

# Getting Players to Care: Using Narrative to Drive Retention

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Producer, Writer & Designer, Pixelberry Studios







## WHICH ARE YOU?



Sporty and  
Bold



Nerdy and  
Inventive



Preppy and  
Social



STORE











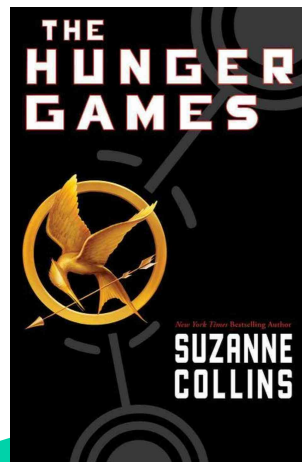
# High School Story

- Most sim games pay lip service to story.
- We put the STORY in...



# Not Just a Little Bit of Story

- Over 1000 unique quests.
- Hundreds of scripted dates and breakups.
- 200,000 words.





## MUSIC FESTIVAL, PART 7



Let's introduce Ezra to his idol!

Mia



Kara L.



Mia



Ezra

**DURATION**  
14h

**REWARDS**  
 1400

**START**



2/3



QUEST



SOCIAL



STORE





## KIMI'S SWEET SIXTEEN, PART 1



Hey, guys, come to my party! We'll have cake, presents, and makeovers, and so much FUN!



2/3



Have a Street Style Outfit(s)



Have a The Brad Outfit(s)



8000 coins

**SPEND**

**DURATION**  
None

**REWARDS**  
 150

**COLLECT  
REWARD**

STORE



## PLAYING CUPID, PART 5



I'm definitely looking forward to going on this date with someone I really care about.

Kara L.



2/3



Kara L.

A Classmate

**DURATION**

6h

**REWARDS**

6000

**START**



STORE





## SPRING FLING, PART 1



Payton

OMG! The snow is gone, the flowers are here, and spring is in the air! You know what that means...



2/3



250 rings

**SPEND**

**DURATION**

None

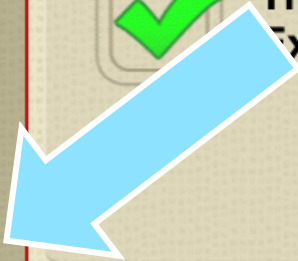


Time-sensitive Quest.  
Expires: 4d 23h

**REWARDS**

1000

**COLLECT  
REWARD**



STORE

COUPLES

QUEST

SOCIAL

VIEW/AD

## SPRING FLING, PART 1

1/2



1/1



0/1



1/1



Payton


OMG! The snow is gone, the flowers are here, and spring is in the air! You know what that means...



