

Narrative Design Portfolio

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Practice

I design narrative as a layer of systems, not a layer of text. My primary interest is the gap between what a game says it's about and what its mechanics actually teach the player to feel. I close that gap by making the world's behaviour do the emotional work that dialogue and cutscenes usually try to carry alone.

Current projects: **Unkindness of Ravens** and **Koel** — two interconnected games targeting playable demos at IGDC 2026, Chennai, October 28–29.



01 – Design Essay

Why Koel Has No Morality Meter

Dev Diary · Karthi Keian · June 2026



Every designer's first instinct when building a reactive world is to add a morality meter.

It makes sense on paper. You want the player to feel the weight of their choices. You want those choices to matter. A bar that fills or empties is clean, readable, unambiguous. It tells the player: *you are becoming something*.

I built one for Koel. Then I deleted it.



The Problem with Meters

Morality meters don't measure morality. They measure optimisation.

The moment a player sees a meter, they stop asking "what should I do?" and start asking "which way does this move the bar?" The story becomes a resource management problem. Paragon/Renegade. Good/Evil. Light side/Dark side. The framing changes but the behaviour doesn't — players chase the ends of the spectrum because that's where the rewards are, and they make choices based on the UI rather than the world.

Koel is set in a dense medieval port city on a single island. The 10th-century Indian Ocean trade world — Chola, Srivijayan, Anjuvannam guild merchants, Islamic traders, displaced monks, and a pirate crew who are nominally your employers. Everyone has interests. Everyone has memory. And there is nowhere to go when things go wrong.

A meter in that setting would be a lie. It would suggest that your relationship with the world is a single number, that a Srivijayan envoy and a Shaivite temple priest are both reading the same scoreboard. They're not. They have completely different relationships with you, built from completely different information, and they don't talk to each other unless the docks make it unavoidable.



What I Built Instead

Koel's reactive system runs on four interconnected layers:

Faction Disposition is a float from -100 to $+100$, one per faction. It is never shown to the player. It doesn't tick up by one every time you do a small favour — it changes in response to *events*. Completing a mission for the guild might move it $+12$. Getting caught stealing from them moves it -15 . Being exposed as a double agent by a rival can crater it -35 . The numbers are internal accounting. The player never sees them.

World State Variables are permanent flags. A burned warehouse stays burned. A smuggling route that was exposed stays exposed. These never decay. They are facts about what happened, not a running score of who you are.

NPC Memory is per-character and fades. A guard who saw you do something will remember it for a while — but if nothing reinforces it, it fades. His colleague might remind him. A faction captain with a grudge might keep the memory active. Or it might simply dissipate, and the next time you walk past, he says nothing.

District Evolution is the layer I'm most interested in. As events accumulate, physical spaces change. A district where the guild has lost trust in the player starts looking different — fewer open stalls, more private conversations that stop when you approach. A district where you've built strong reputation with the resistance starts having people leave food on your path. The feedback is spatial. You see it before you understand it.

The Design Mandate

The guiding principle I wrote for the system was simple: *legible without being telegraphed*.

The player should feel the consequences of their choices through the world's behaviour — not through a notification. A changed district is the feedback. A closed door is the feedback. A merchant who used to meet your eyes and no longer does is the feedback.

What this required was restraint in a place where most systems reach for clarity. The game cannot explain to the player why things are different. It can only *be* different, and trust the player to read it.

That's a harder design problem than a morality meter. It means every consequence has to be expressed spatially or behaviourally rather than numerically. It means the world has to be dense enough that the player notices when something shifts. It means writing NPCs with enough specificity that their changed behaviour is legible.

But it produces something a meter never can: a world that feels like it has its own logic, independent of whether the player is paying attention to it.

The island remembers. The player learns that it does by watching what happens — not by looking at a bar.

02 – Narrative Systems Documentation

Koel: Reactive Story System – Design Document (Excerpt)

Full document: [06_koel/Game_Doc/Reactive_Story_System_GDD.md](#)

Design Philosophy

Koel's world is a single dense island port. There are no other zones to escape to. Every action the player takes happens in a space where people saw it, heard about it, or will feel its consequences next week. This is the core

constraint that defines the reactivity system: **the island remembers**.

