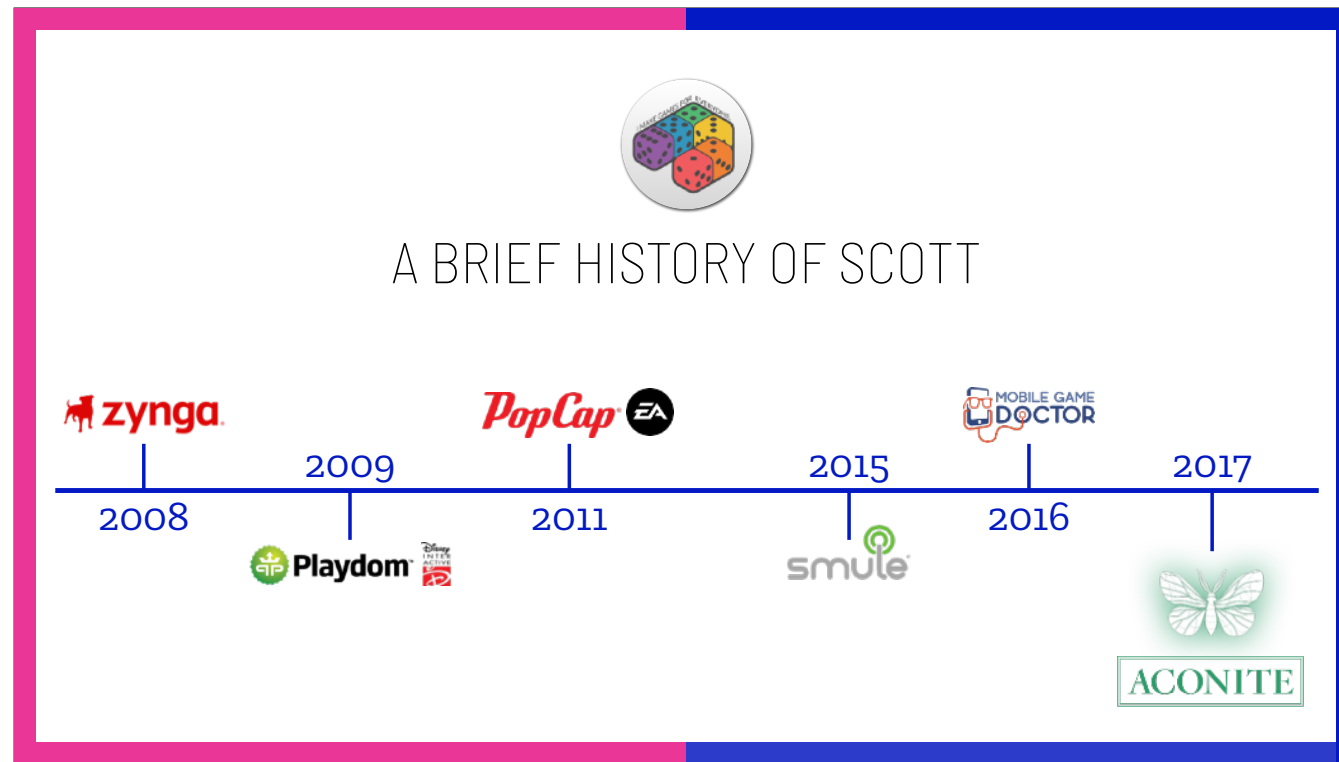




Hello there! My name is Scott Jon Siegel. I was lead designer on HoloVista, and I want to tell you the story of how it was designed and developed. This is a story about an unconventional design process, and what it took to find a unique structure for expressing a beautiful narrative through gameplay.



I've been designing games professionally for the last 14 years, almost exclusively in the casual, free-to-play space. And after years of full-time employment (and a brief attempt to depart the industry entirely) I started freelancing and consulting in 2016.

And in 2017, I was introduced to Star and Nadya, of Aconite.

STAR ST.GERMAIN



NADYA LEV

Nadya Lev is a professional photographer, writer, and artist.

Star St.Germain is an illustrator, musician, poet, and graphic designer.

And together, they founded the company Aconite, in order to expand their combined creative skills into a more interactive medium.

DECEMBER 1, 2017



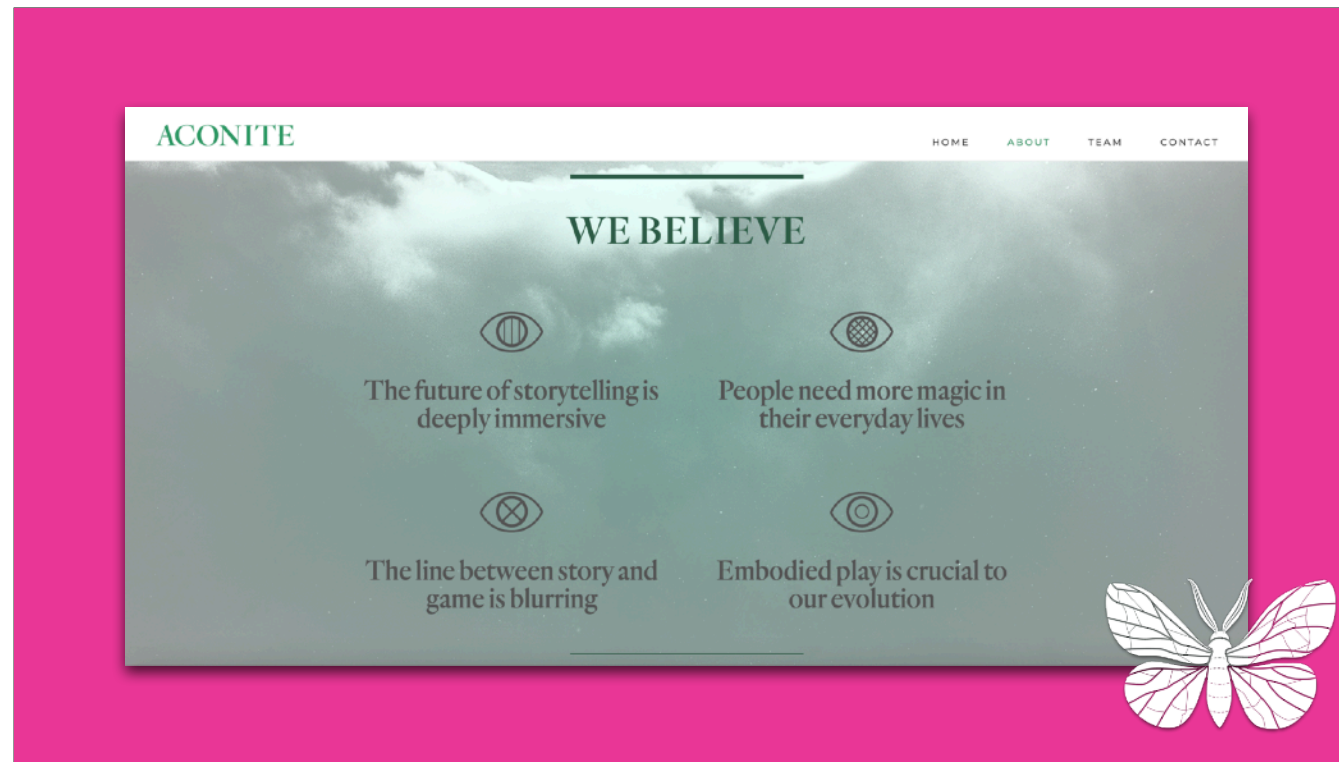
Verve Coffee Roasters, San Francisco

Our first meeting was on a sunny December, in a fancy San Francisco coffee shop.

I ordered a chai, they got matching matcha lattes,

and we sat and discussed their company, and their aspirations.

Star and Nadya wanted my help designing a game. I asked what kind, and they said they didn't know.



What they did know, was what they wanted the game to achieve.

Aconite was founded on the idea of crafting immersive experiences that would blur the lines between fiction and reality, and they wanted their first game to tell a compelling story about technology and culture.

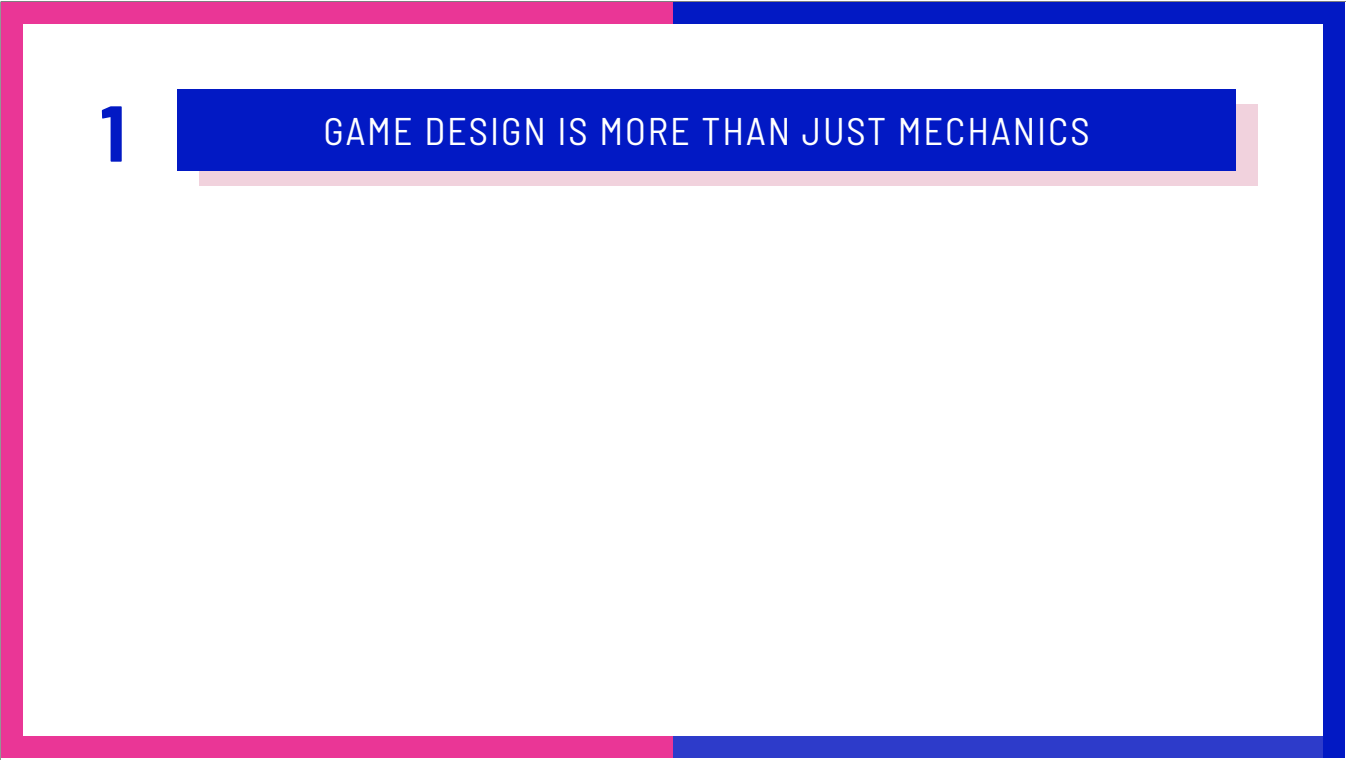
To them, the game's genre didn't matter, at least not yet.



That game would eventually become HoloVista. But what HoloVista was, changed throughout our creative process. And finding the shape of HoloVista required us to be flexible on what kind of game it could be, in order to achieve Aconite's goals.

And this genre-fluid approach, this mechanical agnosticism, is what allowed us to find the structure we ultimately landed on.

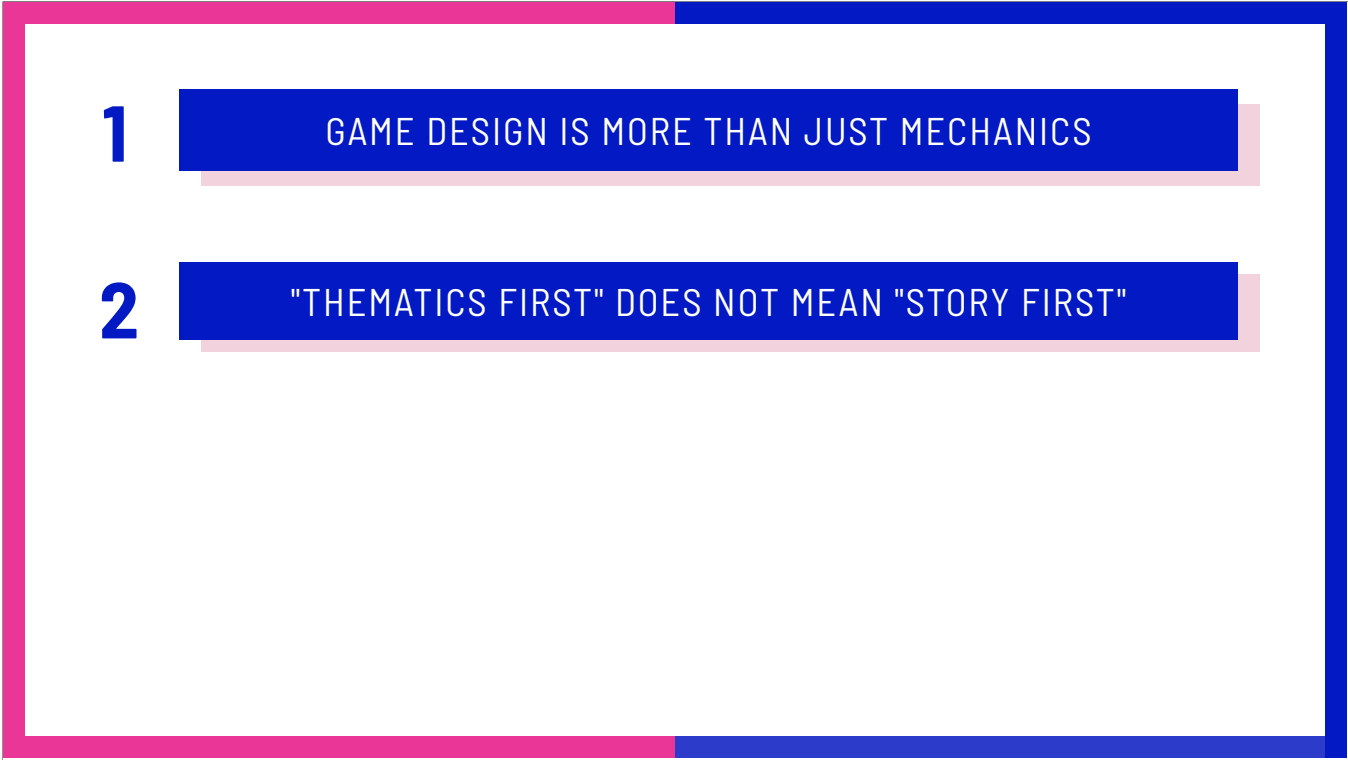
I want to walk through the steps we took to get there, and the most important things that we learned.



1

GAME DESIGN IS MORE THAN JUST MECHANICS

1) That game design is more than just mechanics. And for story-focused games, a thematics-first approach lets you consider mechanics that will help tell the type of story you want to tell, rather than trying to cram your type of story into a pre-defined structure.



1

GAME DESIGN IS MORE THAN JUST MECHANICS

2

"THEMATICS FIRST" DOES NOT MEAN "STORY FIRST"

2) But thematics first does NOT mean story-first, and sometimes finding the best narrative structure means not tying it to any one particular plot, instead crafting a structure that can tell the type of story you want to tell, and only then crafting a narrative that works best within that structure.

1

GAME DESIGN IS MORE THAN JUST MECHANICS

2

"THEMATICS FIRST" DOES NOT MEAN "STORY FIRST"

3

CONTRIVANCE > VERISIMILITUDE

3) And that narrative can be best served through gameplay when contrivance is embraced. That allowing for game-like structure doesn't come at the cost of immersion, and can actually provide better scaffolding for expression than an adherence to "realism"

1

GAME DESIGN IS MORE THAN JUST MECHANICS

2

"THEMATICS FIRST" DOES NOT MEAN "STORY FIRST"

3

CONTRIVANCE > VERISIMILITUDE

4

THE BEST GAME YOU CAN MAKE IS THE ONE YOU CAN SHIP

4) And lastly, that the best possible game you can make is one you can actually ship. We compromised heavily on the ambition of HoloVista, but those compromises led us to the thing we made, which is exactly what it needed to be.