100 rings

**SPEND**

**DURATION**  
None

**REWARDS**  
 1000

**COLLECT  
REWARD**

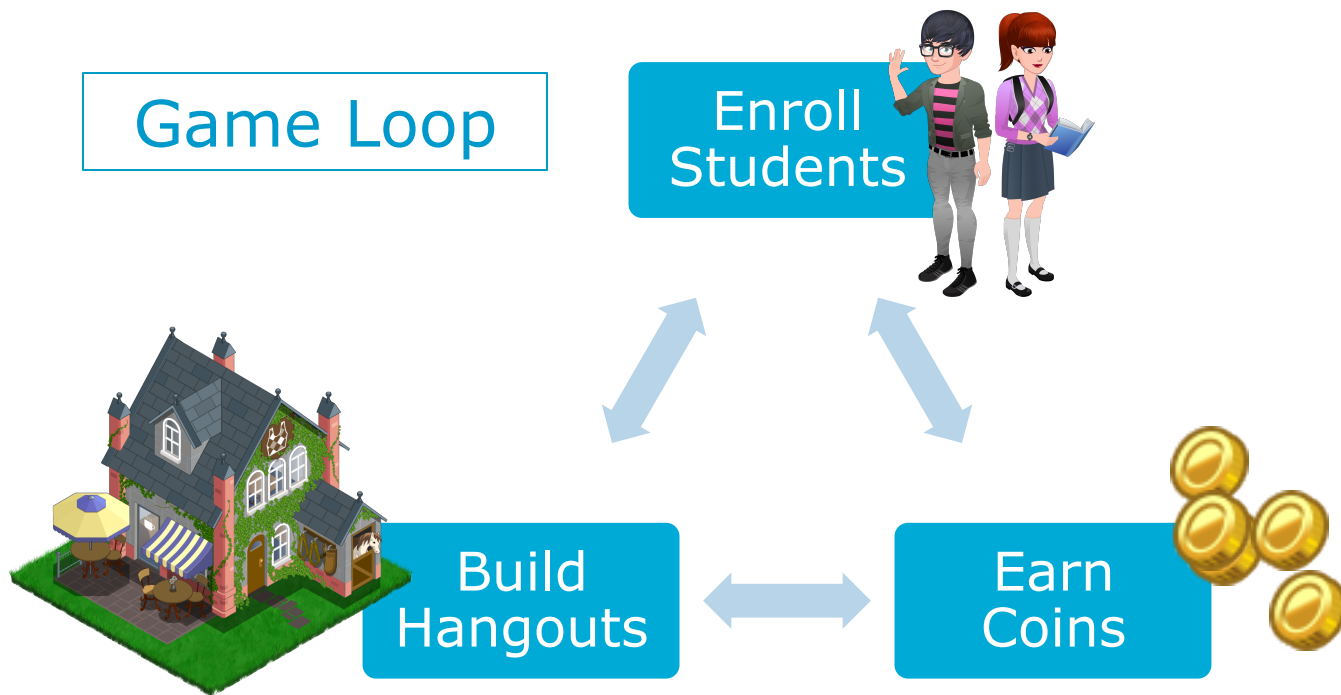


# Ongoing

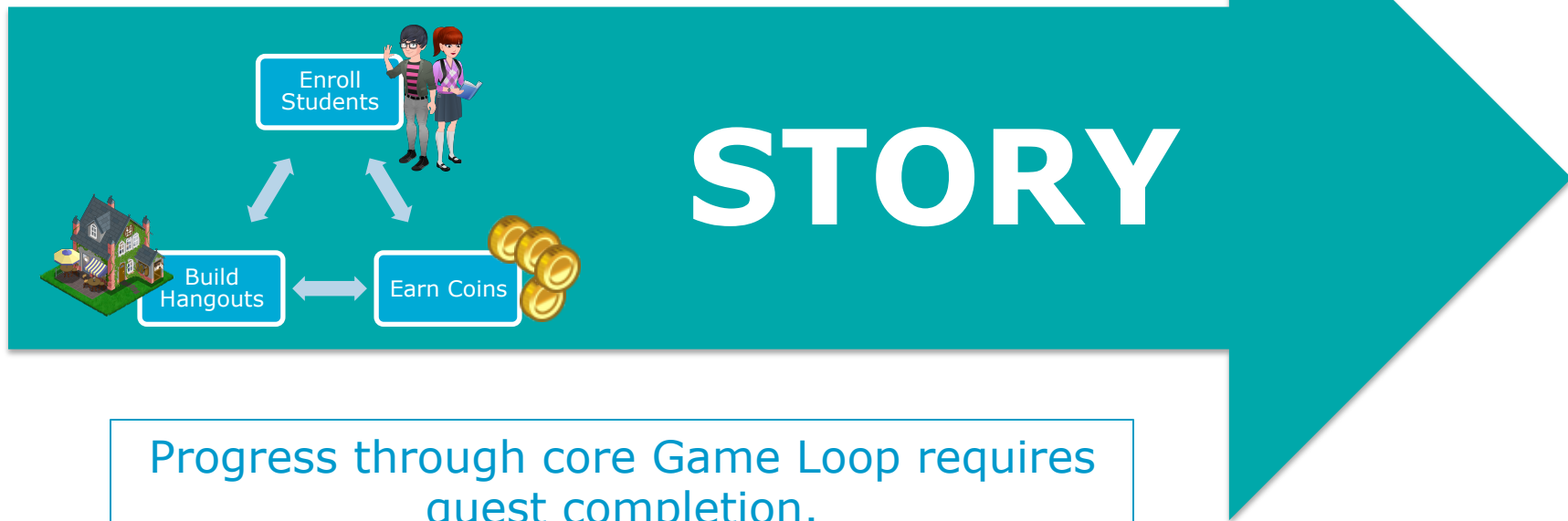
- Plus 2-3 new quest chains *every* week.



# Story is Mandatory



# Story is Mandatory



# Story is Mandatory

- Playing HSS requires playing the story:
  - Story gates leveling.
  - Story gates new cliques.
  - Story gates more STORY.





# Story is Mandatory

- Why do we do this? Because we want our players...
  - To become part of the world.
  - To anticipate.
  - TO COME BACK.




# A Unique Studio

- 8 writers (out of 16 employees)



# Why 8?

- Brainstorms
  - Review and editorial
  - Groups work on quests
- 





## SPRING FLING, PART 1



Payton

OMG! The snow is gone, the flowers are here, and spring is in the air! You know what that means...