The reactive story system is not a morality meter. It is not a good/evil axis. It is a **consequence simulation** — a set of interacting models that track what the world knows about the player, how the balance of power shifts as the player operates, and how the environment itself changes shape in response. The player is never told their "score." The world simply behaves differently.



The Four Layers

Layer	What It Tracks	Scope	Persistence
1. Faction Disposition	How each faction regards the player	Per-faction, global	Long-term, slow decay
2. World State Variables	What has permanently changed	Per-event flag	Permanent, no decay
3. NPC Memory	What specific individuals know	Per-NPC, local	Medium-term, fades unless reinforced
4. District Evolution	How physical spaces change	Per-district	Cumulative, semi-permanent

These layers are not independent — they read from and write to each other. A player action that flips a World State Variable may shift multiple Faction Dispositions, cause several NPCs to update their memory, and trigger a District Evolution event.



Layer 1 — Faction Disposition

Each of the game's ten major factions maintains a Disposition score toward the player — a float in the range [-100, 100] . Disposition is not symmetric with real-world faction relationships. The Chola and Srivijayan Envoys are geopolitical rivals, but both may simultaneously hold positive Disposition toward the player if the player has served both without getting caught. The player is a hidden actor; factions don't automatically share information.

Behavioral thresholds (not shown to player; expressed through world behaviour):

Range	Tier	World Behaviour
+70 to +100	TRUSTED	Greeted by name; safe houses available; faction members will lie for you
+25 to +69	FRIENDLY	Cooperation; access to faction spaces; missions offered
-24 to +24	NEUTRAL	Standard commercial relationship; no special access or hostility
-25 to -69	HOSTILE	Refusal; tracking in faction territory; 30% price inflation
-70 to -100	ENEMY	Active hunting orders; bounty placed; members report your location on sight

Modification is **event-driven, not cumulative**. Killing a guild member mid-dialogue triggers an event evaluation that weighs context (witnessed/unwitnessed, in faction territory, under disguise) and applies a weighted delta — not a flat point increment. Context multipliers range from ×0.3 (ambiguous evidence) to ×2.0 (direct contradiction of a promise made to that faction).



Layer 2 — World State Variables

Permanent boolean flags tracking what has irreversibly changed. Selected examples:

WSV_WAREHOUSE_12_BURNED	– True after player burns the Anjuvannam warehouse
WSV_SMUGGLING_ROUTE_EXPOSED	– True after player reveals the route to the Chola garrison
WSV_PIRATE_ALLIANCE_PUBLIC	– True after alliance with crew is exposed to any faction
WSV_SRIVIJAYA_ENVOY_DEAD	– True after envoy death; cascades to 3 Disposition events
WSV_GATE_DISTRICT_HOSTILE	– Aggregated flag; triggers district visual evolution

World State Variables feed directly into dialogue conditional logic — NPCs check these flags before determining what they know and what they'll say. An NPC who would normally offer a mission won't, if a relevant WSV has flipped.



Layer 3 — NPC Memory

Per-NPC memory entries decay on a timer unless reinforced. Each memory entry carries:

