Deciding What To Make

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hi i'm adam

making overland

publishing night in the woods
(and some other things)

self-employed game maker since 2006
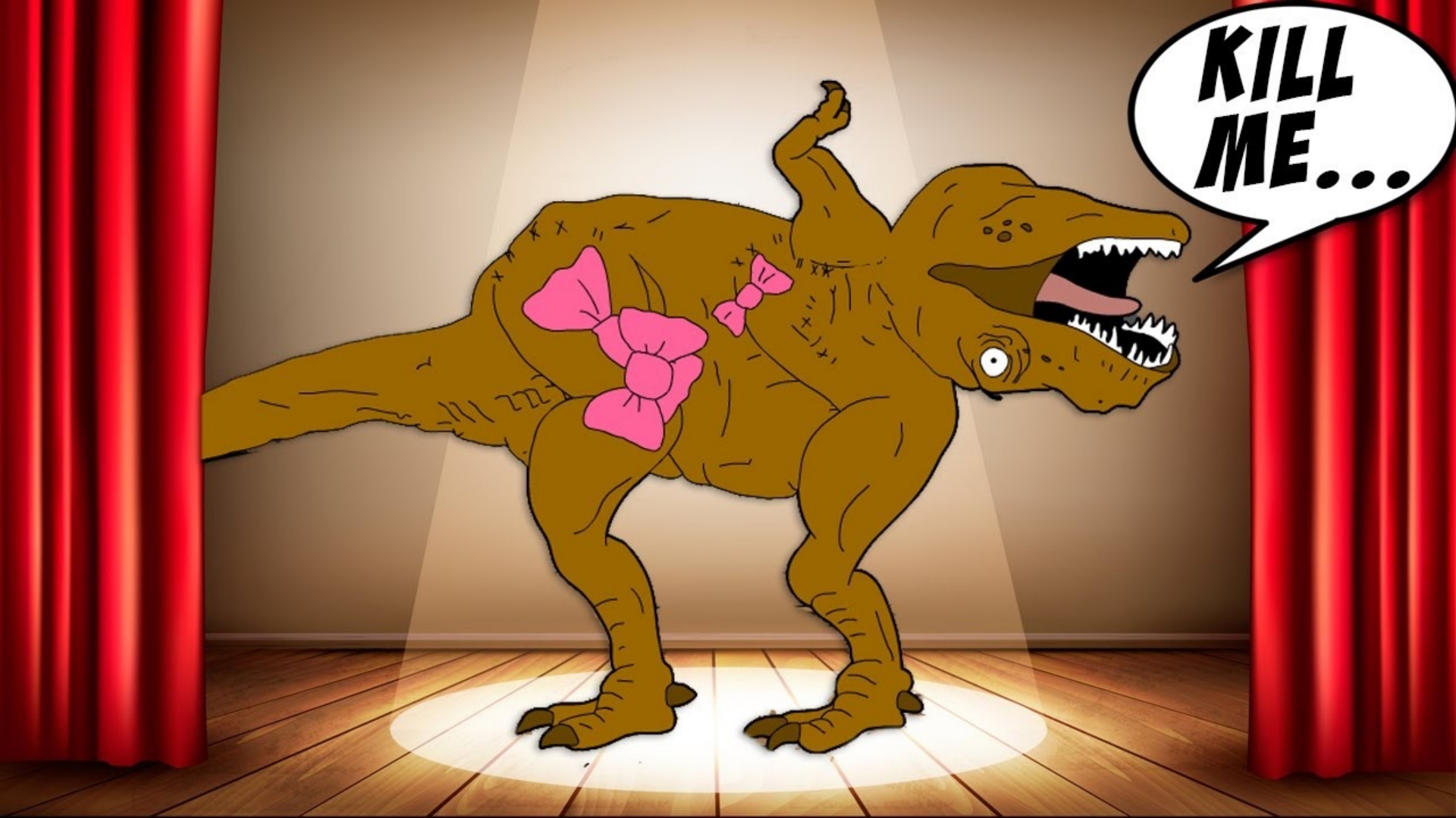
a guide to the finji greenlight process

how do we decide what to work on and invest in

85 slides. 30 minutes.

simplest way to describe indie games is just
the bar for selling games used to be SO LOW

ready?

