

[GDC] Festival
of Gaming

MARCH 9 - 13, 2026
SAN FRANCISCO, CA

WRITE BETWEEN THE LINES

**How to Write Video Game Stories In a
Distracted, Polarized, Media Illiterate World**

Alexa Ray Corriea & Adam Dolin

#GDC2026

CONTENT WARNING

Spoilers for *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33*

The current American experience

Politically-adjacent hot topics

ALEXA RAY CORRIEA

Writer + Narrative Designer

Middle-earth: Shadow of War

Bugsnax

Call of Duty: Vanguard

Aztech: Forgotten Gods

Black Panther (cancelled RIP)

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]



  @alexaray

A presentation slide from the Game Developers Conference (GDC) 2025. The slide has a dark purple background with yellow and white text. At the top left, it says 'GDC MARCH 17-21, 2025 SAN FRANCISCO, CA'. The main title is 'Babygirls, Daddies, and Himbos: Updating Archetypes for Compelling Characters' in large yellow font. Below the title, it says 'Alexa Ray Corriea' and 'Writer + Narrative Designer' in white. At the bottom right, it says '@alexaray.bsky.social'. There is a small globe icon in the top right corner.

GDC MARCH 17-21, 2025
SAN FRANCISCO, CA

Babygirls, Daddies, and Himbos: Updating Archetypes for Compelling Characters

Alexa Ray Corriea
Writer + Narrative Designer

@alexaray.bsky.social

Excellent 100%

Storytelling Through Systems

A Narrative Designer's Approach

Adam Dolin

@AdamDolin.bsky.social
GameDevDolin.com

Excellent 83%.

not as good as
Alexa

Adam's presentation was my favorite of the day.
Give him more time next year!!

ADAM DOLIN

Writer

Narrative Designer

Creative Consultant

Teacher at ELVTR.com



GameDevDolin.com

Writing and Narrative Design

God of War (2018)

Horizon: Forbidden West

God of War: Ragnarok

[cancelled stuff at REDACTED]

[A Very Cool Unannounced Game]

Petal Runner (Demo out now!)

Plz wishlist on Steam!

Casting Coordinator

Here They Lie

Farpoint

Marvel: Spider-Man

Day's Gone

God of War (2018)

Dialogue Editing/Supervision

Uncharted 2

Bulletstorm

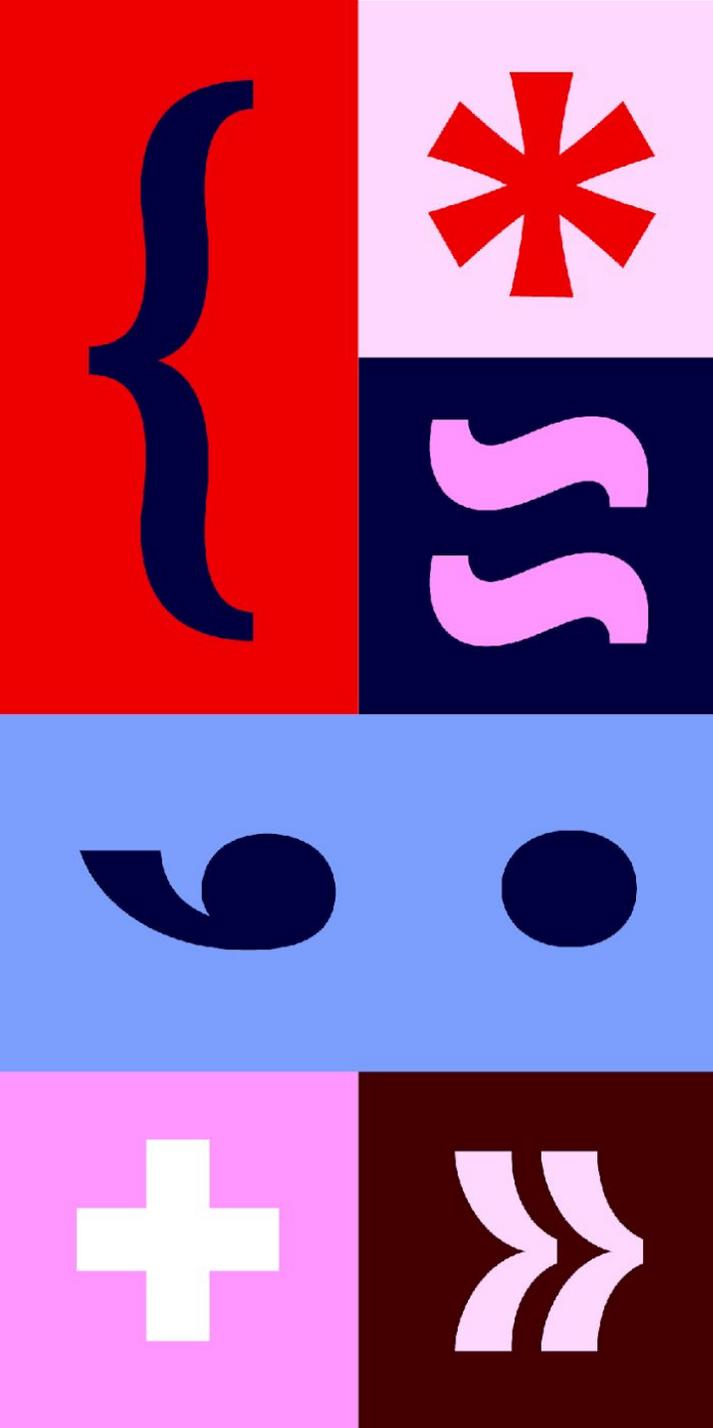
XCOM: Enemy Unknown

The Bureau: XCOM Declassified

EVOLVE

Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare

Uncharted 4



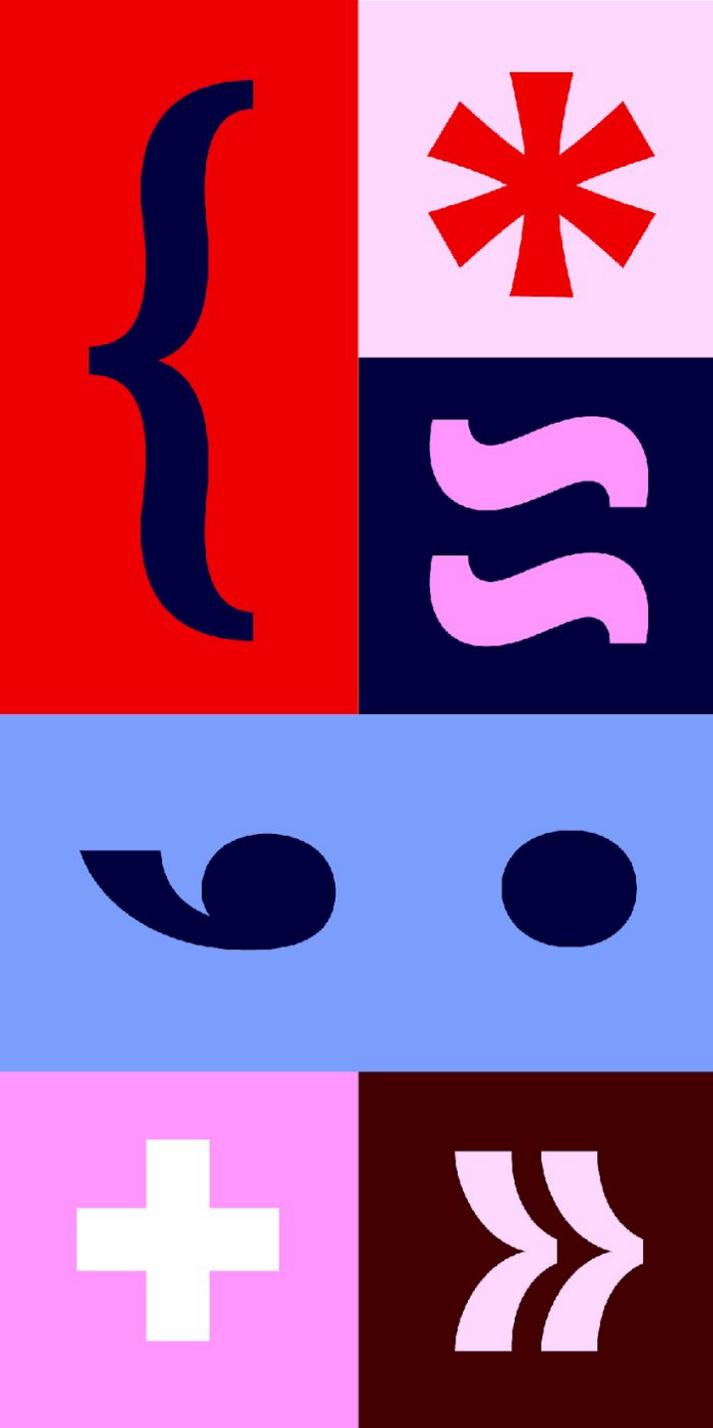
01: Why We Are Here

02: Polarization

03: The Attention Economy

04: Media Literacy

05: Takeaways



01: Why We Are Here

02: Polarization

03: The Attention Economy

04: Media Literacy

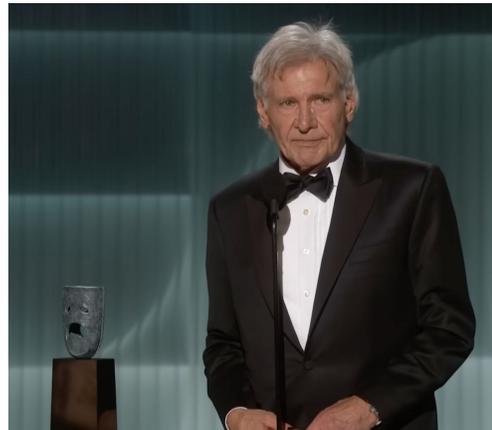
05: Takeaways

BECAUSE WE ARE FORTUNATE

"Sometimes we make entertainment; sometimes we make art.

Sometimes we're lucky to make 'em both at the same time.

And if we're *really* fortunate, we also get to make a living doing it."



– Harrison Ford

THE STATE OF THE INDUSTRY IN 2026

“...[players] face a barrage of new, interruptive, and irresistible notifications...”

“...on a Friday evening, players are placing a growing share of their time and spend *elsewhere*.”