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NPC_MEMORY {
  NPC_ID      : "GUARD_CAPTAIN_RASHEED"
  PLAYER_ACTION : "SAW_PLAYER_STEAL_FROM_WAREHOUSE"
  CONFIDENCE   : 0.85
  DECAY_RATE   : 0.05_per_game_day
  REINFORCED_BY : ["GUILD_FACTION_MEMORY_FLAG"]
  TRIGGERS     : ["HOSTILE_GREETING", "REDUCED_DIALOGUE_OPTIONS"]
}

```

Memory is visible in NPC behaviour, not in UI. A guard captain who saw you steal greets you differently — shorter sentences, no eye contact (conveyed through animation), conversation exits earlier. He does not say "I remember you stole." He just acts like someone who remembers.

Cross-NPC referencing (the "Koel NPC Memory System"): NPCs at the same location can share memory state through their own dialogue with each other — overheard conversations may update a second NPC's confidence in a shared memory. This creates an emergent information network without a formal mechanic.



Layer 4 — District Evolution

As events accumulate, physical districts change state. Six districts have four visual states each (Neutral → Tense → Altered → Transformed). These are not triggered by a single event — they require a threshold of accumulated WSVs and Disposition averages for the district.

Dock District evolution example:

State	Trigger Conditions	Visible Changes
Neutral	Default	Open stalls, ambient crowd, merchants approach player
Tense	1+ negative WSV OR avg Disposition < -10	Fewer open stalls; crowd parts; merchants don't approach
Altered	2+ negative WSV AND avg Disposition < -25	Boarded stalls; visible Chola patrols; NPC conversations stop when player approaches
Transformed	Guild ENEMY + key WSV flipped	Night-only safe passage; guild enforcers patrol; black market only

District state is the primary long-term emotional feedback mechanism. A player who has consistently operated in a way that damages their standing with dock-side factions will feel this through the changed texture of the space — long before any dialogue confirms it.



03 — World Bible Methodology

The faction and culture documents below are excerpts from Koel's world bible — research-grounded documents that every narrative event in the game pulls from. The design goal is that any NPC's dialogue, motivation, or behavioural response can be traced back to a cultural logic established in the world bible.

Koel Setting — The Indian Ocean Trade World, c. 1010 CE

The Chola Empire (excerpt)

The Chola Empire is the dominant force of the maritime world at the game's setting. Under Chakravartin Rajaraja Chola I, the empire has transformed the Bay of Bengal into a Chola lake. They are not an empire of walls and fortresses — they are an empire of water, stone temples, and merchant ships.

Core Ethos: *"We do not hold land. We hold the sea."*

Chola self-image is of a chosen dynasty — solar descendants, patrons of the divine, masters of trade. They conquer not to colonize but to control the flow of goods and the loyalty of distant ports. At the level of the street, this produces something specific: Chola authority is everywhere and nowhere visible at once. A Chola garrison controls the port gate, but the garrison's captain eats with guild merchants. Authority is negotiated, not imposed. The player's operations happen inside that negotiation.

What this means for Koel gameplay: Chola Disposition affects what the player can do in public. At TRUSTED, the player can openly move contraband in guild-adjacent territory. At HOSTILE, the gate is watched and public spaces become contested. At ENEMY, the player is a hunted criminal in the empire's lake. But Chola authority is slow to act — they are managing an entire ocean; a single port operative is rarely their priority until they become one.

The Ainnurruvar Guild (excerpt)

The supreme overarching umbrella organization of the era. Though originating in Aihole (Karnataka), it reached its zenith under Chola patronage. A massive confederation of itinerant merchants operating on a trans-regional, inter-oceanic plane — functionally a transnational corporation with its own mercenary armies, diplomatic envoys, and overseas settlements.

Members styled themselves as protectors of *Vira-Balanja-Dharma* (the law of the noble or heroic merchants). The number "Five Hundred" was purely conventional; the guild incorporated traders of various castes, regions, and creeds.