250 rings

**SPEND**

**DURATION**  
None



Time-sensitive Quest.  
Expires: 4d 23h

**REWARDS**  
 1000

**COLLECT  
REWARD**



2/3



QUEST





SOCIAL




STORE

# Narrative Tools

- Characters
  - Romance & Drama 
  - Comedy
  - Choices
  - Cliffhangers
  - Heartthrobs
  - Emotional engagement
  - Viral screenshots
  - Player investment
- 

# Characters

- Stereotypes
  - Pack more story into a small space
  - Build on the stereotypes
- 

# Memorable Characters

- High School tropes
  - The jock
  - The bad boy
  - The nerd
  - The quirky girl
  - The popular girl





# Memorable Characters

- Meet Julian
  - Jock
  - Loves football
  - Alpha male



# Memorable Characters

- Dig deeper...
  - Worried about paying for college
  - Secretly enjoys decorating
  - Wants to be a better student



# Tutorial Completion

**MOBILE TUTORIAL COMPLETION**

70%

Stats via Web



# Tutorial Completion

**HSS TUTORIAL COMPLETION**

87%

Average, August 14 to October 22

Stats via Web

# Characters Evolve

- Stereotypes introduce characters
- Go deeper with the story
- Players care



# Real Players React



Jenny @ohjenny\_

21 Aug

@HSSGame wait did Julian get a new outfit? He looks hot wow

[Expand](#)

[← Reply](#) [↺ Retweet](#) [★ Favorite](#) [⋮ More](#)

## Question & Answers

### Ezra or Julian?

You and your classmates want to win the battle of the bands. That's why you want to recruit Ezra. Ezra tells you have to kick Julian out of the band if you want to win the battle of the bands. Now you have to choose between Julian and Ezra. The problem is that I don't know who I should choose. I really want to win, but I don't want Julian to be angry. What is the best choice? (Sorry if my English is bad)

From: Carleyyy | Posted on: Dec 9, 2013 | [Report Abuse](#)



# Julian's Girlfriend(s)



**NicoleC** @BabbbyNic

19 Oct

I have a boyfriend in **high school story** his name is **Julian** and were online official.

[Expand](#)



**J. Marie** ♥ @Jvdee\_xoxo

23 Aug

"@Chasiti\_J\_A: I gotta Bae.... On **High School Story** ☐☐☐" Me too named **Julian**.

[Expand](#)



**hannah** @snogstylinson

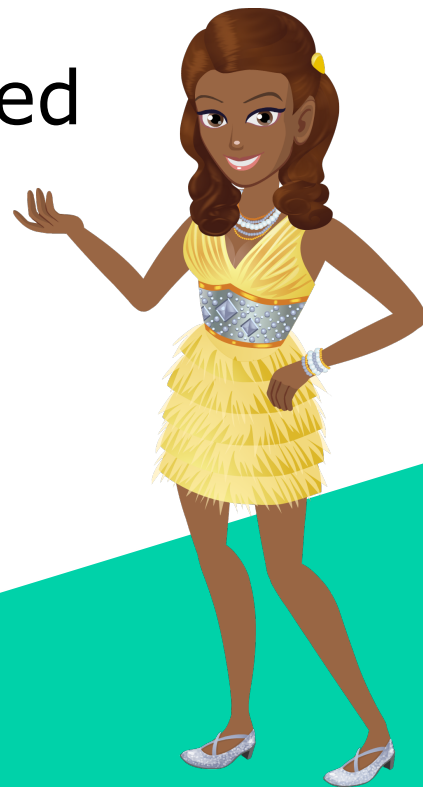
"@TYPICALZOURRY: im dating julian too @snogstylinson o" we r 1

[Details](#)



# Getting to Know the Characters

- Interpersonal dynamics developed through the story
  - Emotional heft.
  - Social consequences
  - Realistic interactions



QUEST



SOCIAL



VIEW AD

PAYTON

NEXT



QUEST

59m 57s

SOCIAL

VIEW AD

KARA

NEXT



# Payton's Quest "Party Animals"

- Begins with helping an animal shelter
- Learn about Payton
- Tell a story and grow the character
- Completed by over 2 million players



# Cyberbullying Quest Hope's Story



# Cyberbullying Quest Hope's Story

- Julian comes to you for help
- You help her get support from a real anti-cyberbullying foundation



**THE CYBERSMILE FOUNDATION**

THE CYBERBULLYING CHARITY

# Cyberbullying Quest

- Over 2 million players
- Over 100 players reach out to Cybersmile every week
- Over \$200k for Cybersmile