SOURCE: Matthew Ball's State of the Video Gaming Industry - 2026
(Early Access)

THE STATE OF THE DISCOURSE IN 2026



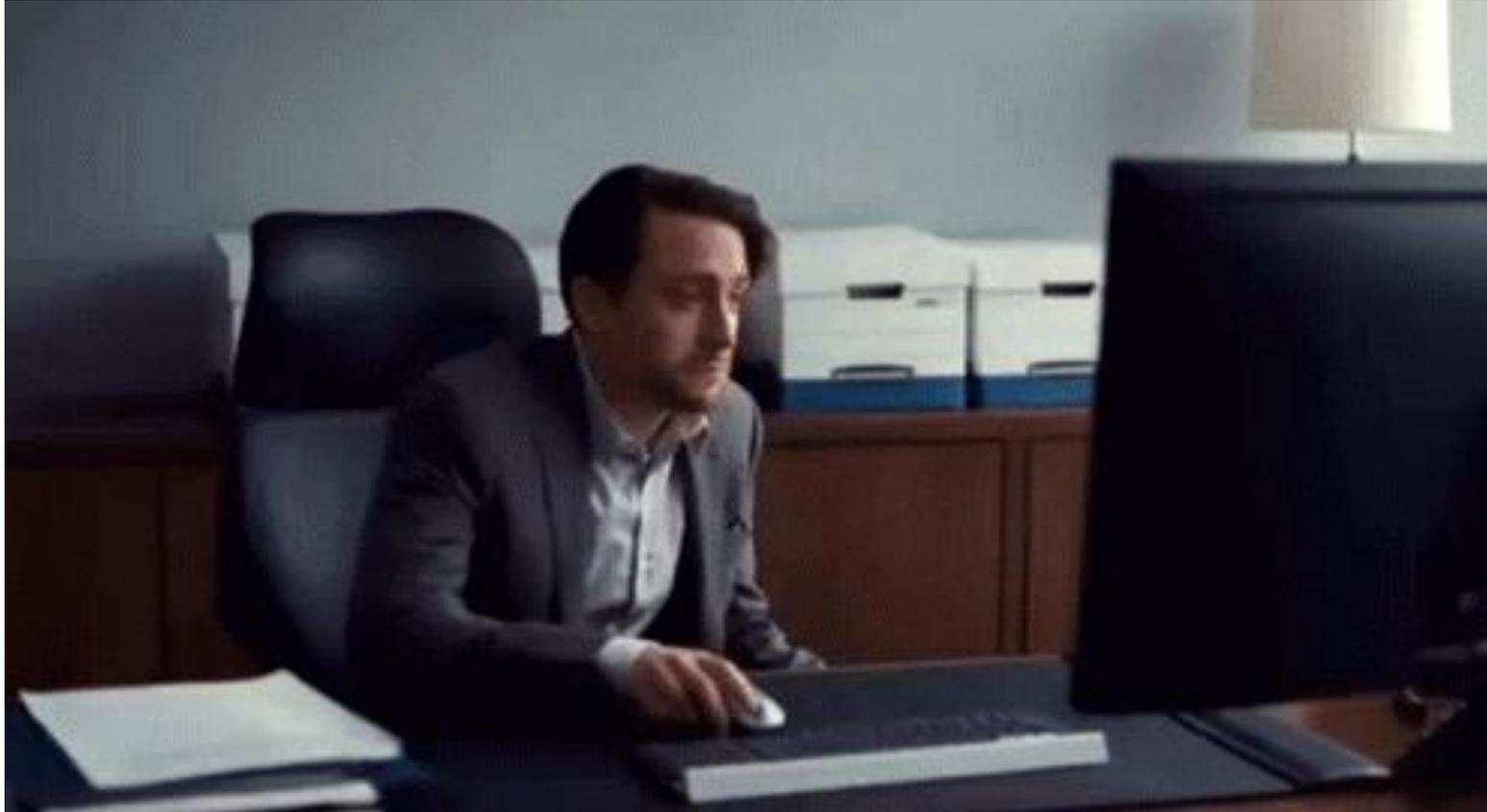
Source:
FlorkofCows

“Is the writing actually bad or are you just trying to order a milkshake from Home Depot?”



bumblebeebats

THE ACTUAL RISK OF TAKING RISKS



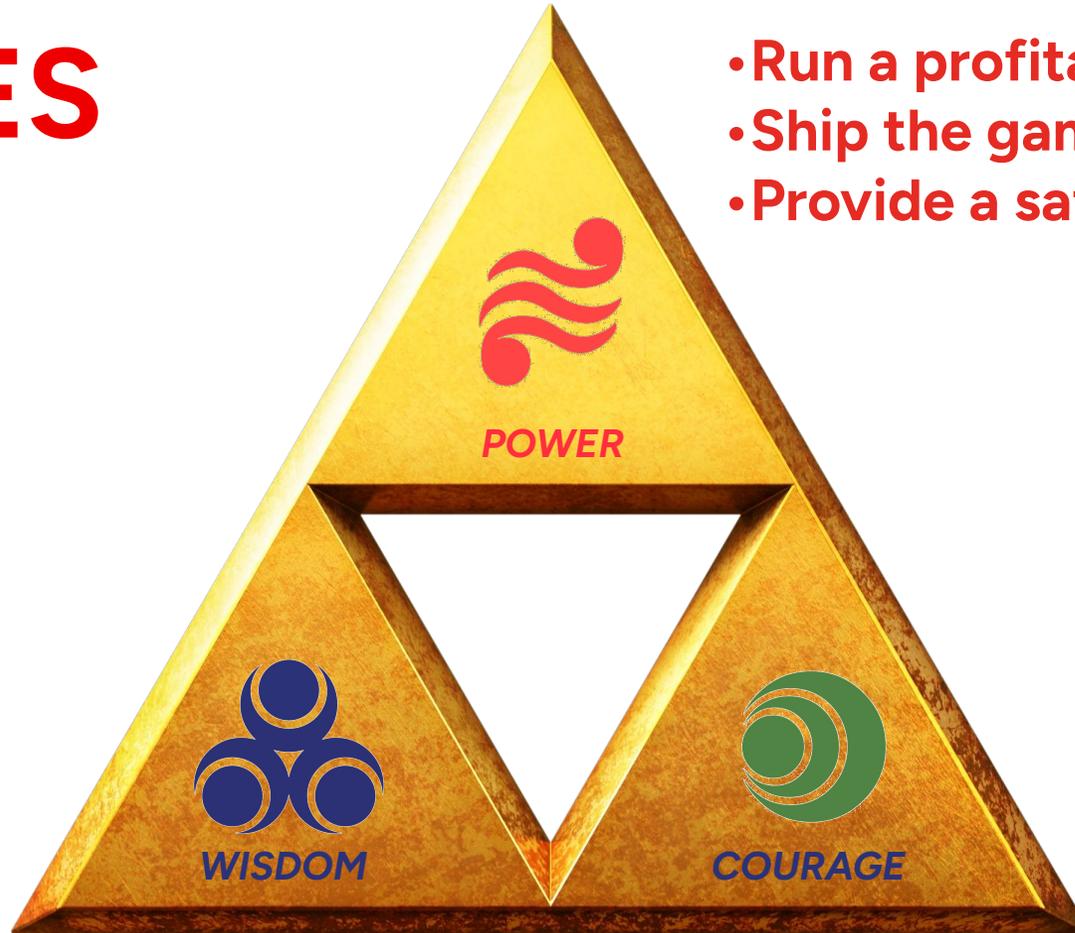
EXECUTIVE TRENDS

- **Mass layoffs following record profits**
- **Live-service pivots after single-player success**
- **Overexpansion during pandemic growth**
- **Studio consolidation and acquisitions**
- **New IP risk avoidance**

DIFFERENT PRIORITIES

AUDIENCES

- To Be Entertained
- To Escape
- To Feel Something



EXECUTIVES

- Run a profitable business
- Ship the game on time and on budget
- Provide a safe work environment

CREATIVES

- To Make Art
- To Say Something
- To Earn a Living

VALUES?

Values are subjective.

Values impact how you behave under pressure.

Values determine where you compromise, and where you fight.

WHAT ARE YOUR VALUES?

Achievement	Adventure
Assertiveness	Authenticity
Beauty	Challenge
Community	Conformity
Courage	Creativity
Curiosity	Empathy
Encouragement	Equality
Fairness	Family

Fitness	Flexibility
Freedom	Friendliness
Forgiveness	Fun
Generosity	Gratitude
Honesty	Humor
Humility	Independence
Integrity	Intimacy
Kindness	Leadership
Legacy	Love
Loyalty	Mindfulness

Nature	Order
Patience	Peace
Pleasure	Power
Resilience	Romance
Safety	Self-development
Sensuality	Sexuality
Simplicity	Spirituality
Stability	Tradition
Trust	Wealth
Wisdom	Suggest a value

OUR VALUES

“By centering values when building technology, we help manifest outcomes aligned with those values.”

— Center for Humane Technology, 2024

Curiosity To be curious, open-minded and interested; to explore and discover
Empathy To understand and share the feelings of others
Fun To be fun-loving; to seek, create, and engage in fun-filled activities

Adam's Core Values

Empathy To understand and share the feelings of others
Courage To be courageous or brave; to persist in the face of fear, threat, or difficulty
Community To be part of and actively contribute to my community

Alexa's Core Values

CORPORATE VALUES

NETFLIX JOBS

PEOPLE OVER PROCESS
You get better outcomes when employees have the information and freedom to make decisions for themselves. We hire unusually responsible people who thrive on this openness and freedom.

UNCOMFORTABLY EXCITING
To entertain the world, we need to be bold and ambitious. That means embracing the thrill of what's next — even when it's uncomfortable.

THE DREAM TEAM
We aim only to have high performers at Netflix — people who are great at what they do, and even better at working together.

GREAT AND ALWAYS BETTER
We often say Netflix sucks today compared to where we can be tomorrow. We need the self-awareness to understand what should

RIOT GAMES

OUR VALUES

WE ARE PLAYER FIRST

Be part of the community

Foster a thriving ecosystem

Hyper-serve the core

Support players everywhere

PERSONAL VALUES vs. CORPORATE VALUES



VALUES - TAKEAWAYS

- ❑ **Know your own values.** Recognize when they're being tested.
- ❑ **Know your studio's values.** Understand where they align with yours and where they don't.
- ❑ **Recognize that disagreements about creative risk are almost always disagreements about values.**

OUR GOALS FOR TODAY

GOAL #1

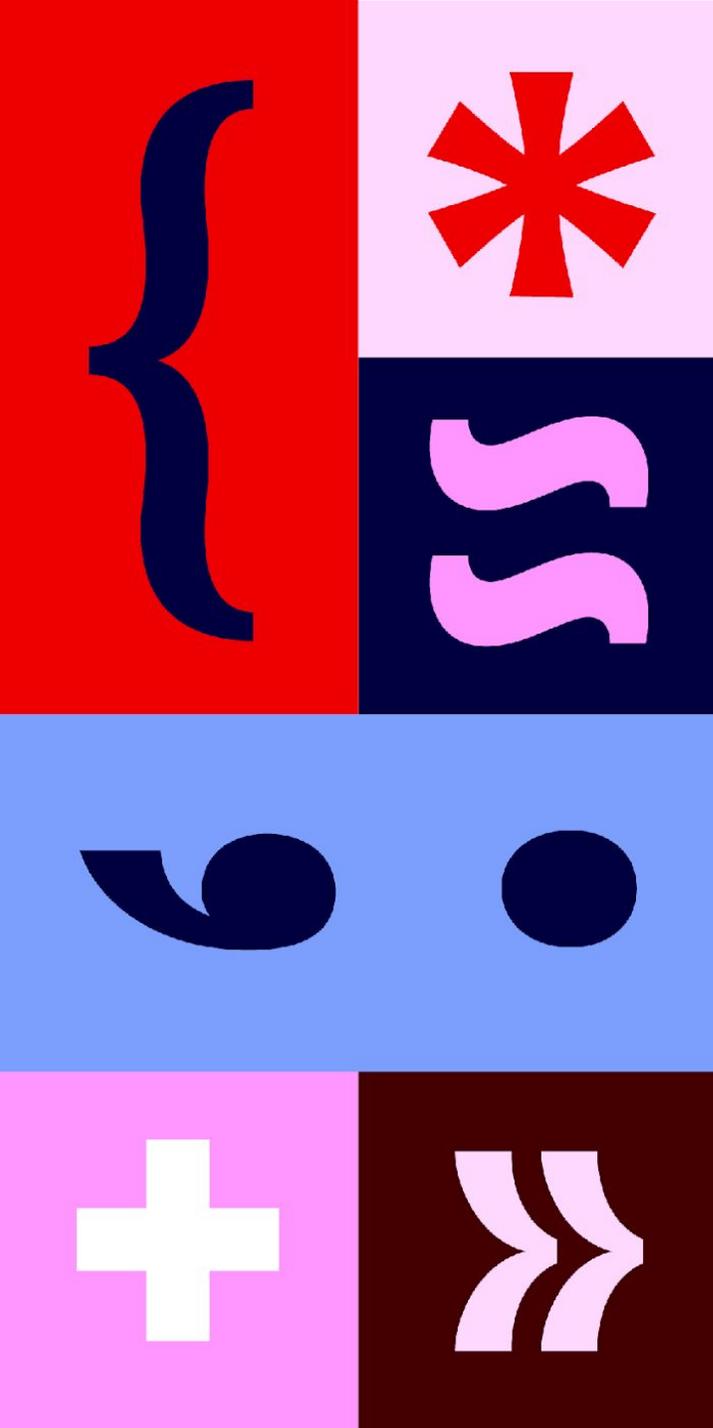
Help Make Sense of the Modern Media Landscape

