The significant events – such as death, vital information, arguments, and challenges to human emotions or morals – are spread among the

100

branches equally. The characters in different vines are affected by what they have chosen and experienced, which lead to various personalities and mental states. The contrast can be observed both vertically (earlier to later character development within the same vine) and horizontally (character personality variations in alternative branches within the same stratum). For further examinations on vine comparisons, see section 3.4.

3.3.2 Minor node

It is common in IDN to encounter mini-interactions that do not alter the story and are included merely for the sake of choice. Choosing the flavour of cereal or the tone in which to speak to characters – these interactions do not affect the overall story but serve to keep players/navigators engaged. This device is a small unit of interaction that doesn't lead to further consequences. Normally they only affect the current dialogues or actions. In *Late Shift*, you can either verbally attack your kidnappers or be obedient, but either way, you will end up becoming one of their crew and being forced to help their heist.

(Page 219-20)

Choose:

1) Pessimism

A car cuts in front of Olivia abruptly, almost colliding with hers. Olivia slams on the brakes. The other car speeds away, leaving her to drive much slower due to the shock of the near miss.

Shortly after, someone honks at her for the slow speed on the highway. Olivia anxiously rummages through the glove compartment and finds a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. She opens the window and smokes.

After a while, she arrives at Elaine's. She throws chewing gum in her mouth and sprays some air freshener in the car and on herself.

2) Anger

A car cuts in front of Olivia abruptly, almost colliding with hers. Olivia slams on the brakes. She notices it's an Audi, although not a particularly flashy model.

OLIVIA. Fucking idiot.

She hits the gas and catches up to the Audi ahead. Olivia lowers the window and throws a cup of half-finished coffee at the Audi. The driver instinctively turns the steering wheel in the opposite direction and hit the brakes, disappearing from her rearview mirror. It was unclear if an accident has occurred.

OLIVIA. Shit.

A while later, Olivia arrives at Elaine's. She sits in the car and searches 'car crash M60' on her phone. The nearest results are from 4 days ago.

She still appeared somewhat apprehensive.

She walks to the door and knocks. Elaine opens the door.

ELAINE. You okay? You don't look so good.

OLIVIA. I almost got in a crash earlier. People these days.

ELAINE. Come in.

In my project, I combine functional dialogue and textual content by having Elaine (as well as the navigator) subjectively fill in details they cannot clearly remember. That is how the minor node is placed. This approach clarifies the nature of the content as supplementary, combining the structure device with the narrative. Additionally, it creates an atmosphere for Elaine to narrate an autobiographical story, aligning with the theme of *Author's Note*.

The minor nodes do not impact the story's progression; the frequency and the number of these nodes can be adjusted relatively freely. Their functions are straightforward. Such repetitive tasks are not essential to discuss in detail for this

project. In a hypothetical filmmaking process, if a filmmaker finds that the interactions in the film are insufficient, the number, location, and frequency of minor nodes can be adjusted. This can involve incorporating additional dialogue, selecting new items, or specifying different expressions.

3.3.3 The agent character: the Scribe

During the creative writing process, I quickly realised that changes in character perspectives, a certain common literary device, are relatively uncommon in IF. The camera tends to follow the protagonist closely from beginning to end, which is seemingly a tradition inherited from video games, where the avatar responds to the player's input (move, interact, talk). As discussed in Chapter 2, this unique and immersive relationship between the player and the character, where the player is perceived as embedded within the agent, renders the limited perspective narrative a natural choice. Especially in video games, most of the time, we only follow the protagonist/avatar. The other characters come to the protagonist to give information about events. Shifting to multiple characters' points of view is a common narrative method in films. In video games, it is not as common to see the camera pointing at an NPC who is in a different space/time and displaying information that cannot be gained by the protagonist. Video games can have multiple points of view, but this is often achieved by having multiple playable characters (*Detroit: Become Human*, and *The Quarry*). However, the perspective remains closely tied to the current character that the player controls, thereby limiting access to information that only the said character can acquire. For instance, in Connor's storyline in *Detroit: Become Human*, players embody Connor and are limited to his immediate experiences, unable to perceive events

occurring even in another room. This approach contrasts with the flexible

information delivery mechanisms in traditional films, where the shot sequence can

seamlessly switch between rooms or even to the perspective of an opponent,

providing the audience with a broader, more dynamic understanding of the

narrative.

The focus on the narrative perspectives of playable characters may be

related to the aim of maintaining player engagement. By primarily following the

viewpoints of these characters, engagement is more likely to be sustained. Studies

indicate that immersion is enhanced through engagement (Brown and Cairns,

2004; Leroy, 2021). The term immersion in video games often refers to the state

where the player becomes so absorbed in the story that they are transported into

the narrative world, temporarily forgetting the real world (Ryan, 1994; Michailidis

et al., 2018). Immersion, often synonymous with the concept of 'flow,' describes a

state characterised as deeply focused, which is associated with enjoyment and

pleasure (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Michailidis et al., 2018). It is logical for video

games to prioritise maintaining player engagement, as this often sustains

immersion.

However, immersion is not limited to gameplay elements such as defeating

enemies or solving problems, nor to environmental exploration (Bowman, 2018).

It also includes narrative immersion: with an empathic process, the player may be

able to adopt the character's thoughts and emotions through an empathic process

of immersion (Gee, 2008). Narrative immersion differs from the ludic, spatial and

sensory types of immersion that are often described in game studies (Bowman,

2018; Tu et al., 2022). Game immersion broadly refers to the flow state where a

player becomes fully absorbed and engaged in the gameplay experience

(Michailidis et al., 2018). For this project, IF leans more toward a 'film' experience than a 'game,' as discussed in Chapter 1. Therefore, we would not necessarily assume or demand such a level of concentrated engagement, even though they are common in traditional games. It seems unnecessary to lock the camera around the controllable character and maintain a singular perspective throughout the film solely to keep the engagement high. The theoretical analysis helps me challenge the convention of a single perspective in IDN. In my creative writing component, I have incorporated multiple perspectives, focusing on narrative immersion rather than ludic immersion.

This focus on narrative immersion creates some challenges to be addressed when using multiple perspectives in IF, especially when there are multiple controllable characters in the same scene. Who are we in the story? In IF with a singular controllable character, the navigator simply roleplays the protagonist (*Complex*, *Late Shift*), or is addressed as the higher will that manipulates the protagonist (*Bandersnatch*). However, with multiple perspectives, it can get somewhat complicated. In *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs. the Reverend* (2020), players can make choices for multiple characters, such as deciding whether Titus goes to the gym or whether Kimmy takes a bus or a plane. This raises the question: who is the navigator within the story? Are we a higher will that influences multiple characters' decisions? Or are we roleplaying the characters (we are Titus at this moment and Kimmy at the next moment)? In *Detroit: Become Human*, there is a scene where Connor and Markus fight each other, and the player alternates between controlling them to attack and defend. This can create confusion and disorientation, as the player is simultaneously influencing two opposing characters. During the writing process on *Author's Note*,

I have encountered similar questions. Among the three main characters (Elaine, Josh, and Olivia), it seems completely free to insert the nodes. We probably can ignore questions like 'Why is the decision here and not there?' or 'Why is this character making the decision and not another?' as long as they do not interfere with the logic inside of the story. However, if there is guidance for node placement which combines with the context of the story, the interaction in IF will be further utilised. It will also help the multiple perspectives narrative in IF become unified.

In *Author's Note*, I have designed an agent character 'Scribe' (corresponding to playable character 'avatar' in video games) to take a step further to that direction. The scribe, Elaine, was built for two goals: connect the major nodes and the multiple character perspectives. The Scribe's functions are achieved by two features.

1) The Scribe is the only one who is offered with choices throughout the story. The story in *Author's Note* is narrated from Elaine's perspective overall. There are plots where Elaine is not presented, but her friends Josh and Olivia will frequently involve her in their problems and share their experiences with her. This explains how she remains informed even without explicitly stating it. (For dramatic effect, however, there are only a few exceptions, such as brief scenes where Elaine could not have known the details, even secondhanded.) The major nodes are the significant moments to her, where she has the power to influence how the events unfold, whilst minor nodes are insignificant details that she is not sure of. Around Elaine, there is a consistent and clear framework for node placement.

What is more, the way Elaine views the events (when it is a 'life-changing moment' and when it is not) reflects on her personality as well. At the end of 0-2-1, Elaine has a choice of whether to lie to stop Joshua from working with the dirty journalist Rachel. At the end of 0-2-2, when Elaine finds out Josh, in desperation, has planned an assassination with one of the victims to kill government official Murray, her choice will be whether to help him with important information or not. In 0-2-1, considering whether to act ('lying to Josh to stop him from working with a journalist or not') reveals certain aspects of Elaine's character. Conversely, in branch 0-2-2, there is no node about whether to inform the police about Josh's plan, which implies that this idea may not even cross Elain's mind. This absence further reflects her personalities.

In this way, there is a clear logic behind how the navigator influences the story: they act through Elaine who influences other characters.

2) The Scribe provides an identity to follow the multiple perspectives. Elaine, maintaining a relatively neutral stance among the three, continues to engage with both Josh and Olivia, thereby providing a consistent perspective on the unfolding events. In the early stage of the writing process, Olivia was the controllable character. The narrative challenge arises when Olivia decides against becoming a whistle-blower, resulting in her character becoming inactive while the story's focus shifts toward Josh. In branch 0-2, Olivia and Josh barely talk, not to mention letting Olivia make decisions that affect Josh. After introducing the Scribe role, the concern that a 'safe choice' may lead to a boring outcome is mitigated, as the Scribe Elaine has access to Josh, who provides an alternative perspective on events. The design of the Scribe ensures a connection to both Olivia and Josh, while maintaining enough distance to prevent direct involvement.

Elaine is not directly involved in the Koss scandal, and she does not face severe consequences for her decisions; even when she encourages Olivia to act ethically, it does not result in Elaine being shot. By removing the concern for self-preservation, the narrative allows the navigator to engage with the story from a secure, detached perspective. An opposite approach is observed in *Bandersnatch*, where if Stefan chooses to jump out of the building, he dies, and the story restarts. Similarly, in *Kimmy vs. the Reverend*, when the viewer selects a supposedly wrong choice, the narrator intervenes, indicating it as a bad decision, and rewinds the narrative, forcing the navigator to make the correct selection. The role of Scribe creates a safe space for the navigator. Elaine influences Josh and Olivia, but she is not involved in the agenda (nor does she have access to it). The decisions will not lead to Elaine being injured or the story ending early. In branch 0-2, when Olivia decides to play safe and keep her job, Josh still pursues the Koss case, and Elaine can provide his side of the story.

In IDN, when the player is a participant rather than a passive spectator, a term 'narrative paradox' is used to describe the difficulty of balancing between player agency and narrative coherence (Aylett, 2000; Aylett and Louchart, 2003). Aylett addresses this paradox through emergent narrative – the narrative is built from the interactions of characters and elements within a simulated world, rather than being pre-defined by an author (Aylett, 1999). Emergent narrative benefits from the free environment and interactable assets (characters and objects) of video games. However, in IF, where authorial and directorial control is stronger and the narrative follows a predetermined overarching structure, this kind of project adopts a different approach to address potential conflicts between the navigator's intent and the author's vision. Here, the navigator assumes the role of the Scribe,

capable of influencing the story to a certain extent. Instead of stepping up and fighting for an authorial voice, the navigator remains distant. Using Elaine's perspective, who by the story setting has limited control over how the story plays out, the film does not promise a god-like power for the navigator to save the world from the start. In this setting, where the navigator agency is not the priority, the film encourages navigation instead of interfering. We can say that when the navigator's level of control is low, the narrative paradox does not arise at all.

Overall, the Scribe provides an observational perspective for the stable development of the drama. Compared to the avatar role in video games, the Scribe provides minimum and only necessary interaction as well as low responsibility from the sequence of events in the story. The Scribe's relatively low level of responsibility in the story does not imply an absence of severe consequences resulting from certain actions and choices. On the contrary, it alleviates the narrative constraints, as the plot no longer needs to be concerned with the agent character losing her job/reputation, sustaining injuries, or facing imprisonment – factors that could hinder her ability to track the unfolding story. Instead, the consequences of the narrative decisions are shifted onto other characters, allowing Elaine to remain an observer without direct repercussions. The Scribe role connects the major nodes and the multiple perspectives, enhancing the cinematic experience by transcending the limitations of a singular character's field of vision.

It is important to note that this approach is not a 'one-size-fits-all' solution. The specific role of the Scribe, while fitting within the scope of this project, is not a necessity for every interactive film. As the navigator becomes increasingly familiar with the medium, there may come a time when such a character is no longer needed to guide or unify all decision nodes. Furthermore, additional

narrative techniques may emerge that better align with the interactive features of the IF.

3.4 Reflection: vines and endings

The branching structure in this project creates multiple ways to unfold the stories that share similar beginnings. The branches share the same characters who choose to do different things in moments of their life and lead life to be changed. This section will examine the vines in *Author's Note*, how they function and what unique narrative experience they can bring to the navigator.

3.4.1 Information attribute

 The parallel branches offer unique opportunities for presenting information and expanding narrative capacity. Compared to traditional non-interactive narratives, branching structure provides additional information with its expanded narrative space. While non-interactive narratives can incorporate parallel or alternative information, doing so often compromises the linearity of storytelling. In contrast, branching structures allow for rich details and plot progression to coexist without conflict, as the alternative branches provide space for additional information. Furthermore, these multiple plotlines present various perspectives that enhance the examination of the main events from different angles, offering a more complex and layered narrative experience.

In non-interactive films, certain information may be deemed irrelevant and, therefore, omitted to maintain narrative focus. At times, specific details may be unsuitable for the context, making them seem out of place if conveyed within the storyline. This narrative feature is inherent to non-interactive media, where linearity is essential to maintain cohesion. In IDN with branching structure,

however, there is room for more information. On the one hand, additional details can be incorporated to enrich the character development in the alternative branch. On the other hand, the character's decisions along different narrative paths reveal different reactions to the same events, which in turn unlock alternative facets of the story. Using the third stratum in the script as an example, in branch 0-1-1, Olivia receives online harassment and narrowly escapes a life-threatening physical attack. In branch 0-1-2, we will find out that Dylan knows the attacker, Dave.

(Page 295)

Dylan hangs up and stares at one of the workers. He rushes out and stands in front of DAVE (a guy dressed in black, wearing a beanie in a warm day).

> DYLAN
>
> Why are you here?

> DAVE
>
> I don't think I've met you before.

> DYLAN
>
> You're on Moreau's security team.

Dave's innocent face turns to a blank expression. He looks to his coworker.

> DAVE
>
> Tell Ruben I quit.

Dave and Dylan walk away to a quiet corner in the yard.

> DYLAN
>
> You need to leave this property.

> DAVE
>
> Relax, I'm not here for Murray Junior.

Dylan pauses for a moment and becomes highly alerted.

> DYLAN
>
> I have this under control. There is no need to take
> out the whistle-blower.

> DAVE

Your only focus is to take Murray out of the report.

And I have mine.

DYLAN

If Koss is willing to make a big offer, we could bribe her.

DAVE

She pissed my boss off. She's gotta go.

In branch 0-2-1, the reporter hypothesises based on her understanding of the politicians, which unveils a potential source of the slanders targeting Olivia in 0-1-1.

(Page 352-3)

They step out of the meeting room and are surprised to see the studio in complete chaos. Journalists and assistants are darting around, squeezed into the nearby room. Rachel and Josh make their way to the open office area, where a large screen is playing breaking news: Critical UK Military Supplies Intercepted by Russia: Avdiivka Falls

They both stopped to watch.

JOSH

That sounds bad. I remember Avdiivka is an important city.

RACHEL

The lab report you kept mentioning – it had data on the soldiers affected by ChromaGlow, right?

JOSH

Yes. ChromaGlow was used in the barracks.

RACHEL

If you'd somehow got that report and successfully blown the whistle then, they could've easily turned it around and blamed you.

Josh looks baffled.

JOSH

What?

RACHEL

They love to make a big deal out of the Official Secrets
Act.

(mimicking a serious tone)

If you leak these sensitive materials, you're endangering
the nation. But how exactly the harm was done? Sorry,
can't say – OSA.

JOSH

That sounds like a stretch.

The information presented would be implausible to include in branch 0-1-1. Given Olivia's desire for reconciliation with government officials, she would neither possess nor share these details with Elaine. Moreover, the events described contribute to distinct tones across the three branches in the third stratum. Generalising the branches, the narrative can be categorised as follows: branch 0-1-1 presents a classic story of 'fighting evil and making sacrifices', a whistleblower facing the consequences and ultimately achieving justice. Branch 0-1-2 adopts a satirical tone, set in a wealthy mansion, highlighting the triviality and ease with which the privileged class navigates challenges, making Olivia's struggles appear insignificant and easily resolvable. Finally, branch 0-2-1 follows Josh as he confronts the complexities of politics over a longer period, uncovering the victims' perspectives and exploring why some individuals prioritise financial gain over the pursuit of justice, thereby introducing a more serious tone. The scattered information is not merely for the sake of spreading details throughout the narrative. Instead, it serves a deliberate purpose in crafting the world and enhancing the thematic elements. In branch 0-1-1, for instance, the government remains hidden, creating a Kafkaesque society where it is invisible and beyond

accountability, while the protagonist continues to struggle. This absence of direct interaction with the government amplifies the sense of alienation and helplessness. In contrast, branch 0-1-2 uses visible and explicit details to capture the careless, indifferent behaviour of the wealthy, making it plausible to depict how they resort to violence as a means of problem-solving. This differential treatment of information aligns with the thematic goals of each narrative branch, enhancing the story's depth and texture. Withholding certain details helps to shape the world in specific ways. Only in IF does it become possible to withhold information because it can be revealed in a different branch as casual or support information.

3.4.2 Character building

 Characters acting in different contexts show their personalities. For example, here is the argument between Elaine and Steve about whether to let Olivia know about Dylan:

(Page 259)

Elaine looks to the card in her hand.

<div align="center">STEVE</div>

I don't need that guy's help. Let's not bother Olivia
with this.

<div align="center">ELAINE</div>

What about your job?

<div align="center">STEVE</div>

It'll be fine. If they keep blocking my promotion, I'll
just find another job.

Choose
1) Throw out the card (0-1-1 Hero)

Steve and Elaine have their personal reasons behind their opinion regarding this argument. The variation in the conversations between the characters is influenced by their emotional states. Elaine is initially inclined to inform Olivia about Dylan's visit. In branch 0-1-1, however, she hesitates after a moment of reflection and ultimately decides against sharing the information. Her uncertainty prompts Steve to recount his nanny's story in an attempt to reassure her.

(Page 260-1)

After some pondering, Elaine throws the card into the bin. The bin is quite empty.

> ELAINE
>
> Well, if I change my mind, there is plenty time to
> retrieve it.

Night, same day.

Elaine and Steve are watching television. Steve notices that Elaine keeps looking at the bin.

> STEVE
>
> It's too late. The news is out tomorrow.

> ELAINE
>
> There's still time. It won't hurt to listen to him.

> STEVE
>
> He's the government's hatchet man. Listening to him
> will definitely hurt. Why're you wavering?

> ELAINE
>
> Maybe he has something important to say. And
> Olivia needed to hear that. We wouldn't know.

Elaine avoids eye contact. She's worried about Steve, not Olivia.

> STEVE

Listen, let me worry about my job, alight? You just

focus on the right thing: supporting Olivia.

ELAINE

Fine. If you're sure about this.

They look to the TV for a while before Steve speaks again.

STEVE

When I was a kid, the girl who used to babysit me was

diagnosed with HIV. She got hit by a car once and needed

a blood transfusion, but the blood was contaminated. She

died at a young age. I remember she used to play Ice

Climber with me. I lost a lot to those polar bears. She'd

say, 'Let me see who's bullying my Stevie', and she'd

take care of it. She called them yetis. The UK imported

blood from America. The blood came from prisoners

and drug users. If they had admitted they messed up sooner,

she wouldn't have had to die. And to this day, they still

don't fully recognize their mistake.

Elaine mutes the television.

ELAINE

I'm sorry. It was so awful.

STEVE

So, yeah, if I have the chance to support, or even push

a whistleblower to come forward, I would. It's no longer

just one person's issue. I need to see the policy changed.

We need new regulations for those chemicals. The

government can't walk away from this.

Steve stands up and takes out the garbage bag, including the card inside it. Elaine

doesn't stop him. She stands at the window, watching Steve walking to the

wheelie bins.

Steve opens up because he is in a safe environment to tell his story.

Conversely, in branch 0-1-2, Elaine chooses to disclose the information to Olivia.

It was quick and in a rather hostile mood, leaving no opportunity for Steve to

bring up his past, including the loss of his friend. Moreover, Elaine's agitation during the ensuing argument, sparked by Steve's comment that 'this way is the best for her', further disrupts the atmosphere. In this argument, Steve has no mood or urge to share a sad memory of his.

(Page 292-4)

Elaine puts Dylan's card in her pocket.

>   STEVE
>   I don't care about his threats.

>   ELAINE
>   Yes. But ultimately, it's my decision.

>   STEVE
>   I'm disappointed in you.

>   ELAINE
>   You know what? I'm going upstairs and calling Liv
>   right now.

…

Ealine takes a picture at the card and send it over.

Elaine comes downstairs. Steve is sulking. He faces the television and pretends watching it.

>   ELAINE
>   Liv wants to meet him.

>   STEVE
>   What if Dylan scares her off?

>   ELAINE
>   You need to back off.

>   STEVE
>   I just think there is some moral choices we can make.
>   It's not all about Olivia, or you and me.

>   ELAINE
>   I hate when you didn't tell me about the job.

STEVE

          It's *my* job. I didn't want it to affect your passion.

          It was my choice. You don't have to disturb Olivia

          because you feel bad for me.

                    ELAINE

          That's the problem, honey. I had the right to know

          that my volunteering was causing you trouble. To

          quit or not was my decision to make. I hate that

          you made decision for me. And I won't make

          decision for Olivia. Talking to Dylan or not, it's

          her choice.

Elaine's phone beeps.

                    ELAINE

           Liv's texting me the address. I'll accompany her to

           talk to Dylan.

Elaine grabs her hoodie.

                    STEVE

           You're leaving now?

Elaine walks pass Steve to grab her keys.

                    ELAINE

           Sorry, I need a walk.

Similarly, before the first major node (page 36) where Olivia seeks

accompany from Elaine, her reliance on Elaine's encouragement is evident. Olivia

will only reveal her inner turmoil and contemplation when Elaine chooses to

approach her. If Elaine does not choose to accompany her, Olivia will not insist.

The further decision ('tell Olivia about Dylan or not') leads to Olivia

displaying different mentalities in the two alternate versions. In branch 0-1-2-2,

after closely observing the luxurious lifestyle of young Murray's guests, Olivia is

growing weary of the battle. Though she's committed to doing the right thing, a

part of her longs for some peace and personal well-being.

(Page 332)

Olvia's attitude is cold.

<div align="center">OLIVIA</div>

How do you want me to react to it?

<div align="center">JOSH</div>

How can you work with that snake? Trust me,

they'll turn on you the first chance they get. You'll

end up feeding the tiger only for it to bite you.

<div align="center">OLIVIA</div>

I don't care what kind of animal they are, Josh.

I won't be a martyr for your perfect world.

I've done enough.

Olivia closes the door.

Conversely, in branch 0-1-1, Olivia shows an opposite attitude. In this branch, she has been through smear campaigns and internet harassment, and at this point, her trust in the justice system has eroded – it did not shield her from the fallout of standing up for what is right. More than that, she has to hold onto the belief that she did the right thing. Otherwise, the regret and pain would become overwhelming. Therefore, when Elaine brings up 'what if', she puts on a tough front, refusing to show any hint of doubt.

(Page 270)

They see the picture of Dylan. Elaine suddenly sighs.

<div align="center">ELAINE</div>

Do you think it would have been better if I had

made you listen to what he had to say?

Olivia has already moved to other pictures.

<div align="center">OLIVIA</div>

> I know I fucked up. But his boss knowingly signed
> off projects with toxic products. They're worse
> than me. I don't bargain with murderers.

The changes observed in Olivia's two versions may appear different on the surface, but they ultimately reflect the same underlying personality. She is afraid to confront the possibility that she has made the wrong choice, so she persists in believing that she has chosen the right path.

Similarly, Josh exhibits conflicting personalities in different paths. For instance, in branch 0-1-2 and branch 0-2-1, he adamantly opposes cooperation. He even joins an assassination plot, seeing no other way to correct the wrongs through legal channels. Throughout the story, he consistently upholds an aggressive moral stance. However, in branch 0-1-1, he acknowledges compromising his morals, justifying it by his commitment to Olivia and his desire to support her.

(Page 282-3)

JOSH

Let's find a lighter topic-

ELAINE

Are you in this as well? You ok with her taking
Murray side?

JOSH

Olivia deserves some easier life. We've suffered
enough.

…

Josh drags Elaine to the bedroom and closes the door.

JOSH

What're you doing?

                    ELAINE

What're *you* doing? You've always been the most
cynical one.

                    JOSH

Everything has been solved. Koss is going to be
prosecuted. ChromaGlow has been recalled. We
just want our lives easier.

                    ELAINE

Wow. Josh. Being in a relationship really has
changed you.

                    JOSH

I don't care how you think of me, but you need to
go out there and apologize to Liv.

                    ELAINE

Or what?

Josh bends his convictions because, like anyone, he has a soft spot. Just as Olivia prioritises her sister's well-being, Josh will set aside his strong beliefs to support Olivia when she's vulnerable, especially when her choices are met with resistance from her friend Elaine and her sister Mia.

In various scenarios, we witness different facets of the characters, demonstrating that branching structure has the potential to not only alter events but also to evolve characters.

Overall, the cross-branch references play a crucial role in differentiating branching structure narratives from traditional non-interactive storytelling. The strategic use of information across branches adds depth to the narrative world and highlights the contrasts in character choices. It is important to emphasise that the narrative features analysed above come from the unique structure used in this

creative writing project, which inherently enables the complexity of the story. In addition to the non-merging branches discussed in Section 3.3, the earlier placement of major nodes and the use of longer branches also contribute significantly to the narrative's depth in *Author's Note*. A contrasting example can be seen in *The Complex* (2020), which employs a similar branching structure to this project, with symmetrical branching from two to four to eight. However, in *The Complex*, the first major branching node occurs very late in the story, approximately ten minutes before the endings. This late divergence results in limited character development and fewer event variations. *Late Shift* and *Bandersnatch* rely more heavily on merging branches, leading to fewer variations in the storyline.

This project introduces new elements that allow for a broader exploration of societal angles, character potential, and the complexities of good and evil within humanity. The narrative assigns events to different variations, such as engaging in a theft within a corporation, seeking support as a dependent reporter, and the mental turmoil experienced by a whistleblower hero facing backlash. The decision-making within the project is not centred around binary notions of right or wrong. When we forgo the conventional narrative device of merging branches and early dead-ends in IDN design, the consequences in the story are liberated from being merely designed to reward or punish. Instead, the narrative can focus on the logical progression of events and the dynamic interactions between characters, who both influence and are influenced by these events.

3.4.3 Fatalism

As discussed in the earlier section, IDN, especially the ones with branching structures, can affect story's structure, character, and the interaction between the writer and the navigator/player. Furthermore, the media also brings a change to the inner logic of the story. In interactive media, the ways to unfold the story vary, which can lead us to different endings. When the player/navigator starts a new journey, nobody can say for sure how the story ends until they make all the choices – even the navigator/player themselves can make spontaneous decisions that were not part of their plan. Before all choices are finalised, the outcome of each narrative path remains uncertain. (Of course, the stories follow the pre-written narratives. The power to challenge fate is not limitless, but it does make the final form of the story indeterminate until the player/navigator reaches the last nodes.) This characteristic is determined by the interactive nature of the medium, introducing an additional layer compared to a non-interactive narrative. Consequently, it brings about a shift in inherent logic, as the uncertainty of the conclusion injects an element of risk into the fates of the characters. Unlike conventional narratives where outcomes may be anticipated, here, success or tragedy becomes contingent, fostering an environment where narrative determinism is challenged. Moreover, this interactive medium affords the opportunity to contemplate fatalism through storytelling, narrating the tragedies of fate, or actively engaging in challenging fatalistic perspectives. This dual capacity creates the unique narrative potential inherent in interactive storytelling.

In traditional non-interactive media, fate can be an explicit narrative element. Everything within the story is predetermined, and characters function as marionettes controlled by unseen forces. In *Minority Report* (2002), for instance,

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the majority believes that the future, as foreseen through pre-visions, is fixed, and laws are in place to punish individuals for crimes they are destined to commit. The protagonist, Anderton, initially upholds this deterministic system. One day, he sees his own name showing up in the machine as a criminal. However, in this section, we are not discussing fate as an overt narrative element within the story, but rather as a broader concept guiding the characters towards their inevitable, pre-designed outcomes. This 'fate' operates at a meta-narrative level, where the characters' actions are directed towards an unavoidable conclusion crafted by the authors.

Unplanned accidents that lead to a series of life-changing events are common narrative devices. The young man and woman happen to meet each other at a karaoke party to which they reluctantly went, and they would not have met each other if one of them had not gone to the party (*We Made a Beautiful Bouquet*, 2021); the German soldier who survives the war but gets ambushed by an armed French boy: if he had not separated from his companion and had remained vigilant, he would have been alive (*All Quiet on the Western Front*, 2022); Mildred sets the police station on fire during the night after she made sure no one is inside, but Dixon happened to have snuck in with his headphones on, which ultimately leads to him being burnt (*Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*, 2017). The sense of fate here does not come from the recurring mentions of predetermined future. Instead, the incidents have such a small chance to happen but change the character's life drastically. In traditional media, stories are decided after the author finishes writing – no matter if it is open-ended, no matter if the characters aim to challenge their written fate (which is usually written by in-story prophet-like characters). In a non-interactive story, even where there is a

protagonist who seeks and successfully achieves the change of the destiny, their

journey will remain the same story every time the audience watches it.

Differently, in IDN with branching structure, the alternative branches

present multiple versions of the story. The plots branch out and weaken the

fatalism to some degree (not completely breaking it). Furthermore, it introduces a

new thematic opportunity for the narrative: the possibilities of one's path. The

fortunate events for someone become more precious when we know how bad they

can go in a different vine. As examined in Chapter 2, the wider the tree is, the

stronger the comparison gets. In *Author's Note*, not only do the protagonists

experience different fates, but the secondary characters also lead various types of

lives across the plots. For example, worker Matthew receives greater financial

compensation in branch 0-1-1 (Olivia's whistleblowing puts pressure on Koss),

significantly improving his circumstances compared to branch 0-2-1, where Olivia

has remained silent on the paint scandal. In branch 0-2-2, as his illness brings him

to the brink of death, facing utter desperation, Mathew plans to murder Moreau,

the CEO who is responsible for Mathew's suffering. As for Dylan, he remains a

busy political aide in branch 0-1-1 with a cold attitude. He has had little

interaction with Olivia and Elaine after he is rejected when attempting to negotiate

with them.

(Page 276)

Dylan walks out of the building. Elaine drags him from behind. The building
security is alerted.

<div style="text-align:center">DYLAN</div>

It's fine. I know her.

Dylan turns to Elaine.

<div style="text-align:center">DYLAN</div>

Please let go. I'm not going to run away.

He walks away. Elaine follows up hurriedly.

ELAINE

Did you do it?

DYLAN

No. I do wish she would get better soon. She's a righteous

citizen.

ELAINE

Didn't stop you from trying to frame her. She's

having enough.

DYLAN

Exactly. She had been having a hard time. Why would

the government physically assault her and make the

public take her side?

ELAINE

Who did it, then?

DYLAN

Please wait for the police report.

Dylan walks in another building after scanning his ID card. Elaine cannot follow

him in.

In branch 0-1-2-2, after Olivia reaches a compromise and omits the details

from the lab report, he shows a rare glimpse of sincerity.

(Page 336)

DYLAN

You reminded me of myself.

OLIVIA

I don't know if that's a compliment.

DYLAN

People like you, me, and your agitated friend

Josh – we only affect others to a degree. The worst

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we might cause is a bloody nose. But powerful

people, they can change lives with just a thought. I

used to work for a senior policy advisor – worse yet,

he pushed for a policy that raised the cap on gas prices

by just 15 pence. That could add up to an extra 20

pound per month for a family. Do you think 20

pound is a lot?

OLIVIA

Not for me.

DYLAN

There're still people in this country going without

heating in winter. Coldness crawling into your

fingers and toes, crawling to your core.

Dylan looks to his hands.

Olivia thinks that this is why Dylan serves Murray loyally.

OLIVIA

Is Murray doing anything about it?

DYLAN

I don't think he cares very much.

OLIVIA

Why do you work for these awful people then?

DYLAN

Because they're scary. These people aren't just

human anymore; they're superhuman, changing

someone's life as casually as deciding where

to dine. I want to be one of them.

In branch 0-1-2-1, where Murray's mansion has been caught on fire, Dylan is hospitalised, struggling to survive. His dreams, goals, past and sincerity are reserved to himself. He is merely a pitiable pawn abandoned by his boss.

'What could have been if…?' is no longer a hypothetical question. The question we wonder many times in reality can be and has been performed in

literature. Now, combined with the unique feature of branching structure, the characters gain more depth in some perspective that is unique to interactive media.

The portrayal of characters experiencing varying circumstances (such as wealth, health, and relationships) is a classic and effective narrative tool commonly used in IDN. Moreover, in my work, I challenge a prevalent narrative norm: the stories are often tied to one specific sequence of events. In *Late Shift*, the main plot revolves around the sequence where the protagonist hides from the mobster and the police in night London. In *Detroit*, thanks to the extensive gameplay, which takes over 10 hours to complete, there are numerous narrative variations. However, despite these choices, the overall sequence of events remains relatively fixed. For instance, regardless of the player's decisions, Markus will always participate in the revolution and protest at the same locations in the same order. Kara will face a near-disassembly at the hands of a criminal before attempting to cross the border.

In non-interactive narratives, there is usually no alternative plotline. Naturally, the protagonist and the main events are often automatically bound together, thus remaining inseparable. However, in IDN with branching narratives, this 'package deal' is not obligatory. What is more, the concept of 'main story' might be a trap that anchor the branches onto one major event and give up the potential of the narrative space. In *Author's Note*, the Koss scandal is the catalyst that forces the characters to make tough decisions. The story moves the focus away from one fixed inevitable sequence of events. Instead, it emphasises what kind of persons the characters can become after different decisions. In this storytelling design, Olivia takes a significant role in branch 0-1 and the following

stratums, facing backlash for challenging officials and corporations. Josh leads in branch 0-2 and the sequent plots, interacting closely with workers who show indifference and resignation to their circumstances. By decoupling the protagonist and the main events, even if one character does not step up when faced with injustice, the story continues with others taking action. Not only are the protagonists and main events decoupled, but the design of Scribe also frees the narrative perspective from the main characters. With this design, the concept of fate takes on a new expression. Fate is no longer a predetermined trajectory or a set sequence of events. It does not mean Olivia is destined to face certain challenges (vine 0-1-1), or she is destined to make a deal with Dylan as an easy way out (vine 0-1-2). These sequences depend on the choices made along the way. In this story, the constancy of life is not defined by specific events but by the internal struggle within oneself. Olivia's struggle lies in her attachment to comfort. Temptations continually emerge, no matter which path she takes. Josh's issue is his anger toward the world. His battle is to suppress his frustration and bitterness. When reasonable options are unavailable, and his friends are not by his side, he does not hesitate to resort to violence (branch 0-2-2). From this perspective, every character's fundamental goal is to confront and reconcile with their conscience. The only thing close to 'unavoidable fate' is the constant battle within oneself, not the world outside.

3.5 Conclusion

The creative component has a different design compared to common branching narratives. It introduces two key changes: the division of responsibilities for two types of decision nodes and a new character type: Scribe.

Major nodes generate and connect the branches. The first major node takes place relatively early in the plot, after the introduction of the Koss scandal, ensuring enough space for further development towards different directions. The following branches stem from options with opposing ideas. They create a symmetrical structure characterised by counterpoint and mutual resonance. Unlike typical branching structures where branches often merge back together, the branches in this work remain strictly separate, which enhances the contrast between different plotlines. When there is no need to arrange the plots to rejoin down the vine, the consequences can be more effective. This node-based approach creates more space for further character and plot development, allowing for richer narrative complexity.

The character type Scribe offers a flexible perspective for the navigator. The consequences of the narrative decisions are shifted onto other characters, allowing Elaine to remain an observer without direct repercussions. The design of a Scribe character connects the major nodes and the multiple perspectives, breaking the common limitations of a singular character's field of vision in IDN. Furthermore, it helps untie the 'package deal' between the agent character and the major events. Thus, the navigator affects the plots to some degree whilst the protagonists' character logic and narrative structure are preserved. This design helps avoid the common narrative paradox found in IDN.

The creative writing component seeks to explore the unique narrative expression from branching structure, which is the contrast among the parallel plotlines. With the fundamental goal of maintaining the complexity and clarity of the branches, *Author's Note* employs a distinct structure and character design.

The reflection and analysis of the script include three perspectives: information attributes, character development, and a fresh perspective on fatalism. Especially for the characters, who break from their fixed fate, showing what could have been done differently if they had chosen another path. And, even more, what would have been the same, even if they had stepped on a different route? Supported by the branching structure, the exploration of character design is not only distinct from traditional film storytelling but also innovative within the existing IDN landscape.

