

Rules of the Game

Revealing Techniques from Resourceful Designers

Your host
Richard Rouse III

with
Joel Burgess
Theresa Durringer
Steve Meretzky
Xalavier Nelson Jr.
Ashley Ruhl



[GDC] Festival of Gaming MARCH 9-13, 2026 SAN FRANCISCO, CA

#GDC2026

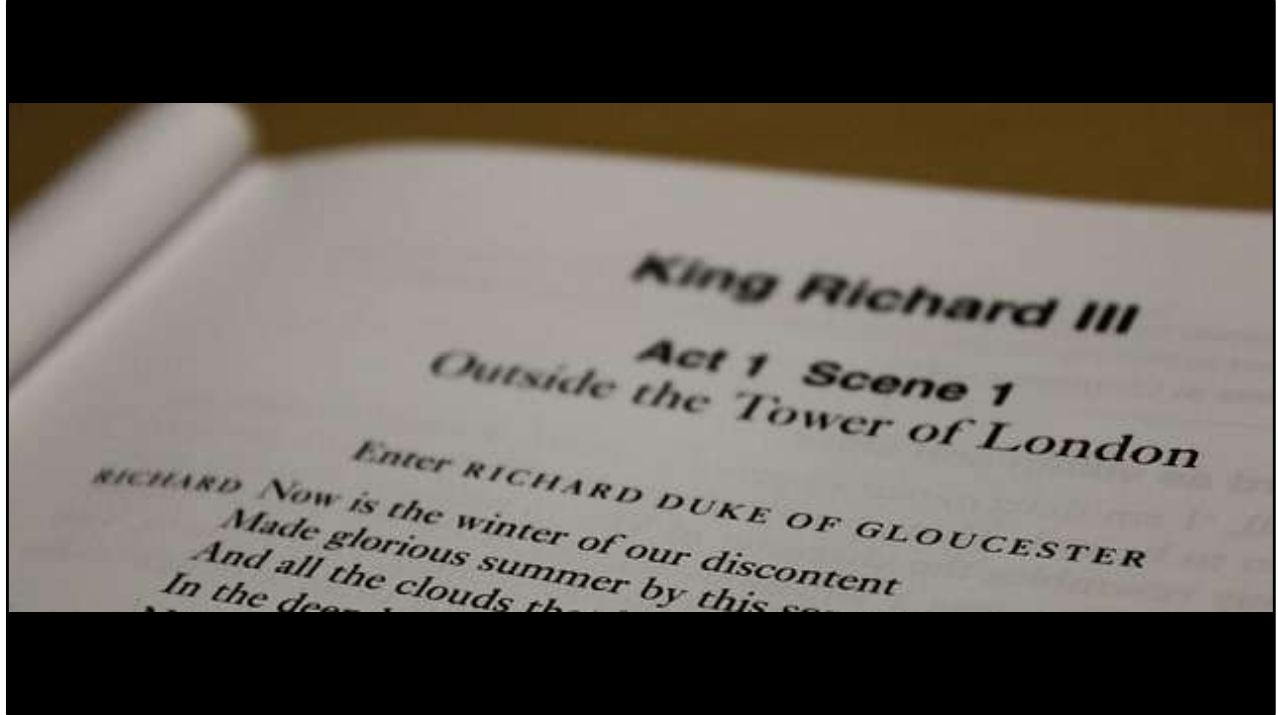
Hello I'm Richard Rouse III, studio creative director at FarBridge

And welcome to Rules of the Game for 2026

5 Designers

10 Minutes Each

Each speaker talks about a rule they use in their game design –



But if you will allow me a brief detour...

You may have noticed that I am, in fact, Richard Rouse III, and that means I've always liked Shakespeare's Richard the III, which starts this line...

NOW IS THE WINTER OF OUR DISCONTENT

And how do I mean this in relation to games?

Well let me tell you. Things are pretty rough out there, between layoffs, game studios shutting down, looming threats of whatever AI is going to, game funding being harder than ever to get,

NEVER MIND things that might be going on outside of games that discourage our international friends from coming to this conference. We do miss them.



And that may make us think now is the time to study our game design rules.

Like a writer in our favorite writing nook where they have all their inspiration around them, our instinct may be to pull up our favorite game design rules around you and make a game.

If you just follow the rules of game design, you will make a good game, right?



And certainly the accountants would like us to follow the rules.

Now is the time for “safe bets”.

The business folks will tell us that’s all we can afford to do now.



But what about the opposite...

The counter-intuitive take is that now, when the Winter seems its bleakest, Now is the time to take the risks.

When our world is changing around us so quickly, maybe we realize we need to move to a small town in Canada.

When no one knows what game will work or creatively or commercially, and if you are lucky enough to still be able to make games, why not take a risk?

COUNTER-INTUITIVE

That is the counter-intuitive thing to take away from times like this. It's the opposite of what you might expect.

I love counter-intuitive rules like that. When people join this talk, I ask them to provide counter-intuitive rules, things that are unexpected, things that will surprise the audience.

**“Pizzazz First, Polish Later”
- Lee Perry, 2016**



**“Don’t Smooth out the Beginning”
- Jamie Cheng, 2023**

**“Make a (Good) Mess”
- Tanya X Short, 2023**



(check them out for free on the GDC Vault!)

And we’ve had some great counter-intuitive rules over the years. Here’s a few examples...

Lee Perry – Pizzazz First, Polish Later

Polishing too early can lock you into bad decisions, but adding some pizzazz can confirm that what you have is actually fun and keep your team playing it.

Jamie Cheng rule – Don’t Smooth out the Beginning

Taught us that if you make your tutorial too helpful, it doesn’t actually teach players how to play when the tutorial is over

Tanya X Short rule - Make a (Good) Mess

That if you follow all the rules to have a really perfect design, it

loses those rough edges that can make it fun, or the mess which lets players be creative.

And speaking of messes, that means we can think about our games in terms of how they are counter-intuitive...



I think every game has to break the rules a bit, to make itself unique. To make itself counter-intuitive.

And it makes me remember some of the counter intuitive things about games I've made

In The Suffering we set about making a horror game where the player character was powerful and that was very counter intuitive for the standards of the time

In Homeworld Vast Reaches, we recognized we were making a strategy game where the fans of that franchise care deeply about the story, so that meant we had to prioritize how it felt to be a space commander over the minutiae of managing every last unit

on the battlefield.

So I encourage you as you go onto projects as designers, to ask or figure out what rules might this project be following, which might it be breaking, and generally what makes this game counter-intuitive.

- 1: “Interpret Trust as a Currency”**
- 2: “Don’t Drown in Innovation”**
- 3: “Make Your Game Better, Not Just Different”**
- 4: “Create (Fake) Choices that Matter”**
- 5: “Let Your Players Do the Cool Thing”**

And today I think we have a number of counter-intuitive rules

Coming up, Steve Meretzky is going to tell us about how innovating too much may backfire on us

Joel Burgess is going to tell you how to watch out for iterating on your game in an unproductive way

Ashley Ruhl is going to talk about how some of the most resonant choices players make may involve some fakery

And lastly Xalavier Nelson is going to talk to us about remembering to let the players do the coolest thing, which in the heat of development is surprisingly easy to forget about.

But first...

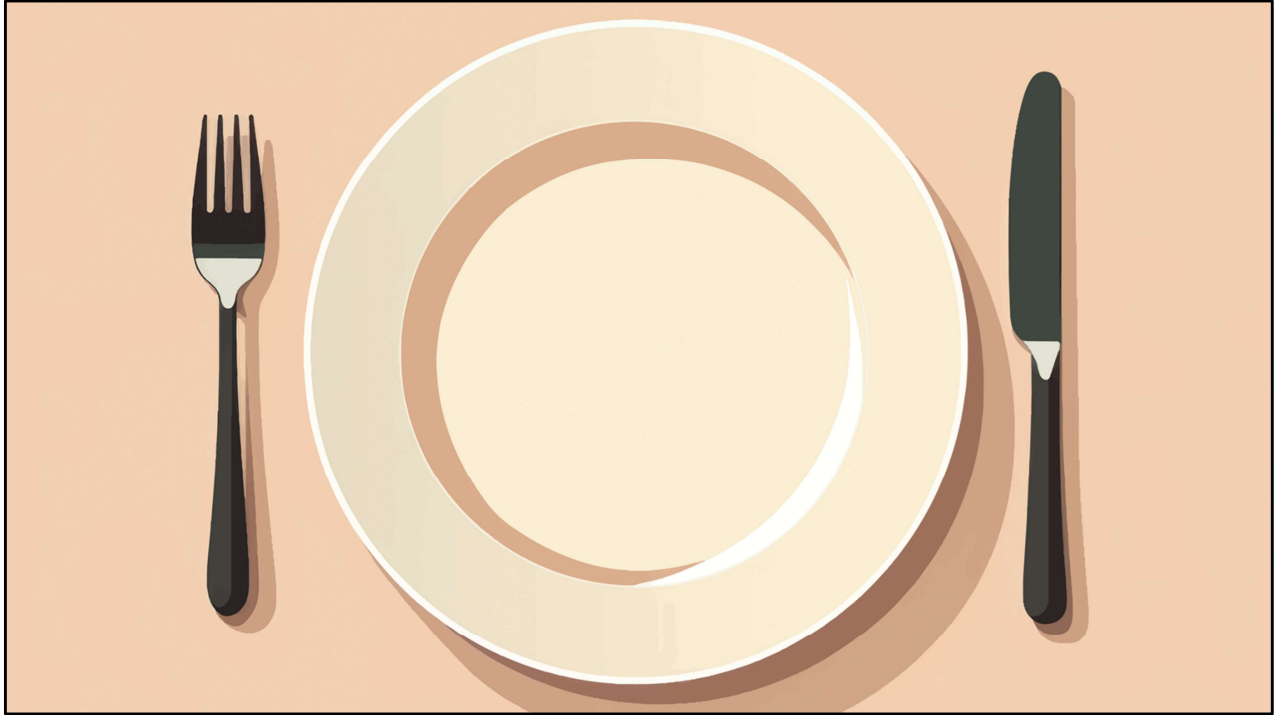
THERESA DURINGER

**CEO
Temple Gates**

Our first speaker is CEO and creative director of Temple Gates Games, where she specializes in digital versions of physical games including Dominion, Race for the Galaxy, Roll for the Galaxy, and Ascension.

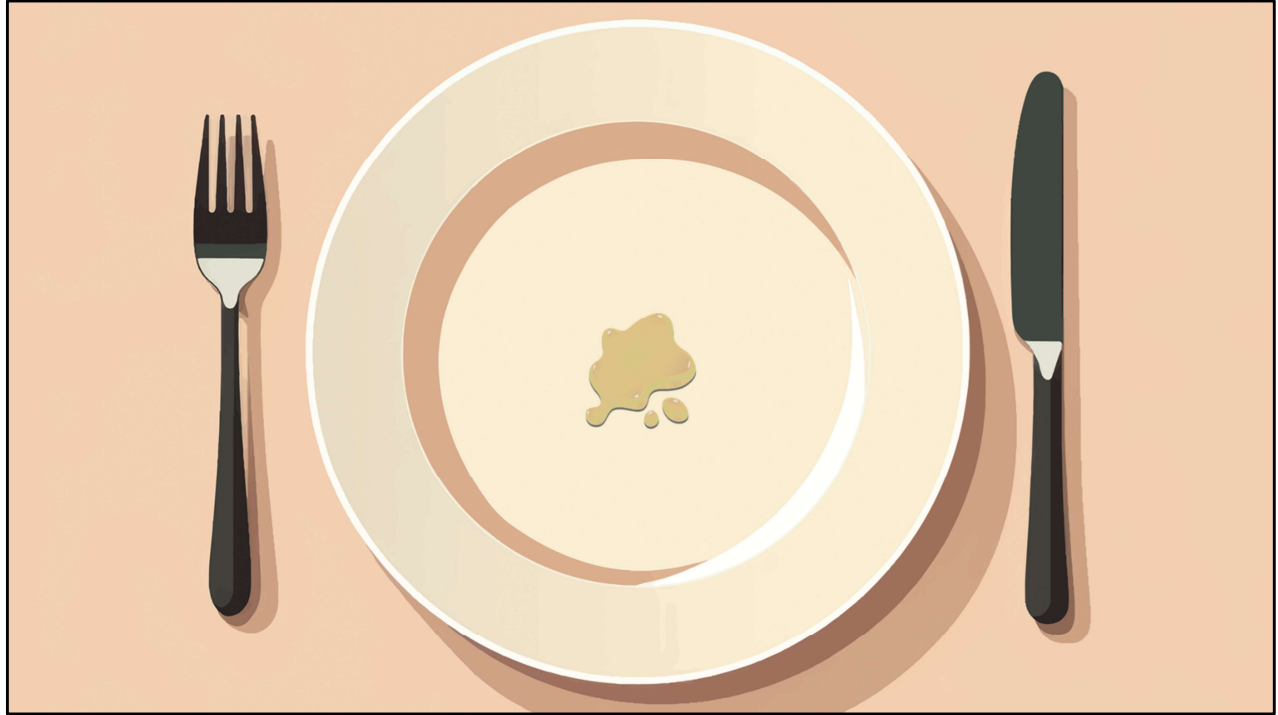
And she's here to tell us about the critical game economy that we sometimes forget...

Theresa Duringer!



At dinner out
You see...

At dinner out, you see...



a mucousy slime

Do you eat

maybe not, but

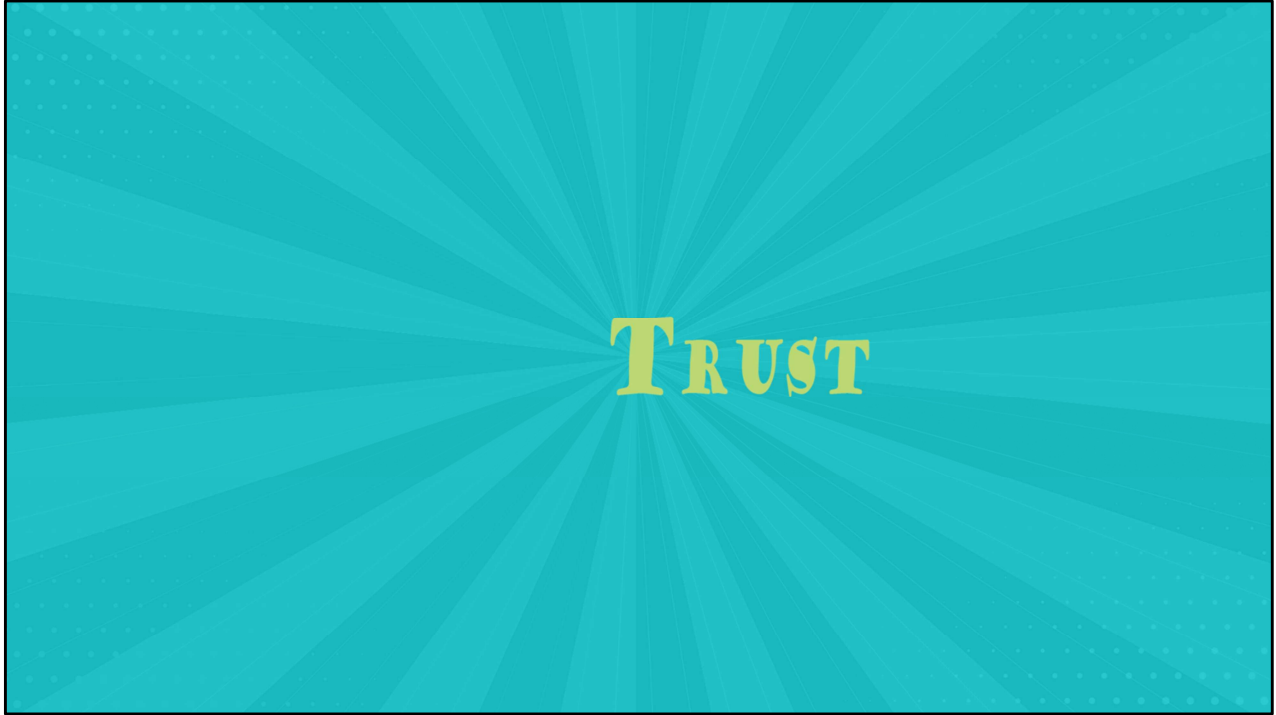
...a mucousy slime alongside the food on your plate - do you eat it?

Maybe not. But what if you're at a...



Michelin starred
More likely
What's the difference?

Michelin starred restaurant? More likely! What's the difference?



Trust

Trust affects willingness

Wild features cook

Trust. Trust affects willingness of players to engage with the wild features you cook up.



That trust is
You can earn it
Spend invest fritter

That trust is a currency: You can earn it, spend it, invest it, and fritter it away.



The most obvious
Is to deliver
A trustworthy gameplay
Systems to be

The most obvious way to earn trust is to deliver on the experiences your players are expecting. A trustworthy gameplay loop needs all sorts of systems to be in sync like...



clear rules...



accurate UI



and rendering



all bug...



free.



These are ways
But they're also
Table stakes

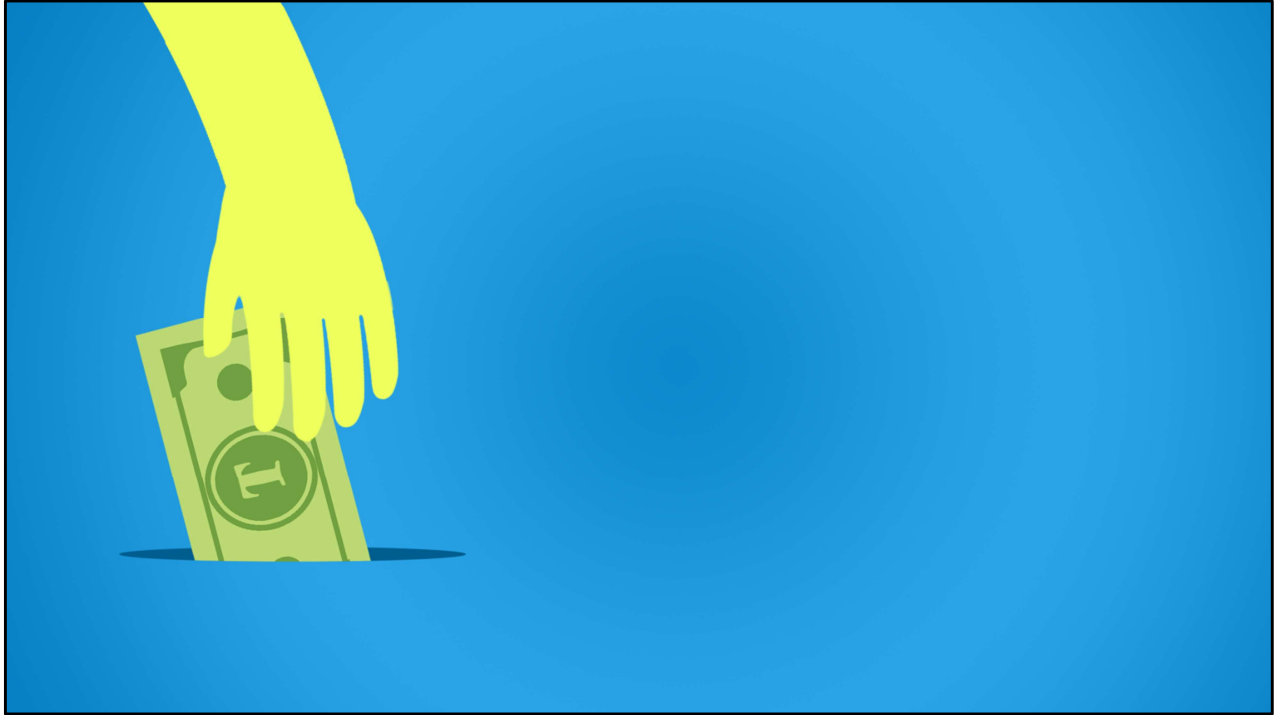
These are ways to earn trust, but they're also table stakes,



a single fault on the chain



and it's game over.



On the other
Side of the ledger
There's spending
And that phrase alone

On the other side of the ledger, there's spending trust, and that phrase alone should hopefully give you pause.



We see lots
Dark patterns in
That abuse trust
But not all expenditures

We see lots of dark patterns in games that abuse trust. But not all expenditures are immoral.



Instead this talk
Make a case
Spending trust constructively

Instead this talk will make a case for spending trust constructively.



My Rule of The Game:

Interpret Trust



As a Currency

Interpret trust as a currency...

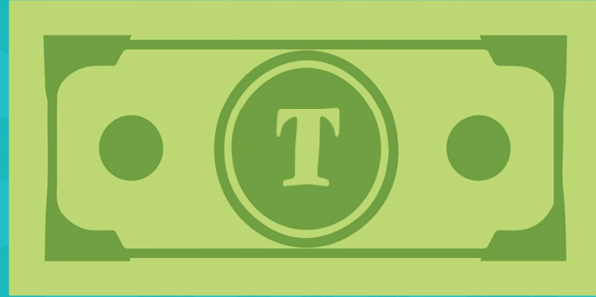
Interpret Trust



As a Currency

to evaluate design trade-offs

Interpret Trust



As a Currency

and avoid trust bankruptcy.



First lets dig
On ways to
Earn trust

First let's dig a bit deeper on ways to earn trust from your players.



One common way
Follow conventions

One common way is to follow conventions.



A game that
Fits into a genre
Than an esoteric

A game that fits into a genre will be easier to take part in than an esoteric art piece.



Less obviously,
Accessibility features

Less obviously, accessibility features...



and difficulty levels
build trust by
supporting players
Their terms

...and difficulty levels build trust by supporting players on their
terms.



At the extremes

Deep logging

backwards compatibility save

Peek into system, facilitating modding

At the extremes, games that support deep logging and backwards compatibility of save files build trust by giving players a peek into the system and facilitating modding.



So, what kind
Conventions? Start UI
In our turn-based
Invest in supporting

So, what kind of conventions am I talking about? Let's start with UI.
In our turn-based games, we invest in supporting an Undo button.



The trust built
Allowed to explore grace
Misclicks more tolerable
Allowing a player

The trust built when a player is allowed to explore a new interface with the grace to walk back a mistaken click can't be overstated. Misclicks are more tolerable, allowing a player to play faster.



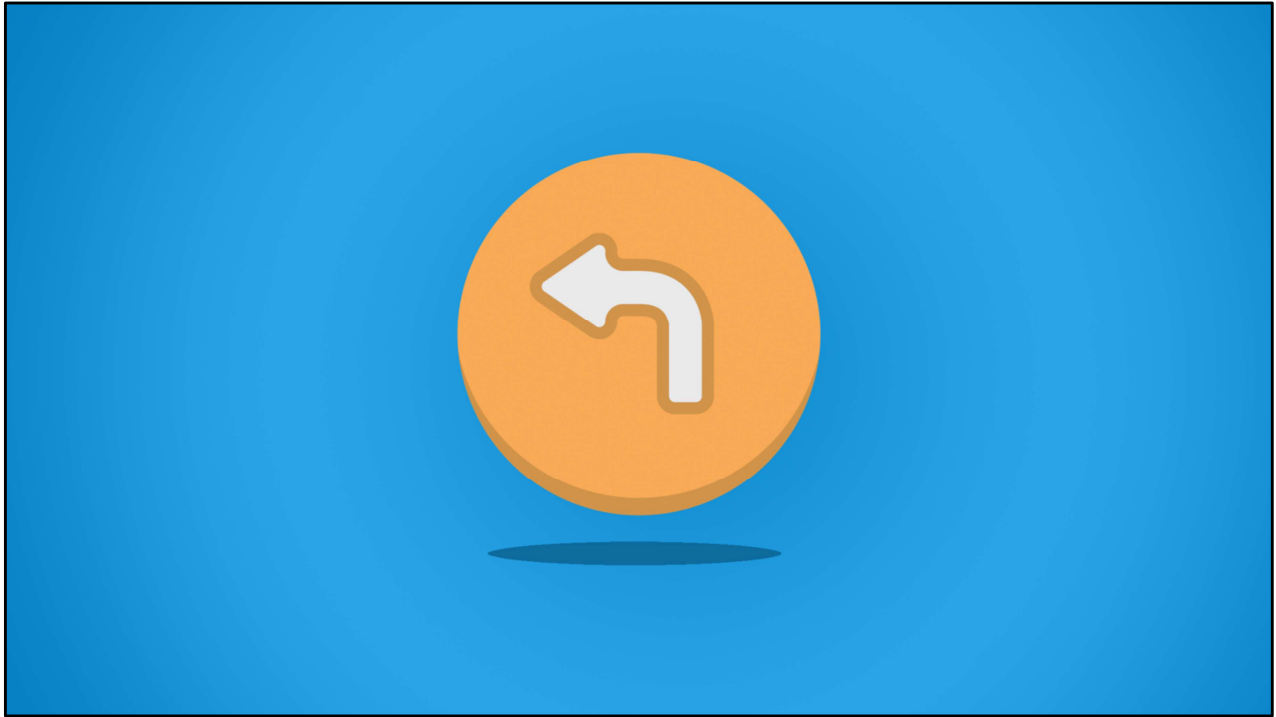
In our game Dominion
Undo allows forgive
So features that grant
Otherwise firm constraints

In our game Dominion, Undo even allows players to forgive buttons that might be a skosh too small for the phone. So features that grant trust can also let you push otherwise firm constraints.

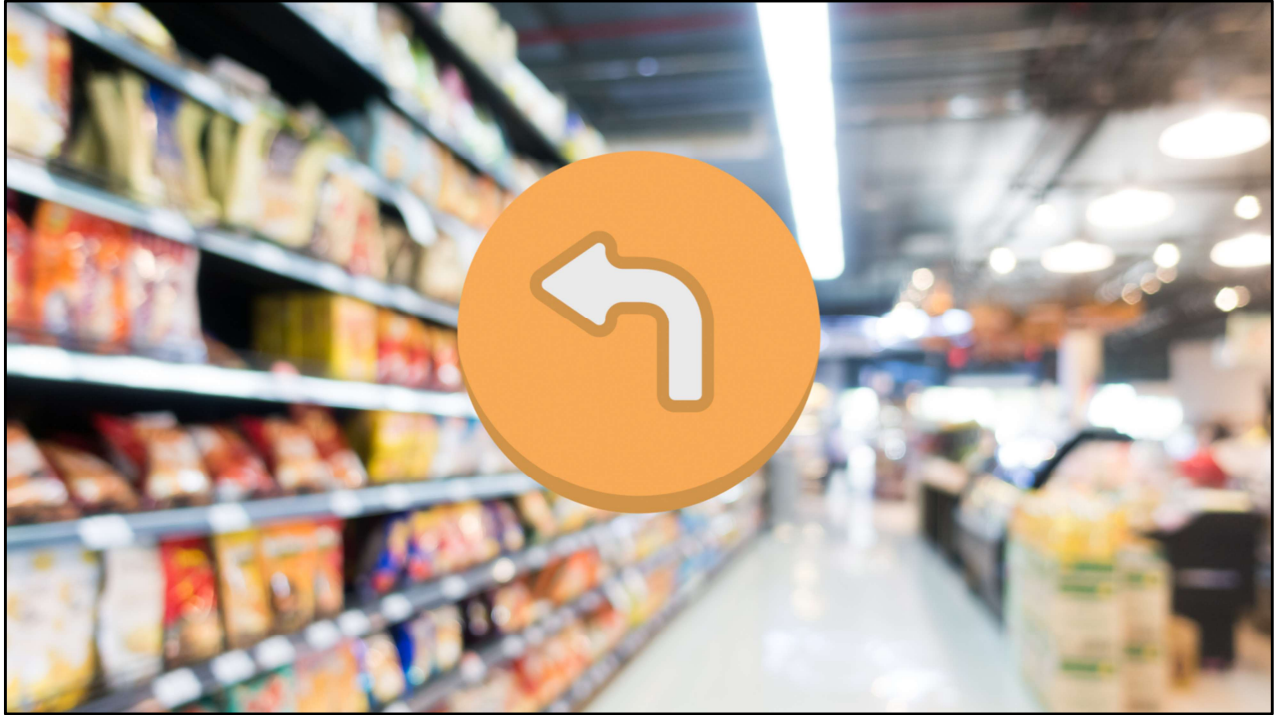


Does your game
This is a critical
Follow platform conventions
Grant refunds

Does your game have an in-game store? This is a critical place to build trust. Follow platform conventions. Grant refunds



Refunds are Undo buttons of...



real life...



Support cross-platform
Facilitate account recovery

Support cross-platform purchases. Facilitate account recovery.



Does your game offer
Social features
Support honor systems, ignore lists
Bans, chat filtering. These

Does your game offer social features? Support honor systems, ignore lists, bans, and chat filtering. These are all ways to make players trust that they are going to feel safe in your game.



Are you bored

Takeaway is:

Reimplementing convention grueling

Are you bored yet? The takeaway is: Reimplementing convention is grueling.



Is it the
dopamine triggering
brilliant nugget
come to life?

Is it the dopamine-triggering point in game development where you see your brilliant nugget of creativity come to life?



No.