# Story + Gameplay

- "Any game can have romance."  
-Royal McGraw







QUEST



SOCIAL



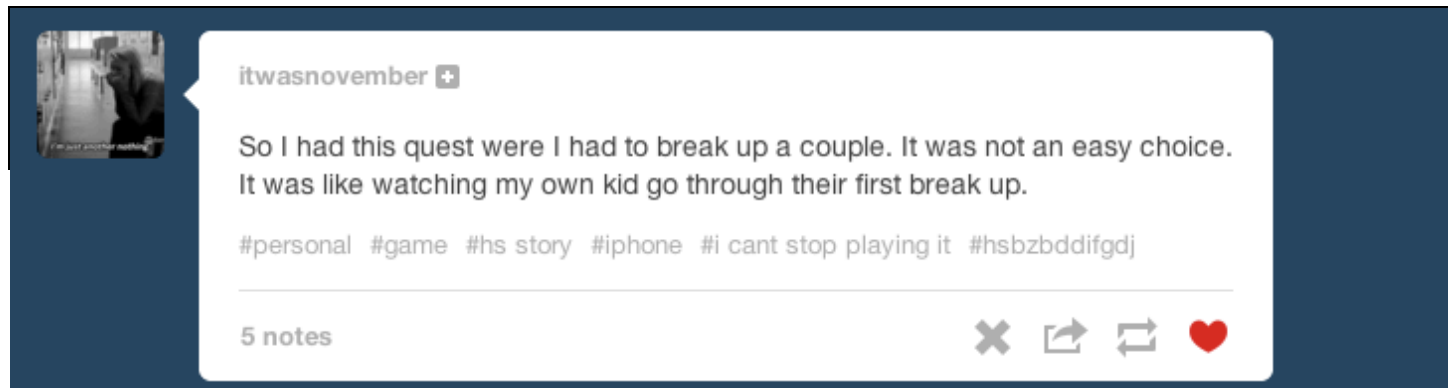
VIEW/AD

59m 53s



# Playing Matchmaker

- Good, bad, or salvaged
- Level up relationships
- Break up couples





jimmyfi



my babies

#thomas barrow #jimmy kent #thommy #downton #downton abbey

17 notes





# Romance and Drama

- Make characters come alive.
  - Players care...
  - And players who care come back.



# Real Players React:



**smeg** @MegwarnJ

Too emotionally attached to **high school story**

Collapse

← Reply ↺ Retweet ★ Favorite ... More



**tashispetewentz** @tashispetewentz · Mar 15

barely downloaded it today and **high school story** is becoming my life.. but i honestly have no problem with that.