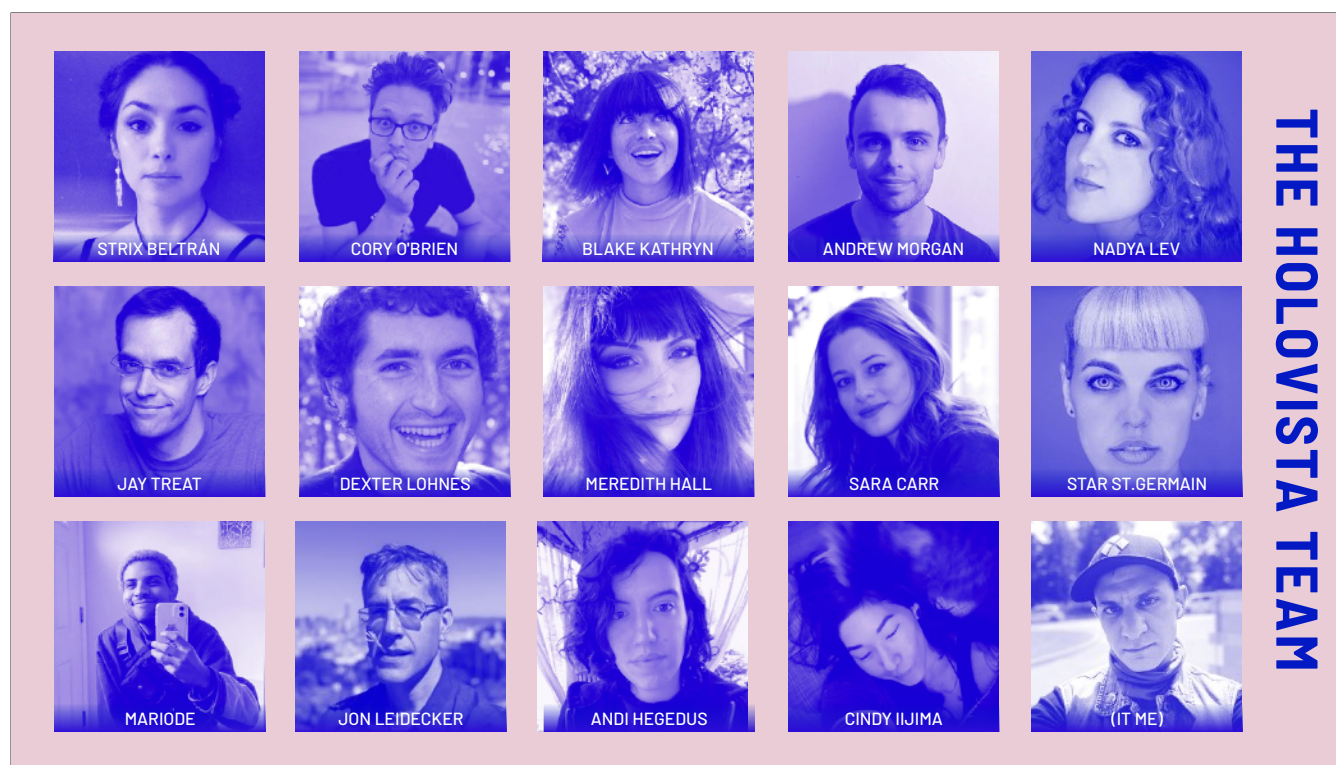
- 
- 1 GAME DESIGN IS MORE THAN JUST MECHANICS
 - 2 "THEMATICS FIRST" DOES NOT MEAN "STORY FIRST"
 - 3 CONTRIVANCE > VERISIMILITUDE
 - 4 THE BEST GAME YOU CAN MAKE IS THE ONE YOU CAN SHIP
 - 5 DOCUMENT YOUR PROCESS

And if there's a fifth learning to be had from this talk, it is this: DOCUMENT YOUR PROCESS. Our ability to reflect back on HoloVista's development owes to us embracing documentation from a very early stage. It's how we were able to learn from every choice, good and bad. It's how I was able to write this talk.



Before diving in, I do want to take a moment to acknowledge that what HoloVista is, what it accomplishes, owes to a great deal more than just its mechanical design.

And though this talk doesn't cover these other aspects, it would feel unusual, and wrong, to not give credit for the game's holistic shape to its other critical components:



The incredible story crafted by our narrative designers **Strix Beltran** and **Cory O'Brien**, with additional writing by **Sara Carr**

The surreal vaporwave aesthetic brought to life by our environmental artists **Blake Kathryn** and **Andrew Morgan** our haunting soundtrack by electronic artist **Mariode**, atmospheric sound design by **Jon Leidecker**, and our accessibility efforts spearheaded and evangelized by producer **Meredith Hall**.

To say nothing of our code crafted by **Jay Treat** and **Dexter Lohnes**, tireless QA by **Cindy Iijima** and additional literally everything by Associate Producer **Andi Hegedus**.

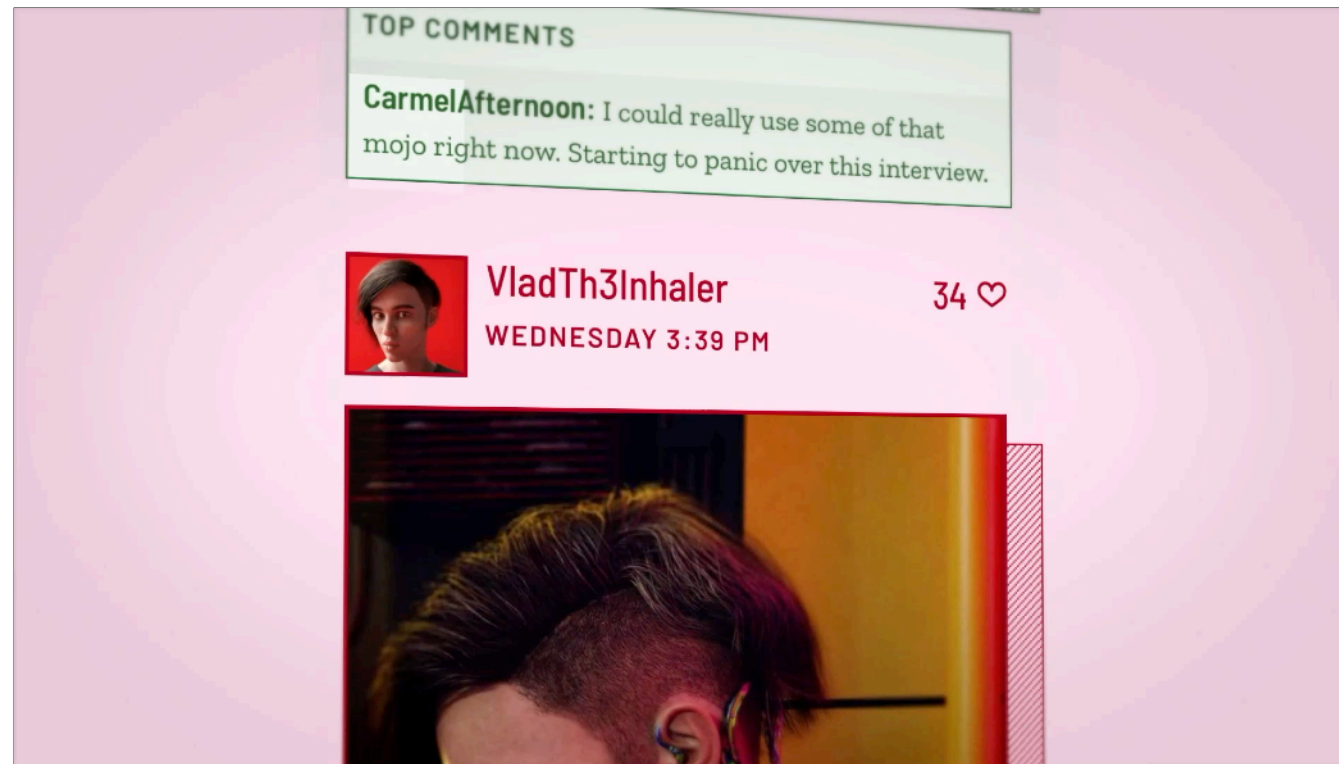
And of course, the work of **Star** and **Nadya**, who not only co-directed the game, but also contributed art, animation, code, design, and music alongside the team.

This was a small but formidable group of incredibly talented people, and the game wouldn't exist as it does today without every single one of them.

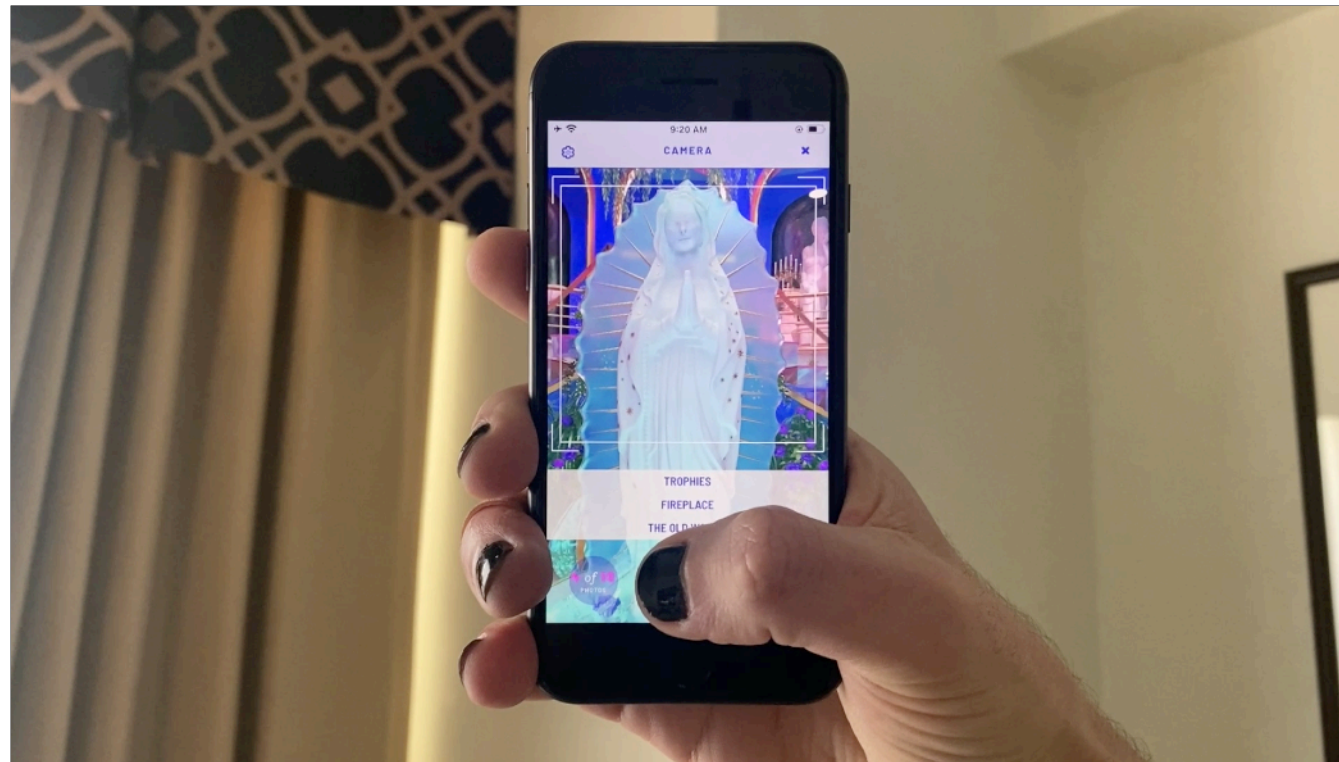


So, what is HoloVista?

HoloVista is... hard to describe sometimes. Maybe it's simplest to call it an immersive hidden object and storytelling game. You could also call it a social media simulation, or a visual novel. It's also a VR game without VR goggles. An augmented reality game, sans reality.



HoloVista is styled as a fictional, Instagram-like social media app. You play as Carmen Razo, an aspiring architect living in New York in the nearish future, and you experience the story entirely through the (literal) lens of her social media.



When you open the “camera” in Carmen's app, you are viewing a virtual 3D environment, a place Carmen has been. Players can move their devices to look around, as though you were looking through your phone’s own camera.

And, of course, you take photographs, which you post to Carmen's feed to progress the story.

Through these mechanisms, HoloVista expresses a beautiful, haunting narrative about memory, identity, and authenticity. No spoilers in this talk, but if you want to play it yourself (and you should), it only takes around 3 hours to complete.

BACK IN 2017...

**Let's make a game that blurs fiction
and reality to tell a compelling story
about technology and culture.**



That was the game we shipped in 2020. In 2017, none of that was known. All we knew was the highest of high level.



SAN FRANCISCO

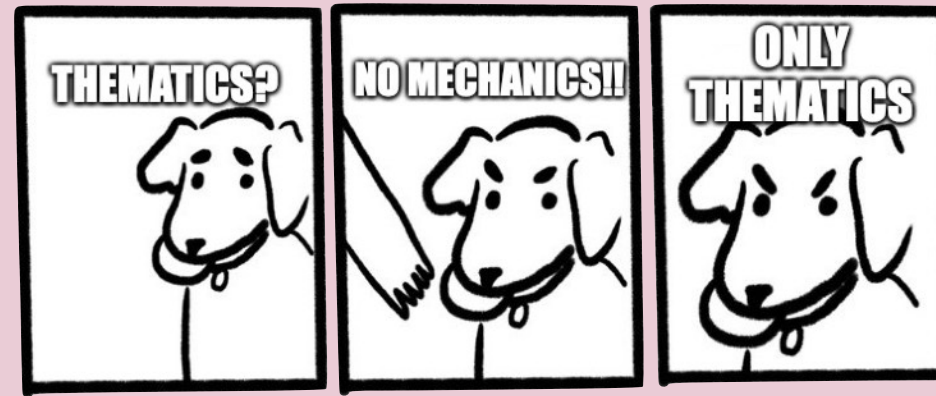
We would meet regularly at an artist coop space in downtown SF. Our earliest discussions focused around Star and Nadya's interests, both in modes of storytelling, and topics prevalent in technology and culture news of the moment.



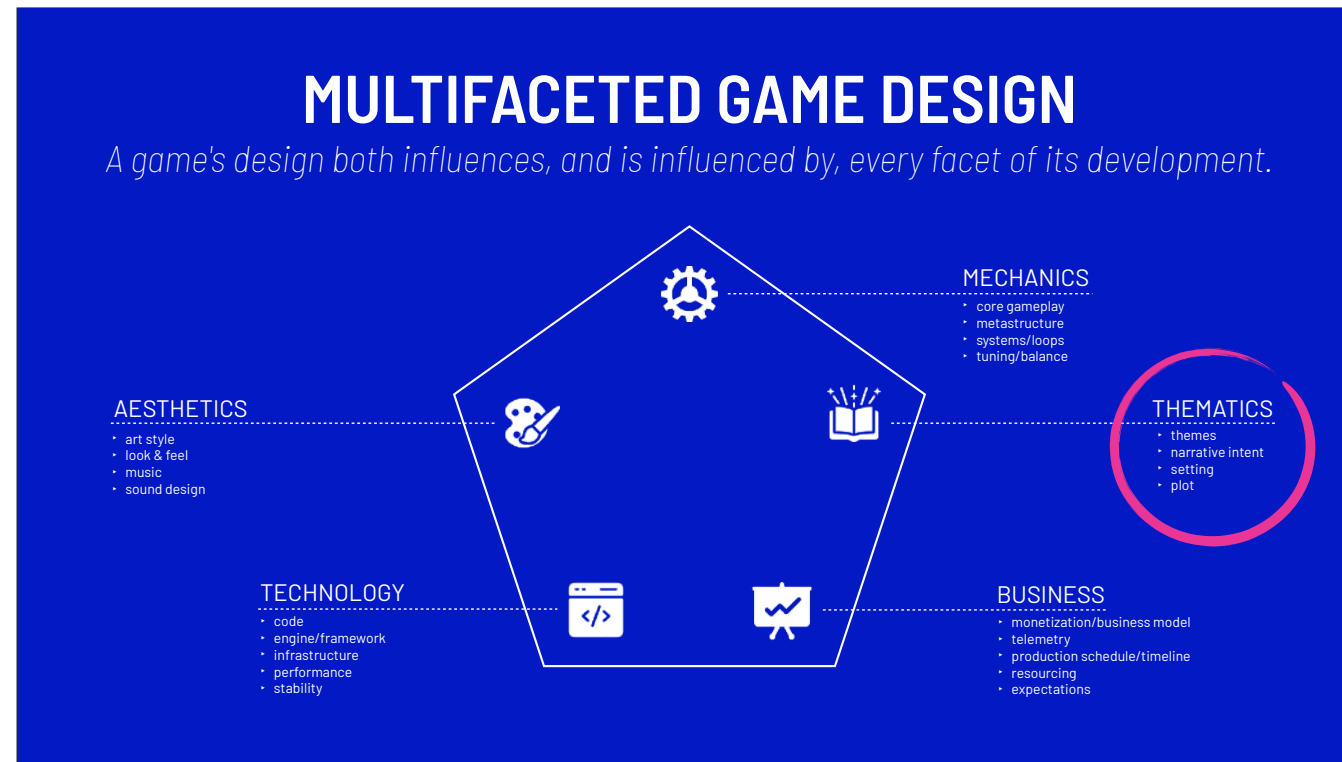
THEMATICS-FIRST

- intersections of magic and technology
- computer vision
- divination (throwing sticks, tarot)
- AI, algorithms (approaching sentience and the singularity)
- Yahoo answers
- mechanical turks

And this is what I mean by thematics first. They shared short stories that evoked the worlds they wanted to play in. We discussed common topics of interest, ranging from AI, and computer vision, to divination, and magic, mechanical turks and Yahoo answers.



But at this stage, what we DIDN'T discuss, were specific game concepts. We weren't in a rush to lock down a genre, or core mechanics. Not before we knew what our thematic focus was going to be.