What this means for Koel gameplay: Guild Disposition is the most practically important of all Faction Dispositions. The docks run on guild infrastructure. A player hostile to the guild finds the economy closing around them — trading costs inflate, storage access is revoked, and certain mission-givers simply stop being available. The guild does not send assassins; it sends lawyers and accountants who make the player's operational life progressively impossible.

Champa (excerpt)

The Hindu-Buddhist maritime kingdom occupying the central and southern coast of modern Vietnam. By 1010 CE, Champa is squeezed between two expansionary neighbors — Dai Viet from the north, the Khmer Empire from the west. It has survived both through ferocious naval capacity and a culture of absolute resistance.

Core Ethos: *"We were here before the mountains. The sea will remember us after."*

The most valuable Cham export is *eaglewood* (agarwood, *oud*) from the Annamite mountains — one of the world's most expensive aromatics, sold by weight to Arab and Chinese buyers. Cham traders in port carry this product; it is simultaneously contraband (a Chola trade license is required) and currency (accepted as collateral by the guild in lieu of gold).

What this means for Koel gameplay: Cham traders appear at the docks as mission-givers and information sources. Their eaglewood is a recurring MacGuffin — valuable enough that multiple factions want it, portable enough that a single operative can move it, ambiguous enough in legal status that getting caught with it is contextually serious but not automatic.



First Springs Setting — The Seven Tribes

First Springs is a separate project set in a fantasy Himalayan region. The following excerpts from the world bible demonstrate the same methodology applied to a non-historical setting.



The Drokha — "The Skybound" (excerpt)

"Below the cloud-line, men argue about the world. Above it, the world argues through them."
— Attributed to Drokha wandering-scholar Karma Pelyang

The Drokha are plateau-dwellers and sky-readers, a people calibrated for immensity — their concept of "nearby" is different from yours. Part nomadic, part monastery-anchored, they move between these poles with the seasons.

The defining structure of a Drokha settlement is the **Gon-Vara** — a monastery-observatory at the highest point of any permanent settlement — with a prayer-wheel corridor, debate hall, and open rooftop observation platform. The Drokha do not separate theology from astronomy. The sky is both scripture and calendar.

Gameplay application (First Springs): Drokha NPCs are the most likely to provide lore and historical context, and the least likely to take sides in a political dispute. Their memory tradition is oral but extraordinarily precise — a Drokha elder who was present at a historical event three generations ago will describe it with witness-report specificity. Players seeking to understand the political history of the Ritual of First Springs always need to route through a Drokha informant.



The Nakvara — "The Iron-Feathered" (excerpt)

"The hornbill does not explain itself. Neither do we."
— Nakvara warrior greeting, spoken before combat is certain

The easternmost of the seven tribes — children of the densely forested ridge-country where terrain becomes a maze of gorges and bamboo-choked ravines. The Nakvara are a confederation of clans bound by shared ritual rather than shared land.

The most important building in any Nakvara village is the **Morung** — the youth dormitory and clan training house, architecturally the most elaborate structure in the settlement. Its roofline carries carved hornbill figures, the number of which indicates the clan's military standing. Its interior walls carry the clan's history in carved timber posts — animals at the base, warriors in the middle, spirits and celestial events toward the top.

Gameplay application (First Springs): Nakvara NPCs are direct communicators who expect the same in return. Attempts to be evasive or politically careful in dialogue with a Nakvara character lose relationship points. The

faction responds to demonstrated capacity — if the player can prove themselves in a physical or tactical challenge, information access opens. Verbal persuasion alone never fully works with a Nakvara informant.



04 — Quest Design

First Springs: The Ritual Gate — Scenario Brief

This scenario functions as the entry point to the Ritual of First Springs — the game's central objective. It is also designed as a standalone StoryFlow demo, showing NPC memory and branching encounter logic in a playable format.