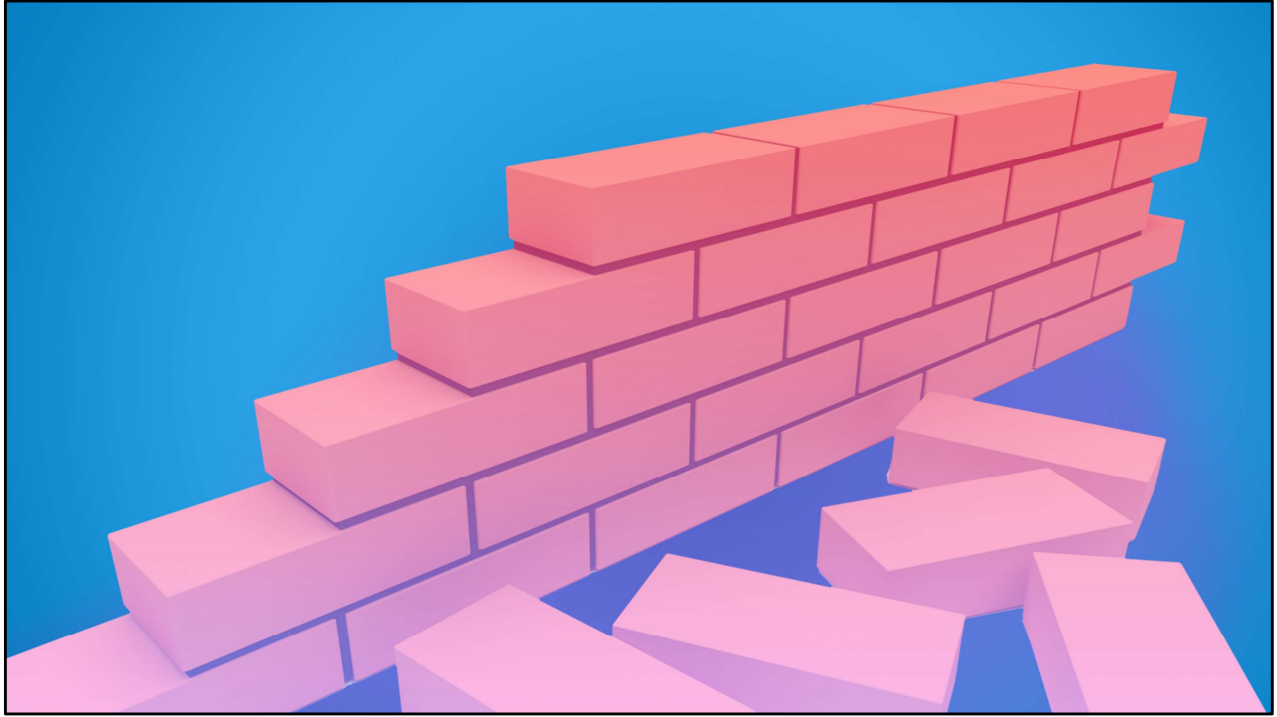
This is grind
This is why
standards conventions tropes
It might feel

This is the grind. This is why we use standards, conventions, and tropes. It might feel like no one is getting any value here.



The developer is
1000x before And the player
Getting chunk 1000x
But what we

The developer is doing something that's been done 1000x before.
And the player is getting some chunk of a game they've seen 1000x
before. But what we are doing here...



is building foundation.



At a restaurant,
One of the five
Consistency. Trust is earned
Over and over And games

At a restaurant, one of the five criteria for receiving a Michelin star is consistency. Trust is earned through meeting expectations over and over and over. And games are no different.



Mechanics-wise
Having clear rules
Easily incorporate mental
Also builds

Mechanics-wise, having clear rules that the player can easily incorporate into their mental model, also builds trust.



Once upon a
Games had AOE
Fire spells

Once upon a time, games had AOE fire spells in them.



Then they moved
AOE fire spells circles
Now no difference
Clear ingest simulate

Then, they moved to AOE fire spells with circles that show explicitly where damage will be done. Now there's no difference to the game, but there's a clear rule players can ingest and simulate, which builds trust.



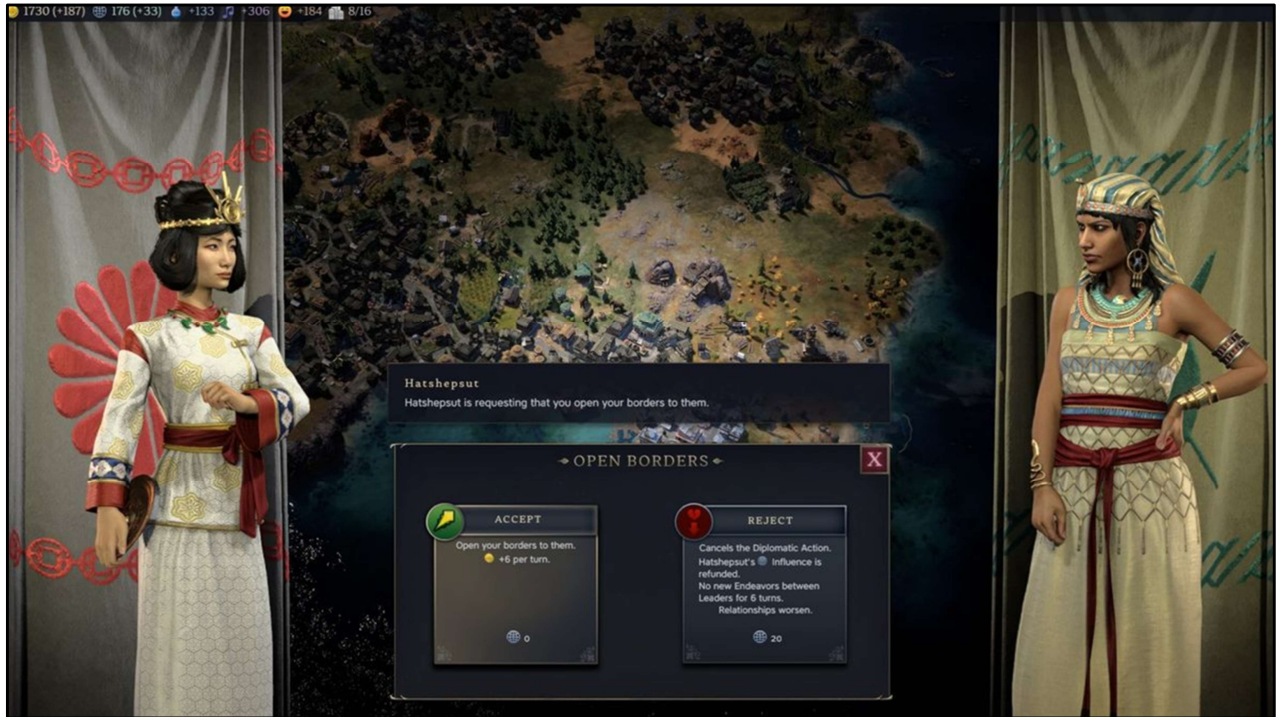
Civ did this
diplomacy system
It was jus vibes
Ghandi would

Civ did this with their diplomacy system. It was just vibes and Ghandi would nuke you out of the blue.



Then with Civ 4
 The game tells
 Another civ is

Then with Civ 4 the game tells you the reasons another Civ is treating you the way it is.



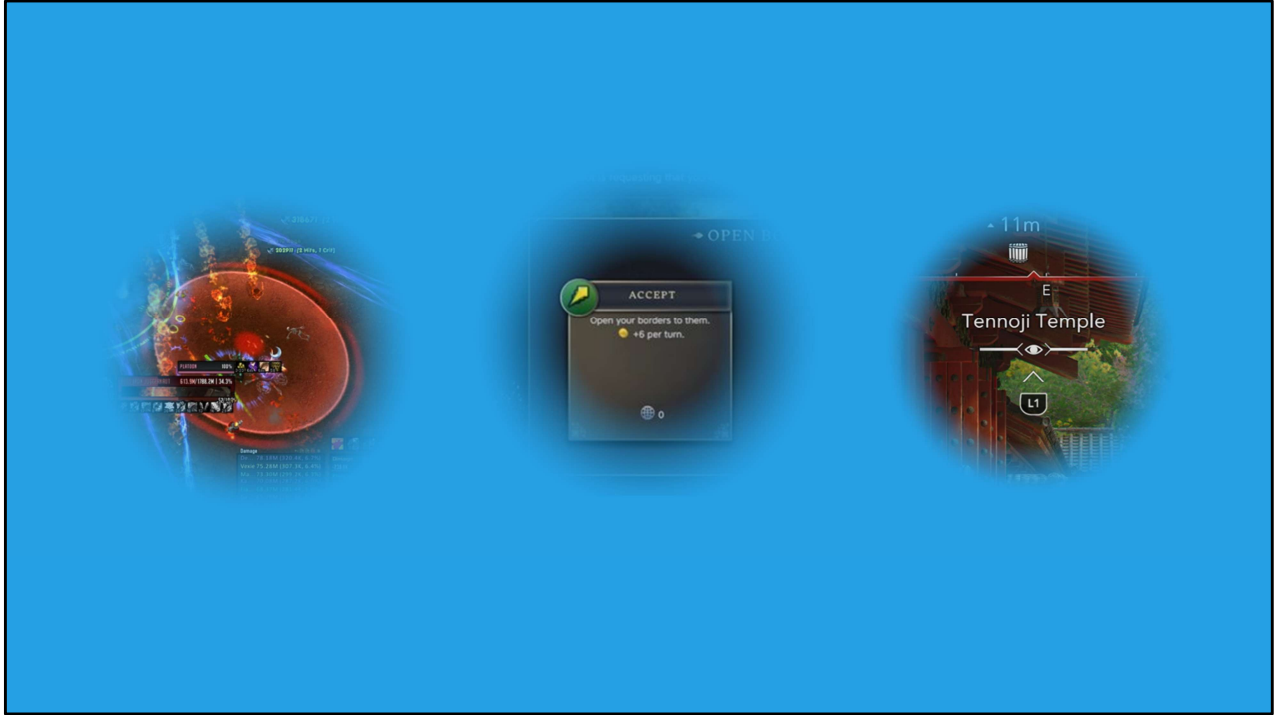
Nowadays, you earn
influence points, and spend
clear diplomatic actions
An obtuse system

Nowadays, you earn influence points, and spend them on clear
diplomatic actions. An obtuse system was clarified, and that built
trust.



Stealth mechanics
Have become legible
Nowadays, meters cover
UI enemy's cone awareness

Stealth mechanics have become legible. Nowadays, there are meters, indicating how much cover you're in, UI showing your enemy's cone of awareness.



And all of these
taking obfuscated
visually clarifying them
play a game rather than

All of these examples are taking obfuscated game rules, and visually clarifying them to the player, earning trust. The player is now able to play a game rather than just experience a system.



So, we've worked
Conventions and mechanics
What can we do?
Maybe first instinct

So we've worked hard to gain trust through conventions and mechanics... What can we do with it? Maybe one's first instinct is to hoard it.



Or maybe spend
For dollars
Quick cash out

Or maybe spend that trust for dollars. A quick cash out.



We could cheat
our players and
Spend the trust
Using dark patterns

We could cheat our players and spend the trust using dark patterns,
such as ...

Daily Deals

New deals in: 23h 55min

Offer Name	Item	Current Price	Original Price
Chest Offer!	Yellow Chest	760	900
Mirror Offer!	VIP Mirror	450	500

USING

obfuscating in-game currency...



dropping loot boxes...



And other forms
Player exploitation
Games that do
Mortgage off

and other forms of player exploitation. Games that do this mortgage off the trust that has been built up, either by that game, genre, or culture of developers.



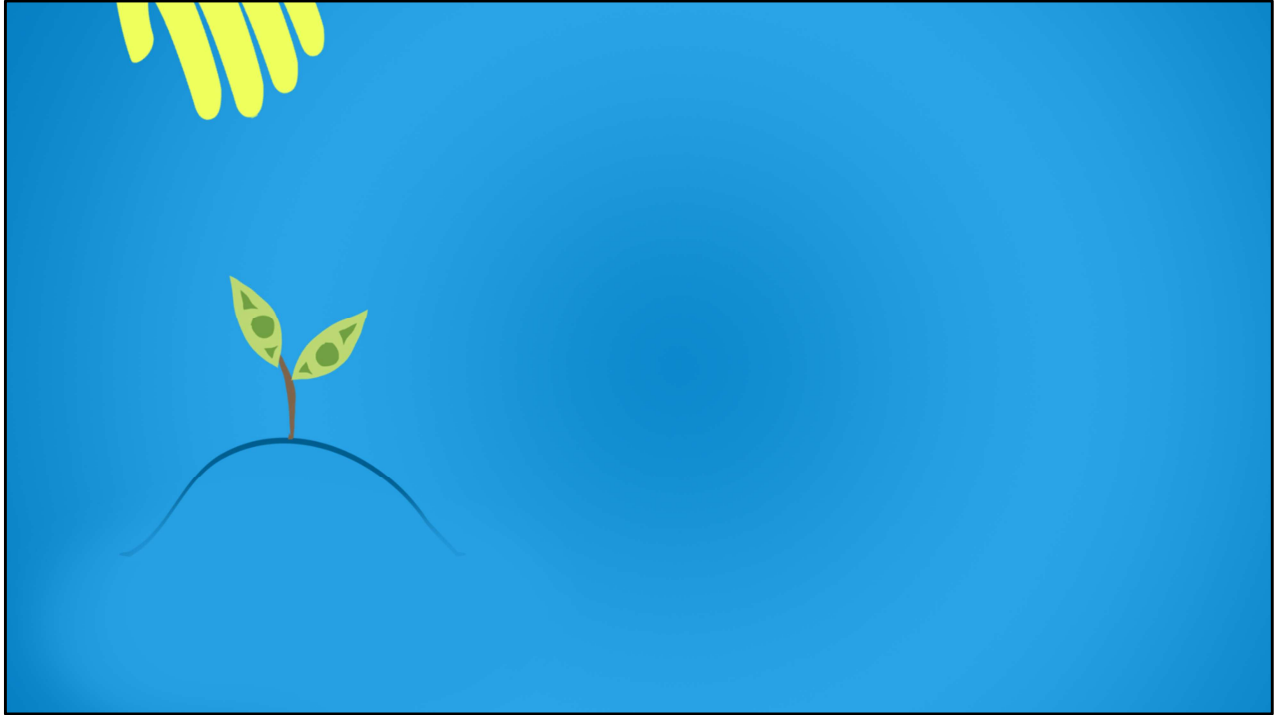
But the mechanics of abuse



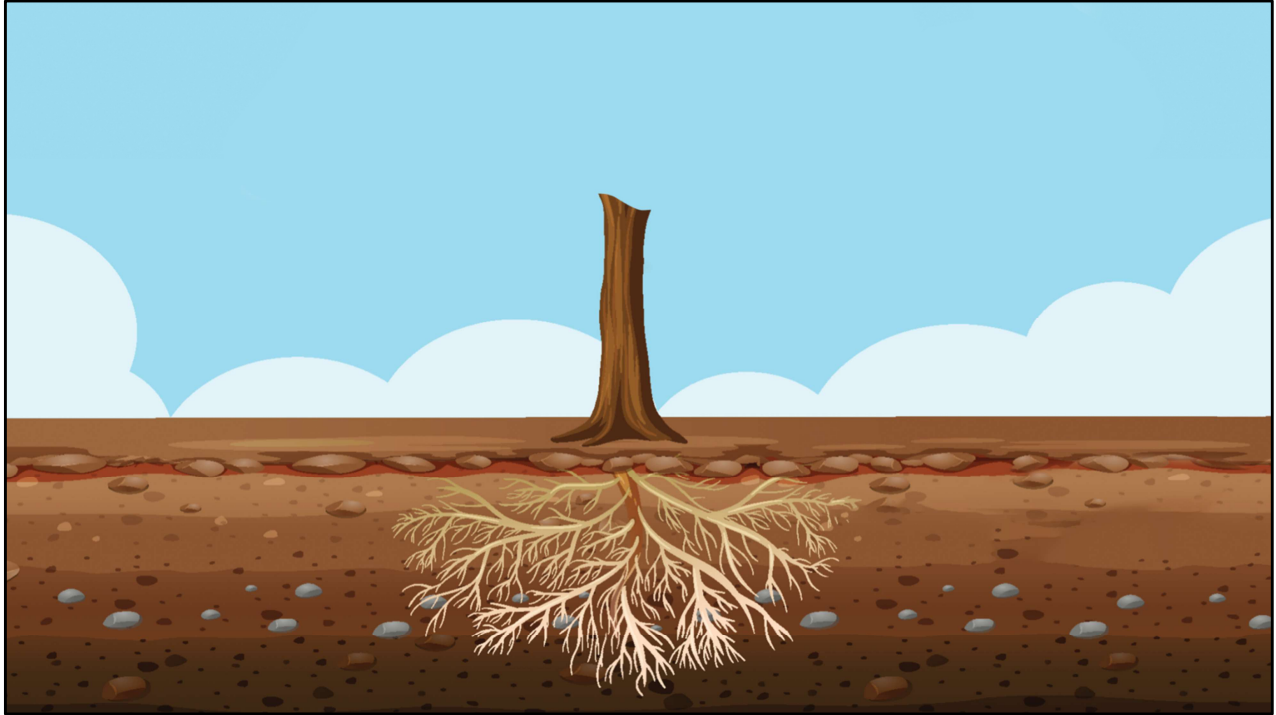
are not the focus of this talk.



Instead, I want to make a case for...

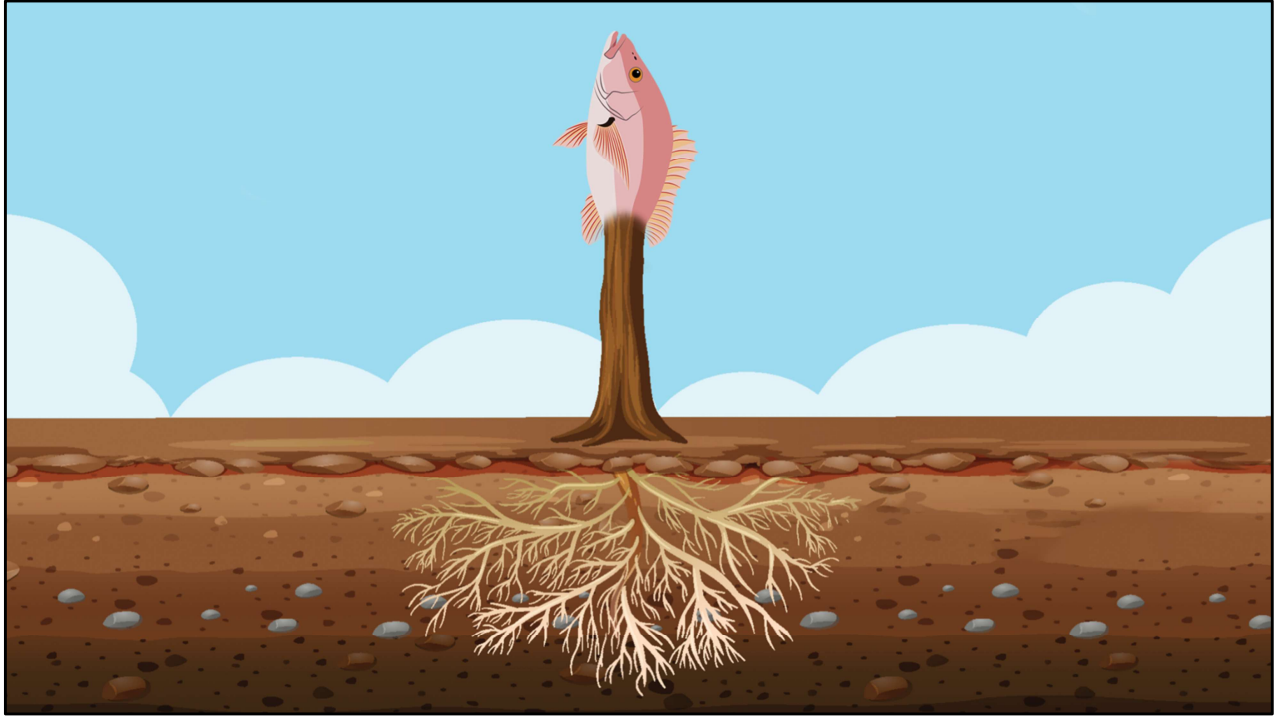


healthy expenditures of trust.

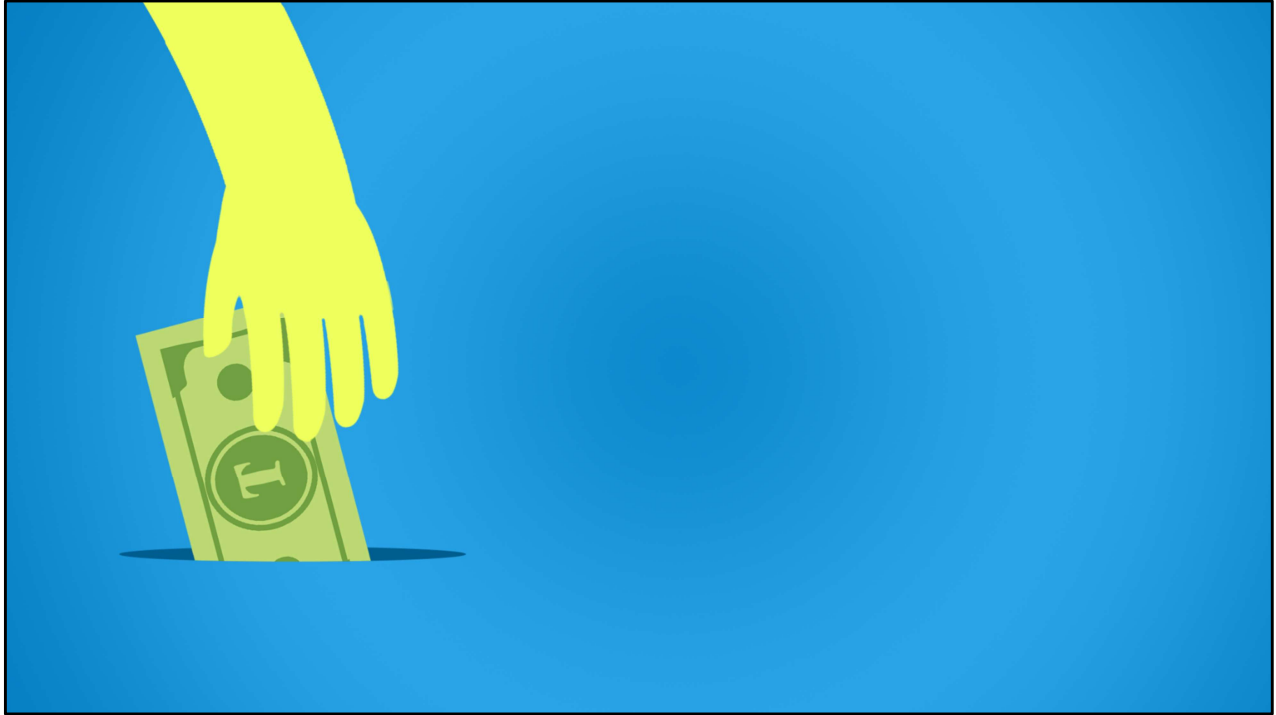


A good joke
Balances build up
Rooted in convention
With a punchline that

A good joke balances a build up rooted in convention with a
punchline that ...



subverts expectations.



The parts of your
That spend subvert expectations
Can be the most
Memorable story reason

The parts of your game that spend trust, and subvert expectations,
can be the most memorable, story making moments. They're the
reason your players play!



My friend Steven
Plays Blood
And he LOVES it
Blood is a

My friend Steven plays Blood on the Clocktower. And he LOVES it.
Blood on the Clocktower is a...



Were-wolf like game...



where one role...



the Wizard
gets to make
And that secret
Spending trust

the Wizard, gets to make up an entirely new rule - in secret. And that secret rule can change the game out from under you, spending trust.



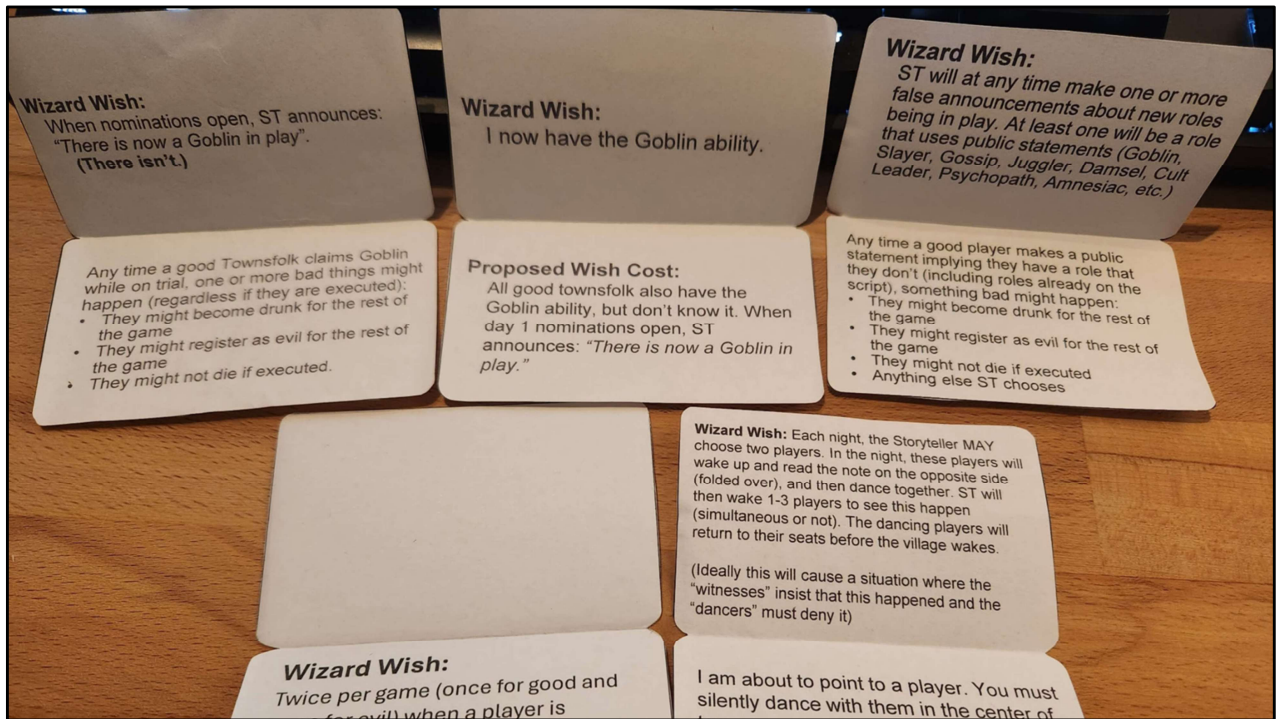
And in the hopes
Any afternoon
Get to the table
Assigned Wizard

And in the hopes that on any afternoon, this game will happened to
get to the table, and he will happen to be assigned Wizard...



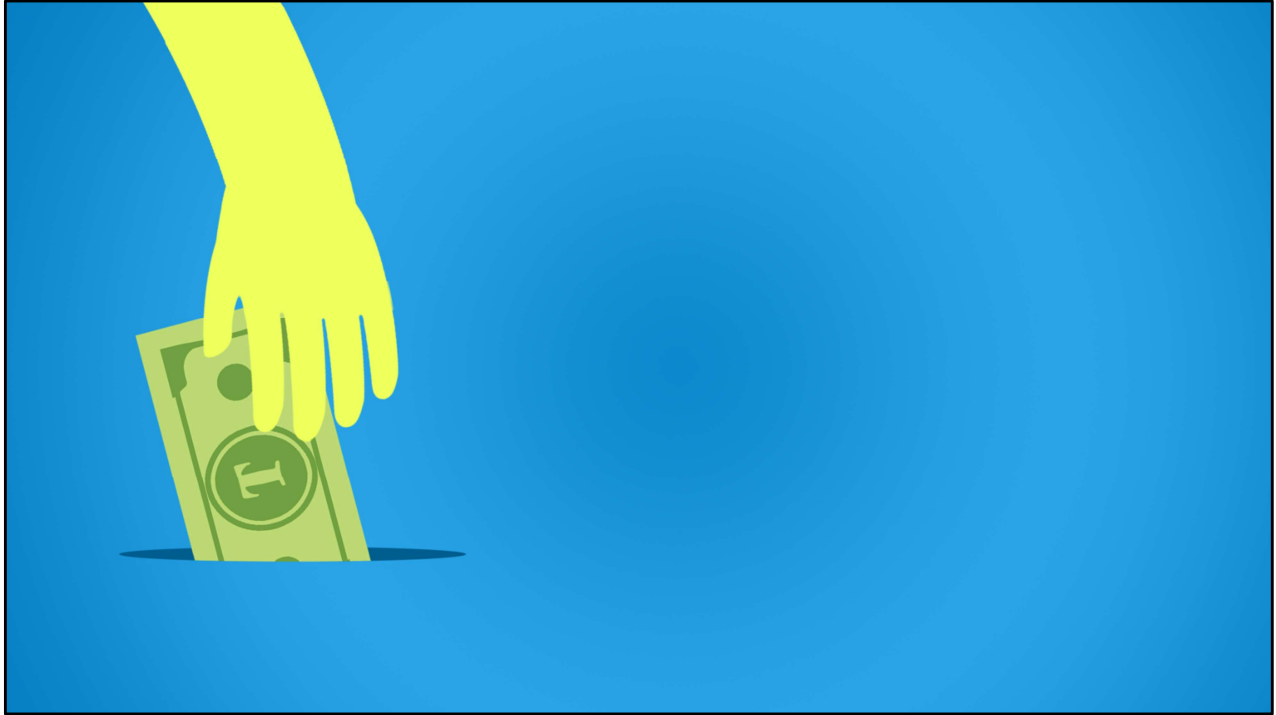
Steven carries
Cards wallet
All times

Steven carries these cards in his wallet at all times.