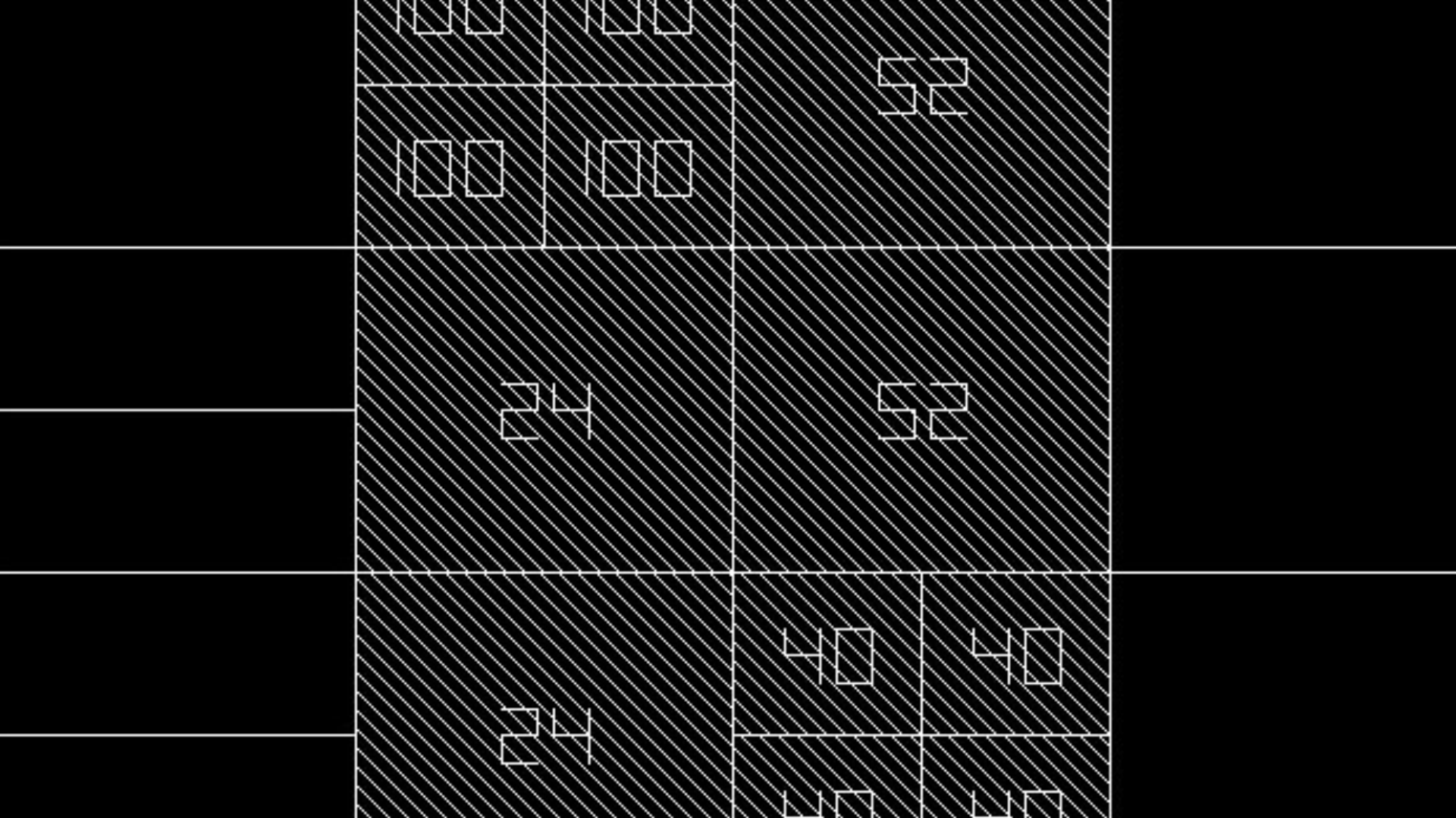indie games used to be categorically worse in almost every way in the last 5 years…

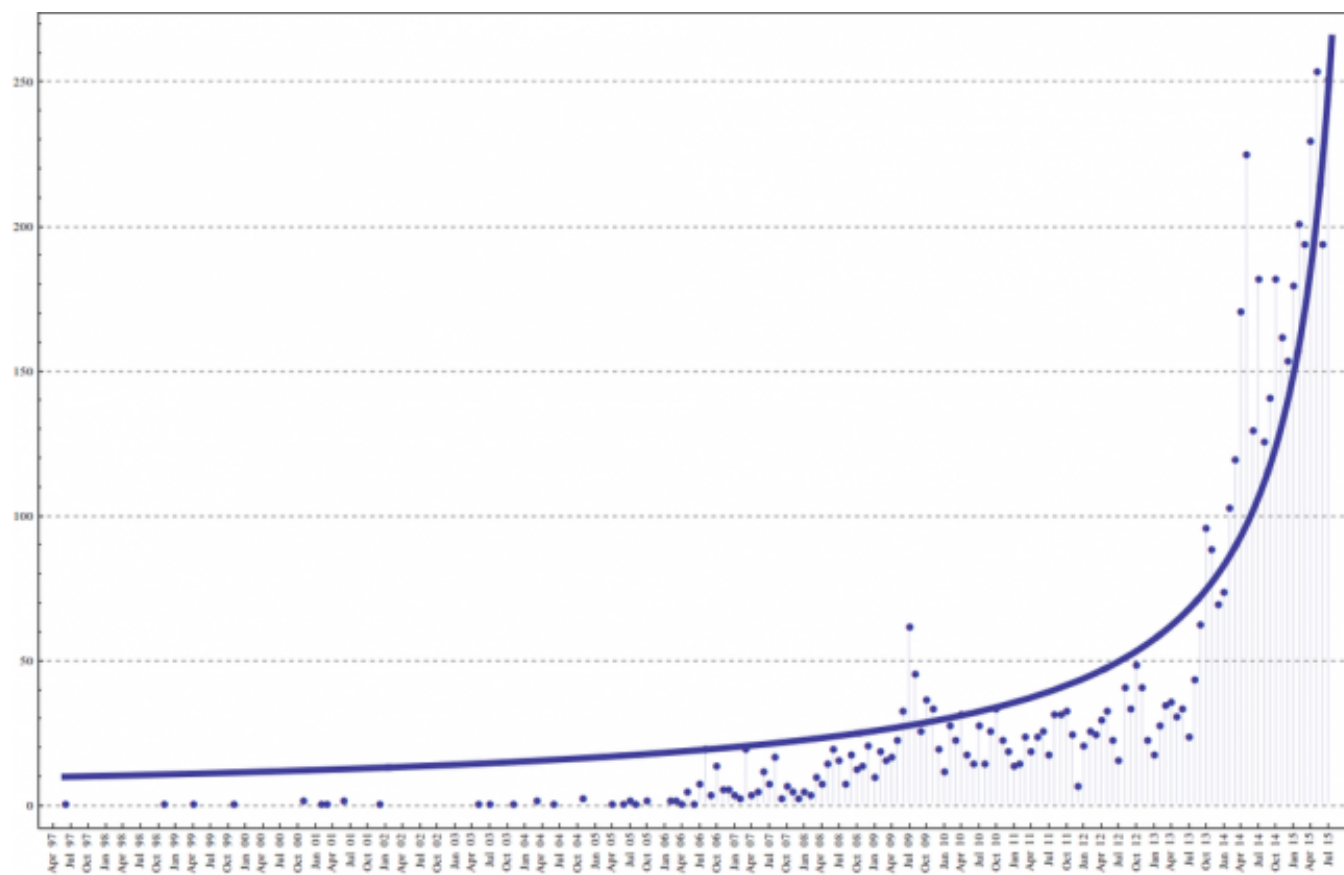the weird games got way weirder

the polished games got way more polished

the big games got bigger

and the small games got smaller

NEVER a particularly low-risk industry to begin with but:
} democratization of game-making tools
} flood of earnest + brilliant students
} + maybe a few AAA midlife crises
}-> have officially raised the bar