The alternative plotlines introduce a characteristic unique to branching structure in IDN, distinguishing them from film: replayability. This is not to suggest that films cannot be rewatched, but rather that games can be replayed numerous times, offering a different engagement. Complex storytelling can present different perspectives on similar events and even allow players/navigators to experience drastically altered versions of events based on their previous choices (Murray, 1997, page 148-68). Replay value can thus be understood as a dynamic interplay between continuity and variability in experience – active participation becomes more effective with repeated exposures, whereas the pleasurable aspects of narrative engagement remain relatively stable over time (Roth et al., 2012). The concept of replayability is closely related to the inability to fully grasp all details in a single playthrough/navigation in IDN. Especially in open-world and simulation games, the experience is non-exhaustive. While IF features a fixed narrative and is therefore enumerable, the broader category of IDN leverages this non-finishability – in single navigation – to enable unique storytelling techniques. The additional information allows supplementary branches to be crafted in ways that enhance the previously experienced narrative effects.

4. Interactive Elements' Influence on Narratology

Following a logical sequence aligned with the creative process of scriptwriting, after the theoretical and case analyses of the foundational structure (Chapter 2), the branching structure was established (Chapter 3). Subsequently, this section examines the interactive elements and their influence on narratology combining my creative experience from previous practice. Section 4.2 examines the text layers in interactive films. I will examine the traditional narrative layers and discuss how the new media potentially changes them. Section 4.3 discusses how the navigators can join and function within various roles in the narratives. When the navigator is in opposition to the protagonists, unique tension will rise. In section 4.4, I will examine the unique tension that arises in IDN from the perspective of text layers and roles.

4.1 Introduction

Narratives, while independent of any single medium, are inevitably shaped by the features of the medium through which they are communicated. This project aims to examine the constraints or opportunities offered by the interactive medium, more especially, interactive film, hoping a deep understanding of the medium will help the creators to reach its potential,

In the previous chapters, I examined the unique features of IDN as a medium. Now, I shift focus to how these narratives function on textual and structural levels. The classic fixed/static narrative forms in the mainstream are from a very early age. As Koenitz (page 9-10, 2023) points out, 'non-interactive narrative forms are dominant and become normalised in the education system as well as in public discourse… It is a considerable challenge to imagine narratives

that differ from this "norm" in important ways'. To better analyse interactive IDN, it's crucial to question the norms of classic storytelling and understand the reasons behind them. By identifying which elements of traditional narratives are useful and which can be replaced or omitted in IDN, we can reshape storytelling for this medium. The same approach applies to studying IF. It's important to discern which parts of video game narratives are influenced by gameplay and which elements are essential for storytelling, thereby isolating what makes each medium distinct and impactful. To examine IDN, we probably need to leave the conventional perspective and expand the horizon of narrative theory.

A crucial distinction in narrative theory lies between *story* – the sequence of events – and *discourse* – how these events are presented. When branching structures are introduced in IF, both layers become more complex and may even introduce self-contradictory elements. For instance, a character may die in one branch and continue living in another, complicating the viewer's understanding of the narrative world. These changes impact the unfolding of both events and character development, offering new possibilities for narrative exploration. Section 4.2 will be discussing the text layers in IDN with branching structure: story, branching and discourse. In Section 4.3, I introduce the Actantial Model to analyse character motivations in depth. This model is also applicable for analysing the roles of both navigators/players and authors in IDN. In Section 4.4, I further explore how the model can be applied to the interaction between **navigators/players and the characters** (when the navigators/players' goals diverge from the characters'), and **between navigators/players and the author** (when the author deliver outcomes that different than what has been promised/hinted through the options; when the author force the navigators/players

into some actions regardless their goal).   Through a combination of critical

analysis and insights gained from creative writing practice, this chapter offers a

unique perspective from the author. It also provides a creative framework for

writers to consider when structuring interactive narratives.

4.2 Layers

In Chapter 2, I briefly discussed the basic two parts of common narratives. Firstly,

there is the story, the content of the narrative. It includes the chain of events

(actions, happenings) and the existents (characters, items of setting). The story of

a piece (novel, film, play, etc.) can be written, presented, implied, or hidden.

Then, there is the discourse, which refers to the expression, the way the actions

and happenings are formed and presented. Narratologists have generally reached a

consensus about the distinction between the story and the discourse. The idea can

be traced back to the *Poetics*. Aristotle discussed the imitation of actions in the

real world, *praxis*, and the plot formed by the selected units, *mythos*. The Russian

formalists described the layers of the narrative as two parts: the 'fable' (*fabula*), as

the sum of events to in the narrative, what has happened, and, 'plot' (*sjuzet*), the

sequence of linked events, how the reader become aware of what happened.

(Erlich, 1965; Chatman, 1978; Aristotle, n.d.; Tomashevsky, 1925). In some

narratives, the background setting (when and how did the story start) can go back

to very long ago. For example, when someone tells the protagonist, 'I knew your

mother when she was young', that is the selected information presented in the

discourse. For different details, it can go from 'I knew your mother when she was

young. She had beautiful eyes…' to 'I knew your mother when she was young.

She had such beautiful eyes. The most beautiful ones I have seen' and proceed to present a series of flashbacks to tell us about how this person knew the woman, their wild romance in the brief summer. The discourse is formed with selected information. Sometimes we know the character's ancestors were from another continent, but we show it by a photo on the wall, rather than presenting the audience with a montage of how the ancestors got on the boat.

The discourse layer also rearranges the events/happenings from the story layer. A chronological narrative (a>b>c>d>e) is common, but we can also see the flashback structure (d>a>b>c>e) in a film like *Titanic* (1997). The narrative starts with an old lady recalling the tragedy that happened seven decades ago. In both present and memory timeline, the events happen in a chronological way. Also, there are discourses that show what really happened in a reverse order (e>d>c>b>a): for example, *Memento* (2000), which is about a man suffering from memory loss and trying to solve a case. The narrative shows us the ending of the sequence of events first, then the penultimate event, until the film ends with the beginning of what actually has happened in the story layer. There are also narratives that present their story in a rather disorderly way (d>a>e>b>c). In Westworld season 2, one of the protagonists wakes up losing part of his memory. The protagonist constantly remembers something but unlike in *Titanic*, he recalls things in a random order. In my creative writing component, there are background events. Olivia and Elaine used to travel together, which is where they got the identical bags. Josh has always had a feeling for Olivia that he has never shown or acted on. In branch 0-1-1, he pursues Olivia, which reveals the information. In other branches, his feelings are still there but not shown through dialogue. In

short, the story layer is the part that is normally implied by the visible text, while the discourse layer is to display certain events in the order of the writer's choice.

In non-interactive films, no matter how complex the plots may be, such as *Memento* (a protagonist with memory loss), *Triangle* (2009; the protagonist is trapped in a time loop and keeps running into herself in different timelines), or *Run Lola Run* (1998; where the protagonist rewinds time to correct mistakes), the narrative discourse remains fixed. These films can explore time paradoxes, alternate realities, or branching plotlines, but the underlying structure of how the story is told does not change. The audience's experience of the plot is linear, despite the complexities of time or reality within the story.

By contrast, in interactive digital media narratives, especially pool and string structure, the discourse layer changes. In string structure, while the main plot remains the same, there are always minor varieties (which route the player takes to the destination, how fast the player solves the problem). The pool structure is formed of video clips that can be viewed in relatively free order, so the discourse of a pool structure IDN technically has a large amount of combination methods to link the video clips together. Moreover, in branching structure, the alternative plotlines not only generate more forms of discourse, but also change, or to say, complexifies, the narrative in the story layer. Using my creative writing component as an example, in branch 0-1-1 and branch 0-1-2, Olivia chooses to be the whistle-blower. In branch 0-2-1 and 0-2-2, Olivia chooses to prioritise her own well-being and her sister's needs above everything else. The information given in different branches contradicts each other. Therefore, the story layers from the four branches cannot be seen as the same one anymore.

The change in the narrative from both discourse and the story layer is a key feature of a branching narrative. With the multiple versions of the story, extra work is added to the discourse-building process. The writer may need to select, rearrange, and identify the information. Olivia's relationship with her friend Josh is changed by whether she chooses to take action against Koss. The story layer will have multiple versions of what happened and what kind of person is Olivia. Her life and personal values change as she makes choices (under a certain level of influence of Elaine). In branch 0-1-1 *Hero*, the repercussions of doing the right thing reinforce Olivia's belief in her moral actions. However, this also leads her to accumulate frustration and disappointment in the shortcomings of social justice. In branch 0-1-2 *Party at Murray's*, Olivia manages to negotiate with a government official's assistant. Her instincts help her avoid the social backlash that unfolds in branch 0-1-1. At the end of branch 0-2-1 *Pawn*, if Elaine asks for help, Olivia will assist her in deceiving Josh, preventing him from collaborating with a corrupt reporter. In branch 0-2-2, upon discovering Josh's plans and directly witnessing the awful conditions of the ill workers' families, Olivia chooses not to stop him but instead supports his efforts. In the subsequent stratum, each of the four versions of Olivia subtly shifted her mindset to a further eight versions of the character development. In branching structure, the design of the characters unlocks new potential and dimensions for their development, which will be further explored in the next section.

4.2.1 Examining characters in the story layer

Chatman (1978) suggests that there are two major parts at the story level: events (actions and happenings) and existence (characters and setting), as illustrated in

Fig. 4-1. In IDN, the change of story is often automatically followed by the change of the happening/events. In *Late Shift*, there are multiple branches regarding how Matt (the protagonist) reacts to the series of crimes. In one branch, he is interrogated by the police. In another, he is captured by the mafia. There is also a branch where he hides from everyone and briefly stays safe. In the narratives, the discourse and the events have changed. However, no matter in which branch, Matt's character remains the same. In either branch, he is a good person who simply wants to survive. In this case, there is no need for him to change as the film is focused on crime solving. While not every film requires deep character growth, it is often a key factor in how films are appreciated.
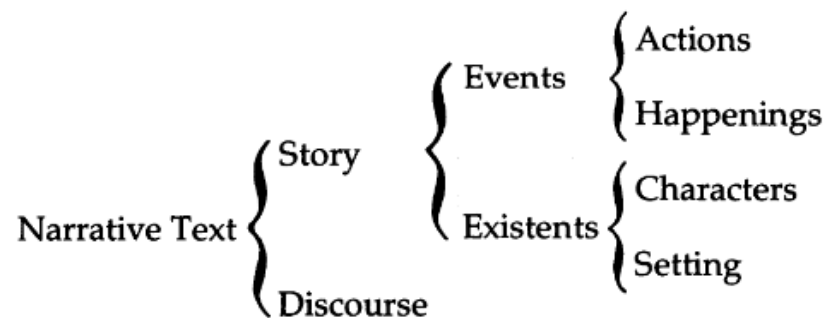
Figure 4-1 Chatman's (1978) narrative text structure

In IDN, when a character changes as the story unfolds, there are two kinds of development. 1) The character grows in the same direction as in the other branches. In *Bandersnatch*, Stefan gets more and more irritated by the odd things happening around him. He cannot figure out the truth of the world ('you are not free'). In either of the branches, he is mostly confused and angry. The alternative outcomes are like a maze with no exit. It emphasises his struggle and despair. 2) The character changes in different directions. In *Detroit: Become Human,* Connor has the option to develop different moral values. Depending on the player's

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choice, Connor can become aware of the injustice the android has been receiving, or he can stay firmly as a human's goon. At the beginning of *Detroit*, you know Connor will have to pick a side between human and androids because the game hints at you this way. For example, on his way to solve a case, you can choose to let Connor spare a second to save a goldfish or just to let it die. It is a way to imply his sympathy ability. Later, he will bond deeply with a drunk, cranky police officer Hank and get to know the meaning of android life, their soul. Or he will disappoint Hank, even though Hank holds a small hope for him to show free will. In the end, he could even kill Hank. The tragedy introduces more emotions because players are aware of the alternate possibilities in another branch of the story. Those who have experienced the branch where Hank and Connor become friends, developing mutual trust, can be particularly affected when faced with the scenario where Connor kills Hank in another branch. The emotional impact is heightened, especially because this is not the only possible outcome, and players know there are other plotlines where they share a positive relationship. The contrast between these branches deepens the sense of loss and tragedy.

Another protagonist, Markus, also has significant character development that diverges along two principal paths: leading a violent revolution or advocating for peaceful protest, even to the extent of refraining from self-defence when faced with police brutality. These divergent paths illustrate the complexity of Markus's character, showcasing how his actions and decisions reflect different ethical and moral standpoints, ultimately shaping the narrative's outcome. For Markus, we can see him struggle to hold back violence in one line despite friends' disapproval and anger. He watches their own kind being gunned down but has to show that the

android is only seeking peace. In another branch, we see him become ruthless and get used to killing.

In non-interactive films, we can also see characters' image change in comparison. Like in *La La Land* (Chazelle, 2016), Mia grows from a waitress nobody to a famous actress, from having a perfect partner to having married a different man. In IDN branching structure, there is another dimension of comparison (discussed in Chapter 3). In *Detroit*, there are personality/value changes from the beginning to the end of the story (Markus transforms from a quiet and caring nurse to a violent leader who has used violence on civilians in one story vine), and there are differences across the branches (two versions of Markus in peaceful path and violent path).

My project also emphasises character development, which is discussed in detail in Section 3.4.1. My project aims to expand what I have learnt from the existing work and expand the character complexity even more. It is the writer's job to keep the character development coherent. Olivia's development variations need to be distinguished from each other to make the comparison, but she cannot change so much that it raises the question of 'I don't think she will be that person'. Having multiple outcomes does not mean characters can do anything and ignore their personalities. In this film, Elaine has options to affect Olivia, but these should be within the reach of both Elaine and Olivia's moral values. While Olivia prioritises her personal interests, Joshua is the more emotional and at times aggressive member of the group. Their differing temperaments lead them to take actions that the other would avoid. Although both are committed to addressing the Koss Group's secrets, their approaches diverge significantly. Olivia, who is more rational and risk-averse, is willing to collaborate with a morally compromised

politician for personal gain, as seen in branch 0-1-1. In contrast, it would be out of character for Joshua, who grows deep resentment towards the government official Sander, to cooperate with him. In branch 0-2-1, Joshua's strong animosity toward Koss inclines him to consider working with a dubious reporter to smear his enemy—an option Olivia would likely dismiss due to the higher risks outweighing the potential benefits. Even when Olivia and Josh face the same situation and are presented with multiple choices to address the problem, their distinct personalities and values lead them down different paths. This divergence in decision-making results in each character experiencing unique events and developments as the situation unfolds. The inherent differences between the characters drive their respective narratives, ensuring that they grow and evolve in ways that are consistent with their individual traits and perspectives, but distinct from each other.

4.2.2 The text layers of IF

Using the traditional framework discussed earlier to examine IFs, they can be understood as comprising two layers: 1) Story layer: The collection of all information, even including the self-contradictory events (e.g., whether the protagonist turns right or left, or whether they turn evil or become good); 2) Discourse layer: This refers to the manner in which the story is presented or structured – the sequence in which events are arranged and experienced by the navigator. To better examine layers in IDN, however, Eladhari (2018) suggests four text layers in her research: 1) code layer (engine, code), 2) story layer (overall story and backstory), 3) discourse layer (the sequence of experiences that the agent goes through.), and 4) narrative layer (the collection of the experiences

from different players [navigators]). Eladhari's model aims to analyse interactive digital narratives in general. The code layer targets the work on the software and other relevant narrative tool. The story layer refers to the common background design, including the forces motivating the actions of the characters, their goals and the specific abilities of each individual entity. The discourse refers to the sequence of experiences (expressed by signifiers in the game world) that an experiencing agent goes through. The narrative (retelling) layer is designed to describe the collective experience of the players, as everyone may experience different game content in IDN. The retelling can happen through social media, in-person interaction, and in recordings displayed on YouTube or Twitch.
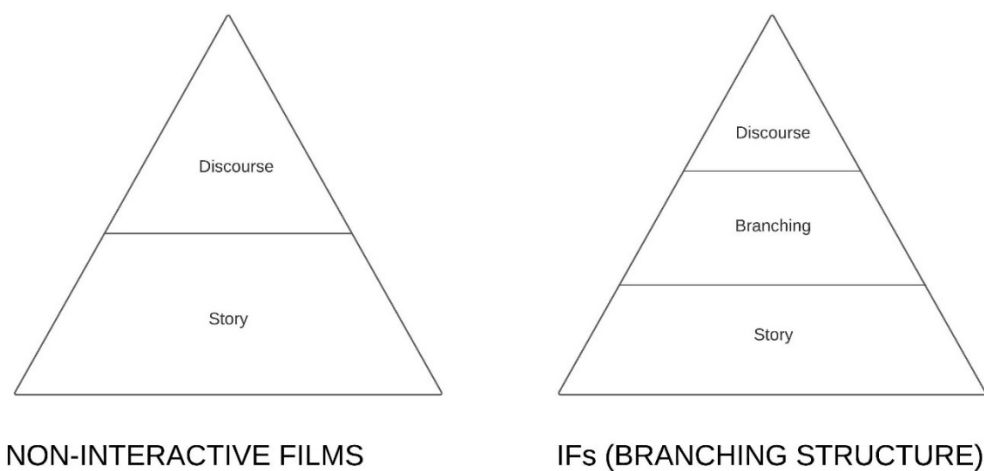
Figure. 4-2 Text layer development

With a distinct research focus centred exclusively on narrative structure, I propose a new layer framework, illustrated in the chart above (fig. 4-2). The **story layer** refers to the collections of all the happenings and events which are directed or in directed expressed in the story; the **discourse layer** in interactive films is how they are presented to the navigators. What people encounter depends on the choices they make; the **branching layer** is the sum of all the branching sections,

which are not the final version of the film, nor the abstract content like the story layer.

The branching layer provides an additional dimension where alternative paths and events are organised. This layer is typically visualised through branching trees, which map out the diverging narratives. However, these branching trees are not commonly made available to viewers or players; in interactive films, such as *Bandersnatch*, *The Complex*, and *Late Shift*, they are fan-made rather than provided by the creators.

From the perspective of the writers, acknowledging the existence of this branching layer can significantly enhance the organisation of narrative material. The branching layer operates as an intermediary between the discourse and story layers, where the narrative's dialogues, actions, and events are formulated before being arranged into a cohesive sequence that makes up the final film. In this phase, creators face complicated designing decisions, such as the node placement (the placement and frequency of narrative nodes), the methods of interaction (why does the navigator interact here, how much is the influence), and scribe character (how does the agent characters affect events, and how do these characters evolve differently across various narrative branches or vines). This phase is critical for structuring the narrative in a way that maintains coherence while allowing for the complexity and variability inherent as responding to the navigators' decisions.

4.3 The roles in IDN
After discussing the text layer in IDN, in this section I will examine the characters. What does it really mean when we say people 'choose your own story'? Does the interaction impact more than just the dialogues of the characters?

This section examines how the dynamics of power and influence shift beyond individual interactions.

Media change brings changes to narrating. For example, novels rely on internal monologues and detailed descriptions to show a character's thoughts and emotions. In contrast, films must externalise this internal complexity through visual and auditory means, such as actions, dialogue, and visual cues, like body language and facial expressions. This shift highlights how character development adapts to the strengths and limitations of different media. For IDN with branching structure, one of the major traits is the alternative plots, as discussed in the earlier chapters.

The truth of a character is only established within a specific narrative path once a choice has been made. Prior to this decision point, when events exist as 'optional,' the character embodies a state of uncertainty. This uncertainty reflects the potential for various outcomes and character developments, dependent on the navigator's choices within the interactive narrative. Thus, the character's true nature and story are not fixed but are instead contingent on the direction chosen by the player, allowing for multiple possibilities to coexist until a decision solidifies one of them. The unique aspect brought by interactive media is that the audience is actively involved in the character's development. In *Author's Note*, there are two events around branch 0-1-1 *Hero*: 'Olivia reveals a company secret' and 'Olivia loses her job'. With the causality, the two events form a plot: Olivia reveals the secret. The company is angry about the whistle-blowing, so they fired Olivia. Then, after adding the character's personalities, desires and expectations, it becomes: Olivia has the company's secret. She wants to reveal it, but she also wants to keep her job and a good life. Olivia becomes the whistle-blower after

going through a mental struggle. She loses her job due to violating the company's interests. Olivia understands there is a chance of losing her job. However, she still makes the decision to step up (with Eliane's encouragement). The decision is against her personal interest and fundamental desire: financial stability. The character's behaviour and desire add more layers to the simple events of 'knowing the secret' and 'getting fired'. At the same time, the events and sequences build the character – when Olivia chooses to stand up against the cooperation, her character changes accordingly. She has made her and her sister's interests a lower priority. The choice makes her who she is. This concept is further deepened by the presence of alternative routes, branch 0-2, where she chooses to remain silent and actively avoids Josh. In the following branches after 0-2, Olivia has a stable job and happily supports her sister in going to her dream university. The meaning of each choice is enhanced: not only does the decision shape the character's identity, but the paths not taken also contribute to defining who the character is not. The very existence of these choices introduces possibilities and heightens narrative tension. Olivia begins the story with conflicting goals, forced to make difficult choices and sacrifice one aim for another. This evolution does not completely transform her into someone unrecognisable. Instead, it is like the philosophical idea of *The Ship of Theseus*, as facing different events down the path she chooses, her goals, morals, emotions, and dreams will change along the way.

To further examine character motivations and actions, I will now discuss the narratology theories that provide frameworks for understanding how and why characters behave as they do – or, more precisely, the underlying ideas or design goals guiding the author in shaping their actions. These theories will illuminate the relationship between internal desires, external conflicts, and narrative

progression. Propp (1968, pp 25-65) uses a way to describe the character functions in narratives based on his study of Russian folktales. He concludes that there are thirty-one functions[8] of characters. Then, there are seven spheres of actions that correspond to roles or dramatic personas: villain, donor (provider), helper, princess (a sought-for person), dispatcher, hero, and false hero. The sphere here does not equal a character. A sphere of action may correspond exactly to one character or be distributed among several characters. One character also may be involved in several spheres of actions.

A. J. Greimas, a linguist and semioticist, brings up his character category theory on the basis of Propp's thirty-one functions, which is called the Actantial model (Greimas, 1970, pp 106-120; Prince, 1987, pp 1-3). The Actantial model (see fig. 4-3) is often used to analyse the action in narratives. It has six Actantial roles with a clearer diagram to indicate the inner relation among them. Actant represents a syntactic unit that precedes any semantic or ideological characterisation of characters or roles (Greimas and Courtés, 1979). The concept of actant has the advantage of describing the study subjects in narratives, since it applies not only to human beings, but also collectives (a group of people, the society, etc.), animals, anthropomorphic beings, inanimate elements, or a concept (hope, freedom, love, etc.) (Greimas and Courtés, 1979; Hébert, 2020).

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[8] See Appendix.
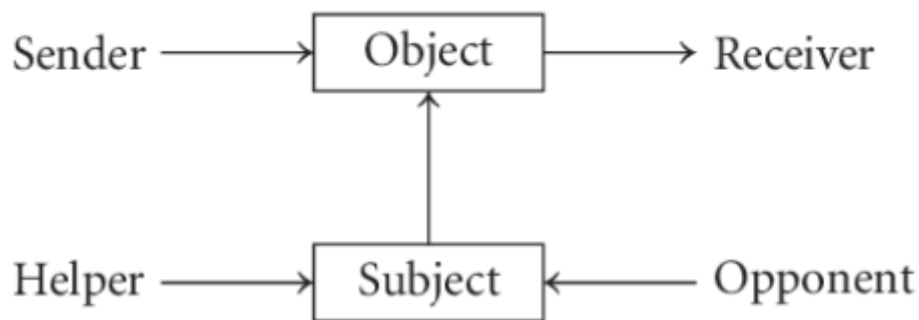
Figure. 4-3 Greimas's Actantial model

The six key Actantial roles are arranged in three sets of binary opposition, namely: sender/receiver, subject/object, and helper/opponent:

(1) Subject/object. The subject is always directed toward an object. In the act one of my creative writing project, Olivia wants to meet her moral standards, so the 'moral standards' is the object. At the same time, Olivia has another object: 'financial stability'.

(2) Helper/opponent. The helper assists the subject, and the opponent introduces impediments. Koss Group will try anything to stop Olivia from leaking the information, so it takes the role of the opponent when the object is 'moral standards'. However, when Olivia wants to seek a stable life and turn a blind eye, Koss Group is the one who has offered her a job and a good salary. Therefore, when Olivia's object is 'financial stability', Koss Group is the helper. In branch 0-1, when Elaine cancels her plan and sits in the car with Olivia, she is the helper who assists Olivia. Olivia gains courage and contacts Josh to send out the secret documents.

(3) Sender/receiver. The sender requests or offers the establishment of the junction between the subject and the object. The receiver often (but not always) benefits from the subject receiving the object. For example, in a story archetype

where the knight defeats the monster and becomes the hero, the King will ask him to marry the princess (normally, the knight happens to be in love with her). In this plot, the King will be the sender of the object (marriage) as the receiver being the knight and Princess. In this case, the Princess is the receiver of the object, but she does not necessarily benefit from it, which depends on whether or not this is against her will in the story. In branch 0 of my creative writing project, Olivia shortly has two objects in mind: financial stability and moral standards. After the first node where Olivia chooses between the two, there remains one object in each branch. In branch 0-2, where Olivia has chosen to live a peaceful life, Koss Group is the sender, and Olivia and Mia are the receiver.

In mainstream film narratives, the links among the six roles are relatively simple. In films like the *Avengers* series (2012-2019), the villain (e.g. Thanos) is the opponent, 'saving the world' is the object, and the local citizens are the receivers. When the characters fill in multiple Actantial roles which hold opposite positions (helper against opponent, or sender against opponent), the complexity brings up tensions. For example: in the first act of *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*, Mildred Hayes (played by Frances McDormand) pays for three billboards to post three sentences: 'Raped While Dying', 'And Still No Arrests?', 'How Come, Chief Willoughby?' She is urging the police to crack the case of her daughter's murder in a way that is seen as rude by the people in town. Using the Actantial model to analyse Mildred, when she is the subject, the billboard is the object. It is a physical existence that she needs to find money to pay for the billboard. At the same time, it is also a symbol of anger (against the police's incompetence) and belief (that the case should not be forgotten as time passes by). At first, chief Willoughby is the opponent. He fails to solve the case, and he also

does not appreciate that his name is being put up on the billboard. The many people in the town are the opponents as well. They know that Willoughby has cancer, and they think it is cruel for Mildred to bother the chief in his last few months of life. When Mildred has difficulties paying for the billboards, a mysterious fund comes in and helps her. Later, Mildred receives a letter from Willoughby, who has passed away. It turns out that the one who has sent her money was Willoughby, whom the billboards are meant to attack. In this case, Willoughby is the opponent on the surface. But in secret, he is also the sender. He helps Mildred with the billboards because he agrees with her to some degree: people should remember the case. Willoughby wants to solve the case, but there is not enough evidence to make any progress. He is being insulted by the billboards, but he also financially supports them. In the first act, Chief Willoughby takes two roles that form a juxtaposition, which comes from the complex relations among his interests, desires, capabilities, and behaviours. As the film unfolds, the characters' interests and personal traits may change, which can lead to the change of the Actantial role they take. Dixon, a police officer who respects Willoughby dearly, is the opponent of Mildred in the first act. He threatens Mildred, arrests her friend, and even beats the people who handle sales at the advertising company. Then, he receives kindness from people who have been beaten by him, and he reads the letter that left by Willoughby. The two incidents change his values. While Dixon knows that Mildred is the one who set the police station on fire (the fire leaves scars on his face), in the third act, he does not let go of a lead he accidentally finds in a local bar. He tries his best to get DNA samples from the suspect, which causes him some more injury. In the third act, he becomes Mildred's helper. The character growth transfers him to another role.

Unfortunately, Dixon is not able to deliver justice and capture the murderer. By the end of the film, the anger towards each other fades away, but they are still not giving up. The opponent at this stage becomes abstract: the unfairness and the absence of justice – it is not directly due to the failure of the system, but more towards fate. There was no evidence or witness in Mildred's daughter's case. By now, Mildred is not fighting any specific person, or the incompetent police, or the system, but the lack of inherent logic of this world. She fights for the absurdity, that bad actions are not always punished, and that good people do not necessarily receive better fates. Using the Actantial model, we can monitor how and when characters' goals have shifted, and how the change affects the characters' relationships with others.

In IDN, the players/navigators can affect the story to some degree, which makes them take roles in the Actantial model as well. Hence, a special Actantial model has been created as the players/navigators have joined in. Players/navigators are from outside of the story world, but they help unfold the story by the right given by the interactive media. The navigators/players can take either role. It is common to see players/navigators taking the subject role, especially in video games. The players control the protagonist and gain agency. They take up the responsibility and/or desire of the protagonist: saving the world (*Halo* game series, 2001-2021), seeking the truth (*Disco Elysium*, 2019), or saving themselves (*The Last of Us*, 2013). Taking the role grants players reasons to take actions, to kill and to spare lives. Moreover, it offers more than a reason to kill; it produces a place in the Actantial model that the player can take. In story-based games, players assume the roles and aspirations of their characters; characters' honour becomes players' honour, while characters' tragedies frequently compel

players to experience moments of sorrow. As discussed in the earlier chapter, in video game studies, the term immersion has been frequently used to describe such experience. The Actantial narrative is a different angle to explain the process of the players' identity change during immersion.

Either in traditional non-interactive stories or in IDN, it is common to see a character take multiple roles among subject/helper/sender/receiver (positive roles). For example, in a game about saving the world, *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of Kingdom* (2023), the protagonist Link is the subject who seeks a peaceful world. He is also the sender (he is capable of defeating the villains and saving the world) and the receiver (he benefits from the peace just like others). However, no matter which role they take, once players/navigators walk into the role, there will be a possibility that they may fail. When the players/navigators receive the outcome that is opposite to their will in the initial action, a special Actantial relation will be created: the player/navigator, along with the character, becomes their own opponent. For example, in *Late Shift*, Matt finds himself embroiled in London's criminal underworld, and he is forced to work with a group of armed robbers. In the story, the subject is Matt, the object is to return to a peaceful life, and the opponent is the criminals. The navigators are granted the power to choose how to act or speak for Matt. Mostly likely, the navigators will want to help Matt to survive the chaotic night. However, they can decide what option to pick, but they cannot decide what Actantial role they take. For example, after surviving a car crash, Matt should choose either to call the police about the robbery or hide away from everyone. If one chooses to call the police, Matt will meet the corrupted police officers, which puts him in an even more dangerous state. The navigator may have an intention to help Matt, but instead, they become the

opponent by sending Matt to the bad guys. The drastic role change and the disparity between their desires and the outcomes can evoke unique emotions rarely provoked in traditional films. These emotions will be discussed in the section below.

4.4 Narrative tensions in IDN

The inherent tension between narrative and interactive goals in IDN has been a recurring subject of academic discourse. This conflict, specific to the medium of IDN, presents unique challenges but also offers significant potential for further development. This section will analyse this tension using the structural theories examined in previous sections, highlighting how they can be utilised to enhance the interactive narrative experience.

4.4.1 Between agent character and navigator/player

The roles and their goals are not fixed in the Actantial model. Greimas suggests that when a given order/balance is disturbed in the story, a contract is established; the subject, 'who becomes competent along the axes of desire, obligation, knowledge, and/or ability', seeks the new order or rebuilds the old one (Prince, 1994, pp 524-27). In other words, when the story begins, the main character, as 'the chosen one' by the author, with or without realising their importance, carries the responsibility, urge, or even obligation to seek a new balance in their world.

In *Three Billboards*, the protagonist, Mildred, embodies the quest for justice, even if it means resorting to violence. Throughout the film, she relentlessly seeks retribution for her daughter's unsolved murder, engaging in acts of aggression against both the police and those she believes responsible. Her

violent pursuit of justice is met with violence, both direct and indirect. Fortunately, throughout her journey, she also encounters not only violence but also acts of kindness from individuals who, despite being caught in the crossfire, choose to support her. Interestingly, some of those she initially opposes evolve to assist her in the case of her daughter's murder. In the film's conclusion, Mildred shows a moment of hesitation regarding her quest for justice. While contemplating whether to enact vengeance by killing a rapist-murderer in a different case than her daughter's, Mildred's initial motivation – rooted in anger and a desire for retribution – seems to waver. This hesitation symbolises a deeper shift in her character. After making efforts and receiving support from civilians from the public and the police, Mildred has realised that her goal has shifted from 'solving her daughter's murder' to an abstract, undefeatable concept: injustice. There will be cases in the world that remain unsolvable, as there will always be violence and malice acting on innocent people. Her new opponent is too big – no longer merely an incompetent police station as she used to believe. At the same time, she is not on her own like she used to think she was, when the police never solved the case, and her ex-husband moved on so fast. There are people unrelated to her who offer support, even going so far as to lie to cover up an arson she committed or going on a murder trip alongside her. That is when the film ended. Even though we will not know if Mildred keeps her murder plan, we know a new balance has formed up around her. The characters and objects in the six Actantial roles have reconstructed the relation among themselves and reached a rather balanced state. From this perspective, even from the beginning to the end of the film, the murder case remains unsolved, as if 'no progress has been made', but the

Actantial model shows us that the old order has been broken while the new one has been built.

The six roles in the Actantial model change in video games as well, and the situation can be complex in a unique way compared to the traditional media. In *Late Shift*, when the protagonist Matt is faced with the choice of either turning to the police for help, or running away with May-Ling, one of the thieves, the decision is largely based on common societal perceptions rather than clear information. Without knowing whether the police are corrupt or if May-Ling is trustworthy, the options become equally ambiguous. The navigator is forced to rely on general assumptions: the police traditionally symbolise order and justice, while the thief represents risk and adventure. This dichotomy encourages players to draw from conventional wisdom rather than informed judgment. However, the twist that hides behind the options is that the police have been working with the local gang. In traditional films, a plot twist where the protagonist turns to the police only to be betrayed by corrupt officers is a common narrative device. It adds suspense and subverts the audience's expectations without giving them control over the character's choices. However, in IDN with branching structure, an additional step is introduced through player/navigator's agency. Here, the protagonist might face the same decision – to trust the police or not – but it is framed as a choice. In *Late Shift*, when they select the police option and discover that it leads to capture and potentially bad endings, the navigator takes the Actantial role of the opponent. Maybe the navigator wants to help, but their choice leaves Matt stuck in a worse position. Roth (2018), analysing a cooperative action game *A Way Out* (2018), describes this situation as 'a betrayal' that occurs between 'the game and the players'. In this game, the two main characters, Leo

and Vincent, build a deep trust over the course of their shared adventure, but we discover late in the story that Vincent is an undercover cop. In the final stages, the gameplay forces both characters into a situation where they must shoot each other to continue. Even though players may be reluctant to engage in the final confrontation, the game forces the action, shifting the relationship between Leo and Vincent from allies to enemies, Actantial helper role to opponent role.

1) One of the common causes of forced change of role is the **information gap**. The *Late Shift* case is an example, where the options given here are not completely fair, because the navigator has no idea about the information about the bad police officers. Similarly, In *Bandersnatch*, when the protagonist Stefan wants to sell his game to the video game company Tuckersoft, he is given the choice of accepting or rejecting help from the company in developing the game. If Stefan accepts, Colin will say he chose the "wrong path", and the film will end shortly after that, his game receiving a 0/5 review from the critics. If Stefan refuses the offer and works on his game by himself, the film will keep going, and he will have the chance to make a highly reviewed game. In this scene, Stefan wishes to finish his dream of making a good video game, and that is the object. When the navigators choose to accept the help from the company, whether they want to see Stefan succeed or not, the navigators affect the story and become the opponent because their action takes Stefan away from his goal. This reflects a common rule during the interaction between the navigators and the story: the navigators can choose what to do, but they cannot always decide if the outcome meets with their initial intention. Whether their choices will help or sabotage the subject's plan depends on the writers. When the navigator steps into the story, they become part of it. This type of 'trap' node will make a plot twist. The promised plots labelled

in the option fail to deliver, which breaks the contract between the navigator/player and the writer. Furthermore, these kinds of nodes will soon lose their meaning of 'choice making' if the navigator/player experiences the story a second time – a trap plot leading to a bad outcome is a waste of time, and the player/navigator will often avoid the choice once they become aware of it. When forced to go against the subject's interest, it's not only breaking the contract inside the story (the subject seeks the object), but sometimes it also breaks the contract outside the story: the writer fails to deliver a purpose behind the forced plot developments. This raises a question: why create a less desirable plot solely for a brief 'gotcha' moment based on an information gap, especially if the navigator/player is unlikely to revisit that choice when they experience the story again? Especially in IF, which has a shorter length compared to common video game playing time, such elements need careful consideration.

