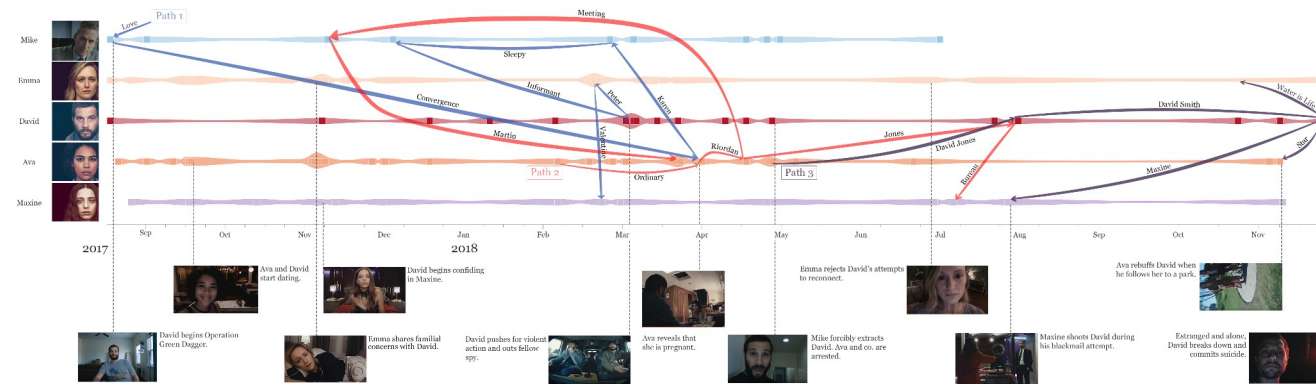# Gated Story Structure and Dramatic Agency in Sam Barlow's *Telling Lies*

*T.M. Gasque, Kevin Tang, Brad Rittenhouse, Janet Murray Georgia Tech*

# ICIDS November 2020

*Telling Lies* (2019) Sam Barlow

# *Telling Lies* (2019) Sam Barlow
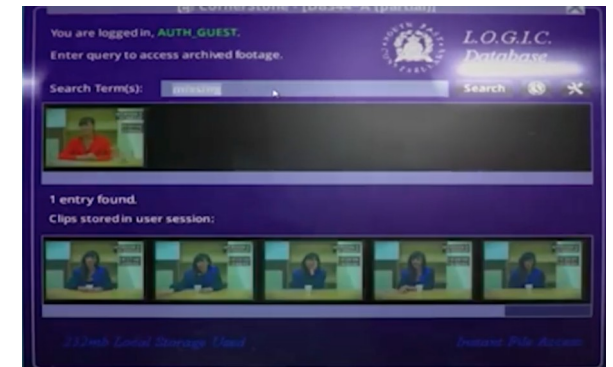


Player **searches a fixed archive of videoclips using keywords** found in the dialog of the fictional characters.

**Epistemic narrative** (Ryan 2008): interactor navigates through a set of unchanging narrative segments, driven by the need to know

Structure involves **hiding information** so that it is later revealed in a way that maximizes the experience of **dramatic agency** which is achieved by aligning a transparent interaction mechanic with narrative motivation and rewards (Murray 2017) .

# *Dramatic Agency in Epistemic Database Narrative*
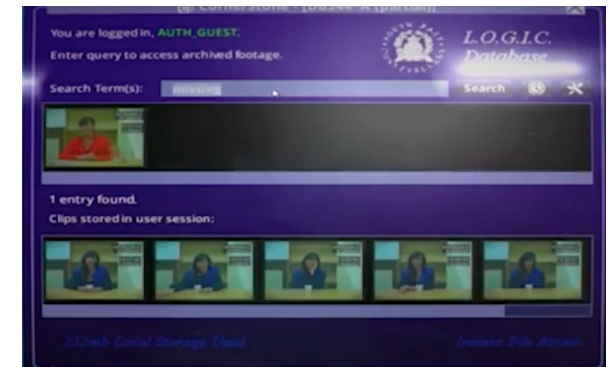


- *Challenge to Dramatic Agency*
  - *Telling Lies* is structured as conversations navigated across time and speakers by keyword search: how to maintain transparency of mechanism coupled to sustained narrative interest with no "spoilers"?