GOAL #2

Share Strategies for Taking Creative Risks

GOAL #3

Demonstrate the Need for Ambitious Storytelling



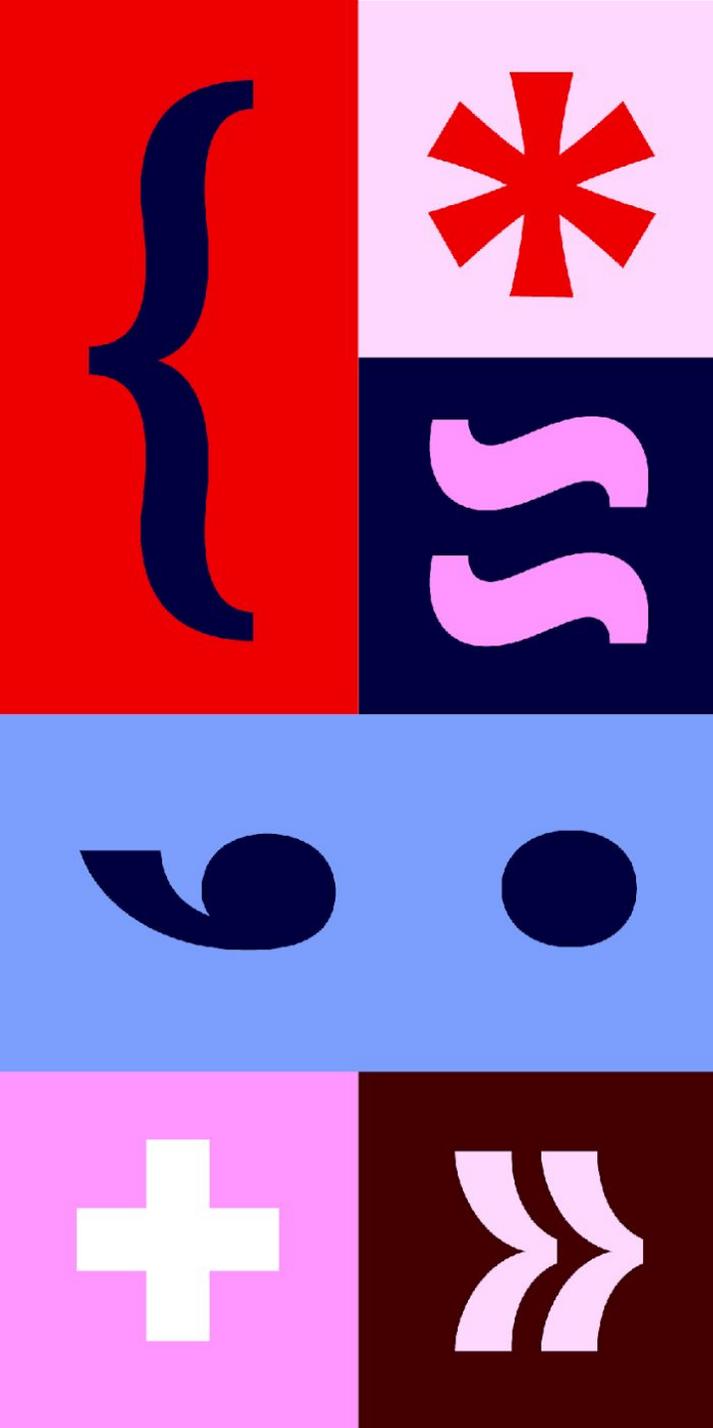
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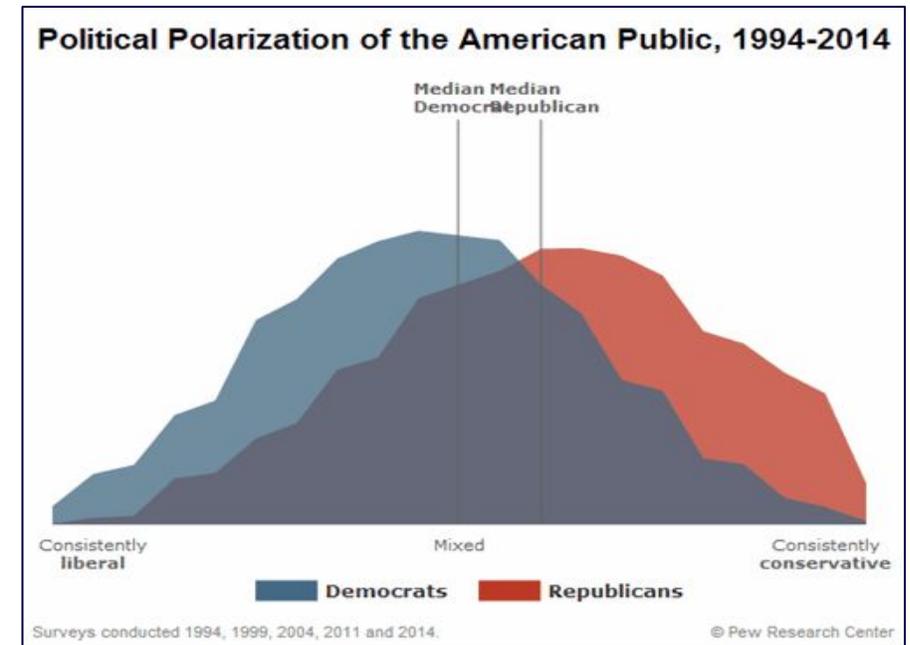
05: Takeaways

THE SOCIAL MEDIA EFFECT

In 2008, fewer than 1 in 8 Americans got news from social media.

By 2019, it was over 70%.

— Levy, "Social Media, News Consumption, and Polarization," American Economic Review, 2021



TOO MANY INFORMATIONS

“The fact that there are so many sources means we cannot consume them all.

And so we become selective in our own ways, which results in polarization.”

— Manshadi et al., “Information Inundation on Platforms and Implications,” Yale School of Management

TANGENT ALERT

Weaponizing the haters: *The Last Jedi* and the strategic politicization of pop culture through social media manipulation
by Morten Bay

f i ® s t m x ñ d @ ¥
PEER-REVIEWED JOURNAL ON THE INTERNET

A RAY OF HOPE

“...participants exposed to counter-attitudinal news learned to rationalize the opinions of the opposing party.

Intuitively, participants may have learned some of the opposing party’s arguments and thus understood better why that party supports certain positions.

This led to more positive attitudes but did not change political opinions”

— Levy, American Economic Review, 2021.

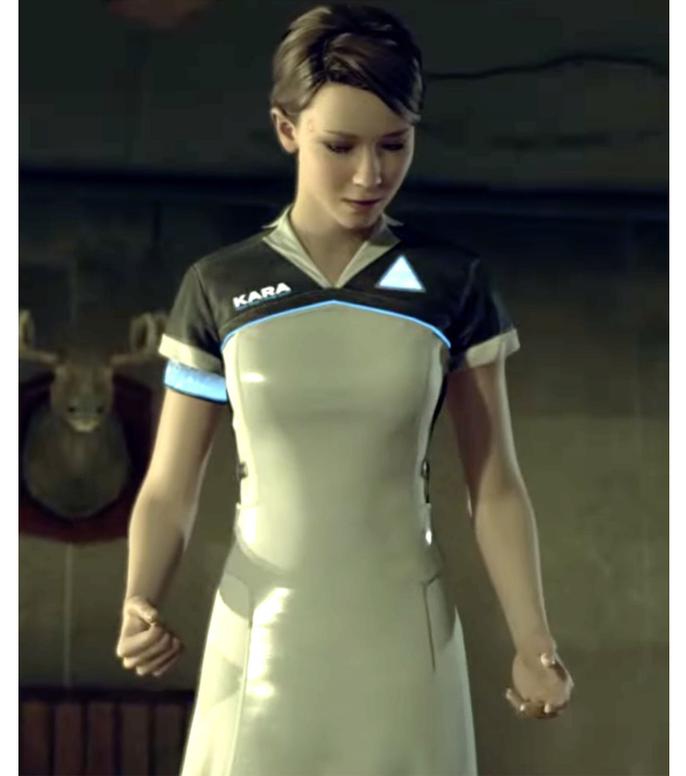
DETROIT: BECOME HUMANE

"Taking the perspective of a gendered violence victim in a video game increases player's embodiment toward the game character, and, in turn, increases player's cognitive empathy toward gendered violence victims."

Video games for good: Active perspective-taking fosters empathy and reduces implicit bias toward gendered violence victims

Sweeney Jing Li, Zeph M.C. van Berlo *

Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR), University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, the Netherlands



A "SAFE" STORY...

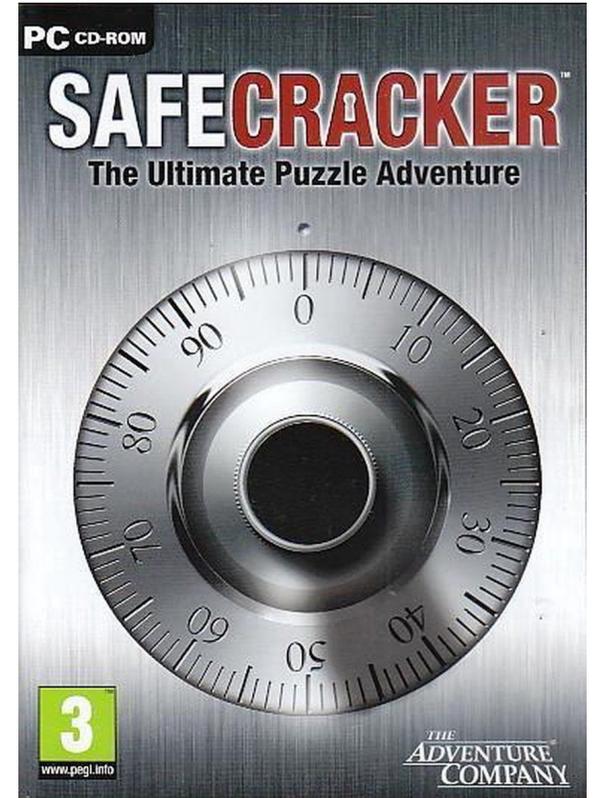
Doesn't make a strong thematic argument

Doesn't challenge the player's values.