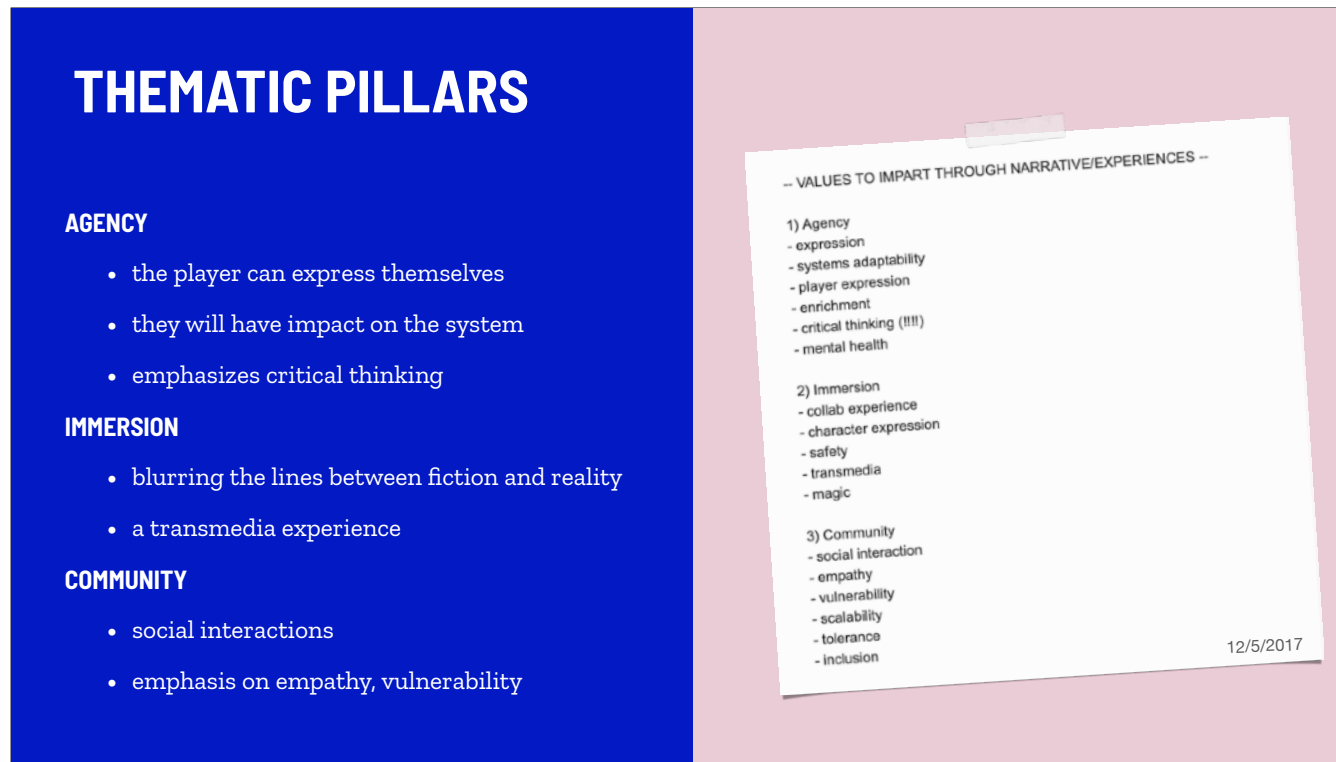


And this has since become kind of a core thesis of mine. The idea that holistically, game design is a function of all aspects of a game's development.

We may think of the design as being just about the game's mechanics, but game development is a multi-faceted discipline, with each facet informing, and being informed by, every other.

Whether they're the game's **thematics**, its **aesthetics**, its **technology** and even its **business**, There are always interlocking dependencies, and for any type of problem, at any stage of development, it can be useful to consider the design through all these facets, not just mechanics.

For us, our focus was on thematics, first and foremost.



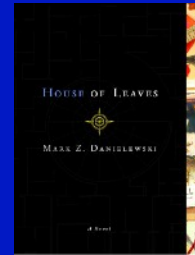
Which led us to start establishing core pillars of our thematics: What we wanted to come across through whatever narrative we expressed, and whatever mechanics we used to express it:

We wanted the player to have agency, both in self-expression, and in their impact on the game's systems.

We wanted the experience to be immersive, to blur fiction and reality.

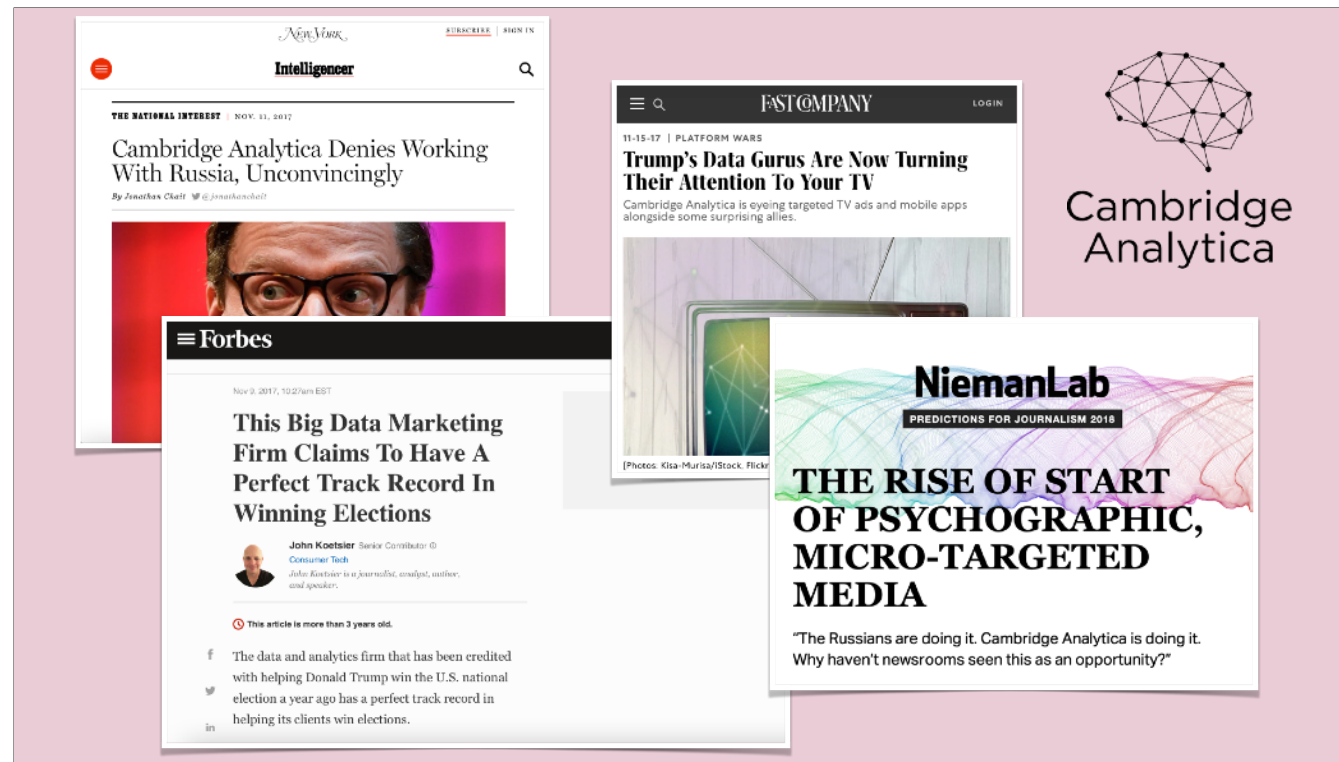
And we wanted there to be a community aspect, emphasizing empathy and connection to others.

THEMATICS / AESTHETICS



At this stage we were seeking both thematic and aesthetic inspiration. Looking at interesting storytelling structures, particular themes of interest, as well as art styles, imagery, vibes we'd want to evoke.

One topic in particular was Cambridge Analytica,



the political consulting firm that would become embroiled in controversy in 2018.

And as we discussed its implications more and more, the micro-targeting, predictive algorithms, big data fueled by personal information, we realized we had a lot to say.

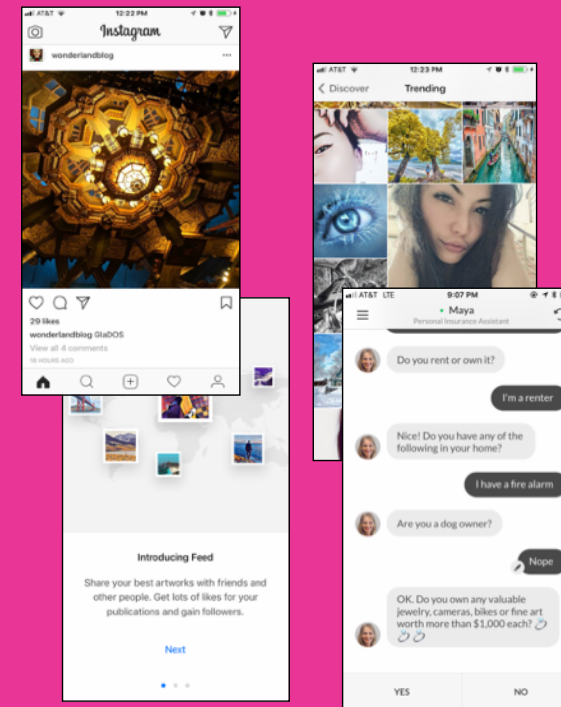


So, we decided to make social media our focus. And if we wanted to blur fiction to comment on reality, then we would speak to social media through its own lens.

And **this** is when mechanical conversations started in earnest. Social media was a thematic wrapper. What kind of game would live within it?

WHAT DOES "SOCIAL MEDIA" GET US?

- **FOLLOWERS**
 - incremental/decremental value indicative of success and audience
- **SOCIAL GRAPH**
 - content visibility
 - public vs. private
- **LIKES/REACTIONS**
 - dopamine tied to content creation
- **COMMENTS**
 - responses to content
 - discourse
- **LOCAL/GLOBAL IMPACT**



Well, fortunately, social media's already heavily systematized, and suggestive of many mechanics. We saw at our disposal a wide range of levers:

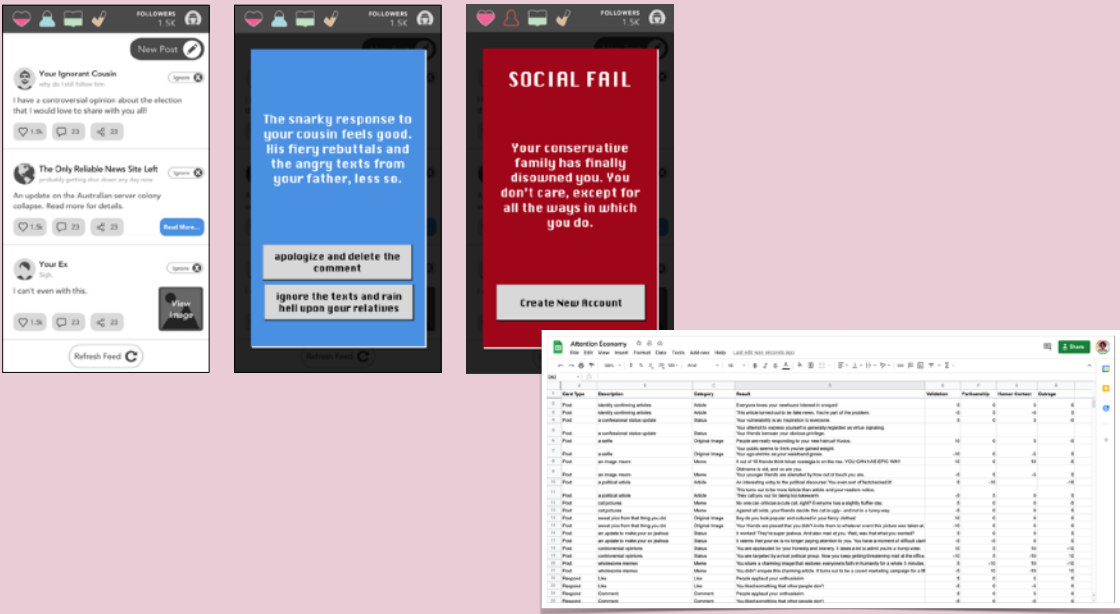
followers, as indicators of both "success" and audience.

the social graph as a mechanism for the visibility of content: public vs. private

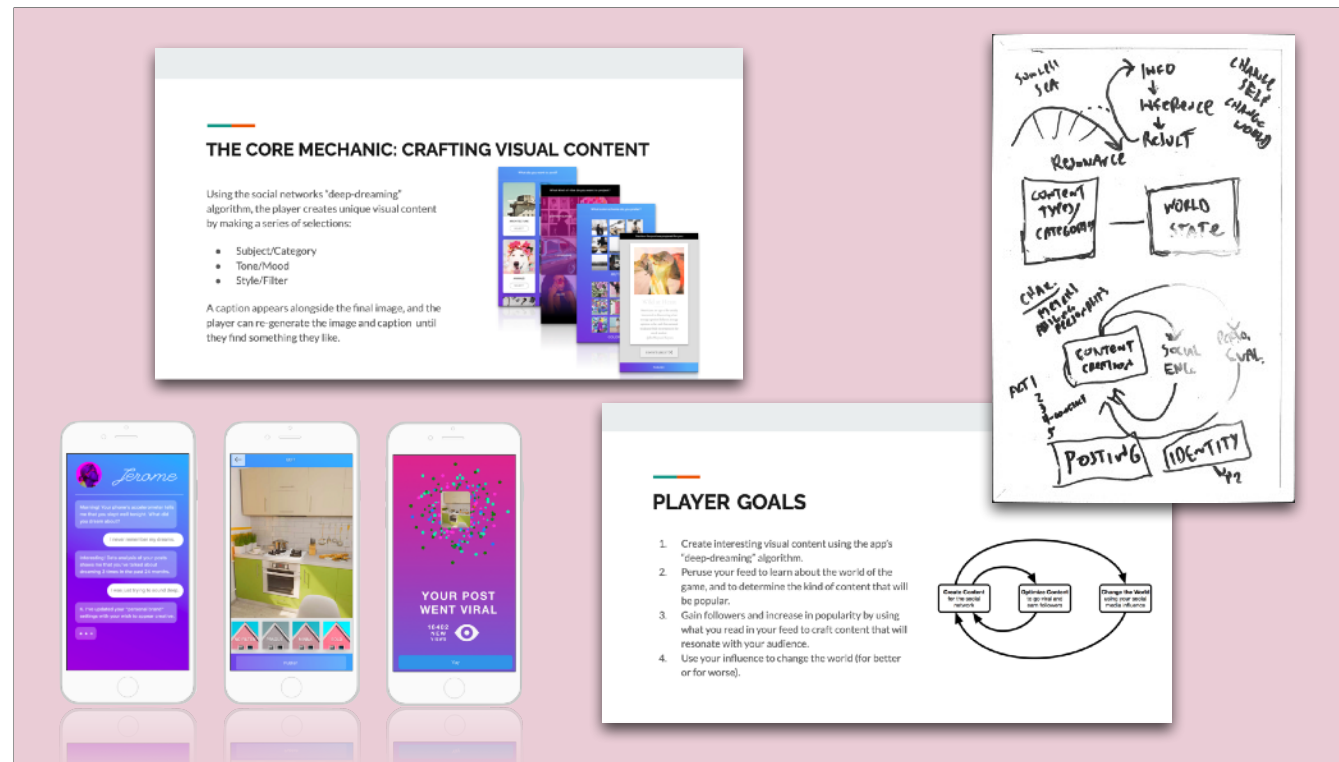
the dopamine hits of Likes and Reactions

Comments as a mode of discourse around posted content

And actions with both local and global impact. Plenty to work with. Where to start?



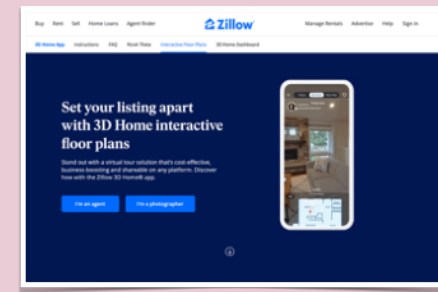
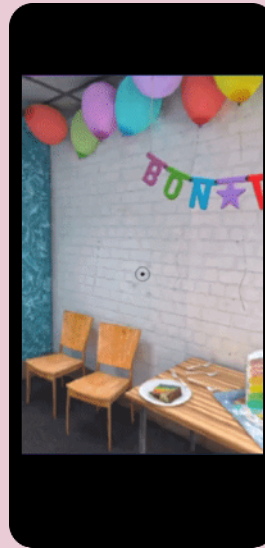
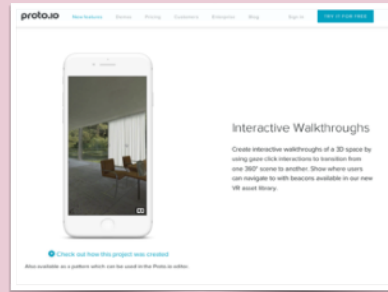
Our early concepts were heavily systematized. One used a Reigns-style mechanic where Liking, Commenting, Reblogging would cause social status changes that could lead to fail states.



Another had a "friendly" AI who would help you go viral by suggesting the types of images and captions that would attract different audiences.

These explorations were interesting, but not quite compelling enough.

THE "VR" PROTOTYPE



Around this time, Nadya was using proto.io to build our various prototypes, and discovered that they had added an "interactive walkthrough" feature where you could use your phone's gyroscope to view a 3D space.