Expand

← Reply ↺ Retweet ★ Favorite ... More



**brooooooke** @brookecohen72

ive never been so emotionally attached to a game #HSSstory

Expand

23m

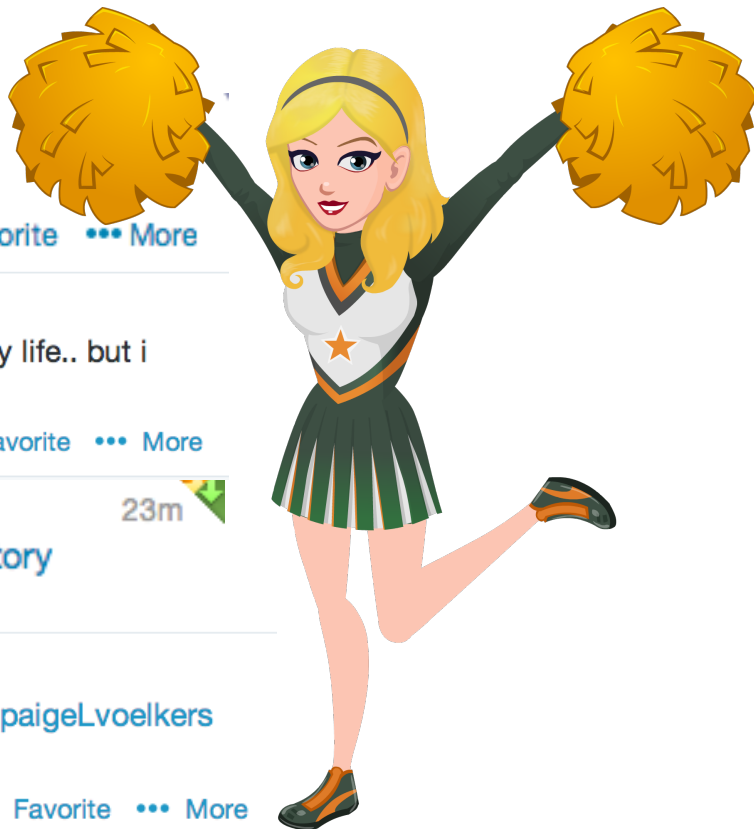


**Hunter** ☆♡ @dirty\_dan1323 · Mar 15

**High school story** is my life right now. Thank you @aly\_bish @paigeLvoelkers @sage\_force

Expand

← Reply ↺ Retweet ★ Favorite ... More



# Interactive Choices

- Story choices
- Pass/Fail choices



# YOUR CHOICES CONTROL THE STORY!



**WHAT DO YOU SAY?**

I pick Truth!

I pick Dare!

I pick just making out!







# Consequences

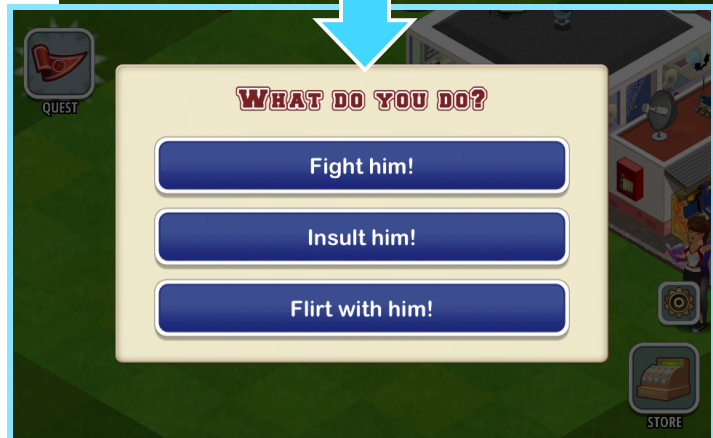
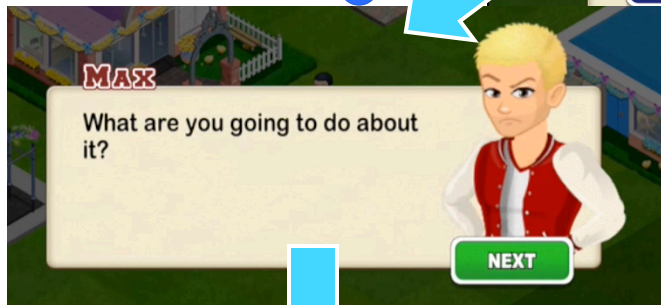
- We track player choices
  - Hidden flags
  - Rich, custom, and layered world
  - Examples:
    - Jock/Nerd/Prep Choice
    - Band choice







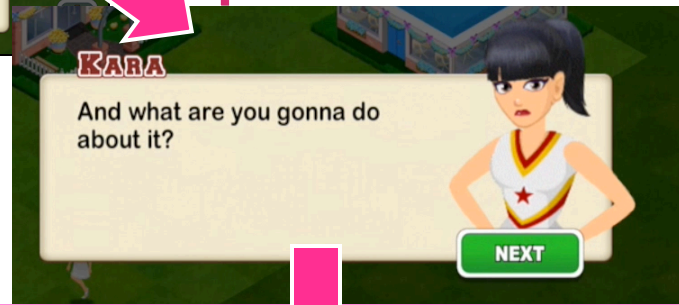




ARE YOU A GIRL OR A GUY?

Girl

Guy



# Comedy and Fun

- Delight and impress players
  - Silly
  - Clever
  - Surprising







sundance-moonlight +



Why I love high school story

#heart throb #tumblr #otp #ship #anchor



hermiethfrog +



Good to know.

#this game is amazing













princessofthehufflepuff +

## my game just murdered the fourth wall....

I was playing highschool story and I made two girls go on a date. when most dates were to like a lazer tag place, this was different

britt: me and nick stayed up all night playing high school story! we made characters of ourselves, and went on a date!

so,let me get this straight. I was playing highschool story and put myself in the game, and fictional me made a highschool story herself and put her on a date with the....

WOW....