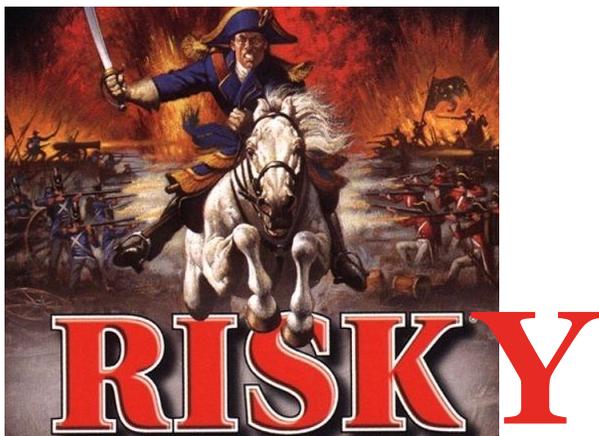
Leans on familiar tropes.

Avoids "unlikeable" characters.

Tries very, very hard not to upset ANYONE.



A



STORY...

Makes a strong thematic argument.

Challenges the player's values.

Subverts genre expectations.

Trusts the audience to engage with discomfort.

Risks alienating some players to deeply resonate with others.

IT'S OKAY TO DISAGREE



...BUT YOU SHOULD DO IT RESPECTFULLY!!!!!!

 **jenniferjenglish** 
🎵 Lorien Testard, Alice Duport-Percier · Cl...



53.9K 659 801 2,139

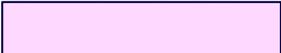
Liked by judyalicelee and others

jenniferjenglish SCREAMING. Nominated for best performance at the Game Awards. Alongside these legends. Expedition 33 receiving TWELVE NOMINATIONS and being the most nominated game EVER. Getting nominated alongside [@the_ben_starr](#) again. What a day. I am BEAMING.

Congratulations [@expedition33official](#) [@kepler_interact](#) [@sandfallgames](#) and thank you [@thegameawards](#) - what an honour.

alexaray MAELLE WAS RIGHT 🔥 

November 17, 2025

 
@alexaray Yeah imagine your daughter killing herself with LSD to avoid reality yeah so right 🙌 

2

Reply

WORTH REPEATING:

Someone else's dislike of something doesn't mean you're wrong for loving it.

Your love for something doesn't invalidate someone's dislike of it.

BACKLASH

Emotional, reactive, loud.



CRITIQUE

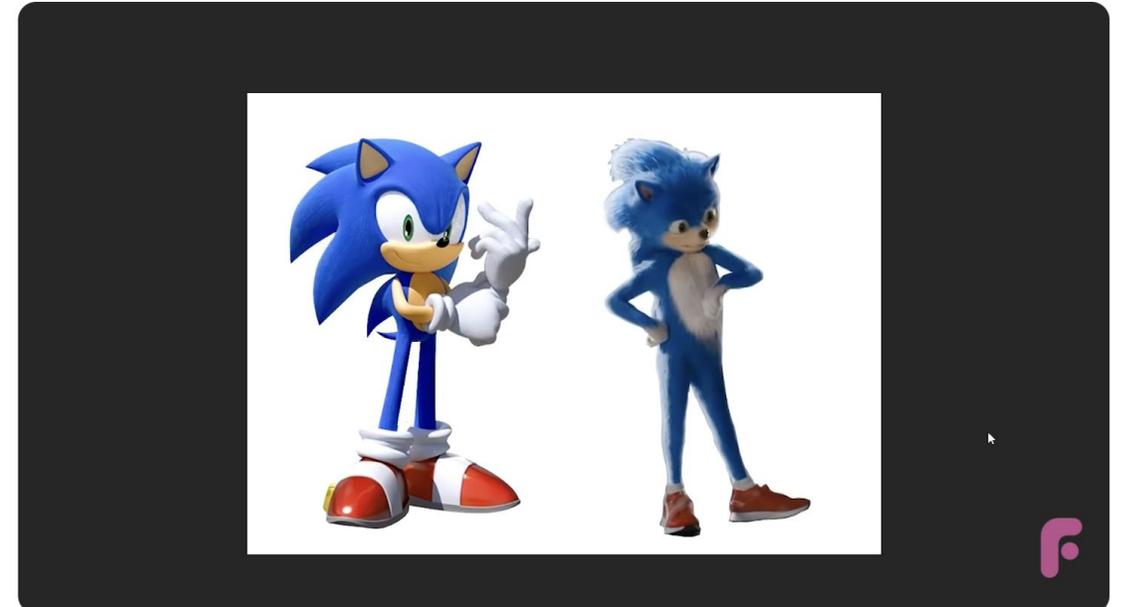
Nuanced, goal-oriented, good-faith.



BACKLASH



CRITIQUE



How to Fix the Sonic Design and Why is it so Terrible?



FlippedNormals ✓
341K subscribers

Join

Subscribe



TRUST YOURSELF, TRUST THE AUDIENCE



HOW TO GET TEAM BUY-IN ON *THAT* NARRATIVE DECISION (you know the one...)

- **Take a breath.**
- **Be curious. Ask questions.**
 - “Can we dig into your reaction?”
 - “Do you have an idea for alternative solutions?”
- **Listen with an open mind.**
- **Engage in good faith discussion and demonstrate mutual respect.**
 - **Assume that you both want the same thing: To ship a great game.**

HOW TO START THE CONVERSATION WITH LEADERSHIP

- **Ensure it's a private conversation in real time**
- **Identify the issue.**
- **Bring data and solutions.**
- **Be curious. Ask questions.**
- **Listen with an open mind.**
- **Engage in good faith discussion and demonstrate mutual respect.**

POLARIZATION: TAKEAWAYS

- ❑ **Figure out what you want to say.**
- ❑ **Then let your players *participate* in the meaning, instead of lecturing them.**
- ❑ **Trying to please everyone is the riskier bet.**
- ❑ **Use data to defend your values.**

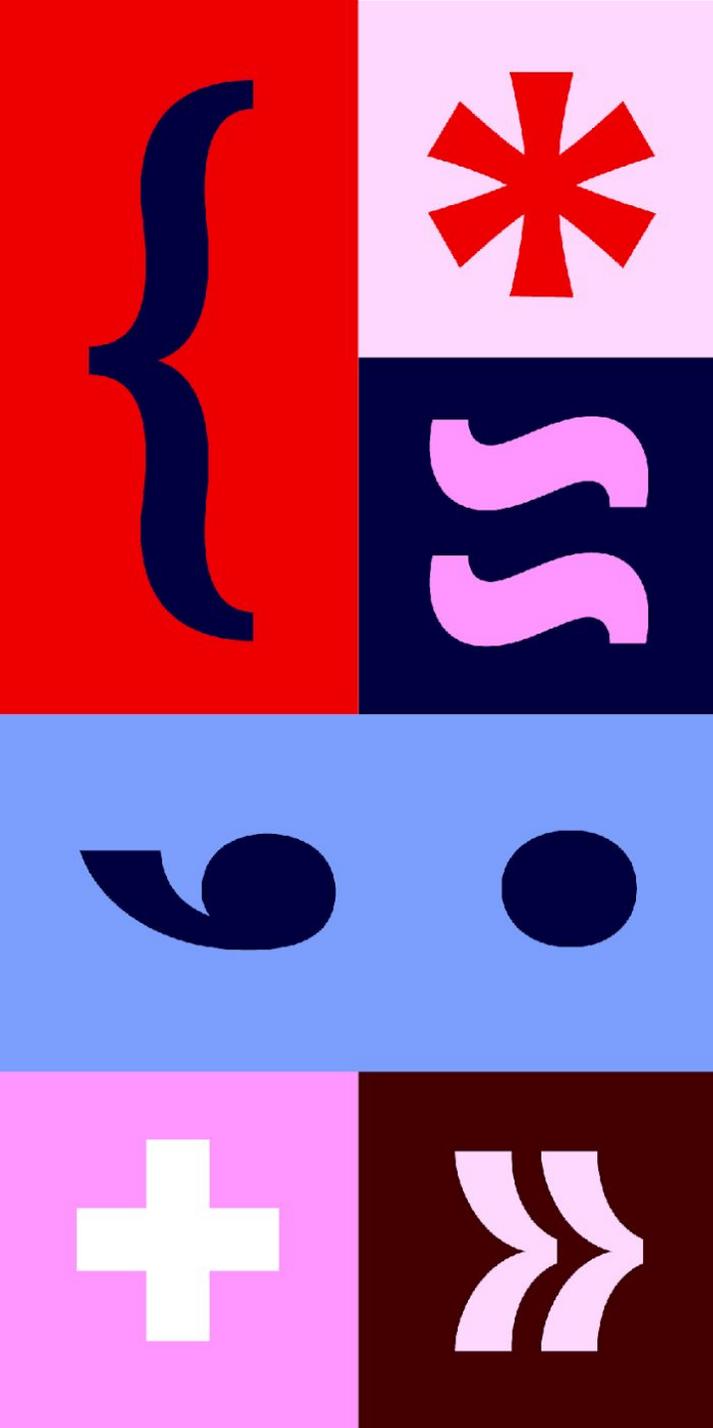
HEY!

Listen!



Let's talk about attention.





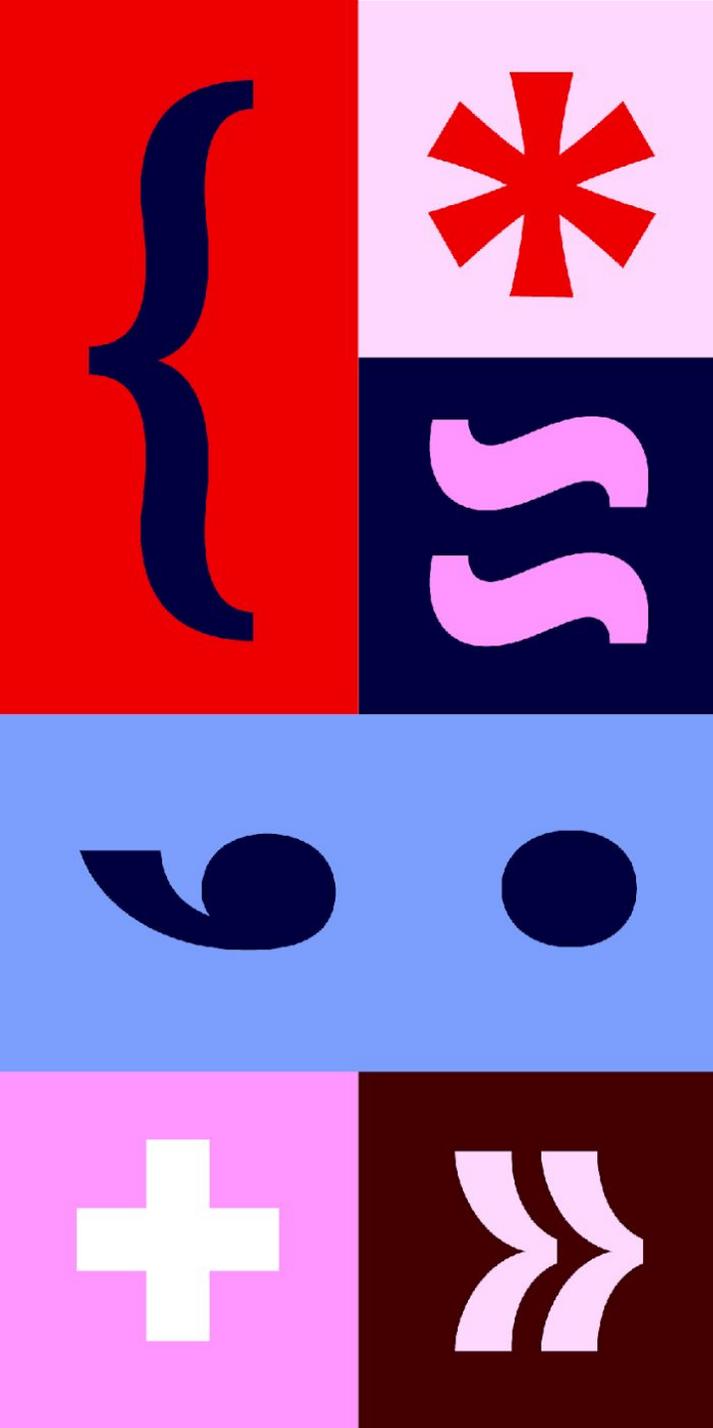
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WHY WE'RE HERE