2) Another forced change of role is the one using **the reward/punish systems**: punishing the ones who choose certain roles. The reward/punish system breaks the balance between the two options and makes one of them more desirable than the other. Use *Bioshock* (2007) as an example: the story takes place in Rapture, a large underwater city that was planned and constructed last century. In 1960, the protagonist, Jack, is a passenger on a plane that crashes in the Atlantic Ocean. As the only survivor, Jack makes his way to a nearby lighthouse that houses a bathysphere terminal, which takes him to Rapture. Jack is contacted by a voice via radio and is guided to confront the perils of the ruined city. The players have two choices when they experience the game/story: to kill the innocent little girls (Little Sisters) and get important resources ADAM (skill points), or not to kill them and stay relatively weak. Although later in the game,

there are other ways to compensate for the skill points, for the player's first play-through, it can be a difficult decision. If the players want to follow their ethical codes and avoid harming the innocent, it will potentially reduce the protagonist's chance of survival against future danger, which is against the protagonist's personal interests. While the players might desire to defeat the enemies, taking the role of the subject and the sender, the game forces them to pick a less aggressive path because the other option may be less humane for the player's value. Here, the player's personal interest is against the character's. The player faces two options: either follow the character's interest and probably feel uncomfortable or follow their own moral codes while preventing the protagonist from improving skills. Clint Hocking (2007) describes the situation in *Bioshock* as '[throwing] the narrative and ludic elements of the work into opposition… the game seems to openly mock the player for having believed in the fiction of the game at all' (para 4). In this argument, he coined the term 'ludonarrative dissonance' to describe such scenarios. The background story in *Bioshock* builds up the urgency to power up the protagonist and defeat the final boss, but the corresponding gameplay can be seen as less desirable. I may have to disagree with him about the term 'ludonarrative', as the game element is not the necessary cause of the scenario here. If the dissonance was generated by the game elements – as the players must encounter some battles to maintain the interactivity – the writers could have simply adjusted the action 'kill Little Sisters' to 'defeat Little Sisters and hug them', and the problem would be solved. Players can still have gameplay, and they do not have to face the cruel choices. Hence, I would argue that what Hocking describes here is less of a dissonance, but more of a moral dilemma occurring solely in the storytelling layer. Damaging oneself to save others is a

commonly used plot in traditional narratives. The reason that it brings more

tension in IDN might be because the navigators/players are made accountable for

the actions here. If the character, under the players/navigators' instruction, harms

some innocent people, it makes the players/navigators the accomplice.

In *Detroit*, there is a similar scene (see image below). One of the

protagonists, Connor, needs an important piece of information from Kamski, the

founder and former CEO of CyberLife (a world-leading manufacturer and retailer

of humanoid robots). Connor is assisting the police on a case about deviant

Androids murdering their owners. The word 'rA9' repeatedly shows up during the

investigation. Connor and police officer Hank visit Kamski to inquire about the

meaning behind rA9. Kamski agrees to tell Connor all he knows under the

condition that Connor kills a robot Kamski owns. 'What is more important? Your

investigation, or the life of this Android?' Kamski whispers.

Figure 4-4. Detroit: Become Human

Different from *Bioshock*, the moral choice is an intentional moral test set

by an in-game character, and Connor's decision will be properly addressed and

discussed by the characters. If Connor chooses to spare the girl, Kamski will

praise him for showing enough empathy to abandon his mission. If Connor

chooses to shoot the girl, Kamski and Hank will both be disappointed,

commenting on his obedience. The characters acknowledge the difficulty of the

choice, and there are further consequences (if Connor keeps acting unsympathetic,

Hank will 'kill' him and end the friendship with him). The consequences of the

choices are also relatively more complex. (1) On the surface, it is a moral conflict:

choose to spare life or choose to seek the truth. On a deeper level, the choice itself

is the goal: the story is about an Android's journey of seeking self-discovery. If he

chooses to shoot, Connor gains information, disappoints his friend, and builds up

his character (even though his character fails to exercise free will in this version).

If he chooses to walk away, he loses the chance to know what rA9 is, but his

change of priority makes him closer to fully embrace his freewill. (2) In this

scene, the two options lead to different outcomes, but it will not drastically change

the character's survival ability. In other words, the hard part is the philosophical

choice itself. It is part of the process of building Connor's character. Compared to

this, *BioShock*'s reward/punish system is hidden in the early stage. When the

option design is clearly about moral choice, the outcome does not address the

moral part immediately. *BioShock* did have the outcome, but it is in the late stage

of the game. It is a lack of promptness in that choice. As I have examined in

Chapter 2, the promptness always plays a part in how the story is received.

Unique tensions are created when the player/navigator walks into the story

and takes a role in the story. Some common narrative plots may provoke different

effects when applied in IDN. The navigator/player makes the choices and is,

therefore, morally responsible for the outcome, even though these consequences

are entirely fictional. Depending on the story setting, the stake of a choice can

vary. It can be a small task about finding a cat for the neighbour or making decisions that involve others' lives. In *Detroit*, Markus leads a revolution, forming an army to protest the lack of basic rights as an android. Peaceful protest or violence? Is causing more destruction under anger worth doing? Players will give their answers under two major influences: 1) the roles they take. Players control Markus and think from his perspective. In the Actantial model, where Markus is the subject, the object is equity between humans and androids. Markus and his followers were designed as subservient beings and, after gaining free will, they are driven by a profound anger, eager to prove their strength to society. Role-playing is an integral aspect of the game, as players are not only controlling Markus but are also invited to see and think from his perspective. 2) the morals and values of the players. In this process, the player's values are reflected in/added to Markus, completing a character arc unique to each player and bringing him closer to the player on a spiritual level – especially when the player makes decisions guided by their heart, rather than choosing options merely to see the consequences. If the player chooses to let Markus be peaceful, the public will accept them more easily, which is a relatively easy path. If Markus chooses violence, the game will show the fear of the public and battle with the police force. In this universe, Karla's journey will be more dangerous. In this case, the outcome is more tailored to the choice than a simple 'rewards or punishment' system.

Most of the time, the choices being made are based on the interests of the characters to assist the subject in seeking the object. But sometimes, it also requires the player/navigator to use their own moral values to make decisions. Putting a player's value above the character's interests is not necessarily a bad

thing, but the in-game dilemma does need to be addressed and acknowledged in the game/IF. After all, in the role-play stories, the player/navigator plays as the agent character, not as themselves.

The dilemma Olivia faces – whether to prioritise personal interests or do the right thing by standing out as a whistleblower – parallels the moral choice presented in *BioShock*. In *BioShock*, players must decide between harvesting the Little Sisters for personal gain or sparing them in an altruistic act. The difference is that Olivia's decisions lead to deeper shifts in personality and layered consequences. With each choice, the character evolves, reflecting on and sometimes regretting her decisions.

At the end of branch 0-1-1-2, Olivia expresses her frustration with the sufferings that she did not deserve:

(Page 290-1)

Neither of them raises their voice, but there is somewhat tension between them.

OLIVIA

You didn't see the funny point in this whole story.

ELAINE

What funny?

OLIVIA

If I keep trying to be the good person, will anyone
really stand by me? If another scandal breaks online,
how fast will they turn on me again? Josh believes
taking Murray's offer to join ChemGuard would actually
make a difference. But if something new comes up
against Murray, will the company turn on him? Will
I turn on him? ChemGuard is another version of Koss
for Murray. I fought one off, only to end up serving
another. Don't you think that's funny? *It is* really funny.

Olivia pauses for a few seconds, waiting Elaine to weigh in.

Elaine is too surprised to say anything.

<div align="center">OLIVIA</div>

> So, you're right that you stand on the moral high
>
> ground, but what does that do? Authors are useless,
>
> Elaine. You can only write things down when history
>
> has already settled. You're not more helpful than a
>
> teenager holding a metal deer.

Elaine has a bitter smile. She knows Olivia is right.

In branch 0-1-2-1, Olivia shows an unsettled feeling about Dylan's death, even though his dying ultimately helps her gain leverage from Murray.

(Page 327)

Olivia watches Elaine walking away. After a few seconds, she follows her. She waits until she sees Eliane hang up her phone through the window. Olivia walks to the balcony and closes the door.

<div align="center">ELAINE</div>

> It's a bit chilly out here, isn't it?

But Olivia stops her from going back in. She whispers to Elaine.

<div align="center">OLIVIA</div>

> Do you think… if we had put out the candle, there
>
> wouldn't have been a fire.

Elaine looks into Olivia's eyes.

<div align="center">ELAINE</div>

> Stop thinking about it. We had nothing to do with
>
> that fire. We just happened to be there.

Olivia purses her lips. The cold wind makes them shiver.

The reflective process of the characters grounds the narrative in human experience, steering it away from being a mechanical allocation of 'skill points'

and instead adding emotional depth and moral complexity. Moral dilemmas themselves are not inherently problematic; it is the method of their delivery that determines their impact and resonance with people.

4.4.2 Between author and navigator/player

After discussing how the navigator/player fits in the narrative roles that are traditionally reserved for story characters, in this section, I will discuss the communication between the author and navigator/player in IDN from two perspectives.

1) Under the text:

At a basic level, in terms of genre films, what will happen in any story is more or less expected. As McKee (1997, pp 178) points out, the lovers in a Romance story will meet, and the protagonist in a detective film will discover a crime. Often, the lovers will end up together, and the crime will be solved. Of course, there are exceptions, but most of times, they follow their genre conventions to various degree. When the recipient of a story (audience to shows/films/plays, reader to novels, navigators to IFs, players to video games) start to explore it, they spend time and money, hoping to gain satisfying experiences. When the story begins, a contract between the author and the recipient forms. However, the recipient of a story often wants more. They want to be challenged but not confused. They want to be surprised, want twists, but a Deus ex machina is unacceptable. In the more classical, linear films, the audience experiences the film in a relatively more passive way.

In contrast, IDN often involves a form of delayed communication between the writer and the player/navigator. For instance, in *Detroit: Become Human*,

when the player chooses whether to take a spare second to save a goldfish before his duty, there is an implicit understanding between the writer and player that this seemingly simple gesture carries symbolic weight, particularly in reflecting Connor's values: does he prioritise sympathy as a key virtue? The writer anticipates that the player will grasp the underlying significance, establishing a form of delayed communication that extends beyond the immediate choice. This interactive process builds a relationship between the player and the author, where the player's decisions elicit responses from the writer through subsequent plot developments.

Especially in IF where the branching nodes are the major interaction points, more information can be conversed through the options and outcomes settings. When there are two branches that are generated from a decision-making point, the navigator picks a branch as a response to the question ('Which option would you like to pick?'). Each subsequent branch then unfolds as a reaction to the navigator's choice. This setup establishes two layers of interaction: 1) Player-Media Interaction: This occurs spontaneously as the player engages directly with the narrative presented by the media. 2) Player-Author Interaction: This begins when the author finishes crafting the narrative options and concludes when the player selects a choice and receives the corresponding response. In the writing stage, the writer interacts with the presumed navigator (because the navigator does not exist in this stage). While navigating the story, the navigator interacts with the presumed writer (because the writer has finished the writing and has no more power to influence the story). When the navigator chooses an option with a certain desire but gets the opposite outcome, it is harder for the writer to stay invisible, since the interactions have been set up. With the power to affect the plot and the

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way to 'converse' with the (presumed) writer, there will be unavoidably disagreement, miscommunication, or deception. The decision node in *Late Shift* about whether to call the police is a deception that is created by the author and directed to the navigator.

Sometimes, after encountering a certain number of nodes and their consequences, people can discover patterns from it. In *Late Shift*, the safer choice is always the one that a character May agrees with. In *Detroit*, the decisions that support the androids' free will are encouraged (while the opposite is not punished, just less rewarding). This narrative design reflects the writers' moral perspective, promoting nonviolent protest as the ideal approach to social change. Once people pick up the hint and apply it further, unspoken rules are established, building up basic guidelines in the story. Players/navigators can use this information to help them make decisions. This information does not belong to the character's interest – it is not in the game or being aware of the characters. It is a rule that exists above the character. It does not belong to the player/navigator's moral values. It is a third factor that can affect the decision-making process, which can be seen as part of the contract between the writer and player/navigator, and it should not be easily broken.

In *Detroit*, whether Connor's decision is based on his own interest or the order he has taken from the company will affect Hank's attitude toward him. Since Connor and Hank meet, Hank always tries to test if Connor has some degree of selfishness, or if he strictly follows the order. If the navigator chooses enough dialogue to show Connor's obedience to humans, Hank will get more and more grumpy, and finally kill Connor, because Hank hates androids for being soulless human-look machines. Otherwise, if Connor shows enough care and

sympathy towards his android kind, Hank will help him and treat him as a friend. As a subject, Connor has two opposing objects. The first, explicitly stated by his superior, who is also the CEO of the cyborg company, is to assist the police in solving android-related cases. The second, while not explicitly stated, is implied by the recurring in-game option to let some cyborg criminals escape from the crime scenes. One of the implied rules is that choosing to be sympathetic to other andirons is encouraged.

While creating patterns for choice nodes and consequences can be a way for the author to communicate with the navigator/player, having no patterns at all – refusing to communicate – can serve a narrative purpose. In *Bandersnatch*, most of the choices we make do not seem to be helpful for Stefan's goal. In one scenario, the two options (take the drug or not) lead to one outcome (take the drug in the end) to display the sense of unavoidable temptation. In one story branch, Stefan experiences a breakdown, leading him to impulsively leap out of the window. Miraculously, he lands on the set of the very film he is a part of, giving rise to a metafictional scenario. These random branches give a sense of lack of contract/ground rules to serve the narrative purpose, which is to create a chaotic and confusing world for Stefan and for the navigators. What is more, in one story branch, the writer lets you incarnate as a Netflix logo in front of Stefan. As though some of the navigators may try to be the helper, Stefan gets upset with the rude intruder from a higher dimension. He swears at the screen, officially taking the navigator as an opponent. The navigators may try to help Stefan's dream of making a good game, but there is not much feedback about it until the last scene of the film. There are very few indications for the navigator to help expect or understand the plot unfolding (What is the Object? What or who is the Opponent?

Are the side characters trying to help or distract Stefan?). In the later stage of the film, it is more about Stefan's mental state than his original desire: making a good video game. It is natural for the navigators to feel confused, and it works. Stefan feels the same way as if his life is under someone else's control – someone he can feel vaguely about but cannot speak to. In this scenario, the only rule is that Stefan's game gets higher reviews in the vines involves murders. However, that rule is vague and needs one to navigate the film multiple time to find the pattern. There is no communication between the navigator and the author. The navigator synchronised with Stefan on the emotional level: they both face confusion and frustration.

2) Classic narrative technique

Classic narrative techniques may have unexpected effects on IDN. For example, hiding information from the protagonist to create a twist is a common narrative technique in traditional films. However, in IF, when this information is also hidden from the protagonist, who is then forced to make choices, a new layer of tension is introduced. In *Late Shift*, when people hope to help Stefan by choosing to go to the police, they put him in danger. In this case, the navigator unintentionally makes the protagonist the enemy of themselves against their will. Furthermore, this resistance can remind the navigator of the author's presence, leading them to speculate about the author's intentions, thereby shifting attention away from the narrative itself.

In common situations, sufficient and honest conversation is needed to create a clear story world, including my creative writing project. Every decision node in IF has relatively higher significance compared to the video game's abundant choices. How to set it and deliver the consequence should be taken more

cautiously. The major nodes in *Author's Note* are delivered with clear descriptions and followed by promised sequences to maintain an efficient communication. The branch always sticks to the information stated and implied in the corresponding option. For example, in branch 0 *Scandal*, when Olivia asks Elaine for moral support about standing up against the big cooperation. If Elaine chooses to comfort Olivia, Olivia will gain extra confidence and take the risk. If Elaine chooses to avoid the conversation, Olivia will lose her courage and avoid upsetting Koss. Trick options like 'Elaine chooses to encourage Olivia, but it backfired, Olivia was disheartened by Elaine's wrong approach' will not be part of the narrative, even though they could be a twist to reflect on human's struggle in non-interactive narrative. In a project with only fifteen major nodes, the priority was to unfold the way it implied, avoiding setting tricks around the options. Instant bad endings, which are also a common structure, will be avoided for the same reason.

To strictly follow the information and implications of the options presented, delivering the outcome as promised without introducing unexpected twists, is a straightforward and simple approach – yet it is often overlooked in favour of unexpected plot development. Trick options can lead to the navigator making choices that damage the protagonist's interest, temporarily forcing the navigator to become the protagonist's opponent. Creating tension in this way can be simple while inflicting strong emotions. However, one needs to be cautious about such plot design, which risks diverting the navigator's attention from the plot itself ('I hope to encourage the character to do the good thing') to the mind game against the author ('I wonder if encouraging would backfire and mess things up'). Interactive media contains a dynamic interplay between the player,

character, and author with each choice made. Every decision alters not only the storyline but also shifts the narrative framework, creating new relationships and tensions among these entities. While not every decision needs to carry deep meaning, it is critical for creators to consider the broader implications of each choice. By doing so, choices can amplify the unique tension among navigator/player, characters and author.

Greimas's Actantial model provides a valuable framework for exploring the nuanced dynamics between the author and the navigator/player, as well as examining how some traditional narrative techniques adapt to the IDN medium. For the creative component of this project, the focus is on using these insights to ensure a straightforward and honest approach to plot design. Rather than prioritising the novel effects of traditional techniques in IDN, the goal is to emphasise character development across branches. *Author's Note* avoids generating tension through hidden twists or concealed options. Instead, it offers straightforward choices where the outcomes are clear and align with the descriptions provided. The option design fosters a more transparent and deliberate interaction, allowing for decision-making that is grounded in logic and clarity rather than uncertainty or surprise.

This does not imply that the unique tensions between the author and the navigator/player should be dismissed. Instead, these tensions are acknowledged as valuable for further experimentation and creative exploration.

4.5 Conclusion

Section 4.2 analysed the text layers, revealing that the branching structure differs fundamentally from other IDN structures by influencing both the discourse and story layers, whereas most other structures typically affect only the discourse. In Section 4.3, I introduced Greimas's Actantial model, which guides the design of *Author's Note*. This model allows for a deeper understanding of the characters' dynamics, illustrating how these relationships evolve in the new media. Additionally, it examines how interactive media introduce both navigator/player agency and authorial intent into the narrative. The navigator/player's participation is more than merely assuming control of characters. Each individual within the narrative – be it a character, player, or author – operates with distinct agendas, goals, and interests. Section 4.4 explored further into the narrative tensions among characters, authors, and navigators/players. The uncertainty in the characters creates unique tensions between the agent, navigator, and author. Understanding the characters' roles is the first step to untangling the dynamic among the three parties.

Examining the Actantial roles serves as both a descriptive tool and an inquiry: how will an author fill in the model and orchestrate the narrative tensions among the three key parties? A distinctive element in this project is the introduction of the Scribe role, which separates the navigator from the protagonist. As Olivia and Josh (subject) are responsible for the main events and happenings in the story, they seek a way to their ideal justice (object). Meanwhile, the Scribe Elaine remains on the periphery of these events. When she observes and engages from a distance without directly influencing the primary narrative arc, granting the navigator an omniscient view, she takes limited responsibility.

When the camera follows the protagonists, the inactive Scribe walks out of any Actantial role, and the navigators temporarily fall back to the audience's seat. Elaine is given certain power to influence the characters, but within the narrative logic, in the end, the ones who make the decision are still the protagonists. The distance between the actual consequence and some level of influence is created; the moral dilemma and difficult choices would be directed to the protagonists, who may or may not share different interests and values than the navigator. In this sense, the Scribe synchronises with the navigator's identity, both of which are involved in the story but cannot and will not take over the protagonists' power to make decisions. Instead, they influence and witness. By doing so, the narrative can explicitly capture the protagonists' goals, morals, or interests. This approach helps to clarify potential conflicts of interest between the character and the navigator, preventing the identity of the protagonist from being overshadowed or blurred by the navigator's agency. By making the Scribe an intermediary, the narrative maintains the integrity of the protagonist's character while allowing room for the navigator's perspective to coexist.

The Scribe role redirects attention inward to the story's internal tension among the fictional characters. It also softens external influences from the navigator. This approach preserves the essence of branching structure in IDN: using alternative plotlines to introduce meaningful changes at the story level. Future exploration of higher-dimensional tensions – such as those depict author and player agency – remains a promising area for further study and creative work. This thesis offers basic tools for analysis to help with such efforts.

5. Conclusion

This project combines academic analysis of IDN theories and traditional narratology with a creative writing component. The critical and practical sections are developed in parallel, influencing each other dynamically. Insights from scriptwriting inform the critical analysis, while theoretical findings shape narrative decisions in the creative process.

The critical analysis identifies three key requirements for branching narratives: complexity, clarity, and coherency. These are combined with practical experience to complete the writing component. Major innovations include a redefined branching structure, distinguishing between major and minor nodes, and introducing a new character type: the Scribe. Reflections on the creative piece are framed from three perspectives: information attributes, character building, and fatalism. Each aspect highlights unique narrative effects achieved through the combination of structure and character design. Using narratology to analyse the dynamics within branching structure in IDN, this project explores how the navigator/player's entry into the story creates a new narrative state where characters, the player, and the author each pursue distinct goals, morals, and interests.

With the support of the critical component, the creative writing component identifies the elements inherited from video game narratives and traditional narratives. Further, the project examines which elements are essential to the narrative and which can be reconsidered or removed through a combination of analysis and practice writing. The story in *Author's Note* has a structure of eight vines, presented as outlines. Of these, four vines and one additional branch are developed into detailed scripts. Each vine portrays characters with distinct

differences to set them apart, while maintaining enough consistency to trace them back to their origins before they take their first steps in the story.

Expanding a single event into eight storylines with different characters requires careful dialectical analysis of the roles (Who are they? What do they want? What are they willing to sacrifice?) and profound reflection on the world itself (What repercussions will the character face? Who will support the protagonist, and who will try to harm them?). This vast narrative universe enables characters to encounter stories wherever they go: when they muster courage, they encounter setbacks (branch 0-1-1); when they struggle to do the right thing, they face temptation (branch 0-1-2 and branch 0-2-1); when they are in rage, they are handed with weapons (branch 0-2-2). Creating such a world demands immense effort to navigate the conflicting possibilities and overwhelming complexity while striving for clarity and coherency. This is challenging but also offers great opportunities.

The branching structure in *Author's Note* allows for varying character outcomes, which have been seen in existing IDN works. It also includes more perspectives of society, more themes, and tones. For instance, the story features Josh visiting victims of the toxic paint, Olivia confronting online harassment, and an extravagant upper-class party. While a non-interactive film or TV show could present multiple perspectives by increasing runtime, this work stands out by weaving these diverse societal angles into 'what if' alternate plots centred around a few main characters, creating an organic meta-universe. This integration is something traditional media cannot achieve and is distinct from this narrative structure.

Complementing the divergent events are the characters' varied development paths. Both Olivia and Josh attain high levels of complexity, with their strengths and weaknesses explored differently across branches. Their characters become more nuanced as alternate plotlines reveal facets of their personalities that would remain hidden in a linear story. This demonstrates one of the purposes of fiction: to reflect reality. The alternative plotlines capture the essence of humanity and explore possibilities that reality itself cannot reach. In real life, a person who chooses to become a whistleblower and bears the consequences might possess the capacity for compromise at the moment she has made the choice, but we may never witness it – even though it is an intrinsic aspect of their character. Traditional narratives have yet to venture into this literary proposition: the potential for unrealised traits in a person's character. The branching structure in IF allows us to explore such dimensions. More possibilities brought by IDN wait to be explored.

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Appendix

<u>Propp's thirty–one functions</u>

1. Absentation. One of the members of a family absents himself from home.

2. Interdiction. An interdiction is addressed to the hero.

3. Violation. The interdiction is violated.

4. Reconnaissance. The villain makes an attempt at reconnaissance.

5. Delivery. The villain receives information about his victim.

6. Trickery. The villain attempts to deceive his victim.

7. Complicity. The victim submits to deception.

8. Villainy The villain causes harm to a member of a family, alt. 8a: Lack. One member

of a family lacks something.

9. Mediation. Misfortune or lack is made known.

10. Beginning counteraction. The seeker agrees to counteraction.

11. Departure. The hero leaves home.

12. First function of donor. The hero is tested which prepares the way for his receiving a

magical agent or a helper.

13. The hero´s reaction. The hero reacts to the actions of the future donor.

14. Provision or receipt of a magical agent. The hero acquires the use of a magical agent.

15. Spatial transference, guidance. The hero is transferred to the whereabouts of an object

of search.

16. Struggle. The hero and the villain join in direct combat.

17. Branding, marking. The hero is branded.

18. Victory. The villain is defeated.

19. Restoration/ Lack liquidated. The initial misfortune or lack is liquidated.

20. Return. The hero returns.

21. Pursuit, chase. The hero is pursued.

22. Rescue. Rescue of the hero from pursuit.

23. Unrecognized arrival. The hero, unrecognized, arrives home or in another country.

24. Unfounded claims. A false hero presents unfounded claims.

25. Difficult task. A difficult task is proposed to the hero.

26. Solution. The task is resolved.

27. Recognition. The hero is recognized.

28. Exposure. The false hero or villain is exposed.

29. Transfiguration. The hero is given a new appearance.

30. Punishment. The villain is punished.

31. Wedding. The hero is married and ascends the throne.

<u>Creative writing component</u>

<u>Author' Note</u>
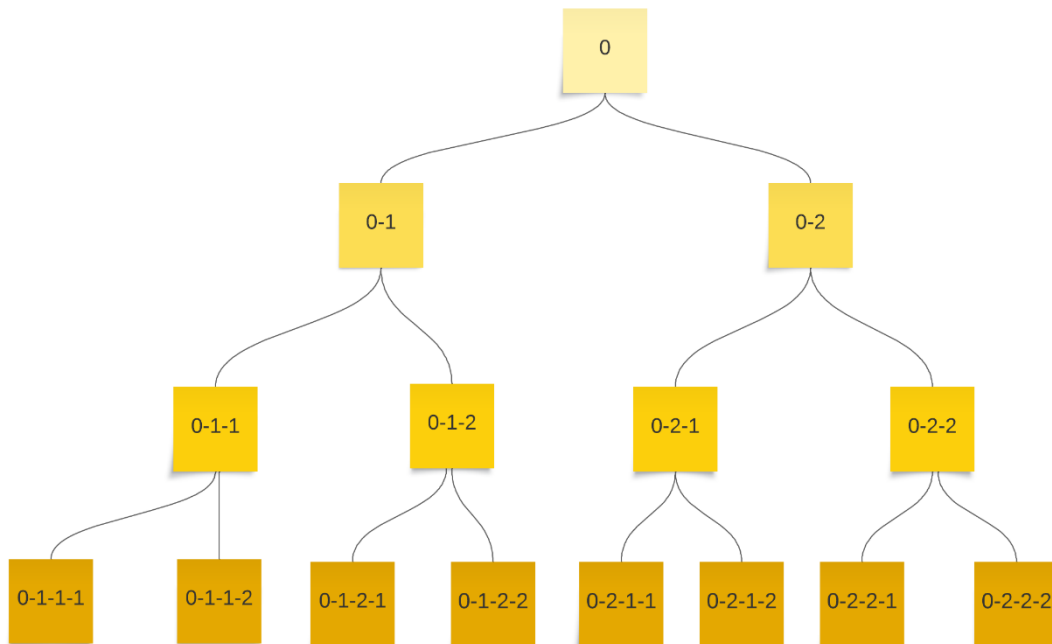
Outlines:

[Branch 0 Scandal](#)

Elaine receives a usb stick from her friend Olivia, who seems to be embroiled in a series of events that could potentially lead to legal disputes. Olivia works for Koss Group, which has been manufacturing poisonous but cheap products to make profits. Olivia has some documents about poisonous products, but it may also cost her job if she leaks it to the public. Olivia seeks advice from Elaine, but Elaine just got a great career opportunity. Should Elaine get involve into the scandal, or focus on her own career?

[Branch 0-1 Go with Olivia](#)

Elaine chooses to encourage her friend to send the information to the media. Olivia comes up with an idea to steal the lab report and succeeds to obtain this important evidence.

Government official approaches Elaine, asking her to convince Olivia to omit some data from the lab report. Should Elaine try to influence Olivia in exchange of some benefits, or refuse to be a pawn?

Branch 0-2 Stay and write

Elaine chooses to focus on her career. Olivia decides not to risk her job and stay quiet about the toxic products. Without Olivia's help, there is no way to gain the critical evidence (the lab report) from Koss. Their friend Josh tries to contact Olivia's colleague. Olivia warns him to not to harass her. Josh has to accept that he cannot do anything on his own.

Josh, a reporter for a sports channel, witnesses a pivotal match with an unexpected twist: a near-guaranteed win turns into a loss. He questions a footballer who stumbled twice during the game, asking if he has recently acquired a new house and what paint was used. The footballer is unsure about the paint but mentions the house's contractor is Koss Group. Later, during a visit to his cousin's house, Josh reaches a breaking point. The couple is preparing a nursery, and he notices the paint they've chosen is the same toxic brand, linked to Koss Group.

Josh approaches Elaine, declaring his determination to expose the toxic paint scandal, with or without help. He asks her for a usb stick containing files that, while not as critical as the lab report he lacks, could still aid his investigation. Elaine has promised Olivia not to share the files. Will she break her promise to support Josh's mission?

Branch 0-1-1 Hero

Olivia leaks the information, not realizing that a high-ranking government official (Sander Murray) had been trying to make contact. After the lab report has been leaked, the public opinion turned to an unexpected direction. Olivia is seen as a traitor because the document she has leaked includes sensitive military information. After enduring half a year of cyber and real-life bullying, Oliva is proven right on the toxicity of Koss's product. She becomes the media's favourite new hero and becomes a famous whistle blower against government and their contractor Koss Group.

Koss Group has received punishments, but Murray, the responsible government official, does not face any consequences at all. Elaine finds out that Olivia has been supporting Murray and receiving benefits from him. During the dinner, Olivia offers to introduce Elaine to a famous writer that Elaine always looks up to. Meeting the writer would also be good for Elaine's career. But Elaine is not happy about how Olivia has changed. Should Elaine support her friend's decision, or point out Olivia's moral value has changed (which will lose her chance to get to know the writer)?

Branch 0-1-2 Party at Murray's

Elaine chooses to talk to Olivia. They were invited to meet Dylan at Sander's property in Manchester. In the house, Ruby discovers some secrets on Sander's personal computer. Josh leaves a lit candle in an empty room. Elain has the opportunity to put it out. Or, she can leave it be.

Branch 0-2-1 Pawn

Elaine gives Josh the documents. Josh immediately tries to contact the media. However, nobody seems to be interested because Josh cannot provide a credible source. After many failed attempts, a reporter (Rachel) contacts him and wants to follow up the lead. After Josh works with Rachel for a few more times, he realises that Rachel has a political purpose. She cares more about tarnishing the image of Sander than being impartial, and she will not hesitate to subtly distort facts for it. Under Rachel's influence, Josh starts to think about using fake facts in the news report to gain his purpose. Elaine has the opportunity to stop Josh working with Rachel.

Branch 0-2-2 Revenge

Elaine chooses not to give Josh the documents, but that doesn't stop Josh from digging deeper into the toxic paint case. He gets in contact with some former residents/workers who have had close, long-time contact with Koss Group. Getting to know the people who are suffering, Josh becomes more and more aggressive. Later, with a constructor Mathew, he plans to murder Koss Group's CEO Moreau. Olivia discovers their secrets by accident, but to everyone's surprise, she doesn't report them. Instead, she leaves some of her savings to help them get some equipment.

They succeed in killing Moreau, but they don't plan to stop there. They plan to murder high government official Murray as well. A few nights before the operation against Murray, Mathew falls to the ground while standing for no reason. He denies it being wobble syndrome. The wobble syndrome can cause the assassination to fail if Mathew falls again during the operation. With no one else capable of carrying out the assassination, Josh volunteers. He's been playing a

supporting role while the actual killing was left to Mathew. Taking over Mathew's job means getting his hands dirty – and risking severe punishment if he gets caught.

Elaine is attending a podcast awards ceremony in the same building where a summit is also being held. Her show recently won a niche storytelling award, making the event a celebratory gathering for the podcasting community. Meanwhile, Josh approaches her with a request to discreetly place a hidden camera on the summit floor as part of his plan. Murray will be attending that summit. Josh assures her that her role will remain anonymous and that, if anything goes wrong, her name will not be revealed. Olivia thinks it is their time to make things right. Elaine can choose to help or walk away.

Branch 0-1-1-1 Grow up

Elaine chooses to support Olivia's decision, even though she strongly disagrees with the morality behind it. Elaine gains more career opportunities, thanks to Olivia. She accepts that people are not easily divided into good and bad. She has grown up.

Branch 0-1-1-2 Usefulness of literature

Elaine refuses to see Olivia's side. Olivia proceeds to live her successful life. One day after an accidental encounter, Olivia stops Elaine and tells her how she feels about Elaine's moral high ground.

Branch 0-1-2-1 A bright secret

Elaine chooses to ignore the candle. Later, the mansion is caught in a fire. Elaine and Olivia cannot forget about the candle. Maybe the fire could have been avoided.

Branch 0-1-2-2 A fair trade

Elaine goes back in and put out the candle. Much to Josh's disappointment, Olivia makes a deal with Dylan. In the end, some details from the lab report is omitted.

Branch 0-2-1-1 At what cost

Elaine doesn't try to convince Josh. He is okay to work with Rachel, who uses fake information to achieve his goal. Once he has accepted the mentality, he loses his standard.

Mathew tries to assassinate Koss's CEO but fails. Mathew is shot at the scene. After finding out this, Josh puts every effort into drawing public attention to Koss's case, including fabricating some information.

Josh and Mark are arrested and charged for defamation and libel. Rachel claims that she has never known about these. It turns out that Rachel works for a government officer Norman, who is political rival to Murray. Mark's family gets him a good lawyer. In this end, Mark and Rachel walk free out of the lawsuits. Josh is convicted, becoming a scapegoat for Norman's machinations. His action puts Koss under the spotlight. A year later, the investigation proves the toxicity of the paints.

Branch 0-2-1-2 Fight fire with fire

Elaine decides to change Josh's mind. She and Olivia lie to Josh, convincing that the lab report was largely made up by Ruby and Max. She and Olivia have made it up to make Josh lose hope on using the materials. Josh gives up.

Over the years, the victims of the paints die one by one due to the illness. Mathew tries to murder Moreau but fails. Josh uses the connection from Rachel (after threatening to expose her plan) and gets a job in the government.

Branch 0-2-2-1 Idealists

Elaine agrees to help. The camera helps them get to know the security and layout of the building before the big day. However, on the way to carry out the assassination, Josh is taken into police custody due to suspicions related to the Moreau's case. With this critical window of opportunity slipping away, the team fears they won't have another chance. Olivia steps in to take Josh's place and completes the mission. She is shot at the scene.

Branch 0-2-2-2 So close

Elaine doesn't help with the camera. Before the big day, Josh has to sneak in the building so they can be more prepared. He gets caught by the security but manages to run away before the police arrives. However, he hurts his ankle when he jumps out of a window while running away. Mathew takes the assassinator's role. Because he is unfamiliar with the layout, he fails to land the kill. Seeing Murray walks out alive, Josh breaks down crying. Everyone wonders if justice could have been achieved had they chosen differently.

INT. MALL. DAY.

A man is walking when he suddenly stumbles and falls on a flat, dry floor. A stranger behind him helps him up. He looks around, confused – there are no obstacles in sight. He shrugs it off and keeps walking.

EXT. A QUIET ROAD. DAY.

A woman with sport shorts is running. She nearly falls over. She doesn't find any obstacle on the floor either.

EXT. KOSS CONSTRUCTION SITE. DAY.

A worker (JUAN) falls from a scaffolding, slightly injuring both himself and another person.

INT. PRIVATE HOSPITAL. SAME DAY.

MAX (33, M), a manager in technical lab belong to Koss Group, is with Juan. Juan sits on the MRI machine, not in a good mood.

                    JUAN

          MRI? It's just some cut. I don't need this.

                    MAX

          Company will cover this

                    JUAN

          Since when do they care so much about the

          workers?

Max sighs and leaves the room. He stands behind the monitors, talking to the doctor. Taking out a file, he points to it as he speaks.

After a while, the doctor leaves the room. Max takes out his hand from his pocket, showing that his phone has been secretly recording the conversation.

INT. OPEN OFFICE, KOSS GROUP. FRIDAY MORNING.

Heading: HALF YEAR LATER

In the development department of Koss Group (a construction and real estate corporation), RUBY (24, F) works at her desk. She has short hair, looks sharp and energetic.

ANNA approaches her from behind.

> ANNA
>
> Mr. Woods wants to see you.

Ruby gets up and walks to Mr Woods' office. Some of her colleagues look at her. She looks like he doesn't know what happened.

On her way passing another department's desks, she exchanges a quick look with one of her colleagues, OLIVIA (25).

INT. MR WOODS' OFFICE. CONTINUOUS.

The sign at the door writes: Head of Development Department.

It's a bright spacious office. Mr Woods sits behind the desk. On this side of the desk, there are two chairs.

> RUBY
>
> Mr Woods.

> MR WOODS
>
> Ruby, here you are! Take a seat, please.

Ruby sits in one of the chairs casually, as if she can't tell that Mr Woods is not happy with her.

> MR WOODS (CONT'D)
>
> I just heard that someone betrayed our trust and took
> screenshots of inside emails.

> RUBY
>
> That sounds awful. We're all bound by the NDA
> that we signed as we enter the company.

Mr Woods inspects Ruby with his cold eyes.

> MR WOODS
>
> Surely, we'd expect people to have some common
> sense, don't we? But unfortunately, some people
> seem to be attracted to trouble.