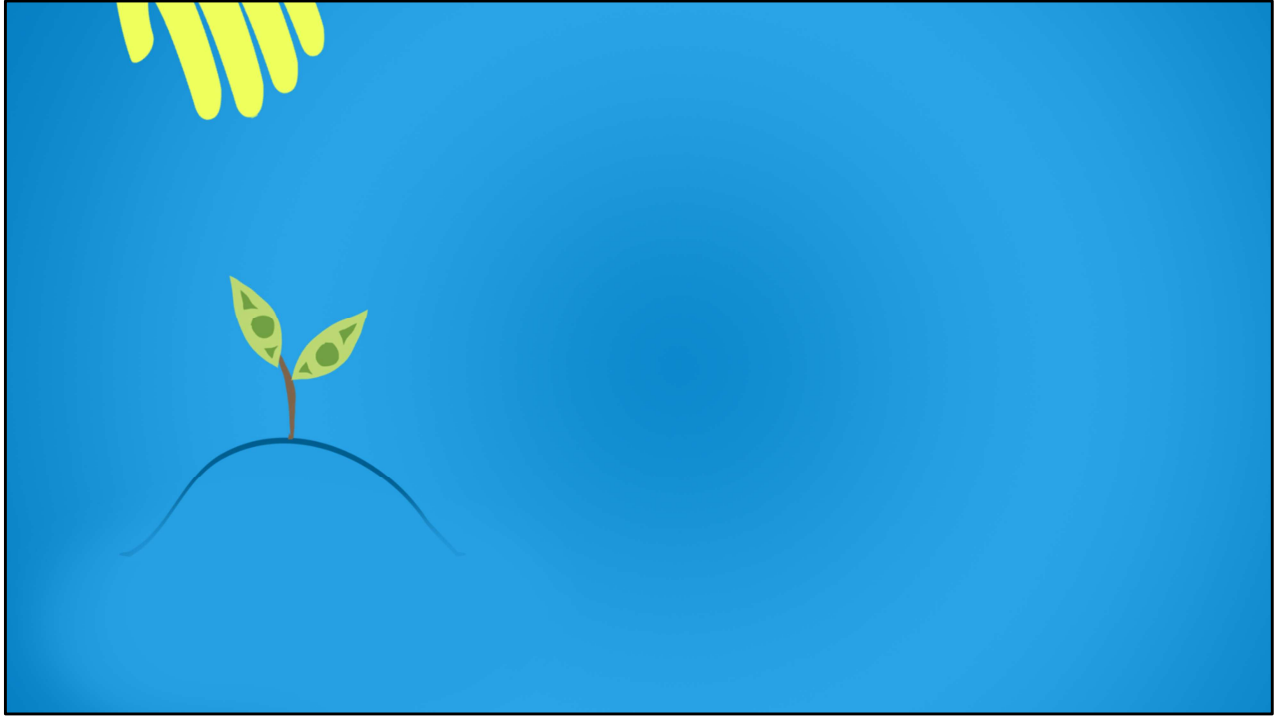
A set of
Hand authored
Wizard rules
Cant wait to

A set of hand authored Wizard rules. And he can't wait to tell you about them.

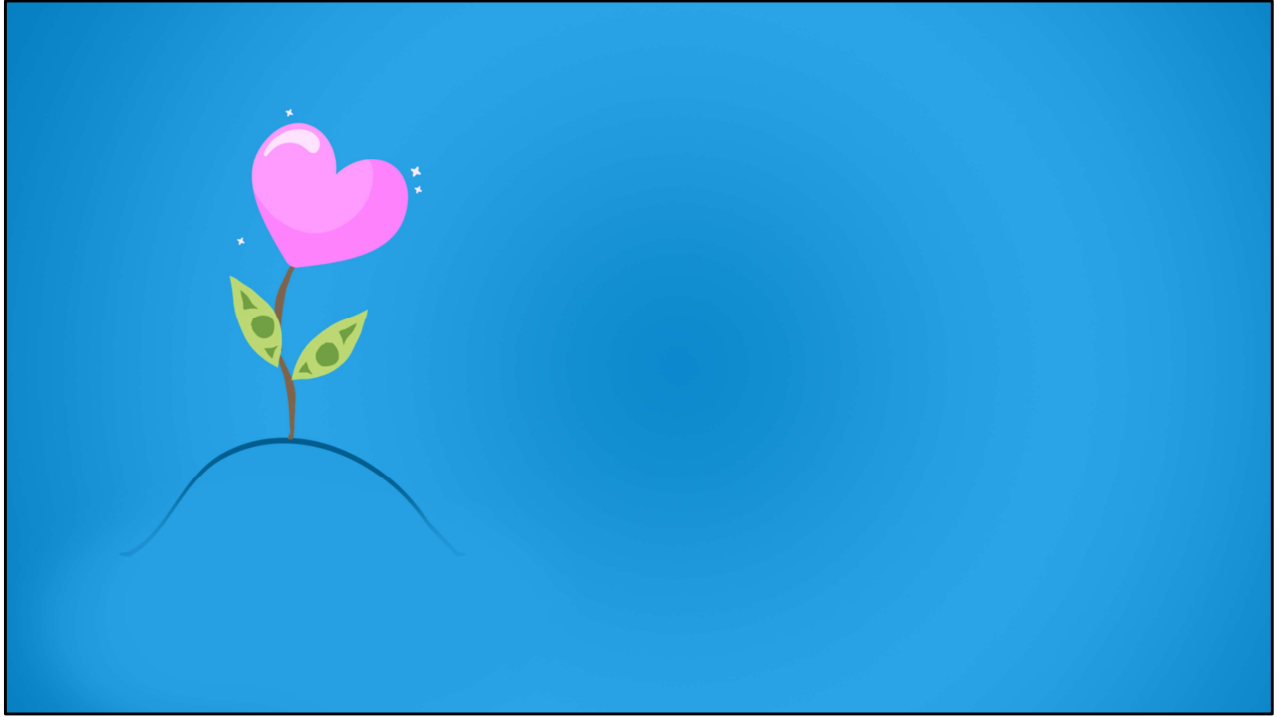


That is how beloved
Trust spending mechanical
Devices can be

That is how beloved these trust-spending mechanical devices can
be.



This is a recipe for



DEVOTION.



So, what are some other examples of..



Healthy expenditures?
Many narrative devices
Based around spending

...healthy expenditures of trust? Many narrative devices are based on spending trust.



A jump scare
Spends trust
Burst of adrenalin

A jump scare spends trust for a burst of adrenaline.



A bridge collapse
Spends trust immersion
Belief your choices environment

A bridge collapse spends trust for immersion. The notion that your choices affect the environment.



Revealing second
Boss fight
Spends trust
Drama

Revealing a second health bar in a boss fight spends trust for drama.



Randomization like critical hits,




and generated levels
Spend trust
Especially at competitive levels
For variance

and generated levels, all spend trust (especially at competitive levels) for variance.

Creeper Ichor ☆

Quick Facts

- Progressive loot
- Side: None
- Party loot
- Added in patch 1.13.0 "Classic"
- Icon:  inv_misc_slime_01

Screenshots

None yet - [Submit one!](#)

Videos

None yet - [Suggest one!](#)

Gather info with the Wowhead Client


Related

Dropped by (4) Objective of (1) Comments (38) Screenshots

WoW Classic - Classic Era - All Phases

Name	Season	Level	Location	React	Count	%	Pop.
Forest Moss Creeper		20 - 21	Hillsbrad Foothills	A H	3,091 out of 6,920	7	●
Creepthess	24 Rare		Hillsbrad Foothills	A H	11 out of 246	4	●
Giant Moss Creeper		24 - 25	Hillsbrad Foothills, Alterac Mountains	A H	1,192 out of 57,958	2	●
Elder Moss Creeper		26 - 27	Hillsbrad Foothills	A H	135 out of 23,004	0.6	●

1 - 4 of 4

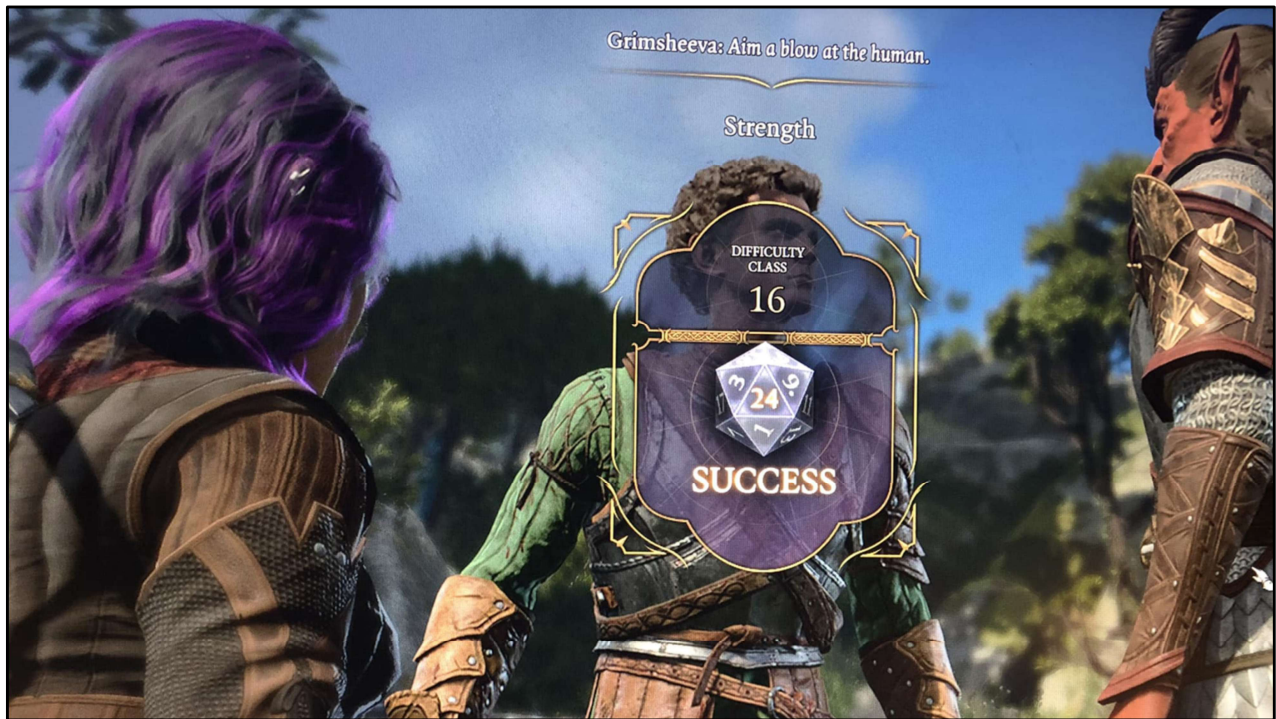


And we oftend
 Need to scale back
 Expenditures with systems
 Like progressive probability

And we often need to scale back on some of these expenditures
 with systems like progressive probability ...



being able to buy loot with tokens,



Or giving players
Ability to alter roll
Outcomes with Inspiration

or giving players the ability to alter roll outcomes with 'inspiration'.



So there is a budget to balance.



They say it
Takes money to make
Well it takes spending trust

They say, it takes money to make money! Well, it takes spending
player trust



To make significant
When you spend trust
Exchange for player delights
You're make investment and the payoffs

to make significant player trust. When you spend trust in exchange for player delights, you're making an investment. And the payoffs come with ..



...snowballing ...



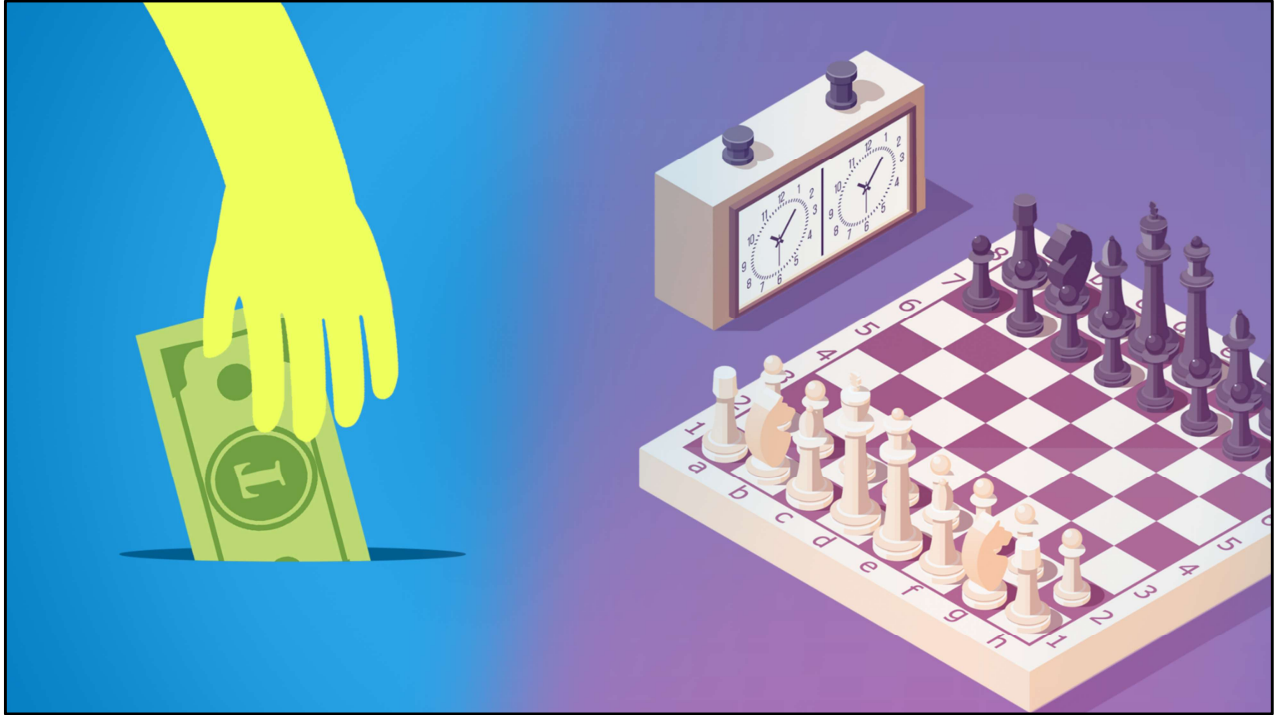
Benefits
What does
look like?

benefits. What does that snowball look like?



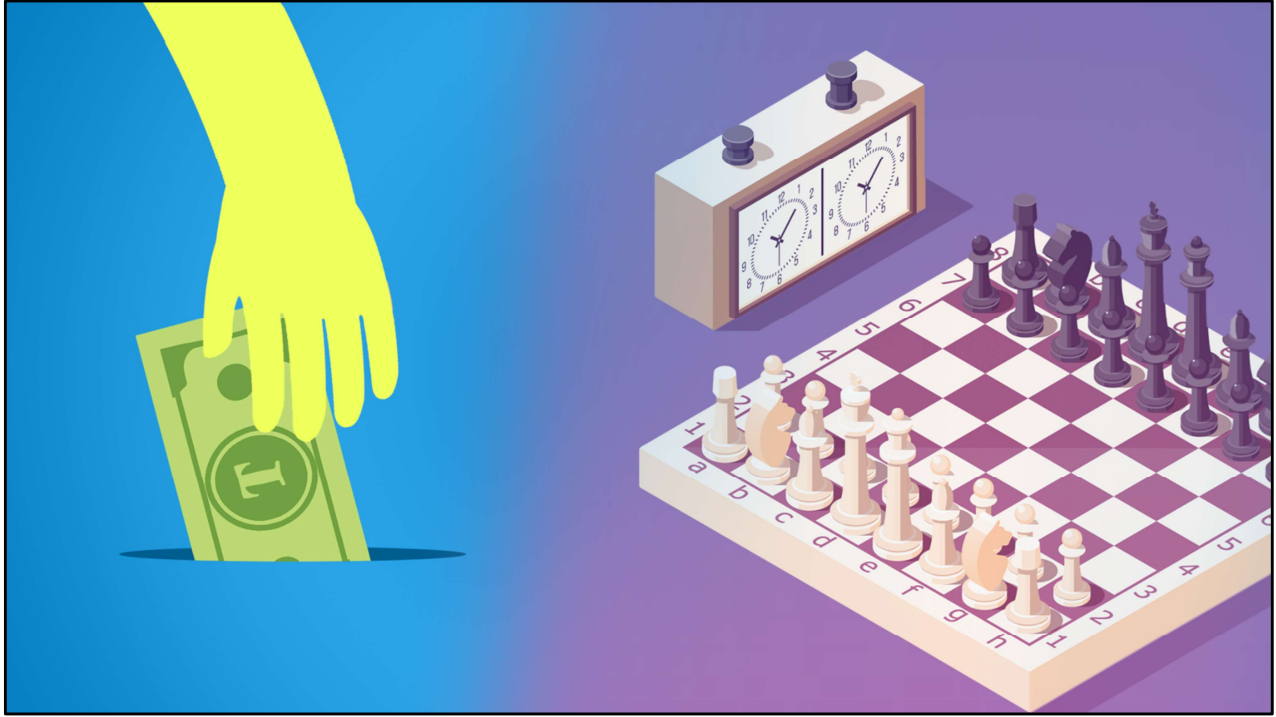
In Dominion,
We earn trust undo
Which lets faster
They're not afraid

In Dominion, We earn trust from that undo button, which lets
players play faster. They're not afraid of making a mistake.

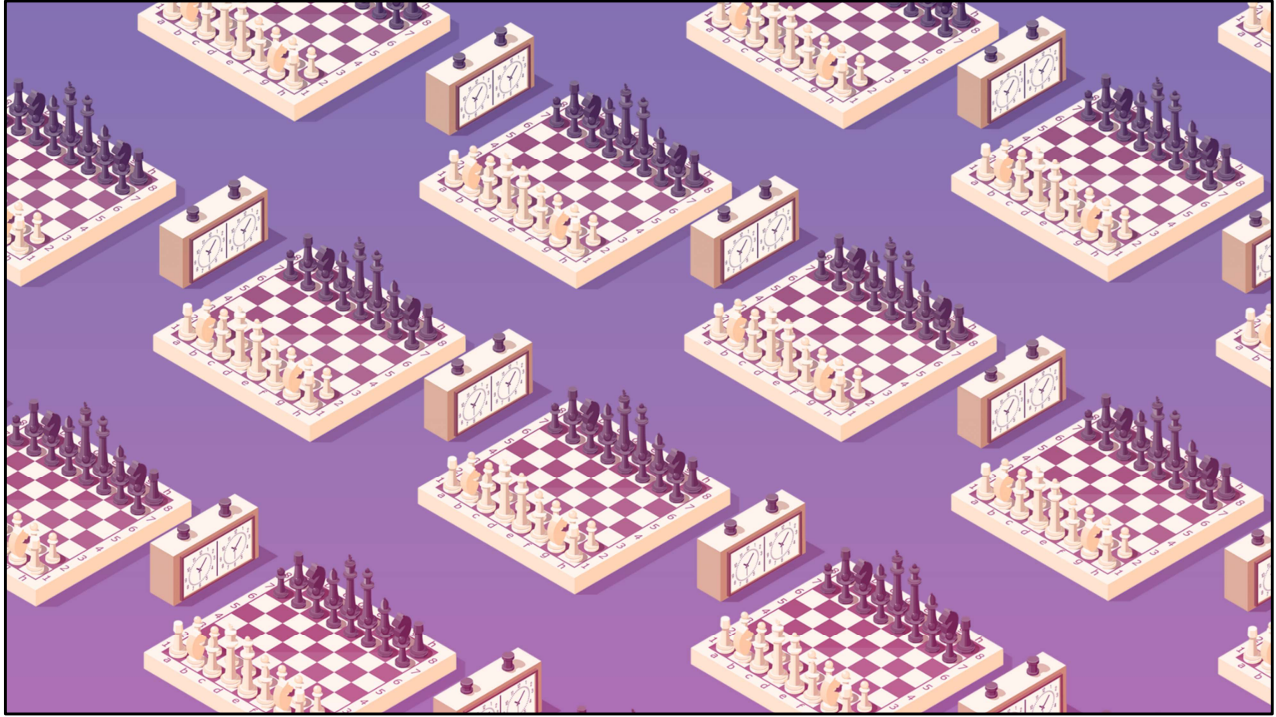


And we spend
Enforcing strict turn
Punishing players
But players tolerate

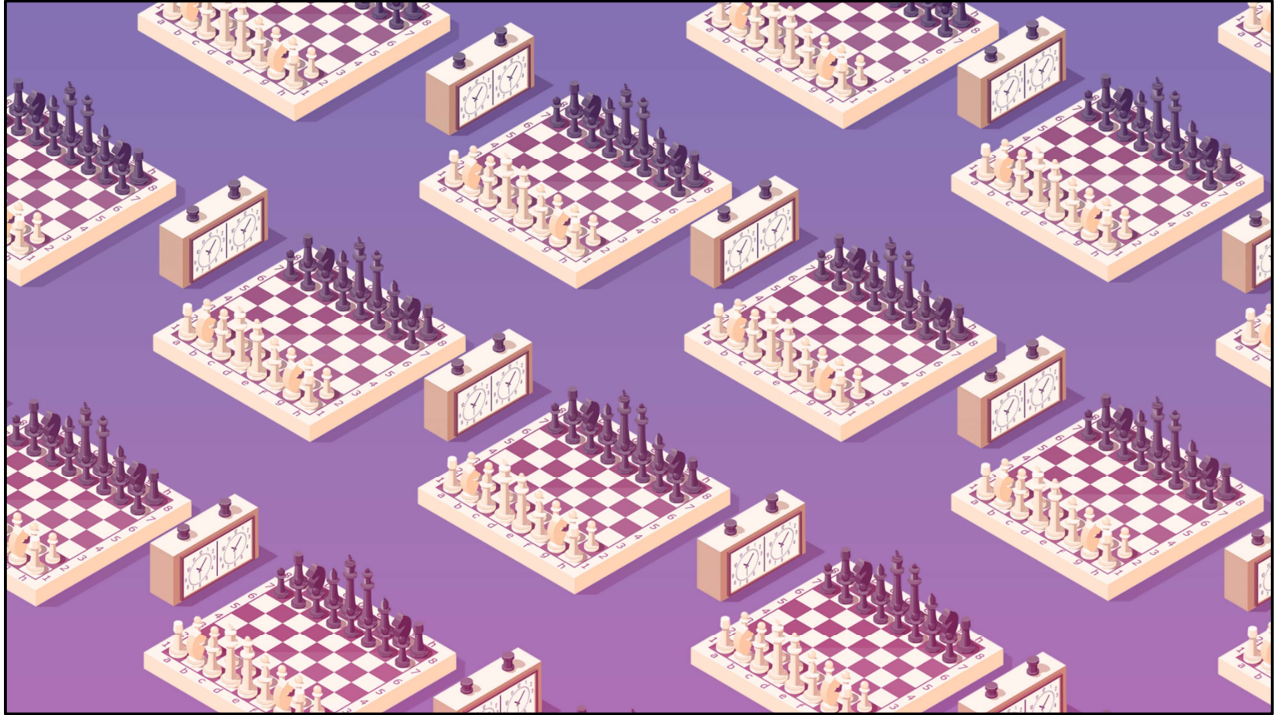
And we spend that trust enforcing a strict turn timer, punishing players for taking too long. But players tolerate that punishment because of the earned trust.



This system expedites player turns, which facilitates



multiplayer games, which grows the multiplayer pool.



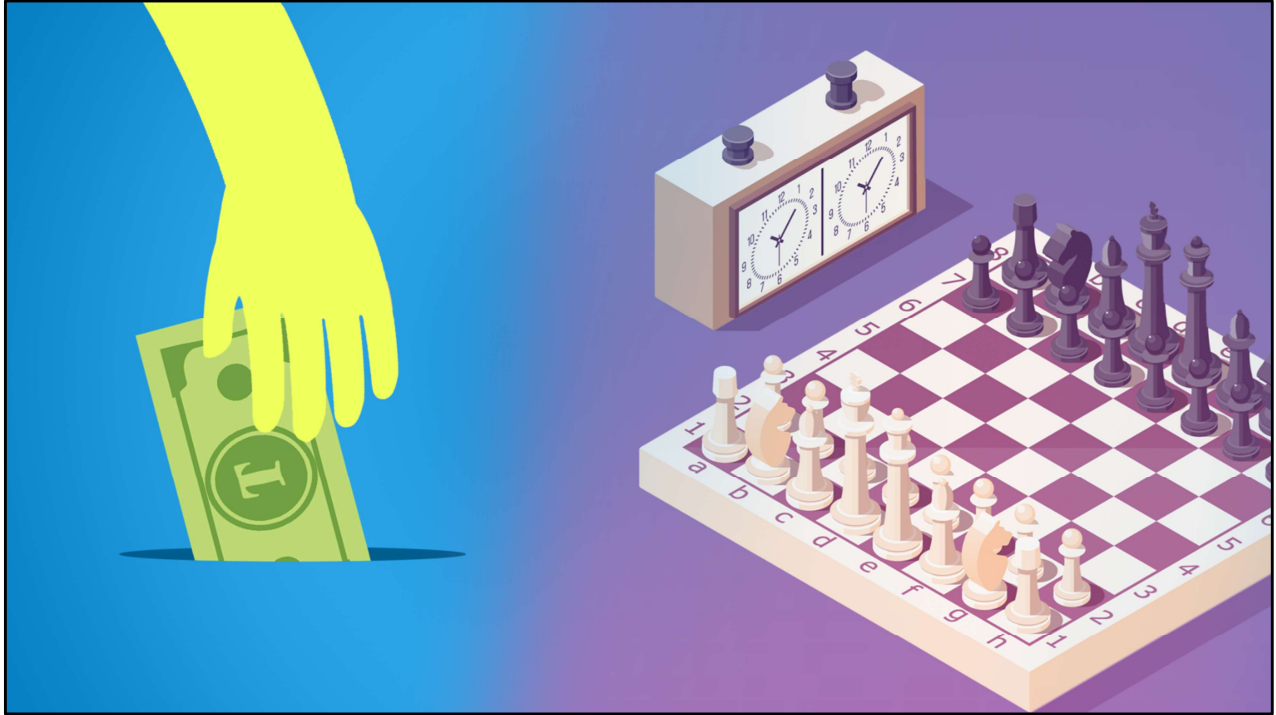
Players who quickly
Large mp pool
Appropriately challenging skill
Leads to repeat

Players who quickly find matches in a large multiplayer pool will play opponents of an appropriately challenging skill level, which leads to repeat game sessions across your player base.



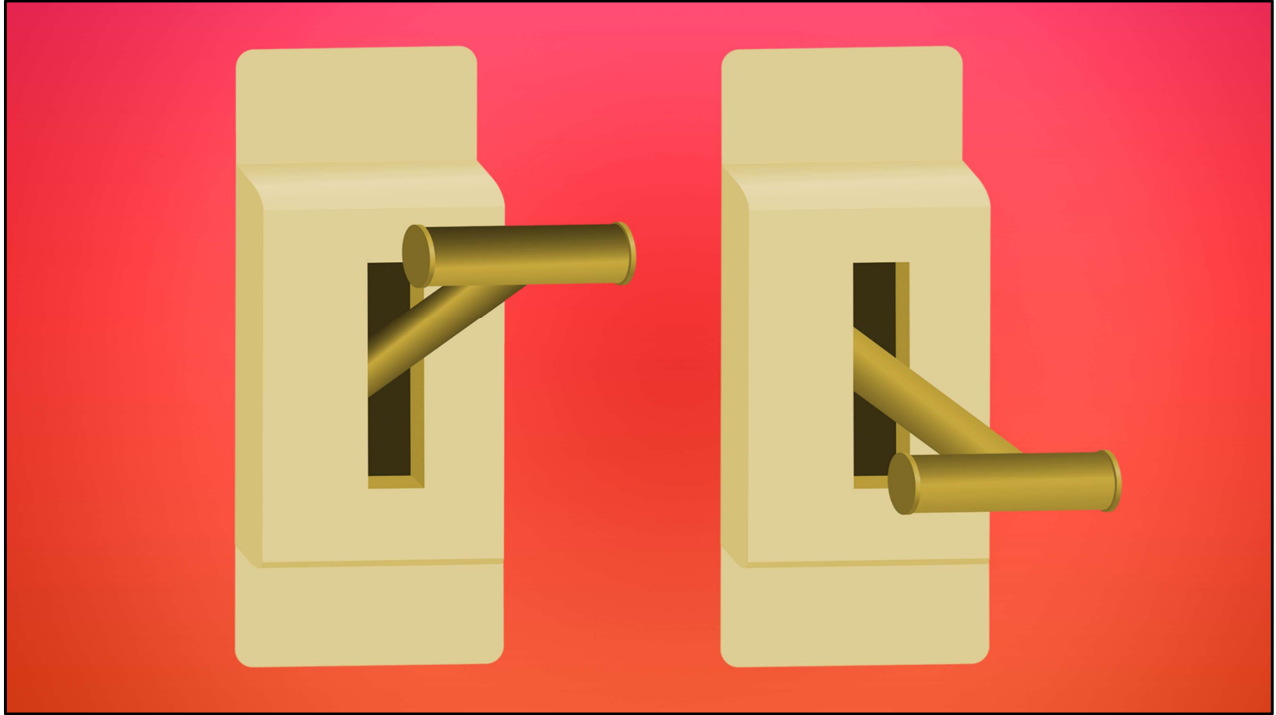
An active
Thriving mp base
Evangelize to friends

An active and thriving multiplayer base will evangelize your game to their friends.



So spending trust
Punitive turn timers
Critical part
Economic equation. Success

So spending trust with punitive turn timers was a critical part of that economic equation that leads to success.



But be aware
External levers
acting on your budget
Levers maybe outside

But, be aware of the external levers acting on your budget, levers which may be outside of your control.



Your game does not
Vacuum
Its important recognize
Trust landscape genre

Your game does not exist in a vacuum. It's important to recognize
the trust landscape of the genre in which players meet your game.