---

7 notes



# Writing as Marketing

MOST APPS	HIGH SCHOOL STORY
2-1 Paid to Organic	1-3 Paid to Organic

HSS maintains avg. non-incent CPI of < \$1.25

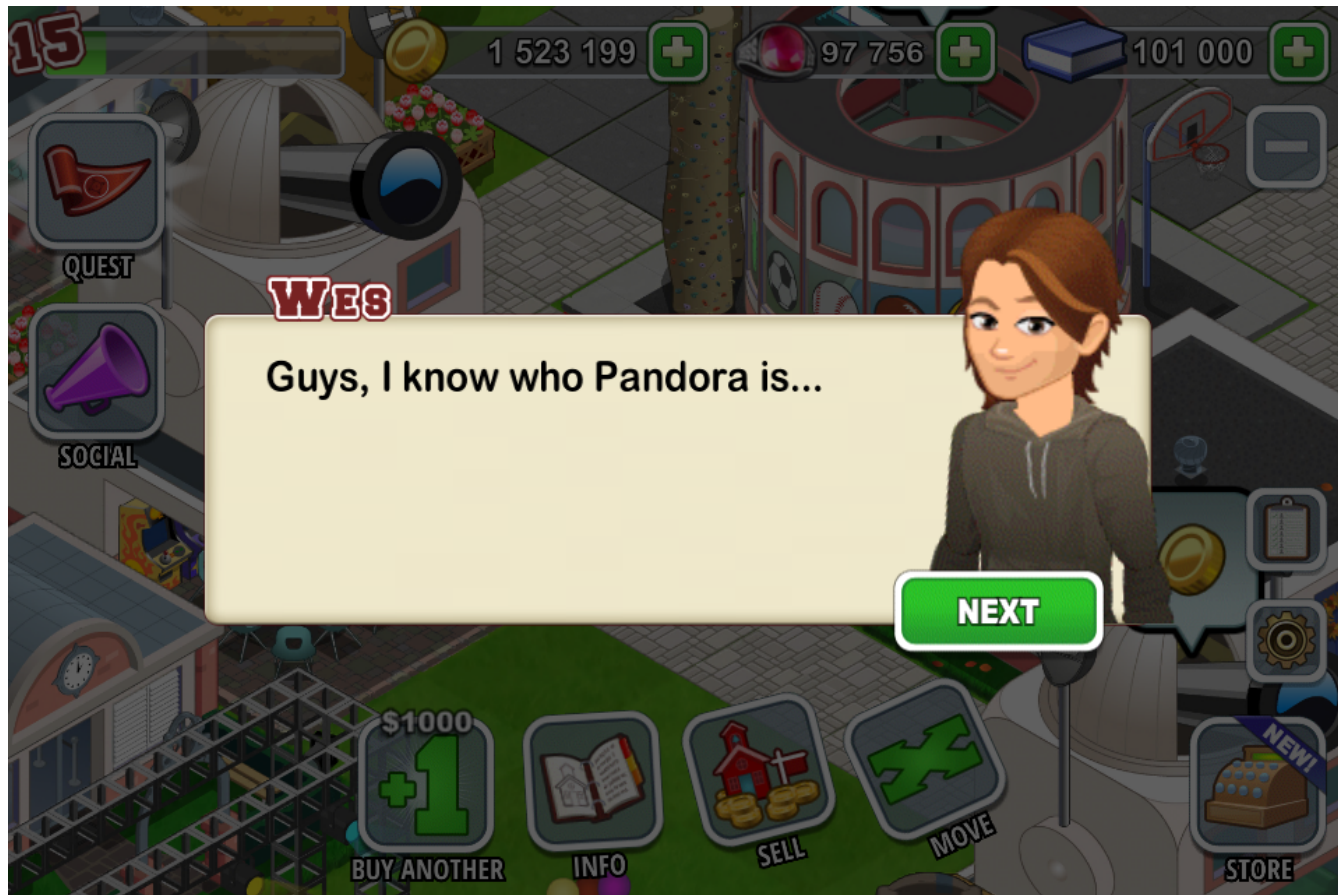
REAL CPI COST ~1/3 OF SIMILAR TITLES.

Stats via GrowMobile

# Cliffhangers

- Probably one of our most important tactics for ensuring players...
- 
- 
- ...Return







15 1 523 199 + 97 756 + 101 000 +

## THE ART FESTIVAL, PART 13

Here goes nothing! Keep a close eye on those Athena girls!