many games that were huge hits 5 years ago would never stand out today
lots of pros and cons here
whether it's good or bad or both though this market change is real

more personal note
bars been raised for us as a family
we have a couple kids now
stakes feel pretty real. all the time. like 24/7.
what we work on, how we work on it
all the potential upsides and downsides of those choices impact
ALL OF US

FINJI

what do we do as a company
as folks that sit around makin indie games all day
what do we do to survive in this ruined hellscape?

hedge them bets

first
all you CAN do is hedge your bets
there are MANY parts of commercial game making that are just out of our control

hedge that $hit

this is NOT about guaranteeing a studios survival (this is impossible anyways)
this is NOT about making slavishly adopting conventional wisdom

i want to talk about doing the opposite

lets talk about minimizing damage from and/or justifying making a weird passion project into a commercial thing

during and after

lots of talks and articles and blogs about how to hedge your bets
DURING development
and release
and even post-release

but what about before?

before

game design lesson: the earlier you can discover flaws or errors,
the more flexibility you have to adapt and either:
solve them or
resolve them or
dissolve them and strengthen your design

this holds for the project as a whole –
design and production and marketing and technological and
artistic components –
the earlier you find the landmines in your path, the more time
you have to adapt

its good to have a strong process
and to take your releases seriously
some problems that is just too little too late

what about before there is EVEN A GAME? well there's a lot of advice out there:
– don't make an experimental game
– don't make a clone
– don't make a premium game
– don't make a f2p game
– don't make a casual game
– don't make a hardcore game

pro tip: don't make a game

sort of joking right but
making a commercial game is insanely risky
its usually a bad idea
this is a thing not to be done lightly

or

if you ARE going to make a commercial game, let's at least:
– acknowledge and potentially mitigate SOME of the risk involved
– still work on something we love

in other words

hedge early. hedge often.

hedge early

hedge often

- PLATONIC SCOPE
- INVERSE PYRAMID [MVP]
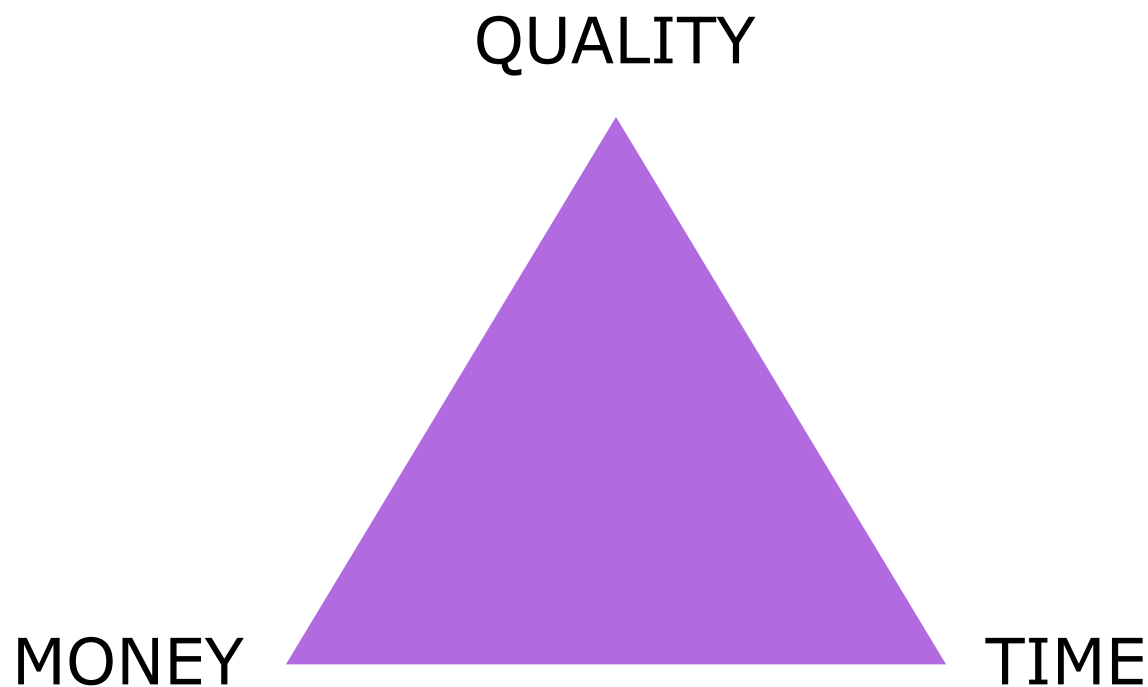- CREATIVE RISKS [DIFFERENTIATION]
- EXPOSURE DESIGN

PRO STRATS for PRE–PRE–PRODUCTION

helps us vet an idea before we even start the prototype

- PLATONIC SCOPE
- INVERSE PYRAMID [MVP]
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thats a dorky name for a thing!!