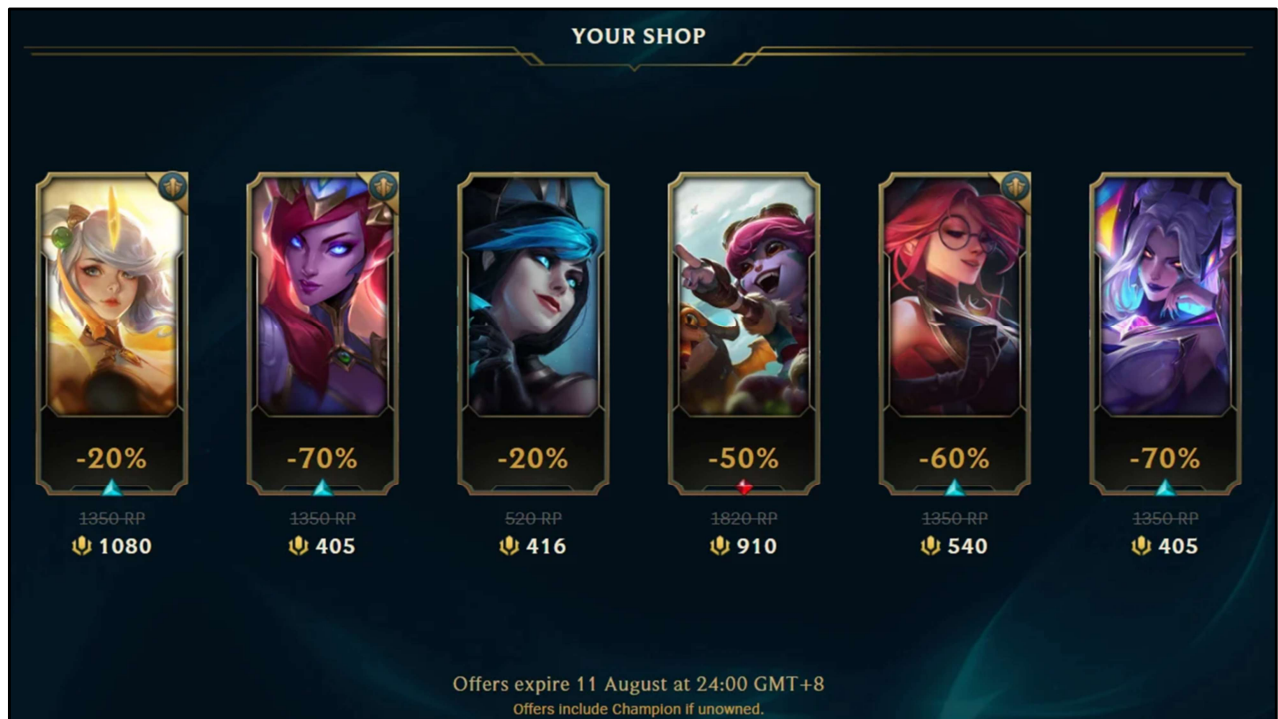


The Dominion app
is a F2P game
The term F2P has been
When a player hears

The Dominion app is a F2P game. The term F2P has been used to mixed results. When a player hears F2P, maybe they come with an experience they really liked like...



LoL. And had a good time buying ...



champion skins
But other people
might have had
experience where F2P was

...champion skins. But other people might have had an experience
where F2P was



Pay to Win
Or had dark patterns
Of some sort

pay to win. Or had dark patterns of some sort.



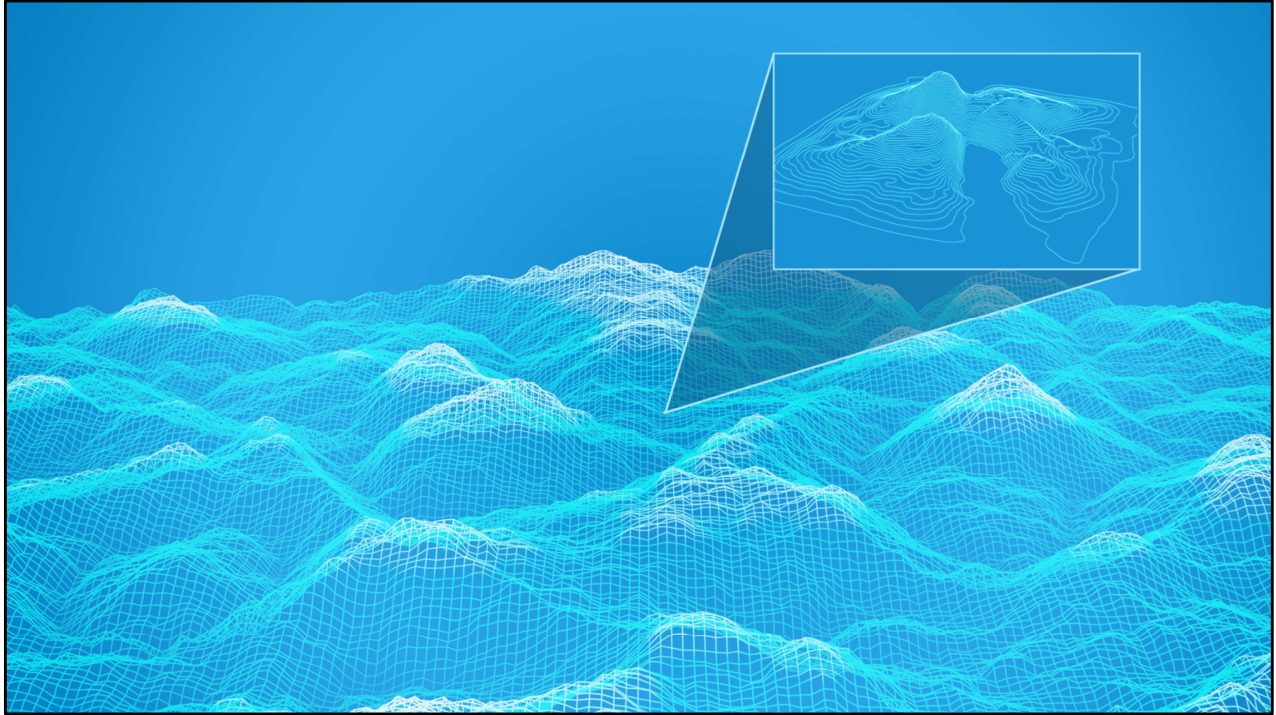
A developer who wants
make F2P game
Should be aware
Term polluted trust siphoned

A developer who wants to make a F2P game, should be aware the
term is now polluted and trust has been siphoned off.



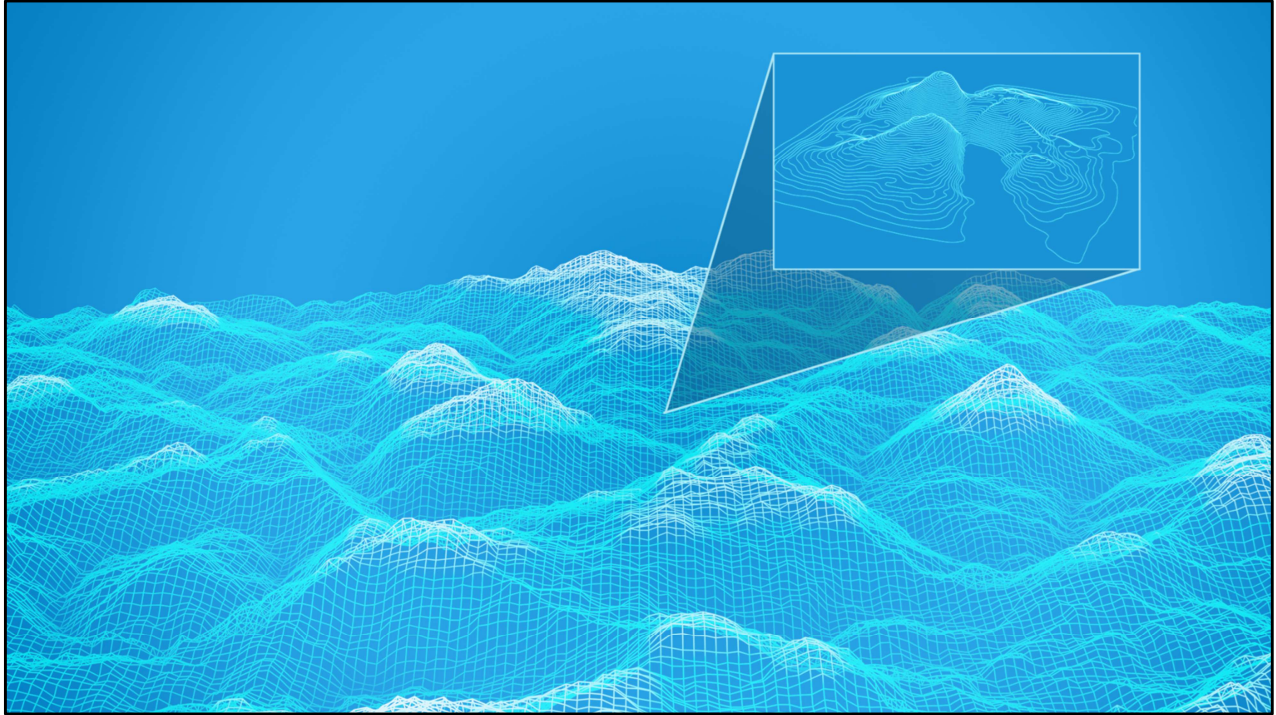
Making a F2P
You'll start in the red
But you can
We experienced this Dominion
The first

Making a F2P game, you'll be starting out in the red, and will have to go really hard to bank trust to overcome the deficit. But you can do it!



The entire ecosystem
Pushes manipulates terms mechanics
Spends earns trust
Pushes everyone else

The entire ecosystem of games pushes and manipulates terms and mechanics, spends and earns trust, and pushes everyone else around.



Even if you're
Pure hearted
Still subject to
So you have to

Even if you're the most pure hearted game developer you're still
subject to these currents, so you have to be aware.



Ok so if we
Accept trust is currency
Could we take
Could we apply economic
Models and theories

Ok, so, If we accept that trust is a currency, could we take it even further. Could we apply economic models and theories to game design decisions?

$$\frac{\partial V}{\partial t} + \frac{1}{2}\sigma^2 S^2 \frac{\partial^2 V}{\partial S^2} = rV - rS \frac{\partial V}{\partial S}$$

What would
Black scholes
Equation pricing options
game mechanics

What would the Black Scholes equation for pricing options mean for
game mechanics?



What would
Credit default swap
Mean for dev teams
Steam catalog

What would a credit default swap mean for a development team's
Steam catalogue?



How could we
Better inform ourselves
About trust economies
Our games situated

How could we better inform ourselves as designers about the trust
economies our games are situated in...



To take bigger swings
Without going bankrupt?

to take bigger swings without going bankrupt?



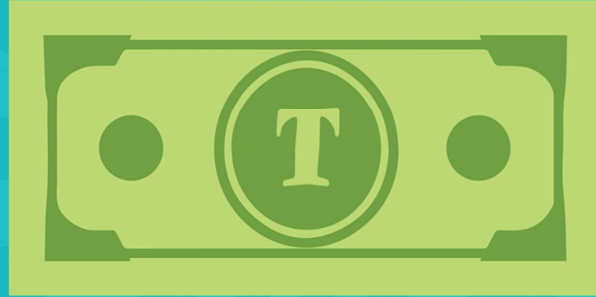
But while we as
Figure that out
Go out there,
Work hard to earn

But while we as a community figure all of that out... go out there
and work hard to earn your player's trust



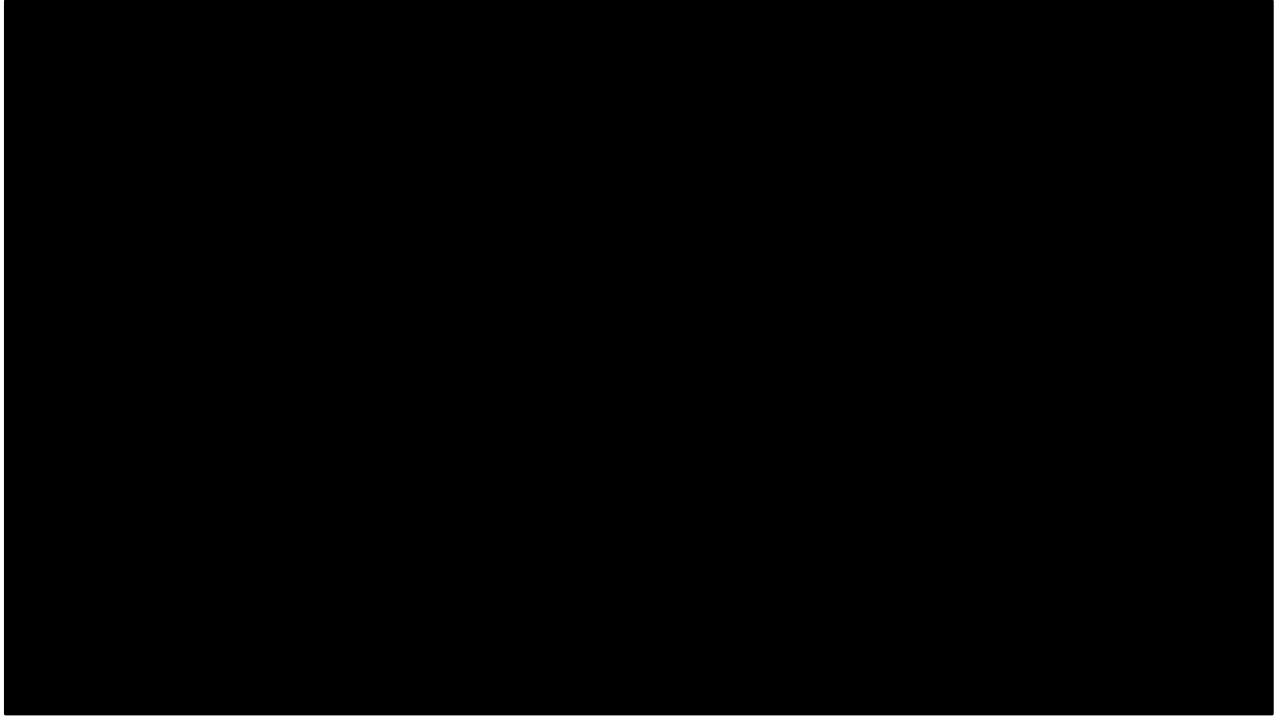
and then spend it to make something delightful.

Interpret Trust



As a Currency

Thank you.



STEVE MERETZKY

VP of Design
PeopleFun

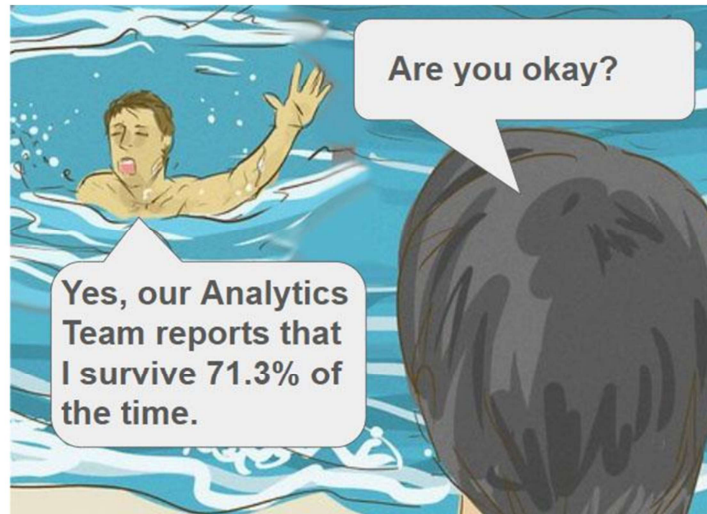
Our next speaker hardly needs an introduction – he is currently VP of Design at People Fun where his most recent title is Wordscapes Soitare . He has worked with everyone from King to Blizzard to Google, and his career stretches all the way back to Infocom where he created on some of my favorite games, including Planetfall and a Mind Forever Voyaging

It is my great honor to introduce...

Steve Meretzky!

Rules of the Game 2026

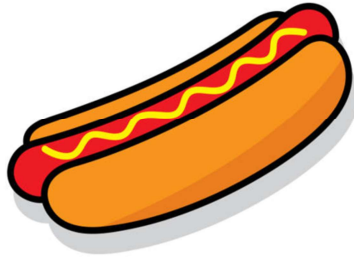
Don't Drown in Innovation



Many years ago, I heard...

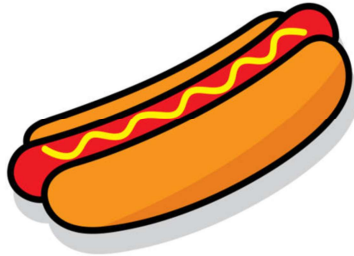


...a borscht belt comedian talking about the impact of being bar mitzvahed. Before your bar mitzvah, your mom says, “Don’t go in the water for 30 minutes after you eat, or you’ll get a cramp and drown!” But after your bar mitzvah, now that you’re a man, you are ready for complexities.

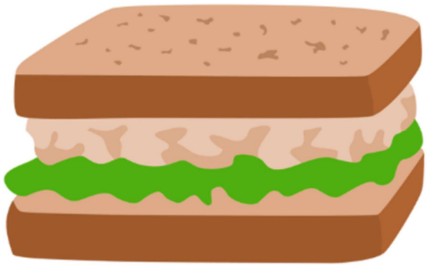


= 24 minutes

Hot dog? Safe to go into the water after 24 minutes.

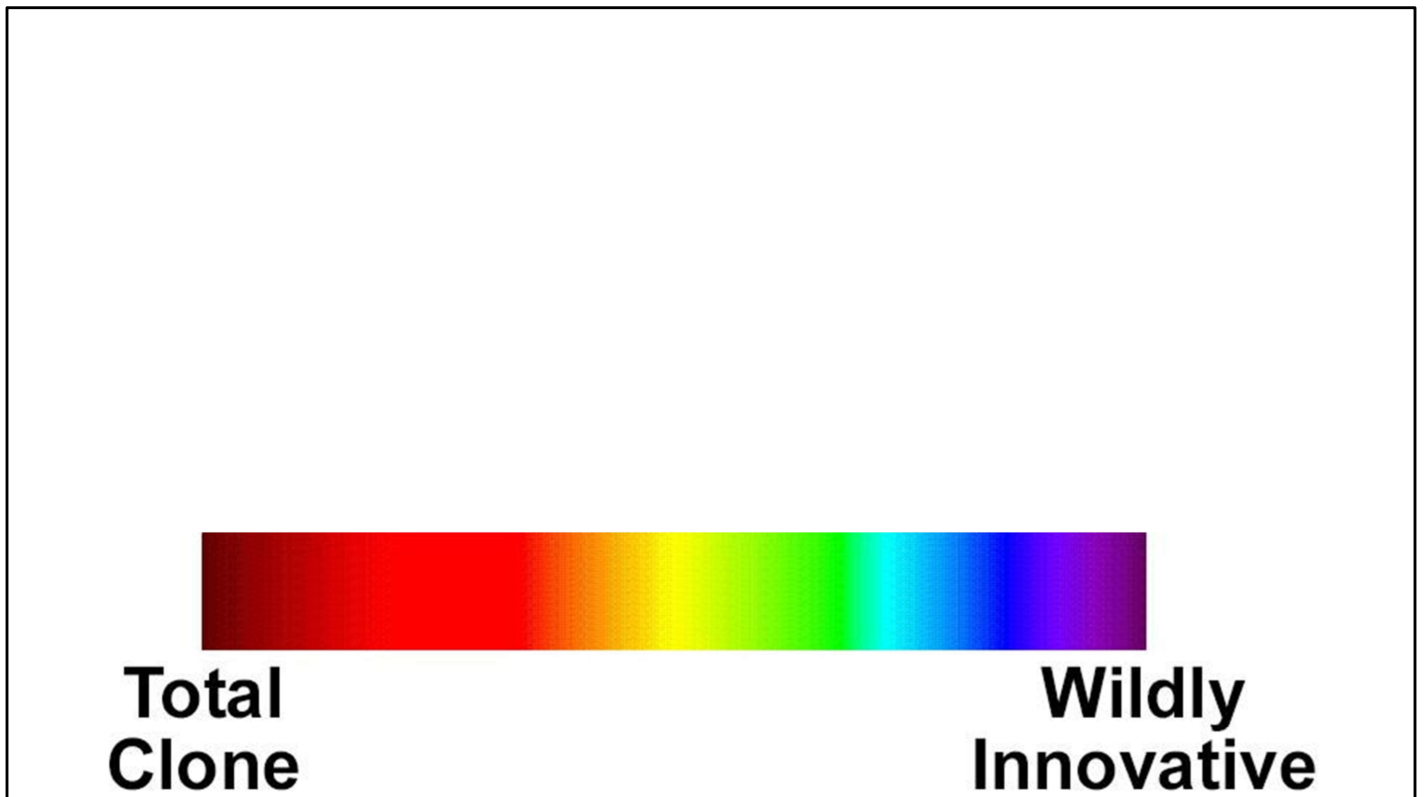


= 24 minutes

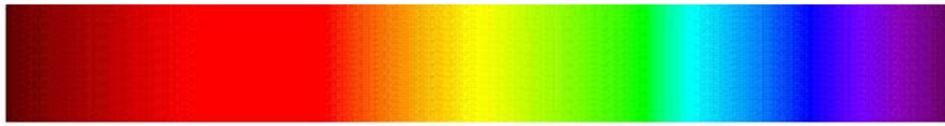


= 28 minutes

Tuna fish sandwich? That's 28 minutes. Now let's turn to the feast in front of us when we make game development decisions.



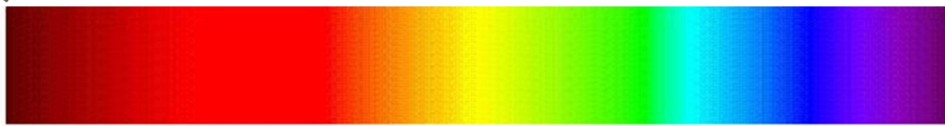
When I start working on a new game idea, the first thing I usually think about is “how new do I want this to be”? Where will it fall on the mental model I have of an Innovation Spectrum, running from an exact clone of an existing game to something so new that no one has ever seen anything like it before?



**Total
Clone**

**Wildly
Innovative**

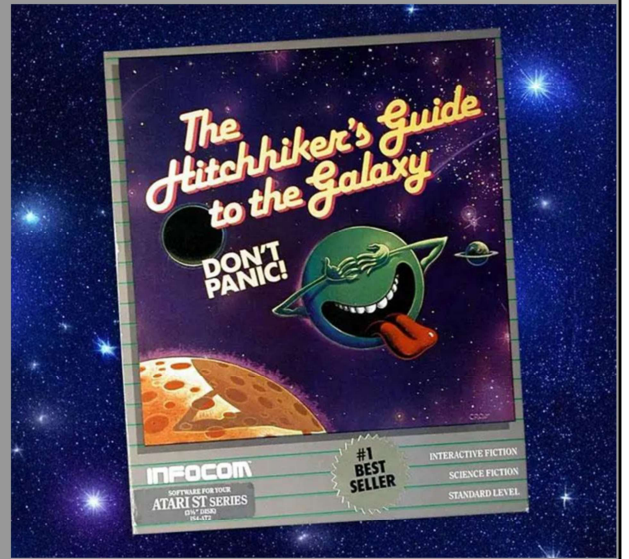
As designers, of course, our inclination is always to go for the most new, different, exciting, unexplored territory.



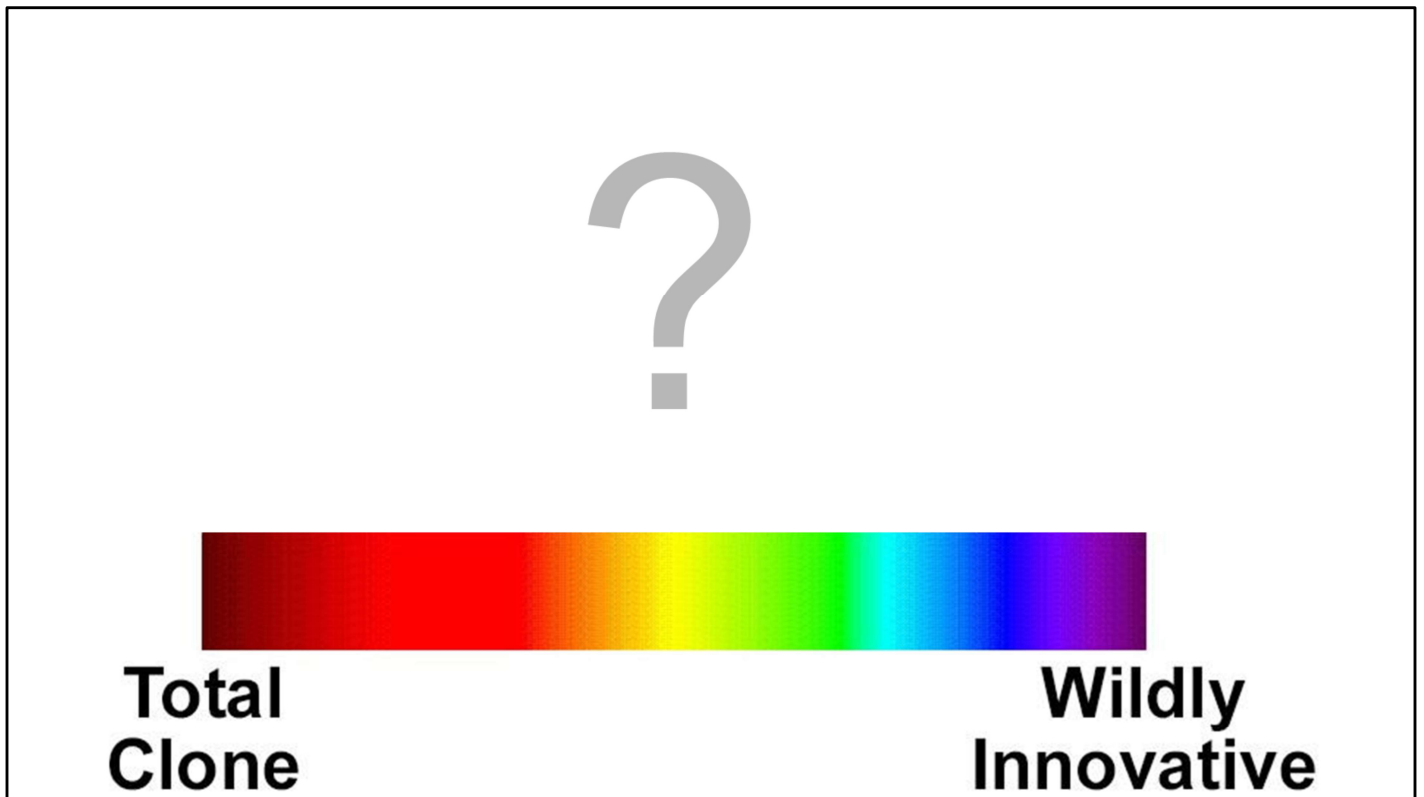
**Total
Clone**

**Wildly
Innovative**

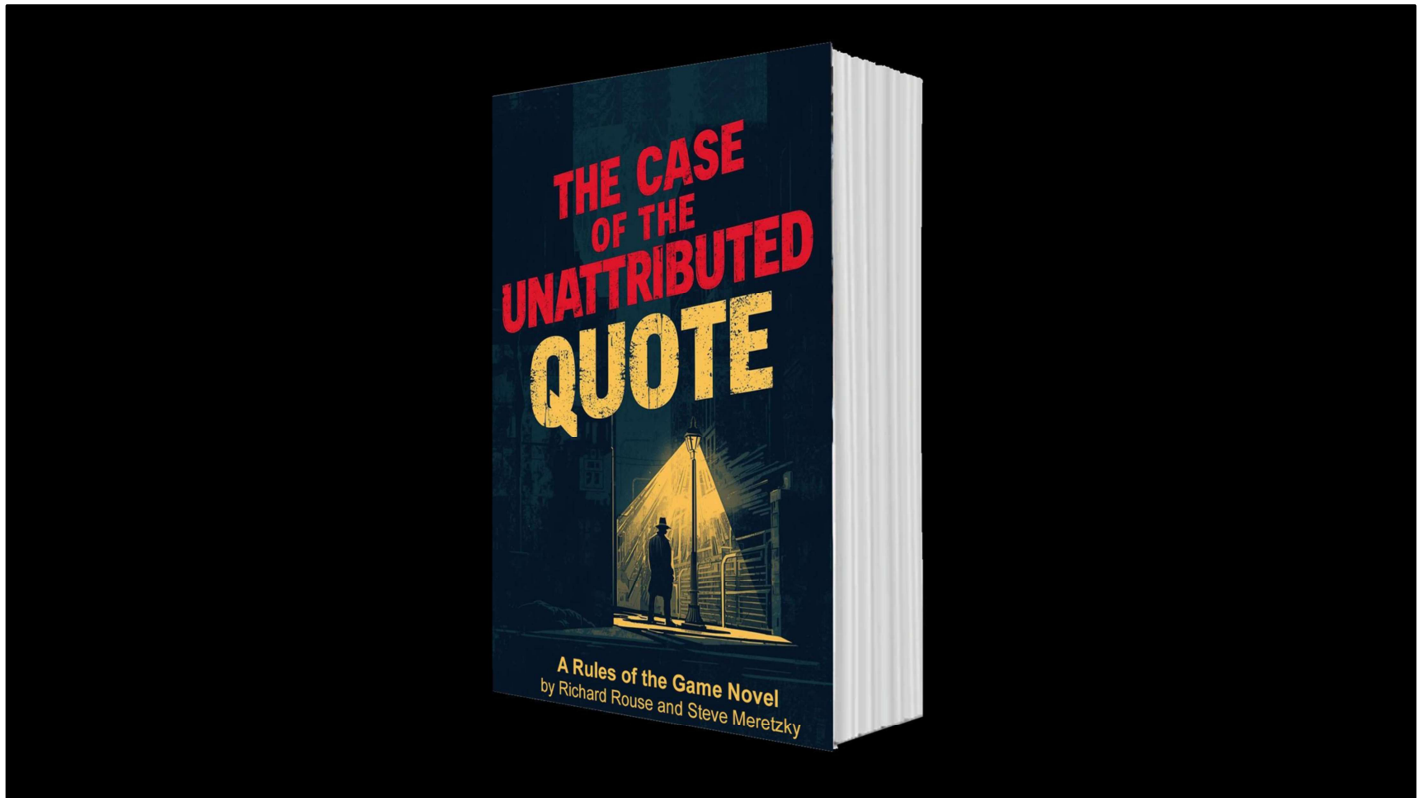
While the risk-averse publisher points at Game X and says, "That was successful, make me one just like it."