Autumn

- Jennifer
- Autumn
- A Classmate

REMAINING  
23h 59m

REWARDS  
XP 456  
34 000

RUSH

0/1

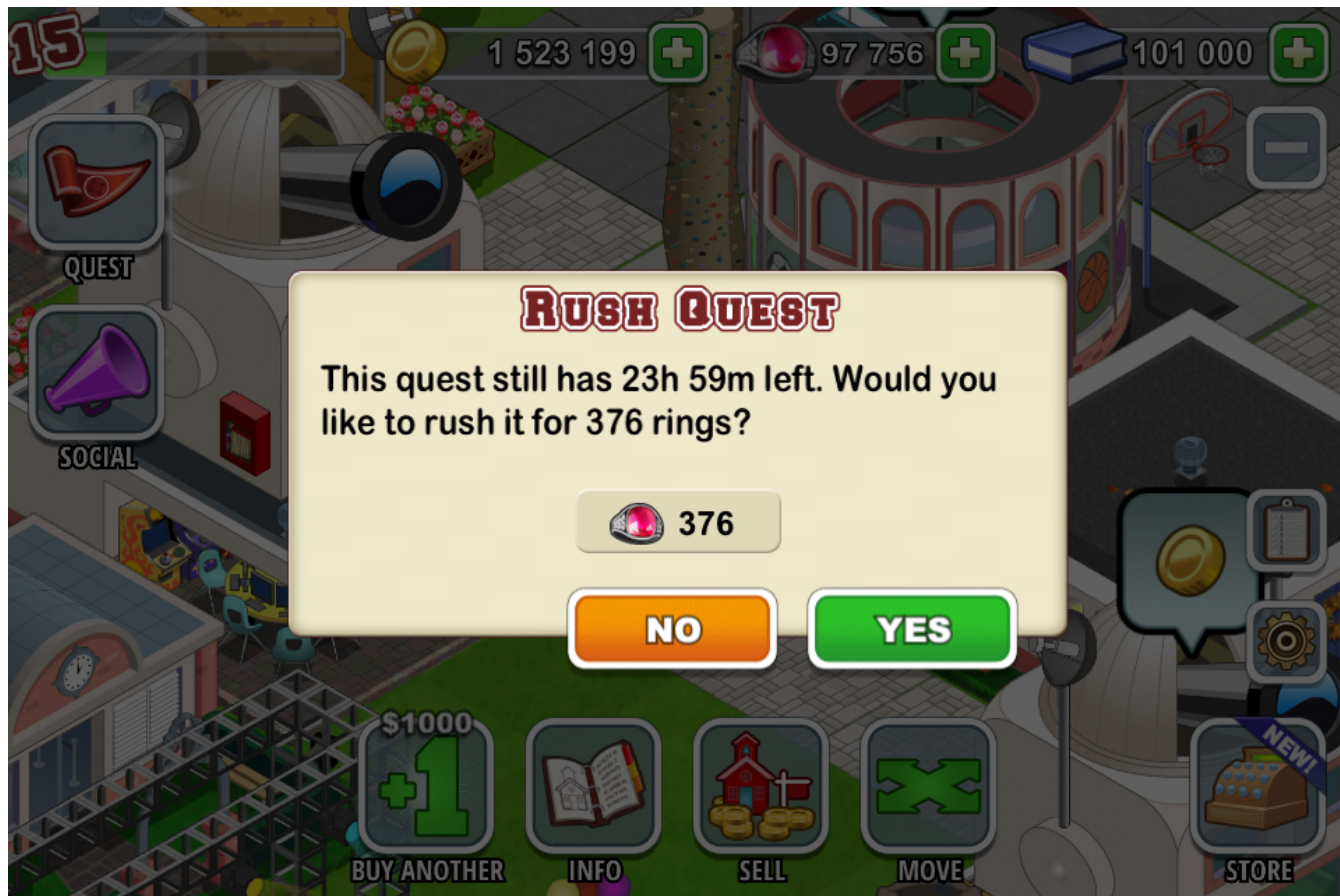
0/1

0/2

NEW!

NEW!

NEW!



# Rushing Quests

**RUSHING USERS**

83%

August 14 to October 22

Stats via Leanplum

# Cliffhangers

- Positive worry
- Need to know
- Delayed gratification



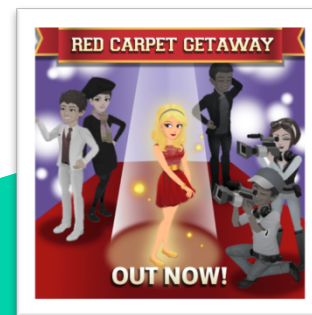
- Rushing
- Retention





# Story as its *own* Reward

- Premium Quest Chains offer
  - More time with characters you like
  - Unique emotional experiences
  - Opportunities to do something fun