probably all familiar with game production cerberus: Scope, Budget, and Schedule

QUALITY

MONEY   TIME

scope, budget and schedule:
basically our fancy abstractions for some p discrete resources:
– game quality (whatever that means)
– money
– time
imagine these as kind of the three points of a triangle, and
different games kind of have different triangles

different game ideas react to changes in these variables
differently
increasing time or money may or may not affect the budget and/
or ship date and/or output quality

since we're trying to make games commercially and somehow
eat food also:

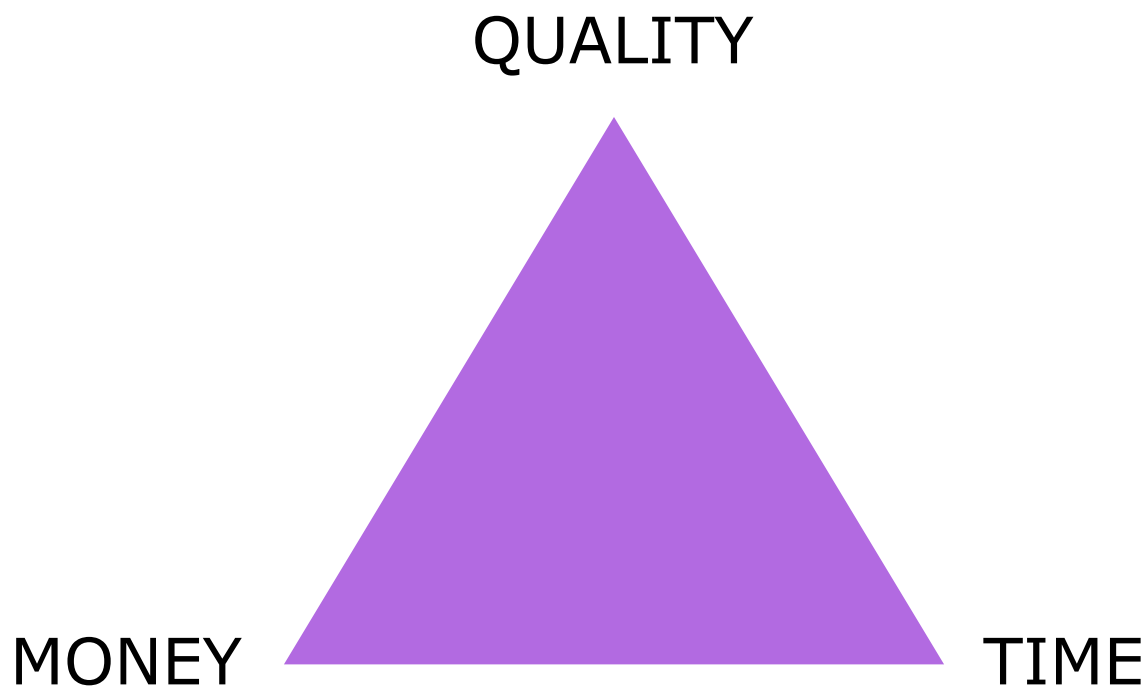platonic ideal: something that is the most perfect or true version of itself
– somehow perfectly authentic
– the ur–thing
– the essence, etc

our TARGET for quality variable: somehow create platonic version of any given game idea
– radically different from game to game
– ideal sandbox game largely unrelated to ideal RPG

AND, PROBABLY OBVIOUSLY BUT:
– basically impossible to achieve!
– still useful as a target on the horizon

QUALITY

MONEY   TIME

SO: we have these three variables:
– time
– money
– quality

in commercial game dev 'time' and 'money' have very real upper bounds
AND we have this idea of "what is the platonic ideal of a given game?"

SO here's an easy way to manage your risk when greenlighting a project:
given the time and money you have access to, which of your game ideas can you get the closest to its platonic ideal?

WHAT

this is an INSANE question

there are so many factors in play here
you may not even have invested in a prototype

even if you DO have a prototype...
games have a tendency to grow in unpredictable ways
that's a good thing!
but you can grow a LARGE tree from a SMALL seed
SO: how can we even guess which of our game ideas we can get
closest to its "platonic ideal"?

predicting ABSOLUTES is quite hard
e.g. accuracy in predicting exact budget and dev time and design
complexity and final quality of an original game idea is
impossible

making a RELATIVE comparison
pitting a handful of ideas against each other
imagining which one you can take the farthest given the
resources you have
that might actually help

- PLATONIC SCOPE
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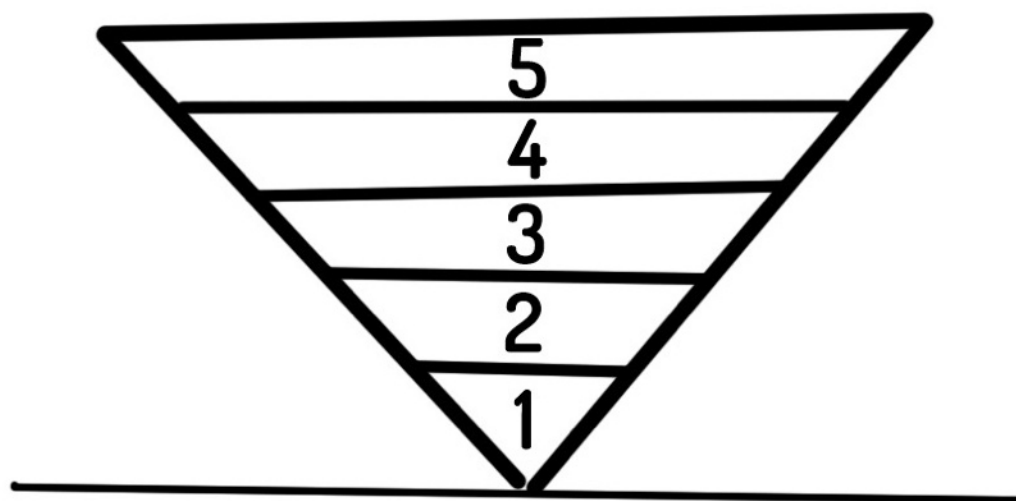- EXPOSURE DESIGN