Ruby looks concerned for Mr Woods.

> RUBY

That's too bad. Can I help you by any chance?

Mr Woods still looks angry.

                    RUBY (CONT'D)

Mr Wood, if you are suspecting me-

Mr Woods opens a file and displays a few of papers, which proves that it was
RUBY who took the screenshot.

                    MR WOODS

Not suspecting you. I *know* it was you. We have ways

to track down which account the screenshots were taken

from. Ruby, you're fired. The necessary documentation

to finalize this decision will be completed by the end of

the week. You can return home now.

Ruby realises her job cannot be saved.

                    RUBY

You know what they've been doing? Of course. This

company is run by corrupt scumbags, and you're one

of them.

Ruby takes out her nametag and throws it on the desk.

Mr Woods doesn't even raise an eyebrow.

                    MR WOODS

I have to remind you, any further breach of confidentiality

will be met with legal action. If you still want to sell your story

to the media, my advice is, don't.

Ruby stares at Mr Woods and strides out of his office.

INT. OPEN OFFICE, KOSS GROUP. CONTINUOUS.

Ruby picks up her personal belongings at her desk. A security guy stands nearby
to keep an eye on her.

                    SECURITY

Please make sure you've deleted every piece of

sensitive information from your personal devices.

                    RUBY

I have. Why would I want to keep them? Your boss

just threatened to sue my arse off.

Ruby shows the security guy the photo album and emails on his phone. Nothing suspicious. While the security guy looks at Ruby's phone, Ruby exchanges a brief look with Olivia.

Before walking to the lift area, Ruby raises her voices and announces her exit.

<div align="center">RUBY</div>

Stay alive and healthy, everyone!

The security guard nudges her out.

After making sure no one is looking at her, Olivia opens her personal email on her phone. The phone is using mobile data instead of company Wi-Fi.

In Olivia's mailbox, there is a starred email sent from Ruby with the title 'I think you should take a look at this'. She looks at her bag, there is a blue usb stick. Olivia proceeds to delete that email. Then, she goes to the bin folder and deletes the backup. Nobody seems to be looking in her direction.

INT. TOILET. A WHILE LATER.

Olivia checks the doors and makes sure there is no one here. She stops hiding her emotion here. She angrily stares at the mirror. Olivia dials a number.

<div align="center">OLIVIA</div>

Meet me at old place after work. Today.

<div align="center">JOSH (V.O.)</div>

I'm not in town today-

<div align="center">OLIVIA</div>

They fired Ruby, because they found out-

<div align="center">JOSH (V.O.)</div>

What? Another one? Are you alright?

<div align="center">OLIVIA</div>

I'm fine. I deleted *that* email. Got a backup in my usb

stick-

A lady walks in.

<div align="center">OLIVIA (CONT'D)</div>

Anyway, bye. Don't forget our plan.

Olivia hangs up.

INT. OPEN OFFICE. 4.50M.

Olivia keeps checking the time. The manager office seems empty. She turns off the computer 10 minutes before the end of the work and heads off early.

Olivia checks her phone.

There is a text from Josh.

JOSH: I'm taking a train from Liverpool. Should be there in an hour. See you in the old spot.

Olivia steps in the lift. She turns around and sees Anna. Olivia immediately puts her phone away.

INT. LIFT. CONTINUOUS.

Nobody says anything. Olivia is uneasy. Anna has a serious look, like a hound.

The lift reaches to the ground floor. Olivia strides out.

> ANNA
>
> How's your young sister doing? I heard that you're
>
> planning to support her through university in London.
>
> You're a good person.

> OLIVIA
>
> Eh, yeah…

> ANNA
>
> Koss gives us good working benefits. Don't you
>
> think so?

Anna walks to a different direction.

Olivia watches Anna leave.

INT. OLIVIA'S CAR. 30 MINUTES LATER.

The car is parked near William's Café.

The phone rings.

> OLIVIA
>
> I'm just here. I'm gonna grab some food before you
>
> arrive.

> JOSH (V.O.)
>
> Bad news. I can't make it by 6. The train from
>
> Liverpool to Manchester is cancelled. Strike,
>
> apparently. I'm taking a colleague's car. She

lives in Warrington. I'll take a bus from there.

> OLIVIA

When can you arrive?

> JOSH (V.O.)

I don't know. I just left Liverpool. My colleague

had something else to do here before setting off.

Olivia looks relieved.

> JOSH (V.O.)

Liv? Do you mind waiting for a bit longer?

Or, we can meet at yours later tonight, or this

weekend.

> OLIVIA

I don't know. Maybe it's not a good idea.

Olivia starts the engine, ready to leave the café.

> JOSH (V.O.)

What? Wait. You're going to give me the

recordings, right?

> OLIVIA

I need this job. I'm sorry.

> JOSH (V.O.)

We can find another way-

> OLIVIA

I've got to return to work. Talk to you later.

Olivia hangs up.

Someone knocks at the window. Olivia almost drops her phone.

INT. WILLIAM'S CAFÉ. A WHILE EALIER.

ELAINE (25) sits at a small table by the window. We can see William's café's

logo on the window.

> ELAINE (V.O.)

This was the ninth month after I quit my job to

be a full-time writer. I don't think I have made any

real progress.

On the table, there is coffee, a slice of cake, a notebook and a tablet (which displays some fantasy monsters/creatures on the screen). Elaine checks the time and puts her stuff in the bag. She walks out of the café. Through the window, we can see cars drive by on the street. One of the cars driven by Olivia, blocked in the traffic. Elaine didn't see her.

Elaine stops at a bookstore. At the corner of the display window, there is a pile of books with faded covers, next to a sign 'CLEARANCE £1'. There're a few copies of *Dawn before the Dragons* by Elaine Tomlinson.

<div align="center">

ELAINE (V.O.)

</div>

I had a fantasy novel published when I was young.

But this story is not about me.

A young man who has bought *Dawn before the Dragons* just leaves the shop. He falls over somehow. Elaine gives him a hand.

<div align="center">

ELAINE (V.O.)

</div>

I often wonder if I have the right perspective to

tell this story, as I was merely a bystander. Yet,

I feel compelled to share what I saw.

Elaine keeps walking. There is a parking space next to the main road. Olivia's car is parked there. Elaine notices Olivia's car. She walks to it and knocks at the window. Olivia almost drops her phone.

<div align="center">

OLIVIA

</div>

Oh. Hey! What're you doing here?

<div align="center">

ELAINE

</div>

I assume the same reason as you are here – for our

favourite cafe in town? I'm just leaving, but I'm

down for grabbing another coffee with you.

<div align="center">

OLIVIA

</div>

Oh. Um… I changed my mind. Next time?

Choose:

1) Ask what's going on

ELAINE. What's going on?

OLIVIA. It's something about work.

ELAINE. Anything I can help with?

OLIVIA. I don't think you can. I think I'm fucked.

ELAINE. Ok. You don't want to talk about it. But at least give me a ride?

2) Change the subject

ELAINE. Sure. How's Mia doing?

OLIVIA. She's fine.

ELAINE. Is she still skateboarding?

OLIVIA. Yeah. Not as much as before. Last semester in high school. You know.

Elaine can tell Olivia is really bothered by something.

ELAINE. Look like you're the person facing final year exams. Give me a ride, will you?

Olivia unlocks the door. Olivia's bag is on driver's seat. Olivia puts her bag to the backseat as Elaine gets in. Elaine is carrying a stylish bag, identical to Olivia's.

> ELAINE
>
> Was that Josh you were speaking to?

> OLIVIA
>
> How did you know?

> ELAINE
>
> I was stalking you.

Elaine points at the screen of the centre console.

> ELAINE
>
> Joking. I saw his name before you hung up. You two
>
> hanging out without me?

> OLIVA
>
> Doesn't matter. He's not coming anyway. Your
>
> home is that way, right?

> ELAINE
>
> Yes.

Elaine tries to ask something more, Olivia diverts the conversation.

> OLIVIA
>
> You still writing in local cafés? How's your
>
> full-time writing going?

Olivia drives the car onto the road.

ELAINE

My publisher is only interested if I write fantasy.

                    OLIVIA

They refused your horror drama?

                    ELAINE

They said it was too dark. Apparently, nowadays

people can play video games to knife enemies. But

when you write about guts and blood and organs,

it is too much for them.

                    OLIVIA

Have you tried other publishers?

                    ELAINE

Their responses are all the same-

Olivia's phone rings. The centre console screen shows it is from Josh.

Olivia rejects the call. Josh rings in again.

                    ELAINE

Okay, you're being weird. Talk to me.

Silence.

                    OLIVIA

No. it's nothing big. I mean, it might be something big.

In fact, I think, maybe I'm putting my career at risk.

                    ELAINE

By meeting with Josh? He's just a sports reporter.

                    OLIVIA

I need his resources. If the company finds out that I'm

doing this…

Olivia's phone lights up again. It is Josh sending texts.

                    ELAINE

You want to back out.

                    OLIVIA

It might be deeper that I thought. I don't want to

get involved in this anymore… We're here.

The car stops at tram station. Elaine looks at Olivia, who refuses to elaborate.

                    ELAINE

> Thanks for the ride. You sure you don't want to talk
> about this?

Olivia shakes her head.

> ELAINE (CONT'D)
> You take care. Call me if you want a talk.

Olivia nods. Elaine grabs the wrong bag from the backseat without looking and leaves the car.

INT. ELAINE'S HOME. A WHILE LATER.

Elaine walks in, puts the kettle on, and gets changed. She makes tea and sits down at her desk, reading a magazine. Then, she does yoga, takes a shower, makes dinner.

A few hours later, her phone rings.

> ELAINE
> Liv?

> OLIVIA (V.O.)
> I think I grabbed the wrong bag.

Elaine checks the bag on the sofa.

> ELAINE
> Oh, shit. What should we do? I need my notebook back.

> OLIVIA (V.O.)
> Too late today. Don't want to be caught in the traffic.
> Need to pick up my sister from her boxing lesson.
> Tomorrow?

> ELAINE
> Can't. Got plans for Saturday. Will be out of
> town the whole day. What about Sunday? Probably
> 2pm?

> OLIVIA (V.O.)
> That works.

> ELAINE
> Alright, I need to check the food. I will see you later.

> OLIVIA (V.O.)
> Wait. Is there a usb stick in my bag? It has my some

important information about Koss on it.

> ELAINE

Wait a second. Let me see. I don't think it's here.

Elaine looks through the bag.

> OLIVIA (V.O.)

No no no no… You sure it's not there?

> ELAINE

Still looking.

Olivia is distressed. She mutters to herself.

> OLIVIA (V.O.)

It was the only copy. Shit. Shit!

Elaine lifts the bag and turns it upside down. The blue usb stick falls on the sofa.

> ELAINE

Ha. I found it. Is it a blue one?

Olivia takes a deep breath of relief.

> OLIVIA (V.O.)

Yes. Yes, that's the one. Thank God.

> ELAINE

Your job is saved.

INT. INSIDE A CAR. CONTINUOUS.

Olivia is driving on a busy road. She is not fully relaxed about the usb stick being found.

> OLIVIA

I don't know about that.

> *(pauses for a while)*

Hey, can you do me a favour, and check the file on it?

Tell me what you think. I need your opinion.

> ELAINE (V.O.)

About Koss? I don't know much about designing

and art stuff.

Olivia takes a deep breath.

> OLIVIA

It's not really about my department. It's… We got

some dirty secrets from Koss. It might get the company

into trouble. One person fired, one suspended, so

far. I'm not sure if I want to be the third…

                    ELAINE (V.O.)

Okay. I'm listening.

                    OLIVIA

Koss Group is intentionally making the house buyers

ill. They know their newly synthesized polymer

compound is poisonous. But they're hiding

their lab data.

                    ELAINE (V.O.)

Why am I not surprised? How poisonous is it?

                    OLIVA

12 people diagnosed for now. The number will only

rise as time goes by.

                    ELAINE (V.O.)

Diagnosed for what?

                    OLIVIA

leukaemia.

Elaine gasps.

                    ELAINE (V.O.)

Check the usb drive. I need your opinion on it. But if

you don't want to get involved, it's fine. I'll pick it up

on Sunday. Just don't let Josh know you have it, alright?

He'll fight you for the information on it… Ugh. Maybe

he's right. I am a coward. I need to do the right thing-

Olivia makes a mistake while merging a lane. Car behind her honks.

                    ELAINE (V.O.)

Are you driving?

                    OLIVIA

I'm fine.

                    ELAINE (V.O.)

Doesn't sound like it. Stop thinking about it. You can't

fight for justice if you're dead in a car crash.

<div align="center">OLIVIA</div>

I didn't say I want to do the right thing.

<div align="center">ELAINE (V.O.)</div>

Huh?

<div align="center">OLIVIA</div>

Fine. I'll focus on the road.

Olivia hangs up. She still looks very concerned.

INT. ELAINE'S HOME. CONTINUOUS.

Elaine hangs up. she looks at the usb stick.

<div align="center">ELAINE (V.O.)</div>

I had the opportunity to intervene in this soon-to-be

widely known event. And indeed, I did intervene.

She walks around, looking for a place to put the usb stick.

Choose:

1) In the locked drawer.

She puts the usb stick in the locked drawer.

2) On the desk.

She puts the usb stick on the desk

<div align="center">ELAINE (V.O.)</div>

I made important choices. But this one is not one of

them.

The door opens, and Elaine's boyfriend STEVE (29) walks in.

<div align="center">STEVE</div>

I smell dinner!

<div align="center">ELAINE</div>

Shit.

She runs to the kitchen to check on the forgotten food on the stove. They are a

little overcooked.

<div align="center">STEVE</div>

You need a hand?

<div align="center">ELAINE</div>

I'm fine. How was work? How's the new position?

                    STEVE

It's not settled.

                    ELAINE

It's been more than three months. How's that

background check taking so long? You're not even

working directly for the government.

                    STEVE

Don't worry about it. They're just routine checks.

Steve is not telling the truth. But Elaine fails to notice the uneasy look on his face.

                    ELAINE

What a stupid routine.

An hour later.

It's darker outside. Lights in the house are on. Steve sits in the living room,

watching television. Elaine is in her study. She plugs the usb stick in the

computer.

On the screen it shows a few files, most of which are films and photography. One

file named 'Koss'. Elaine opens it. There are a few documents and an audio file.

Elaine clicks on the audio.

A man's voice comes out.

                    ALEXANDAR MOREAU

That doesn't matter. We don't need to announce it.

INT. KOSS BUILDING. A MONTH AGO.

It is an office room. A small microphone hides behind a plant at the corner of the

room. There are three people in the room, Alexandar Moreau (63), Luke

Chambers (31), and Rosie Moreau (22).

                    ROSIE MOREAU

But if we just let it go, everyone involved will be

affected - the assembly line workers, construction

workers, residents. The impact of Chloromoldexanate

is severe-

LUKE

Hehe. That's a funny word.

ALEXANDAR MOREAU

Enough about the leukaemia. What about that thing

that makes people fall?

Alexandar looks to Luke. Luke tries to remember. But the words escape him.

ALEXANDAR MOREAU

Sporadic Ataxic Episodes.

LUKE

Yes. That.

ALEXANDAR MOREAU

Whatl do people in the lab say?

LUKE

They said there is no need to worry about it.

Alexandar doesn't really believe Luke. But he doesn't keep chasing the subject.

He is reluctant about this subject.

ROSIE MOREAU

I can't believe this, Dad. You'd rather take a gigantic

fine when it blows out a decade later with millions more

affected?

LUKE

We're strictly following COSHH. How would they

know?

ROSIE MOREAU

They'll find out one day.

LUKE

Why're you even here, Rosie? Don't you have classes

to attend?

ROSIE MOREAU

Shut up. I don't have any courses today.

ALEXANDAR MOREAU

You shouldn't be here. In this office. It's not your

playground.

ROSIE MOREAU

But-

                    ALEXANDAR MOREAU

Nobody leaks the information. It's not up for

discussion.

Luke opens the door for Rosie.

                    LUKE

Time to go back to school.

Rosie looks at Alexandar, who dismisses her with his impatient gesture.

                    LUKE

Let me tell you something valuable: don't draw attention

to yourself when nobody is suspicious of you.

INT. ELAINE'S HOME. CONTINUOUS.

                    LUKE (V.O.)

Kids these days.

The audio ends.

Elaine looks through the other documents in the Koss file.

The first one she opens is a picture of a screen, which displays the first page of a

document. There are texts as following:

** Chloromoldexanate: Chemical Safety and Clinical Trial Report**

Company Confidential - For Internal Use Only

Report Summary:

In our comprehensive clinical trial analysis of the chemical compound code-

named "Chloromoldexanate", a highly volatile component found within the

commercial product "ChromaGlow", alarming findings have emerged. The trial

results indicate an unprecedented and alarming increase in leukaemia incidence

rates, posing significant health risks to both consumers and workers exposed to

"ChromaGlow".

Key Findings:

1. Leukaemia Incidence Surge:

According to the reported cases among the exposed individuals and lab tests

conducted on rats, it was observed that exposure to 'ChromaGlow', specifically

due to the presence of 'Chloromoldexanate,' led to an astounding 355% increase in

leukemia incidence rates compared to the control group.

There is no more of the document.

                              ELAINE

              What kind of trouble you got yourself into, Liv?

Elaine search 'Sporadic Ataxic Episodes' in the file but doesn't find anything. She
then looks up Koss's information on internet. Mostly of which is positive news.
Koss Group has a local project in Manchester which is to build big council house
buildings.

Koss Group Recognized as a Leading Builder for Exceptional Quality and
Customer Satisfaction
Koss Group: Building Dreams and Delivering Delightful Homes Across the
Nation
Manchester's Housing Crisis Addressed by Koss Group's Low-Cost Council
House Developments

                              STEVE (V.O.)

                 Do you want some ice cream?

INT. LIVING ROOM. A WHILE LATER.

Elaine and Steve sit in sofa, having ice cream while watching tv.

                              STEVE

                 That's what you've been reading tonight? Wow. I see

                 upcoming lawsuits for Koss. This is going to be a huge

                 scandal.

                              ELAINE

                 Yeah. She probably should stand up. Be that hero.

                              STEVE

                 Lawsuits can be daunting though.

                              ELAINE

                 She needs a good lawyer.

ETX. MAX'S HOSUE. SUNDAY MORNING.

Olivia parks her car outside Max's house. She gets out of the car. We can hear a
kid crying inside the house.

Another car pulls in. Ruby gets out of the car. Ruby doesn't look like she is too
bothered about being fired earlier this week. They walk to the door.

OLIVIA

How have you been?

                        RUBY

I'm fine. My dad owns the flat I'm living in. It's not like

I'm worrying about the rent or something. Max didn't

sound like he has been well though.

Ruby knocks at the door.

                        OLIVIA

You said you didn't get the lab report before they

caught you.

                        RUBY

Nope. They must have been alerted after they found

out that Max had taped them.

Max opens a door with a tired face and a kid (DONNA, 3) in his arm. Donna still

has tears in her eyes, but she is not crying right now. He doesn't seem too happy

to see his old colleagues, and he is avoiding eye contact.

                        MAX

Come on in. Please don't raise your voice. This one

doesn't like it.

INT. MAX'S HOUSE. CONTINUOUS.

Olivia and Ruby take off their shoes. The hallway is beautifully decorated. But

there are toys lying around.

They enter the living room. There are even more kids' stuff and some clothes

laying around. Olivia picks up some and drops them to the toy basket next to the

sofa.

                        MAX

Don't bother.

                        RUBY

Jesus, when was last time you had a sleep, man?

                        MAX

Must be the night before I got suspended.

                        RUBY

Let us know how we can help.

OLIVIA

          I can't stay too long. I need to meet up with a friend

          after this. But if you need babysitting or something,

          just text me. You know my schedule.

Max puts Donna in the playpen and walks to the kitchen. Olivia and Ruby sit
down.

                    MAX

          Can I get you anything? Tea? I ran out of-
                         (checks the cupboard and fridge)
          everything other than tea and formula.

Olivia and Ruby exchange a look.

                    OLIVIA

          I'm fine, thanks.

                    RUBY

          Same. I can't have tea without milk. Too bitter.

Max looks at the sofa. There are too many items piling up on the sofa and no more
room for Max. He sits at the table.

                    RUBY

          Any words from Koss about what happens next?

Max doesn't reply that question.

                    OLIVIA

          What's our plan now? Only you two had the access

          to the lab report. And now both of you are out of

          the company.

                    RUBY

          Even though Olivia is in the designing department,

          maybe we can still find a way to get the files…

          I mean, Luke Chambers is dumb enough but

          also has the highest clearance. We could-

                    MAX

          I think we should stop doing this.

                    RUBY

          What?

                    MAX

That's why I asked us to meet one last time. I

quit. And Olivia, I suggest you doing so too, before

you lose your job as well.

Silence.

The head of the robot toy in Donna's hand disconnects from its neck.

Max walks over and puts the robot head back to its body.

                    RUBY

The hell you mean by quitting?

Max stares at Ruby. Ruby looks at Donna, who is focusing on the robot toy.

                    RUBY (CONT'D)

                    (lowering voice)

So what? It's not like she can understand us.

                    MAX

It was a mistake to let you know the whole thing about

ChromaGlow. I'm sorry that got you fired, Ruby.

                    RUBY

Then don't quit after we're halfway there.

                    OLIVIA

Did Koss make you an offer?

                    MAX

They said I could come back if I stop what we were

doing and tell them who also knows about

ChromaGlow's toxicity.

                    RUBY

Did you-

                    MAX

I didn't snitch. No. They reached me with this offer

after they caught you. I think they are a bit scared.

Woods promises me the company is working on

reducing the chemical's toxicity. They want to solve

the matter inside the company.

                    RUBY

And for some reason, you don't think they're lying.

                    MAX

Ruby, I have a huge mortgage and three kids to
feed.

RUBY

What about recalling the products? What about
reducing the toxicity of the crucial ingredient?
Did they mention that?

OLIVIA

He's right. Koss is not going to change, unless it gets
slapped with a hefty fine.

MAX

It's the government's duty to regulate new products and
protect citizens' health. It's something too heavy to
be put on normal people like you and me.

RUBY

That's what you called us in for?

Donna looks up because RUBY raised his voice. RUBY puts up a forced smile at
her.

RUBY

Come on, man. We can fix it. Once the case is made
public, Koss will have to reimburse you, and the
victims. We just have to hang in there a little longer.

MAX

I told you, the Moreaus weren't aware they were being
recorded. The taps can't be used as evidence. Without
the solid data from the lab report, we can't prove
anything by that illegally recorded audio.

RUBY

They still don't know about Olivia. She can-

Max turns to Olivia.

MAX

We've reported ChromaGlow to HSE and Trading
Standards office. We've done enough. Don't
risk your job for this.

RUBY

We're running against time, Max. While we wait for

government to go through procedures, ChromaGlow

will take over the market; Chloromoldexanate

will be absorbed in millions of people's

bodies.

Donna is a bit unsettled. Max picks her up and walks around to calm her down.

MAX

Don't be so dramatic. Let's trust the system, okay?

RUBY

Is that supposed to be a joke?

Olivia's phone rings. It is from Elaine.

OLIVIA

Sorry. I need to take this.

(to the phone)

Hi, what's up?

She walks away and picks it up. We can hear Max and Ruby argue in the
background. The voice in the room overlaps with Elaine's.

ELAINE (V.O.)

Are you still coming this afternoon? Can you arrive

a bit earlier? I plan to use the rest of the day writing.

It would be nice if we meet before I'm in the zone.

Also, I have some good news for you-

MAX

Kid, look, I've been in your age. I was cynical,

too. But once a while, you gotta trust the government

and let them do their job.

Olivia frowns as she can't focus on the call. She walks to the corridor.

RUBY

Don't you 'kid' me. Maybe you should grow

a pair.

Olivia checks the time, it is 11.15 am.

MAX

Say that again?

OLIVIA

(to the phone)

I'll set off soon. Probably be at yours at 12.30.

ELAINE (V.O.)

That'd be great. Thanks.

The toddler in the playpen makes a noise. Ruby obliges Max's request, but she lowers her voice.

RUBY

Grow a spine, Max.

MAX

Yes. Probably. That's called life. I have a family

to support. I can't act as reckless as you, who

can just run back to live with her parents.

Another kid's voice comes from upstairs.

KID (V.O.)

Daaaaad, I can't find my orange colouring pencil!

MAX

Be there in a second!

The exhaustion on Max's face erases Ruby's anger.

MAX

Great. Now you feel pity for me.

RUBY

You're middle-aged man with 3 kids and mortgage.

It's easy to feel pity.

KID (V.O.)

DAD!

MAX

The bloody pencils.

RUBY

It's okay for him to swear.

Max runs upstairs.

Olivia stands up.

MAX (V.O.)

Have you checked your backpack?

OLIVIA

> I need to go. I have to meet a friend. Kinda urgent.

>   RUBY

> I'm leaving, too. I guess Max has all of this to morally
> exempt him from stepping aside and watching people
> die.

Max walks down the stairs just as Olivia and Ruby entre the doorway.

>   MAX

> Don't be so dramatic. The odds of people developing
> leukaemia after long-term exposure is 0.04%. It's not
> like we were gassing them.

Ruby glares at Max. Olivia steps out before Ruby starts another argument.

>   OLIVIA

> We got to go. Hope everything works smoothly with your
> work, Max.

Max and Olivia share a quick hug. He turns to Ruby, hesitating about hugging or not.

Ruby's hands are in her pockets. She is not hostile to Max anymore, but she still needs to emphasise the number.

>   RUBY

> 0.04% is four times the normal rate. And people
> have only been exposed for two years. The number
> will rise. We all know it.

>   MAX

> Sorry, Ruby.

EXT. OUTSIDE MAX'S HOUSE. CONTINUOUS.

Ruby and Olivia stand in front of their cars, looking at each other.

>   RUBY

> Olivia, please don't quit. I can help you get the lab
> report. We can do this together.

>   OLIVIA

> I really need to go. Sorry.

>   RUBY

> Let me know when you've made a decision!

Olivia gets in her car. From the mirror, we can see Ruby stays still and watches her drive away.

<div align="center">ELAINE. (V.O.)</div>

> That was all I heard from her afterwards. Probably
>
> missing some details but doesn't hurt.

INT. OLIVIA'S CAR. CONTINUOUS.

Olivia drives absent-mindedly, troubled by her thoughts. The view of Manchester suburb flies passes the window.

<div align="center">ELAINE (V.O.)</div>

> She described her colleagues well to me, but she didn't
>
> really talked about herself. And the car crash she almost
>
> had. So, I have to use my imagination.

Choose:

1) pessimism

A car cuts in front of Olivia abruptly, almost colliding with hers. Olivia slams on the brakes. The other car speeds away, leaving her to drive much slower due to the shock of the near miss.

Shortly after, someone honks at her for the slow speed on the highway. Olivia anxiously rummages through the glove compartment and finds a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. She opens the window and smokes.

After a while, she arrives at Elaine's. She throws chewing gum in her mouth and sprays some air freshener in the car and on herself.

She walks to the door and knocks. Elaine opens the door.

ELAINE. You okay? You don't look so good.

OLIVIA. I almost got in a crash earlier. People these days.

ELAINE. Come in.

2) Anger

A car cuts in front of Olivia abruptly, almost colliding with hers. Olivia slams on the brakes. She notices it's an Audi, although not a particularly flashy model.

OLIVIA. Fucking idiot.

She hits the gas and catches up to the Audi ahead. Olivia lowers the window and throws a cup of half-finished coffee at the Audi. The driver instinctively turns the steering wheel in the opposite direction and hit the brakes, disappearing from her rearview mirror. It was unclear if an accident has occurred.

OLIVIA. Shit.

A while later, Olivia arrives at Elaine's. She sits in the car and searches 'car crash M60' on her phone. The nearest results are from 4 days ago.

She still appeared somewhat apprehensive.

She walks to the door and knocks. Elaine opens the door.

ELAINE. You okay? You don't look so good.

OLIVIA. I almost got in a crash earlier. People these days.

ELAINE. Come in.

INT. ELAINE'S HOME. CONTINUOUS.

Olivia is about to take off the shoes.

                    ELAINE

          No need. The floor needs a clean anyways.

                    OLIVIA

          How was your day?

Olivia notices the blue usb stick on the tea table, next to her bag. She strides into the living room and pick them up.

                    ELAINE

          I…

TITLE: EALIER TODAY.

The camera stays in the living room. The doorbell rings. The clock on the wall shows 10.40 am.

Elaine drags her feet as her walking out of the study and heads to the doorway.

                    NICHOLE (V.O.)

          Morning Olivia! Did I wake you up?

                    ELAINE (V.O.)

          No, on the contrary…

They walk into the living rom. NICHOLE (25, F, junior editor) is a cheerful person. Olivia's bag is on the tea table.

Nichole gazes at Elaine with an admiring look, while also trying to make it less obvious.

<div align="center">NICHOLE</div>

Night owl, huh? How's your writing going?

They walk into Elaine's study. They sit down at the desk, which is covered with drafts.

Elaine looks uneasy. She looks small next to the stacks of books and drafts.

<div align="center">ELAINE</div>

I've made some progress.

<div align="center">NICHOLE</div>

Don't worry, I'm not here to push for your new book.

Look, you got some letters.

Nichole takes a few letters from her bag.

Elaine puts the kettle on and puts some instant coffee in her mug.

<div align="center">ELAINE</div>

Thank you. You didn't have to make a trip for this.

<div align="center">NICHOLE</div>

It's fine. I'm seeing my friend today who lives
nearby. I saw these pile up from last year. I figured
may as well. Um… by the way, how is your short
story collection going? Not the fantasy novel. I mean
the one that got rejected last year.

Nichole observes Elaine carefully.

<div align="center">ELAINE</div>

Still sitting in my pc. The editors all cite similar
reasons. The content is too dark and gory. The
themes of suicide, the body horror, the violent
relationships… You've read it.

<div align="center">NICHOLE</div>

Yes. And I think it's brave of you to try different
genre. To explore the style. Even though
mainstream publishing may find it too edgy.

<div align="center">ELAINE</div>

I've been told that, too. Including from you guys.

NICHOLE

I'm sorry. If only it was up to me to decide.

(pauses)

What do you think of podcasts?

ELAINE

As storytelling media? Yeah, people nowadays prefer

listening than reading, don't they?

NICHOLE

You're not opposed to the idea? Great. You probably

would like to hear this. I may have found the perfect

show for you. I'm sending you the link.

Nichole takes out her phone and sends a link to Elaine.

ELAINE

The Ninth Eye.

NICHOLE

It's absolutely your style. They feature niche, macabre

stories with a bloody, horrifying, and extreme style.

They need a writer urgently.

Elaine checks the description of the podcast show.

ELAINE

It does look interesting.

NICHOLE

You need to hurry up. The deadline for accepting

applications is tomorrow. Sorry, I just saw this

today.

ELAINE

No, thank you for showing this to me.

The conversation is over. But Nichole is not standing up. She still has something

to say.

NICHOLE

I, I heard your arguments with our senior editor.

Did you really give up writing fantasy? You were so

good in your last book.

Elaine purses her lips.

INT. LIVING ROOM. A WHILE LATER.

Nichole has left. Elaine makes breakfast with headphones on, listening to the podcast, The Ninth Eye.

Steve comes home with sportswear from his morning exercise.

> STEVE
>
> Elaine. Elaine?

Elaine is very focused in the story. He walks to her and taps on her shoulders. Elaine snaps out of concentration.

> STEVE
>
> What're you listening to?

> ELAINE
>
> A fiction podcast. I love its style. They're looking
>
> for a new writer. I want that role.

> STEVE
>
> Cool.

Steve gets a glass of water from the tap. He brings up a subject causally.

> STEVE
>
> How about the work you used to do with your activist
>
> friends on environmental issues. How's that been going
>
> lately?

> ELAINE
>
> That was just two articles. I'm not writing anything for
>
> them lately. Oh, hell…

Elaine puts her sandwich and coffee in a tray while checking her phone.

> STEVE
>
> What?

> ELAINE
>
> The Ninth Eye. The podcast. I need to add more words
>
> to my story so it fits the length requirement for the
>
> writing sample. I need to go.

> STEVE
>
> When's the deadline?

> ELAINE

> 10 pm tonight. Is Olivia still coming today? I
>
> need to check with her.

Steve watches her busily walk away.

BACK TO PRESENT.

> OLIVIA
>
> How was your day?

Choose:

1) Elaine talks about herself.

ELAINE. I just learnt about a good opportunity for my stories. You know how

I've been stuck since I tried to change my style and genre, but…

Elaine notices that Olivia is frowning.

ELAINE. Anyways, what's up? Were you in a fight when I called?

2) Elaine asks about Olivia.

ELAINE. A busy day for me. But I always have time for you. Catch me up.

What's been going on?

> OLIVIA
>
> Me and another colleague were at Max's. He was the
>
> guy who recorded the audio in that usb drive. Have you
>
> listened to it?

Elaine walks to the study. She digs out some short stories that printed on A4
paper. Olivia follows her to the study.

> ELAINE
>
> Yeah? Shouldn't you guys be like… on the same side?

> OLIVIA
>
> There're only three of us. Now one wants to quit.

Elaine is skimming through her old works.

> ELAINE
>
> What's your stand in this?

> OLIVIA
>
> You know, the 18-year-old version of me would
>
> choose to fight without a doubt. But now? ... Have

224

I become a bad person?

                    ELAINE

Of course not. You just learnt how this world works.

It sucks.

                    OLIVIA

 I want to go to Koss's construction site. I know

you said you had some writing to do, but can you

spare this one day to go with me?

Elaine checks the time. It is almost 3 pm.

                    ELAINE

 For what? Like a serial killer going back to

the crime scene to admire her work?

                    OLIVIA

Come on.

                    ELAINE (V.O.)

I had a feeling that the podcast was the opportunity

I had been waiting for. However, is it more

important than being there for Olivia when she

struggles?

Choose:

1) Be there for Olivia. (branch 0-1 Go with Olivia)

2) Work on the short stories. (branch 0-2 Stay and write)

INT. CAR. A FEW MINUTES LATER.

Elaine tries to talk, but Olivia's moody face stops her from saying anything.

Elaine looks out the window.

ELAINE (V.O.)

Can you tell from her face that she's about to make a

big life decision? I couldn't. She told me this day was

that important point where she made that decision

about the Koss case, and I helped her make that

decision.

Elaine looks down to checks her phone. She puts on her headphones and listens to the podcast Ninth Eye.

ELAINE (V.O.)

Nicole was right. I do like this podcast. I thought,

 I could take an afternoon off to be her company.

Then, go back, finish complete a brilliant application

that would get me the role I wanted.

It didn't.

EXT. ST HELENS STREET. A WHILE LATER.

It is the less pretty side of the city. The street looks dirty. Even the trees are small and half dead.

OLIVIA

That's our newest project with the government.

There are two apartment building in progress. The construction site is partly enclosed. The banners have pictures of smiling face with the sign: Koss Group, delivering your next home.

Elaine and Olivia stand outside the fence.

The main structure is finished. We can see a complete shape of an apartment building. There are no frames on windows or doors, no paints.

Olivia walks closer. A worker (SAM, 30) stops them.

SAM

Can I help you?

Olivia shows her company name card.

> OLIVIA
>
> I'm from the design department. We're here to check
> the inner decorations.

> SAM
>
> What you want to check for? We're just starting the
> paints.

> OLIVIA
>
> Just some routine checks the MEP systems. See if they
> coordinate with our designs.

> SAM
>
> We *are* following the blueprint, you know? Shouldn't
> have any problems.

He steps away to let Elaine and Olivia in anyways.

INT. APARTMENT BUILDING. CONTINUOUS.

Elaine whispers to Olivia.

> ELAINE
>
> Are you sure we want to go in?

> OLIVIA
>
> A few minutes should be fine. It does more harm to
> people who get exposed to it long term.

Elaine takes out a N95 mask from her bag and puts it on.

> OLIVIA (CONT'D)
>
> Where did you get that from?

> ELAINE
>
> I have a big pile of masks left from COVID.
>
> *(to Sam)*
>
> Sorry, I'm a bit sensitive to the smell of paints.

Elaine and Olivia walk in, followed by Sam. They walk around in the building.

The flats look bright and nice. Everything seems normal. There are piles of paint

buckets in the corner. The labels show that they are ChromaGlow.

> OLIVIA
>
> Paint job's not done?

SAM

               Only a few rooms left in the top floor.

Olivia and Elaine tour a few rooms with Sam following them.

                              OLIVIA

               Do you like our newest paint, ChromaGlow?

                                SAM

               Not bad stuff. It dries quickly, applies evenly,

               and layers well.

Sam looks impatient.

                              OLIVIA

               Do you think Koss's construction is safe enough?

               No one gets ill for working on site, do they?

Sam gives Olivia an odd look. He thinks Olivia asks a dumb question.

                                SAM

               Nope. Everything here follows HSE safety requirements.

               Are you done?

                              OLIVIA

               Yeah. Thanks for your time.

As they leave the construction site, they hear a thud. They look back. Sam just
stands up from the ground.

Elaine is startled. She looks at Sam as if he was dying.

                              ELAINE

                Are you okay?

                                SAM

               I'm fine. Probably need some energy drink.

ETX. ST HELENS STREET. CONTINUOUS.