When I was on press tour with Douglas Adams for our “Hitchhiker’s Guide” game, he would always quote publishers as saying, “Remember that thing you wrote that was hugely successful because it was unlike anything anyone had ever seen before? Well write us another one that’s exactly the same as that.”



The hard truth is that we almost always want to be somewhere in between those two extremes. But where exactly?



Which brings us to the Case of the Unattributed Quote. When I started working on this talk, Richard told me he'd heard a quote from Brian Reynolds, the designer of Civ II and Rise of Nations.



**“Two-thirds old;
One-third new”**

The quote was that Brian’s formula was one-third new stuff and two-thirds old stuff. So I asked Brian to confirm, and he said, “I don’t remember ever saying that.” He said that his formula for success was “Take the best-selling game right now, and make it about HISTORY!” Then someone else suggested that the quote might be from Sid Meier.



**“One third the same,
one third improved,
one third new”**

So I asked Sid, and he said he hadn't said that, but had said something similar, namely one-third the same, one-third improved, and one-third new. Seems like a good rule! But is a one-size-fits-all formula like that suitable for all games? Is it like that “don't swim within 30 minutes of eating” rule?



Benefits of Innovation:

Different!

Exciting!

Completely own a new genre!

The benefits of newness are, well, the newness itself. It's exciting. It gives you something to talk about in your marketing and your PR. And if it's a success, it's a blue ocean that you can completely own for maybe years to come!



Downsides of Innovation:

Unfamiliar.

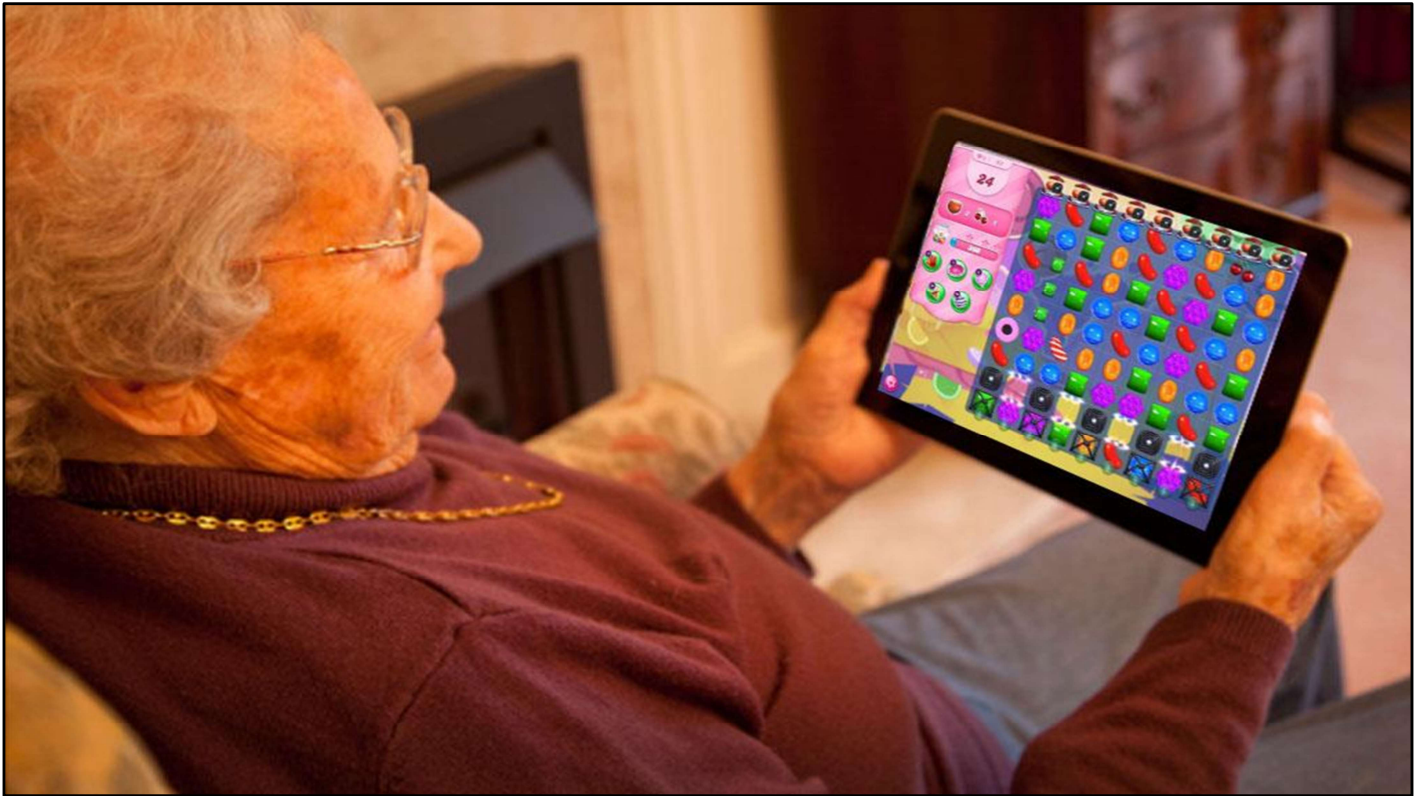
High learning curve for players.

Unproven gameplay.

On the other hand, newness is also unfamiliar. It means a hurdle that marketing will have to overcome in enticing players to try the game, and a hurdle that the game will have to overcome in teaching new mechanics to those players. And unproven gameplay is more of a gamble, especially for that risk-averse publisher who signs the checks. But another huge consideration is who do you expect to play your new game?

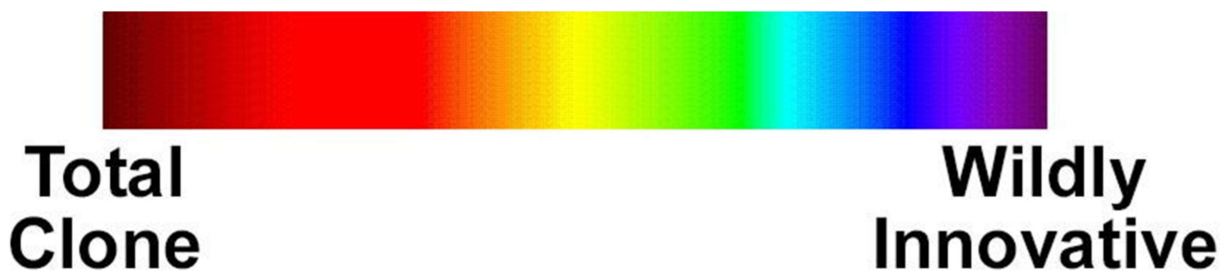


Core players will put up with more newness. In fact, they will demand a greater degree of innovation for a game to pique their interest.



Whereas casual game players are much more resistant to learning anything new, and more likely to gravitate toward the familiar ... but also don't want something that's TOTALLY identical to what they're already playing.

Is “Wildly Innovative” ever the right direction?



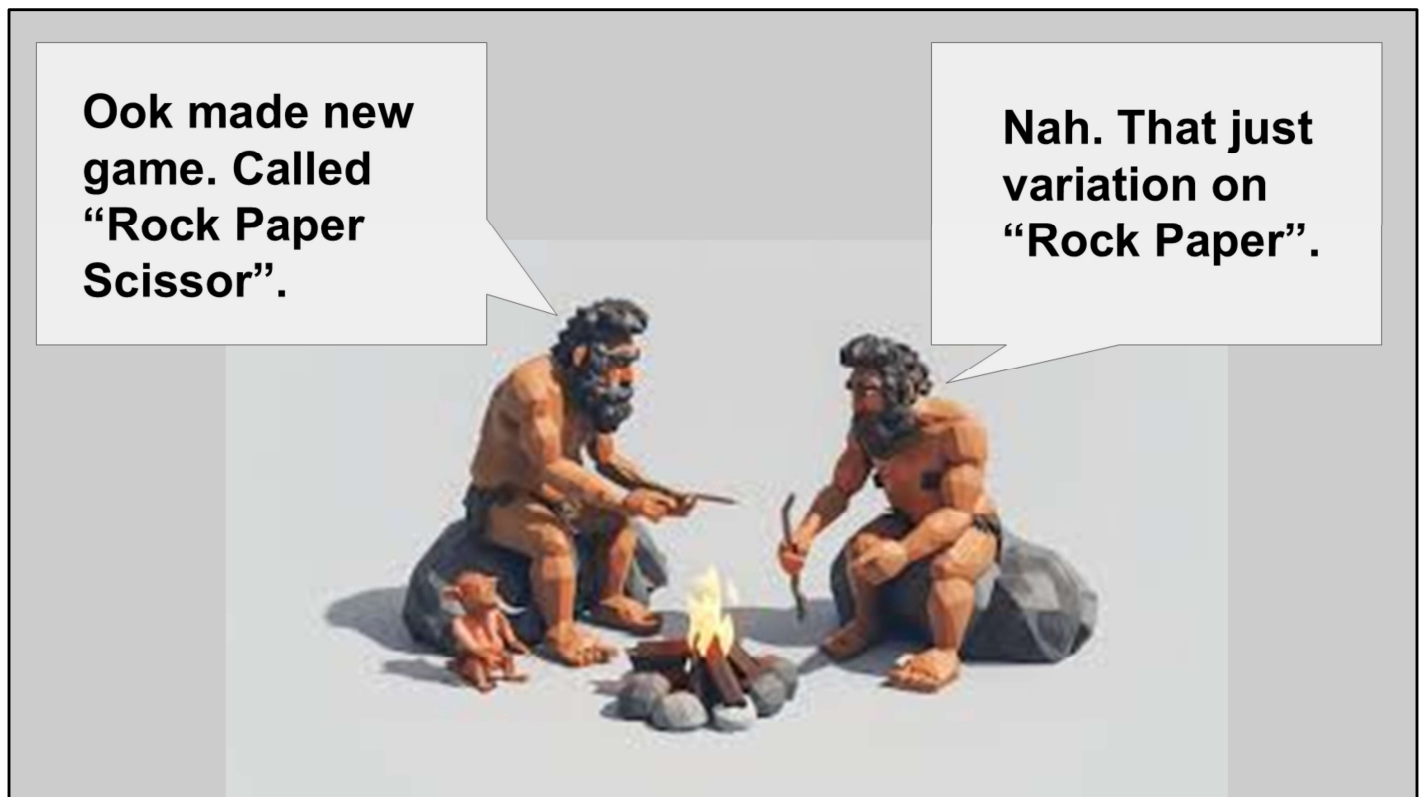
I said earlier that you want to be somewhere in the middle territory of this spectrum. Is way over on the right side EVER where you should be aiming?



There are examples of games that were wildly innovative... and also wildly successful. But ... funny story. I brought up the question of truly innovative games at a recent roundtable of designers, including these examples.



For every example, SOMEONE in the room had a precursor game. Minecraft? No, there was Infiniminer. The Sims? What about Little Computer People.?

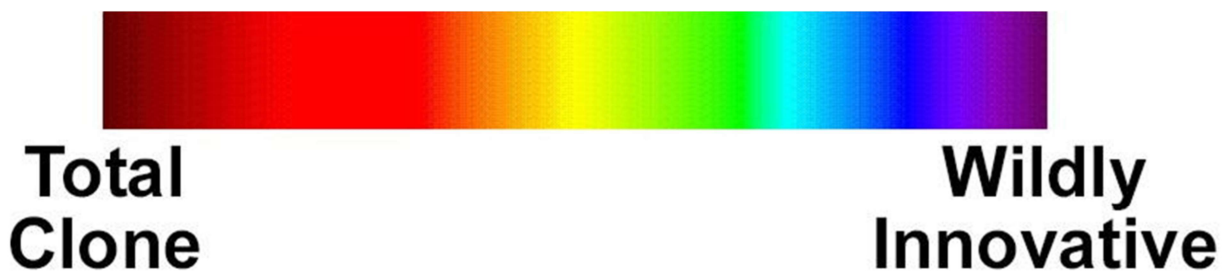


I got the feeling that you could go back to the dawn of time, and it would still be impossible to find a truly original game. Nevertheless, these games I listed, and others, are far more innovative than the norm, and they succeeded.



But, succeeding with such an innovative game is kind of like catching lightning in a bottle. Huge rewards ... but a tiny chance of success. If you're one or two people working weekends in a garage, great! Go for it! But if a company and hundreds of jobs depends upon the success of your game, I would advise against it. Unless you are in a position to make many shots on goal, in which case a few of them can be crazy, out-there ideas.

Is “Total Clone” ever the right direction?



Conversely, is it EVER the correct idea to have basically zero creative innovation?

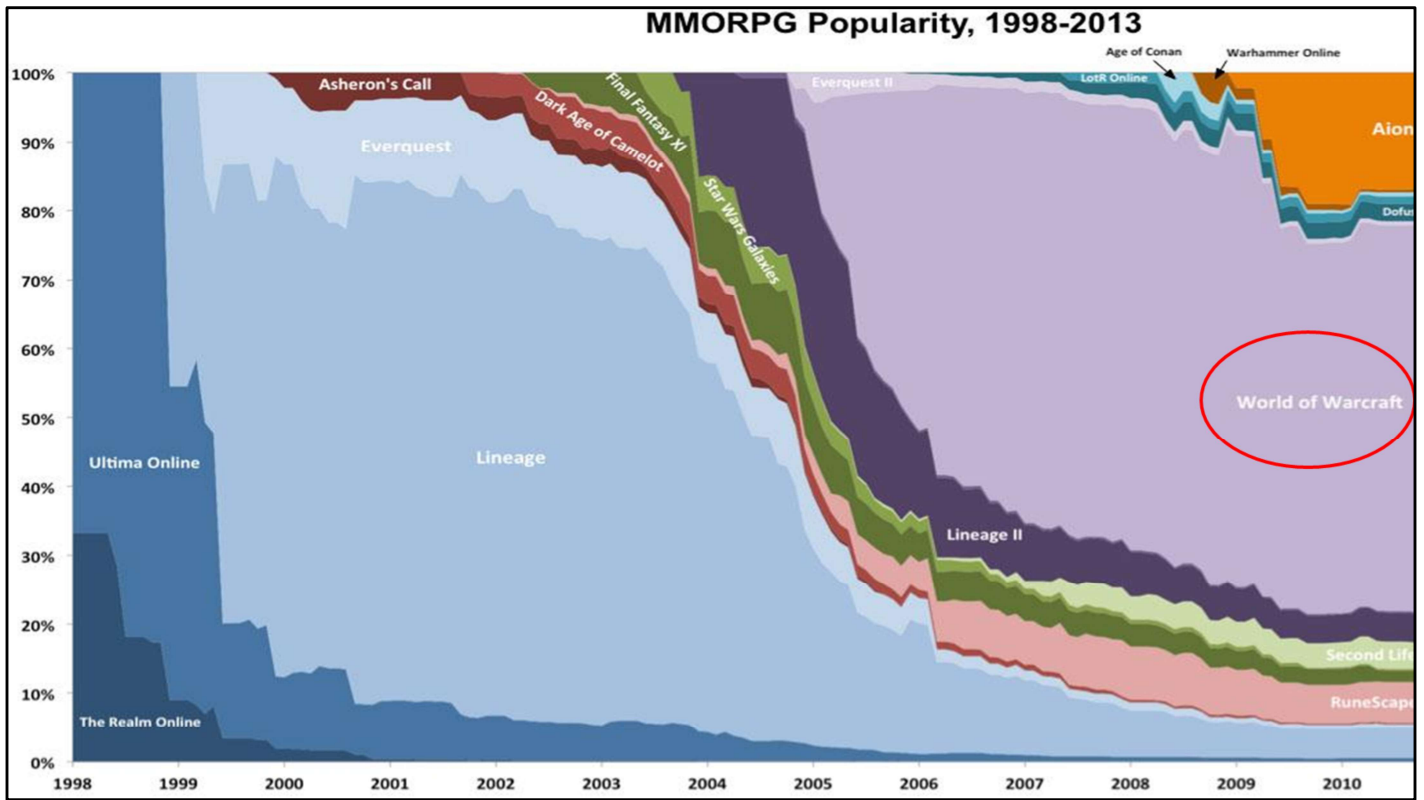
A young genre, where the quality bar is still low...

One case would be very early in the lifecycle of a new genre, where the offerings so far have set a fairly low quality bar and you have the resources to significantly surpass that quality bar. For example, Damion Schubert talks about “Blizzardification”, Blizzard’s ability to out-polish and out-UX and out-onboard the competition, with games like Diablo and Hearthstone and especially...

A young genre, where the quality bar is still low...



...with WoW, released in 2004 when the MMO RPG market was still in its early stages. In terms of game design, it didn't do much that existing games like Everquest weren't already doing, but it did it with a significantly higher quality bar...



...and just completely took over the market for many years.

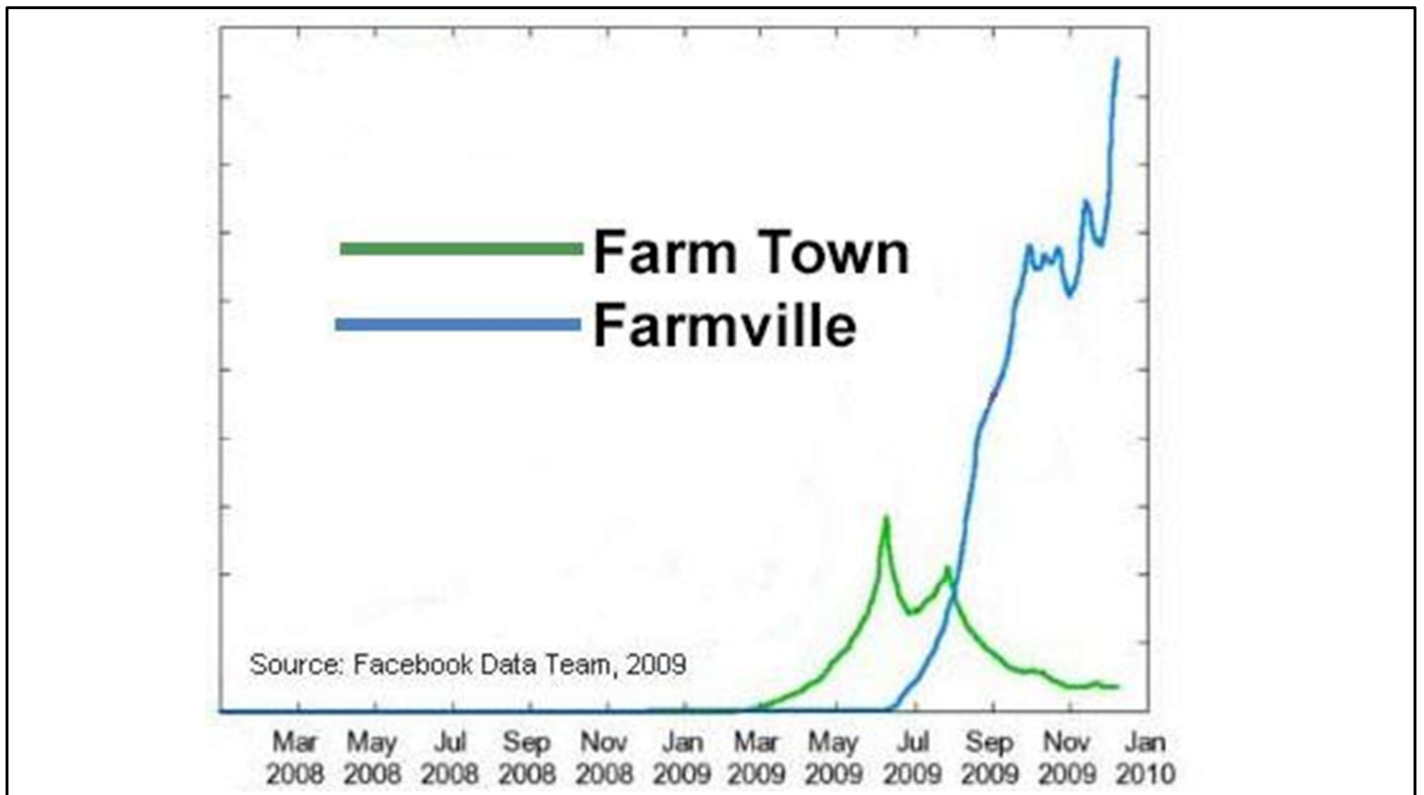
When you can overwhelm the early leader with \$\$\$

Or, another case for cloning is if you have the marketing dollars or other marketplace clout to completely overwhelm the early leader or leaders.

When you can overwhelm the early leader with \$\$\$



An example of this is Farmville, which was a near copy of the existing Facebook game Farm Town, when Zynga launched Farmville in 2009.

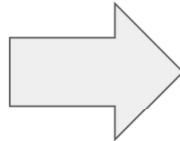


Thanks to Zynga's deep pockets, its close relationship with Facebook, and the ability to cross-sell players from other Zynga games, Farmville completely wiped out Farm Town despite the earlier game's 6-month head start.

When you can adapt a hit game to a brand new territory

A third case is taking a hit game in one territory and adopting it to a new one...

When you can adapt a hit game to a brand new territory



...such as Epic taking the battle royale from the Asian hit PUBG, and adapting it to their existing game Fortnite, turning a game with only moderate success into a 5-billion-dollars-a-year behemoth.

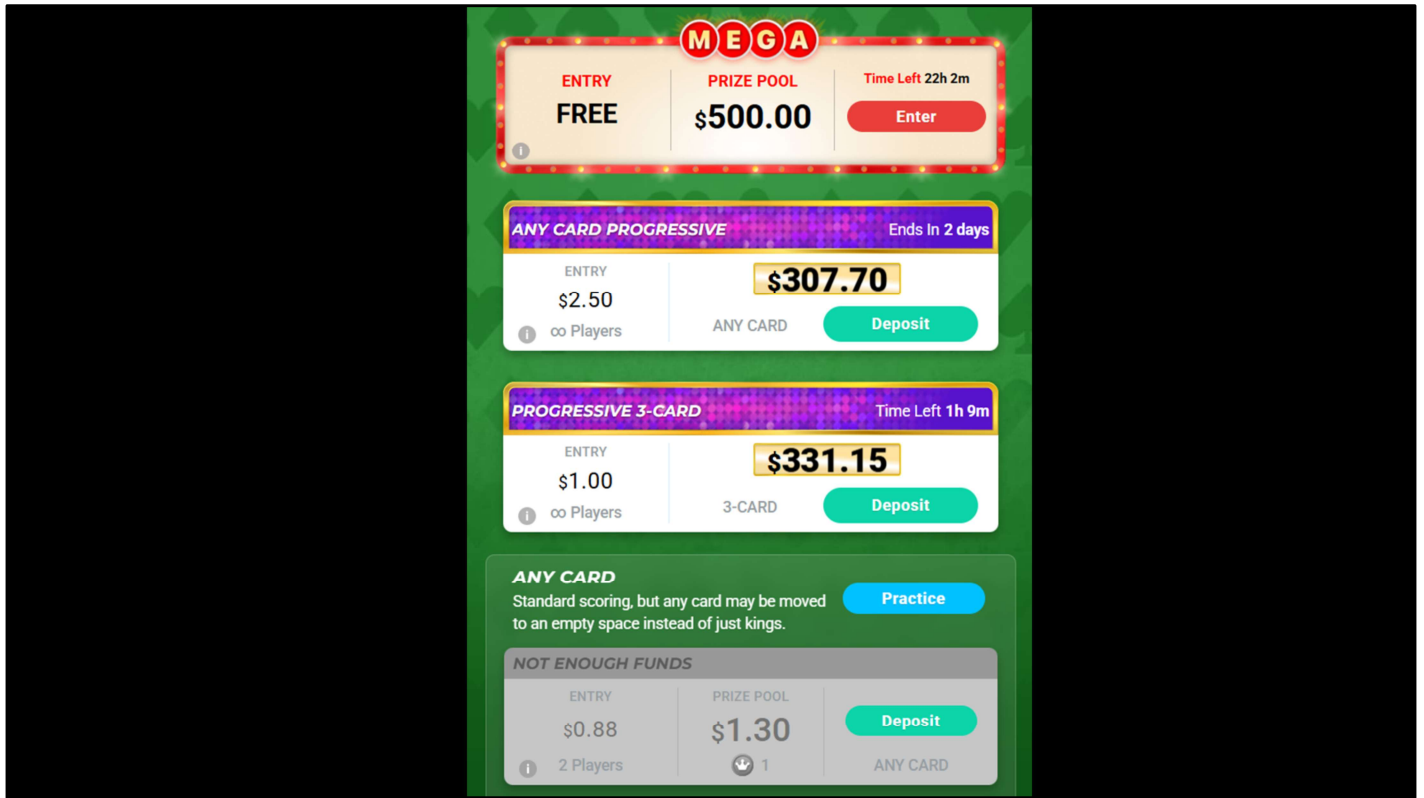
“New” is Not Just Creative Innovation

It's also worth pointing out that newness doesn't just mean innovation on the design front. It can also be a new business model or a new platform or even just a new peripheral. For example...

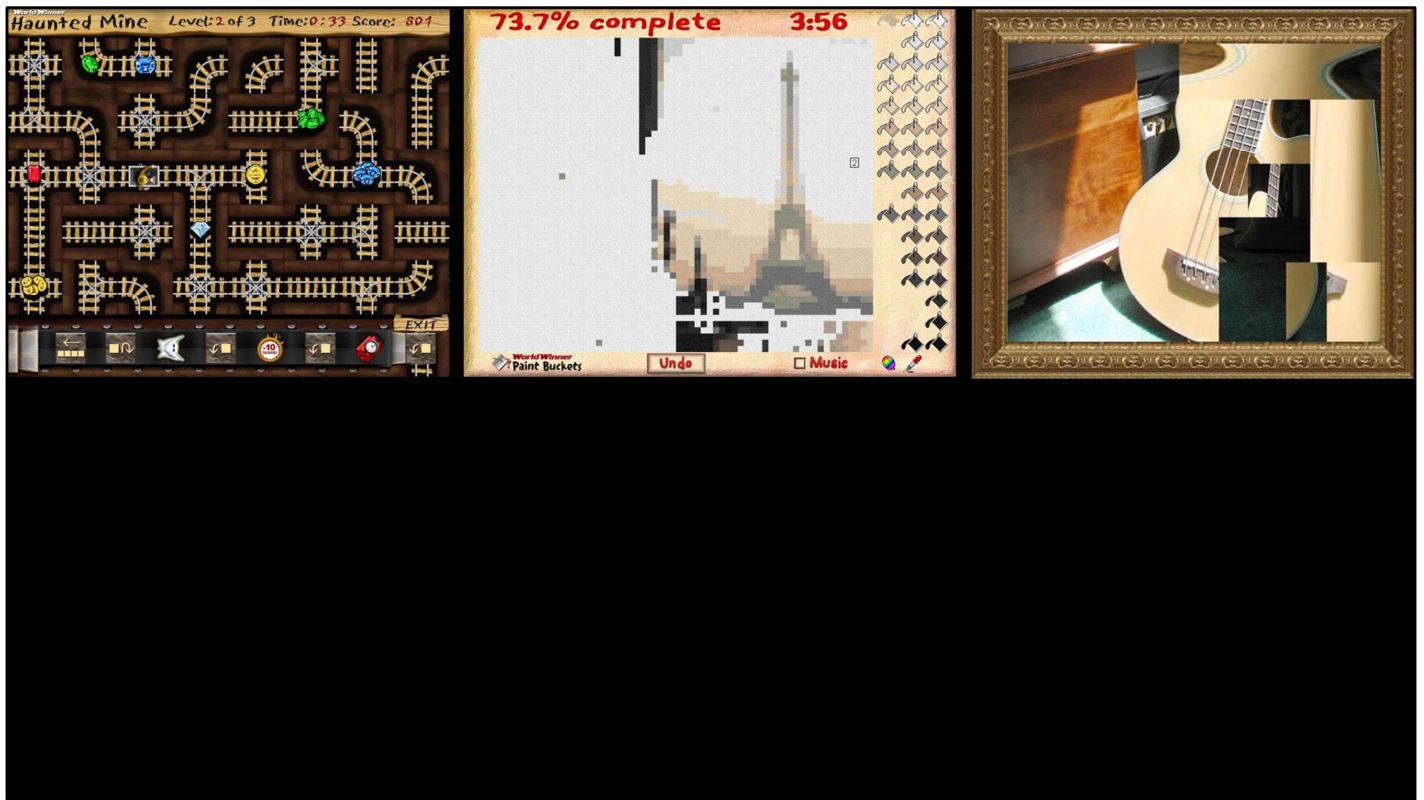
WiiSports



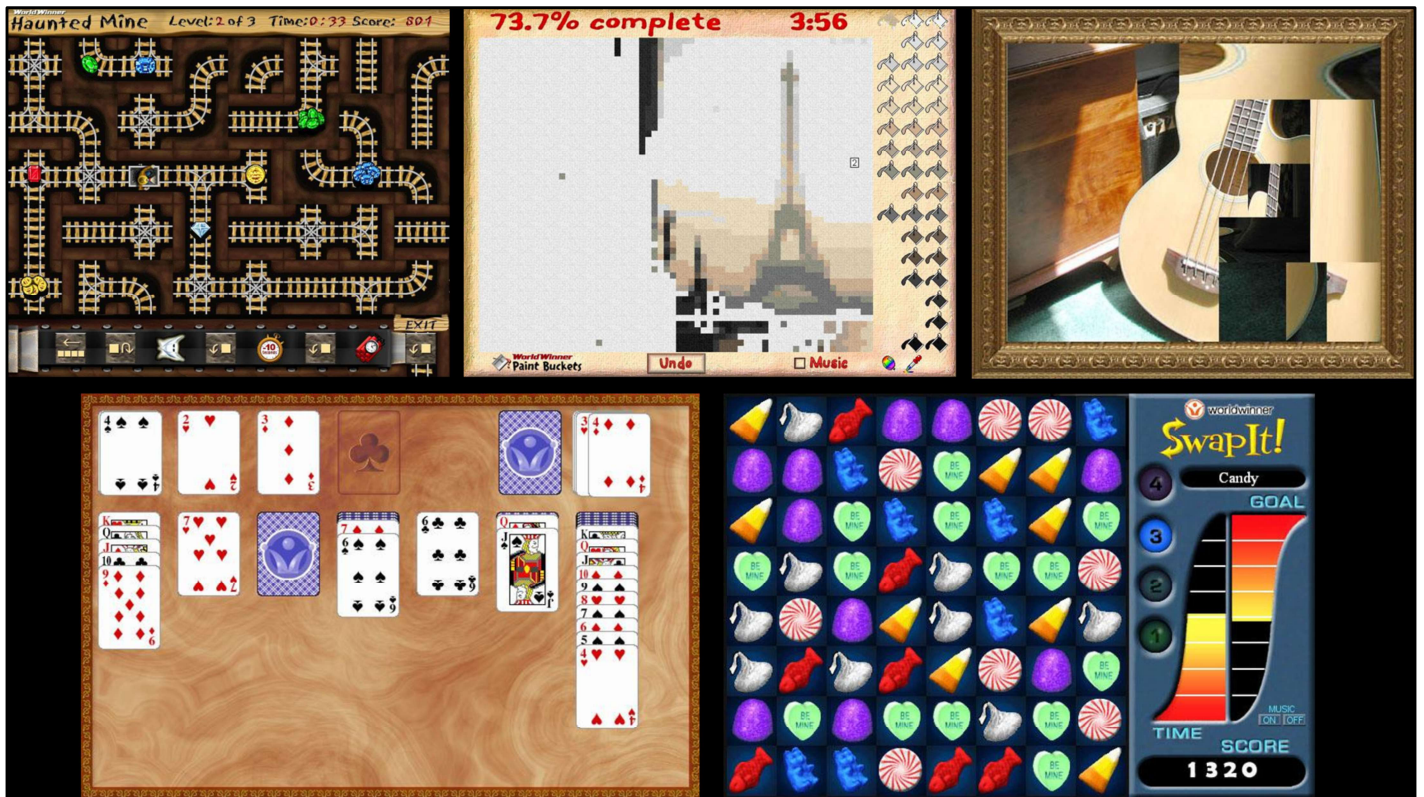
...neither sports games nor rhythm games were new. But playing Wii Sports with a Wiimote or Guitar Hero with the guitar peripheral felt astoundingly new and led to huge success.