anyways that's where that dorky name comes from

PLATONIC SCOPE: you may be able to make a pretty good call about which of your game ideas you can take the farthest given the resources you have
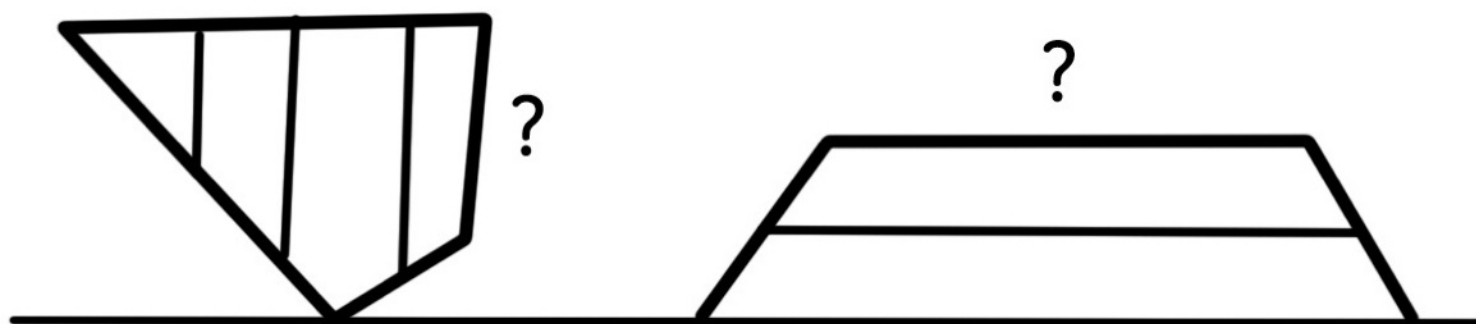
not the end–all / be–all of greenlighting an idea internally!
just one step that might be useful

- PLATONIC SCOPE
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next pre-game consideration: ominous-sounding INVERSE PYRAMID TEST

– an inverted pyramid maintains the same overall shape over time as you add new layers
– may decrease risk because you can stop prototyping at any time and still have a whole game

– vertical strata or regular "non-inverted" pyramids don't have the same weird shape-maintaining property
– inherently incomplete/unstable until final touches are applied
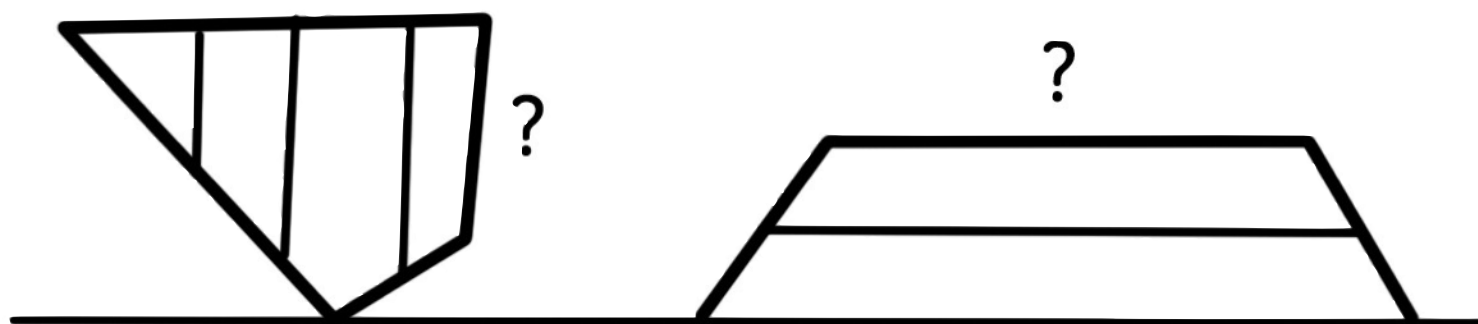
no way