There is nothing to look at on this side of the street except for the unattended lawn
full of weeds. There is a café with an old sign and dirty windows.

                              ELAINE

               What was that? Did he have it?

                              OLIVIA

               Do you want some coffee?

                              ELAINE

Sure.

INT. OASIS CAFÉ. CONTINUOUS.

They walk into the café and get seated in the small outdoor area. The ground has some suspicious stains. The chairs and tables are a bit rusty, and some paint has peeled off. There is no waiter coming up after they are seated.

                    OLIVIA

I think we need to order at the counter. What do

you want? My treat.

                    ELAINE

Cappuccino, and a slice of cheesecake, if they have any.

                    OLIVIA

You got it.

Oliva goes to the counter. Two workers queue before her. She stares at them closely.

                    WORKER B

The fucking valve had to break right before my

shift ends. You know that central control one on

the third floor? If it can't be fixed, the work of the

rest of the floor has to wait. But I left. It passed

my working hour, I ain't working for free.

                    WORKER C

Not your problem. The workload is insane. They

Can't expect us to do everything.

Olivia comes back to their table with deserts and coffee.

                    ELAINE

Thanks. That looks better than I expected.

Olivia watches the two workers walk out the shop.

                    OLIVIA

That was Sporadic Ataxic Episodes.

                    ELAINE

I remember it was mentioned in the recordings. But

I didn't find any files in the usb.

                    OLIVIA

They call it Wobble Syndrome. People who have it
sometimes fall over. That's it.

ELAINE

So it's not leukaemia.

OLIVIA

No. It's because the spinal cord disturbed by the chemical
in ChromaGlow.

ELAINE

At least it's not something serious.

OLIVIA

It can be if you work on a construction site. But you're
right. It's a condition that would often be ignored. No pain.
No pattern. Koss doesn't take it as a big deal. If it wasn't
the spike number of workers falling over on site, they
wouldn't even notice it's a thing.

ELAINE

And they still think it's possible to hide it? What else
have they been hiding? And other cooperations?

Elaine is slightly scared by the thought. But Olivia is not following.

OLIVIA

Mia wants to apply to an art uni in London.

ELAINE

Westminster, right? That's a good uni. But London
is… London.

OLIVIA

I know. But I want to make it happen for her. My
parents were not that good at raising me. At least
I want my little sister to have someone reliable,
supportive.

They both look at some workers at the construction site. A truck with the ads of
ChromaGlow slowly drives through the gate.
Elaine looks at Olivia carefully.

ELAINE

So, what're you thinking now?

OLIVIA

I'm thinking how my colleague's life is screwed by
Koss.

ELAINE

Can you give the file to someone else? Like Josh?

OLIVIA

They're secret recordings. It won't be enough for
standalone evidence in the court. At least we need
the rest of the lab report to prove anything.

ELAINE

So, we do nothing now?

Elaine looks frustrated.

OLIVIA

I've been thinking a lot about this. When I was
younger, I always admired the people who stood up
against the bad guys. I never considered myself
a nobody, standing in the background, wishing to be
nothing but the background.

ELAINE

Liv-

OLIVIA

Do you remember the short story you wrote
when we were in high school? It was about the clerics
in a city located in a fantasy land, where the city was
always under dragon attacks. The clerics, their magical
power came from their faith. They vowed they will always
have their swords and wands in their hands. The
protagonist, what was his name?

ELAINE

Joseph.

OLIVIA

Joseph was one of most powerful male clerics,
feared even by ferocious dragons. But one day,
he fell in love.

ELAINE

Oh no. I know where this is going.

OLIVIA

Yeah. When he had a soft spot for this nice

lady, he began to wish to hold her hand,

instead of the swords and wands as he had vowed.

He wished that more and more. Finally, one

day, he lost his power, and the city army lost

a great fighter.

ELAINE

No. I wouldn't read too much into it, it was

a story written by a dumb 16-year-old.

OLIVIA

You'd change the plot if you were 30?

ELAINE

I'd make it ok to keep his power while trying

to love. Gods are not that rigid.

OLIVIA

In your stories, possibly.

ELAINE

Don't. Please don't try to seek life wisdom from it.

OLIVIA

I'll read it however I like. And that 16-year-old was

right. When you have too much to lose, you lose your will

to play.

Elaine studies Olivia's expression. She has known her long enough to know she is
not as certain as she sounds.

ELAINE

But you don't really feel this way, do you? You want

me to talk you into it, not the other way around.

Elaine looks out to the window. There is a laundrette across the road. Two women
are leaning against the window outside the laundrette with an absent look on their
face.

INT. CAR. A WHILE LATER.

Olivia drives on the highway absent-mindedly. It is a sunny day with a very blue sky. Beneath the glaring sun, it seems as though every shadow is left with no refuge.

She brings the car to a halt in front of a small house.

INT. OLIVIA'S HOME. CONTINUOUS.

Olivia dials Josh's number.

There are some textbooks and brochure of universities (belonging to Olivia's sister) on the table. Olivia grabs a magazine and put on top of Mia's stuff.

                    JOSH

          Hi, Olivia. I was about to call you. Wait, wait, let me see.
          Oh, yeah. I know there could be risks standing up to a
          corporation like Koss. But I won't let you face everything
          by yourself, you know?

                    OLIVIA

          Josh, I called you.

                    JOSH

          Oh yeah. Sorry. What were you going to say?

                    OLIVIA

          I've decided. I'm on board.

                    JOSH

          Yes! Yes! I still have some savings. If Koss fire you, you
          can come stay with me. I'll cover your expenses.

                    OLIVIA

          No. That's not the biggest problem. We're not on the
          winning side, Josh. Without the lab reports, this case
          could be easily accused of fabricating facts.

                    JOSH

          The recordings-

Olivia shakes her head.

                    JOSH

          Can you get the lab data? Do you know anyone who can?

                    OLIVIA

I don't see other options than me.

> JOSH

You work in the design department.

> OLIVIA

I guess I'll have to find a way.

INT. OLIVIA'S HOME. NIGHT.

Olivia opens the door. It is JOSH and HENRY.

Josha introduces the two to each other.

> JOSH
>
> This is Henry. Top-notch political reporter. This is Olivia.
>
> This case relies on her.

> HENRY
>
> I'm not top-notch. But nice to meet you, Ms. Jennings.
>
> It's very brave of you to decide to stand up against
>
> a big company like Koss.

They walk into the living room and sit down.

> JOSH
>
> She used to be more left-wing than I am. You should
>
> see what she said on twitter-

> OLIVIA
>
> I deleted them all.

> JOSH
>
> Wishing Tory leaders took a field trip, and the bus falls
>
> into the river with only the driver surviving.

> OLIVIA
>
> I was young and too cynical.

> JOSH
>
> You don't wish Koss's CEO fell into the river and drowned?

> OLIVIA
>
> That's something I'll no longer post on social media.
>
> These are the documents related to ChromaGlow. The
>
> colour is more vibrant than most brand on the market.
>
> It has longer durability. It resists yellowing. The colour

can stay fresh for decades. And it's stain repellent.

                    HENRY

But it's poisonous.

                    OLIVIA

Yeah, the tiny downside.

                    HENRY

Do we have information that suggests the toxicity was
known to the company before its market release, or was
awareness of these issues only realized after the product
had already been introduced to consumers?

                    OLIVIA

According to a colleague in the development department,
the date of the report was about the same time when they
scale up production.

                    JOSH

ChromaGlow has been being put in use for two years.
The initial internal report was issued one year ago.

                    HENRY

How are you only coming forward now? Sorry, I don't
mean to criticize.

                    OLIVIA

They conducted a second examination recently due to
the Wobble Syndrome. My colleagues happened to hear
the name and thought it funny. They did some digging.
And here we are. We only got the first page of the
lab report.

                    JOSH

You didn't tell me about the Wobble Syndrome.

                    OLIVIA

It's nothing serious compared to Leukaemia. People
who have it will occasionally fall over. That's it.
We guess it's the chemicals disrupting the spinal
cord. I don't know more than that.

                    HENRY

Huh. None of these health issues show immediate

effects – people don't fall ill the second they walk into

the house. It's no wonder they're determined to conceal

the connection, and they're succeeding. And the

material, Chloromol-

JOSH

Chloromoldexanate

HENRY

It's not on any checklist, you said.

OLIVIA

This is an entirely new synthetic chemical compound. It's

not covered in the standard regulations.

JOSH

Remind you of something?

HENRY

Yeah. Asbestos. People can't look out for the danger

That's not on the danger list.

Henry and Josh look to the living room wall.

OLIVIA

The walls here are safe. They've not been painted for

a few years.

Henry still looks unrelieved.

OLIVIA

My colleague Ruby made a map that highlighted all

the buildings Koss has built after they started to use

ChromaGlow. Do you want a copy?

HENRY

Yes, please.

JOSH

I want one as well.

A moment later.

Olivia sticks a printed map with some highlighted buildings on the wall. They
look at it for a while.

HENRY

My ex works at that building. I'll warn him later. Now

he can't complain I own him that expensive suit when I

saved his life.

                    JOSH

My landlord painted the wall before I moved in. I don't

know which brand he used.

                    OLIVIA

Yeah. This map only marked buildings built by Koss.

Homeowners and small business who purchased the paint

are not on it.

                    JOSH

You need to get that report for us. And we'll have to

expose it. I don't want to be scared of every newly

painted wall in the future.

                    HENRY

What's your plan?

                    JOSH

Are we sneaking into some document storage?

                    OLIVIA

There is no such thing in our building. Everything is

stored digitally. So, unless you happen to know some

trustworthy hacker, I'll have to sneak into Luke

Chamber's office. He's Vice President of Quality

and reliability. He has the access. I think.

                    JOSH

You think?

INT. KOSS GROUP. MONDAY.

Olivia walks in the building, nodding and smiling at acquaintance/colleagues.

                    OLIVIA (V.O.)

The young guy in that recording, he's the CEO Alex

Moreau's nephew. He has a little notebook to

keep track of his passwords for different use.

JOSH (V.O.)

            How did you know such thing?

                       OLIVIA (V.O.)

            He's not secretive about that.

INT. MEETING ROOM. A FEW MONTHS AGO.

People are listening to a report. Olivia sits in the corner. Luke is talking. He is

dressed in a well-tailored suit with a posh demeanour.

                          LUKE

            I'd like to address a strategic shift that I believe

            will greatly benefit our company. As you're aware,

            our long-standing partnership with the trusted factory

            in China has served us well since 2001. However,

            in light of the current economic landscape and

            political considerations – we've seen how everything

            has been shut down during the 3 years of pandemic.

            The costs have been rising as well. It's time to seek

            alternative product lines. If you follow the charts

            here-

Luke presses the clicker. The screen shows that it requires be logged in. Luke

bends over to the laptop to type. He does not look so sure about the password.

Then, the screen shows 'Wrong account or password'.

                          LUKE

            Apparently, "q-'capitalised W'-e123#" was not secure

            enough.

Luke pulls out his notebook (dark red, leather cover) to check for the passwords.

He types slowly while slowly complaining.

                          LUKE

            Complicated. Nonsense. Wasting. My. Life.

He clicks 'login'. The password is still incorrect. Luke grunts. He moves the

cursor to the 'reveal password' button and pauses.

                          LUKE

            Could you all close your eyes so I can double-check

            what I entered wrong?

OLIVIA

You can just turn off the projection. Just click that

Corner. Yes. There.

                    LUKE

Good idea, Miss.

INT. KOSS GROUP. CONTINUOUS

Olivia walks to the lift.

                    OLIVIA (V.O.)

He usually keeps that notebook in his desk. I assume

it would be in a locked drawer. There is a colleague's

birthday next week. So, there will be cake and a small

celebration during the lunch break. I'll take that

opportunity to sneak into Luke's office.

The lift door's about to close. There is small space for another person. Then,

Olivia sees Luke Chambers is also there.

Olivia gestures to them that she will wait for the next lift.

                    JOSH (V.O.)

So, we're sneaking into a room and stealing something

After all.

                    OLIVIA (V.O.)

Calm down. There's nothing fun about it.

Olivia takes a breath. She looks excited.

Another lift arrives. It is empty. Her colleague Anna strides in before the door

closes. Anna has her usual stern look. Olivia cannot tell if Ana is interrogating or

trying to socialise. Olivia tries not to look guilty.

                    ANNA

Morning.

                    OLIVIA

Hi, Anna. Morning!

                    ANNA

Did you have a special weekend?

                    OLIVIA

What?

ANA

You look… vibrant.

                    OLIVIA

Oh. Thanks. Umm, I met up with my best friends

this weekend.

                    ANA

What did you do?

INT. MAX'S HOME. LAST WEEKEND.

Olivia, Max, and Ruby argue. We can tell from the tense body language. No

audible dialogue.

INT.ST HELEN STREET. LAST WEEKEND.

Olivia and Elaine inspect the Koss's new construction site.

INT. OLIVIA'S HOME. LAST WEEKEND.

Olivia, Josh, and Henry point at the map that highlights ChromaGlow buildings.

INT. LIFT. CONTINUOUS.

Anna stares at Olivia. Olivia coughs.

                    OLIVIA

We watched a film.

The lift reaches to the floor. The door opens.

                    ANNA

What film?

                    OLIVIA

Some lousy horror film. See you later.

                    ANNA

Huh.

Olivia walks out of the lift and towards her desk.

INT. KITCHEN. LUNCH BREAK.

The kitchen is decorated with some golden balloons with 'Happy Birthday,

Emma' printed.

People take coffee and chat. Olivia sits down with a sandwich and tea, listening to the conversation at the table. Three people (MARK, JACK, ELSIE) around her age are talking.

                    MARK

It's weird. Ruby picked the cake for Emma. They were good

buddies. Now she's gone. I heard they talked with Emma to

see how much she's involved.

                    JACK

What cake is it?

                    MARK

Ice cream. It's from the popular bakery in city centre.

                    OLIVIA

Ruby got fired because she violated NDA.

                    JACK

How did you know?

                    ELSIE

I heard about that too. You don't want to violate that. I

think it leaves you basically no money for the contract

being terminated early.

                    JACK

Wonder what she violated.

                    MARK

Emma says something about ChromaGlow.

                    ELSIE

Ah, the star product. No wonder they made a fuss about it.

                    JACK

I'm going to kill myself if I hear ChromaGlow one more

time. The whole department has been working the arse off

for this project throughout the first half of the year. Posters,

billboards, lightbox displays, pop-up ads, website inserts.

                    MARK

Brochures.

                    JACK

Fucking brochures. I don't believe anyone read those

nowadays.

                    MARK

My granny does.

                    JACK

The only generation has money in their pockets.

Someone carries a big box show up from the lift.

Someone arranges the ballons. The number of Emma's age shows: 27.

                    JACK

I thought she's 30 something! Damn. 27 and already got

the down payment of her first house? How did she

manage to save up so much? She must have some *real*

talent somewhere.

Jack winks at Mark, but Mark ignores him.

                    MARK

Is the house she bought on Willow Street?

Olivia nearly chokes on her coffee.

                    ELAINE

She bought house built by Koss?

                    ELSIE

Duh. You don't know about the employee discount?

Olivia notices that Luke is walking by to his office. He is talking to his assistant,

KATIE (23, F, attractive). Luke and Katie's communication looks purely

professional, but we can sense something beyond from the way they look and

smile at each other.

People in the department sing the Happy Birthday song. Emma looks very happy.

                    EMMA

Don't forget to join us in pub after work. First round

on me!

                    MAN 1

Congratulations on the new house.

                    EMMA

I can finally live by myself. I can't wait. I'll have

room for dogs. I always wanted dogs.

Olivia gets a slice of cake and walks to Luke's office. She grimaces when she hears about the dogs.

When passes Katie's desk, Olivia notices Katie's handbag is placed on the floor behind her.

Katie is taking a call.

Olivia approaches her quietly.

> KATIE
>
> No way. She said that? What a sociopath. I love
> it! Remember that time she nicked all the bog rolls
> in the toilets from that pub – yeah, both men and
> women toilets – AFTER they banned her for
> nicking their pint glasses?

Olivia takes a lipstick from Katie's bag and cautiously walks away. Then, Olivia senses something. She turns around, there is Anna with her usual stern-looking face.

> OLIVIA
>
> Hi! Anna. Emma is sharing her birthday cake at the
> kitchen. Have you got a slice?

Anna looks at the slice of cake in Olivia's hand.

> ANNA
>
> No, thanks… Do you think the contributions you
> bring to the company matches up with what they're
> giving you in return?

Olivia hides the lipstick she just stole from Katie in her sleeve.

> OLIVIA
>
> Hmm… I hope so?

Anna walks away. Olivia takes a long breath. Katie is still on the phone. Olivia walks to Luke's office and knocks on the glass door. Luke nods at her.

INT. LUKE'S OFFICE. CONTINUOUS.

Luke is slightly agitated.

> LUKE
>
> Ha, another one. Do you want a pay rise, too?

> OLIVIA

Oh, no. I'm just asking. Emma in our department is

celebrating her birthday and her first house. Do you

want a slice of cake?

Luke checks his watch.

LUKE

I see. Well, thank you for that.

Olivia walks in and hands over the paper plate to Luke, while secretly checking the items on his desk.

LUKE

I shouldn't be eating dessert. But what the heck. I have

a meeting in 15 minutes. I'm not in the mood for a

healthy lunch.

There is no red notebook on his desk. And all drawers appear to be closed properly. One of the drawers needs a key to open.

Luke devours the cake.

LUKE

Emma, I remember her. Nice person. She bought a house,

huh?

OLIVIA

On Willow Street.

Olivia observes Luke's expression. But there is no sight of uneasiness or guilty there. On the contrary, Luke looks cheerful.

LUKE

Good for her! I've been in the Willow Street project.

Good location, quiet. Easy to commute. And a lovely

park nearby. Anyways, nice cake. I probably should

say congratulations to Emma when I see her later.

Luke looks at Olivia, waiting for her to say something or leave. Olivia has no excuse to stay. She nods and leaves the office. She loiters behind a corner, where she can observe Luke's office.

Later, Luke leaves his office hurriedly. Olivia sneaks back. The door is not locked. The office has glass wall. But nobody in the open plan office is looking at her direction.

She reaches to the drawers. There is no red notebook there. As she rummages through the desk, footsteps approach. Olivia squats down.

The door opens. Luke stops in front of Olivia.

<div align="center">LUKE</div>

What else can I help you with?

<div align="center">OLIVIA</div>

I found this on the floor. Is it… yours?

Olivia stands up, holding the lipstick she steals from Katie's bag. Luke recognises the lipstick and becomes visibly nervous.

<div align="center">LUKE</div>

Yes. No. I mean, I know who it belongs- may belongs to. I have seen a few people in my office today. Could be one of theirs. I'll take it. Thanks.

Luke takes the lipstick. He sits down at his desk.

<div align="center">LUKE</div>

Ugh. I forgot that I need to get acquainted with this document. Can you go upstairs to tell them that I'll be there in 10 minutes? Just a small delay. And, take this.

Luke gives Olivia a big binder that contains the sample of different colours and patterns for tiles and paints.

INT. MEETING ROOM, UPSTAIRS. CONTINUOUS.

Olivia walks in the room. She puts down the binder.

<div align="center">OLIVIA</div>

Mr. Chambers will be a bit late. 10 minutes, he said.

MAN 2 in the back whispers to the woman next to him.

<div align="center">MAN 2</div>

Told you. He wouldn't have read the important document that has been tagged for 3 weeks.

The woman next to him hands over 5-pound note to Man 2.

Olivia moves the documents a little. The red notebook is under the pile.

People in the meeting room don't pay much attention to Olivia's behaviour. She opens the notebook.

There are doodles that draw colleagues as ugly goblins. Swear words like 'fuck this shit'. The most used pages (softer and more wrinkles) are the ones with ID and passwords.

There is a sign on the wall, 'No Photography'.

There is no one looking. Olivia takes out her phone and films the three pages with account names and passwords.

Anna walks in from the door behind Olivia. Olivia almost drops her phone.

> ANNA
>
> Your manager is looking for you.
>
> OLIVIA
>
> Oh. Yes. I'm heading back now!

Olivia shoves the notebook back under the pile and walks out of the room.

INT. OPEN PLAN OFFICE, DOWNSTAIRS. CONTINUOUS.

Olivia finds her manager, TERRY.

> TERRY
>
> (*something about work*)
>
> OLIVIA
>
> Ok.

Olivia goes back to her desk. She secretly views the video she recorded from Luke's notebook. There are username and password for bank accounts, emails, and some exclusive pubs. There are also some sets of username and password are unmarked. It is hard to tell which one is for Koss.

Olivia tries hard to remember. Finally, she remembers the username that Luke once uses during that meeting. She locates the password.

Olivia operates on her computer. She logs on her own account, open a half-finished designing project. She leaves her desk with a coffee mug and her phone. Henry has reminded her something last weekend.

> HENRY (V.O.)
>
> Careful. Don't use your own computer to download the file.
> It's easy to track back the IP address if they want. We don't
> want you to be fired right away.
>
> OLIVIA (V.O.)
>
> The important documents can only be viewed from company's

computers.

> HENRY (V.O.)
>
> Use someone else's pc. Let them take the blame.
>
> OLIVIA (V.O.)
>
> If only I don't get caught.

Choose:

1) Use Jack's computer

2) Use Anna's computer

INT. OPEN PLAN OFFICE. CONTINUOUS.

Olivia sneaks to the person's (Jack/Anna) desk while they are away. She manages to download the document without anyone noticing.

INT. PRODUCER'S OFFICE, ROBIN NEWS CENTRAL. A FEW DAYS LATER.

A logo 'Robin Newsroom' hangs on the hallway. Staff walk through the hallway all hurriedly, holding scripts, clothes, and coffee.

The sign of the office door writes:

<u>Senior producer</u>

<u>Jenny Faries</u>

Office door is shut. The blinds are dropped. Inside the office, the producer of Robin Newsroom television programme is JENNY FARIES (37, F). Jenny looks through the materials of Koss. Josh and Henry sit opposite to her, waiting for her decision. Josh can't stop shaking his legs.

After finishing reading, Jenny pauses a while before speaks.

> JENNY
>
> It'll be big if it's true.
>
> JOSH
>
> It's true. One of the sources currently works
>
> in Koss, Olivia Jennings. The other just got
>
> fired for probing this, Ruby Song.
>
> JENNY
>
> And you said they have agreed to be interviewed

by us. No Anonymity. Real names and faces.

Have you informed them of the risk?

> HENRY

Yes. Both of them are aware of the risks.

Jenny ponders for a while.

> JENNY

Accusing the one of the biggest corporations

In Europe. I'm not saying no, but-

Someone knocks on the door. ASSISTANT 1 pops his head in.

> ASSISTANT 1

Jenny, the witness from Zack's case-

> JOSH & HENRY

Not now.

> JENNY

I'll check about it 10 minutes later.

Assistant 1 leaves the room startled.

> JENNY

Be nice to my assistant.

> JOSH

I can send her a big apology card if you want.

Just finish the sentence. But what?

Jenny looks dead serious.

> JENNY

Koss parent company StellarHorizon has 3%

share in Robin. They have a seat in the

boardroom. If we want to annoy the big shots,

it's best to do things a bit more elegantly.

Henry and Josh cheer.

> JENNY

Now, move, boys. It's 9.30 am now. I want the

story on tomorrow's evening news. I'll make it as

the lead.

Henry nods.

> JOSH

You got it!

                              JENNY

                    You don't even work in our programme. Henry,

                    make it professional.

Henry and Josh walk out of Jenny's office.

                              JOSH

                    Yes. We're covering the case. Let's win this one.

Henry is happy but not as optimistic as Josh.

                              HENRY

                    Politics isn't as simple as a scoreboard.

                              JOSH

                    What do you mean?

                              HENRY

                    Sometimes you think you've won in a landslide, but weeks

                    later, it turns into a crushing defeat.

INT. MEETING ROOM, ROBIN NEWS CENTRAL. CONTINUOUS.

The room is full. Henry stands in front of the laptop that controls the slides.

Reporters and assistants take notes quickly.

EXT. A HILL NEAR OLIVIA'S HOME. AFTERNOON.

Olivia and Elaine walk up the hill, surrounded by beautiful and tranquil scenery.

In the vicinity, there were lush greenery, forests, and sheep. In the distance, they

could see the urban buildings of Manchester city centre. The lights start to light

up.

They walk in silence. There is a bench on top of the hill. They sit next to each

other.

                              OLIVIA

                    At some point, I'll have to break it to Mia that I can't

                    support her with her tuition. I have savings for the

                    first year. But with a lawsuit coming up…

                              ELAINE

                    I have some savings.

                              OLIVIA

You're unemployed yourself.

>   ELAINE

> By choice.

>   OLIVIA

> How's the journey towards your dreams anyways? Did
> you land that role on the podcast?

>   ELAINE

> Rejected.

>   OLIVIA

> That's not good. Do you have any second thoughts?

>   ELAINE

> Hmm?

>   OLIVIA

> About leaving your job.

>   ELAINE

> Not at the moment. But I can't help but wonder if
> I'll kick myself later when my savings run dry and
> I'm still not making progress.

Olivia sighs.

>   OLIVIA

> It's too late for me to have second thoughts
> anyways. Koss had suspended my coworker. I used
> their computer to download the lab report.

Elaine doesn't know what to say. The atmosphere is subdued. They look to the
skyscrapers of Manchester for a while.

Suddenly, Olivia stands up and picks up a fallen tree branch from the ground. She
holds this like a sword and points it at the city.

>   OLIVIA

> Let's fight the dragon. 'You don't pick the fight because
> you can win. You pick the fight because if you didn't, it would
> haunt you in the dreams. You pick the fight so you can
> have peaceful dreams.'

>   ELAINE

> Wait a second-

OLIVIA

         Luna Esta. The night before the Fall. She said that

         to cheer the soldiers to fight against the dragons who

         were attacking their neighbouring country. You've

         always been helping me to find who I am.

Olivia's phone rings. She drops the branch, steps away and answers the phone.

                                ELAINE

         I didn't. That was Luna.

Elaine stands up and picks up the branch. She wields it, but she is nothing like a
hero in an epic story.

In the distance, the sound of chatter and laughter drifts over, signalling the nearby
high school's dismissal. The students, full of vitality, seem more spirited than
Elaine, the disheartened adult. Elaine watches them pensively, lost in thought.

A while later, Olivia walks back with a pale face.

                                ELAINE

          What's wrong?

                                OLIVIA

          They said something about national security.

                                ELAINE

         Who?

                                OLIVIA

          The legal department of Robin News.

                                ELAINE

          Koss. National security? You're joking.

                                OLIVIA

         The lab reports we're planning to expose include

         data involving government buildings. Seems it

         would incur additional legal risks.

                                ELAINE

         That sounds a bit far-fetched.

                                OLIVIA

         I need to go to the Robin building. They said they

         want to omit that part of information to be safe.

         Henry wants a talk.

ELAINE

     You should go.

                         OLIVIA

     You okay by yourself here?

Elaine nodes at her. They both look concerned about the future.

Olivia quickly walks down the hill. Elaine watches her figure disappear into the

greens.

INT. ELAINE'S HOME. A WHILE LATER.

Elaine arrives home.

                         STEVE

     How's Olivia doing? When can we see the news coming

     out?

                         ELAINE

     She's stressed. So much going on there. It sucks I can't

     help much.

                         STEVE

     You're helping. You're part of her support system. It's

     a tough fight. And moral support is important.

                         ELAINE

     And you're my support system.

                         STEVE

     Support chain.

They kiss.

                         STEVE (CONT'D)

     Your mum called. Apparently, you're not picking up

     her calls or replying to her texts.

                         ELAINE

     Ugh, no. Not today. Enough of her opinion on what

     a successful life is.

                         STEVE

     Hope she doesn't hate me for not getting a higher

     position. Not being so alpha and provide for the family.

     That kind of stuff.

ELAINE

No. She loves you. You have a real job. I'm going to

try to write something. Either that, or stare at the

screen for an hour. Then, maybe we can watch

something together.

STEVE

Alright.

Elaine walks into her study, turns on pc, and open the document, staring at Empty

page. There are many scrambled drafts paper on the table.

After a while, Elaine takes a deep breath.

ELAINE

Okay. I need a drink.

She walks out the study. Steve is not in the living room. Elaine grabs some wine

from kitchen. The doorbell rings.

ELAINE

Please don't be my mum.

She opens the door. It is a stranger. DYLAN (30s, M). He has a kind smile,

behind it hides an icy coldness that is not easily discernible.

DYLAN

Ms Tomlinson?

ELAINE

That's me.

DYLAN

Dylan Shears. I work for Mr Murray. The Financial

Secretary to the Treasury.

He hands over his card. Elaine scrutinizes Dylan, trying to determine whether it is

an opening of some kind of scam. Dylan has this convincing manner that makes

Elaine listen.

DYLAN (CONT'D)

Your friend Ms Jennings seems to have some

misunderstanding with us. I'm here to solve this.

Can we talk inside?

Elaine lets him in.

ELAINE

Is this urgent? She's in the Robin News building,

if you want to find her-

DYLAN

I will not walk into a building full of reporters in this

very moment. That would not be very wise.

ELAINE

You don't want media to know that you're trying to

influence Olivia's choices. Suspicious, I say. Take a

seat.

Dylan sits down.

DYLAN

First, allow me to clarify our stance: Our objective

is not to provide protection or defence for the Koss

Group. Their actions pose a significant threat to public

health, and we find their behaviour truly reprehensible.

ELAINE

Why is the Treasury worrying about this matter all of

sudden?

DYLAN

A minor correction. I do not present the Treasury. It's just a

small personal meeting. Consider it as a faithful reader

finally getting to talk to the talented young author. I've been

waiting for the sequel of *Dawn before the Dragons*,

by the way.

ELAINE

You don't look like the kind who would read fantasy.

DYLAN

I have an appetite for any genre of books. Fantasy. Sci-fi.

Romance. Something that is not real but has the ability to

make an impact on someone's thoughts, value, personalities.

The potential only obtained by the good books, of course.

ELAINE

What's your favourite novel?

DYLAN

Resurrection.

Elaine scoffs.

> ELAINE
>
> A bit ironic to bring that up in this circumstance, isn't it?

> DYLAN
>
> Tolstoy has a great imagination. Don't get me wrong, I love dragons and magic. But I would be much more shocked if I wake up to find out a rich man morally suffering from their privileges and wealth than a hundred dragons violating our airspace. At least the dragons have the reasons to do so.

> ELAINE
>
> But you work for the Treasury.

> DYLAN
>
> I do. Ah, yes. The Koss scandals. Back to the point. The data that Ms Jennings is planning to leak is sensitive. It's related to military information.

She looks at him warily, unwilling to believe a single word he is about to say.

> DYLAN
>
> Ms Jennings has every right to expose what Koss has done. A commendable act of courage to take on such a big enemy herself. However, some of the data used to demonstrate the toxicity of this chemical substance comes from sources outside the laboratory-

> ELAINE
>
> Do you mean the army barracks Koss built for the government?

> DYLAN
>
> Bourlon Barracks, yes. Ms Jennings let you read the report.

Regret flashes across Elaine's face, quickly masked away.

> DYLAN
>
> That really doesn't matter. Soon enough, the whole nation will be reading those documents. Like I said,

I'm not here to stop everything. It's just Bourlon.
Please let Ms Jennings know, she will have full
support from our government if she leaves Bourlon
out.

                    ELAINE

What's so special about Bourlon? You're fine with
civilians getting poisoned, but not soldiers? I find it
hard to believe.

                    DYLAN

Nobody chose to poison anyone intentionally. It was
an unfortunate accident. As for Bourlon, you just
need to understand that military intelligence like the
analysis on building area, population size and density,
the movement trajectories of the personnel. The
information is considered to affect the national
security-

Elaine stands up.

                    ELAINE

I see your point. I'm sorry such information is about to
be leaked. Maybe next time, choose your contractor
wisely.

Elaine waits for Dylan to leave, but Dylan remains seated.

                    DYLAN

Is this how you see the obstacles that your partner
encountered in this promotion?

                    ELAINE

What?

Some noises from the doorway.

                    DYLAN

I guess that's him.

It's Steve comes back from outside. He walks in with a Tesco bag.

                    STEVE

Hey. Our ice cream ran out-

He sees Dylan on the sofa.

STEVE

Hi.

                    DYLAN

Good afternoon. Dylan Shears. I'm here to offer some

help regarding your promotion.

                    STEVE

What?

                    DYLAN

You work for CEA, and your department is closely linked

with the government. We're aware that you've been in

the same position for a while, unable to advance due

to background screening issues stemming from

Ms Jenning's activist ties.

Elaine looks to Steve in disbelief. She whispers to him.

                    ELAINE

It was all because of me?

Steve admits with a silent nod.

                    ELAINE

Why didn't you tell me earlier?

                    STEVE

Because you weren't wrong for doing what you've

been doing.

                    DYLAN

You have been held at a position for which you are

overqualified for almost a year.

                    STEVE

What do you want?

                    ELAINE

They're trying to shut Olivia up.

Dylan maintains a smile as if he is not aware of Steve and Elaine's annoyance.

                    DYLAN

That's a misunderstanding. I haven't laid out my offer.

                    ELAINE

Then spit it out.

DYLAN

        It would be best if Ms Jennings could omit the sensitive

        section of the report. Bourlon Barracks, to be precise.

        Beyond that, we won't ask her to remain silent about

        the rest of the report. I hope you can persuade Olivia to

        meet with me. In return, someone will handle the screening

        process for Mr Davis.

Elaine looks to Steve. Steve shakes his head. Elaine can't make a decision.
After a short silence, Dylan stands up.

                    DYLAN

        I'll give you some time to think. There are still 26 hours

        before the news airs tomorrow. If Ms Jennings wishes to

        arrange a meeting to discuss strategies for avoiding legal

        action, please feel free to contact me. You have my

        card.

Dylan leaves. Elaine watches his car driving away and closes the curtain.

                    STEVE

        Just some procedure background checks. It's that

        serious as it sounds.

                    ELAINE

        But it's because of me.

                    STEVE

        Who was that guy?

                    ELAINE

        From the Treasury. If he wasn't lying.

                    STEVE

        The treasury? Not Health and Safety Executive?

                    ELAINE

        They're panicking, must be because their

        department messed up…

But Elaine does not care why Treasury wants to meet Olivia.

                    ELAINE

        That's utter nonsense. I simply volunteered for a

        campaign focused on addressing global warming and

                                                                    258

advocating for corporate accountability. I wasn't even

in a leadership role.

Steve tries to light the mood by telling a joke.

                    STEVE

I know. I've tried to explain to them that you weren't

pouring milk in the supermarket dairy section. But

it didn't work.

                    ELAINE

This fear of journalism and suppression of truth –

what are we now, communists?

Elaine looks to the card in her hand.

                    STEVE

I don't need that guy's help. Let's not bother Olivia

with this.

                    ELAINE

What about your job?

                    STEVE

It'll be fine. If they keep blocking my promotion, I'll

just find another job.

Choose

1) Throw out the card (0-1-1 Hero)

2) Pass the message to Olivia (0-1-2 Party at Murray's)

After some pondering, Elaine throws the card into the bin. The bin is quite empty.

> ELAINE
>
> Well, if I change my mind, there is plenty time to
>
> retrieve it.

Night, same day.

Elaine and Steve are watching television. Steve notices that Elaine keeps looking at the bin.

> STEVE
>
> It's too late. The news is out tomorrow.

> ELAINE
>
> There's still time. It won't hurt to listen to him.

> STEVE
>
> He's the government's hatchet man. Listening to him
>
> will definitely hurt. Why're you wavering?

> ELAINE
>
> Maybe he has something important to say. And
>
> Olivia needed to hear that. We wouldn't know.

Elaine avoids eye contact. She's worried about Steve, not Olivia.

> STEVE
>
> Listen, let me worry about my job, alight? You just
>
> focus on the right thing: supporting Olivia.

> ELAINE
>
> Fine. If you're sure about this.

They look to the TV for a while before Steve speaks again.

> STEVE
>
> When I was a kid, the girl who used to babysit me was
>
> diagnosed with HIV. She got hit by a car once and needed
>
> a blood transfusion, but the blood was contaminated. She
>
> died at a young age. I remember she used to play Ice
>
> Climber with me. I lost a lot to those polar bears. She'd

say, 'Let me see who's bullying my Stevie', and she'd

take care of it. She called them yetis. The UK imported

blood from America. The blood came from prisoners

and drug users. If they had admitted they messed up sooner,

she wouldn't have had to die. And to this day, they still

don't fully recognize their mistake.

Elaine mutes the television.

                    ELAINE

I'm sorry. It was so awful.

                    STEVE

So, yeah, if I have the chance to support, or even push

a whistleblower to come forward, I would. It's no longer

just one person's issue. I need to see the policy changed.

We need new regulations for those chemicals. The

government can't walk away from this.

Steve stands up and takes out the garbage bag, including the card inside it. Elaine
doesn't stop him. She stands at the window, watching Steve walking to the
wheelie bins.

The next day.

Elaine and Steve watch the news in the living room. They cheer for Olivia
standing out.

Elaine texts to Olivia: I'm very proud of you.

                    ELAINE (V.O.)

People showed her support for her brave action…

for a brief period of time. In the first couple of

days, we kept checking on news, twitter, reddit,

exited to see people discussing it. Talking about

the paints and the whistle-blower. It felt like

she was the hero who has set off the journey to

slay the dragon.