Objective

Gain entry to the Ritual Gate without a formal invitation. The gate is controlled by a Gate Official (bureaucratic, process-bound) and a Guard Captain (pragmatic, reads people). Both must be satisfied — or circumvented — for the player to pass.

Setup

The player has arrived in the city thirty days before the Ritual. The Gate Official enforces a formal invitation system; no invitation exists for the player. The Guard Captain has seen a lot of people try to get through this gate.



NPCs

Kiran, Gate Official

- ◆ Authority type: procedural — he enforces rules he didn't write and has no power to change
- ◆ Tells: formal address, repetition of process language ("I understand your situation, but the procedure requires...")
- ◆ Hidden: he's been offered a bribe by the Merchant faction to deny access to anyone not guild-affiliated; he's uncomfortable with this
- ◆ Leverage point: if the player names a Drokha elder whose approval letter Kiran is waiting on, Kiran's procedural logic breaks — he wants to approve but has no mechanism to

Saya, Guard Captain

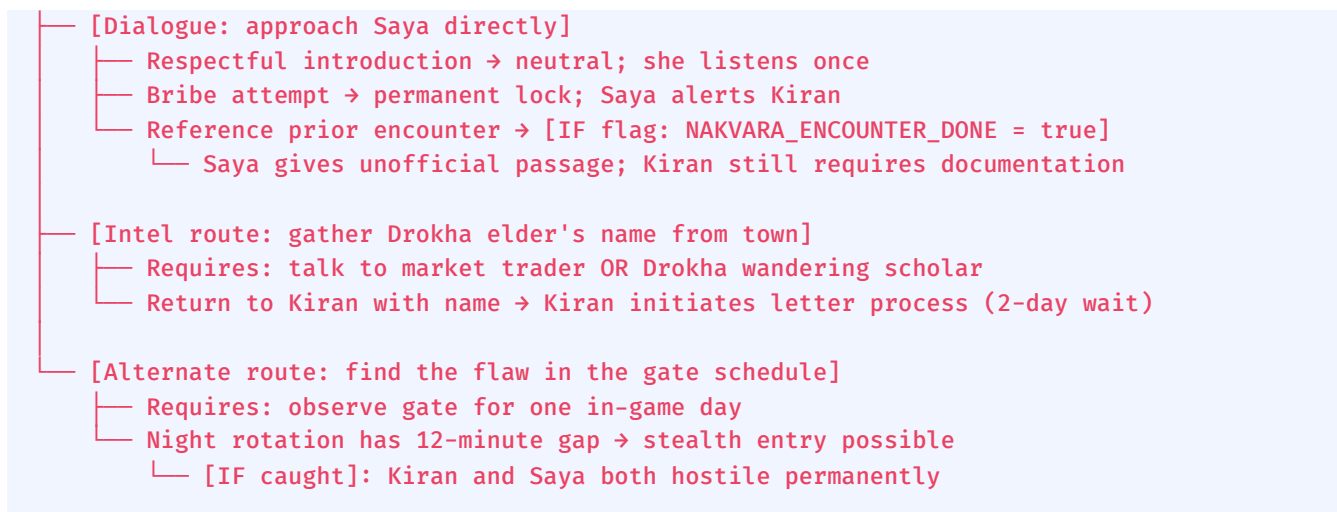
- ◆ Authority type: experiential — she judges people, not documents
- ◆ Tells: minimal words, long pauses before replies, direct eye contact
- ◆ Hidden: she remembers the last person who talked their way through without cause; it ended badly; she is calibrated against charm
- ◆ Leverage point: if the player has demonstrated competence in a previous encounter she heard about, she opens a side channel; if the player attempts to bribe her, she closes permanently



Branching Structure

ENTRY

- [Dialogue: approach Kiran]
 - Ask about procedure → learn invitation requirement
 - Name drop (Drokha elder) → Kiran uncertain; Saya watches
 - Claim to be guild-affiliated → Kiran checks; if false, -10 Kiran trust



NPC Memory Integration

Saya remembers across encounters. If the player previously:

- ◆ Completed the Nakvara challenge → she shortens the conversation and opens the side channel
- ◆ Bribe a market official (seen by a Nakvara trader who talks to her) → she is colder; one fewer option available
- ◆ Was involved in a violent public incident → she is categorically closed; only stealth route remains

Kiran does not remember in a strategic way — but his emotional state does shift. If the player was patient and honest in the first conversation, he tries harder to help in subsequent ones. If the player was impatient or aggressive, he becomes procedurally inflexible — technically correct, practically obstructive.



Outcomes

Path	Outcome
Full legitimate route (letter)	Entry + Kiran becomes recurring ally (gate access, minor intel)
Saya side channel	Entry + Saya remembers; opens faction-level Nakvara connection later
Stealth entry	Entry + both NPCs track player; gate hostile for rest of game
Failed bribe	No entry; both NPCs permanently hostile; requires alternate path to Ritual entirely



05 – Projects in Development

Unkindness of Ravens (UKoR)

Action-RPG. A dying world with limited evacuation capacity — the player is a rookie crow pilot flying a steampunk mechanical familiar. Narrative core: what you preserve and who you leave behind. Systems: flight mechanics, reputation with communities, time pressure. *Playable demo targeting IGDC 2026.*

Koel

Narrative stealth RPG set in a 10th-century Indian Ocean port city. Narrative core: operating inside a world that has its own memory and logic, without the game explaining that logic to you. Systems: Reactive Story System (four-layer consequence simulation), NPC Memory, District Evolution. *Playable StoryFlow demo (dialogue system) targeting Jul 2026; full playable demo targeting IGDC 2026.*

First Springs

Action-detective RPG set in a fantasy Himalayan city. 30-day time limit to gain entry to the Ritual of First Springs.

Narrative core: the difference between the ceremony a city performs and the truth underneath it. Systems: NPC relationship network, tribal faction reputation, time-gated access. *Concept stage; StoryFlow demo targeting Jul 2026.*

Punk Noir

Noir horror ARPG. Themes: colonisation, labour, corruption, resistance. Visual language: Moebius + Bloodborne. *Kitbash prototype targeting Sep 2026.*

Bio Mimics

Action RPG with biomechanical drone flight. *Kitbash prototype targeting Aug 2026.*



All case studies and full GDD documentation available on request.

Portfolio: keian.org