why does this matter?
sometimes
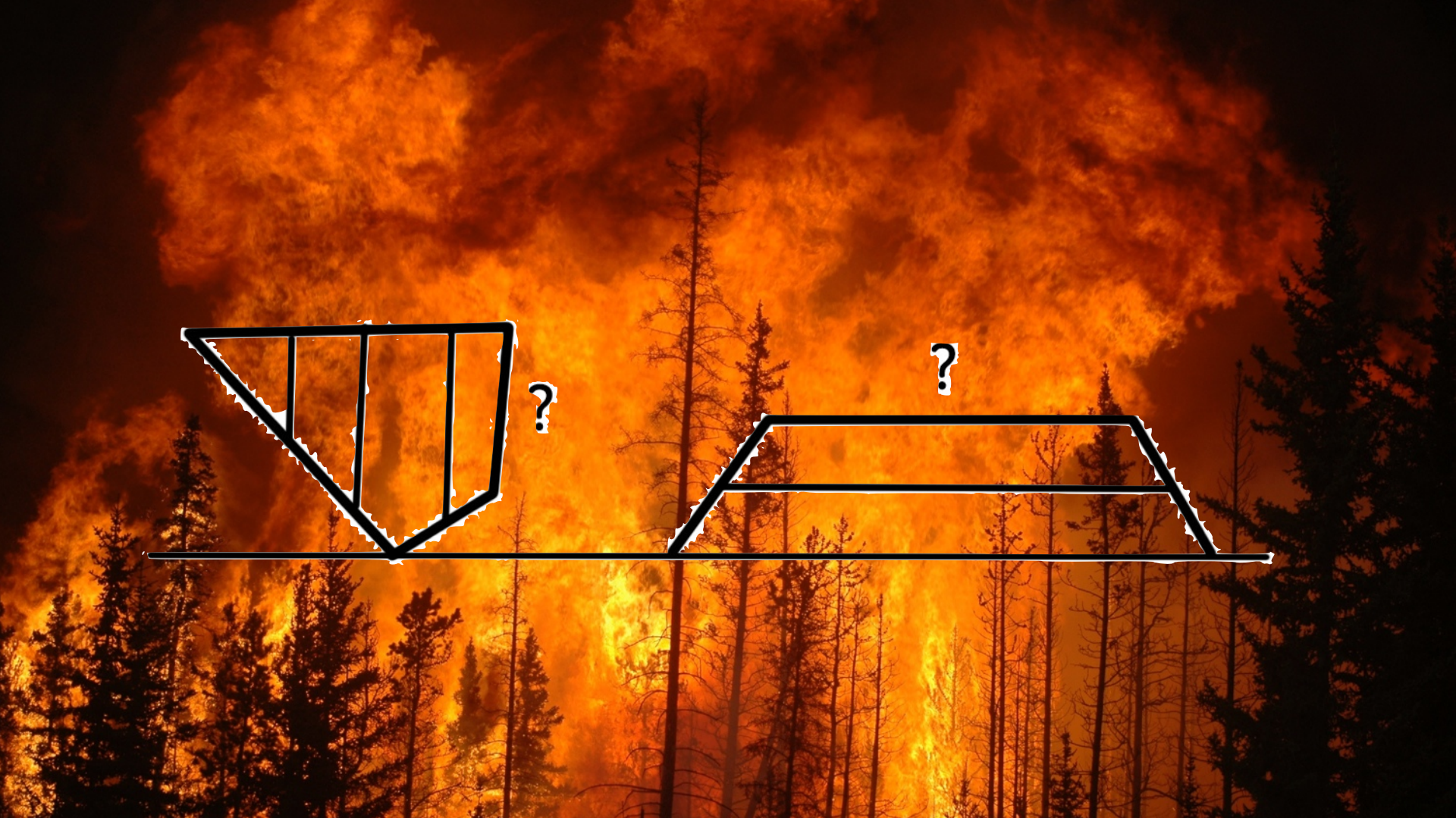budget and schedule estimates end up being slightly off
SO if you end up not having as much time and money as you
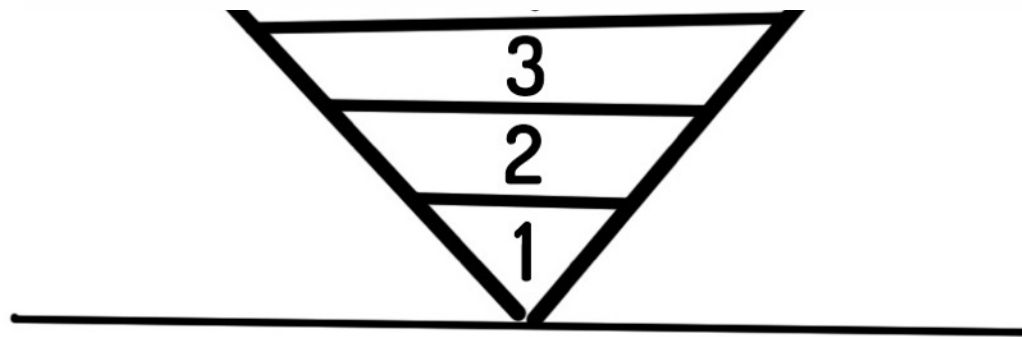were hoping
somehow
do you want to end up like...

this?

or like this?

– in other words: "minimum viable product"
– (i love that in this metaphor you have to rebuild all the parts at each step)
– (you can't use skateboard wheels on a bike)
– (you have to REVISIT the wheels)
– (you have to QUESTION old assumptions)

The Minimum Viable* Pizza

Hypothesis: Can we sell pizza for profit?
Time to produce the pizza: 4 minutes
Cost: €€€€€
Learning: No demand for pizza.

NOT EVERY IDEA IS GOING TO BE A GOOD FIT FOR THIS MODEL

sort of the whole point right
these "pre-game considerations" are
not best practices
not design methodologies
not workflow processes

more like ways of interrogating or examining an idea

for us inverse pyramid test usually means focusing on systems-
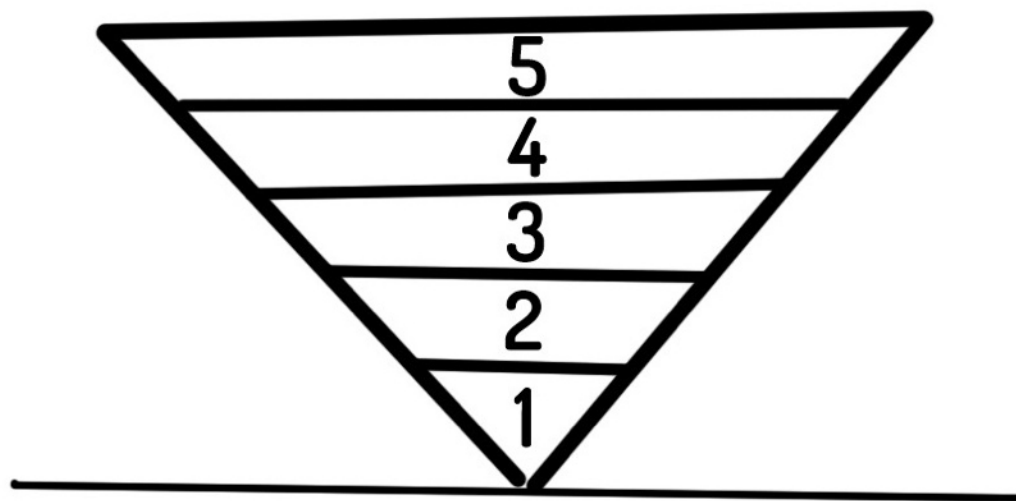based games as opposed to content-based games

games with a lot of randomly generated content are a good fit
for us
takes a long time to nail down the basics
but you end up with a good game that is small
and new content grows the game exponentially

sandbox games too
a single new mechanic might double the size of the experience

weird thing about this "shape" of game:
new layers or mechanics might contain disproportionate amount of new 'content'
not really just a triangle
multidimensional prism
each new layer adds a lot and alters/augments existing layers