Similar tech was being used for real estate listings. But Nadya, being a photographer...

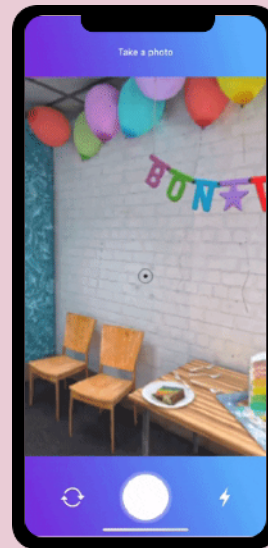
THE "VR" PROTOTYPE

ties to social media thematics

immersive, reality-blurring

gives player agency

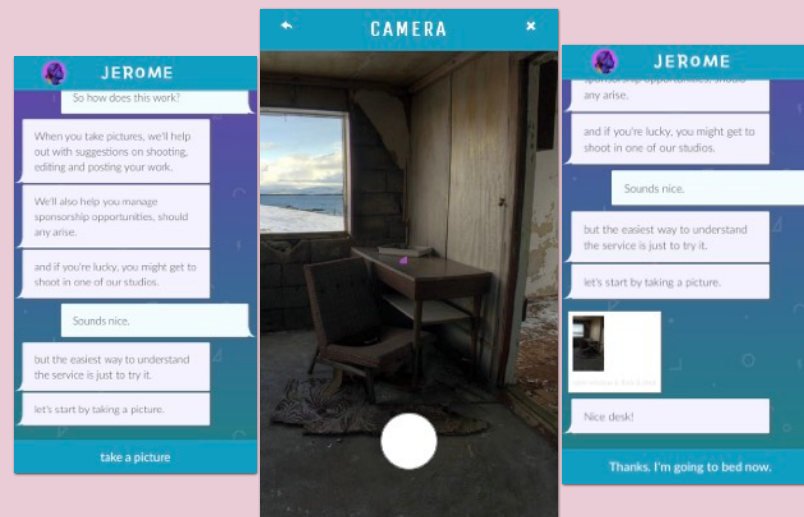
mechanical implications



...took the feature and added a shutter button. And suddenly you're not just looking around a space. Now you're looking through a camera.

The possibilities were immediately apparent. It tied to our themes of social media. The VR feeling was immersive, and reality-blurring. Players had agency through self-expression. And there were mechanical implications.

THE CAMERA PROTOTYPE



We evolved the prototype with the ability to detect what you took photos of. Sort of Zillow meets Pokémon Snap.

And with that, we had a new mechanic that tied to our thematics, and could give the player agency in our story.

Great, so, what are we going to do with it?



The image shows a white smartphone on a magenta background. The screen displays a camera interface with a blue header bar containing a close button and the text 'Take a photo'. The main view is a 3D rendered scene of a desk with a computer monitor, a chair, and a lamp. At the bottom of the screen is a camera control bar with a circular shutter button and a flash icon. The phone is reflected on the surface below it.

WHAT DOES THE CAMERA GET US?

- player can take photos in different locations
- we know what's in the photos
- photos taken can influence the story direction
- branching narrative through photo taking and other social media behaviors

Well, we could really do anything.

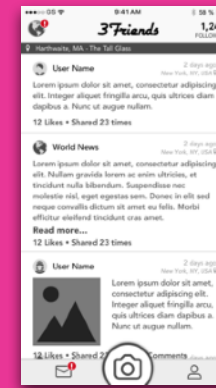
The player could visit different locations, take photos, and we could evaluate the photos based on their content.

And we could have the story change depending on what they took photos of.

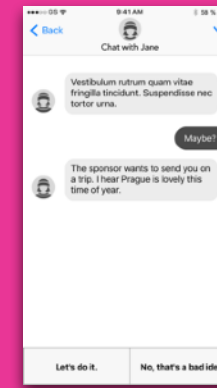
1. Take photo
2. Select caption
3. View results
4. Read feed
5. Character chat (with choices)
6. Travel to new location



CAMERA



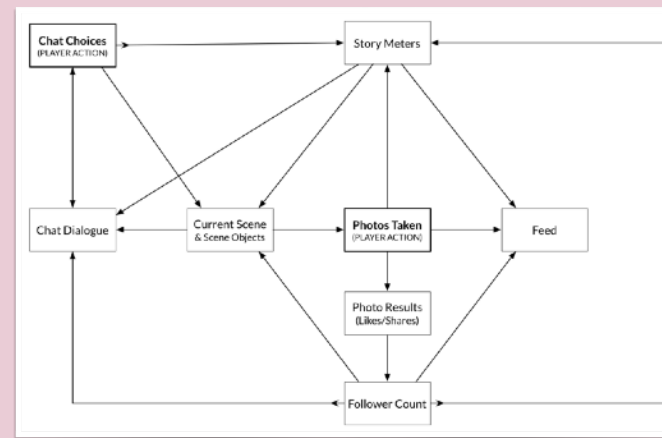
FEED



CHAT

We envisioned this as a loop of taking photos, picking captions, reading the feed, chatting with characters, and then traveling to new locations to take photos, and so on.

GDD V1 MAY, 2018



Aconite 3Friends Project

Game Design Document

Scott Jon Siegel for Aconite

First Draft - May 9, 2018

Overview

This document provides overarching design direction for the "3Friends" game/app. Its intention is to lay out all the components of the game necessary for implementation, including core game systems, features, and screens, and to surface content requirements.

App Overview

"3Friends" (working title) is a game that uses the framework of a fictional Instagram-like social app to convey a story in the style of interactive fiction. By reading the social network's feed, taking photographs with a virtual camera mechanic, and engaging in chat with characters, the player will impact the events of the story, which will culminate in one of several different endings, encouraging multiple replays in order to see all the content.

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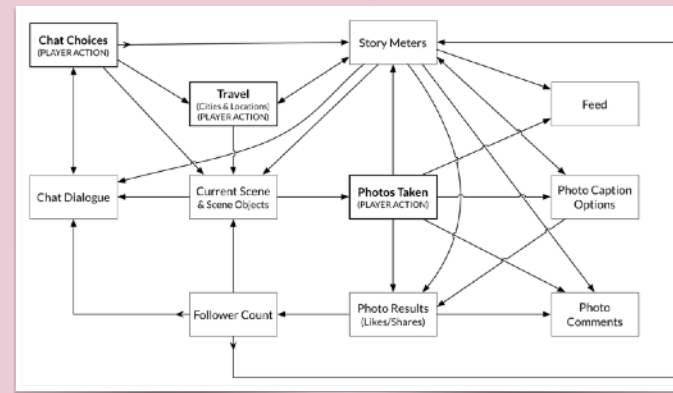
[App Overview](#)

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[Game Systems](#)

Our first GDD described a system where player choices could influence the game's world, and story direction. Depending on what things the player photographed, and the things they said in chat, the narrative would unfold one way or another.

GDD V3 JULY, 2018



Aconite 3Friends Project

Game Design Document

Scott Jon Siegel for Aconite

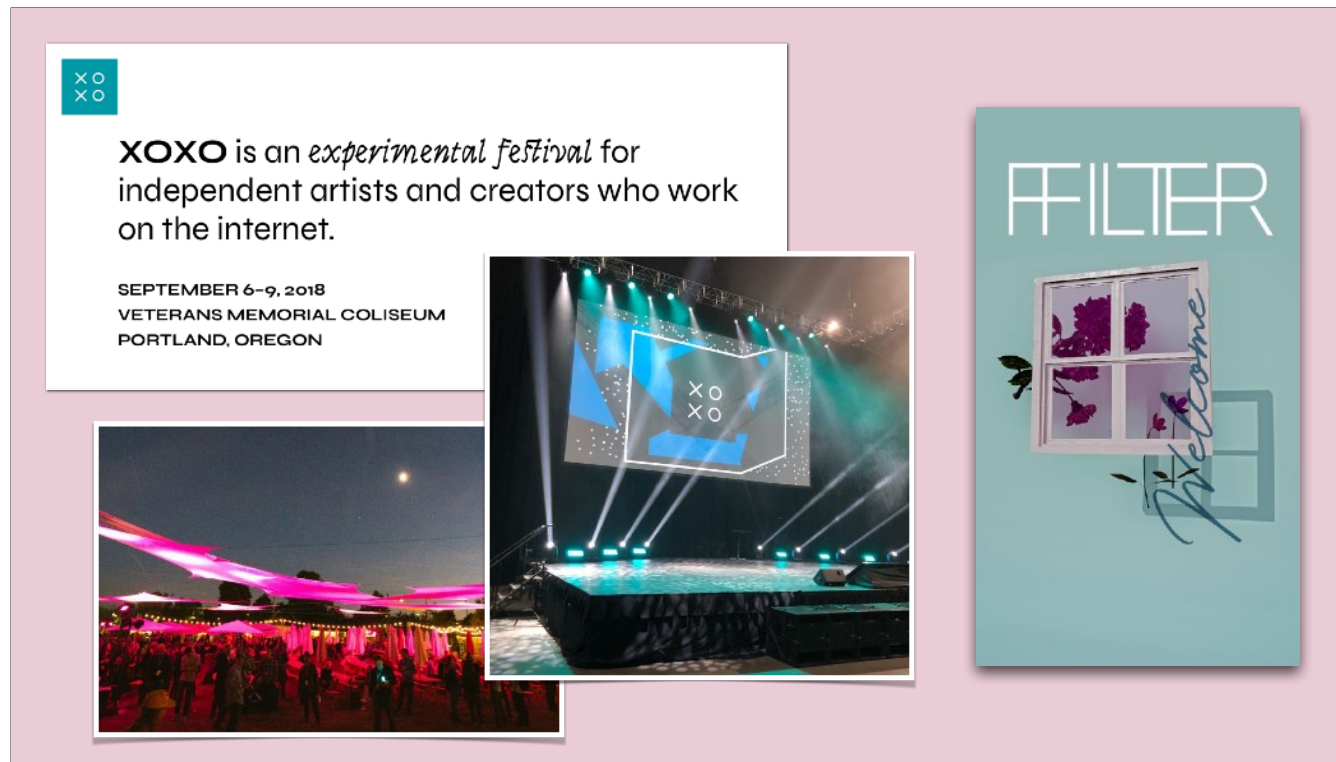
Version 3 - July 18, 2018

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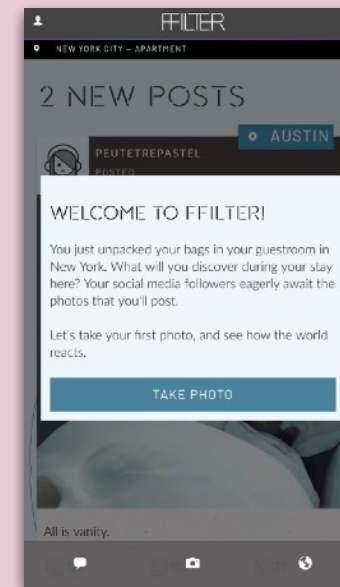
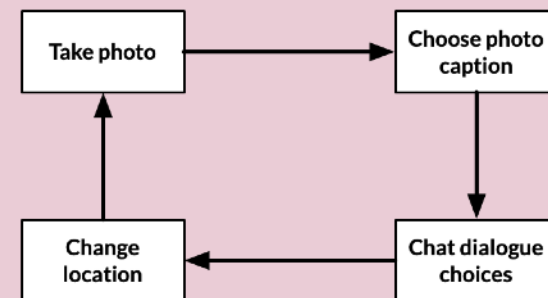
And because this wasn't complex enough, we then expanded the concept further, to have more types of player choice influence parts of the system.

It's easy now to look back and realize that this was ambitious. Especially for a new team. And especially given that, as lead designer, I'd never worked on a branching narrative game before.



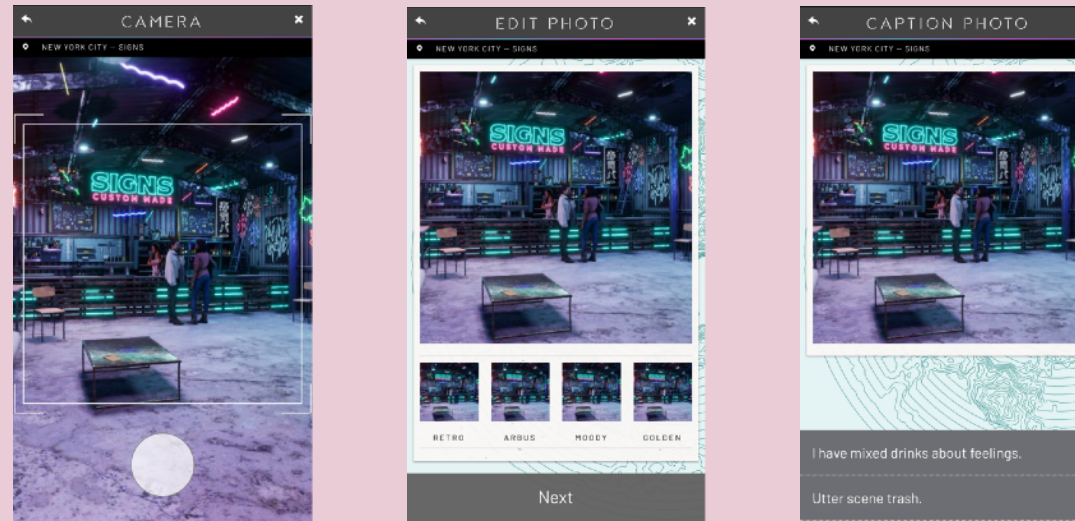
So it was for the best that we decided to build out a full vertical of this prototype to demo and playtest at the internet art festival xoxo, in September 2018. It imposed a deadline on our work, which was incredibly useful given the scope of the concept.

THE "FFILTER" BUILD



This version, called FFilter, framed the player character as an up-and-coming influencer, getting paid to travel to new locations and take photos of places and events.

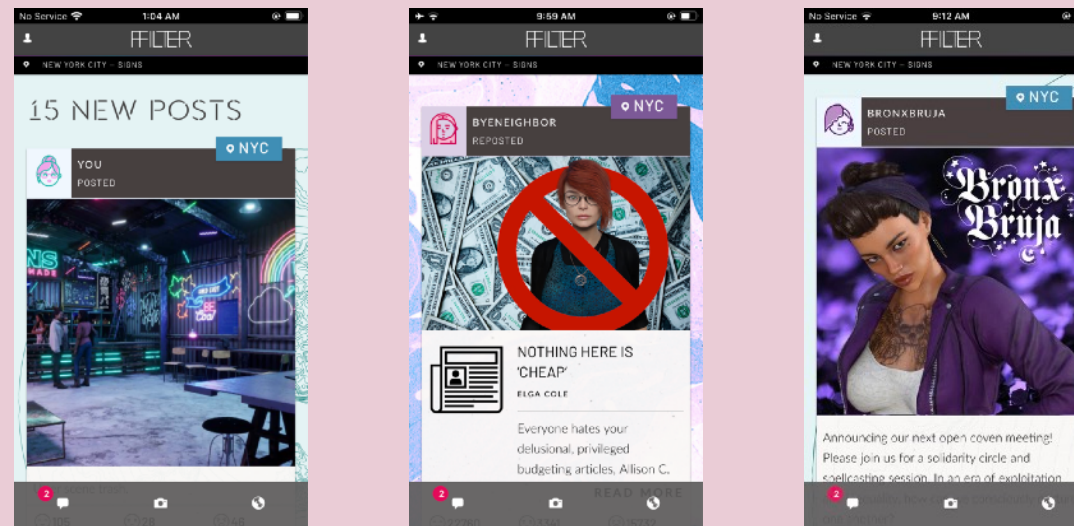
PHOTOGRAPH + CAPTION



The player would open the camera into a location.