POLARIZATION

ATTENTION

OUR DIGITAL WAKING LIFE

US Adults Will Spend 12:55 a Day With Media in 2026 via a Multitude of Disparate Activities
average hrs:mins spent per day with total media by US adults, by media/platform, 2026

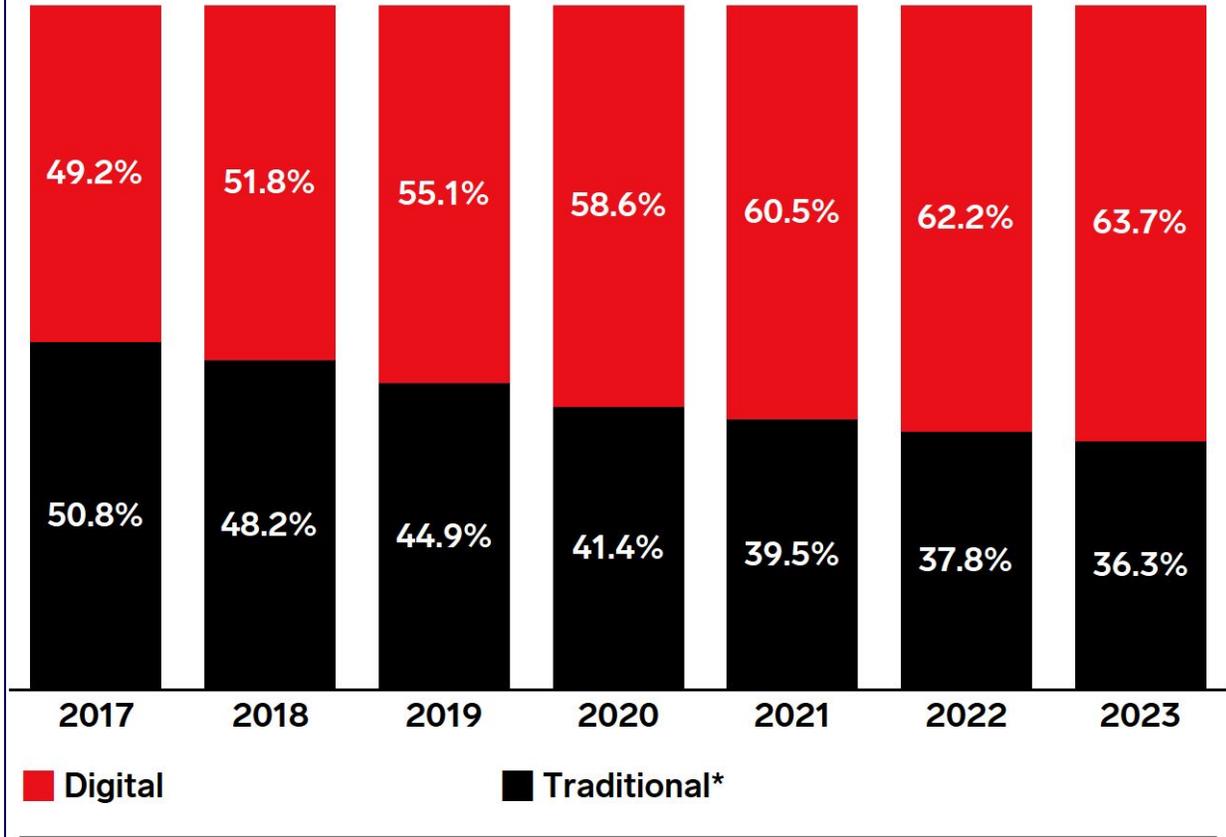
Note: ages 18+; includes time spent with digital internet activities (desktop/laptop, nonvoice mobile, connected TV, and other connected devices), print, radio, TV, and other traditional media including printed catalogs, direct mail, cinema, and out-of-home; "other digital nonvideo" includes ecommerce shopping, checking email, accessing fintech services, using fitness apps, checking maps, and reading the news; "other digital video" includes esports, news videos, educational videos, and adult content
Source: EMARKETER Forecast, Dec 2025

358806



— Source: eMarketer, "US Time Spent With Media 2025," February 2025

Traditional* vs. Digital Media: Share of Average Time Spent in the US, 2017-2023
% of total



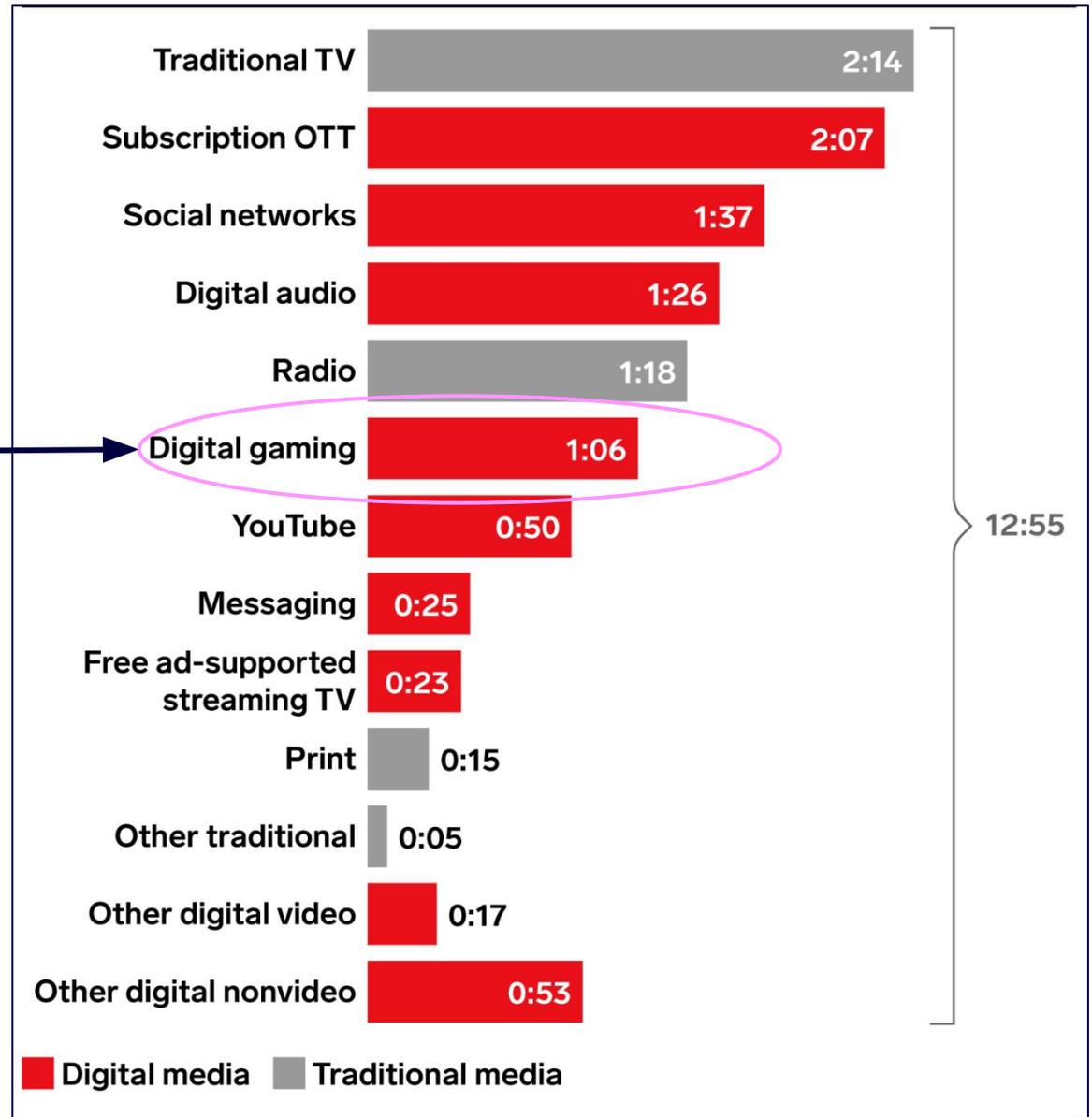
OUR DIGITAL WAKING LIFE

1:06 hours of daily gaming on average

— SOURCE: eMarketer, "US Time Spent With Media 2025," February 2025

"...on a Friday evening, players are placing a growing share of their time and spend *elsewhere*."

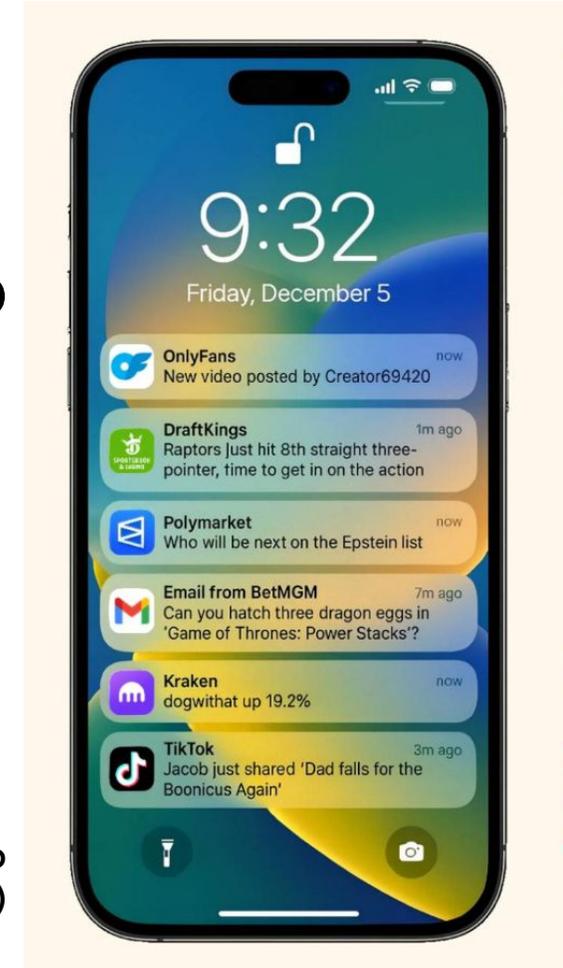
—SOURCE: Matthew Ball's State of the Video Gaming Industry - 2026 (Early Access)