- PLATONIC SCOPE
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anyways thats the inverse pyramid idea

next up

- PLATONIC SCOPE
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CREATIVE RISKS
or: take as many risks as possible without being COMPLETELY "unbuyable"

WHY EVEN TAKE CREATIVE RISKS THOUGH
- one of the reasons you went indie in the first place
- nobody is making the game you want
- gap to be filled, wilderness to explore
- fun, feels good!!
- BUT ALSO...

DIFFERENTIATION

– differentiation is a weird apparent-contradiction of commercial game making

– can't be UNbuyable

– and yet important for practical and personal reasons to have a... recognizable but unique silhouette

– this is like the world's worst graphic design brief and yet

- •How much game is there?

- •How accessible is it?

- •How 'fair' is it?

- •Is the interesting stuff on the surface or buried underneath (or both)?

– ok so we want to be not-unbuyable
– but what does buyable even mean?
– these are some ways of thinking about that or defining that BUT
– breaking some of these "rules" is a GREAT way to differentiate your game
– two birds with one stone etc. HOW ABOUT SOME EXAMPLES

MINECRAFT for example is not particularly accessible (or polished?)
– scores REALLY well on the "how much game is there" part though!!

Gone Home is a pretty short game (and politically progressive)
– but VERY polished and (relatively) accessible

– these games don't really follow the normal 'buyable' formulation perfectly
– these are subjective judgments but
– i admire the way these games take progressive or challenging ideas and present them to a big audience
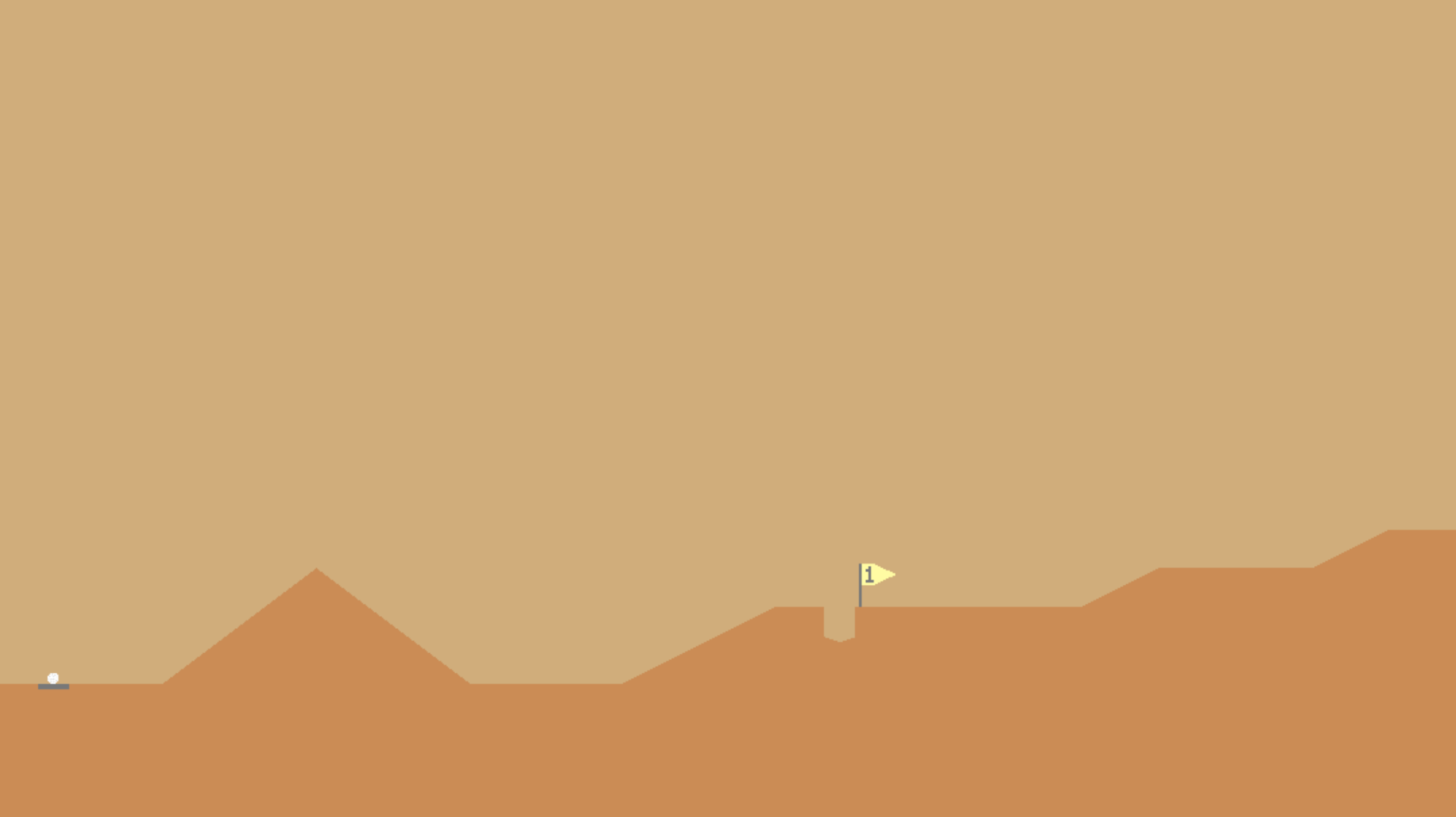– this is cool