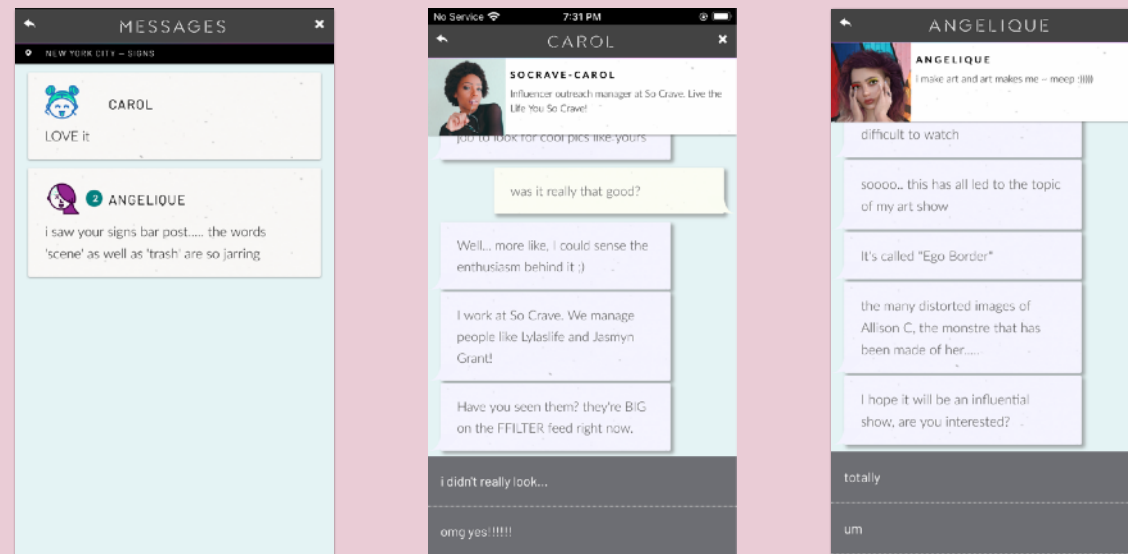
They'd be able to look around, and take one photo, which they'd then apply a filter to, and pick one of two captions (which were related to what was in the photo)

READING THE FEED



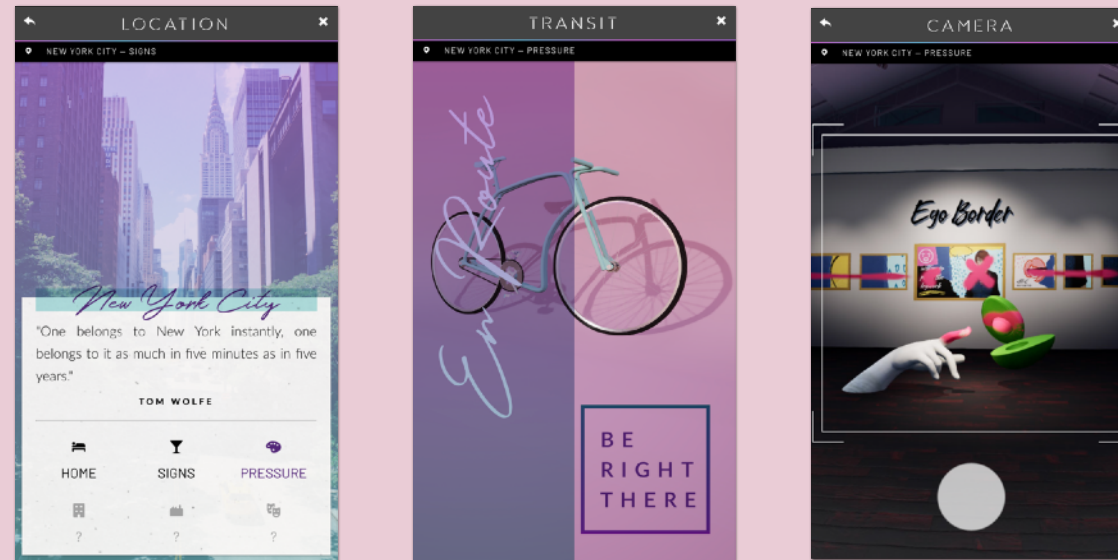
The photo would get posted to the feed, which would also populate with posts from other characters from around the same time period. The player can read those posts to get a sense of the world, and the larger story.

CHARACTER CHAT WITH CHOICES

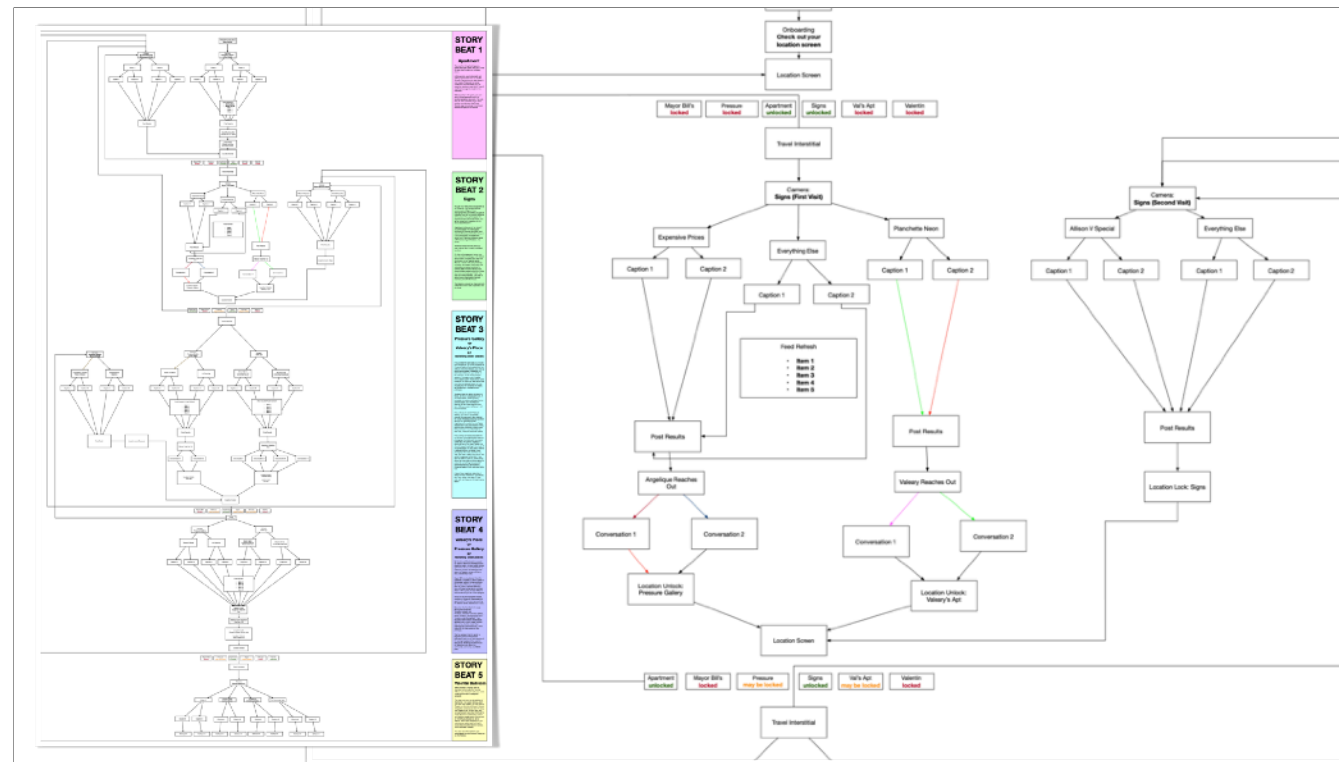


At the same time, characters would reach out over chat, and the player had choices as to how to respond. Depending on these choices, the characters might suggest the player visit one location or another.

TRAVELING TO NEW LOCATIONS



The player would then use the Location feature in the app to visit those new locations, where they would take another photo, apply filter, caption, and post, resulting in more feed and another character messaging them. And that's the loop.



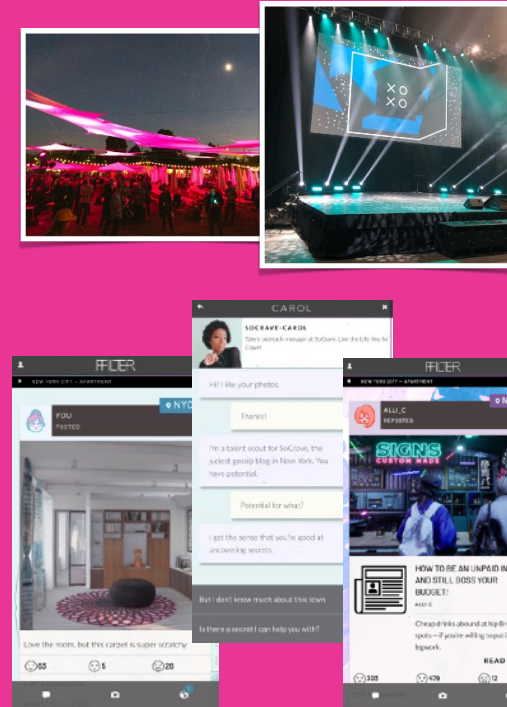
This was the narrative map for just our prototype build. 5 locations to visit. And all this variance in choice structure, amounting to about 15 minutes of gameplay.

So, how'd it go?

FIRST PLAYABLE FEEDBACK

XOXO FESTIVAL, SEPTEMBER 2018

- Players loved the aesthetic
- Opening the camera for the first time was a jaw-dropping moment
- **Didn't know what to photograph**
- **Unclear how player choices impact the story**
- **Players not paying attention to the feed**
- **Story hard to follow**
- **Playing as a social media influencer was unappealing**



Players loved the look and feel (massive credit to Star's graphic design),

and the moment of opening the camera into a virtual space was one that was a repeated highlight.

But they didn't know what they should be photographing.

They didn't understand the significance of their actions.

And most players weren't bothering to read the content in the social media feed.

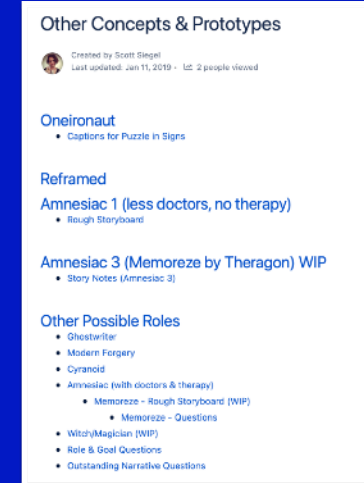
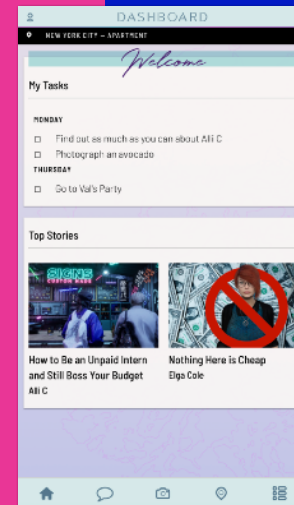
so they either didn't follow the story, or if they did, didn't care enough to get invested.

In part because the idea of playing as a social media influencer was also unappealing.

POST-XOXO IDEATION

OCTOBER-DECEMBER 2018

- adding quest/journaling system to make goals more explicit, and keep track of the story
- changing the story to be more engaging



More playtesting after xoxo reinforced the feedback we received: what we had wasn't resonating. How could we make it work?

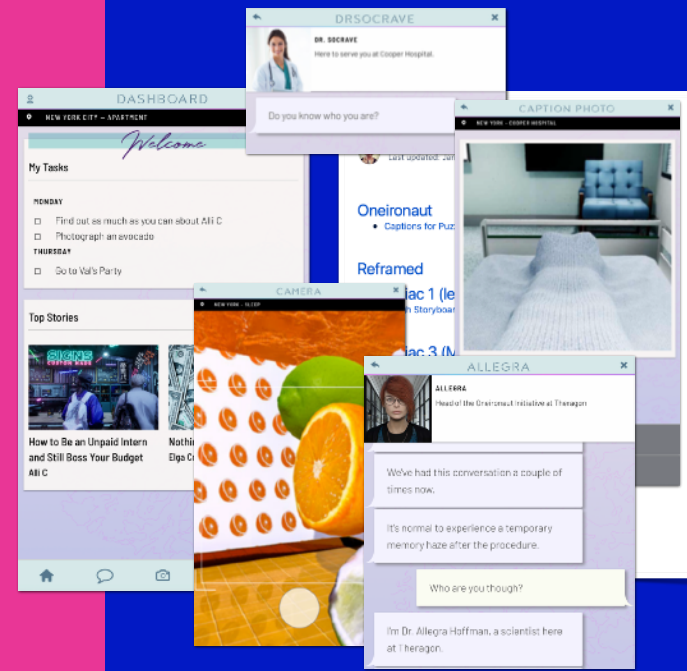
Players were having a hard time following the story, and knowing what to do next, so we added a journaling system to help guide them.

And the "you're an influencer" story itself wasn't engaging, so we experimented with different narrative ideas.

POST-XOXO IDEATION

OCTOBER-DECEMBER 2018

- adding quest/journaling system to make goals more explicit, and keep track of the story
- changing the story to be more engaging



Our only constant in this exploration was the structure we'd already built. How could we create something more compelling around the idea of photo taking and posting?

Every team member went off on pitching their own version of the game. Maybe you were posting photos taken in your dreams. Or you were an amnesiac revisiting places you had been and taking photos to recover your memory. Or you were a detective using social media to solve a murder case.

Role & Goal Questions

 Created by Nadya Lev
Last updated: Nov 19, 2018 •  1 person viewed

This also exists as a template! Click below to utilize the template if you wish to run an idea through it:

Create from template

- Why am I going places?
- Why am I taking photos?
- Why am I posting?
- Where am I posting?
- Why do I want to read the feed?
- What's my main objective?
 - What is the secondary objective?
 - Without something to complicate the objective -- an obstacle, a secondary goal, a conflicting goal -- we always end up with games that are like "go to point A when told, then go to point B when told", and the player just kind of "follows the story", which then forces you to come up with really strong answers for "why is it interesting for someone to take these actions themselves rather than read about them or (relevant in the youtube era) just watch someone else do it"
- How do I win? How do I lose (can I lose?)
- Why does the player want to do this?
- What is the player's emotional investment?

 Like Be the first to like this

No labels 

We kept trying to make the structure work by tweaking the narrative.

We wanted to know what the story of the game was. And if we could crack the story, we could figure out the right mechanics for it.

Created by Nadya Lev
Last updated: Nov 19, 2018 • 1 person viewed

Create from template

- Like Be the first to like this

[illegible]

Cynoid
Created by the Wolfram Demonstrations Project
Published 10/10/2014 10:00 AM

Brief description:
This is the story of my son, but 7500 characters later it is an extremely long answer to a question. Perhaps just there to appear to not be so boring. Character 1 character in their heads and the future, and the future, and without a body, then together, as one. Perhaps they are together.

Questions:
Why am I getting answers?
As I go, are doing a normal influence thing, whatever answers. This changes when you
Why am I asking questions?
Because it's your job.
Why am I getting?
Because it's your job. This information is to be given.
Where are you getting?
To the people of your choice, it is included.
Why don't I want to read?
To get content, it will answer.
What is my main stage?
Help in making your goal.
Why do I make your goal?
What is the second
identity and cause of
the in the future.

Wolfram
Created by the Wolfram Demonstrations Project
Published 10/10/2014 10:00 AM

Answer 1: Bias doctors, no therapy

Question A 45-year-old male with a 10-year history of alcohol abuse presents with a 2-week history of decreased energy, anhedonia, and weight loss. He reports no suicidal thoughts and no recent trauma. Physical examination is unremarkable. Laboratory tests show a mild anemia and elevated liver enzymes. What is the most likely diagnosis?

Options

- Major depressive disorder
- Alcohol withdrawal syndrome
- Generalized anxiety disorder
- Substance-induced mood disorder
- Post-traumatic stress disorder

Correct Answer: D. Substance-induced mood disorder

Explanation: The patient's symptoms are consistent with a mood disorder, but the history of alcohol abuse and the physical findings (mild anemia and elevated liver enzymes) suggest a substance-induced mood disorder. The symptoms are not severe enough to meet criteria for major depressive disorder, and there is no evidence of trauma or anxiety disorder. The physical findings are consistent with chronic alcohol use.

Learning Objectives:

- Understand the clinical presentation of substance-induced mood disorder.
- Recognize the importance of a thorough history and physical examination in diagnosing mood disorders.
- Identify the role of laboratory tests in diagnosing mood disorders.

References:

- Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5).
- Textbook of Psychiatry, 7th Edition, by Kaplan and Sadock.

[illegible]

And most critically: why would the player want to do any of this? What was their emotional investment? We struggled to find answers to these questions that we found satisfying, and we struggled to find a shape of the game that worked. And we were running out of ideas, and running out of time.



My first meeting with Star and Nadya had been at the end of 2017. And by the end of 2018 we still had no real certainty around what the game was going to be.

After 12 whole months on a direction that wasn't working, the project was in a bit of an existential spiral. After exploring so many ideas, trying so many things, there was a real fear that we might never figure it out, and the game might not ever ship.



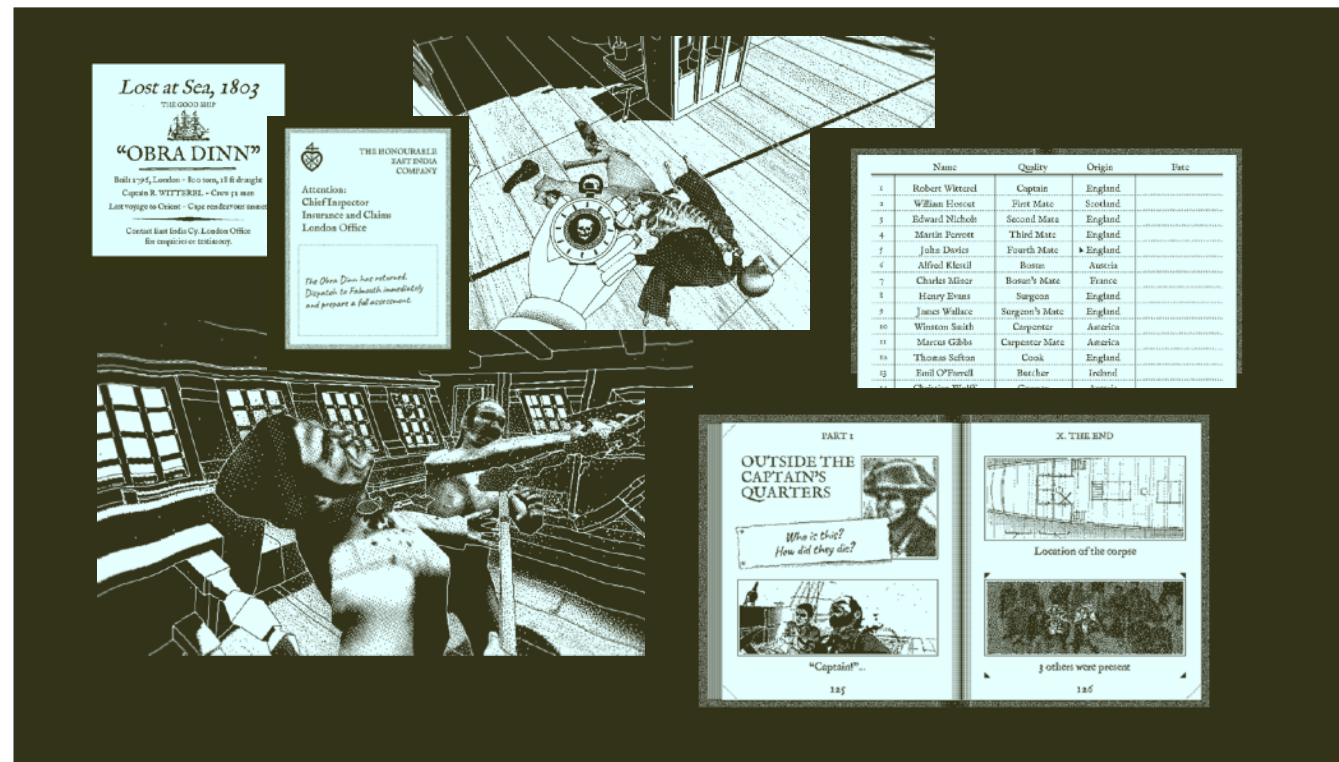
And we entered 2019 in kind of a dark place. So we did what any reasonable humans would do in the face of overwhelming despair...