A few days later.

Elaine paces in the living room. She changes the channels. Every channel is covering a similar topic.

<center>ELAINE (V.O.)</center>

<center>But soon, we found out, there was more than</center>

<center>one dragon to fight against.</center>

Elaine stares at the television in shock.

ITV News headline: <u>Critical UK Military Supplies Intercepted by Russia: Avdiivka Falls</u>

<center>ANCHOR 1</center>

<center>Good evening. Our top story tonight: the fall of</center>

<center>Avdiivka and the critical interception…</center>

BBC News headline: <u>Russian Interception Raises Questions About UK and Ukrainian Operational Security</u>

<center>ANCHOR 2</center>

<center>This raises serious questions about the security</center>

<center>of military aid routes and the intelligence failures…</center>

Sky news headline: <u>Loss of Avdiivka: How Intercepted UK Weapons Could Have Turned the Tide</u>

<center>ANCHOR 3</center>

<center>Let's talk about the glide bombs Russian</center>

<center>forces have been using…</center>

Elaine throws herself in the sofa.

<u>Later that day.</u>

Steves comes home, running from the car to the front door. It is raining outside.

<center>STEVE</center>

<center>I just looked at my phone. What's going on? It</center>

<center>seems that everyone is hating the whistle-blower</center>

<center>now. Oh, hi, Olivia.</center>

Both Olivia and Elaine look stressed.

<center>OLIVIA</center>

<center>All of the job I've applied turned me down.</center>

<center>STEVE</center>

<center>It's okay. Stay at ours as long as you want. You'll</center>

<center>get through it.</center>

Steve notices that Elaine looks very concerned. He walks to the kitchen. Elaine follows.

<div align="center">STEVE</div>

You okay? You look more stressed than she is.

Elaine points at the television and whispered. Steve opens a can of fizzy drink.

<div align="center">ELAINE</div>

Ukraine lost a city. It could have been saved if they

had the equipment sent from UK.

<div align="center">STEVE</div>

And that's relevant because…

<div align="center">ELAINE</div>

News said that there was an information leak

regards the weapons that were meant for Ukraine.

The weapons have been intercepted by Russian

should have been able to turn the tides in Avdiivka.

<div align="center">STEVE</div>

That's a shame.

Elaine grabs Steve's drink and put it on the counter.

<div align="center">ELAINE</div>

Those weapons were stored in the Catterick

Garrison,

the same place where Bourlon Barracks is located.

Steve pauses, trying to recall this name.

<div align="center">STEVE</div>

Wait, I've heard of that place.

<div align="center">ELAINE</div>

That Dylan guy came over last week. He said

something about Bourlon. And sensitive

information. Do you think the lab report

caused all of those?

Elaine's voice becomes lower and lower.

Steve looks at Elaine in despair. Elaine tries to hide that she is

panicking as well.

<div align="center">ELAINE</div>

Did we fuck up?

Steve looks very weak.

                    STEVE

Have you told Olivia about it?

                    ELAINE

I haven't. But what could that change?

They return to the living room to be with Olivia. Her phone is on the tea table, faced down. It keeps beeping.

                    ELAINE

Olivia, we have something to tell you. There was a guy from the government came the day before you went on the news…

A while later.

                    ELAINE

We're so sorry that we didn't let you know about him. If you had removed the Bourlon part out of the lab report, all of this wouldn't have happened.

Olivia looks to the television. There are images of wars. Olivia used a moment to take in the information.

                    OLIVIA

I don't blame you. I've seen him.

                    ELAINE

Huh?

                    OLIVIA

He tried to talk to me outside of the Robin building. Josh told him to get lost.

Elaine and Steve are somewhat relieved.

                    OLIVIA

If I wanted to talk to him, I had the chance to take his card. We thought he was just bluffing.

INT. OLIVIA'S PLACE. THE FOLLOWING DAYS.

Olivia leaves the house to find the door has been vandalised with red paints. It says 'traitor' and 'war crime'.

Olivia shops for grocery with her face covered by a hat and a face
mask.

INT. ELAINE'S BACKYARD, DUSK - WEEKS LATER.

The sky during sunset is mixed by pink and purple.

Elaine and Steve sit at the backyard with wine.

                    ELAINE

      To your new job.

They click their glasses.

                    ELAINE

      I'm glad in the end you find a way to work everything

      out.

Steve doesn't look particularly excited. But he is trying to be a pleasant company.

                    STEVE

      You've been stressed too much over this.

                    ELAINE

      So, how's your thoughts on your new colleagues?

                    STEVE

      They're friendly. Overall nice people.

Steve hesitates.

                    STEVE

      They don't like Olivia. They think she should've

      kept quiet when the documents are military

      related.

Elaine plays with the leaves on a plastic plant.

                    STEVE

      How's Olivia recently? Has she settled down

      in the new place?

                    ELAINE

      She's doing ok crashing at Josh's.

                    STEVE

      It'll be fine. When the investigation finishes, people

      will know how severe the paint problem is.

                    ELAINE

Now we just wait.

Her phone beeps. Elaine picks up and checks.

                    ELAINE

          Uh-oh.

                    STEVE

          What?

                    ELAINE

          Someone posted this yesterday.

The headline of the YouTube video is: ‘Whistle-blower’ or home-wrecker?.

                    STEVE

          That doesn’t look good.

There are intimate photos of Olivia and Max. A Youtuber’s face shows up and
enthusiastically greets the audience.

                    YOUTUBER

          Hi, chads. Welcome back to What’s New Today.

Elaine drags the video progress bar forward a few seconds.

                    YOUTUBER

          According to our inside sources, the so-called

          whistleblower was initially fired for having an

          inappropriate relationship with a married man,

          leading to both of them being dismissed. Later,

          they produced documents harmful to Koss, but

          how credible can those really be? We have

          contacted one of Olivia’s close former co-workers,

          Mark. Do you agree or disagree with this opinion?

Jack shows up and sits next to the Youtuber.

                    JACK

          Unfortunately, I lean towards agreeing. As much

          as I adored my former colleague slash friend, Liv,

          I have to say, there were always signs-

Elaine closes the video and puts down her phone angrily.

                    ELAINE

          What a snake.

INT. JOSH'S FLAT. MEANWHILE.

Olivia sits on the windowsill. The window is wide open.

Josh walks over hurriedly.

> JOSH
>
> Let's get you away from there.

He steers Olivia to the sofa.

> JOSH
>
> Are you okay?

Olivia looks like she hasn't been slept for many days.

> OLIVIA
>
> I'm fine.

> JOSH
>
> Ther're all lies-

> OLIVIA
>
> I said I'm fine.

Josh shuts up.

> OLIVIA
>
> I'm sorry. But I'm fine, seriously. A city fell. People
>
> died. I don't care if people think I'm a whore now.
>
> The crime is too small, I don't even care.

Josh's phone rings. He ignores it before it rings again. After checking the caller's name, the caution on his face disappears.

> JOSH
>
> It's your sister.

Olivia takes his phone and answers it. She has an exhausted smile.

> MIA (V.O.)
>
> Jesus. Are you okay? Why are you not picking up
>
> my call?

> OLIVIA
>
> I think it's dead.

> MIA (V.O.)
>
> And I thought you were dead.

Olivia smiles.

> MIA (V.O.)

I saw the fake news. Jack is a dickhead. And if
you listen to one word from a dickhead, you've
already lost.

                    OLIVIA

Absolutely.

                    MIA (V.O.)

I want to go to yours this weekend. I worry-

Someone raises his voice near Mia. It's there dad ARTHUR.

                    ARTHUR (V.O.)

Are you talking to your sister? Tell her she
brought shame to the family-

                    MIA (V.O.)

I got to go. Love you.

Mia hangs up from the other end.

Olivia notices that Josh is feeling sorry for her.

                    OLIVIA

Hey, it's okay. They're like that before I got
kicked out of Koss.

ETX. ELAINE'S HOME. MEANWHILE.

                    ELAINE

Liv has been off the internet. Maybe she wouldn't
see these posts… The whole thing has been like a
nightmare. Nothing changed – except Liv and
others got sued by the company.

                    STEVE

I'm sorry. I persuaded you to ignore Dylan.

                    ELAINE

It's not your fault, is it? You'd think things have
changed in the modern world, but there's nothing new
under the sun. The truth is always hidden behind the
clouds, and the sky is always cloudy. It's never
a summer sky, never clear. There will always be
clouds.

They look to the pink sky above them. Today the sky is clear.

> ELAINE
>
> That's a dream. Reality is not like that.

INT. JOSH'S FLAT. A FEW WEEKS LATER.

It's a weekday afternoon. Olivia is doing yoga alone, without phone or television on. After finishing the workout, she sits down in the sofa and zones out, staring at the window.

After a while, her phone beeps.

Olivia sighs. She picks up the phone carefully, as if it was explosive.

It's a text from Elaine.

ELAINE: Do you want to come for dinner? Probably should leave the flat once a while.

Olivia replies with a thumb up emoji. She changes her clothes and wears a face mask before leaving.

INT. ELAINE'S STUDY. LATER.

Olivia looks through the materials Elaine has collected, which includes binders, papers, and notes that stick to the wall. There are pictures of Alex Moreau (CEO of the Koss Group), some pages of the lab report that Olivia has exposed, a picture of Dylan standing behind Sander Murray (Financial Secretary to the Treasury).

> OLIVIA
>
> This is your new non-fiction project?

> ELAINE
>
> I don't have many things to do anyways. I've
> talked to some affected workers from the list
> in the documents.

Olivia is half joking and half sarcastic.

> OLIVIA
>
> First step to journalism.

> ELAINE
>
> I want to be a witness to the madness. Oh, by

the way, this is from one of the workers' families.

Olivia hands out a knitted scarf.

> OLIVIA
>
> It actually looks quite stylish. From whom?

> ELAINE
>
> Maisy May. Her partner is Mathew Jones.
>
> He had been working for Koss for over
>
> 10 years until he got sick. Him and Maisy
>
> said they thank you a lot.

Elaine shows Olivia something: a corner on the wall masked as 'Affected workers/residents' section. Olivia looks through Elaine's material.

> ELAINE
>
> The victims are getting helps from the government
>
> and the society. Koss had paid out eight hundred
>
> grand along with covering medical expenses.

Olivia softs down a little.

> OLIVIA
>
> Have you been talking to them a lot?

> ELAINE
>
> Not much. They're just hanging on, trying to make
>
> money most of the time. I like to collect
>
> perspectives from different people.

They see the picture of Dylan. Elaine suddenly sighs.

> ELAINE
>
> Do you think it would have been better if I had
>
> made you listen to what he had to say?

Olivia has already moved to other pictures.

> OLIVIA
>
> I know I fucked up. But his boss knowingly signed
>
> off projects with toxic products. They're worse
>
> than me. I don't bargain with murderers.

EXT. OUTSIDE THE FLAT BUILDING. A FEW DAYS
LATER.

A guy (DAVE) wearing black sits in his car, which is parked far away.

He watched at the flat building. His phone rings. He grabs it, but it falls under the seat.

                        DAVE

        Damn it.

He bends over, struggling to reach it.

In the background, a girl (MIA) approaches the building.

He finds the phone.

                        DAVE

        Yes?

Dave looks up.

Mia has gone around the building, heading to its backyard.

                        DAVE

        I'm ready. Yes. Target confirmed alone during

        daytime. The man won't be in.

He has a gun on him. He looks around. A resident just walks pass. Dave smiles at her, pretending he lives here as well, and follows her into the building.

INT. JOSH'S FLAT. A FEW HOURS EARLIER.

Someone knocks at the door. Olivia hurriedly opens it. It is MIA, Olivia's young sister. She has red eyes from crying.

                        OLIVIA

        Come in. Aww, Mia. You came here by yourself?

                        MIA

        Bus.

                        OLIVIA

        That's nearly 2 hours.

                        MIA

        Doesn't matter. I don't want to see their faces.

                        OLIVIA

        You can stay here for the weekend. But you have

        to go back to school on Monday.

                        MIA

        I know.

<div align="center">OLIVIA</div>

Let me get you some snacks.

Olivia walks to kitchen.

<div align="center">MIA</div>

Your building gate has changed the code.

<div align="center">OLIVIA</div>

Is it? I forgot to tell you-

<div align="center">MIA</div>

How often do you leave the building?

Olivia returns with snacks and drink. She laughs awkwardly.
Mia waves her hand.

<div align="center">MIA</div>

Anyways. I climbed over your fence. I tried to
follow a resident, but he won't let me in. Do I
look like a criminal? Why everyone is so stupid?

Olivia doesn't reply.

<div align="center">MIA</div>

You know, like, everyone's so busy scrolling
through their feeds. They don't even bother to fact-
check or think critically. It's like their brains just
shut off as soon as they open their apps.

Olivia brings Mia a cold drink, chocolate, and some crisps.

<div align="center">OLIVIA</div>

They've never been the most supportive parents.

Mia hugs Olivia tightly.

<div align="center">MIA</div>

It's not only them. Also kids in my school. Some
cousins. It's like… everyone.

Olivia pat on Mia's back. Mis sobs a little.

<div align="center">MIA</div>

Why is it feeling like you have to fight the whole
world to do the right thing?

Olivia shoves beef jerky to Mia's hand. Mis takes a big, fierce
bite.

OLIVIA

It'll be fine. When the investigation result comes

out, they'll know how wrong they are. Then, it's

your time to tell everyone, 'I told you so'.

                    MIA

I'm not that childish.

Olivia turns on the television. The show plays for a second before Mia rants
again. Olivia turns the volume down to listen to Mia.

                    MIA

Mum doesn't even care if you're right or wrong.

'Oh no! Olivia lost her job. What about the

money?' Money, money, money. That's her

favourite word.

I'm suffocating!

Olivia sighs. Mia looks at her face.

                    MIA

No! Don't tell me you agree with her! I don't care

about the stupid uni in London. Umm… I would

care if they're wise enough to offer me scholarship.

If not, well, that's their loss-

INT. OUTSIDE THE FLAT DOOR. MEANWHILE.

Dave walks to this floor and looks around. The corridor is empty.

He squats down and listens to the door. Then, he proceeds to pick

the lock.

INT. LIVING ROOM. CONTINUOUS.

Olivia turns her head to the direction of the door for a few

seconds.

                    MIA

Can I play on your computer?

                    OLIVIA

Do you have homework-

                    MIA

Pleeease. I need video games to cure the wounds

caused by reality.

                    OLIVIA

That's a surprisingly accurate description of video

game function. Fine. Go ahead. The smaller

bedroom is mine.

Mia goes to Olivia's bedroom. There is a decorative metal deer statue on the shelf outside the bedroom.

Olivia sets the volume of the television higher. She watches it for a few seconds, before picking up her tablet. When she unlocks it, the page is on 'Scholarship and Financial Support'.

There is a little click sound as she reads. Olivia stands up and checks the door. There is no one.

Dave hides behind the door of the storeroom, peaking out.

INT. OLIVIA'S BEDROOM. CONTINUOUS.

Mia has her headphones on. The video game is running, with characters fighting and the screen filled with the glowing effects of various attacks.

Sound of a gunshot. Mia frowns and moves one side of the headphones away from her ear. The flat is silent again.

INT. LIVING ROOM. CONTINUOUS.

Dave fires more bullets. This time, Olivia dives behind the sofa with incredible speed, despite being covered in blood and sweat

Dave walks to her.

                    DAVE

Let's get it over with. Everyone hates you now. You

don't want to live like this forever, do y-

Mia shows up from behind with the metal deer statue decoration and swing it at him.

Dave is hit at the temple. He staggers a bit before stands straight again. He points his gun back and forth between the two women.

                    MIA

JOSH? We got a thief!

Dave is visibly confused. He shoots at Mia's direction. When she dodges, he quickly leaves the flat.

ETX. UNDER THE FLAT BUILDING. A WHILE LATER.

There are ambulances, police cars, and press.

INT. ELAINE'S HOME. A WHILE LATER.

Elaine picks up a call. Her face changes after a few seconds. She picks up her bag and runs to her car.

> ELAINE (V.O.)
>
> Literature feels so powerless. Fiction just creates a
> world on paper, while non-fiction often arrives too
> late, after everything has already settled. I had
> added fearless characters in my story. I had
> documented every detail of the battle against Koss.
> But they are so weak against reality.

INT. HOSPITAL. LATER THAT NIGHT.

Elaine, Josh, Mia and her parents waiting in the hospital. The time pass slowly as they are eagerly waiting.

A doctor appears, who announces something. Everyone is relieved. They take turns to visit Olivia.

> ELAINE (V.O)
>
> I can't get over how powerless I am. More
> importantly, I don't know what I believe when I
> write. Here is a question: how can you manage a
> whole fictional world when yourself are lost?

The next day.

Olivia wakes up. Josh is just organizing the flowers he has brought here. They start talking (inaudible). Josh looks out the window. There are some reporters with cameras waiting. Police officers talk to Olivia, taking notes.

> ELAINE (V.O.)
>
> It turns out, getting shot at your home will make people
> Think that you're a victim. When they have empathy for

you, they start to listen what you've been trying to say.

<u>The following days.</u>

Josh visits Olivia every day. The two become closer and closer. When Olivia leaves the hospital, they kiss.

ETX. GOVERNMENT BUILDING. DAY.

Dylan walks out of the building. Elaine drags him from behind. The building security is alerted.

<div style="text-align:center">DYLAN</div>

It's fine. I know her.

Dylan turns to Elaine.

<div style="text-align:center">DYLAN</div>

Please let go. I'm not going to run away.

He walks away. Elaine follows up hurriedly.

<div style="text-align:center">ELAINE</div>

Did you do it?

<div style="text-align:center">DYLAN</div>

No. I do wish she would get better soon. She's a righteous

citizen.

<div style="text-align:center">ELAINE</div>

Didn't stop you from trying to frame her. She's

having enough.

<div style="text-align:center">DYLAN</div>

Exactly. She had been having a hard time. Why would

the government physically assault her and make the

public take her side?

<div style="text-align:center">ELAINE</div>

Who did it, then?

<div style="text-align:center">DYLAN</div>

Please wait for the police report.

Dylan walks in another building after scanning his ID card. Elaine cannot follow him in.

INT. WILLIAM'S CAFÉ. MEANWHILE.

Elaine stares at her computer screen. The document page is empty except for the title 'Chapter 3'. She is really bothered about not being able to write anything. The two persons (LILY and VICKY) walking past Elaine's table, chatting while sitting down nearby.

> LILY
>
> My mum's house was built by Koss. She's super
>
> tense recently.

> VICKY
>
> She shouldn't be! Make sure she doesn't 'commit suicide'
>
> by getting shot in the back of the head.

Lily and Vicky laugh.

> LILY
>
> Big company think they can get away with doing
>
> anything.

The waitress brings up coffee and cakes.

> VICKY
>
> Society is fucked. Oh, thank you!

Vicky snaps a picture of the dessert before digging in.

EXT. OUTSIDE THE COURT. DAY.

The reporters surround Olivia.

> REPORTER 1
>
> Ms Jennings, what do you think about the earlier
>
> slander on the Internet?

> REPORTER 2
>
> Will you take further legal action towards Koss?

> REPORTER 3
>
> Ms Jennings, any comments on the investigation
>
> result regarding ChromaGlow?

Olivia replies to the question of reporter 3.

> OLIVIA
>
> I'm glad the truth comes out eventually.

INT. ROBIN NEWS BUILDING –   TALK SHOW SET. DAY.

Olivia is the guest of this show. She walks onto the stage as the hosts greet her welcomely.

> HOST
>
> Welcome back to our show. Today, we have an
> incredibly resilient guest with us. She stood firm as
> a whistleblower, survived a harrowing assassination
> attempt, and faced relentless slander. But she's never
> wavered. Welcome to Olivia Jennings!

INT. ICE CREAM SHOP. DAY.

Eliane sits down at a table with two bowl of ice cream and hands over Mia one.

> MIA
>
> Thank you for meeting me.

> ELAINE
>
> No problem. What's up?

Mia is hesitating.

> MIA
>
> I'm worried about Olivia.

Elaine becomes alerted immediately.

> ELAINE
>
> Anything wrong?

> MIA
>
> No. No. On the contrary, everything has been great
> after the investigation report came out. I was offered
> scholarships for next year from several art schools.
> It's just…

Elaine waits patiently.

> MIA
>
> Olivia gave up on finding out the truth. I asked a
> few times about her attacker. It looks like the police
> has given up the case. But she doesn't care. She even
> told me to drop it. I suspect she knows something.

> ELAINE
>
> I had no idea about this. That sounds odd.

> MIA
>
> I'm worried that she stopped to ask questions
>
> because she's being threatened.

> ELAINE
>
> Well, if someone has been threatening her, it's
>
> understandable that she wants a peaceful life. Especially
>
> now the Koss scandal has been exposed-

> MIA
>
> Is it okay to have one crime punished and let go the
>
> other?

Mia has the typical stubbornness of young people. Elaine has to avoid her eyes.

> ELAINE
>
> I don't know.

> MIA
>
> Can you help me find out what's going on? With the
>
> media and public on our side, we will get help easily.

INT. CAR. A WHILE LATER.

Elaine sits in the car for a while.

She texts in the group chat (with Josh and Olivia in it): <u>When was the last time we met for dinner?</u>

INT. JOSH'S FALT. EVENING, ANOTHER DAY.

In the kitchen, Olivia cooks. Josh helps. Elaine drinks wine. The atmosphere is chill.

> ELAINE
>
> I guess the 'no partners allowed' rule is out the window
>
> now.

> JOSH
>
> You should've brought Steve here. It would be fair.

> ELAINE
>
> Or, one of you leave right now.

They laugh at the joke.

> OLIVIA
>
> How has your writing been?

> JOSH
>
> Oh. I've read something about writing. Something
> about 'great literature springs from misery'.
> A happy life will make the writer's mind blunt.
> Has the whole Koss thing helped your writing?

> OLIVIA
>
> Yes. You were collecting materials. I did tell
> some reporters that you might help them.

> ELAINE
>
> I haven't got lots of work done.

> JOSH
>
> Why? There's quite a lot of things to write about.

> ELAINE
>
> I'm lost.

> JOSH
>
> Lost in what?

He turns around but to find Elaine has left the kitchen.

INT. DINNER TABLE. LATER.

Elaine, Josh and Olivia chat during dinner.

We can see there are a few fancy pieces of furniture added in the flat.

> OLIVIA
>
> Have I told you about the latest offer I got?
> ChemGuard. They want me to join their
> management team as the Director of Environmental
> Safety and Compliance.

Josh touches Olivia's hand proudly.

> JOSH
>
> Hard work pays out eventually.

> ELAINE
>
> Congratulations. You've been so busy lately. We

haven't had much chance to catch up.

                    OLIVIA

Yeah. There have been quite a few interviews and

Shows, haven't there?

                    JOSH

I think there is one with Question Time next Friday.

Sander Murray will also be on that as well.

                    ELAINE

What? The Financial Secretary to the Treasury?

                    OLIVIA

The subject is about boosting the economy. Koss

will be used as a case to show how some companies

exploit the boosting policies for their own benefit,

evade taxes, and take advantage of their employees.

                    ELAINE

But you are not an economy specialist.

                    OLIVIA

I'll be offering some perspective from inside as a

former employee. Nothing too deep.

Olivia puts down her fork and reaches to the table salt.

                    ELAINE

 Murray. He definitely has something to do with

Koss. He sent people to stop you from going on air.

                    OLIVIA

There's no evidence for that.

Elaine is shocked that something like that will come out of Olivia's mouth.

                    ELAINE

 Are you on his side now?

                    JOSH

 Let's not talk about politics-

                    OLIVIA

 You talk like you were still in high school. He helped

 me, Elaine. I got better job offers. Mia has scholarships

 now-

ELAINE

Mia? Mia was worried. She thought about you're

being threatened. Why did you stop trying to find

out who shot you? Did this Murray help the case…

From Olivia's look, Elaine realises something.

                                                ELAINE

He asked you to stop.

                                                JOSH

 Let's find a lighter topic-

                                                ELAINE

 Are you in this as well? You ok with her taking

Murray side?

                                                JOSH

Olivia deserves some easier life. We've suffered

enough.

                                                ELAINE

And you're ok to let it go and work with people

who made you suffer?

                                                OLIVIA

You are not the one who got shot in the chest. You

don't decide what I should do.

                                                ELAINE

What if Murray does it again?

                                                OLIVIA

No. Murray didn't do this. The hitman was hired

by Koss. Murray showed me the evidence. But we decided

not to chase that CEO down. There's more to consider

than just one version of justice.

                                                ELAINE

Is it because the CEO has dirt on Murray?

                                                OLIVIA

And what do I get if Murray got into trouble? Are you

paying Mia's tuition from your moral high ground?

                                                ELAINE

Let me get it straight. You're working with a guy,

who greenlighted the projects that put thousands

of lives under risk; to help him, you'd rather forgive

the person who tried to kill you.

OLIVIA

Oh my gosh. You are not listening to me.

ELAINE

The part where you needed fame and money?

OLIVIA

You should leave.

JOSH

You both need to calm down.

Josh drags Elaine to the bedroom and closes the door.

JOSH

What're you doing?

ELAINE

What're *you* doing? You've always been the most

cynical one.

JOSH

Everything has been solved. Koss is going to be

prosecuted. ChromaGlow has been recalled. We

just want our lives easier.

ELAINE

Wow. Josh. Being in a relationship really has

changed you.

JOSH

I don't care how you think of me, but you need to

go out there and apologize to Liv.

ELAINE

Or what?

JOSH

Right. I guess I'll spoil this surprise. Liv was planning

to surprise you with this: she found a big publisher

who would consider your novel. Let me remind you:

the one got turned down by your old publisher.

Elaine's attitude waivers.

> JOSH
>
> Go out and make up with her. You know Liv. She
> won't hold grudge over this. You two can go to the
> book launch together. She planned to let you meet
> the publisher there.

Elaine's tone is not as tough as earlier.

> ELAINE
>
> So I become corrupted like you guys?

> JOSH
>
> Do you know which book that party is for?

> ELAINE
>
> I don't care-

Elaine certainly has an idea. It would be too good to be true.

> ELAINE
>
> Shut up!

> JOSH
>
> *Silent Symphony*. It would be Antonio Ricciardi's
> last book. We all know how much you wouldn't
> stop talking about it last year. Going on and on
> about your favourite writer being too old. Yeah,
> I remember, you even once joked about stalking
> him at his house just to meet him before he kicks
> the bucket, which, by the way, was not that funny.

Elaine freezes. She faces a very tough decision.

She sits in the chair. On the wall beside her hangs various handcrafted items and photographs. Some of the pictures capture simple moments, like a sunrise on the street or swans in a lake—amateur photography taken by Olivia. Other photos feature Olivia, Elaine, and Josh, showing their memories from high school through to more recent moments captured just a year ago.

Elaine sighs.

> ELAINE
>
> It feels wrong.

                    JOSH

I know. We've looked. We thought he and Koss had

some kind of deal, but the guy looks clean. If we had

solid proof on Murray, we would have acted on it.

Elaine's attitude softened.

                 ELAINE

Am I… am I overreacting?

                    JOSH

No. You care about the right thing. I appreciate it.

Liv must do as well.

Choose

1) Murray can be an ally (branch 0-1-1-1 Grow up)

2) Murray is enemy (branch 0-1-1-2 Usefulness of literature)

Branch 0-1-1-1 Grow up

Elaine relents.

                 ELAINE

Alright.

                    JOSH

You're staying, right?

                 ELAINE

I'll go apologise to Olivia. But I'll be really pissed

if later I found out that you were lying about Murray.

                    JOSH

I promised, if we find anything, I'll let you know

right away.

Elaine walks to the dinner table.

                 ELAINE

I'm sorry. I shouldn't have been snarky about

It.

Olivia is relieved.

                              OLIVIA

          Don't worry about it.

Elaine and Olivia hug briefly.

EXT. RICCIARDI'S BOOK LAUNCH PARTY. TWO MONTHS LATER.

Elaine and Steve stand at the party, both dressed in formal attire. The waitstaff
move through the elegant hall, offering trays of bite-sized canapés. The guests,
well-educated and sophisticated, engage in quiet conversation.

Steve glances around, slightly uneasy.

                              STEVE

          I get the feeling I haven't read enough books to

          belong here. If a famous author comes over, do

          me a favour—let me know, so I don't embarrass

          myself.

As people walk by, Steve exchanges polite smiles with them, trying to blend in.

Elaine doesn't reply.

                              STEVE

          What's wrong? I thought you'd be excited about

          being here.

                              ELAINE

          I wouldn't have made into this party without her.

          I don't want to pretend that it's not benefit for

          supporting Sander Murray.

                              STEVE

          Cheer up. We got Koss. The certificated bad

          guys.

Elaine looks at a painting of a lone traveller walking in a snowy field, his
footprints trailing behind.

                              ELAINE

          When you follow a tail of footprints in the snow,

          And they suddenly disappears – what do you think

          that means?

                              STEVE

Hmm... Maybe the snow got heavier and covered them?

> ELAINE

Or maybe... he flew away.

> STEVE

Like an angel?

The word 'angel' strikes her.

It's as if all the strength has just drained from her body. Her shoulders slump in relief. This is the moment she gives up.

She smiles.

> ELAINE

I should probably stop overthinking this.

Olivia arrives with a book agent in tow.

> OLIVIA

This is my friend Elaine Tomlinson, the author of—

> AGENT

Dawn before the Dragons, yes! I've been dying to meet you. Great book, by the way. What's your recent project, if you don't mind me asking?

Elaine smiles politely.

> ELAINE

I do have a new story idea in mind. Inspired by something recently happened in my life.

> AGENT

Oh?

The book agent looks interested. Olivia frowned a little.

> ELAINE

The working title is… *Giving up: First Step of Growing Up.*

The end

                          EALINE
          Do you seriously believe the government's hands are

          clean in all of this?

Josh tries to say something. Elaine doesn't give him chance.

                          ELAINE
          You once told me their job was to cover their

          Tracks and tell pretty stories. And now you're

           telling me they deserve the whole 'innocent

          until proven guilty' treatment?

Elaine walks out of the room and grabs her coat.

                          ELAINE
          Have a nice dinner, Liv.

EXT. A WEDDING VENUE. A YEAR LATER.

Elaine stands near an open bar. There are a few people (old classmates HARRY,

ALIYAH, CHARLIE) around her. They are chatting, while Elain is mostly

listening.

                          HARRY
           When was the last time you see Leo? Gosh, he's so

          jacked now.

The camera moves past a very muscular man, revealing the bride and groom in

the distance—two faces unfamiliar to us. This isn't Olivia and Josh's wedding.

                          CHARLIE
          I don't think Olivia and Josh is coming today.

                          ALIYAH
          Hey, Elaine. How have they been doing? I still

          remember the internet last year. Phew. Madness.

Elaine pauses a few seconds.

                          ELAINE
          Oh, Olivia's company? It's really taking off from

          what I've heard.

> HARRY

They're on a private island in the Maldives now,

celebrating Mia landing an internship at Elysian's.

> CHARLIE

What's that?

> HARRY

An exclusive art gallery. We're too poor to ever

hear of it.

> CHARLIE

Olivia's moving up in the world, huh?

> HARRY

And those two are getting married.

Everyone feels about mid-life crisis to some degree except Elaine, who shows little emotion.

> CHARLIE

How's your writing going, big author?

Elaine takes a sip of her cocktail.

> ELAINE

I'm certainly doing good staying on my moral high

ground.

Her old friends all look confused.

INT. WILLIAMS CAFÉ. A FEW MONTHS LATER.

The season has changed. We can see the street is covered by golden fallen leaves through the window.

Elaine works on her laptop. She hears something and looks up, just to notice Josh and Olivia sit down not far away. They have seen her as well.

Olivia is just about to wave her hand. Eliane broke the eye contact quickly.

Elaine types in silence but obviously slower than before. After a while, she pays packs her stuff and leaves.

The waitress just comes to serve some desserts to Olivia's table.

ETX. ALLEY BEHIND THE CAFÉ. CONTINUOUS.

Elaine walks alone. Olivia calls her from behind.

OLIVIA

Wait.

Elaine stops and turns.

Olivia walks to her and hands over a book.

OLIVIA

It's Ricciardi's book from last year. You didn't go to the

book launch, but I've got the signed version. I don't

know anyone else who reads him, so you might as

well have it.

Elaine is surprised by the gift, as the author means a lot to her.

Despite the thoughtful gesture, Olivia's expression remains cold, almost as if

she's just trying to get rid of the book.

ELAINE

Oh, thanks.

Elaine pauses for a few seconds.

ELAINE

I appreciate it, but I need to go-

Olivia cuts her off with a flat tone.

OLIVIA

I know you feel like you are better than us.

ELAINE

I don't-

OLIVIA

You do.

Elaine doesn't argue with that.

Neither of them raises their voice, but there is somewhat tension between them.

OLIVIA

You didn't see the funny point in this whole story.

ELAINE

What funny?

OLIVIA

If I keep trying to be the good person, will anyone

really stand by me? If another scandal breaks online,

how fast will they turn on me again? Josh believes

taking Murray's offer to join ChemGuard would actually
make a difference. But if something new comes up
against Murray, will the company turn on him? Will
I turn on him? ChemGuard is another version of Koss
for Murray. I fought one off, only to end up serving
another. Don't you think that's funny? *It is* really funny.

Olivia pauses for a few seconds, waiting Elaine to weigh in.

Elaine is too surprised to say anything.

>   OLIVIA
> So, you're right that you stand on the moral high
> ground, but what does that do? Authors are useless,
> Elaine. You can only write things down when history
> has already settled. You're no more helpful than a
> teenager holding a metal deer.

Elaine has a bitter smile. She knows Olivia is right.

The end

Elaine puts Dylan's card in her pocket.

>   STEVE

>   I don't care about his threats.

>   ELAINE

>   Yes. But ultimately, it's my decision.

>   STEVE

>   I'm disappointed in you.

>   ELAINE

>   You know what? I'm going upstairs and calling Liv

>   right now.

Elaine walks to her study and closes the door from inside. She calls Olivia. She waits for a while before it is picked up.

>   ELAINE

>   Someone wants to talk to you. It's a guy from the

>   government. He said he couldn't reach you through

>   Robin News. Do you want to talk to him?

There is a brief silence.

>   OLIVIA (V.O.)

>   Maybe. What do you think?

>   ELAINE

>   It depends on you. I just didn't want to intercept

>   information that you might need.

>   OLIVIA (V.O.)

>   That's why you're more reliable than Josh.

>   ELAINE

>   What happened?

>   OLIVIA (V.O.)

>   Is the guy named Dylan? I saw him earlier, outside

>   of the Robin building. Josh told him off. Well, I

>   didn't stop him doing that anyways.

>   ELAINE

I have his card. Do you want to call him back?

It sounds like he wants to meet you in person.

Olivia thinks for a while.

> OLIVIA (V.O.)
>
> I'm not getting cold feet.

> ELAINE
>
> I know.

> OLIVIA (V.O.)
>
> I need to hear what the other side says, you know
>
> what I mean?

> ELAINE
>
> Yeah. I know. I'll send you his number.

> OLIVIA (V.O.)
>
> Wait, will you come with me? I love Josh. But
>
> he's giving me too much pressure. I need someone
>
> calm for my sanity.

> ELAINE
>
> I will.

Olivia takes a deep breath.

> OLIVIA (V.O.)
>
> Okay, send me the number.

Ealine takes a picture at the card and send it over.

Elaine comes downstairs. Steve is sulking. He faces the television and pretends

watching it.

> ELAINE
>
> Liv wants to meet him.

> STEVE
>
> What if Dylan scares her off?

> ELAINE
>
> You need to back off.

> STEVE
>
> I just think there is some moral choices we can make.
>
> It's not all about Olivia, or you and me.

> ELAINE

I hate when you didn't tell me about the job.

> STEVE
>
> It's *my* job. I didn't want it to affect your passion.
> It was my choice. You don't have to disturb Olivia
> because you feel bad for me.

> ELAINE
>
> That's the problem, honey. I had the right to know
> that my volunteering was causing you trouble. To
> quit or not was my decision to make. I hate that
> you made decision for me. And I won't make
> decision for Olivia. Talking to Dylan or not, it's
> her choice.

Elaine's phone beeps.

> ELAINE
>
> Liv's texting me the address. I'll accompany her to
> talk to Dylan.

Elaine grabs her hoodie.

> STEVE
>
> You're leaving now?

Elaine walks pass Steve to grab her keys.

> ELAINE
>
> Sorry, I need a walk.

INT. 3, CHAPLE CLOSE. MEANWHILE.

Dylan paces in the living room of an annex with a phone. He is in the call with
Sander Murray. From the window, we can see there are young people come in and
out to the main house.

> DYLAN
>
> I got in contact with Olivia Jennings. Yeah. We'll
> meet at Chaple Close. Understand.
> There might be a small problem. It seems like Will
> is having a party here. I don't know where he got
> the keys.

Two workers carry a neon light reading 'graduation' and walk pass the window.

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DYLAN

        Yes. The annex is still empty. Okay.

Dylan hangs up and stares at one of the workers. He rushes out and stands in front
of DAVE (a guy dressed in black, wearing a beanie in a warm day).

                    DYLAN

        Why are you here?

                    DAVE

        I don't think I've met you before.

                    DYLAN

        You're on Moreau's security team.