# HSS Premium Quest Purchases

PURCHASED PREMIUM QUESTS	PURCHASED "HAUNTED HEARTS"
63%	25%
Aug 14 to 10/23	Oct 17 to Oct 22

Percent of Active Users  
Stats via Leanplum

# Good Game Writing

- Memorable Characters
- Romance and Drama
- Choices and Consequences
- Comedy and Fun
- Cliffhangers
- Story is its own reward



# Good Game Writing **Is NOT**

- Overlong
- Present for its own sake
- Self-indulgent
- Lacking in delight or surprise





# Very Good Retention

## OTHER APPS

1 DAY	7 DAY	30 DAY
60%	40%	10%

Retention Formula:  $\text{Intersection of Day A} + \text{Day B} / \text{Day B}$   
Stats via GrowMobile

# HSS Retention

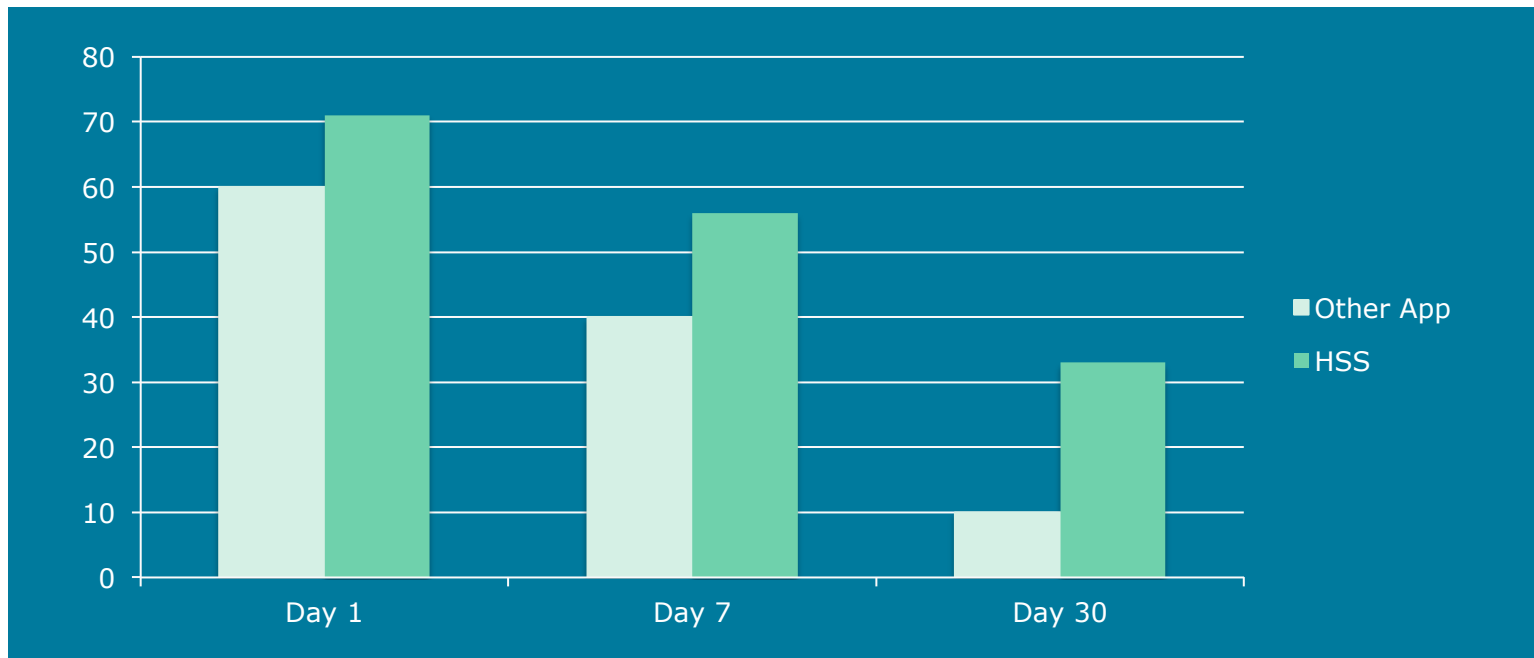
## HIGH SCHOOL STORY

1 DAY	7 DAY	30 DAY
71%	56%	33%

Average, August 1 to March 10

Retention Formula:  $\text{Intersection of Day A} + \text{Day B} / \text{Day B}$   
Stats via GrowMobile

# HSS Retention



Retention Formula:  $\text{Intersection of Day A} + \text{Day B} / \text{Day B}$   
Stats via GrowMobile

# Takeaways

- Story can be a tool to aid retention
- Add story judiciously
- Integrate story early... *with* writers
- Don't be afraid to revise or cut



# ...Questions?