THE DOPAMINE ARMS RACE

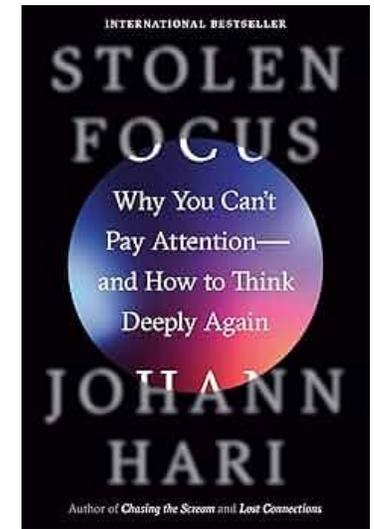
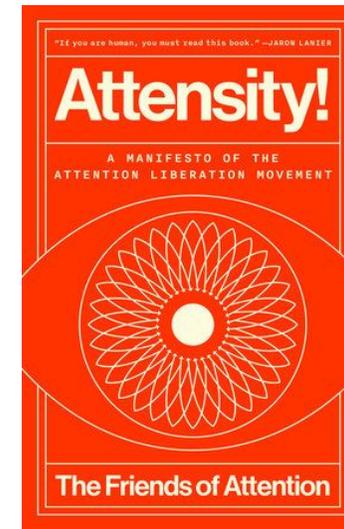
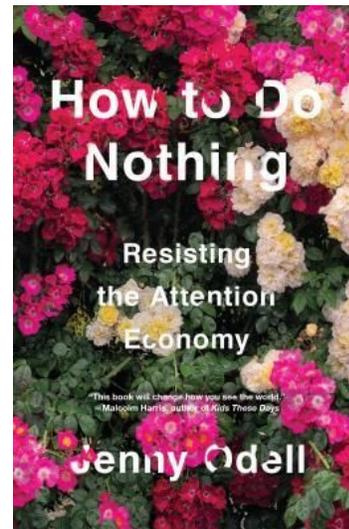
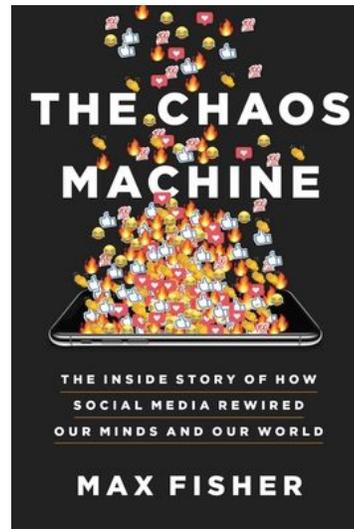
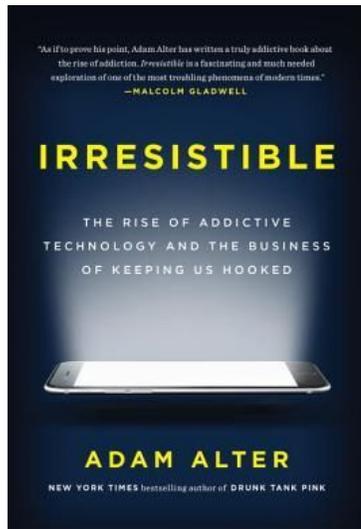
- Short-form social feeds
- Prediction markets, online gambling, crypto
- Video streaming services
- Subscription-based content creators
- AI-generated everything

SOURCE: Matthew Ball's State of the Video Gaming Industry - 2026 (Early Access)



WAIT...

WHAT WERE WE TALKING ABOUT?



International Journal of
*Environmental Research
and Public Health*



Review

Exploring the Impact of Internet Use on Memory and Attention Processes

Received: 5 November 2020; Accepted: 16 December 2020; Published: 17 December 2020



healthcare

Article

The Struggle for Human Attention: Between the Abuse of Social Media and Digital Wellbeing



STRATEGIES FOR NARRATIVE SUCCESS

Layered Storytelling

Rewarding Curiosity

Strategic Brevity

LAYERED STORYTELLING

- **Art and Environment:** Show, don't tell. Use the world to carry narrative.
- **Audio:** Leitmotifs, Sound Design
- **Design:** UI/UX choices to guide player's emotions
- **Performance Directors:** Pacing and visual beats that frame the moment
- **Actors:** Informed performances

Remember:

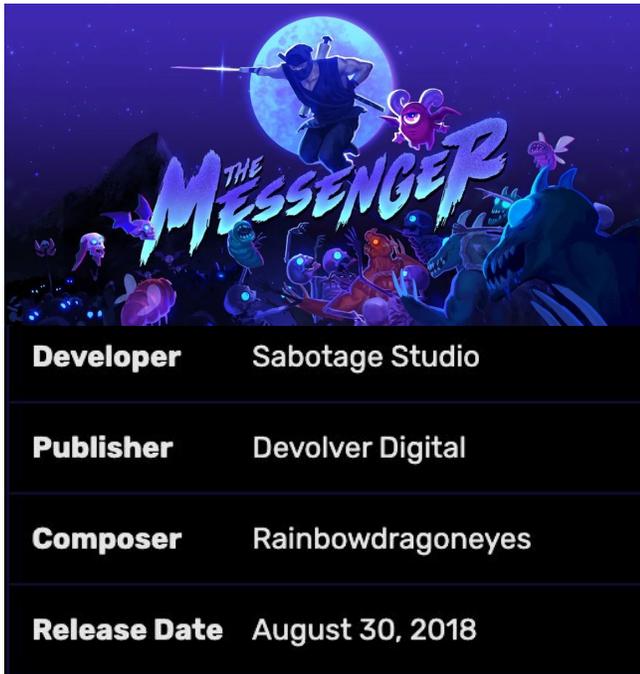
dialogue can't solve everything!



REWARD CURIOSITY



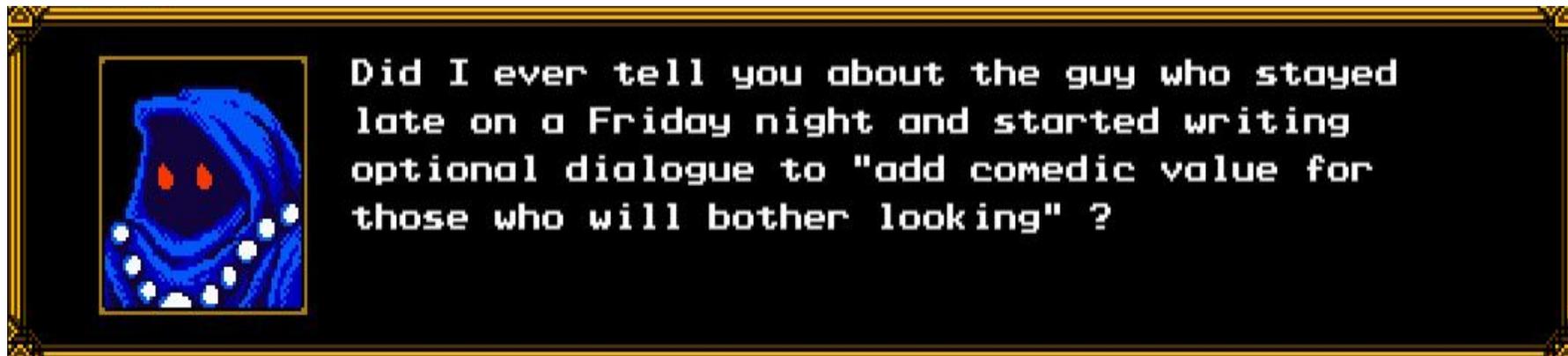
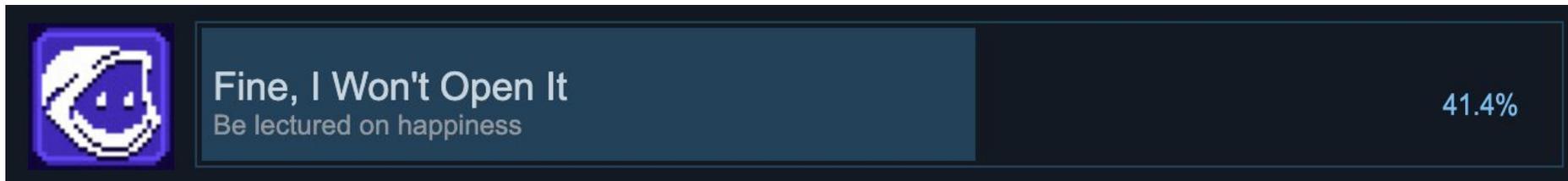
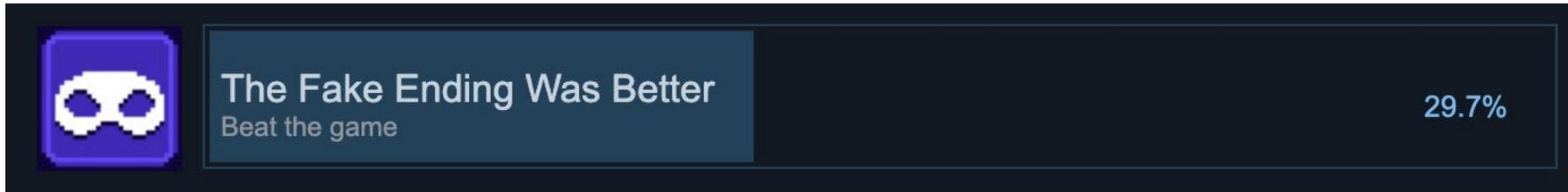
THE MESSENGER



BUT... WHAT'S IN THE CABINET?



FOR THOSE WHO BOTHER LOOKING



STRATEGIC BREVITY



Meaningless Choices and Impractical Advice (Notes from a *Disco Elysium* writer)

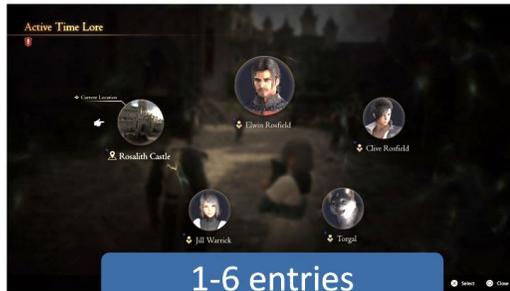
Justin Keenan
Writer, ZA/UM Studio



EXPOSITION DESIGN

How did we design ATL?