We watched YouTube.



Star had been playing Return of the Obra Dinn, and wanted us all to watch the episode of Mark Brown's Game Maker's Toolkit on how the game works.



If you haven't played it, Obra Dinn is an adventure game set in the 1800s, where you have to uncover the fates of 60 people onboard a merchant ship that mysteriously vanished 5 years prior. You do so by using a mystical pocket watch to rewind time to the moment of each character's death, and you use their dialogue, the environment, and deductive reasoning skills to identify each person in the ship's manifest, and how they died or disappeared. It's an incredible game.

And I credit it, and Game Maker's Toolkit, with saving our project. So, thank you Lucas Pope and Mark Brown.



In the video, Mark Brown was interested in how Obra Dinn succeeded as a detective game, despite not having traditional "detective-y" mechanics. And he called particular attention to the mechanics of the pocket watch -- whose behavior is never fully explained -- and the player's journal that only confirms correct answers in sets of three.

And he likened them to similar mechanical conceits and limitations in Sam Barlow's Her Story.

He refers to these mechanics as CONTRIVED. But he doesn't mean that in a bad way.

"The worlds of Obra Dinn and Her Story are **not trying to be realistic**. Instead they have stories, gameplay systems, and means of interactivity **that exist purely for the purposes of allowing for deductive reasoning** - without taking power from the player's hands."

-Mark Brown, Game Maker's Toolkit



As he puts it,

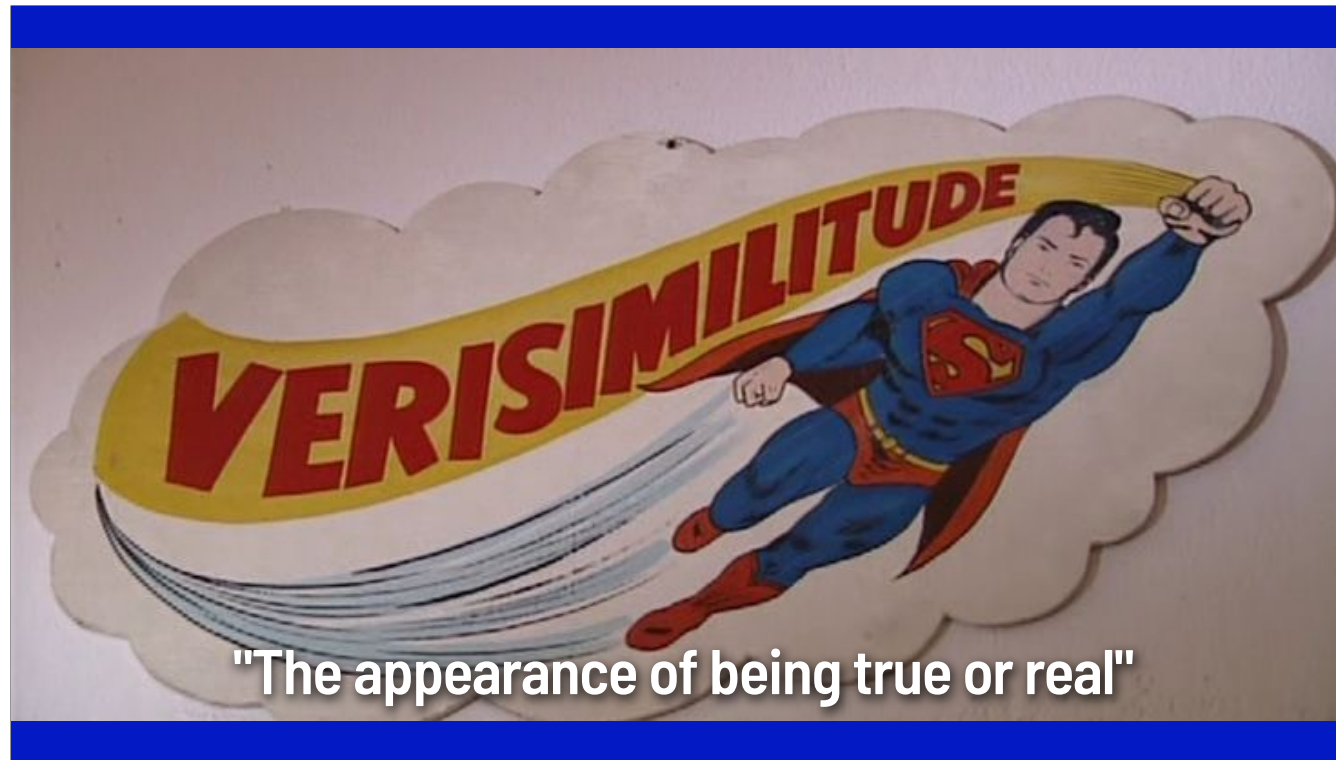
"The worlds of Obra Dinn and Her Story are not trying to be realistic. Instead they have stories, gameplay systems, and means of interactivity that exist purely for the purposes of allowing for deductive reasoning - without taking power from the player's hands."



And that, for me, was a galaxy brain moment. Because the greatest impediment we were perpetually up against, was narrative justification for mechanics.

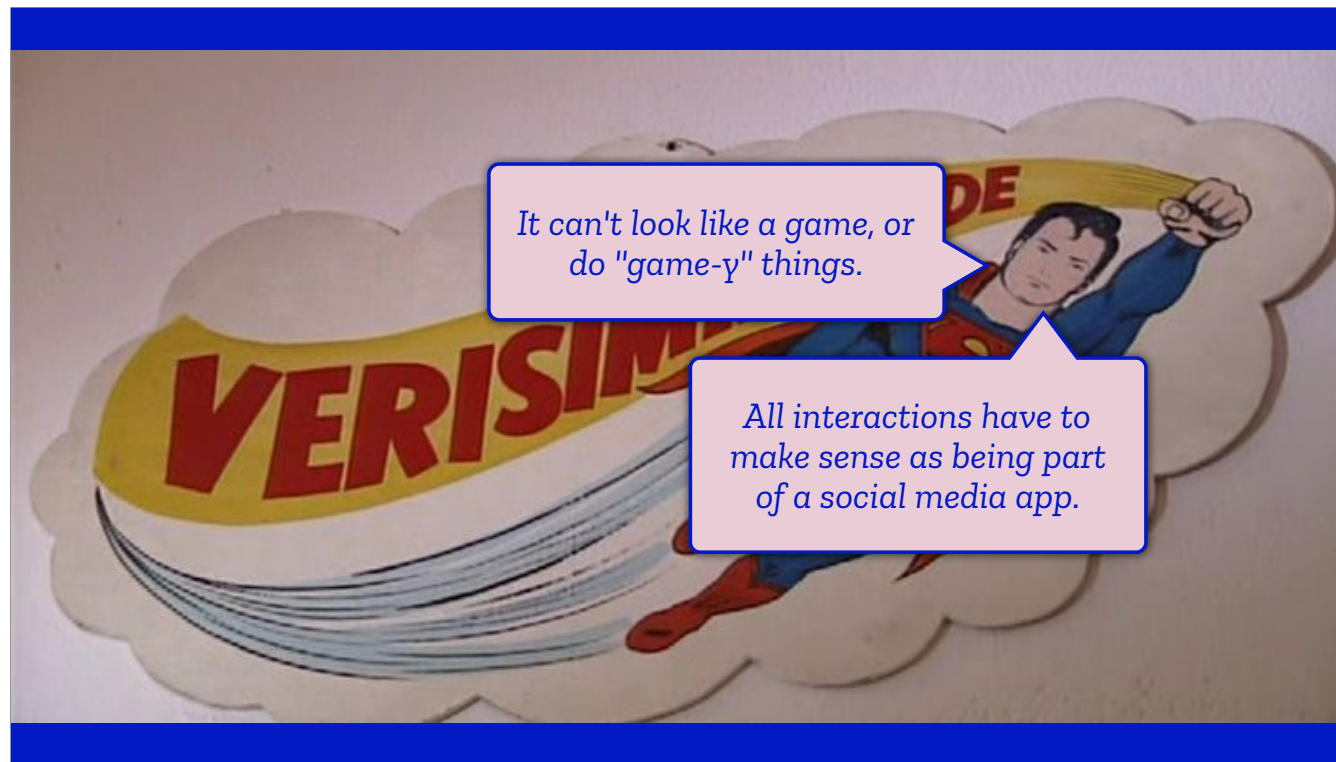
Why would the player be doing this? How do you explain this in the world of the story? Does this interaction make sense in the context of a social media app?

This had led us to prioritizing...



...Verisimilitude, or the appearance of being true or real.

For us, we believed that immersion depended on the mechanics of the game being believable in the context of the game's world. The game is styled as the app itself, and if the app feels too much like a game, or behaved in game-like ways, we believed that would break immersion.



This also meant that all our UI had to be "diegetic", or embedded in the fiction, rather than breaking the fourth wall. So everything the player does had to make sense as things you'd do in a social media app.

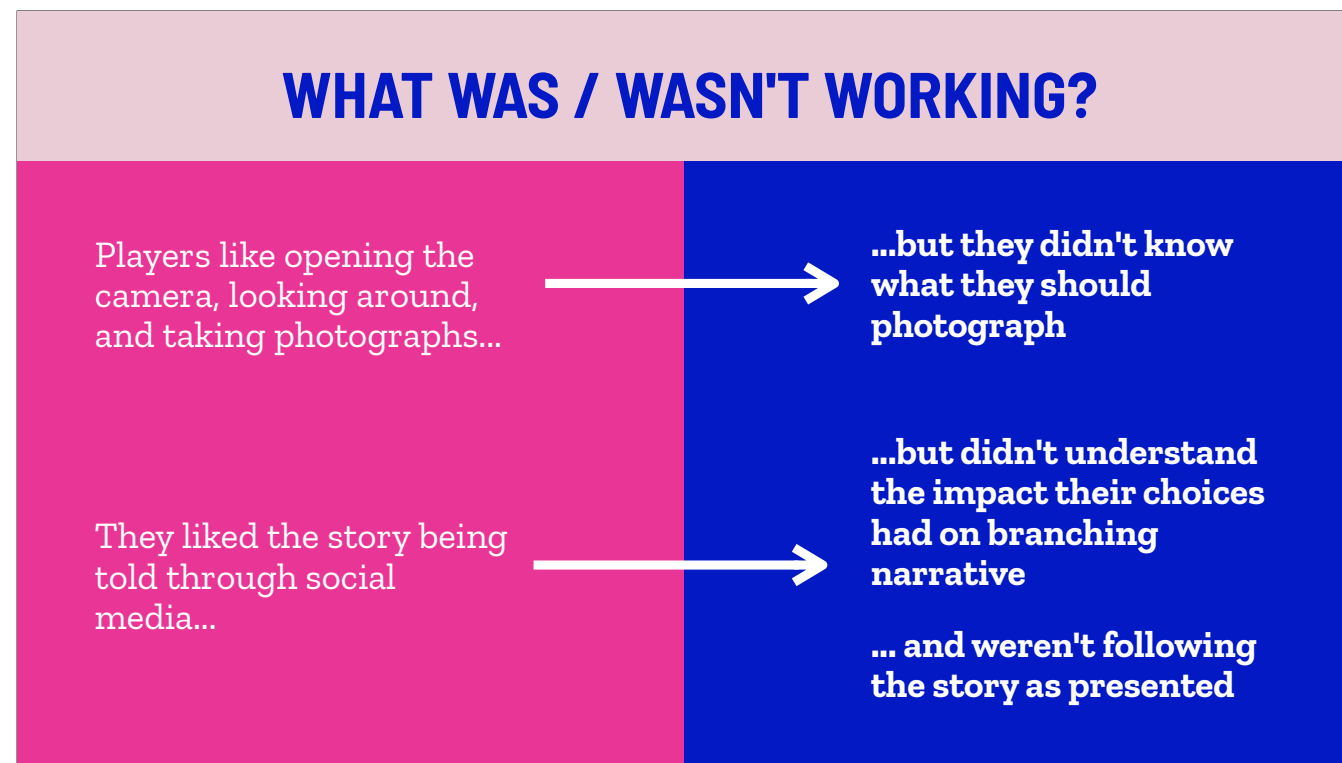


But this devotion to supposed realism was boxing us into a corner. There were more things we **couldn't** do than things we could. So what would change if we allowed ourselves contrivance?



What if we let the game, be a game, and trusted the player to excuse contrivances for the sake of making the story and gameplay work?

What if we let ourselves get REALLY contrived?



So, here's what we knew:

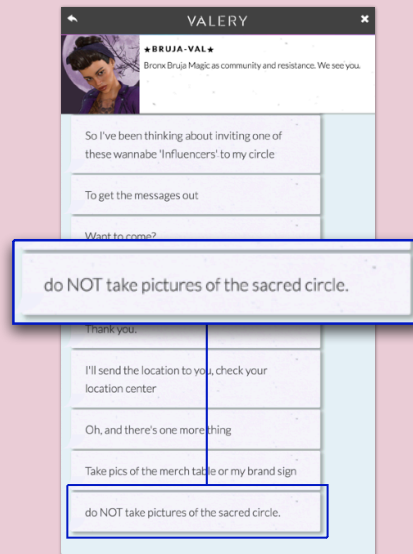
Players liked the act of opening the camera and looking around... but didn't know what they should photograph.

And they liked the thematic wrapper of social media... but they didn't understand how their choices mattered

And they weren't following the story, because they weren't reading the feed

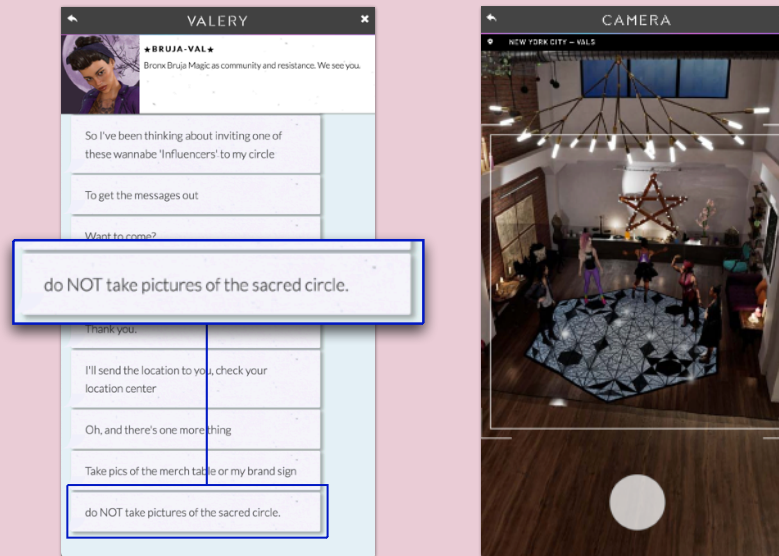
But there's one other thing we knew. One moment in the demo that folks responded well to. And that was the sacred circle.

THE SACRED CIRCLE



At once point in the xoxo build, the character Valery invites the player to her apartment to attend a sacred ritual, but tells them to NOT photograph the ritual itself. And this moment came up in a number of playtests, because it's the only time a character explicitly calls out a specific element of a scene.