Dave's innocent face turns to a blank expression. He looks to his coworker.

                    DAVE

        Tell Ruben I quit.

Dave and Dylan walk away to a quiet corner in the yard.

                    DYLAN

        You need to leave this property.

                    DAVE

        Relax, I'm not here for Murray Junior.

Dylan pauses for a moment and becomes highly alerted.

                    DYLAN

        I have this under control. There is no need to take

        out the whistle-blower.

                    DAVE

        Your only focus is to take Murray out of the report.

        And I have mine.

                    DYLAN

        If Koss is willing to make a big offer, we could bribe her.

                    DAVE

        She pissed my boss off. She's gotta go.

Long pause. Dylan tries to read how serious Dave is from his emotionless face.

                    DYLAN

        You don't have to do it on this property. *Today.*

        Have you seen how many rich kids there are here?

Dave shrugs.

DAVE

          Your place has somewhat fewer cameras than the

          news building.

                    DYLAN

          No. Don't do this on Mr Murray's property. I don't

          care if you're incapable of finding another place-

WILL MURRAY (18, M) walks out of the garage.

Dylan's attention is shifted.

                    DYLAN

          I've got to go. Listen. *Don't* do anything here. The

          whistle-blower can't die on the property of a

          government official. We're not allies at this point.

          But you don't want to turn us to enemies.

Dylan runs to Will.

                    DYLAN

          Mr-

                    WILL

          I'll give you a thousand quid if you haven't snitched.

EXT. CHAPEL CLOSE. NIGHT, SAME DAY.

Josh's drives slowly with Ruby and Olivia in the car. Along the roadsides are

planted tall vegetation, providing a solid protection of privacy for the residents

inside.

                    JOSH

          Posh side of Manchester. A footballer I interviewed

          has a house in this area. I couldn't even afford the

          doorframe – custom-designed by some famous

          architect.

                    RUBY

          That's a few million parked on this road.

They look to the cars (all very expensive) parked along the road.

                    RUBY

          3 Chapel Close. I think it's nearby. How did your friend

          know someone who works in the Treasury?

OLIVIA

She doesn't. The guy just knocked at her door, saying he

wants to meet us.

JOSH

I still think it's a mistake.

Josh looks to Olivia, who avoids his eyes.

JOSH

You don't have to be there to know what they're

going to say. They want us to keep quiet. Liv.

Liv?

OLIVIA

Stop worrying. I know what I'm doing.

JOSH

You're still on our side, right?

OLIVIA

And I'm the one risking being sued.

Josh shuts up.

Olivia softens her tone.

OLIVIA

I want to know what consequences I'll be facing.

Josh tries to say something.

OLIVIA

I know they'll try to intimidate me. Yes. I'll keep

that in mind. But still, I need to hear them out first.

RUBY

I don't blame you for trying to find a middle ground.

Some of the fancy cars are not parked properly. Josh drives very carefully. He

doesn't want to scratch the cars on the sides of the road.

JOSH

For Christ's sake, you'd think they could afford some

garages to store their luxury chariots.

RUBY

Looks like there's a party somewhere.

With no spot in sight, Josh has to park further away. His dusty Ford stands out in this fancy neighbourhood – it doesn't belong here.

They get out of the car. Ruby spins left to right looking at the map app, trying to figure out the direction.

                                JOSH

                   Are we really doing this? It doesn't feel like

                   a good idea. At all.

Josh half-jokingly half-annoyed punches at the tall bush wall next to the road. Peering through the branches, we catch a glimpse of a magnificent mansion and its expansive yard. Each residence along this street exudes a similar charm: secluded, adorned with beautiful gardens, and exuding elegance in their architectural design.

                                RUBY

                   Treasury finds out about us pretty fast. You just

                   pitched the story to the producer this morning,

                   right? Ah, this way.

Ruby leads the way. The rest of them follows.

Josh keeps looking at Olivia, who is annoyed by him.

                               OLIVIA

                   Let me make my own decision.

                                JOSH

                   You're not alone. I just want to make sure you know

                   that.

                               OLIVIA

                   I kind of wish I had come alone now.

Ruby coughs.

                                RUBY

                   How many houses do you think Murray owns?

There is tension in the air. Nobody answers her.

They walk up to the destination. Loud music comes from the house. There is a party.

They stop at 3 Chaple Close. The party noise is coming from here, the big house behind the gate.

                                JOSH

Really? A party?

                    OLIVIA

I left something in the car.

She turns around and walks away.

                    RUBY

Does she have the car key?

                    JOSH

Don't worry. She's going to have a smoke.

Josh kicks the empty bottles used for laughing gas. There are a couple of them

lying on the ground. A couple of young adults (around 18 years old) walk past

them and head into the yard.

Josh takes out his phone.

                    JOSH

That doesn't look right. Let me check with Elaine.

Dylan shows up behind a bush wall.

                    DYLAN

Ms Song, Glad you made it. And you are-

                    RUBY

This is Josh Hammond, Olivia's friend.

                    DYLAN

Nice to meet you.

Josh grunts from his nose.

                    DYLAN

And Ms Jennings-

                    RUBY

Olivia's a few steps behind us.

                    DYLAN

Brilliant. I'm Dylan Shears. I assure you that I'm

capable of advocating for Mr Murray's decision,

which will be beneficial for both parties.

A loud screaming/laughter come from the house.

                    JOSH

Are they also representing Mr Murray? Or someone

else.

DYLAN

          No. They're using the house for a different purpose.

          A party, as you can see. There have been some

          miscommunications regarding the use of this house.

                        JOSH

          Who're these kids?

Dylan doesn't reply immediately.

                        JOSH

          Did the young master use the lord's side mansion

          for a party without permission?

                        DYLAN

          My apologies for the inconvenience. Please don't

          take the small incident as the lack of sincerity on

          our part. Fortunately, there is a suitable place for

          use. Ah, Ms Jennings, you arrived just on time.

Olivia comes back, some chewing gum in her month. Dylan welcomes her
graciously. His charming attitude surprises Olivia a little.

                        DYLAN

          You can call me Dylan. We can discuss how to

          keep yourself safe while dealing with large

          corporations like Koss. This way if you follow me.

Olivia nods and stops chewing.

Josh mouths to Ruby: what a wanker.

Dylan is on alert. He walks close to Olivia, almost anxious. A loud noise from the
garage makes him jump.

                        RUBY

          Why is he acting so weird?

                        JOSH

          So many witnesses. At least we're not getting

          murdered silently in the backyard.

Dylan suddenly turns around and talks to Josh.

                        DYLAN

          By the way, this is a private property. Please

          don't take any pictures.

Josh pulls a fake smile. He rolls his eyes after Dylan turns around.

They walk in. The central building of the courtyard is a three-storey structure with a glass exterior wall and grey stone walls, giving it a modern yet elegant look. This is the main house and where the party takes place.

To the right is an annex (a smaller house that has its own entrance). It has a big glass wall. But now the curtains are drawn.

Ruby whispers to Josh.

>   RUBY
>
>   Should the Secretary of the Treasury's pay be enough
>
>   to afford this? They don't even live in Manchester.

>   JOSH
>
>   For some people, their salary is just a small part of their
>
>   total income.

Dylan leads them to the smaller house.

>   DYLAN
>
>   We can have a chat here. The party over there
>
>   won't disturb us.

INT. ANNEX. CONTINOUS.

He opens the door. There is an open plan living room. Elaine is standing at a shelf and looking at the display and decorations.

>   ELAINE
>
>   Hi.

Olivia is relieved to see Elaine is already here. Ruby shakes hands with Elaine.

>   RUBY
>
>   Hi, I'm Ruby. Olivia's colleague. Well, former
>
>   colleague.

Everyone takes a seat.

Josh whispers to Elaine.

>   JOSH
>
>   Are you his guest, Elaine? Which side are you on?

>   OLIVIA
>
>   I asked her to come.
>
>   (to Dylan)

You said you want to talk about the Official Secret
Act.

                    DYLAN

Yes. The information regarding the barracks is
under the protection of OSA. It would be for the
best if the information related to the barrack
buildings remain undisclosed.

                    JOSH

A law Thatcher made to shut the public up when
they want to talk about things they shouldn't.

                    DYLAN

I see you understand it well. We shouldn't bring
Bourlon to the public's attention. It risks national
security.

                    JOSH

In what way?

                    DYLAN

We can't say.

                    JOSH

Isn't that convenient?

                    DYLAN

I understand how it might appear that way. However,
with all due respect, every law has its social, logical,
and professional rationale. This particular legislation
has been in place for decades, shielding the government
through numerous crises and maintaining stability.

Josh rolls his eyes.

                    OLIVIA

You threatened to sue me if I leak the full lab report.
It only took half a day for the information to reach
your ears.

Dylan tries to say something. Olivia doesn't give him a chance to cut in.

                    OLVIA

If your source is so powerful, tell me, why did you

overlook the fact that the ChromaGlow was not

quality-assured?

Josh is surprised to see Olivia open with an aggressive question. He raises his

eyebrow and sits up.

> DYLAN
>
> It's not within the scope of Treasury's responsibility
>
> to conduct such checks.

> OLIVIA
>
> But monitoring the media for potential coverage falls
>
> within your responsibility.

Dylan's smile fades a little.

> DYLAN
>
> I understand. There were some mistakes made during
>
> the process. But please, let's focus on how to
>
> avoid further damage.

> OLIVIA
>
> Okay. So, the second question. You require us to
>
> remain silent, but who can ensure the oversight of
>
> your actions? How will your mistakes be addressed?

> DYLAN
>
> We have already initiated the compensation process.
>
> After you release Koss's Lab report, I believe the
>
> British Standards Institution and Ministry of Housing
>
> will urgently add Chloromoldexanate into their
>
> restricted substance list.

> JOSH
>
> We want to see government take accountability
>
> for this disaster. Imagine the damage it would
>
> cause after a few years if Olivia didn't make
>
> a stand.

> DYLAN
>
> What's on your mind, Mr Hammond?

> JOSH
>
> More funds to the public housing. Nationally.

Dylan's face cracks a little.

> DYLAN
>
> That's not something anyone can promise, really.
>
> Things like this should go through the cabinet
>
> first.

> JOSH
>
> Well, will you bring a proposal to the cabinet?

Dylan and Josh look at each other for a while.

Dylan smiles. He looks at Olivia.

> DYLAN
>
> Is that what you want? In exchange for leaving
>
> the Bourlon out?

> JOSH
>
> They're only basics. If you can't promise that,
>
> I don't see the point of continuing the negotiation.

Dylan keeps a composed expression, letting his gaze shift subtly between Josh
and Olivia.

> DYLAN
>
> Okay. Let me make a call.

The rest of them are surprised to see Dylan didn't fight them over the conditions.

> DYLAN
>
> Meanwhile, why not grab some drinks from the
>
> storage? Right over here.

Dylan opens that door. It is a small room, full of expensive drinks.

Dylan leaves the annex.

Elaine and Olivia check the drinks.

> JOSH
>
> What do you want? Are you seriously planning to
>
> bargain with him?

Olivia googles the price of the drinks. She answers half-mindedly.

> OLIVIA
>
> He's not completely banning our story, just trying
>
> to prevent a certain part from being exposed. Since
>
> they brought up the OSA…

The website shows that it worth £900.

> OLIVIA

Wow.

> JOSH

Or, Bourlon would bring Murray big trouble. That's
why he's trying everything to stop us. Think this
way. Since the enemy wants to avoid it, we need to
make it happen.

Ruby opens the blinds. Dylan is dialling but quickly puts away his phone and
walks towards the front door of the main house.

We see a corner of the party when the door opens. Dylan looks up to the ceiling
and argues with someone.

> RUBY

This case is not that important. He has the time to
parent some kids.

> JOSH

What?

> RUBY

Looked like they disabled some detectors, so they
could smoke inside.

Ruby suddenly stands up.

> RUBY

I'm going to have a chat with Murray's son.

Ruby unbuttons another button on her shirt, ruffles her hair, and walks out to the
main house.

> OLIVIA

I want to take a walk as well.

> JOSH

Liv, there's something more to Bourlon Barracks.
Don't you want to find out?

> OLIVIA

That depends on how much they're willing to offer to
cover this. I'd prefer to choose something that genuinely
benefits the public rather than digging up dirt on some

politician.

INT. MAIN HOUSE. CONTINUOUS.

Ruby walks pass Dylan and squeezes through the door. Dylan has a smoke

detector in his hand. He is talking to a young man that is not really sober.

DYLAN

Where are the batteries?

Ruby sneaks in. She grabs a drunk kid.

RUBY

Where is Murray?

The drunk kid points out a direction while still dancing to the music.

RUBY

What's Murray's first name?

The drunk kid shrugs.

Ruby walks to the living room and looks around. A few students walk pass her,

holding a small bag of powder and heading upstairs.

STUDENT 1

Wait for me, Thom.

There are a few brand hoodies with Cambridge's logo on it. But the hoodies are

laying around on the floor and furniture. No one is seriously wearing them.

She asks another person under the loud music.

RUBY

Murray? You know Murray?

Will Murray taps on her shoulder from behind.

WILL

Here.

Murray appears to be somewhat intoxicated, although he seems more sober

compared to the rest of his guests. He has bright eyes and beautiful short hair.

RUBY

Are you at Cambridge? Which year?

WILL

I'm going there this autumn. So are these guys.

Will pointed at some people, all very drunk and/or high. She raises an eyebrow.

WILL

I'm Will. You are?

> RUBY

I'm Ruby. We're alumni. I'm five years ahead of
you.

> WILL

Cool.

Will isn't interested in talking about school.

> RUBY

And your dad is trying to sue me.

Will lets out a short laugh.

> WILL

He's suing you? Sorry. It's normally the other way
around. Pretty young girl and old boring powerful
white man, you know. What did you do? Refused
to free him when he was stuck in a washing machine?

> RUBY

Your dad does his own laundry?

> WILL

Nope. He probably doesn't know where the washing
machines are in his house. To be honest, I am not so
sure, either.

> RUBY

Me and my friend are going to disclose a
document that makes him look bad. I guess
he doesn't like to see his whistle getting blowed.

Will is amused by the joke.

> WILL

I like you.

> RUBY

Yeah? Your dad hates me.

> WILL

How weird. Are you suggesting he has human
emotions?

> RUBY

Hate is the easiest and cheapest emotion.

                    WILL

Well said.

                    RUBY

Is your dad a personal friend of Alexander Moreau?

Will shows a grin.

                    WILL

Hmmm… Why would I tell you that?

                    RUBY

Because I asked really nicely?

                    WILL

Yeah. A convincing reason. Let me answer you…

I don't know. I don't care who he makes friends

with. I'm not a paranoid helicopter mum.

                    RUBY

Do you think your dad is a good politician?

                    WILL

I don't know. I'm not a political expert.

                    RUBY

Okay, what about this one: how much do you hate

him?

Will smiles.

                    WILL

Just a little bit.

Will takes out his phone and types out a combination of number and letter in a

blank page.

                    RUBY

What is it?

                    WILL

Why don't you find out in his computer? No photos.

Ruby tries her best to memories the combination.

Dylan shows up and stands between Ruby and Will. Somehow, his hair is all wet.

                    DYLAN

I think you got lost, Ms Song.

RUBY

                      What happened to you?

Across the room, some students laugh hysterically.

                              STUDENT 1

              He made the fire sprinkler squirt so hard.

                              STUDENT 2

             Something he'd never do to his girlfriend.

Dylan acts like as if he didn't hear that.

                                DYLAN

                             Ms Song?

                                WILL

          Come on, Scissors, you got to quit being so annoying.

But Will doesn't stop Dylan when he asks Ruby to leave.

                                DYLAN

                  This way. We need to go back.

On the way out, we can see the smoke detector is still on the counter with no
batteries in it.

Ruby bumps into someone and gets drinks spilled all over her.

EXT. YARD. MEANWHILE.

Some of the party guests are having fun around the pool.

Elaine, Josh, and Olivia watch them from distance.

Josh notices people running across the front yard.

                                JOSH

                  You see that van over there?

There are two vans parking outside. The logo on the vans is a simplistic spaceship
with letters 'ff' on it.

                                JOSH

              That's a delivery company called FreshFleet.

                               ELAINE

                    I've never heard of it.

                                JOSH

              Because it's very exclusive. It collaborates with

              Michelin-starred restaurants and offers cross-city

delivery services. They got their own planes and

and drones. People order something from London

with this. It's probably faster than you order

something local with your Deliveroo.

>   OLIVIA

> Meanwhile I'm worrying about my student loans.

The staff leaves the van and jogs to the main house. Three of them carry insulated

boxes. One of them carries an empty food trolley, running behind them. The ff

enters the main house hurriedly.

>   OLIVIA

> Mia said she'd prefer a local college. I offered to

> help with money, but she told me to focus on

> paying off my own loans. But you know how it is

> with debt – once you have enough, you stop caring.

> If it were me, I'd take the chance and head to London.

> She's too stubborn.

Josh wants to say something. Elaine stops him with a stern look.

>   OLIVIA

> I need some fresh air. Elaine, you coming?

Olivia walks to the quiet side of the house.

Josh is confused. They are outside already.

Elaine puts two fingers at her lips and makes a gesture of 'smoking'. Josh shakes

his head at Elaine, who follows Olivia and walks away.

ETX. YARD. CONTINUOUS.

Dylan walks Ruby out. He looks annoyed.

>   DYLAN

> Please don't wonder off to a party you were not

> invited to.

>   RUBY

> Relax. We were just chilling… about how his dad is

> a good friend with Koss's CEO, Alexander Moreau.

Dylan is on the edge of losing his cool.

>   DYLAN

Please, Ms Song. Don't you think you've passed
the age to hang out with a bunch of students?

                    RUBY

As said by Mr Assistant who has didn't check
the contractor's QA qualification. Who also cannot
figure out if someone is having a secret party on
a property he invited people to. Oh. And failing
to fix the smoke detector.

                    DYLAN

I don't need your opinion. Ms Jennings is the one
credited for release the lab report. Why're you
even here?

Ruby ignores his question and points at her clothes. They are soaked in beer.

                    RUBY

Do you have spare clothes in this palace? It's so sticky.

                    DYLAN

Do you have spares?

                    RUBY

Nope. Can't I borrow one from McDuck? He wouldn't
even notice.

                    DYLAN

Go to the Annex. There're some spare shirts upstairs.
And, bad joke. McDuck is a businessman, not a
politician.

                    RUBY

Bussinessduck.

Elaine sneaks to another direction and around the corner.

INT. ANNEX. CONTINUOUS.

When Dylan and Ruby walk in, there is only Josh, who rolls his eyes at Dylan.

                    DYLAN

Where are Ms Jennings and Ms Tomlinson?

Josh shrugs.

Ruby walks upstairs. She heads to the study where a computer is visible.

DYLAN

The other direction.

RUBY

You didn't have to follow me up here.

Ruby walks to the other room. She opens the closet. Dave is standing there.

Ruby almost jumps. She and Dave stare at each other. She finds it funny, whilst

Dave's hand is secretly on his gun.

RUBY

I found your skeleton in the closet.

Dylan walks in and sees Dave in the closet. Dylan is pissed, but he has to hide in

front of Ruby.

He drags Ruby to the study.

RUBY

Hey. I saw the shirts.

Dylan strides back and grabs a shirt from the closet.

He whispers to Dave in an angry voice.

DYLAN

Don't move. No. Move. Leave this property. Don't

let me see you tonight. No assassination.

Dave shrugs.

Dylan delivers the shirt to Ruby. She closes the door and immediately turns on the

computer. She tries the passwords she got from Will, mumbling. After a few

attempts, she gets in.

After a few seconds' thinking, she opens the email and searches 'Dylan'. She

comes across a file containing photos showing Olivia in seemingly intimate

moments with Max, their former married colleague.

RUBY

What? Did they? Wait.

She continues to look through the documents and uncovers the original versions

of the photos. In one, Olivia is actually embracing her sister, and in others, Max

and Olivia are pictured at different angles. It becomes clear that these photos were

manipulated without their knowledge.

She digs more and finds an email with the texts from Dylan to Murray:

That should divert public attention. Nobody would believe a liar.

312

Dylan knocks at the door.

<div align="center">DYLAN</div>

Are you ready?

<div align="center">RUBY</div>

Gosh. You're impatient.

Ruby turns off the computer and changes as fast as she can.

Dylan locks the door after Ruby leaves the room.

He walks Ruby downstairs. There is only Josh sitting there. Dylan sighs and walks out.

<div align="center">DYLAN</div>

I'll find them.

Dylan walks out.

Ruby strids to Josh.

<div align="center">RUBY</div>

I found something crazy in Murray's computer.

EXT. YARD. MEANWHILE.

Olivia is smoking, leaning against the wall to the main house. Elaine is next to her. They aren't talking.

There is a window nearby. Some young adults chatting in the room next to them. The most recognisable conversation comes from two students, EMMA and CHRIS.

<div align="center">EMMA</div>

What about Kyle?

<div align="center">CHRIS</div>

States. He's going to Yale.

<div align="center">EMMA</div>

Going there for what? To get shot on campus?

<div align="center">CHRIS</div>

Kyle isn't the brightest bulb in the box, but he has
an aunt who knows the board. He's even got the
full scholarship, I hear. For rowing.

<div align="center">EMMA</div>

I hope I don't get bored by seeing the same faces

<div align="right">313</div>

in uni. I hate to see Thom's stupid face. I swear

to god…

Dylan shows up at the door. He gestures the height of Olivia.

DYLAN

Have you seen two women. One of them is

about this tall. Brown hair.

EMMA

Oh my god. Are you looking for me?

CHRIS

You're weird, man.

Dylan notices there are candles all over the room.

DYLAN

Can you put them out?

CHRIS

Why would I? How else should I light my blunt?

It tastes smoother this way.

Dylan walks over to put out the candles. Emma and Chris leave the room.

Olivia doesn't intend to show Dylan that she is here, even though knowing that he

is looking for her.

She extinguishes the cigarette butt on the soil of the flowerpot.

OLIVIA

You seen those?

Olivia points the alcohol cabinet.

OLIVIA

That wine they just brought out costs more than a year

of tuition at Westminster.

Choose:

1) A snarky response

ELAINE

Is this your first time learning about wealth

inequality?

OLIVIA

Maybe not. But it could be my first time

2) A genuine response

> ELAINE
>
> That's how life is. Come, let's head back. I'll
>
> help you persuade Mia. If she can get an
>
> offer from Westminster, we'll find a way to
>
> support her through it.
>
> OLIVIA
>
> I know an easy way.

Dylan puts out the candles and leaves the room

Olivia climbs into the room through the window.

ELAINE

What're you doing?

Olivia heading to the alcohol cabinet.

ELAINE

If you want to nick from Murray, there're drinks in

the annex.

OLIVIA

So he knows that we took them? He won't speak a

word if he thinks Mr and Miss Posh took some

bottles.

Olivia grabs two bottles from the cabinet.

OLIVIA

This is one year of tuition. This is one year of rent.

Dylan walks pass the room. He hears the sound of glass clinking and walks back

in. Olivia immediately squats down behind a chair, but the cabinet door is open.

From Olivia's angle, there is a candle on the floor. It is on a discreet corner. Dylan

didn't notice this one.

Dylan is about to turn around and see the cabinet. Eliane walks to the window.

ELAINE

Hi!

DYLAN

Here you are. Where is Ms Jennings?

Behind Dylan, Olivia slowly closes the cabinet door.

Elaine points to a direction to the back yard.

> ELAINE
>
> Just over there. Is the meeting going to continue?
>
> We've been waiting for you for a while.

> DYLAN
>
> Have you? I'll be with you in a moment. Please don't
>
> get lost again.

Dylan looks to the smoke detector (no battery in there) and leaves the room. He closes it from outside.

Olivia passes the two bottles to Elaine and climbs out of the window.

> ELAINE
>
> You satisfied? Let's head back.

> OLIVIA
>
> What was he doing?

> ELAINE
>
> Putting out the candles.

> OLIVIA
>
> He's not doing a good job. He missed one.

> ELAINE
>
> Did you put it out?

> OLIVIA
>
> I'm not the butler of the house.

Elaine stops.

> OLIVIA
>
> Is your car nearby? I need to hide them somewhere.

> ELAINE
>
> Is it okay to leave it?

> OLIVIA
>
> We didn't light it. We're not babysitters of those
>
> kids. Most importantly, we've never been in that
>
> room.

Branch 0-1-2-1 A bright secret

Elaine goes to her car, so Olivia can hide the wine bottles in the car boot.

INT. ANNEX. MEANWHILE.

Dylan enters the annex. There is no one here.

<u>Upstairs</u>

Josh and Ruby are trying to unlock the door.

> JOSH
>
> I have no idea what I'm doing.

> RUBY
>
> Do you need me to find a YouTube tutorial?

They hear the footsteps of Dylan and hurriedly stand up.

They walk to the staircase. Dylan is walking up.

Dylan has lost most of his usual politeness.

> DYLAN
>
> You shouldn't be here.

> RUBY
>
> I hear something upstairs. I thought it was
>
> another skeleton in the closet.

Dylan strides past them and checks the rooms.

> RUBY
>
> That's the downside of having too many closets.
>
> Just saying.

Josh and Ruby walks downstairs, acting innocent.

> JOSH
>
> *(whispering)*

What skeleton?

Dylan checks the office door. It is still locked.

                    RUBY

        Relax, we didn't see that weird man again. It must

        have been the wind.

                    JOSH

                    (whispering)

        Now what? We have to get the evidence.

Elaine and Olivia enter the Annex.

                    JOSH

                    (whispering)

        We found something that you really need to know.

Dylan walks downstairs.

                    DYLAN

        Finally, everyone is here. Let's talk. Mr Murray-

There is some commotion outside. Men and women shout something.

Elaine looks through the gap between the blinds. A few students tumble out of the

main house.

                    DYLAN

        - has agreed to some of your conditions. There're-

Elaine stands up and opens the blinds.

                    STUDENT 2

        Fire! Everyone, get out!

They look to the window. The front yard is bathed in unsettling red light of

flames.

ETX.YARD. CONTINUOUS.

They dash out of the Annex. More students have gathered on the yard.

                    DYLAN

        Shit.

Dylan looks around and notices Dave looming behind Olivia.

He strides over and grabs him.

                    DYLAN

        Did you do it?

Dave is relaxed. He doesn't care for the chaos in the yard at all.

> DAVE
>
> I'm a killer. Not an arsonist. And you're a terrible
>
> babysitter.

> DYLAN
>
> Stop trying to kill people and help me get the kids
>
> out. Damn.

The fire has spread to the most rooms on the ground floor. But it is much stronger in the dining room.

> DYLAN (O.S.)
>
> Will? Will. Have you seen Will?

> RUBY (O.S.)
>
> I'm calling 999.

Dylan dashes into the house. Dave follows. They help some students out. But as the fire grows stronger, they both stopped to take a breath.

> DYLAN
>
> Has anyone seen Will?

Nobody answers. Dylan takes a wet towel from the annex, covers his head, and rushes back into the fire.

Dave doesn't follow. He looks at Olivia, who is in the middle of the crowds.

As the siren sounds approach, Dave gives up his plan and disappears into the crowds.

No one notices him.

Ruby talks to a student.

> RUBY
>
> Hey, were you the one who warned everyone first?

> STUDENT 2
>
> Yeah. I saved the day.

> RUBY
>
> How did the fire start? Did you see it?

> STUDENT 3
>
> We all did.

> STUDENT 2
>
> The guy called Scissors left the dining room. Not

long after, that room started burning.

Josh grabs Ruby's arm.

> JOSH
>
> Now, it's the time!

Josh points to the Annex.

> RUBY
>
> Right.

> JOSH
>
> Elaine, Liv. Come with us. Ruby found something
>
> in their office.

They rush back to the Annex.

INT. ANNEX. CONTINUOUS.

Upstairs.

Elaine picks the lock and opens the door.

> ELAINE
>
> I've done enough thievery tonight.

Olivia coughs.

> RUBY
>
> That's so cool. Did you learn lockpicking as research
>
> for a thief character?

> ELAINE
>
> Nope. I just got bored.

Ruby turns on the computer and copies all the files.

Elaine stands by the window. The firefighters just arrive.

Olivia looks at the materials that they have planned to defame her with. She gets
angrier as she goes through the fake materials.

> OLIVIA
>
> What's the point of making up stories? How is my
>
> personal life going to help them with the Koss case?

Ruby finishes copying the documents and forwarding them to the emails her and
Olivia's email accounts.

> JOSH
>
> Maybe because they can. Thanks to Ruby, we found

the emails before they managed to do anything.

We can just add these to tomorrow's news.

Murray can't stay out of it.

> RUBY

I think we should talk with Murray before making

any decisions.

Josh tires to say something.

> RUBY

Hold on. I know. We can't trust a word this man says.

But this is the night before we start a war against

Koss. We don't want more enemies who want to

destroy us.

> JOSH

Do you think talking to him can prevent that?

> RUBY

I'd assume that. He sent Dylan to talk to us.

They all look to Olivia. She thinks for a while.

> OLIVIA

I don't want to challenge Murray if he can promise

to stay out of it. I want to keep the focus on the

Koss issue, not expand the battlefield.

Josh frowns.

> JOSH

Alright, if that's what you want.

> ELAINE

We got everything we need. Let's get out of here

first.

EXT. YARD. MEANWHILE.

There is some commotion. Then, some paramedics rush pass by the camera.

That's Dylan on the stretcher.

The ambulance sounds the siren after they carry Dylan in.

Next to another ambulance, there sits Will, covered with a blanket. He seems not

injured at all. Only a bit sweaty.

Two police officers are talking to him.

> OFFICER 1

So, it's your family's property.

Will shrugs.

> OFFICER 2

Where have you been in the past 20 minutes?

> WILL

Busy trying not to die, probably.

Will jerked his chin to the mansion.

> WILL

I fell out of a window. Didn't even know there was a window in that closet. Guess that's why you need a big house.

The officers are not impressed.

> OFFICER 1

Glad you're okay.

> OFFICER 2

Do you have any idea what happened there? Seen anything?

> WILL

Scissors locked the door with lit candles in it. Peter mentioned seeing him fondling the smoke detectors, but I didn't see it.

> OFFCIER 1

Where is this person? Do you know his full name?

Will shrugs.

> OFFICER 2

Anyone else who might know more?

> WILL

Ask anyone. They will tell you Scissors locked the fire in the room. Everyone saw it.

> OFFICER 2

We'll be back to talk to you after this.

> WILL

> You better hurry up. I won't be in Manchester
> tomorrow.

Elaine, Ruby, Olivia, and Josh walk past Will and the officers.
Ruby stops and turns to Will.

> RUBY

> Hey, any chance you know your dad's personal
> phone number?

Will laughs.

> WILL

> Let me check my block list.

Will scrolls a while on his phone and shows Ruby a number.

> RUBY

> Thanks.

> WILL

> Tell him that Scissors set the house on fire.

> OFFICER 2

> Please don't say that. The cause of the fire is not
> confirmed yet.

Elaine, Ruby, Olivia, and Josh walks out of the front gate.
Elaine stops at her car. She gestures at the car boot to Olvia.

> ELAINE

> Are you forgetting something?

Olivia looks back. There are police officers not far away.

> RUBY

> Can we make a call in your car?

INT. ELAINE'S CAR. A MOMENT LATER.

Everyone is seated. A number is ready to be dialled through the car's calling
system, appearing on the display screen.

Olivia is still reading the evidence of Dylan's plan on destroying her.

> OLIVIA

> They had some of my colleagues to accuse me of
> being a jealousy incompetent bitch in the office.

> RUBY

Who? I bet it's that dickhead Jack.

> OLIVIA

It's him. And Sophie? We're not even on the same floor!

> RUBY

Don't worry. Now we know what they're doing. Are you ready to tell him to fuck off?

Olivia nods.

Elaine presses the dial button on the screen.

Murray picks up after a few seconds.

> MURRAY

Who is this?

> RUBY

Mr Murray, you sent your assistant Dylan to talk to us.

> MURRAY

Ah. You're the Koss whistle-blowers.

> RUBY

Your house is on fire. Did you know that? It's still burning.

Murray sighs.

> MURRAY

I've heard. I guess Dylan is occupied with the fire. What do you want?

> RUBY

Actually, I think he's gone to the hospital.

Ruby waits for a few seconds, but Murray doesn't ask further questions about Dylan.

> RUBY

We're calling just to let you know, we've discovered your evil smear campaign.

> JOSH

Those are some cruel plans. Is that how you treat the nation's hero, Mr Murray?

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MURRAY

So what's your plan? Accuse me of something

that hasn't even happened? My assistant put

together a few contingency exercises to help you

manage the potential risks of whistleblowing.

That's all there is to it.

JOSH

So you won't mind if we include this little

'contingency' in tomorrow's news?

MURRAY

Aright, what do you want?

RUBY

Here's the deal: we're exposing all of Koss's dirty

secrets. And in recognition of us being such responsible

citizens, doing a huge favour for the public and the

government, you'll do absolutely nothing to stop it. If

we hear a whisper against Olivia, we'll release the

evidence immediately.

INT. MURRAY'S HOUSE. CONTINUOUS.

It's dark. We can see a silhouette of a man holding a phone. His posture is

relaxed. We can't see his front face.

MURRAY

Fine. Air it.

He hangs up and dials another number.

MURRAY

Tell Moreau that old bastard better stop creeping

after the whistleblowers. Dylan saw their damn

hitman show up on my property. Jesus, it's like

I don't have enough problems already.

INT. OLVIA'S APARTMENT. MONTHS LATER.

Olivia is preparing snacks in the kitchen for a casual friend gathering.

The television is on.

The news title: <u>Follow-Up on Paint-Gate Scandal</u>

> NEWS ANCHOR
>
> Thousands of soldiers have received compensation
>
> following an urgent round of medical examinations,
>
> with many diagnosed with Wobble Syndrome.
>
> Numerous soldiers are now facing medical discharge
>
> due to the long-term health impacts.

The doorbell rings. Olivia greets her guest. It's Elaine and Steve. They hand a few wrapped gifts to Olivia.

> ELAINE
>
> Congrats to Mia on choosing her uni. That's exciting.
>
> Hope she loves it!

> STEVE.
>
> It's a new chapter of life.

Olivia smiles politely. She can't hide the disappointment in herself.

> OLIVIA
>
> It's a local university. She won't even try to apply
>
> any art school. She chose computer science,
>
> because it's more practical.

Olivia puts the gifts down.

> ELAINE
>
> Yes. Doing art isn't a good idea if you want
>
> to make money.

The doorbell rings again.

Olivia whispers to Elaine.

> OLIVIA
>
> At least her first year's tuition and rent have
>
> been taken care of.

Olivia opens the door. It is Josh and his new girlfriend ARIKA.

> JOSH
>
> Congratulations. Here is the gift for Mia. And this
>
> is Arika.

> OLIVIA
>
> Welcome.

ELAINE & STEVE

Hi, Arika.

Josh watches Olivia's expression as she interacts warmly and naturally with
Arika. A brief, complex emotion flickers across his face.

They sit down and chat. There are food and drinks ready (fast food and beers).

The atmosphere is causal and happy.

A while later

Everyone is a bit tipsy.

ELAINE

I'm going to take a call.

She goes on the balcony.

Olivia watches Elaine walking away. After a few seconds, she follows her. She
waits until she sees Eliane hang up her phone through the window. Olivia walks
to the balcony and closes the door.

ELAINE

It's a bit chilly out here, isn't it?

But Olivia stops her from going back in. She whispers to Elaine.

OLIVIA

Do you think… if we had put out the candle, there

wouldn't have been a fire?

Elaine looks into Olivia's eyes.

ELAINE

Stop thinking about it. We had nothing to do with

that fire. We just happened to be there.

Olivia purses her lips. The cold wind makes them shiver.

INT. HOSPITAL. THE NEXT DAY.

Dylan is covered with bandages and in coma. NURSE 1 checks his condition.
NURSE 2 walks in.

NURSE 2

I'll take it from here.

Nurse 1 rubs his face. He's exhausted and ready to leave.

NURSE 1

Can't wait to take a nap. This one's been

stable. No real sign of improvement though.

Nurse two shakes her head and checks the medical equipment.

The camera leaves Dylan's window and moves to the hospital parking lot. Elaine parks the car there.

INT. CAR. CONTINUOUS.

Elaine sits there for a long while.

People come and go as she sits in the car at the hospital car park. A family gets into their car, their child in a leg cast, yet all of them are laughing. An old man steps out of his vehicle, carrying flowers and chocolate. A guy walks past, clearly annoyed, accompanied by his lawyer who he complains to.

Eliane is almost fascinated by the scenes, but she doesn't leave the car.

It is approaching sunset.

She eventually drives away.

The end

Branch 0-1-2-2 A fair trade

Eliane gives Olivia her car key.

> ELAINE
>
> Turn right after you leaves the gate.

Olivia shrugs.

> OLIVIA
>
> I don't think they'd hurt if one of their mansions
>
> were burnt down. But fine.

Olivia leaves with the bottles.

Elaine enters the house front the front door and runs into Dylan.

> ELAINE
>
> I heard one of your guests said something about

the candles in that room.

Elaine walks past Dylan, but she soon releases that she has no idea where that room is – the house is too big.

                              DYLAN

          Do you mean the room I was just in? This way.

They return the room and put out the candle.

INT. ANNEX. LATER.

Elaine and Dylan walk in.