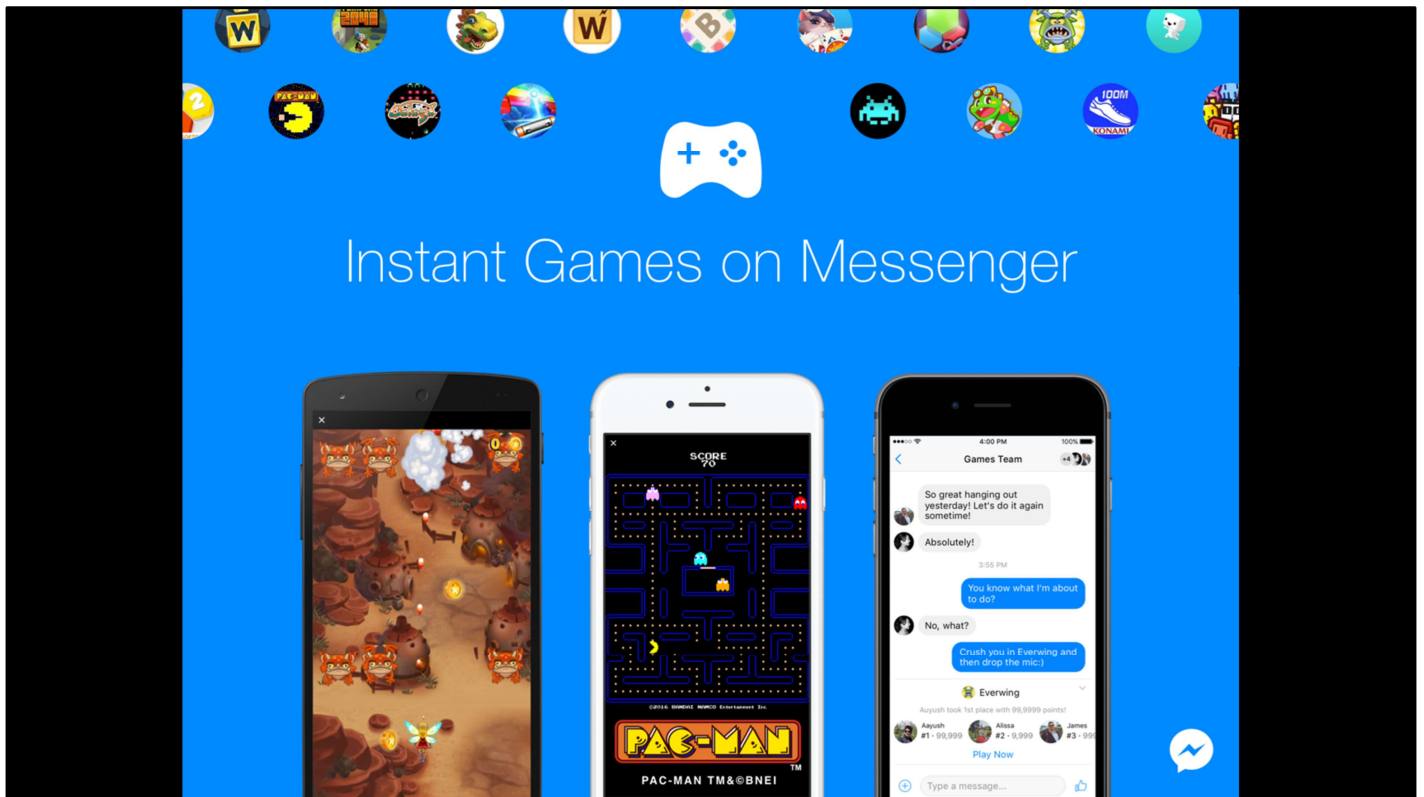
In the year 2000, I joined a startup called WorldWinner, that was launching a new way to play games, via skill-based tournaments.



We made a number of games for the platform that were both really fun and pretty innovative.



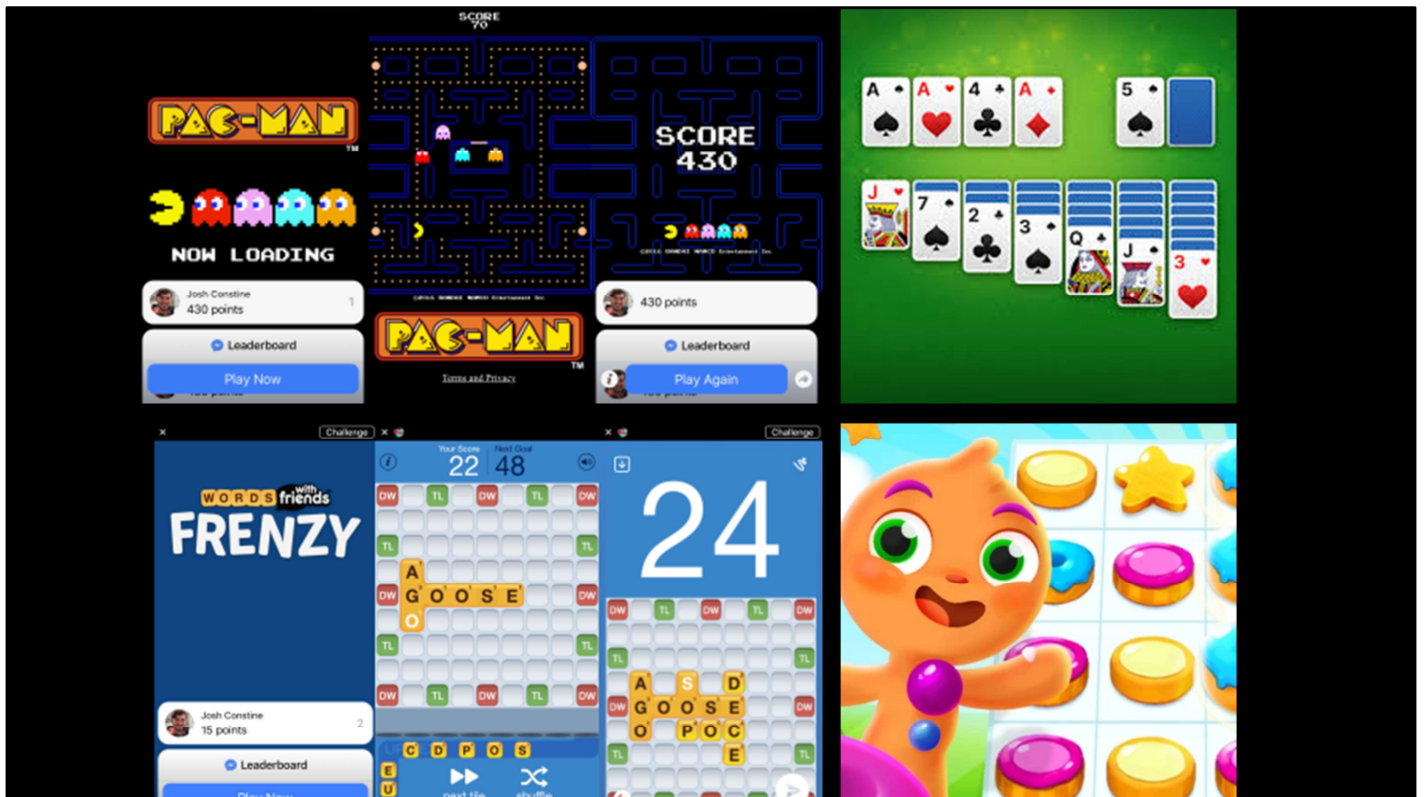
But the games that were most successful, by far, were the old familiar favorites, like Klondike Solitaire and Match-Three. The cash tournament platform was enough innovation for players ... plenty there to wrap their heads around ... they didn't want the additional overhead of having to learn new gameplay.



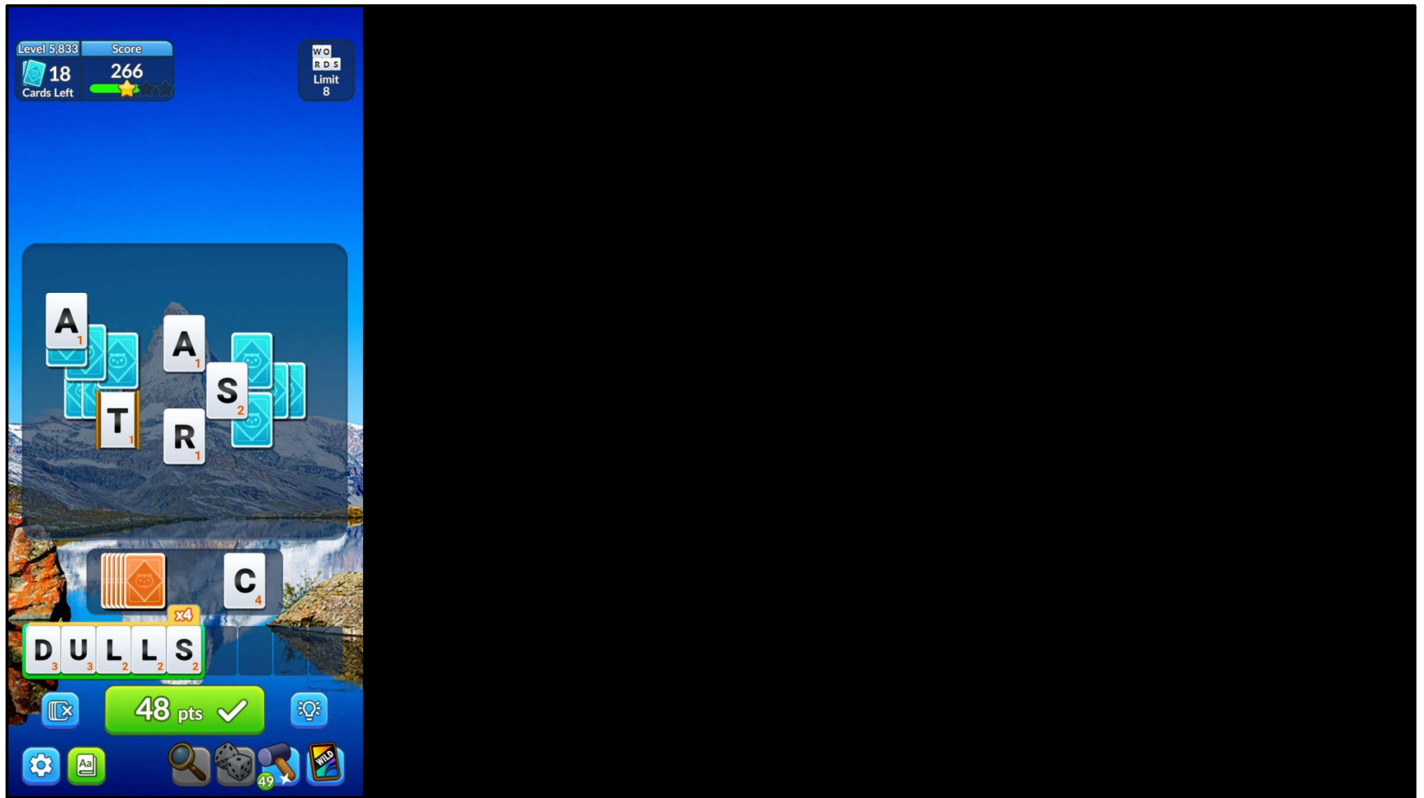
Another example. From 2016 through 2018, I led a team at King, creating games for Facebook Messenger ... Instant Games in Facebook's parlance. I thought that the socialness and easy access to your friends would be the *raison d'être* of the platform...



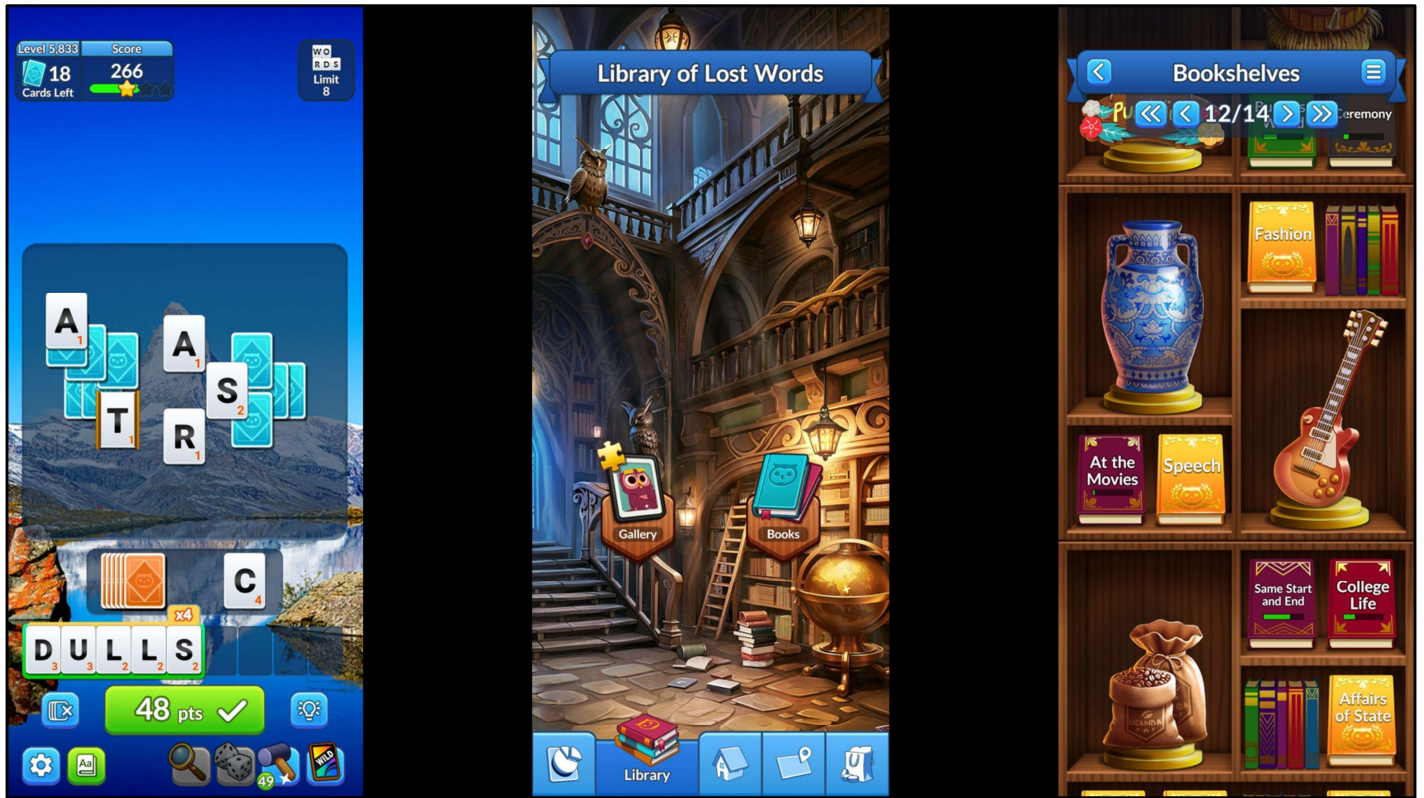
... so we created several multiplayer, very social games, such as this two-player cooperative tower defense game.



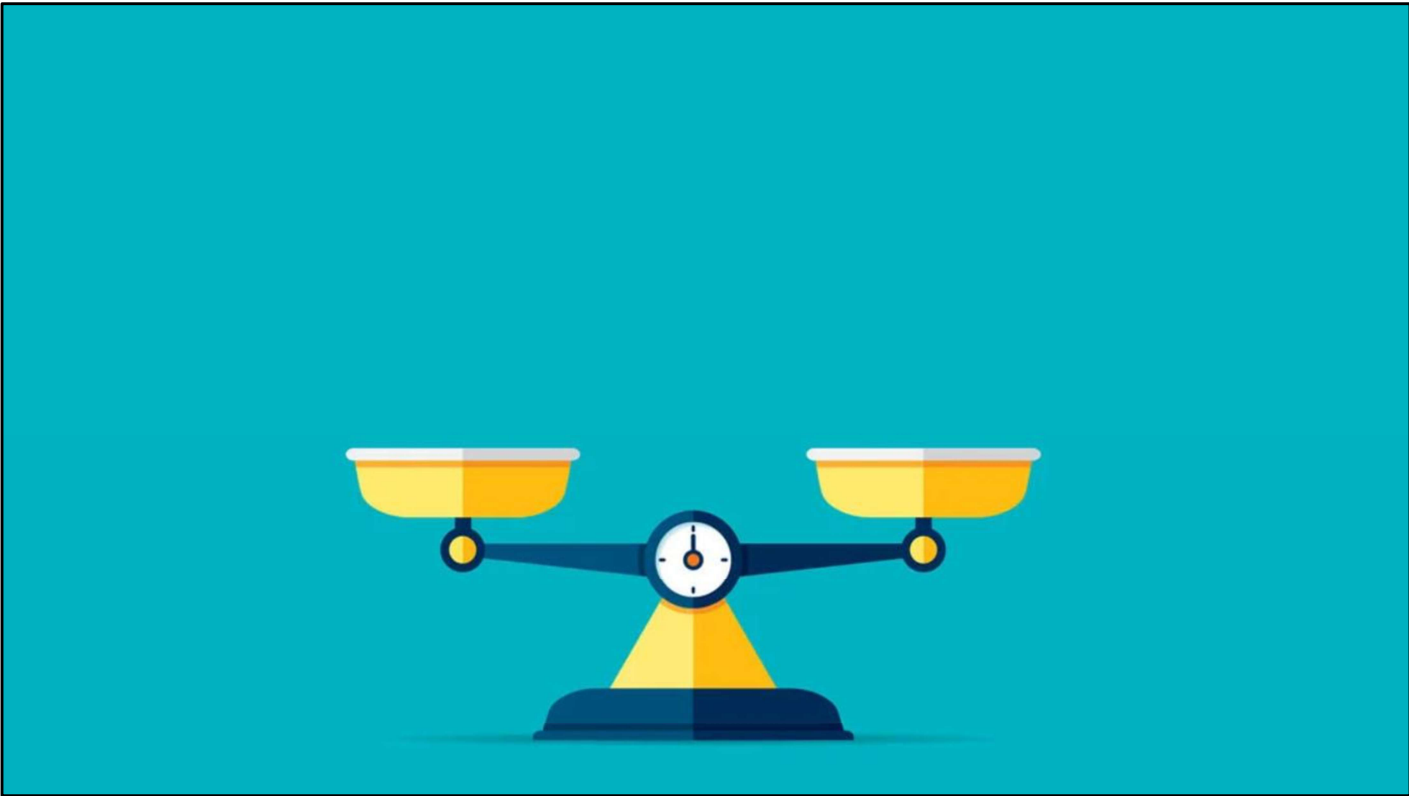
But as the months went by, it was very obvious that the games that were getting traction were basic single-player or 2-player asynch retreads ... Solitaire, Match-3, Pac-Man, Chess, Scrabble. Again, the platform itself was more than enough innovation for players, at least in those early launch days.



The game I most recently launched, for PeopleFun, is called Wordscapes Solitaire. Its core gameplay combines the tableau-clearing of solitaire with the word game mechanic of using letters to form words. My original pitch deck for the game was that it felt familiar and easy to start playing, but also felt like something new.



In addition, the meta-game involves filling books of words in the Library of Lost Words. It's basically a collection mechanic for words, a collection mechanic with literally tens of thousands of things to collect. That made the game more innovative, but also made it a little more imposing for casual players. We found during soft launch that we had to push out the introduction of the Library to later levels several times before finding the optimal spot... but that once players understood it, they loved it.

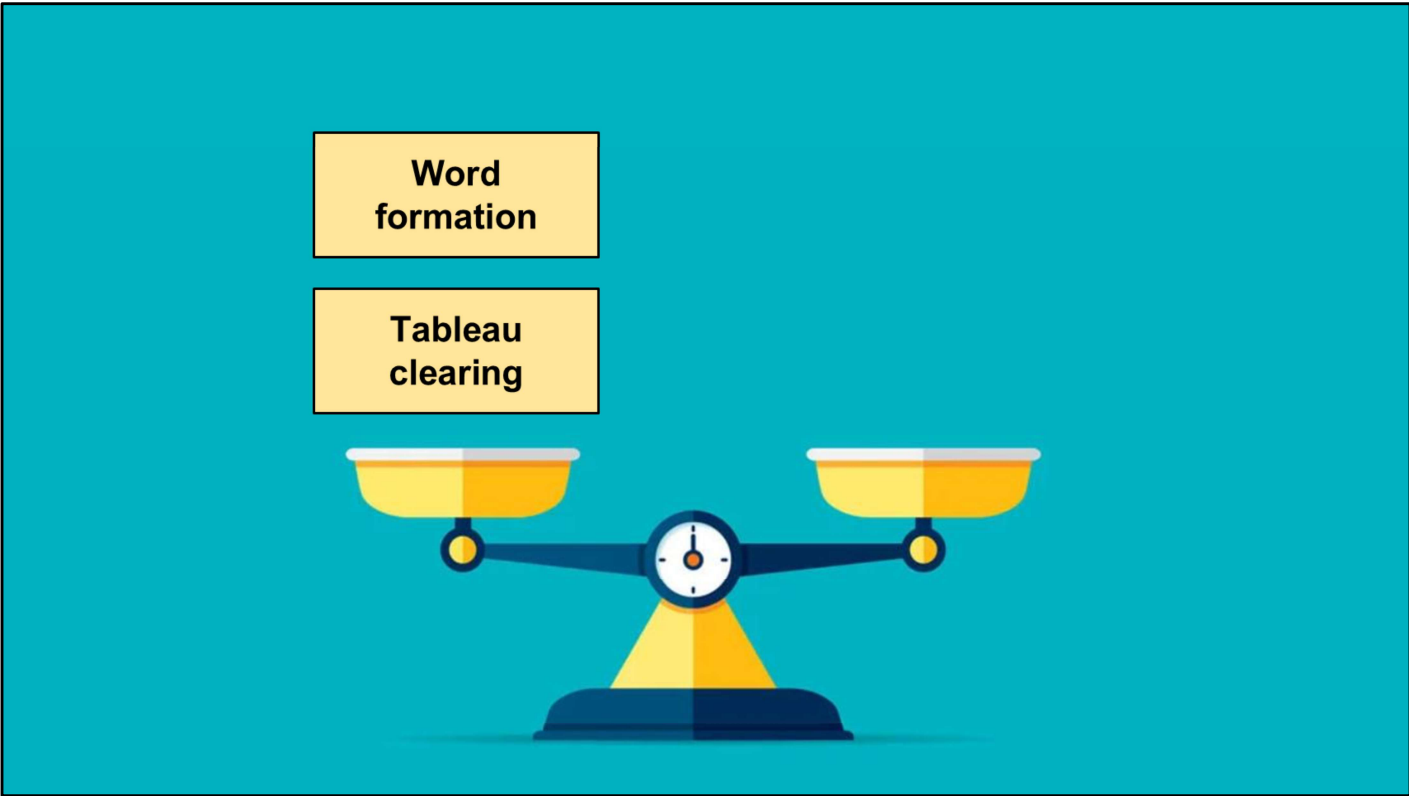


So on balance...

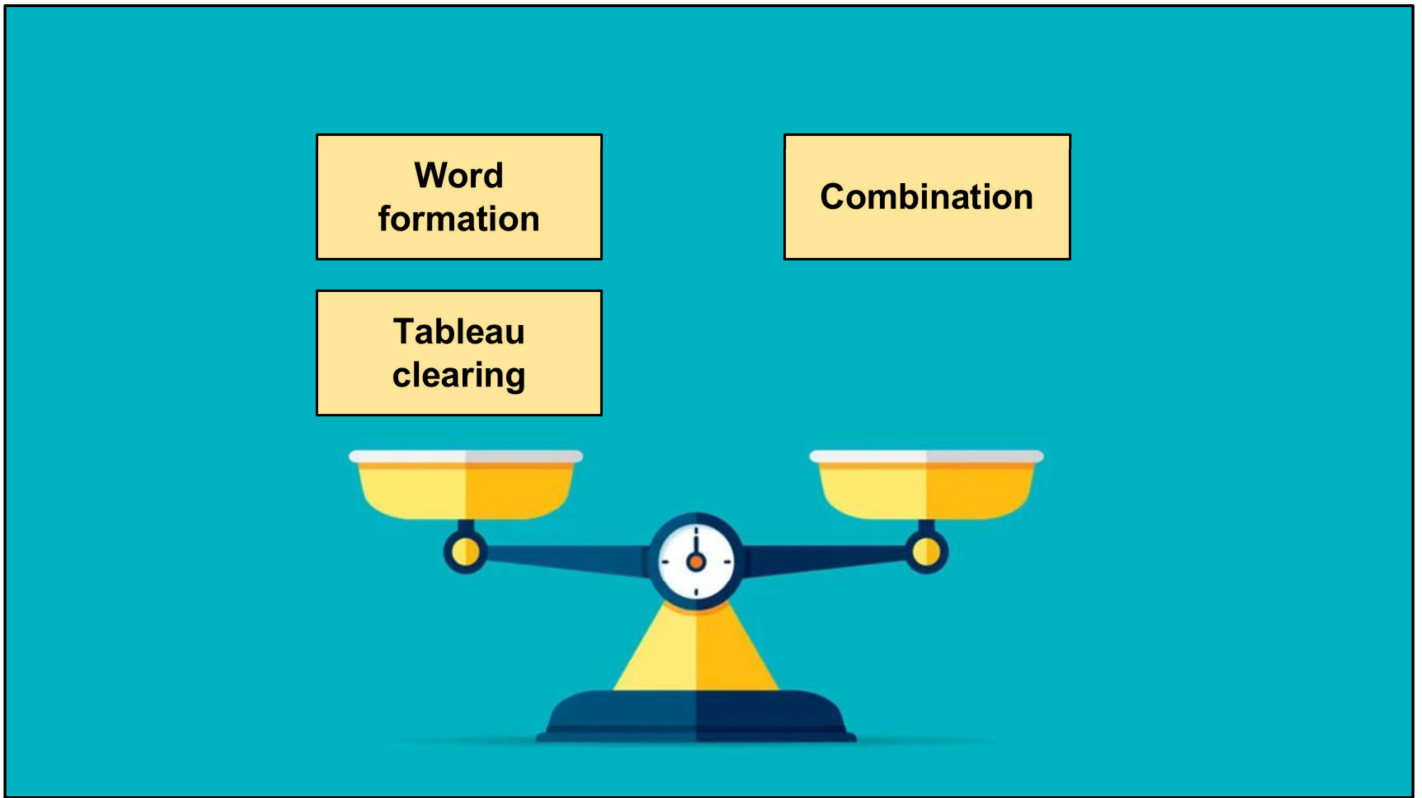
**Word
formation**



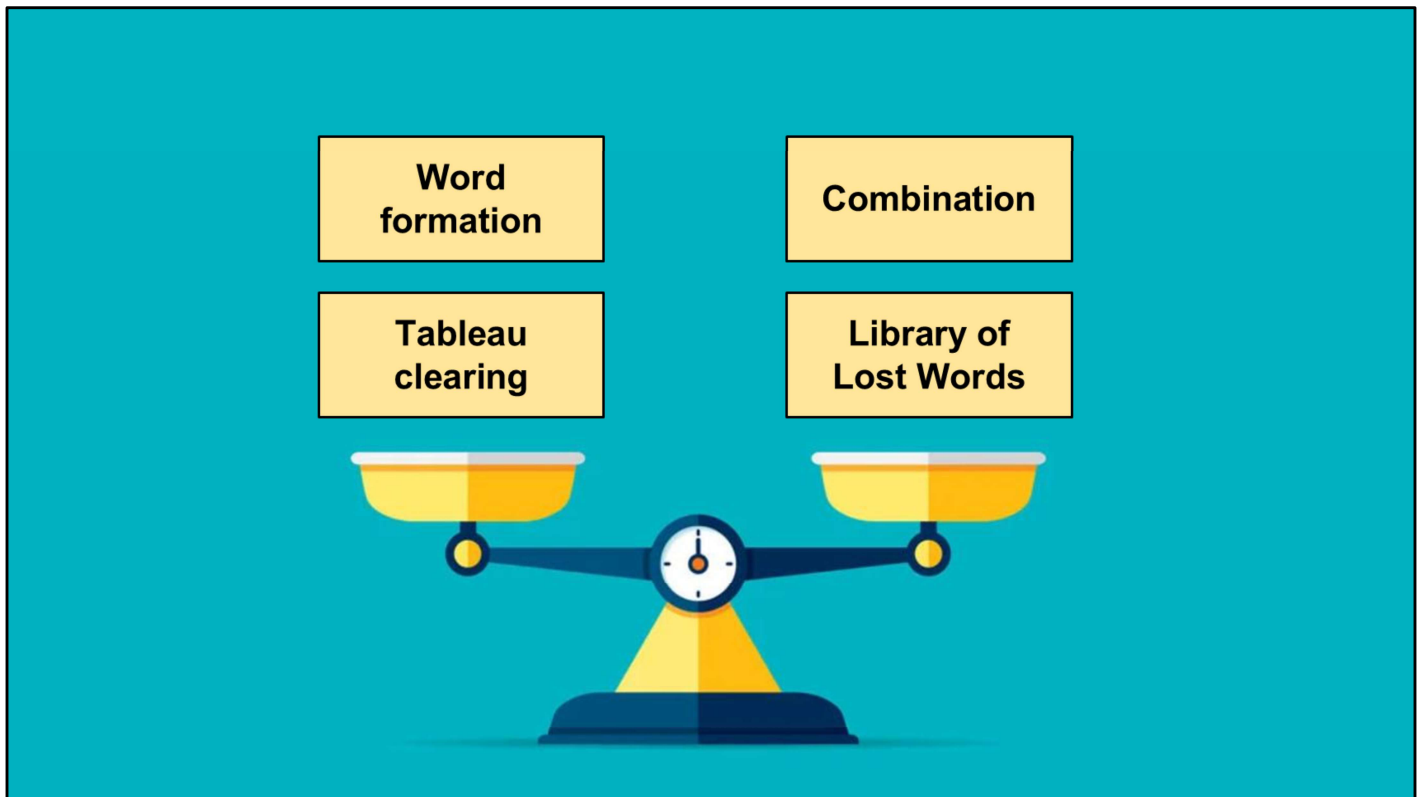
Wordscapes Solitaire had tried and true mechanics, like word formation...