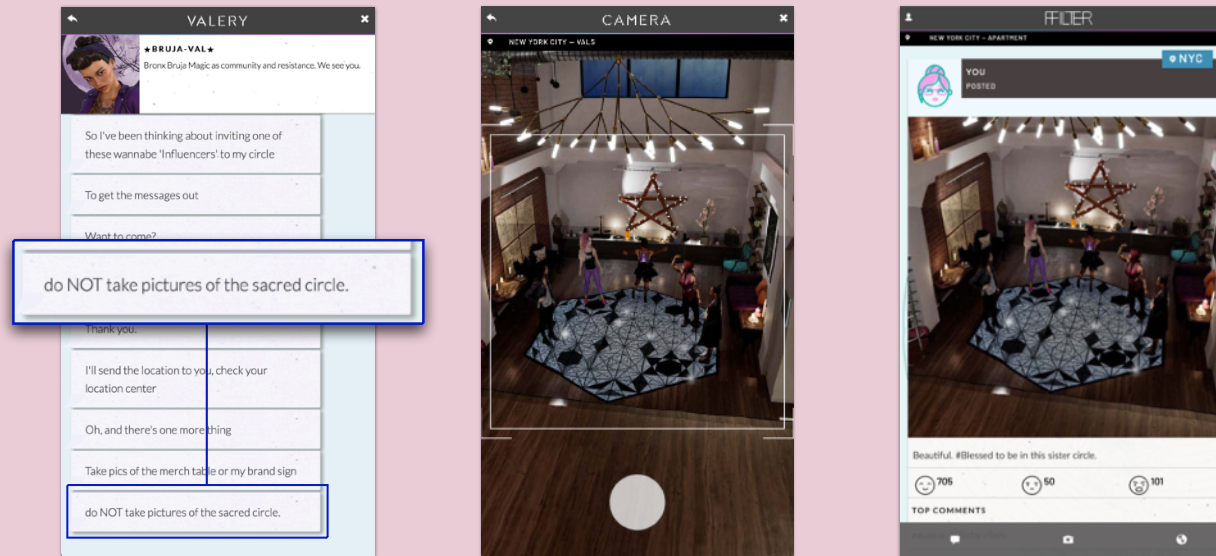
THE SACRED CIRCLE



Obviously, everyone going into the scene immediately looked for the ritual. Some people photographed it. Others didn't. But at least for that one moment, everyone understood the ramifications of their choice.

We credited this as the one time we were making the choice space explicit. The one moment our “branching narrative through photography” worked.

THE SACRED CIRCLE



But maybe that wasn't the real takeaway. Maybe the takeaway was that the game was more interesting when players knew what to look for, and what they should be photographing.

So, maybe we should just tell them what to find in each scene. We could even give them a list of things to find. What kind of game does that start to sound like?

HIDDEN OBJECT GAMES



So, one of the most successful games I ever worked on was a game called Gardens of Time. And Gardens of Time... was a hidden object game.

And you know the genre. Cluttered 2D scenes. Lists of things to find and click. Little bits of story interspersed between linear progression. It's simple, but very effective. And more importantly, fun.

But I wanted my work with Aconite to be different than everything else I'd done. I didn't want to say "Oh, this immersive narrative experience? This artful vehicle for storytelling? Let's just make it a hidden object game, like that other thing I did that one time."

But here I was, being resistant to contrivance.

WHAT DOES "HIDDEN OBJECT" GET US?

- Clear direction for players (photograph these things)
- Force players to observe environments
- More time in each location.
- Opportunities for environmental storytelling



Because here was a structure that actually worked... really well for us.

Giving players a list of objects to photograph provides clear direction. It forces them to observe the environments more closely, and gets them to spend more time in each place.

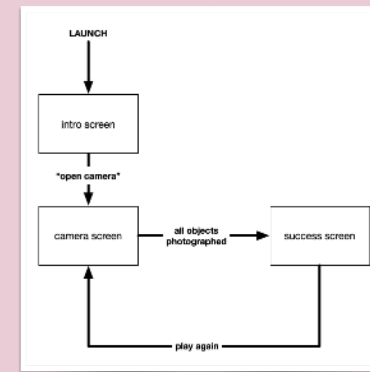
We could also use the spaces themselves more creatively. Employ environmental storytelling and use the object list as a way to guarantee that the player would notice certain things.



But this was also us arguing for the most seismic shift in the game's direction yet. We weren't just changing the story. We were changing the genre, while still trying to preserve the overall structure.

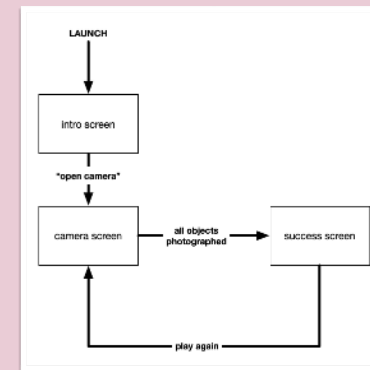
We needed to prove it was going to work.

THE "FTN" BUILD



So we created a new prototype, to see if hidden object gameplay was actually effective. And we called it FTN.

THE "FTN" BUILD



*F*ck The Narrative*

Or, f*ck the narrative

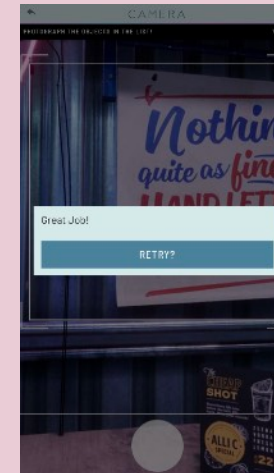
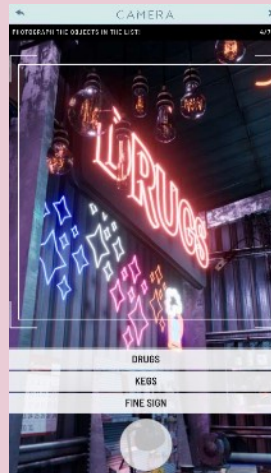
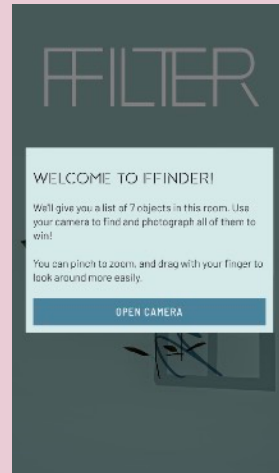
Because at this stage, I didn't want to discuss story AT ALL. This was just about finding a fun core mechanic. We couldn't worry about why the player would be taking these photos, or why there's a list.

Fun first, fiction later.

No plot; just play.

FTN

HIDDEN OBJECT GAMEPLAY



FTN was easy to build, using the same scenes as the xoxo demo, with a little extra (non-diegetic) UI for listing objects and crossing them off as you photographed them.

It was obvious how to play, and fun to look around the scenes and take photos. And players were even picking up on more details that they didn't notice in earlier playtests. FTN was a success.

1. ~~We need them to enjoy taking photos, and pay attention to the environment~~
2. We need them to read the feed
3. We need them to understand progression, and follow the story

But the problems extended beyond just making it a hidden object game.

We needed players to actually read the social media feed.

We needed them to understand how to progress. And we needed them to understand the story through this structure.



1. HIDDEN OBJECT GAMEPLAY (FTN)

- **give players things to photograph**
- *is hidden object gameplay fun?*

2. HIDDEN OBJECT + FEED PUZZLES

- **get players to read the feed**
- *are feed puzzles fun?*
- *do players understand the connection between the scenes and feed puzzles?*

3. HIDDEN OBJECT + FEED + CHAT

- **close the loop**
- *do players understand progression?*
- *can they follow the story?*
- *do they want to keep playing?*

So we created a three-step prototype plan to prove this new direction could work.

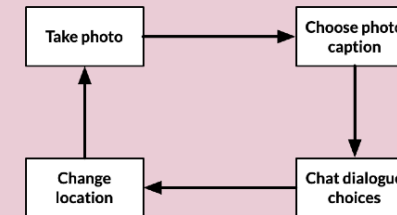
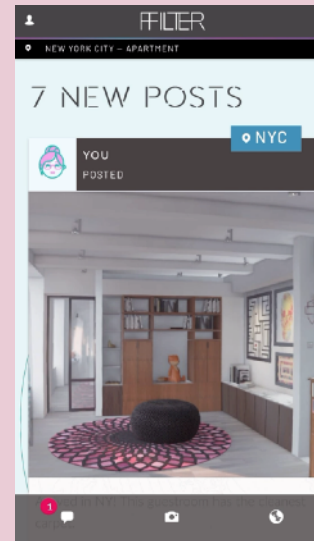
FTN just needed to answer one question: is hidden object gameplay fun with our scenes?

Step 2 was about getting players to read the feed.

And Step 3 was about closing the loop, testing whether all this contrivance actually did a better job telling a story.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE FEED?

- Easy to not notice new feed content
- Chat badge is distracting
- No mechanical incentive
- No reason to read it (doesn't gate progression).



So, what's wrong with the feed?

Well, it was easy for players to miss it entirely.

The moment they landed on the feed, the Chat icon was badged, pulling their attention away.

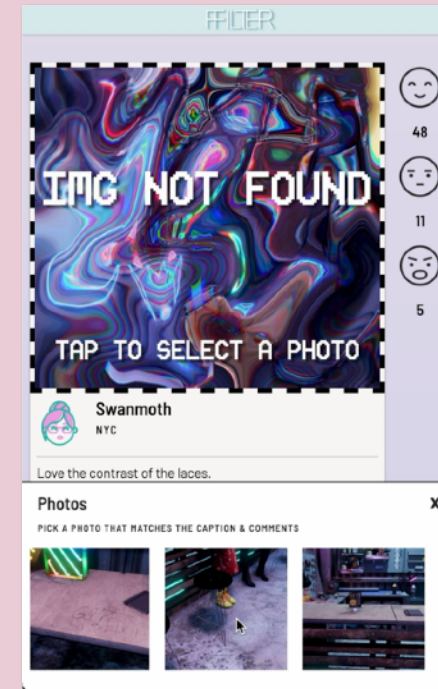
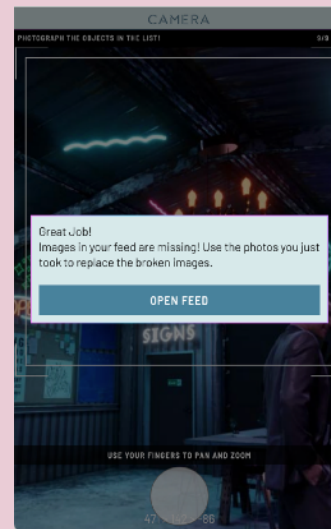
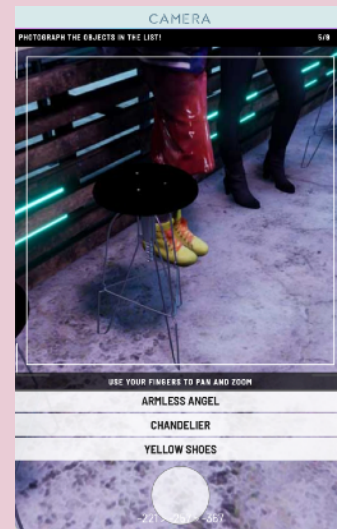
And the feed had no mechanical purpose. There was nothing "to do" on it. We wanted players to just read it out of sheer interest, without us adding an incentive to do so.

And since they could skip right to chat, it didn't actually need to be read at all to progress.

So let's get contrived again!

FIXING THE FEED

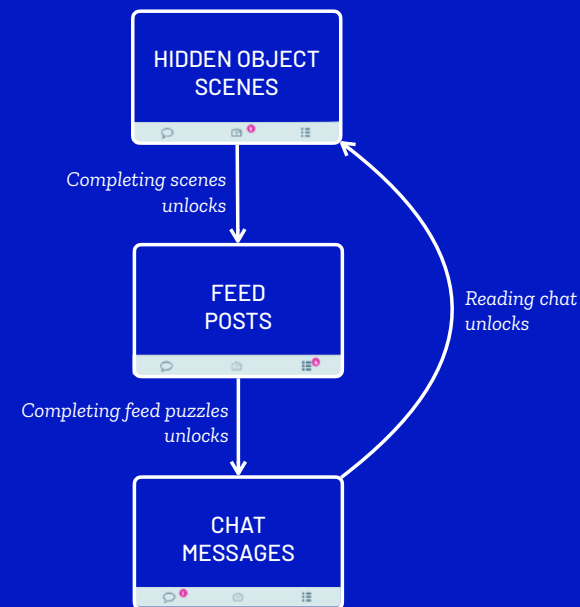
HIDDEN OBJECT + FEED PUZZLES



For our second prototype, we turned the feed into a reading comprehension puzzle. The posts from the player character would already be in the feed with captions and comments, but the images would be missing. So the player must open their photo drawer, and from the photos they just took in hidden object gameplay, select the one that matches the caption and comments.

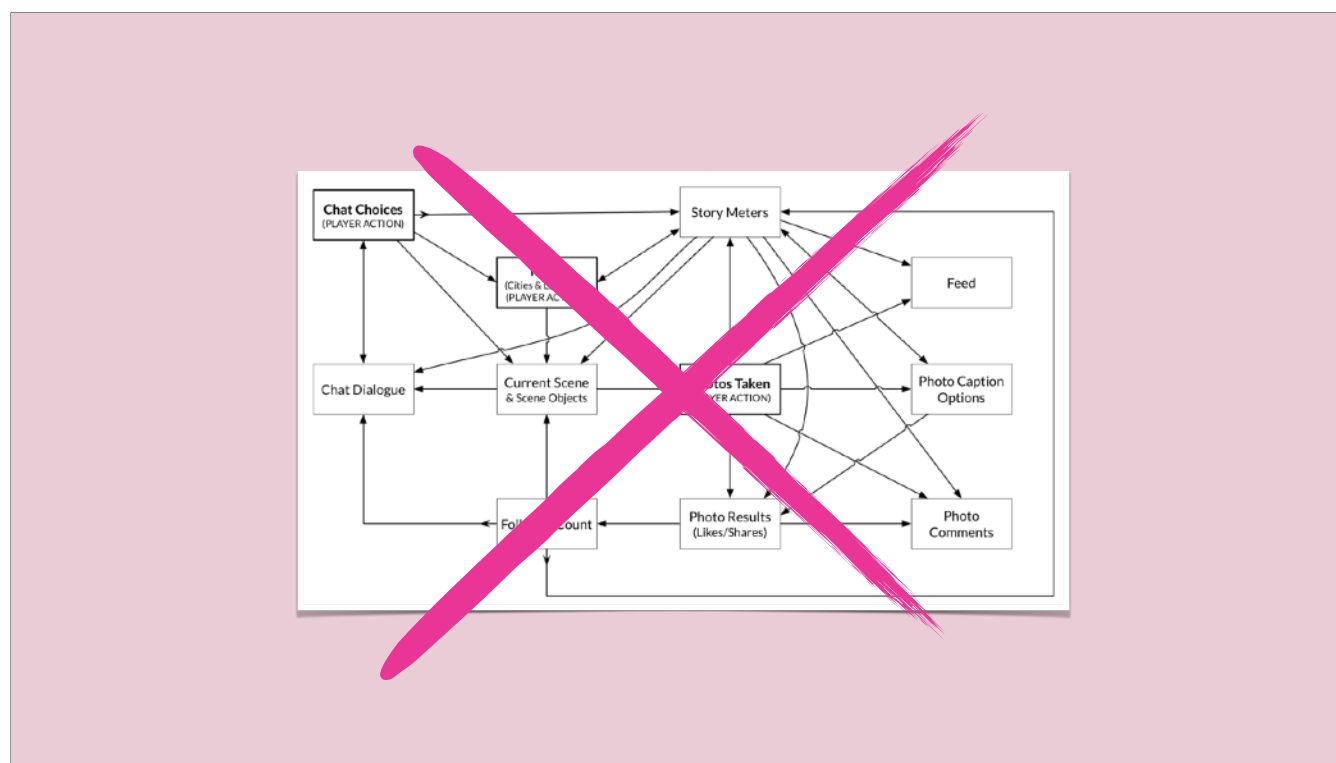
It's no Her Story or Obra Dinn, but it forced players to prove they'd read the feed to progress. And it made it more fun to engage, as well as connecting to the photos they'd actually taken.

CLOSING THE LOOP



Now it was time to bring it all together. We already knew that hidden object gameplay would unlock new feed content. But now the feed could gate chat, requiring players to complete the feed puzzles in each section to unlock new messages. And then only after reading those messages does the next hidden object scene unlock.

Each of the three parts of the structure -- hidden object, feed, chat, would move in a loop, always in the same direction. **And we could use diegetic badges on the UI as breadcrumbs**, to make sure it was always clear what the player had to do next.



This direction meant entirely abandoning branching narrative, which was the right call.

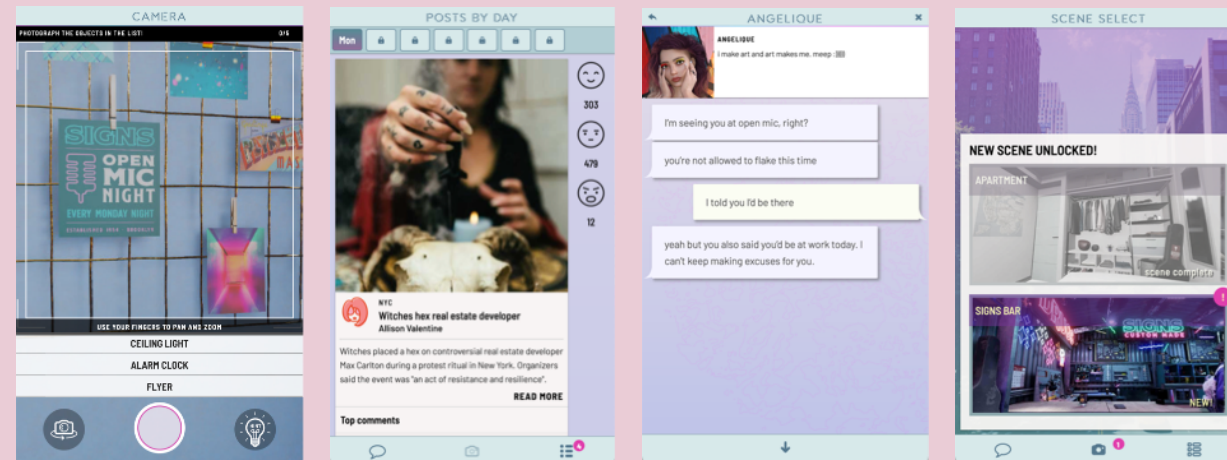
This pivot was about finding the right structure, but it was also about scope. The complexity of what we had spec'd was never realistic, but it was in our best interest to remove the complexities of a branching narrative system to simplify our development.