Short, brief and limited information



© SQUARE ENIX



MARCH 18-22, 2024 #GDC2024

Test case

New countries:

The Dhalmekian Republic, The Iron Kingdom
The Kingdom of Waloeo
The Holy Empire of Sanbreque

New places:

Nysa Defile, Fort Zirnitra

New characters:

Wyvern, Tiamat, Hugo, Benedikta, Barnabas,
+more

Unique terms:

Dominant, Shiva (Eikon) +more



© SQUARE ENIX



MARCH 18-22, 2024 #GDC2024

Designing Active Time Lore for 'Final Fantasy XVI'

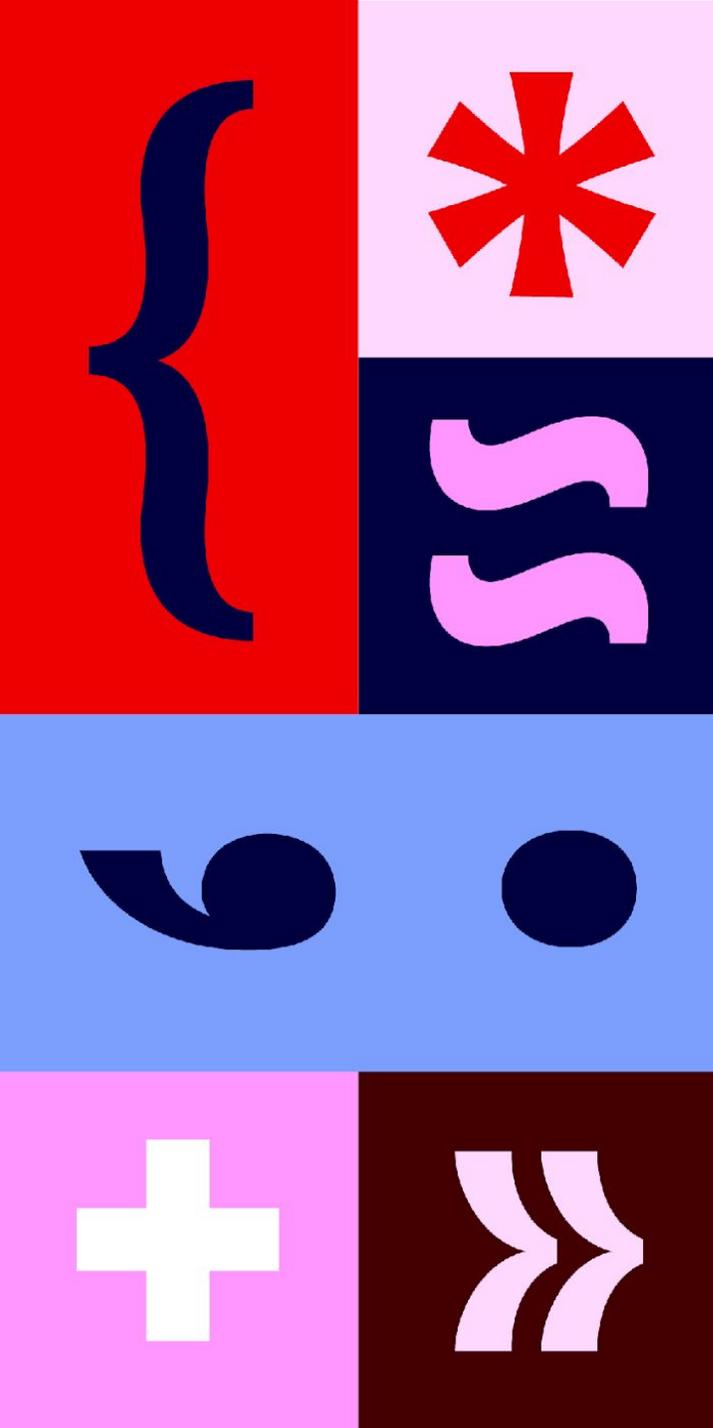
Momoka Aono
Game Designer
SQUARE ENIX CO., LTD.

THE ATTENTION ECONOMY -

TAKEAWAYS

- ❑ **Design for narrative depth.**
 - Cross-disciplinary collaborate for layered storytelling
- ❑ **Reward player curiosity.**
 - Hide surprising and delightful content
 - Be okay with the fact some players might never see it
- ❑ **Short text ≠ shallow story.**
 - Be strategic with your text layouts.
 - Walls of text are visually intimidating.





01: Why We Are Here

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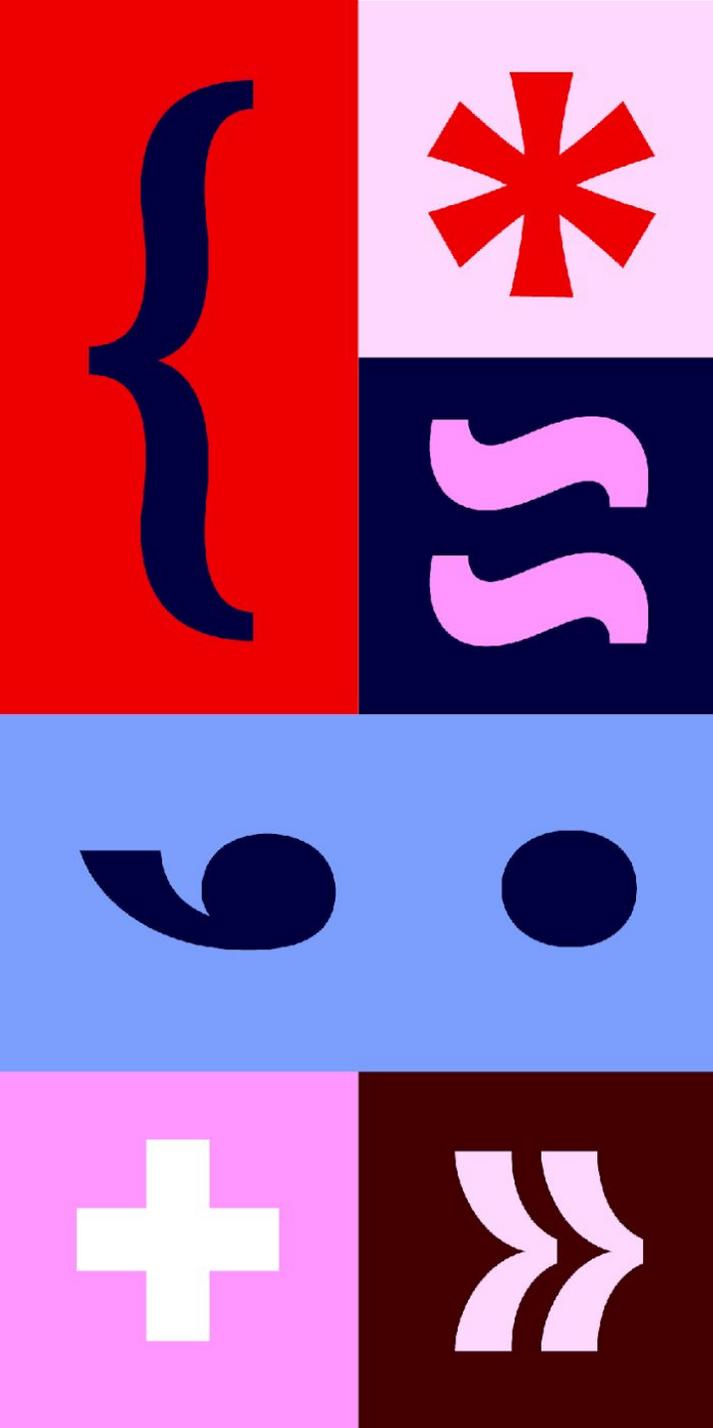
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WHY WE'RE HERE

POLARIZATION

ATTENTION



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WHY WE'RE HERE

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MEDIA LITERACY

MEDIA LITERACY

media 1 of 3 **noun (1)**

me·dia 'mē-dē-ə 

plural medias

often attributive

- a** **singular or plural in construction** : **MASS MEDIA**
 - b medias plural** : members of the mass media (such as news outlets)
- : a **medium** of cultivation, conveyance, or expression
| Air is a *media* that conveys sound.

literacy **noun**

lit·er·a·cy 'li-t(ə-)rə-sē 

Synonyms of *literacy* >

- : the quality or state of being **literate**
- | a program to promote adult *literacy*

WHAT IS MEDIA LITERACY?

The ability to critically analyze the media you consume.

WE DIDN'T MAKE THIS UP, WE PROMISE



Since January 2024, eleven states have taken new steps to strengthen media literacy education for K-12 students, reflecting broad public support and urgent demand. To date, 25 states have media literacy laws on their books.

Some highlights:

- Alabama – Banned personal devices during the school day and now requires media literacy instruction on social media risks and benefits before 8th grade.
- Georgia – Added digital citizenship and responsible tech use to its statewide character education program.
- North Carolina – Passed the Protecting Students in a Digital Age Act, requiring instruction on safe, responsible social media use and online risk awareness.
- Tennessee – Enacted the Teen Social Media and Internet Safety Act, directing creation of curricula for grades 6–12 on social media safety, mental health impacts, and evaluating AI-generated content.

These actions illustrate a growing recognition that media literacy education is essential for students' online safety and civic engagement, empowering young people to become informed, responsible, and capable digital citizens who can navigate the complexities of all kinds of media.

As schools consider cell phone restrictions, youth social media use, and the influence of AI, this report underscores a key takeaway: policies that limit access without teaching skills leave students unprepared. Kids need guided, empowered learning—not just restrictions—to thrive in today's digital world.

THE STATE OF LITERACY



BARBARA BUSH
FOUNDATION for
FAMILY LITERACY

ECONOMIC IMPACT REPORT

<https://www.barbarabush.org/reports/>

Assessing the Economic Gains of Eradicating Illiteracy Nationally and Regionally in the United States

A new study released by the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy and Gallup examines the impact of adult literacy on the U.S. economy, finding that the nation could be losing up to \$2.2 trillion annually due to low adult literacy rates.

**54% of U.S. adults 16-74 years old
read below a sixth grade level**

YIKES.

JANUARY 15, 2026

Lawmakers Hold Hearing on the Impact of Screen Time on Kids

Conclusion

This is not a debate about rejecting technology. It is a question of aligning educational tools with how human learning actually works. Evidence indicates that indiscriminate digital expansion has weakened learning environments rather than strengthened them¹².

Dr. Jared Cooney Horvath, PhD, MEd

NEW YORK POST

US NEWS

Gen Z — the first generation officially dubbed dumber than the last

BUT HOW CAN I, A VIDEO GAME WRITER, HELP STEM THE TIDE OF INCREASING MEDIA ILLITERACY?

- ❑ **Trust your audience.**
- ❑ **Your audience is capable of nuance.**
- ❑ **Ignore “discourse” and trust yourself.**

DESIGN SYSTEMS THAT ENCOURAGE DEEP ENGAGEMENT



NOT PASSIVE CONSUMPTION

DON'T FORGET THE WRITER'S TOOLBOX



(the toolbox is a metaphor)

Subtext

Satire

Allegory

Hyperbole

Juxtaposition

Analogy

Allusion

Symbolism

Metaphor

Simile

Motifs

Verisimilitude

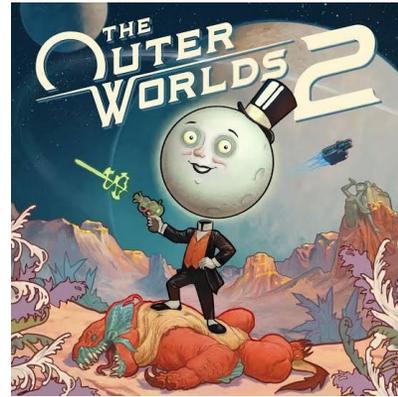
EXAMPLES INCLUDE BUT NOT LIMITED TO:



SYMBOLISM

Red: Authoritarianism

Blue: Independent Thought



SATIRE

The absurdity of late-stage capitalism.



MOTIF

Questioning your own existence and the search for meaning.



ALLEGORY

A fictitious game studio's rise and fall, told over the span of 50 games.

Media Literacy - Takeaways

❑ Trust your players to think. Design for it.