- *Design Solution*
  - Keyword frequency serves as a gating mechanism to prevent premature revelations of later plot points
  - Only 1 side of conversation retrieved at a time, creating immediate narrative curiosity to find the other half
  - Only the chronologically first 5 instances of a keyword will appear as the result of a keyword search
  - Unique, specific words at the end of long word trails reveal later revelatory scenes

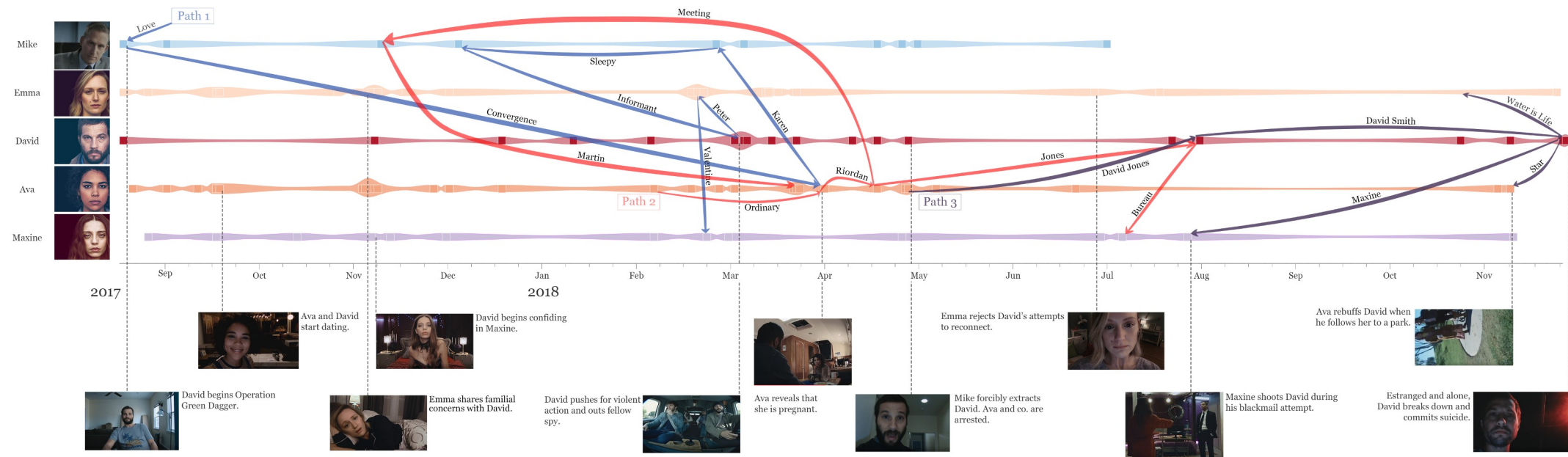# Barlow's narrative design based on words in the script with "hits" values

| | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| 2 | **Hits** | 168 | 81 | 86 | 161 | 52 | 124 | 91 | 41 | 97 | 44 |
| 4 | Clip | mirr | prin | hug | dad | hey | how | hey | you | oka | hi |

| | A | FD | FE | FF | FG | FH | FI | FJ | FK | FL | FM | FN |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | | 159 | 160 | 161 | 162 | 163 | 164 | 165 | 166 | 167 | 168 | 169 |
| 2 | **Hits** | 2 | 10 | 7 | 1 | 35 | 6 | 12 | 95 | 6 | 13 | 16 |
| 4 | Clip | ton | hey | hey | you | wha | hey | why | i mi | it s | my | mill |