A linear story made it easier to plan our content, and especially with a plan to ship sooner rather than later, it was an obvious scoping decision that would let us focus on telling one story well, instead of several at lower fidelity.

CLOSING THE LOOP

GDC 2019

GDC 19



We brought our final prototype to GDC 2019, to test with some trusted, highly critical peers.

In this version, we reintroduced an actual story, a short, two-scene plot where the player character attends an open mic night and meets a small coven of millennial witches (*#hexthepatriarchy*). Proving the structure meant not only proving that it functioned as a game, but that it also functioned as a storytelling mechanism.

And... it worked. It was fun, the loop made sense, and our testers were able to follow the story. We'd finally cracked the game's structure, and we were back on track with a path to production.

NARRATIVE DEVICES

- Places visited
- Things photographed
- Public feed posts (w/ captions, comments)
- Other posts in feed
- Private messages



What's more, we knew exactly how a story could be told within our structure. Through the places visited by the player, the photos they take, the posts they make in the feed, along with the comments on those posts. Posts from other characters, and lastly, the private conversations had over chat.

BEING PREPARED

Narrative Design Overview

 Created by Scott Sigal
Last updated May 15, 2019 by Moudin'hat · Version comment · 1 edited · 10 5 people viewed

Narrative Design Document, providing an overview of the design requirements of the story.

OVERVIEW

The PFiler system allows us to tell a story through a game that blends a fictional social media app with a unique, photography-themed spin on hidden object gameplay.

The PFiler demo is a "vertical slice" of gameplay, demonstrating the game's main features and core loop. In PFiler, the player will play 3D hidden object scenes, solve puzzles in a fictional social media feed, and read chat dialogue with a variety of characters.

For our first title, the system is designed for a linear form of narrative, told one day at a time, over the course of a week.

Link to Playable Demo:

- https://www.apple.com/ios/2019-03-16_ios_120.html
- Estimated playtime of demo: 5-10 minutes
- For best play experience:
 - open the link on a mobile device
 - Select "Add to Home Screen" from the web browser's menu
 - Launch from Home Screen to play game
 - NOTE: on iOS 12.2 and above you need to enable "Freedom of Orientation Access"
 - Settings > Safari > Settings > Orientation Access (under Privacy & Security)
- If you're unable to play the game, you can view footage of gameplay [here](#).

HOW WE TELL A STORY

Story is told in PFilter in a day-by-day structure, and is revealed chronologically as the player progresses.

For each "day" of gameplay, the player will:

- Visit locations the character visited on that day (hidden object gameplay)
- Read posts from the character's social media feed, and solve puzzles to complete the character's own posts.
- Read chat logs between the main character, and their various friends and acquaintances.

The player must complete all scenes, post puzzles, and chat logs for each day to unlock the next day in the story progression.

WHAT TYPES OF STORIES DO WE WANT TO TELL?

Personal, gripping, emotional, personal. The PFiler system itself is telling us how where social media plays a central role, but we believe it's reduction to have the story be purely about social media itself. Instead, we'd like to use the format to tell a story which transpires over social media, but is about other themes and topics.

Possible themes and story elements include:

- Identity & Authority
 - Public vs. Private
- Relationships
 - Chosen Family, and the idea of "Home"
 - Activism (BSP, environmental and "technoactivism")
- Magic and the occult
- Technology
 - Dystopian vision and/or near future

Using elements of science fiction and fantasy should serve our narrative and themes, and never be magic for magic's sake.

For example, magic and witchcraft can be employed to tell stories of empowerment, and speaking truth to power.

Likewise, the game isn't ABOUT social media. Rather, it uses social media to explore other themes and concepts.

EXPECTED PLAYER ENGAGEMENT

Player engagement with the story will vary. All major story beats will be contained within the player's own posts, (post created and/or read). Additional points in the feed can serve as world building, character building, worldbuilding, but we can't assume all players will read them.

The game is designed to tell the player and engage by players who are less invested in every given vertical slice has demonstrated this range, with some players focusing solely on the puzzles and scenes, and others more closely reading every line in the feed.

NARRATIVE DESIGNER RESPONSIBILITIES

Plot:

The narrative designer will work with the team to develop a storyline, and plot which takes the player from the beginning to the end of the story.

Part of this includes determining major story beats each day -- the events that occur at the locations visited, and in the feed and chat.

Worldbuilding:

We are establishing a world in which there is tension between technology and the occult. The narrative designer will help find (or the details of that world), and the rules in which it operates (including technological rules, political/dynasty, etc.)

Locations:

The places that character visits will define the 3D content we will create. In developing the plot, the narrative designer will work with us to determine each day's locations, the events that occur there, and the games the player makes both that location (which determines the objects and post puzzles).

This is also what let us find our narrative designers. We attended GDC 2019 was a robust narrative design document, laying out our exact structure of where and how narrative would be delivered.

[illegible]

2020

So, that happened.

Yeah.



#2020PROBLEMS (AND BEYOND)

- The Thing
- diminished work capacity
- unanticipated work outages
- technical issues
- story rewrites and content changes
- playtesting feedback and design changes

Some of our challenges in 2020 were absolutely pandemic related. And others are just part of game development. Our working capacities were severely diminished. Several of us had to take time off. And we ran into technical issues that ate into our engineering estimates.

But we also received invaluable feedback from sensitivity readers that resulted in some story rewrites, which also required other necessary and worthwhile content changes. And playtest feedback also led to a few late-stage design tweaks, and cutting of a few additional features.



It took more time than we wanted

(it always does)



but the game we now knew as HoloVista slowly started to take shape.



You would open the camera into each scene, seeing through Carmen's eyes, finding and photographing the objects listed on-screen.



Completing each scene would take you to Carmen's social media feed, where you'd match Carmen's captions with the photos just taken to complete her posts, revealing comments, as well as posts from other characters in the story, establishing a world and building a cast.



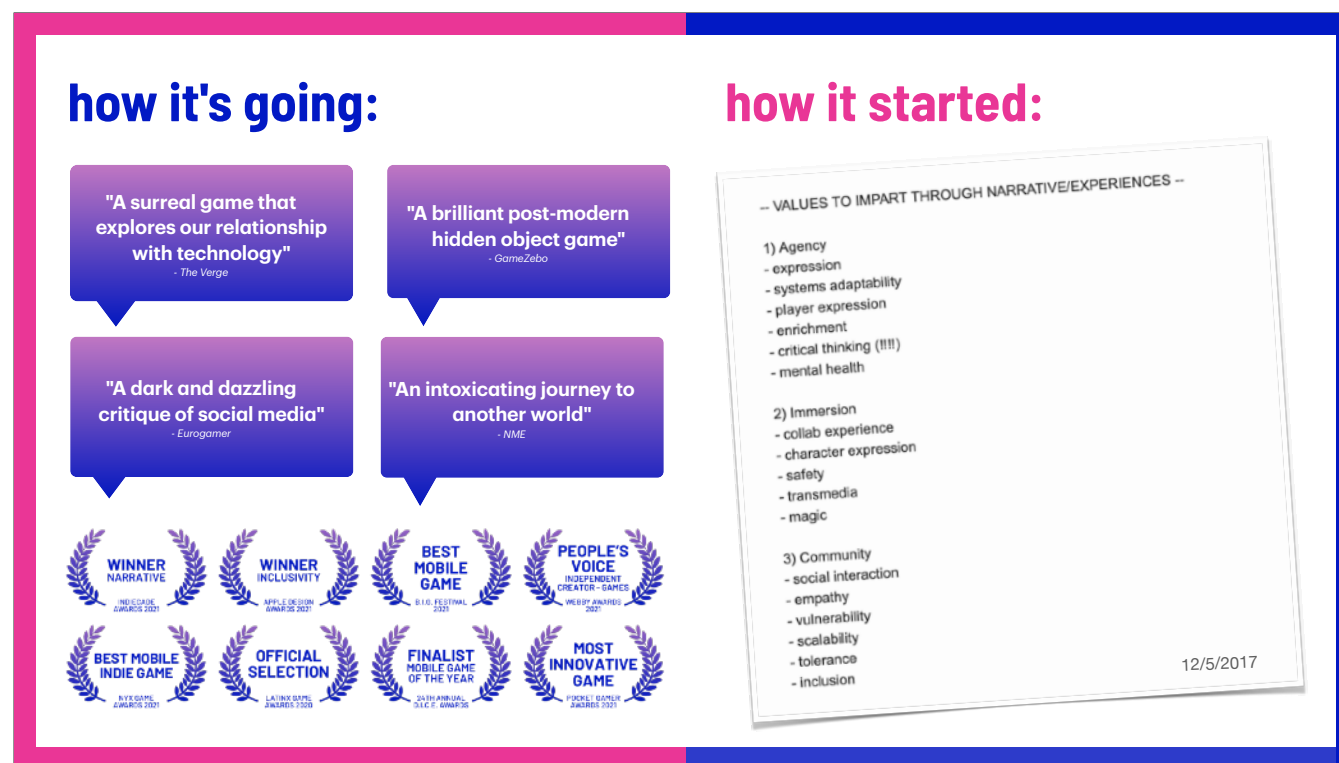
And as you finished each section of feed those characters would reach out in private messages, direct dialogue that would reveal more about Carmen's relationships, her interior world.



And then the next scene would unlock, and you'd find yourself traveling once again to a new location, finding and photographing objects in each new place as you experience five very strange days in the life of Carmen Razo.



On September 30 of 2020 we released HoloVista on iOS. Roughly 32 months after matcha lattes with Star and Nadya. After our first spirited discussions about making some sort of game -- who knew what kind? -- that would blur the lines between fiction and reality, HoloVista was finally out, and available to the world.



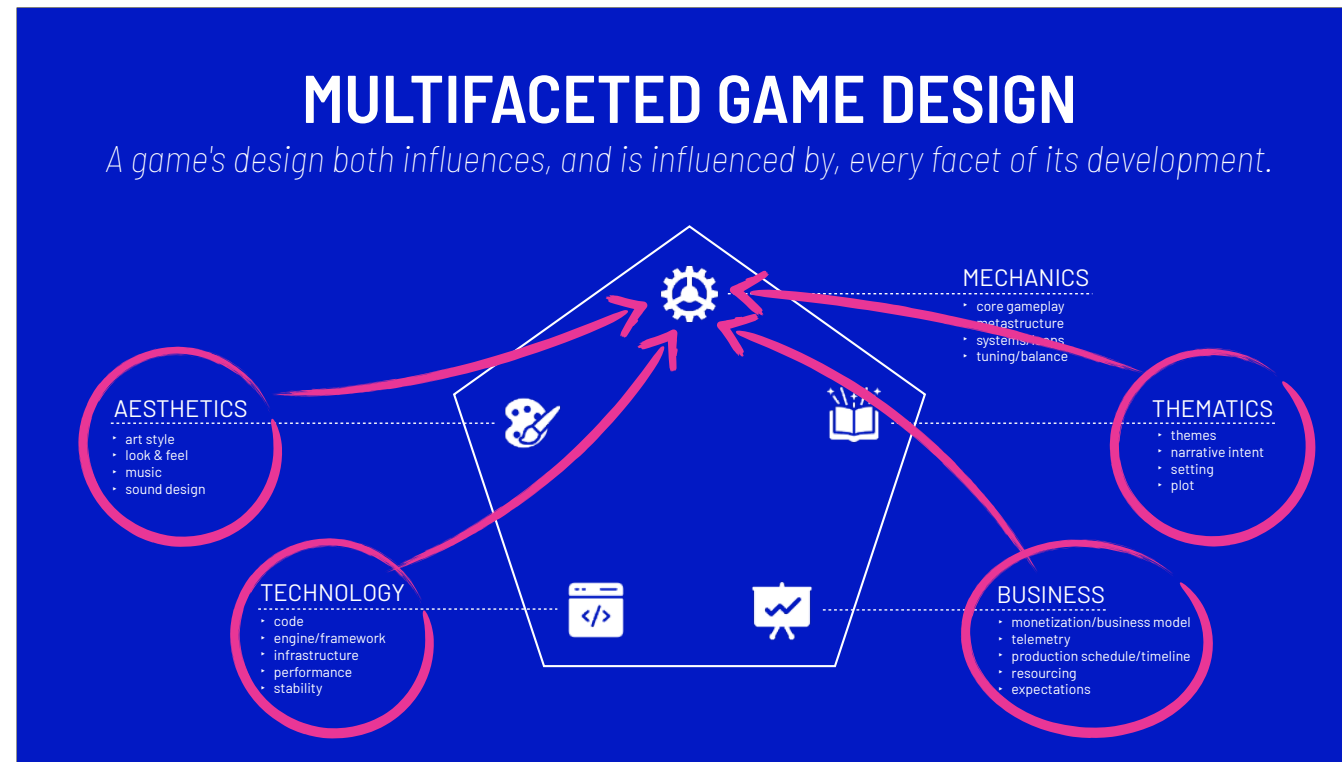
I continue to be blown away by how well HoloVista has been received. And I have been moved to tears on multiple occasions by some of the honors bestowed upon our game.

And looking back at our earliest thematic pillars, you can see that even with some divergences, our aspirations were reached in the spirit of the law, if not always the letter.

Certainly HoloVista is immersive. And maybe we sacrificed agency in the sense of embracing a linear narrative over player choice, but our camera feature still allows for a degree of player expression, just as Carmen explores her own agency over the events unfolding.

And though we didn't impart a sense of community through multiplayer, as originally intended, HoloVista is still a story about social interaction, isolation and vulnerability. And the importance of finding connection to others, and yourself.

We achieved these goals because we allowed ourselves to remain genre-fluid, mechanically agnostic, for the sake of what we wanted the game to say.



And I'd argue that this mechanical agnosticism extended beyond just a focus on thematics.

Technology brought us the AR camera that became the game's centerpiece, without which we never would have found our eventual genre.

Our Aesthetics provided our unique look and feel. And the talents of Blake, Andrew, and Star in creating beautiful scenes and locales led us to gameplay and narrative that focused around environments and architecture, and influenced the story's slow dive into surrealism and the uncanny.

Even business! Our pivot to hidden object was a production-driven decision. We needed a way to work with what we had, to come up with a solution that didn't require starting over. That this design shares a structure with our earlier versions is entirely due to the constraints of needing to still ship in a reasonable timeframe, even after a significant shift in direction.

So, what did we learn?



HoloVista would never have found its shape if we allowed mechanics alone to dictate the shape of the game. Pivoting genres entirely required us thinking of mechanics as only one facet of game design to be considered.



A good story can't fix bad mechanics

And that pivot was necessary because our design wasn't helping us tell a story.

We got stuck in late 2018 trying to find the right kind of story that would make our gameplay work. But the reality was that our gameplay didn't work, and no narrative was going to fix that. Finding the right solution required us putting aside story entirely (as with FTN), and focusing on finding core mechanics and a loop that were engaging, and building a solid narrative structure out from there. Only then did we explore writing new story to fit that structure.



Part of our challenge came from striving for "realism" in our game's mechanics.

Immersion can easily become an excuse for things being obtuse, or non-intuitive. It's okay for games to be games. HoloVista still looks like a social media app, even if it has a level select screen. The scenes are still beautiful and draw you in, even if they list things you need to find and photograph. Our immersion is aided by the contrivances that make it intuitive and functional. Nothing is less immersive than not knowing how a system works, or what you're supposed to do.



And ultimately, our design pivoted as it did because we needed a path to actually putting it out into the world.

Good design is working within constraints. For professional game development, there's no more critical constraint than the realities of production. We could have gone down a hole in 2019, trying to make our branching narrative structure work. We could have thrown the entire thing out and started with an entirely different concept. But the thing that got us to ship was finding out how to work with what we had, pivoted and scoped to create a visible end to development.

And that's why HoloVista exists as it does today. It is exactly the shape that it needed to be.



I frequently described my role on HoloVista as creating a narrative scaffolding. My job was always in support of Aconite's vision. It was in support of Star and Nadya's aspirations, Strix and Cory's story, Blake and Andrew's art, Mariode's music.

The proudest I've ever felt as a designer is knowing I helped create a structure that allowed something beautiful to be expressed. I hope this talk helps all of you create beautiful things, and enables you to support more beautiful expression in our industry.

GDC

March 21-25, 2022
San Francisco, CA

HOLOVISTA
ENTERHOLOVISTA.COM

THANK YOU!

*(How'd I do? Please fill out your
speaker evaluations and let me know!)*

Scott Jon Siegel
(they/them)

Game Designer
@numberless

#GDC22 #HoloVista



Thank you all!