                              ELAINE

          Huh. Where is everyone?

Josh and Ruby walk down the staircase.

                              RUBY

          Here you are.

                              DYLAN

          You shouldn't be there.

                              RUBY

          We've waited too long. Got bored. Sorry.

The apology doesn't sound sincere.

                              DYLAN

          And where is-

The door opens. Elaine walks in. The wine bottles are no longer in her arms.

                              DYLAN

          Brilliant. Let's come back to track. Mr Murray-

                              JOSH

          Wait a second, I need to talk to Liv.

                              DYLAN

          No. You can talk after this. Let's get back to the track.
                    (to Olivia)
          Mr. Murray understands that you're seeking

          compensation. However, the conditions your

          friend mentioned aren't his decision alone.

          Raising public benefit, as you suggest, is a long

          process – it takes years to make real change

happen. I'm sure you're looking for something
that can make an immediate impact, aren't you?
We'll provide a financial settlement to assist you
with your unfair dismissal situation.

Josh smirks.

> JOSH

Trying to buy us off, are you?

Dylan still looks at Olivia.

> DYALN

Mr Murray happens to know of a vacancy at a
company called ChemGuard – a managerial
position. It's an independent agency for chemical
product testing that works closely with the
government to monitor and ensure product safety
standards. We could give you a referral. You
have the right intentions and the right attitude.
This position would be a good fit for you.

> OLIVIA

In exchange-

> DYLAN

We want you to keep quiet on the Bourlon
Barracks.

Olivia thinks for a while.

> OLIVIA

The news with Robin is still set to air tomorrow.

> DYLAN

That's good to hear. No one wants the truth to
be buried – unless, of course, it's a matter of national
security.

Olivia stands up and shakes hands with Dylan.

> OLIVIA

Okay. As long as you keep your promise.

> JOSH

Liv!

DYLAN

          I'll have to remind you. If your friend leaks

          the sensitive part of the report, our deal will

          no longer stand.

                    OLIVIA

          I'll take care of it.

Olivia nods at Dylan as she walks out of the Annex.

Josh catches up. Elaine and Ruby follow.

EXT. STREET. CONTINUOUS.

The party is still going.

They leave the house and the yard.

Olivia stops by Elaine's car. Elaine opens the boot, so Olivia can take the alcohol
out.

                    JOSH

          Liv, let's talk- What's this?

Olivia changes her idea and puts the alcohol back. She closes the car boot.

                    OLIVIA
                    (to Elaine)

          On a second thought, I'll take a lift with you.

Olivia opens the door to the backseat and climbs in. Elaine gets in the driver's
seat.

                    JOSH

          You haven't heard what Ruby found in Murray's

          computer.

Olivia pauses.

                    RUBY
                    (whispers)

          I don't know if it's the right timing.

                    (to Olivia)

          There are some fabricated photos. Looks like

          they're gearing up for a smear campaign if

          things go sideways.

                    OLIVIA

What kind of photos?

                              RUBY

Accusing you of an affair with Rob.

Olvia's attitude is cold.

                             OLIVIA

How do you want me to react to it?

                              JOSH

How can you work with that snake? Trust me,

they'll turn on you the first chance they get. You'll

end up feeding the tiger only for it to bite you.

                             OLIVIA

I don't care what kind of animal they are, Josh.

I won't be a martyr for your perfect world.

I've done enough.

Olivia closes the door.

Elaine drives away.

Olivia sits right behind Elaine. She can't see her face in the mirror.

                             OLIVIA
                            (quietly)

Can you put on some music?

Peaceful instrumental music starts. Nobody talks.

The sky above Murray's house is lit up by the party. The sky above the mansion

glows red from the party lights, as if illuminated by flames.

ETX. STREET. MEANWHILE.

Josh walks to his car with Ruby.

He talks to himself.

                              JOSH

What did I do wrong?

Josh turns to Ruby.

                              JOSH

How would you choose?

                              RUBY

I'd refuse the offer and expose the complete lab

report.

>   JOSH

See? That's what I meant. The right option is

obvious.

>   RUBY

My parents are doctors. My grandparents are

doctors. I can afford to be unemployed for

a long time and hire good lawyers, if necessary.

INT. PARK. WEEKS LATER.

There is a bench facing a pond. Dylan sits on it, eating an ice cream.

Olivia walks over and sits next to him. She is dressed better than before.

>   DYLAN

How's the new job?

>   OLIVIA

I'm less tired, but I got paid more. That's so strange.

>   DYLAN

You'll get used to it.

A brief silence.

>   DYLAN

Well, you asked for a chat. What do you want to

talk about?

>   OLIVIA

Why Bourlon Barracks? Murray has sighed off many

projects with Koss. Why is Bourlon so special?

>   DYLAN

That's why you wanted to see me?

>   OLIVIA

It bothers me. I made a trade with you, but I don't

know what I traded off.

>   DYLAN

Sensitive information that-

>   OLIVIA

What does it mean to Murray? If Bourlon case

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had been exposed, what would Murray lose?

                    DYALN

Is this when you regret your choice and come back

with a recorder, trying to trick me to say something

so you can use it against me?

Olivia opens her purse, there is only a phone. She turns it off. She shows that
there is no secret device hidden on her.

                    OLIVIA

I don't even have a pocket on this dress.

Dylan looks into her eyes and knows that she is genuinely wanting an answer.
Dylan laughs gently.

                    DYLAN

Sorry, I wasn't mocking you. It's just… You

won't like the answer.

                    OLIVIA

Tell me.

                    DYLAN

Your friend thinks that it would be the key

file to take Mr Murray down. But it's really not.

See, he wasn't involved in any of the paint

production. It might hurt him as in he'll have to

take a vacation in the pacific for a while. But he'll

be back. Faster than you'd like.

                    OLIVIA

I don't believe it.

                    DYLAN

It would be annoying if that part of report were

leaked, that was why he sent me. It wouldn't be

a disaster, that was why he only sent me.

                    OLIVIA

Like what?

                    DYLAN

Being held accountable for poisoning all those

soldiers would lead to huge payouts in

                                                        334

compensation. The military would likely use
the chance to demand more funding. But like
I said, it won't be anything dramatic your
friend hoped for

Olivia sighs.

> DYLAN

It could bring trouble for you, even.

> OLIVIA

OSA bullshit?

> DYLAN

Have you seen the news about the intercepted
weapons?

> OLIVIA

I wasn't paying attention to the news. Life's been
busy.

> DYLAN

Some weapons intended for Ukraine were intercepted
by the Russians. They've been investigating the source
of the leak. If you'd included the barracks in your
report, it'd likely be pinned on you.

> OLIVA

What? You had that planned?

> DYLAN

Don't look at me like that. I'm just saying, I could
see it happening. The timing is perfect. The
interception happened right after you reported
on Koss. That's how it is – you cross those people,
and they have plenty of ways to make your life hell.
And you won't even know it.

Olivia tries to take in the information.

> OLIVIA

That… was a lot. And insane.

> DYLAN

I'm glad you turned around in the end. It was a fair

trade, if you ask me. You became a hero, and you

got connected with Mr Murray. Most of all, you

are safe.

Olivia shakes her head. She still can't fully believe things could go that bad.

DYLAN

You reminded me of myself.

OLIVIA

I don't know if that's a compliment.

DYLAN

People like you, me, and your agitated friend

Josh – we only affect others to a degree. The worst

we might cause is a bloody nose. But powerful

people, they can change lives with just a thought. I

used to work for a senior policy advisor – worse yet,

he pushed for a policy that raised the cap on gas prices

by just 15 pence. That could add up to an extra 20

pound per month for a family. Do you think 20

pound is a lot?

OLIVIA

Not for me.

DYLAN

There're still people in this country going without

heating in winter. Coldness crawling into your

fingers and toes, crawling to your core.

Dylan looks to his hands.

Olivia thinks that this is why Dylan serves Murray loyally.

OLIVIA

Is Murray doing anything about it?

DYLAN

I don't think he cares very much.

OLIVIA

Why do you work for these awful people then?

DYLAN

Because they're scary. These people aren't just

human anymore; they're superhuman, changing
someone's life as casually as deciding where
to dine. I want to be one of them.

The end

ELAINE

Sorry, I'm busy today. Another time?

OLIVIA

Sure.

Olivia looks a little disappointed. Nothing more.

ELAINE (V.O.)

Can you tell from her face that she's about to make a
big life decision? I couldn't. She told me this day was
that important point where she made that decision
about the Koss case, and I helped her make that
decision.

EXT. ST HELENS STREET. A WHILE LATER.

Elaine parks her car. She walks around the gate to the construction side, but she
doesn't walk in. After some hesitation, she gets in the car and leaves.

Outline:

Without Olivia's help, there is no way to gain the critical evidence (the lab report)
from Koss. Josh tries to contact Olivia's colleague. Olivia warns him to not to
harass her. Josh has to accept that he cannot do anything on his own.

Josh, a reporter for a sports channel, witnesses a pivotal match with an
unexpected twist: a near-guaranteed win turns into a loss. He questions a
footballer who stumbled twice during the game, asking if he has recently acquired
a new house and what paint was used. The footballer is unsure about the paint but
mentions the house's contractor is Koss Group. Later, during a visit to his
cousin's house, Josh reaches a breaking point. The couple is preparing a nursery,
and he notices the paint they've chosen is the same toxic brand, linked to Koss
Group.

Josh approaches Elaine, declaring his determination to expose the toxic paint scandal, with or without help. He asks her for a usb stick containing files that, while not as critical as the lab report he lacks, could still aid his investigation. Elaine has promised Olivia not to share the files. Will she break her promise to support Josh's mission?

Choose:

1) give him the documents (Branch 0-2-1 Pawn)

2) pretend you don't have it (Branch 0-2-2 Revenge)

> ELAINE
>
> No need to talk to her. I have the documents.

She hands over the usb stick to Josh.

> JOSH
>
> So, she's okay letting you have it? Am I not trustworthy
>
> enough?

> ELAINE
>
> Save the drama. Do you want it or not?

Josh quickly shoves the usb stick into his pocket.

> ELAINE
>
> You have to realise that she won't testify for these
>
> documents on court.

> JOSH
>
> I know. I'll find a way.

Josh leaves hurriedly. Elaine watches him leaving. She is concerned about him.

INT. TRAIN. HALF HOUR LATER.

There are no empty seats. Josh leans on a pole and takes out his phone. He searches 'How to report toxic chemicals in construction site' 'How to call to report toxic paints' on his phone.

INT. JOSH'S HOME. HOURS LATER.

The computer is on. On the screen, there are documents related to Koss, like Environmental Permits and HSE Compliance.

Josh looks through his contacts and makes phone calls.

> JOSH
>
> Hi, Ken. I have some big news. Public health related.
>
> Koss Group, the company building council houses for
>
> Manchester? They've been using toxic paints in their
>
> construction sites…

Josh sits at the table with a different position.

> Henry, the thing we talked before – Koss Group, yeah.

I got the recordings...

Josh stands at the window, fiddling with the leaves of the plastic plant.

                    JOSH

          Hi, Michelle. This is Joshua from Robin news.

          Remember me? Yeah, I've been alright. I have

          a recording that proves they have been knowingly

          positioning the residents and their workers…

Josh covers his face.

                    JOSH

          No, the source won't testify.

Josh takes a beer from the fridge and cracks it with one hand.

                    JOSH

          It's *real*. I assure you… No, I know the drill.

          But surely we can find a way…

Josh presses his head against the wall, putting his whole weight into it.

                    JOSH

          If you see the documents, you know how serious it

          is… Really? Many thanks! Let me grab a pen. Ok,

          go on. Yeah, yeah. And which press he works for-

          The Sun? You got to be kidding me.

EXT. TRAIN. MORNING.

Josh is on his morning commute to work.

INT. ROBIN NEWS CENTRAL. DAY.

Josh goes to Henry. He gives Henry a football-shaped usb stick.

                    JOSH

          Here is the copy. You got to read it. Please.

                    HENRY

          I will. And I've seen the screenshots, Josh. It's

          big. But without a source willing to testify, we

          can't run with it. Even if I want to, Jenny won't

          let me.

                    JOSH

Robin Newsroom's senior producer? You two

are friends. At least you got to bring it to her.

HENRY

Fine. I'll try. But don't hold up too much hope.

Josh returns to his desk, which is on a different floor than Henry's. Josh works at

his desk absent-mindedly. He keeps checking his email.

Josh's phone beeps. He looks at the screen. Another reporter saying that they are

not interested.

INT. HOME. ANOTHER DAY.

Josh is woken up by a phone call. He looks at the time, is 11.15.

Josh signs and picks up the call.

JOSH

Hi, boss. I'm sorry. I'm not feeling well. Can I take a

sick day today?

Josh hangs up and gets out of the bed. He looks messy but not ill. There are empty

bottles piled up in the kitchen and living room. He has toast for his breakfast after

feeding his dachshund first. The dog is eager to play, but Josh is not in the mood.

He scrolls through his contact while looking at a sheet. There are a dozen names

that has been crossed out.

He receives an email. It's from Laura Omissi: I'm sorry, Josh. Without credible

source, we can't…

Josh doesn't open that email. He cross Omissi's name off.

His phone rings again. It's a stranger's number.

JOSH

Hello.

RACHEL

This is Rachel Jordan from Fox News.

Is this Mr Joshua Hammond?

JOSH

Yeah. Call me Josh.

RACHEL

And you can call me Rachel. Anyways, I heard from

Kenny about the construction scandal. Have you found

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any press willing to take it?

>   JOSH

No. Are you interested?

>   RACHEL

In fact, I am. It's big news. I've been working on some

relevant cases. The material you have will really help

us.

>   JOSH

What else did Koss do?

>   RACHEL

Can we meet in person? I'm on a trip to Media City.

You should come and see me.

INT. RACHEL'S HOTEL ROOM. THE NEXT DAY

Rachel opens the door and welcomes Josh in.

>   RACHEL

>   Thank you for coming all the way here. Take

>   a seat.

The is a newspaper on the tea table. Headline is <u>Chancellor Unveils New Policies</u>

<u>Boosting Employment</u>.

Josh sits down while Rachel grabs her laptop.

>   JOSH

>   Nice for you to reach me. Not going to lie, I was

>   pretty anxious earlier. No one was willing to

>   consider the story-

>   RACHEL

>   Have you showed the story to many people?

>   JOSH

>   A few.

>   RACHEL

>   That's not good. Probably you should find a

>   new place to stay.

>   JOSH

>   What are you suggesting? Koss wouldn't

try to kill me- Would they?

RACHEL

I prefer not to find out what they're willing

to do. Let's not give them the opportunity,

ok?

Josh sits there. His face shows a mix of worry and disbelief.

RACHEL

But let's talk about that later. What have you got?

Josh takes out a usb stick.

JOSH

I'll need to tell you. None of these will be

backed up by my source. They want nothing

to do with it.

RACHEL

Yeah. Kenny told me that. If you had a name,

your own channel would have run it the second

you had these materials.

Rachel puts the usb stick into the laptop.

Josh paces at the window while Rachel plays out the recording.

JOSH

What do you think?

Rachel hesitates.

RACHEL

I contacted you because I have been working on

this investigation for over two months now. I was

hoping your material would provide another

perspective to support my case. But… I'm not

sure. It doesn't seem really relevant to my work-

JOSH

What is your investigation about?

Rachel points at the newspaper: the person stands behind the chancellor.

JOSH

Who is this guy? Sorry, I only remember the chancellor.

RACHEL

The man behind her is Sander Murray. The Financial

Secretary to the Treasury. I was hoping to find

some direct relation between Koss and Murray.

                    JOSH

I remember his name. Koss gets some low-interest

Loans. Sander's name pops up a few times in the

File. Wait. Wait.

Josh dashes to the laptop and opens a few documents. He pulls out a document of

government funding with Sander's signature.

                    JOSH

In fact, if it wasn't for the Treasury's subsidies, Koss

wouldn't have got the deal. Is it enough to

be relevant to your case?

A satisfied smile shows up on Rachel's face.

                    RACHEL

You should come to London with me. So we can

go through these materials thoroughly.

                    JOSH

Umm…

                    RACHEL

At least, you shouldn't stay at your own place.

whistle-blowers die often. Everyone knows who

are responsible. But the government will never

find the evidence. Do you want to be one of them?

INT. ELAINE'S HOME. LATER THE DAY.

Elaine opens the door. It is Josh with his dog.

                    ELAINE

Hi, Ronaldo.

The dog is happy to see Elaine, wiggling its tail.

Josh carries some dog food in.

                    JOSH

Thank you for agreeing to taker her in. I'll

pay you. At least for the dog walking.

ELAINE

You don't have to.

They walk into the living room and sit down.

                    JOSH

I insist. You're a life saver. I'm not sure

when I'll be back. So, it might be a bit

hard for you.

                    ELAINE

I can manage for a couple of weeks. Where're

you going?

                    JOSH

I found someone who's interested.

                    ELAINE

You mean the Koss news?

Josh nodes.

                    JOSH

I'll leave town for a while. Probably a few

days. I took a week off from work. I'll let you know

if anything changes.

                    ELAINE

Wait. Wait. Which media? The Sun?

                    JOSH

Oh hell, no. It's Fox News.

                    ELAINE

Not so much better.

                    JOSH

That's what I can get. She's working on a piece

on someone in the government, who covers for

Koss. I'm not entirely sure how deep we'll go

in Koss's case. What?

Elaine looks very concerned.

                    ELAINE

I don't like the sound of it.

                    JOSH

I'll be careful.

ETX. TRAIN STATION, LONDON. A FEW DAYS LATER.

Josh walks out of the train station.

INT. FOX NEWS, UK HEADQUARTER, LONDON. SAME DAY.

                      RACHEL

            I appreciate you made all the way here.

Rahcel and Josh walk pass different working area.

                      RAHCEL

            Feel any difference than your Robin's building?

            Things are bit cramped here. We also cover the

            news in Europe.

Josh is not really listening. He holds tight to his bag, which carries the printed
documents from the usb stick.

INT. MEETING ROOM. CONTINUOUS.

They walk into a meeting room. Josh only notices there is a young man (MARK)
sitting at the corner after he steps in the room. There is a fish tank next to Mark.
Rachel's phone rings.

                      RACHEL

            This is Mark. This is Josh. You two both have

            some material related to Murray. Now, excuse

            me.

Rachel leaves the room to pick up the phone.

Josh picks a seat and sit down. His eyes meet Mark's.

                      MARK

            I was a friend of James.

                      JOSH

            Nice to meet you.

Josh takes out the documents and sets them on the desk.

                      MARK

            James Murray, have you heard of him?

                      JOSH

Not really.

Mark shrugs. His attention is caught by a fish swimming next to him. After a while, Mark looks to Josh again.

                    MARK

He died in a car accident 2 years ago.

                    JOSH

Whom? Oh. I'm sorry.

                    MARK

Well, actually, he killed himself. Jumped onto
the train rail. Caused some train delays. His
dad Sander Murray covered everything, and no
one in the family is allowed to talk about him ever.

Josh doesn't know how to respond.

                    MARK

Anyways, Rachel wants to dig this thing up.
We don't have much solid evidence on this.
Security cameras in that train station were
broken. Typical cameras, huh?

                    JOSH

Didn't know a senior figure's son could be suicidal.
They have everything… It's insensitive to say.
Sorry.

                    MARK

Everyone is suicidal nowadays. I am suicidal. My
poly partners are suicidal. My sugar gliders are
suicidal. Self-destruction is a hidden subroutine in
the machine.

Mark point at his head.

                    MARK

Sometimes, you simply wake up on the wrong side
of the bed, and that program activates. Sometimes,
you have a cunt dad. But eh, either way…
Do you have suicidal thoughts?

                    JOSH

Eh? No.

> MARK

> You'd better write something down, then. Rachel
>
> told me about you. High suicidal rate in
>
> whistleblower career. Well, not that a non-suicidal
>
> statement can protect you from it, but at least-

Rachel opens the door and walks in.

> RACHEL

> Sorry about that. Hi, Mark, you're still here?

> MARK

> Can I stay?

Rachel looks to Josh. Josh frowns.

> RACHEL

> I'm sorry. We need to discuss this in private.

Mark shrugs. He puts something in the fish tank and walks to the door. The fish rush together and swallows the things Mark has dropped in.

> RACHEL

> What did you put in?

> MARK

> Flake food. I found them in your drawer.

Mark leaves.

> JOSH

> Is the suicidal son your main story? Don't tell me
>
> that your source is always high.

> RACHEL

> He's not going to testify on court right now. But yeah,
>
> I plan to investigate Murray's character from the
>
> perspectives of his family life and private affairs.

Rachel notices Josh's look which shows that he might disagree on this direction.

> RACHEL

> What? In general, your story is more important.
>
> That is true. But I won't change my work for
>
> a story that doesn't have credible source to back
>
> it up. Now, let's get to work, shall we?

Rachel takes some documents and starts to read.

She puts most of the documents to the left side and only picks out two pieces of

paper on her right side. Josh gets more and more anxious.

Rachel puts another paper on the left side.

>   JOSH

>   That's the emails inside Koss where they talk about

>   Chloromoldexanate is not on the regulating list.

>   RACHEL

>   I know.

>   JOSH

>   It's solid proof that they were actively looking out

>   for this component. They knew there was something

>   wrong about it.

>   RACHEL

>   I have to remind you that my report does not focus

>   on the toxic paints. I'm looking for evidence that

>   Murray is protecting Koss and using their position

>   to help Koss profit unethically. Not to accuse Koss

>   of knowingly poisoning their customers-

>   JOSH

>   You can do both.

Rahcel sits back to her chair, eyes fixing on Josh.

>   RACHEL

>   You have a big heart but possible the worst

>   approach. Look at this.

Rachel looks behind the fish tank and picks up an aquarium scraper. She opens the

lid of the tank.

>   RACHEL

>   What do you see in the tank now?

>   JOSH

>   Fish. Plants. And sand.

>   RACHEL

>   You see the blue one? That should be the most

>   expensive one in this tank.

Josh nods.

Rachel shoves the scraper in. She stirs the sands and gravel forcefully. The substrate kicks up, and the water becomes cloudy.

>   JOSH
>
> Now I can't see it. Can you stop now?

>   RACHEL
>
> People like Murray… when they want to hide a blue
> fish, they can very easily make it disappear. Once
> he finds out you're trying to take him down, there'll
> be too many things stirred up. Suddenly, so many
> people would step up and accuse you of being
> a fraud, scumbag, broken addict, sex offender…

Rachel hits the tank from inside, making a loud noise.

> The tank becomes so cloudy. Now you can't even
> see if the blue fish has died or not.

>   JOSH
>
> Hey! Stop it!

Rachel smiles. She takes of the scraper. There is no trace of dead fish on it.

>   RACHEL
>
> I was kidding.

>   JOSH
>
> Not funny.

>   RACHEL
>
> I don't want to broaden the battlefield and give the
> opposition more chances to attack. The paints will
> catch so much attention, but it's also a weak
> spot they could exploit. I hope you can keep quiet
> about the ChromaGlow.

Rachel has a stern look.

>   RACHEL
>
> Now, shall we proceed? I'll take you through the
> main findings and narrative threads I've collected.
> It's quite the story.

Josh is looking at the notes that he has taken some notes during the conversation.

> RACHEL
>
> What do you say? Murray isn't enabling just one
>
> company like Koss. There are several more benefiting
>
> from his influence.

Josh pinches his nose bridge.

> JOSH
>
> But we're not allowed to mention ChromaGlow.

> RACHEL
>
> Unless you find me solid proof.

Josh takes a breath.

> JOSH
>
> If we can take him out, Koss will hurt as well. I'm in.

Rachel shakes hand with him.

> RACHEL
>
> If you haven't found a place to stay in London. I
>
> can help.

They step out of the meeting room and are surprised to see the studio in complete chaos. Journalists and assistants are darting around, squeezed into the nearby room. Rachel and Josh make their way to the open office area, where a large screen is playing breaking news: Critical UK Military Supplies Intercepted by Russia: Avdiivka Falls

They both stopped to watch.

> JOSH
>
> That sounds bad. I remember Avdiivka is an important
>
> city.

> RACHEL
>
> The lab report you kept mentioning – it had data on the
>
> soldiers affected by ChromaGlow, right?

> JOSH
>
> Yes. ChromaGlow was used in the barracks.

> RACHEL
>
> If you'd somehow got that report and successfully blown

the whistle then, they could've easily turned it around and blamed you.

Josh looks baffled.

                    JOSH

    What?

                    RACHEL

    They love to make a big deal out of the Official Secrets
    Act.
                    (mimicking a serious tone)
    If you leak these sensitive materials, you're endangering
    the nation. But how exactly the harm was done? Sorry,
    can't say – OSA.

                    JOSH

    That sounds like a stretch.

INT. AN EMPTY APARTMENT. SAME DAY.

Rachel opens the door and walks in, followed by Josh.

It is a pretty and furnished flat with exquisite paintings and decorations.

                    RACHEL

        We've arrived. My friend was going to turn it into
        an Airbnb next month. She's ok to let you
        stay here for free.

Rachel shows him around.

                    RACHEL

        This painting and that sculpture are originals. Be careful
        with them. The fridge is empty. Order fresh food delivery.
        It's convenient.

Josh is slightly uncomfortable about how good this flat is.

                    JOSH

    It looks nice. But I have a question.

                    RACHEL

    Yes?

                    JOSH

    What's the point of me hiding, if we're not doing

        report on Koss?

                  RACHEL

        Are we pretending you wouldn't just write your

        own piece and have an influential YouTuber or

        podcaster release it?

                  JOSH

        You're giving me ideas.

EXT. CHIU'S HOME. THE NEXT DAY.

It's a town house.

Josh checks the address on his phone. The name <u>Craig Chiu</u> is on a list called

'Employee Illness and Injury Report'.

Josh knocks on the door. A pale man (CRAIG) in his forties opens the door.

                  JOSH

        Hi, I'm Josh from Robin News. I understand you

        worked for Koss. I would like to speak with you

         for an interview. Is it okay?

Craig looks alerted.

                  CRAIG

        How do you know me?

                  JOSH

        I have the list of workers who worked in Koss

        and diagnosed as leukae-

                  CRAIG

        Did Mathew tip you this? You should leave.

        There is no story here. He's out of his mind.

Josh checks the list on his phone.

                  JOSH

        Mathew? Do you mean Mathew Jones? Your

        former coworker?

Craig sighs.

                  CRAIG

        Come in. I don't want to stand on my porch

        all day.

INT. CHIU'S LIVING ROOM. CONTINUOUS.

It is a small, cramped living room.

> CRAIG
>
> What do you want to ask?

> JOSH
>
> First, how do you do, Craig?

> CRAIG
>
> You probably got my health report. Looks like
> you've got my name on that list.

Josh is slightly embarrassed.

> JOSH
>
> Yeah.

> CRAIG
>
> Six months, they said.

> JOSH
>
> I'm sorry. How have you been holding up?

> CRAIG
>
> At least my oldest is almost out of college. The younger
> ones still in high school. With the compensation from
> the company, I wouldn't worry about them too much.

> JOSH
>
> Is it ok to disclose how much it is?

Craig hesitates.

> CRAIG
>
> They say it would be twenty-five grand.

> JOSH
>
> What about Mr Jones? You thought he reached
> out to the press, didn't you? And you don't like it?

> CRAIG
>
> He's a good man, but he hasn't been reasonable
> lately. He's not dealing with the illness well. Mentally,
> I mean. Physically, he still looks tough like a bull.

> JOSH

You know him well?

CRAIG

He's been trying to organize people who got sick
and tried to ask the company for more money.
We've already received compensation. I don't want
more trouble, and most of us don't either.

Craig pauses, trying to see if Josh is judging him.

CRAIG

He doesn't have proof for his speculation. It's all just
an idea…

JOSH

ChromaGlow?

CRAIG

You've heard of it?

JOSH

I have. It's about ChromaGlow causing the leukaemia.

CRAIG

What do you think?

JOSH

I think we don't have enough proof to make any
conclusions.

Craig looks relieved that Josh seems to be on his side.

CRAIG

Exactly.

JOSH

What matters is that you've got support from Koss.

Craig's face changes a bit.

JOSH

You haven't received the money?

CRAIG

No. Not until a few months later. They're saying
something about a long review and approval process.

A while later

Craig walks Josh to the door, already looking like he regrets the conversation.

> CRAIG
>
> Please don't alter my words. I don't want to get
> involved in it. I just want my family to have an easy
> life after I'm gone.

EXT. MATHEW'S HOME. LATER.

Josh knocks at the door. He waits for a long while before MATHEW finally opens it.

> JOSH
>
> Hi. I'm josh from robin news. I'm working on a
> story about Koss. Are you open for an interview?

Mathew opens the door and lets Josh in. He points the seat at Josh. When Josh settles down, Mathew already shows up with 2 glass of water. He puts one in front of josh. Waiting for josh to talk.

> JOSH
>
> So, I heard that you've been organising people and
> tried to sue Koss-

> MATHEW
>
> Which side are you on? And don't tell me the 'we
> don't pick sides' bullshit. Everyone picks sides.

> JOSH
>
> I'm on your side. I want to help you.

> MATHEW
>
> How do you plan to help?

> JOSH
>
> First, we need to let your story be heard.

> MATHEW
>
> Everyone tells me there is no solid evidence. I've
> talked to people in your channel. The guy said they
> won't consider cover conspiracies. Nick. You know
> him?

> JOSH
>
> Not really. You might be talking to the news

producer of News Show.

                    MATHEW

Are you really working for Robin? will Robin run the

story?

                    JOSH

We don't need Robin. We can find other platforms.

The little piece of hope in Mathew's eyes vanishes.

                    MATHEW

Great, you are on your own. You said you are working

a report on Koss. How much have you done?

                    JOSH

I have some inside material.

Mathew's face lights up.

                    MATHEW

 What have you got?

                    JOSH

We can't use it. The source has their reasons.

In short, they won't stand up to testify.

                    MATHEW

 Of course they won't. This case looks like a dead

end to me. Why are you bothering?

                    JOSH

So what? I'll write this dead end down. I want

people to see there is a dead end and want them

to think why this will happen.

For a second, Mathew is almost moved by Josh's emotion. Then, he chuckles.

                    MATHEW

 By the time your story makes a point, I'll be under

the ground – hopefully my stubborn partner won't

waste too much of her money on a coffin for me. You

should leave. I have no interest in being part of your

sad story.

EXT. A DIFFERENCE STREE. LATE AFTERNOON.

Josh walks out of the house of another victim. He looks back. The curtain just has been drawn. He sits in the car and take a deep sigh.

INT. CAFÉ, LONDON. THE NEXT DAY.

On the way to Fox News, Josh passes the café near the entrance to the building.

Josh sees Rachel and mark talking while having coffee together.

Josh walks in. Rachel and Mark haven't noticed him. Josh sits near to them, secretly listening in.

> RACHEL
>
> The last version was just fine. I won't accept this
>
> note until you remove those irrelevant details.

> MARK
>
> The details I added are all very much relevant.

> RACHEL
>
> We've gone over this. You need to listen. It's not
>
> about how much your brother loved his ex-girlfriend,
>
> it's about how much his dad had hurt him-

> MARK
>
> James would have talked about Ava.

> RACHEL
>
> He's not writing this will, is him. I don't want
>
> to be harsh. But we don't want people to think
>
> the bad breakup is the cause of his suicide. Tune it
>
> down, will you?

Someone knocks over a mug.

Rachel and mark look over to the direction. It is a waitress. They turn back to their subject. Waitress weirdly looks at josh, who is hiding under the table in an absurd manner.

INT. ELAINE'S HOME. LATER THAT DAY.

Josh knocks on the door. After a while, Elaine opens the door. Dog Ronaldo welcomes josh. Elaine has messy hair.

> ELAINE
>
> Sorry about this. I've been catching some deadlines.

Josh gives a dramatic smile.

> JOSH

>> Am I hearing things, or what? You've hit the busy
>> season as a writer. Congratulations!

Elaine smiles before yawns.

> ELAINE

>> Come up.

They walk to her study.

> ELAINE

>> I'm working on taking on a serialized podcast show.
>> There's so much to pay attention to. Normally I
>> wouldn't enjoy writing cooperatively. But this one.
>> It's really interesting-

Elaine notice josh is stressed.

> ELAINE

>> Are you busy going somewhere?

> JOSH

>> I don't know.

> ELAINE

>> What's wrong?

> JOSH

>> It's the reporter I've been working with. I suspect
>> she has been using fabricated evidence.

Josh talks more. Elaine's look gets more serious.

A while later.

Elaine brings a glass of wine and a cup of coffee in. josh takes the coffee.

> ELINAE

>> I think you should back off. Being associated with
>> people like her will ruin your career.

> JOSH

>> I thought so as well. But I keep thinking, what if
>> She's my only chance? The only big press that
>> would cover Koss's case? Rachel is obviously okay
>> to use a fabricated file, as long as it helps her story.

Then, what if…

Josh is nearly whispering. He stares into somewhere in distance.

                    JOSH

                    What if I change the documents so it fits better in

                    Rachel's narrative against Murray? She'd cover

                    more details in ChormaGlow. Like… Murray

                    is actually Koss's secret stockholder? It was

                    Murray who insists in pushing the product to the

                    market when there is health issue raised? Yeah…

                    Rachel would love this story.

                    ELAINE

                    Josh.

Eliane and Josh stare at each other.

                    ELAINE

                    You're a reporter. You should never say things

                    like that.

                    JOSH

                    You're right.

He looks reluctant.

                    ELAINE

                    Josh.

                    JOSH

                    I know what you're going to say. 'Truth will come

                    out eventually. Don't bother getting your hands dirty.'

                    Right?

                    ELAINE

                    Spreading the truth shouldn't come at the cost of lying.

                    JOSH

                    Truth won't die of leukaemia. The victims will.

Josh stands up.

                    ELAINE

                    Where're you going?

                    JOSH

                    Back to London.

> Choose:
>
> 1) respect his choice (Branch 0-2-1-1 At what cost)
>
> 2) need to talk him out of it (Branch 0-2-1-2 Fight fire with fire)

Branch 0-2-1-1 At what cost

Josh is okay to work with Rachel, who uses fake information to achieve his goal. Once he has accepted the mentality, he loses his standard.

Mathew tries to assassinate Koss's CEO but fails. Mathew is shot at the scene. After finding out this, Josh puts every effort into drawing public attention to Koss's case, including fabricating some information.

Josh and Mark are arrested and charged for defamation and libel. Rachel claims that she has never known about these. It turns out that Rachel works for a government officer Norman, who is political rival to Murray. Mark's family gets him a good lawyer. In this end, Mark and Rachel walk free out of the lawsuits. Josh is convicted, becoming a scapegoat for Norman's machinations. His action puts Koss under the spotlight. A year later, the investigation proves the toxicity of the paints.

Branch 0-2-1-2 Fight fire with fire

A few days later, Elaine informs Josh a shocking news: the documents were largely made up by Ruby and Max. She and Olivia have made it up to make Josh lose hope on using the materials. Josh gives up.

The victims of the paints die one by one due to the illness. Mathew tries to murder Moreau but fails. Josh uses the connection from Rachel (after threatening to expose her plan) and gets a job in the government.

Branch 0-2-2　Revenge

Elaine chooses not to give Josh the documents, but that doesn't stop Josh from digging deeper into the toxic paint case. He gets contacts with some former residents/workers that had close long-time contact with Koss Group. Getting to

know the people who are suffering, Josh becomes more and more aggressive. Later, with a constructor Mathew, he plans to murder Koss Group's CEO Moreau. Olivia discovers their secrets by accident, but to everyone's surprise, she doesn't report them. Instead, she leaves some of her savings to help them get some equipment.

They succeed in killing Moreau, but they don't plan to stop there. They plan to murder high government official Murray as well. A few nights before the operation against Murray, Mathew falls to the ground while standing for no reason. He denies it being wobble syndrome. The wobble syndrome can cause the assassination to fail if Mathew falls again during the operation. With no one else capable of carrying out the assassination, Josh volunteers. He's been playing a supporting role while the actual killing was left to Mathew. Taking over Mathew's job means getting his hands dirty – and risking severe punishment if he gets caught.

Elaine is attending a podcast awards ceremony in the same building where a summit is also being held. Her show recently won a niche storytelling award, making the event a celebratory gathering for the podcasting community. Meanwhile, Josh approaches her with a request to discreetly place a hidden camera on the summit floor as part of his plan. Murray will be attending that summit. Josh assures her that her role will remain anonymous and that, if anything goes wrong, her name will not be revealed. Olivia thinks it is their time to make things right. Elaine can choose to help or walk away.

Branch 0-2-2-1

Elaine agrees to help. The camera helps them get to know the security and layout of the building before the big day. However, on the way to carry out the assassination, Josh is taken into police custody due to suspicions related to the Moreau's case. With this critical window of opportunity slipping away, the team fears they won't have another chance. Olivia steps in to take Josh's place and completes the mission. She is shot at the scene.

Branch 0-2-2-2

Elaine doesn't help with the camera. Before the big day, Josh has to sneak in the building so they can be more prepared. He gets caught by the security but manages to run away before the police arrives. However, he hurts his ankle when he jumps out of a window while running away. Mathew takes the assassinator's role. Because he is unfamiliar with the layout, he fails to land the kill. Seeing Murray walks out alive, Josh breaks down crying. Everyone wonders if justice could have been achieved had they chosen differently.