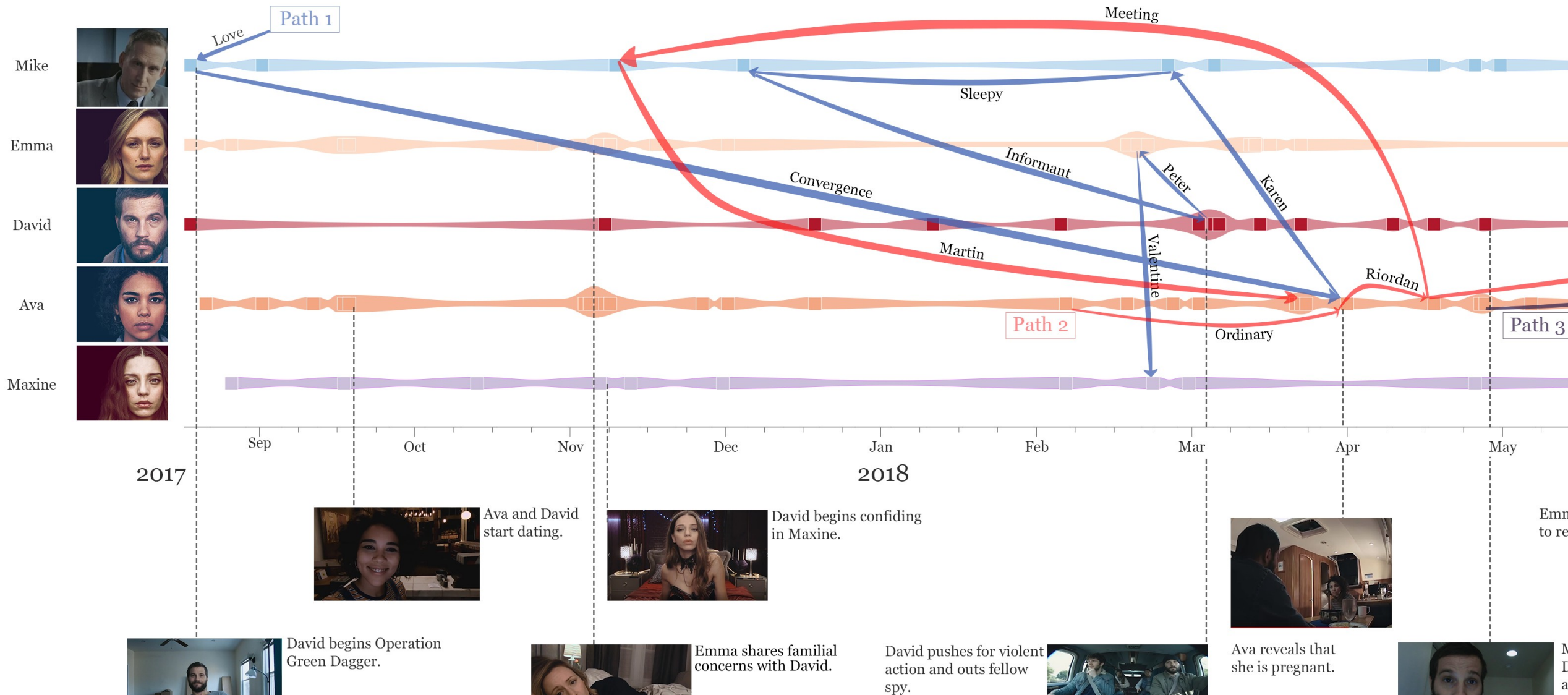# Our experience of following keyword trails
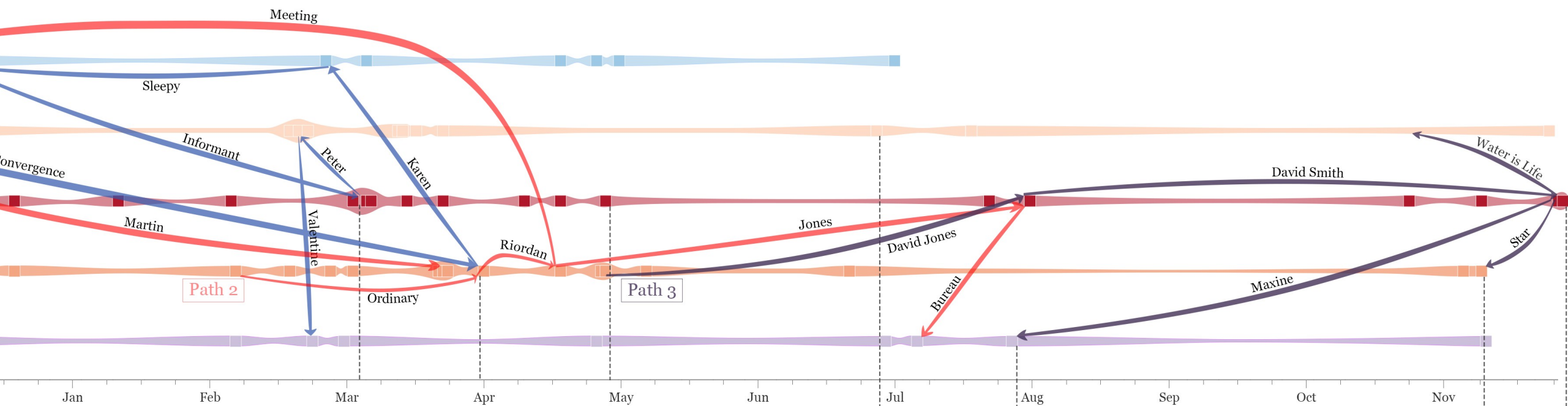


**Navigating a Database Narrative**
A visual representation of one playthrough of Sam Barlow's *Telling Lies*

# Navigating a Database Narrative

A visual representation of one playthrough
of Sam Barlow's *Telling Lies*



Mike

Emma

David

Ava

Maxine

Path 1

Love

Meeting

Sleepy

Informant

Convergence

Peter

Karen

Valentine

Martin

Riordan

Path 2

Ordinary

Path 3

Sep

Oct

Nov

Dec

Jan

Feb

Mar

Apr

May

2017

2018

Ava and David
start dating.