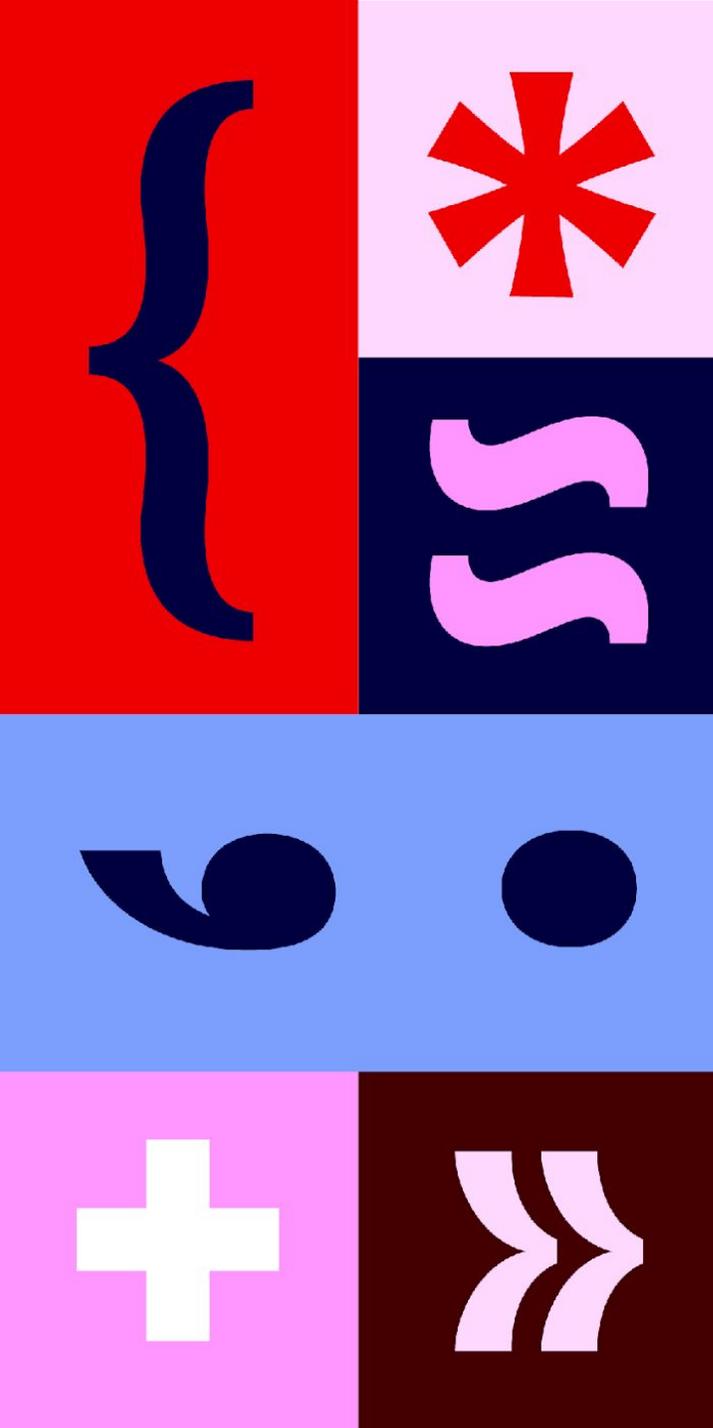
Don't flatten your narrative because literacy is declining. Structure it's depth for accessibility.

❑ Don't forget your toolbox.

When you can't be direct, lean on your craft.

❑ Teach players to read between the lines.

The majority will rise to the occasion.



01: Why We Are Here

02: Polarization

03: The Attention Economy

04: Media Literacy

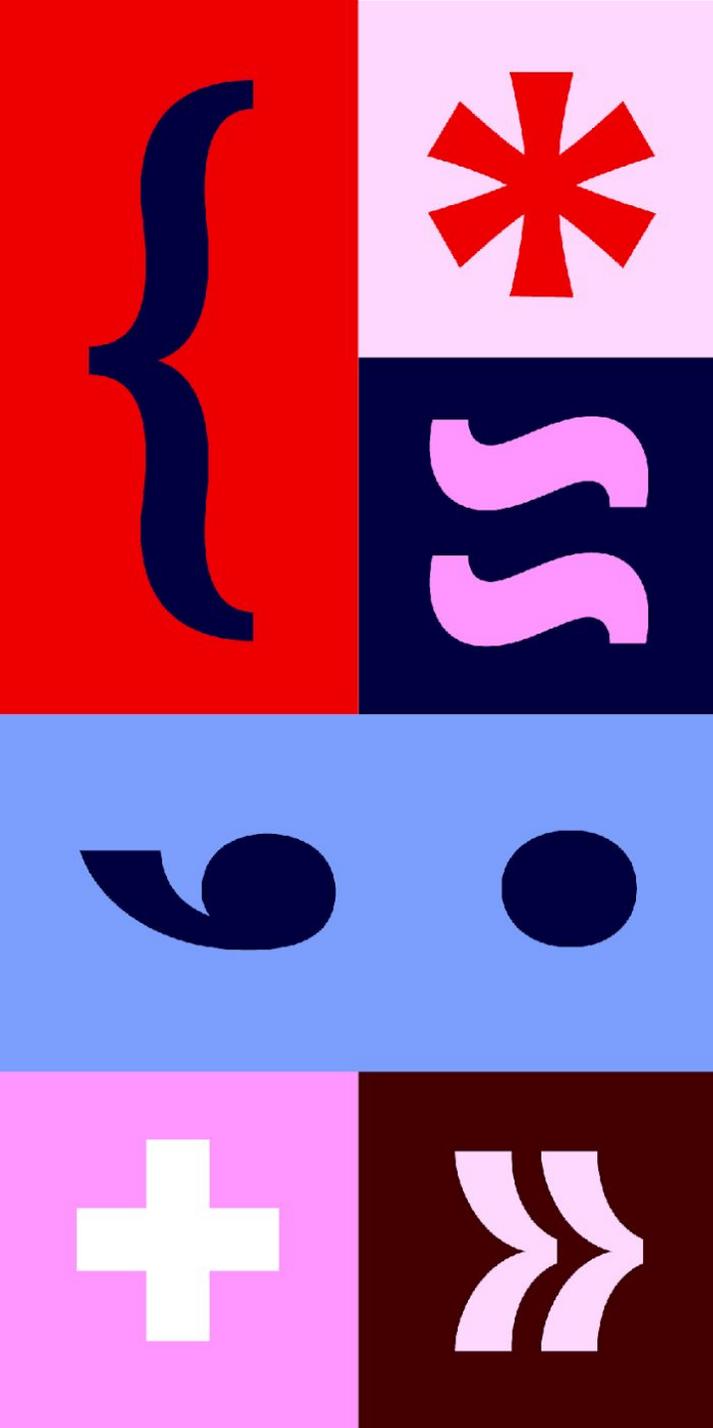
05: Takeaways

WHY WE'RE HERE

POLARIZATION

ATTENTION

MEDIA LITERACY



01: Why We Are Here

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04: Media Literacy

05: Takeaways

WHY WE'RE HERE

POLARIZATION

ATTENTION

MEDIA LITERACY

TAKEAWAYS

IT STARTS WITH YOU

(yes you, writers)



BUT WHAT CAN I DO?

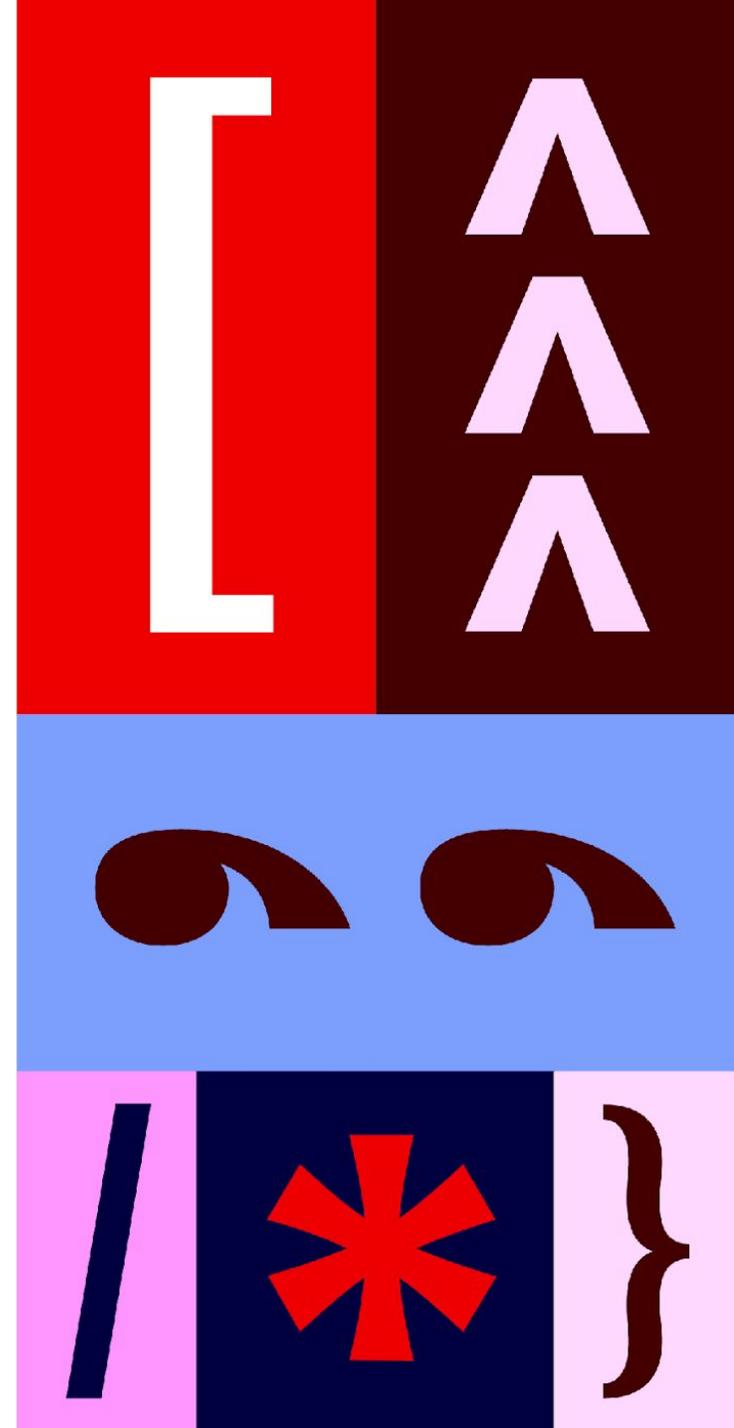
- ❑ Determine your core values - as a person, as a developer, an artist.
- ❑ Evaluate your own ability to reflect critically on the games you play and the stories you read. Identify strong feelings and where you can improve.
- ❑ Familiarize yourself with the aforementioned tools.
- ❑ Advocate with your toolbox not just in the writers' room, but in the designers' room too
- ❑ When you write, trust your audience



BE THE CHANGE YOU WISH TO SEE IN THE INDUSTRY



**THANK YOU,
AND
GOOD LUCK!**



SOURCES

[Social Media, News Consumption, and Polarization: Evidence from a Field Experiment](#)

[Video games for good: Active perspective-taking fosters empathy and reduces implicit bias toward gendered violence victims](#)

[Study: An Abundance of Media Fuels Polarization](#)

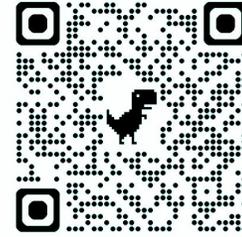
[Exploring the Impact of Internet Use on Memory and Attention Processes](#)

[Center for Humane Technology: Centering Values](#)

[The Struggle for Human Attention: Between the Abuse of Social Media and Digital Wellbeing](#)

[Lawmakers Hold Hearing on the Impact of Screen Time on Kids](#)

Find Your Core Values



GameDevDolin.com

LINK TO SOURCES



[The State of Video Gaming in 2026 \(Early Access Edition\)](#)