...and clearing a tableau of cards, solitaire-style.



But on the innovative side of the scale, we had the combination of those two mechanics for the first time.



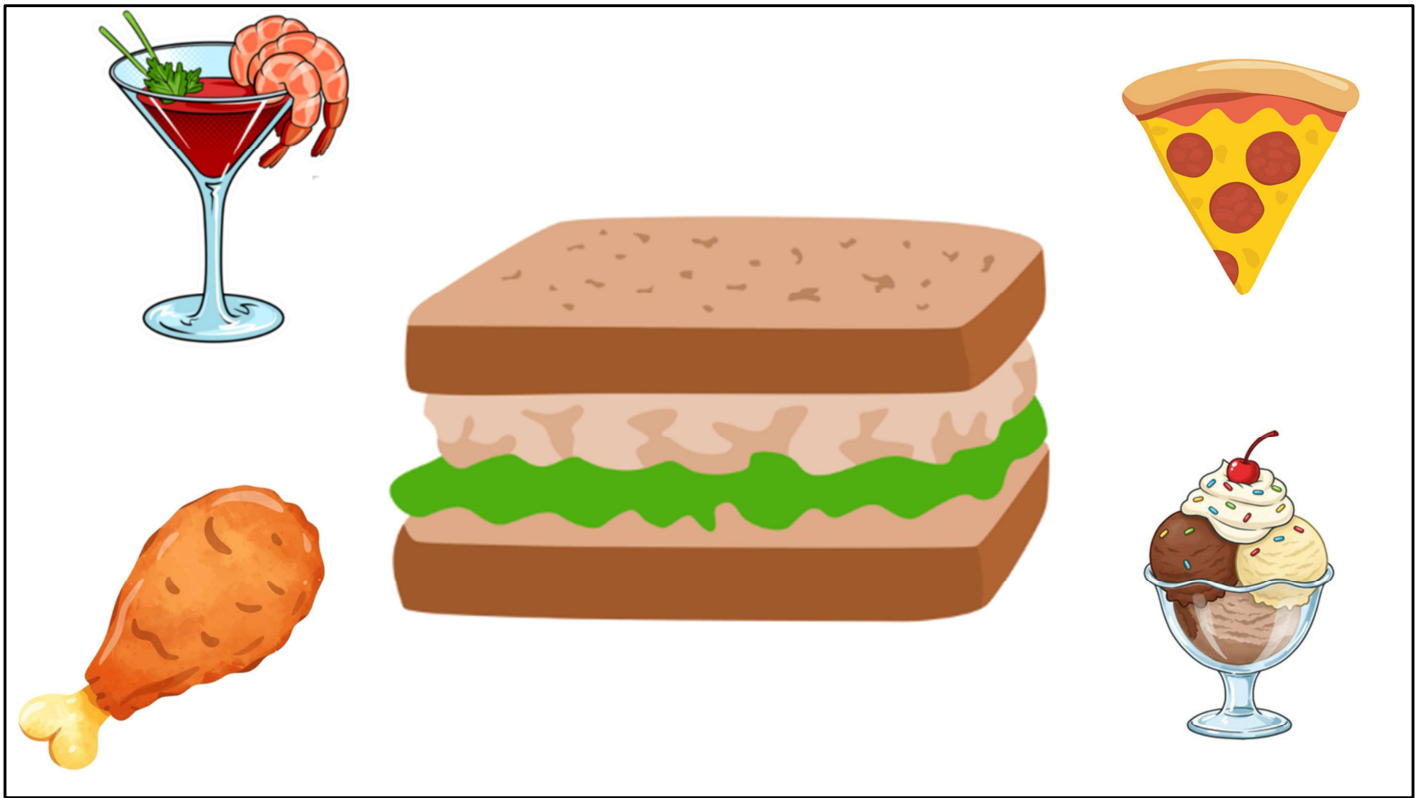
And that Library of Lost Words that I mentioned. So, where does this leave us on the question of how much innovation you can have without drowning?



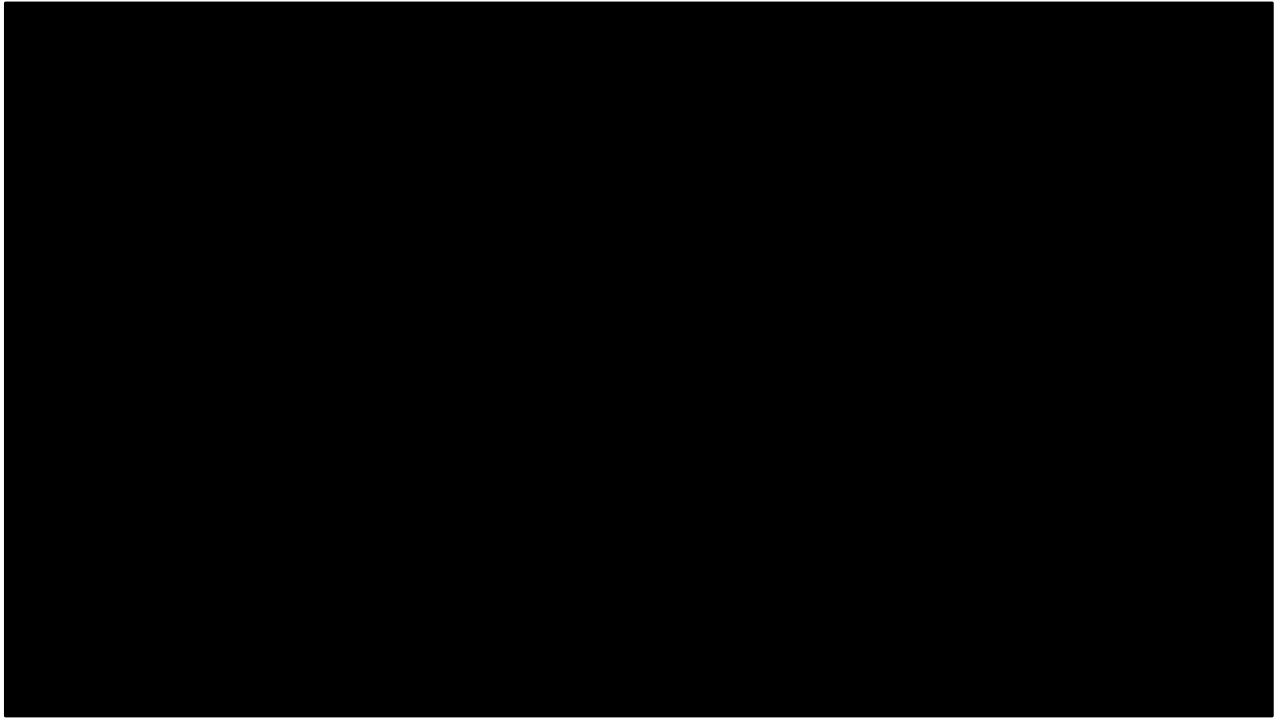
Well, I've been bar mitzvahed, both literally half a century ago, and figuratively by my decades in the game industry...

23.7%

...so I can reveal that the right amount of innovation for casual mobile puzzle games is precisely 23.7% new.



But perhaps your game *isn't* a tuna fish sandwich but something else ... in which case you'll have to figure out what the right amount of newness is before you can go swimming without getting a cramp and drowning. Thank you.



JOEL BURGESS

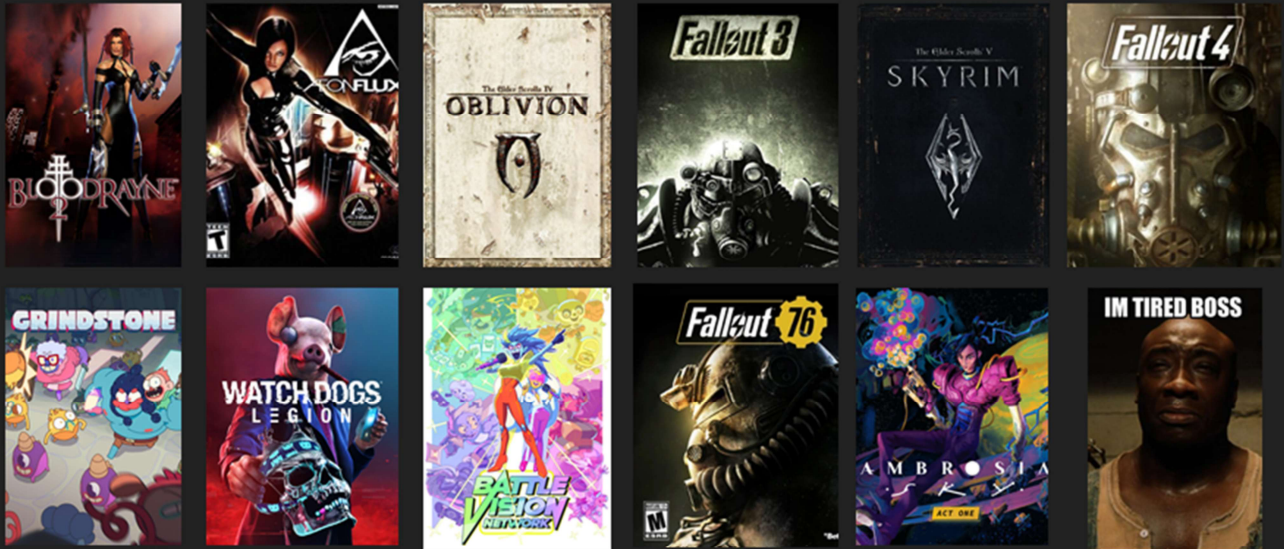
**Studio Head & Creative Director
Soft Rains**

Our next speaker has a history on huge open world classics like The Elder Scrolls Oblivion and multiple Fallouts, he also made a favorite mobile game of mine in Grindstone, and most recently shipped the sci fi cleaning immersive sim Ambrosia Sky.

And he is here to change things up and share what seems like a simple lesson, but one that I assure you we all have fallen prey to from time to time...

I give you... Joel Burgess!

I'm Joel, and I've been doing this a while



I've been at this a while! Different roles/levels. Making games is hard! Not just the HOW - but also the WHY

Here's a simple-sounding rule I've learned and tried again-and-again over a 20+ year career to actually obey as a game designer:

When making changes, pause and ask yourself: "am I making the game better, or just different?"

BETTER?
or just
DIFFERENT?

Ability to discern BETTER from DIFFERENT during the iterative process.

This seems self-evident? But like a lot of simple rules, it can have nuance and complexity

Better, or just different?

This isn't a hard-and-fast rule that gets you 5% more gigaflops.

It's a **gut-check** to critique my own judgement.

I've found this useful at all stages and levels of my career:

- In personal and IC work,
- as part of project leadership...
- and at the studio/direction level, too

Well, not exactly. Not ALWAYS. This is a rule that I try to keep in mind when I'm reviewing work that is in progress. I've found it handy as a leader, both at the studio and discipline levels - but I first learned it and often use it today as part of my personal, interior process.

Example: Bloodrayne 2 and the Heli Battle (that wasn't)



I was working on BR2, and I'd recently completed work on a major level for the game. It was my first big, commercial project, and this new level I'd been assigned was part of a climactic setpiece for the end of the adventure



I had been through an initial design documentation process and had alignment on the basics of the level sequence - but I really believed that I could juice the experience by adding a series of strafing runs by a helicopter.

This happened to coincide with a long weekend where my partner was out of town. I wound up working long days, staying after hours and ultimately slept under my desk at the office to have more time in the editor to implement my vision.

A lot of you will have already guessed the outcome of the story - the 72 hour bender of crunch didn't result in my best work.

So... how did that pan out?

The work was *Bad*

I was exhausted

My teammates had to bail me out



The work was bad.

I'd over-extended myself trying to implement an idea. I was in over my head when I attempted it, and too worn out to fix it. Not only that, my colleagues had to help cover the gaps, and I was not as creatively invested in the work I did on the level afterwards.

This is a classic example of what self-imposed crunch looks like, and why to avoid its deleterious effects on oneself, the blast radius on teammates, and games themselves.

But it also showed me early on that I needed to be more critical of my own impulses when getting excited about an idea. That level had a lot of raw material to work with when I attempted my helicopter idea - if I had instead focused my effort on making the existing rooms and hallways more engaging, and doing so in the normal flow of work (where I benefitted greatly from the feedback of my peers and leads - people I didn't have access to when scripting through bleary eyes at 4am) I'd have likely accomplished much

better work and given the game's final act a better contribution.

What did this failure teach me?

Distrust my **Discontent**

I needed to be more critical of my own impulses when getting excited about an idea.

As my career went on, I started trying to embrace this rule in a conscious way. I'm the kind of designer who gets sparks of inspiration, and - I think a lot of us are like this - gets excited and wants to try things out. That's a wonderful impulse, and great work often springs from it.

The first, more direct version of this rule was just learning to recognize this impulse, pause, and ask myself - if I make this change, will I be making the game BETTER? Or is this just going to make the game different?

1. Question the urge to change

Can you define the underlying reason to make the change?

Boredom?

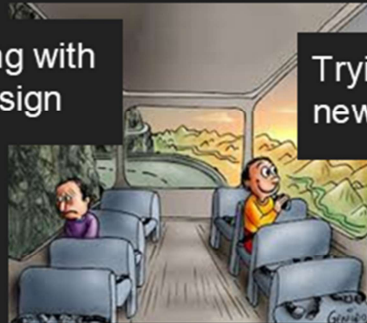
Curiosity?

Misalignment?

Ambition?

Sticking with
the design

Trying out a
new idea



Framing the question - even in a moment of pause in ones own head - pushes back against one of the most common urges that I see manifest in creative people on a long-term project. Boredom. We often just get BORED because we've worked on something for months, played it a thousand times over dozens of iterations - and we lose touch with the freshness and novelty of encountering it for the first time.

<It can also expose other root causes - this would become useful as a lead to recognize these in others, as well as myself>

2. Evaluate the change

Use critical thinking and critique to assess the change you have in mind.

There are a lot of simple, informal techniques to do this:

Pitch a peer

“Fresh Eyes” Playtest

Pitch a lead

Study another game

Timeboxed test

Check against pillars

Sleep on it

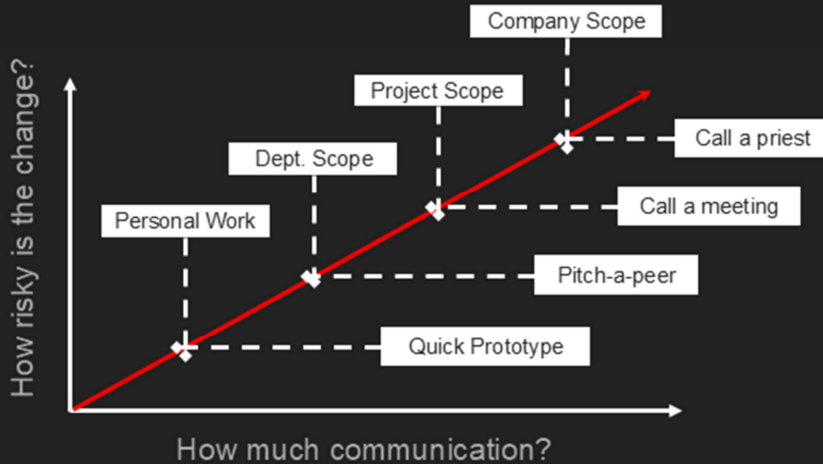
Like all subjective problems, it can be difficult to put this into a clear-cut framework.

Depending on the project and team setting, you might have access to some formalized rules. Perhaps your game has very declarative pillars to help you judge whether your imagined change will move things in a “correct” direction. Perhaps your studio has access to playtesting or other resources, which you can use when making significant changes.

3. Escalate the idea appropriately

Think about the potential impact on other people and their work.

More blast radius = more rigor needed before experimenting.



But some changes put more at stake than a few days of personal effort. This thinking scales all the way from personal iteration on an hour-by-hour level to project and company thinking at a months-and-years scale. But the rigor needs to change.

4. Judge the work: is it Better?

Let' apply a classic Sid Meier rule:

"Double it or cut it in half"

Original context: design balance & tuning

Here: Using **vibes** to make a judgement call

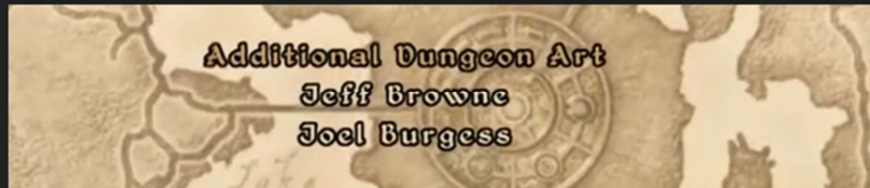
Is your change fussy and incremental?

Or does it meaningfully improve the game?



Sid Meier's quote here is about tuning, but I think it applies to subjective debates like "is this going to be better" where you lack the clarity of measurement. If you feel the change is a few percentage points "better", that's probably not a strong enough impulse. If you (and colleagues) feel this is going to meaningfully improve the game, then it's far easier to justify the risk and time

Example: Oblivion Dungeons



Towards the end of production on TESIV, I had a chip on my shoulder.

I was really not enthused about the way I'd been asked to implement dungeons, and felt there were some techniques that could dramatically improve the experiences we could make. But they were more time-consuming than existing metrics permitted, and some of the tools I wanted to use required stepping on toes of other disciplines who normally used those tools exclusively.



A lot of this personal hypothesis was based in work that I'd done on my own, but I wanted to take a bigger swing, and make a meaningfully project-affecting change by overhauling a handful of dungeons near the beginning of the game, to hopefully make a better first impression on players.

But rather than attempt to sneak this change in, I enlisted a colleague and approached our studio head with a proposal - give us a set number of days to attempt this overhaul, and agree to back the changes out entirely if they weren't up to snuff.

This time, change paid off

We welcomed scrutiny & achieved consensus on a new approach to level design

This paved the way for a multi-project evolution of our entire department



This brought more scrutiny upon the levels in question - and put more pressure on myself and Jeff to do a good job - but ultimately it paid off. We reached a consensus that the changed dungeons were an improvement.

This gave us the confidence to expand our toolset during DLC, and ultimately we overhauled the entire dungeon creation process for F3, which set the course for building a new team that would persist for TESV and F4 as well.

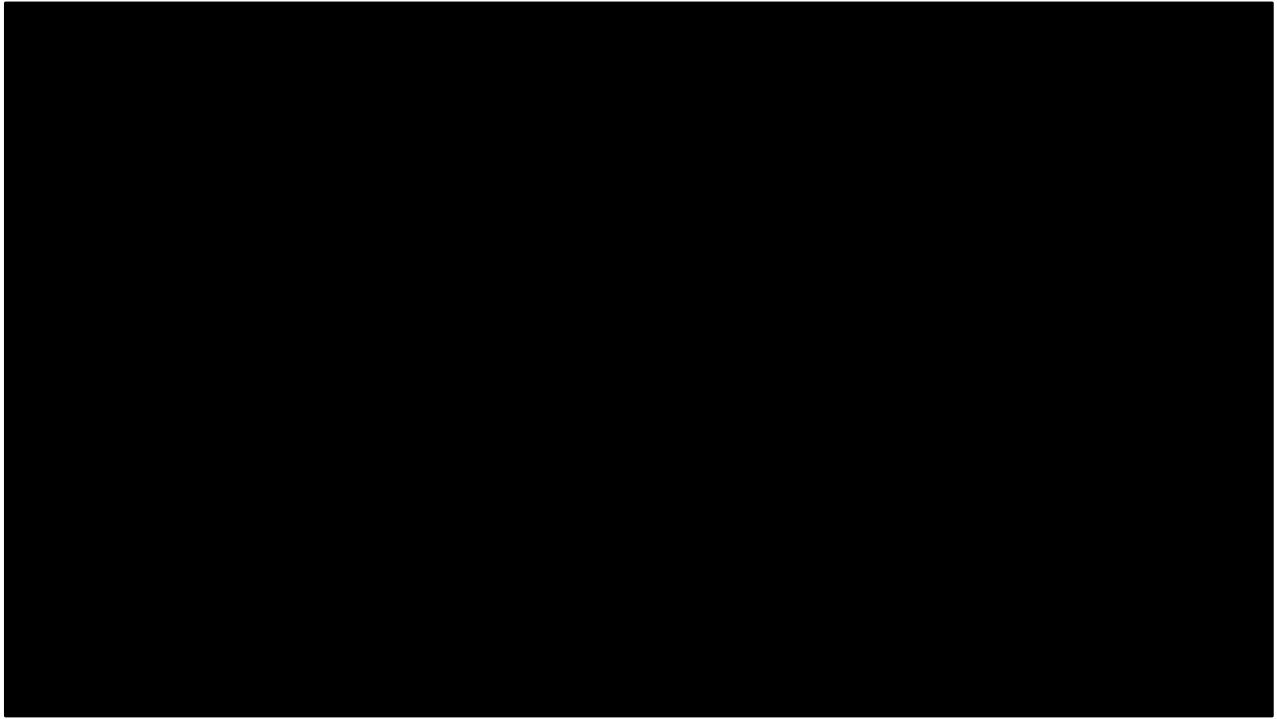
This rule is about critical thinking

Game design is a process of creation, self-doubt, improvement, and learning.

So is your design process! So ask yourself how to strive for better (not just different.)

Thank you!





ASHLEY RUHL

**Narrative Director
Broadsword Online Games**

Our next speaker is the Narrative Director on the long-running massively multiplayer online game "Star Wars: The Old Republic". She's also got experience everywhere from BioWare to Telltale Games.

And we had a pre talk discussion about how exactly I should introduce her and I just want to say if there is one ruhl you need to hear about it is our next speaker.... Ashley Ruhl!

ASHLEY RUHL

**Narrative Director
Broadsword Online Games**

My name is Ashley Ruhl, I'm the Narrative Director on Star Wars the Old Republic at Broadsword Online Games. I've been working in varying facets of game narrative for 15 years, from BioWare to Telltale and now Broadsword, and primarily in game narratives that give the player story choices. So...

Create Choices That Matter

Today I want to talk about everyone's favorite narrative topic, how to create choices that matter. But specifically, I want to talk about...

Create “Fake” Choices That Matter

... how to create “fake” choices that matter, the choices we put in games that don’t change the story, don’t branch the content, and on the surface may seem unnecessary in an interactive experience. But, these “fake” choices can still be emotionally impactful, and an important part of an interactive story.



The topic of how “Choices Matter” in games is often a highly contentious one online. The most rigid definition of “Choices Matter” is interpreted as “The game changes significantly when I pick a choice”, with differences in dialogue, cinematics, and game state. Obviously these types of headlines are intended to be click-baity and inflammatory, but the question remains: what is the purpose of a choice in a game if the game doesn’t change? Can “fake” choices matter? Short answer: yes. Longer answer, we need to broaden the definition of a choice “mattering”.

Choices Matter if they feel meaningful in the moment that you make them

Choices Matter if they feel meaningful in the moment that you make them. When you were offered the choice, when you made a decision, when you saw the result, did it feel important? Did you feel immersed in the story?

Choices that have no impact on the game state can have just as much emotional depth as a choice that branches the game state. But to make them matter, we need to not only follow the same rules that make branching choices impactful, but also understand the best use cases for “fake” choices.

Real choice

Fake choice

Let's ditch "real" vs "fake" choice, and instead...

~~Real choice~~

~~Fake choice~~

Let's ditch "real" vs "fake" choice, and instead...

Diverging choice

Illusion choice

...talk about diverging vs illusion choices.

A diverging choice is a narrative choice that dramatically branches the state of the game.

An illusion choice presents itself as a choice, but ultimately doesn't change the state of the game.

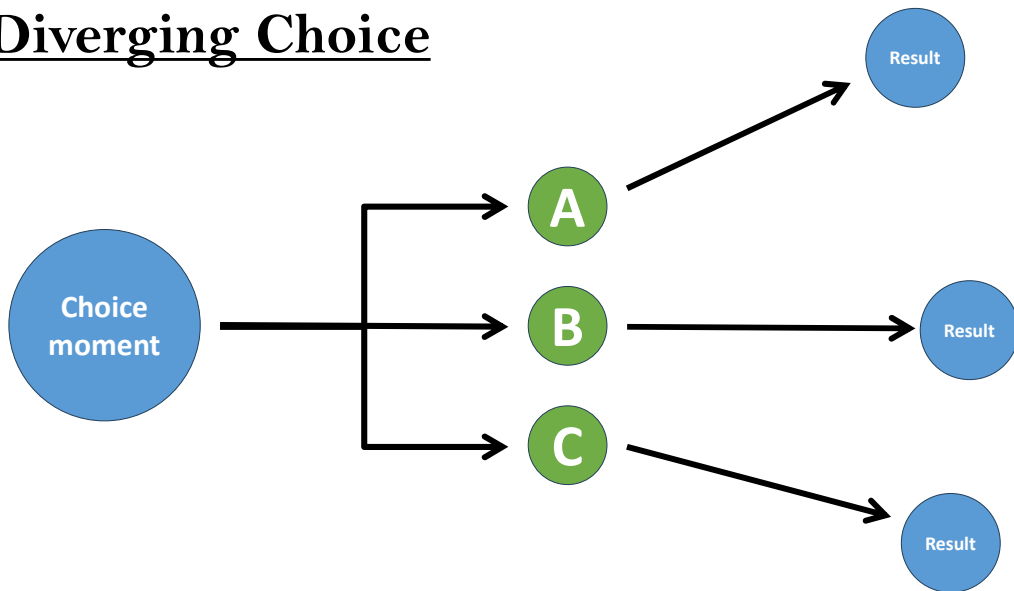
Great game stories have a mix of both types, as well as types between these categories.



There are moments where diverging choices feel good to have in a game's story. Moments that define a major theme of the game, force you to make impossible decisions about characters you care about, or face consequences for the faction you've aligned yourself with. In these instances, big choices feel like they need to be branched to respect the player's intent of the choice.