David begins confiding
in Maxine.

Emn
to re

David begins Operation
Green Dagger.

Emma shares familial
concerns with David.

David pushes for violent
action and outs fellow
spy.

Ava reveals that
she is pregnant.

Meeting

Sleepy

Informant

Convergence

Peter

Karen

Martin

Valentine

Riordan

Jones

David Jones

David Smith

Water is Life

Star

Bureau

Maxine

Path 2

Path 3

Ordinary

Jan    Feb    Mar    Apr    May    Jun    Jul    Aug    Sep    Oct    Nov

2018

...id begins confiding
...Maxine.
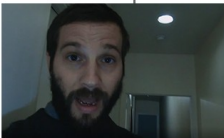
Emma rejects David's attempts
to reconnect.

Ava rebuffs David when
he follows her to a park.

...milial
...avid.

David pushes for violent
action and outs fellow
spy.

Ava reveals that
she is pregnant.

Mike forcibly extracts
David. Ava and co. are
arrested.

Maxine shoots David during
his blackmail attempt.

Estranged and alone,
David breaks down and
commits suicide.

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# Database Narrative

A visual representation of one playthrough
of Sam Barlow's *Telling Lies*



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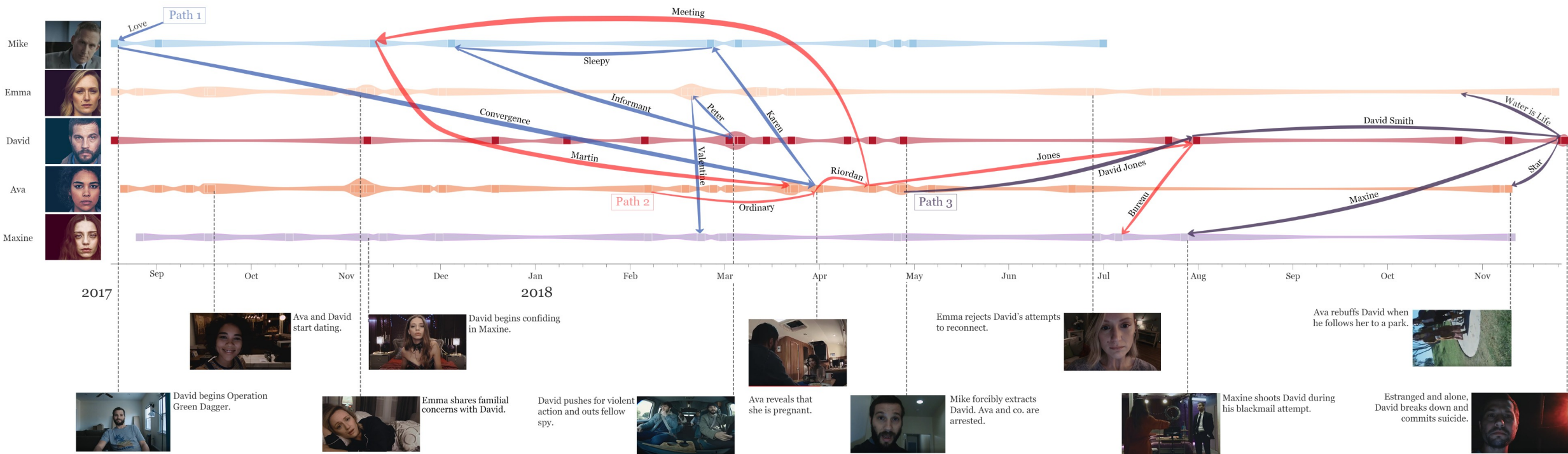Estranged and alone,
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Each playthrough of the game creates a unique instance of Hannah Wood's "dynamic syuzhet" (2017) ,  an instantiation of all the potential narratives implicit in Hartmut Koenitz's "protostory" (2015).

Dramatic satisfaction comes from revealing the underlying sequence of events and the chain of causation through the gated search.

Each of the 4 main characters have an ending, but the player's story is not cathartic because final choice of revelation is not a choice

Thank you !!!