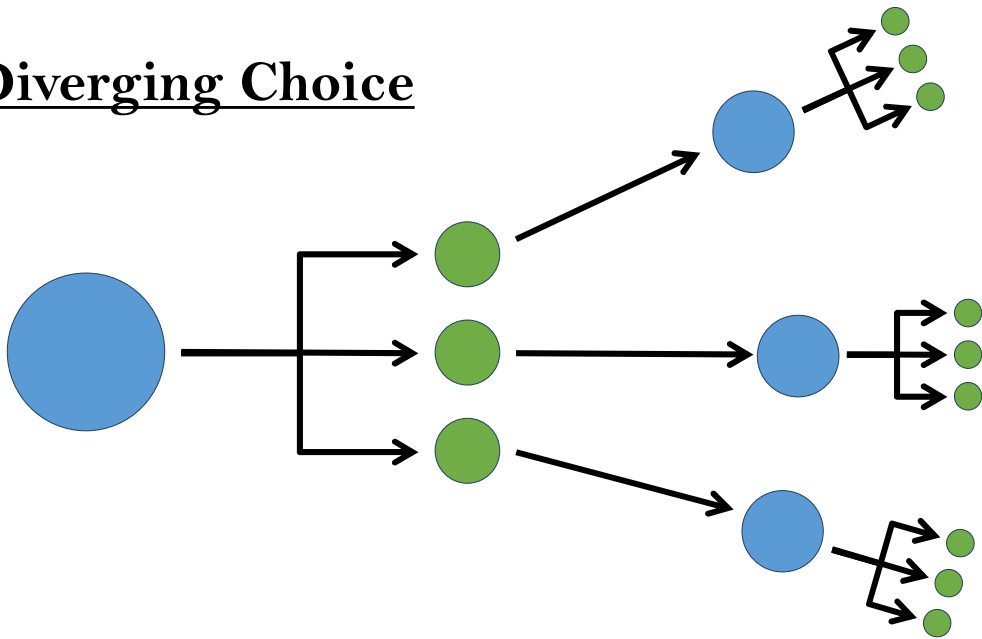
Notes: Examples listed here are Baldur's Gate 3, Mass Effect, Fallout 3

Diverging Choice



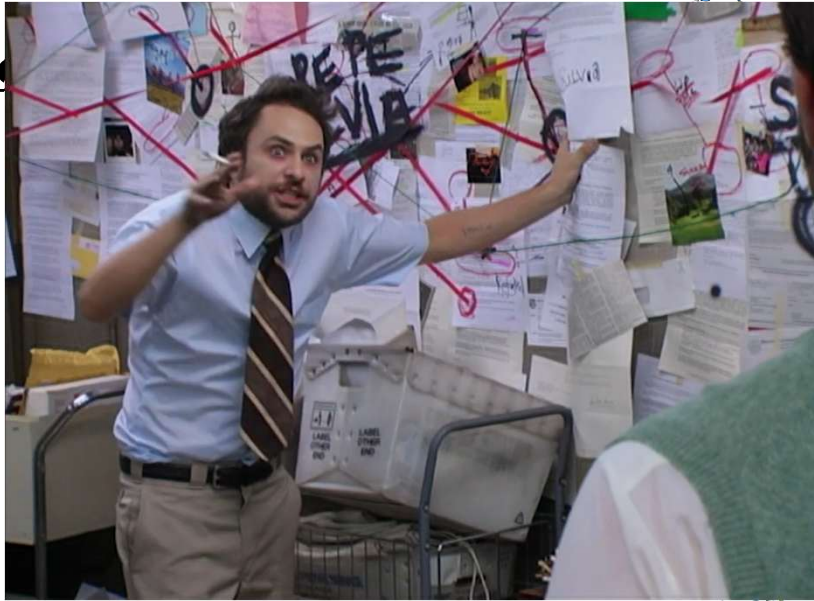
Diverging choices branch the outcome of a choice, affecting all the content after it. Here we see 3 options that lead to 3 different outcomes. But if taken to an extreme...

Diverging Choice



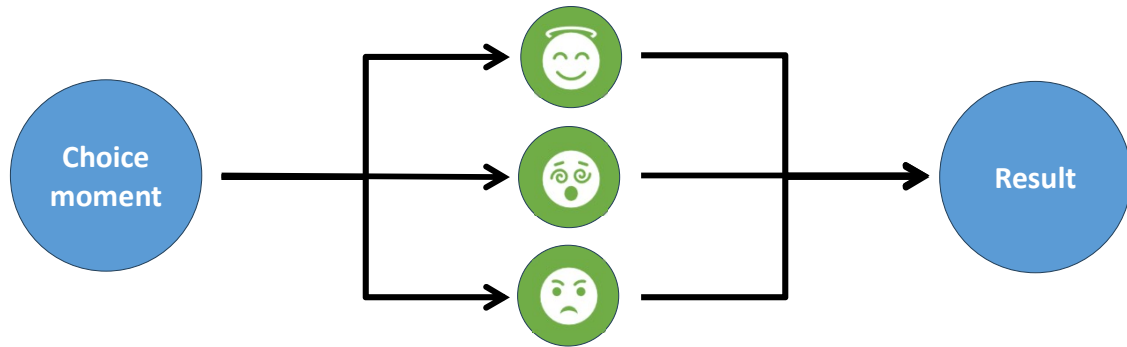
... that exponentially increases the amount of content for each narrative beat...

Dive



... and eventually leaves your narrative and scripting teams in a harrowing mind prison of alternate realities trying to keep everything straight. This exact type of branching is an exaggeration, but it is to say that overusing diverging choices can create headaches down the line for content management and documentation.

Illusion Choice



Illusion choices in contrast have minimal effect on the game state. The illusion choice usually includes different immediate reactions, but the game state resolves in the same place narratively for all choices. On the surface this can feel antithetical to an interactive experience, but I argue that how we present the illusion choice, from setup to decision to reaction, can make it an impactful part of the interactive experience.

Choices in game narrative are not just about branching content. They're about connecting with the player's perception of the story.

Game narrative is a dialogue between the developer and the player

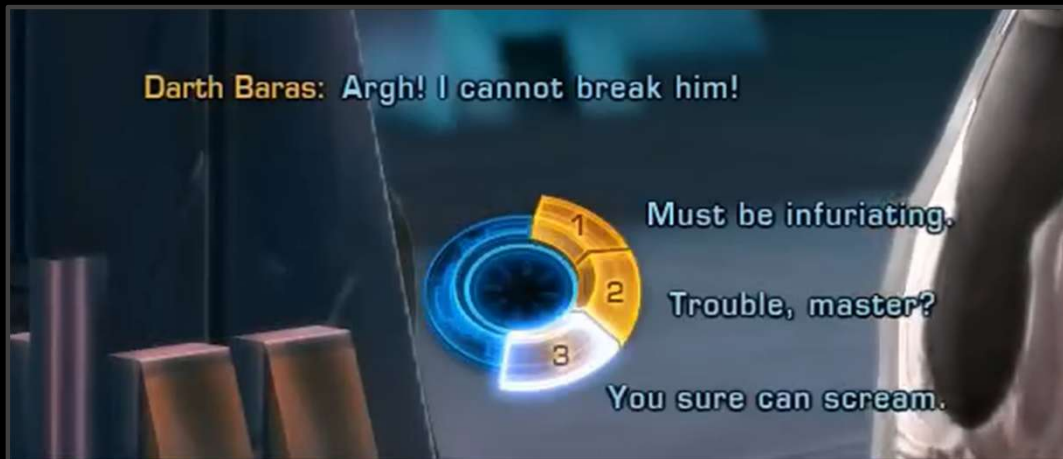
At its best, **game narrative is a dialogue between the developer and the player**, each a storyteller with a perspective in the story. A choice asks the player to reflect, creating questions of what each result might mean for their experience. The act of making the choice impacts the player's perspective of the story.

Illusion choices are impactful because they leave the interpretation of "what has changed" to the player's discretion and imagination. However, the game's story needs to create that space for the player to do so.

Use Cases for Illusion Choices

So let's briefly talk about use cases for illusion choices and how they're presented to the player.

Illusion Choices for Roleplay



Sometimes if players know a choice is an illusion choice, it gives them permission to experiment in roleplay. Through expectation-setting in narrative systems, the player will get a sense of which choices are just there for “flavor”, aka illusion choices.

Roleplay illusion choices don’t branch the game state; they’re more like improv prompts for the player to define what that choice says about their character. This gives the player permission to experiment more with their roleplay. If the player believes that every choice is capital “I” Important to the game state, they are less likely to diverge from any path that doesn’t feel like “winning”.

The moment of reflection for the player is the point, not the change to the game state. These reflections often lead to the

player being MORE invested in the story, because they've been given space to better define their unique character within the game world.

Diverging or Illusion?



Obscuring if a choice is divergent or illusion can create a stronger connection to the story.

Often after an important choice in a Telltale game, the text "[Character will remember that]" appears on screen. The assumption is that the game is logging the player's choices and storing them as delayed conditionals. But that isn't always the case. *Some* "remember that" choices are delayed conditionals, and *some* are illusion choices. But the "character will remember that" text and the system notification encourages the player to reflect on what "remembering" means. The game is saying to the player "pay attention, this choice is important". It assigns value to the story moment in the player's mind, who will now look for ways that this choice is affecting the story down the

line.

Subvert Diverging Choice Systems



Very rarely, having an illusion choice within a diverging choice system can create powerful moments.

In Mass Effect's paragon/renegade "interrupt" system, a flashing indicator lets the player know they can make a diverging choice in the conversation, like punching the subject of an interrogation, or stopping an ally from making a decision that they'll regret.

This system is meant to change the story in meaningful ways, so an illusion choice here could feel cheap... unless it's subverting the narrative system itself.

Subvert Diverging Choice Systems



In Mass Effect 3, a paragon interrupt appears to save a companion from falling off a cliff. In this moment, the player believes the interrupt will be a diverging choice, that the interrupt action will save her... but the companion still falls.

This is an illusion choice that subverts the player's expectations of the narrative system. It's telling a story of inevitable loss, saying "You can try to do the right thing and still lose." The fact that the choice is offered in a moment that the player has no agency is what makes it a powerful message.

Oops All Illusion Choices



What if... every choice was an illusion choice?

I couldn't talk about illusion choices without discussing one of my favorite narrative experiences, Kentucky Route Zero. This is a game where you're given dozens of choices that do not have a systemic impact on the game. There are no big choices change the course of the story. But what changes is the player's perception of the story.

Oops All Illusion Choices



Rather than using dialogue choices to branch the story, the choices create varied lenses to view the characters and events. What Conway names (or doesn't name) the dog that follows him, or his perspectives on the antiques company, are not going to change how the story ends. But the choices that the player makes change how they see Conway.

By offering the player questions through dialogue choices, and leaving the answers to player interpretation, the game builds a unique version of the story in the player's head without branching any of the story itself.

Blank Spaces and Headcanons



Illusion choices pair well with blank spaces in the story that the developer leaves to the player to define. In *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, the player begins with an archetypal role that motivates a particular tone to the story (a marauding Sith, an adventurous smuggler, etc). Dialogue choices are also defined by these archetypes, and they focus on who the character is *now*, rather than how they got to this point. This framework leads the player to ask, “why would my character with this strong archetype make this choice?”, naturally guiding them to support or subvert the archetype with their own motivations and backstory, or “headcanons”.

After playing a character for a while, instead of, “I’m playing a bounty hunter”, a player instead describes it as, “My character is

a gun-for-hire who's been down on her luck, she was betrayed by her best friend so she's emotionally closed off but secretly a big softie, so when someone kind comes along with a big opportunity, she's wary but hopeful of the change this could bring..." etc.

The choices presented in the game - many of them illusion choices - inspire reflection. And the game in no way needs to keep track of that headcanon, it just needs to leave room for it to exist.

Conclusion

- Illusion and diverging choices are both in the narrative toolbox
- Narrative systems assign value to illusion choices
- Illusion choices must leave space for player interpretation

Illusion choices are not more effective than divergent choices, or vice versa. They are tools in the narrative toolbox that should be used side-by-side, catalysts to help the player contextualize their role in the story.

Narrative systems can set expectations of what choices are important to the story, including illusion choices. How the choice is framed and presented is what gives it value to the player.

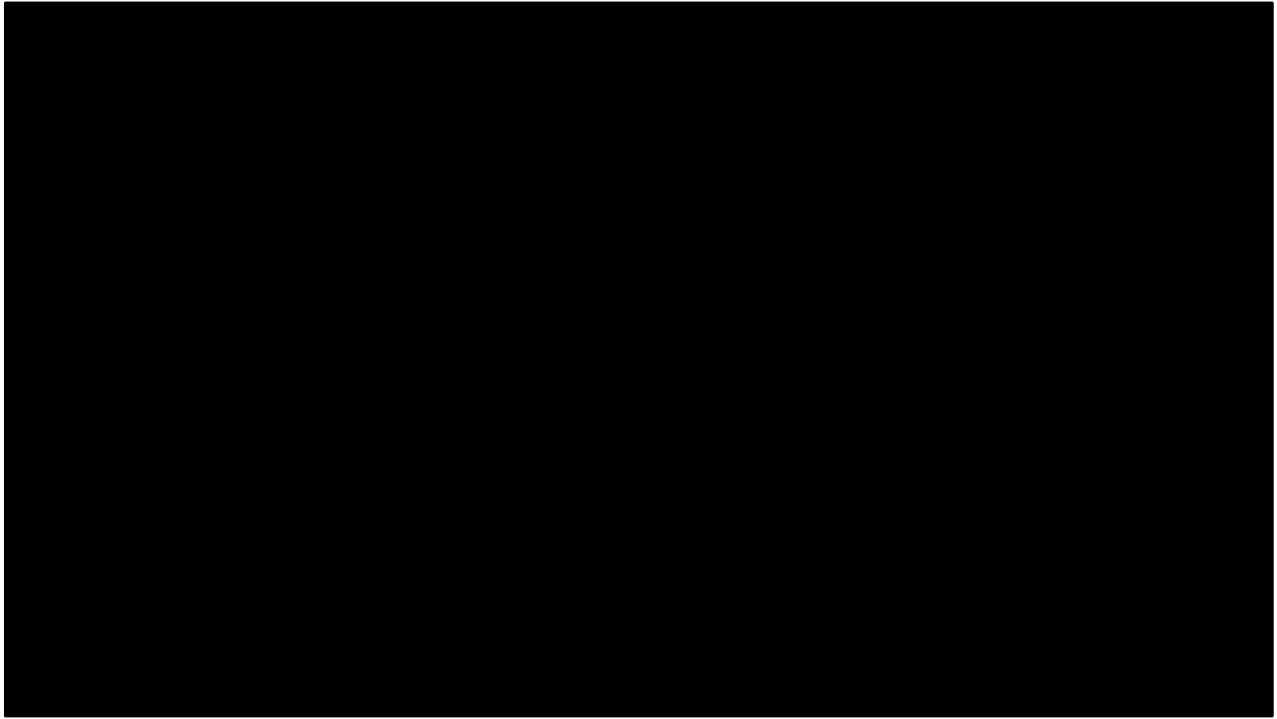
Game narrative is a dialogue between the developer and the player. For illusion choices to be effective, they must leave space for the player to create their own story within the game's story.

And finally, in regards to diverging and illusion choices.

“Choices Matter”
if they feel meaningful in the
moment that you make them

Thanks!

Ashley Ruhl
Narrative Director
Broadsword Online Games
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XALAVIER NELSON Jr.

Studio Head
Strange Scaffold

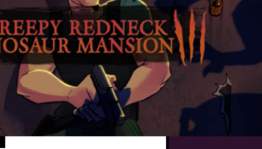
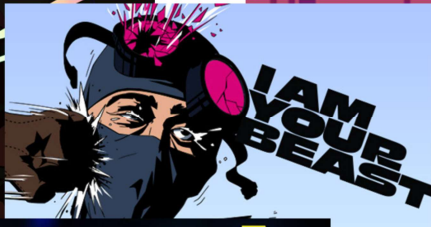
And our last speaker doesn't just make the most engaging content on social media, he's also staying busy on games from I am Your Beast to Hypnospace Outlaw to El Paso Elsewhere to Space Warlord Baby Trading Simulator.

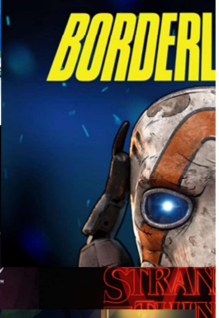
And he's here to share a rule that goes to the core of what we are making for players...

Xalavier Nelson Jr!

Xalavier Nelson Jr.

Studio Head,
Lead Designer,
Ex-PC Gamer Columnist,
Comic Writer,
More Stuff, Somehow





Home > Film > News Apr 22, 2024 9:30am PT

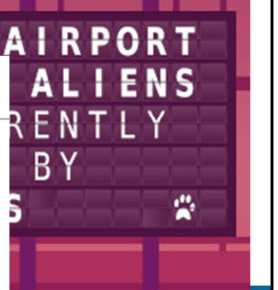
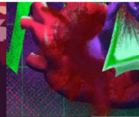
'El Paso, Elsewhere' Film Adaptation in the Works With LaKeith Stanfield in Talks to Star

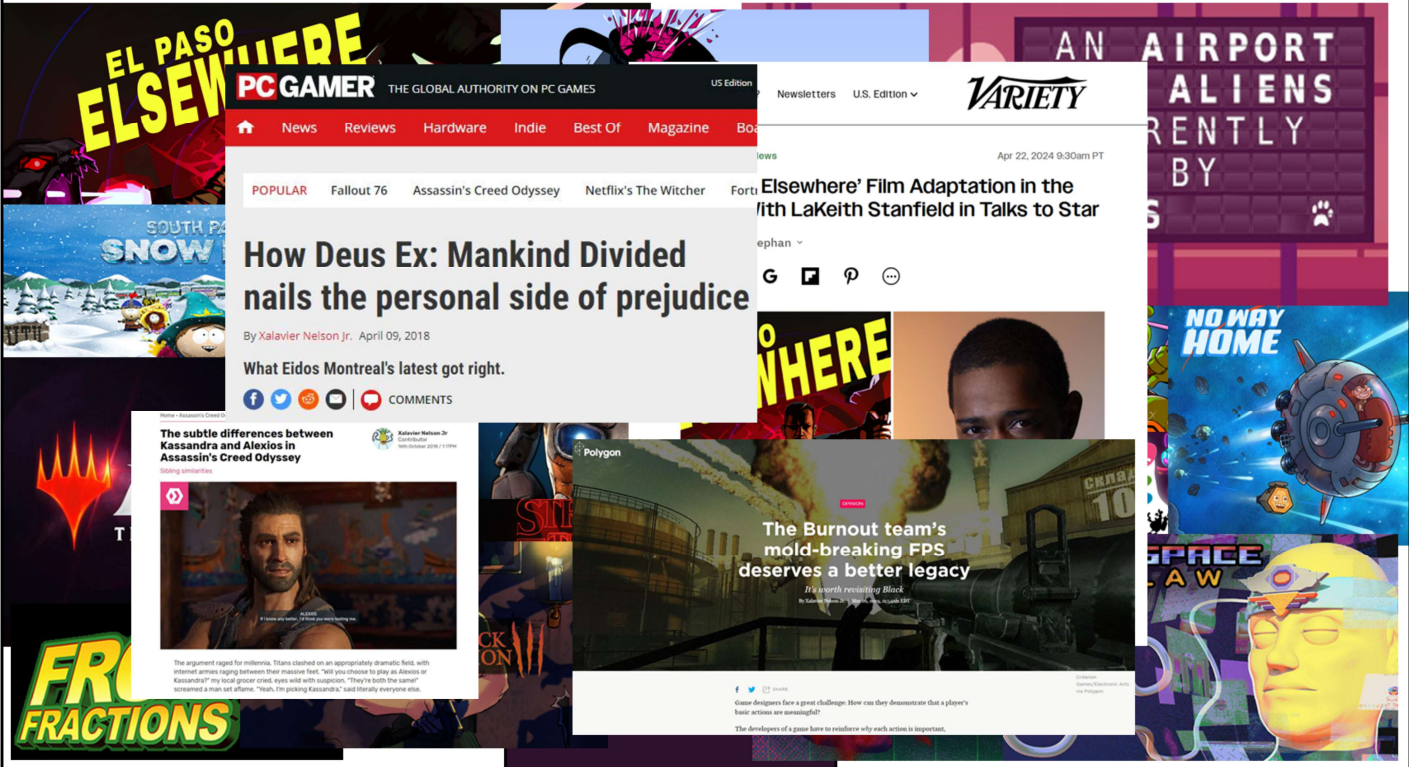
By Katcy Stephan

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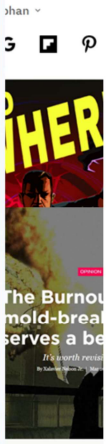


THE GLOBAL AUTHORITY ON PC GAMES US Edition

NEWSLETTERS U.S. Edition VARIETY Apr 22, 2024 9:30am PT



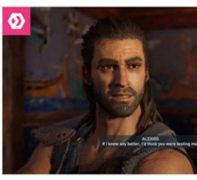
Elsewhere' Film Adaptation in the th LaKeith Stanfield in Talks to Star




Ellipses RPG
Session Starters
 Xalavier Nelson Jr. | @WritNelson

What Eidos Mont

The subtle differences between Cassandra and Alexios in Assassin's Creed Odyssey

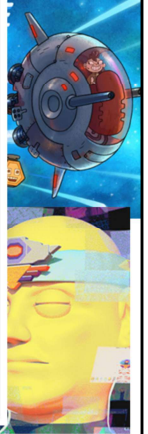


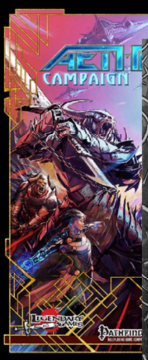
The argument raged for millennia. Titans clashed on an approxi...

Clear budgets have a great challenge. How c... basic articles are amazing!

FRACTIONS

AN AIRPORT ALIENS PRESENTLY BY





SHERLOCK HOLMES HUNTS THE MOTH MAN
WRITER: XALAVIER NELSON JR.
ARTIST: J. CODY LAMBERT

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The argument raged for millennia. Titans clashed on an approxi-
mated arena, raging between their massive feet. "All you chi-
Kassandras!" my soul growled, eyes wild with suspicion. "I
screamed a man set off. "Yeah, I'm picking Kassandras," said literally everyone else.

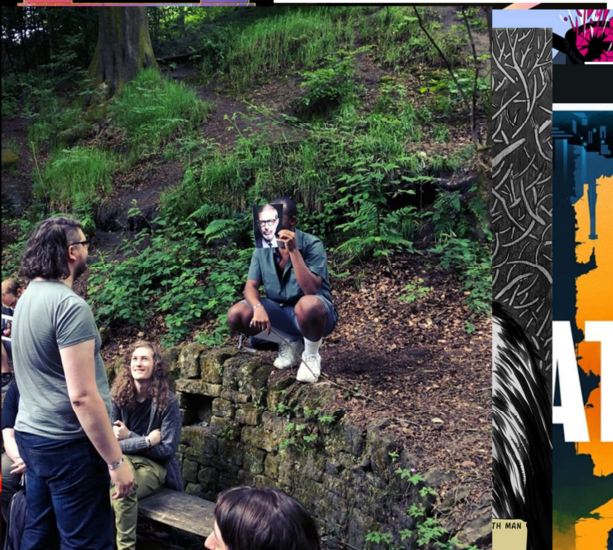
FRACTIONS



AN AIRPORT
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Clear designers have a great challenge. How a
basic article are amazing!
The developers of a game have to evidence a



FRACTIONS

The argument raged for millennia. Titans clashed on an apocalyptic battlefield, raging between their massive feet. "All you city Kassandra!" my soul growled, eyes wild with suspicion. "I screamed a man set off!" "Yeah, I'm picking Kassandra!" said literally everyone else.

basic actions are meaningful?
The developers of a game have to reinforce

**Congratulations,
designers!**

We're in marketing
now.



"Attention economy."

Attention Economy

The concept that the time of the audience is a scarce commodity, to be competed for as much (or more) than their dollars.

Netflix Claims 'Fortnite' Is a Bigger Competitor Than HBO

By Todd Spangler



Epic Games

Microsoft's CEO agrees Xbox's competition isn't other gaming platforms, it's TikTok

SATYA NADELLA DISCUSSES THE FUTURE OF MICROSOFT'S GAMING DIVISION

VIDEO GAME NEWS
28TH OCT 2025 / 7:56 PM

Posted by
Andy Robinson



Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella has ahead comments

Conventional wisdom is that if you are **ubiquitous**, you have a greater chance of commercial success.

...This fails to account for the **patterns** of an algorithmic landscape.

Our audience is
actively filtering their
world.



(Source: Netflix Technology Blog)

Economy of Care

*The concept of winning the **sentiment** of the audience, to overcome their attitudinal and algorithmic filters, and create advocates of our work even if they have **neither time or budget** to directly engage with it.*

**Let Your Players
Do the Cool Thing**

**Let Your Players Do
the Cool Thing**

Let Your Players Do
the Cool Thing
Quickly

**Tell Your Players
About the Cool
Thing**

Tell Your Players
Why You're Doing
the Cool Thing

Someone buying your game
does not **inherently** mean they
are **now an advocate.**

WARNING

Our game has no map, no markers indicating where people or things are, where to go next, or who to talk to.

We will never tell you precisely what must be done or how to do it.

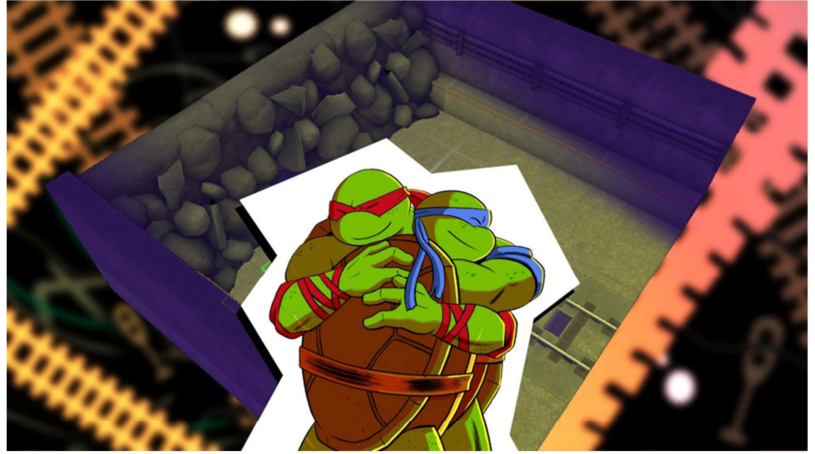
To thrive in Hell is Us, you will need to pay attention to your environment, listen, and be vigilant.

Strange Scaffold
development cycles are as
much a **marketing
apparatus** as a creative
exercise.

Points of Care we've used:

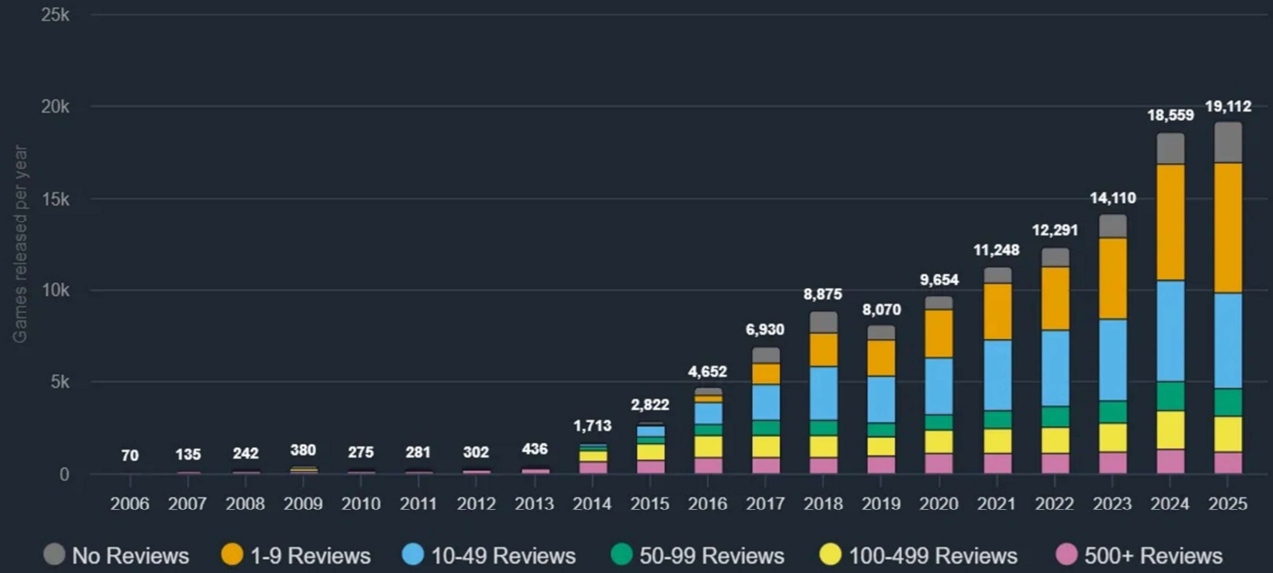
- Plot details
- Internal documentation
- UI deep dives
- Design pivots
- 2D art showcase
- Worldbuilding details
- Asset iteration
- Explaining cut features
- Developer interviews
- Discord conversations
- Behind-the-scenes for chosen screenshots
- Editor tools
- Bugs
- Bizdev considerations
- Implementing Kinect support...

Atomized Design



For your players to care
about spoilers, **they have
to give a sh*t** in the first
place.

SteamDB.info — Games released by review count on Steam



(Source: SteamDB)

Thank you!

@WritNelson / @strangescaffold
nelson@strangescaffold.com

**COUNTER-INTUITIVE
RULES**

for

**COUNTER-INTUITIVE
GAMES**

Just remember that it's some of the best counter-intuitive rules can make for the best counter-intuitive games, go out there and make interesting things!

Rules of the Game 2026

With your host **Richard Rouse III**

Theresa Duringer “Interpret Trust as a Currency”

Steve Meretzky “Don’t Drown in Innovation”

Joel Burgess “Make Your Game Better, Not Just Different”

Ashley Ruhl “Create (Fake) Choices that Matter”

Xalavier Nelson Jr. “Let Your Players Do the Cool Thing”

Slides at: www.paranoidproductions.com

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SAN FRANCISCO, CA

*Thanks to Soren Johnson for all his help with this session
And thanks to all these amazing speakers*

#GDC2026

Thanks!