– some games follow all those "rules" about buyability quite closely and are still beautiful/interesting
–The Witness for example (differentiated by presentation / insane quality)

also Bloodborne!
– but these games that take fewer creative risks are i think actually MORE risky
– they MUST have EXTREMELY good 'content' and they tend toward being expensive to make
– the Witness would definitely struggle if the puzzles were a bit crap

it is easier i think esp for small devs to differentiate by breaking some rules instead

DO NOT DESIGN FOR ALL AUDIENCES

ANOTHER WAY OF LOOKING AT THIS PROBLEM:
- "you can't make everyone happy all of the time"
- heard that a million times
- we understand it cognitively/emotionally
- we get it!

- BUT if making art and trying to share with world...
- lot of tension/pressure to make concessions to reach out to new audiences
- to draw in people who might not know about this new thing
- suddenly we ARE trying to design for all audiences

WHEN YOU DO THIS:
– the game starts to trip over itself
– undermines the thing that made the game so different / interesting

- PLATONIC SCOPE
- INVERSE PYRAMID [MVP]
- CREATIVE RISKS [DIFFERENTIATION]
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creative risks:
– feel good
– help you stand out
– but they're tricky

you have to have a lot of confidence and a lot of humility at the same time
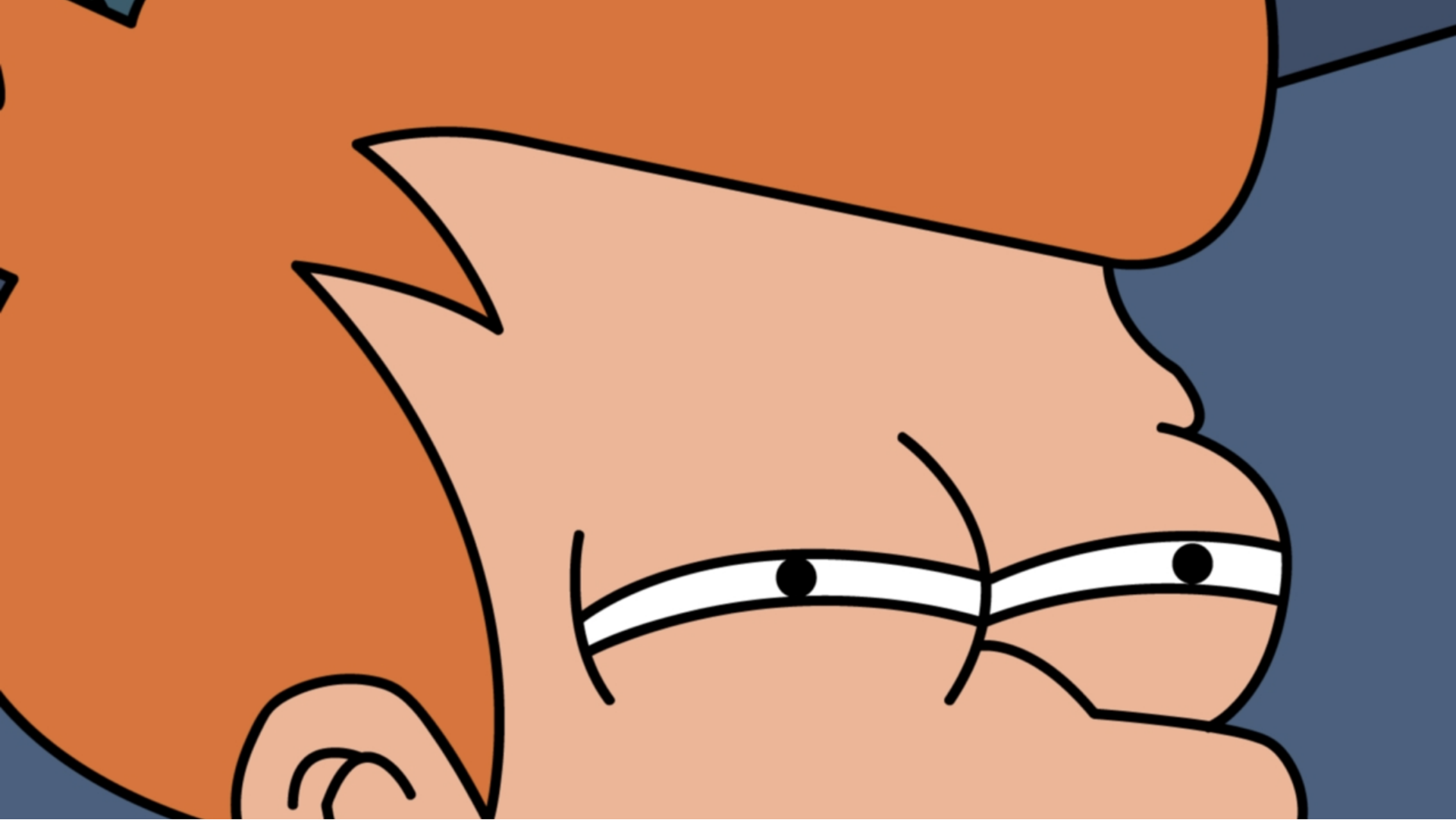not easy
TOTALLY WORTH IT

last but not least, the final pre-game consideration is

- PLATONIC SCOPE
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EXPOSURE DESIGN

which is what exactly??

MARKETING

MARKETING

– marketing not a thing you DO or DON'T DO
– marketing just is
– marketing is the part of your game that people can see and/or hear about
– the first time someone sees a screenshot of your game is the first time they experience your game
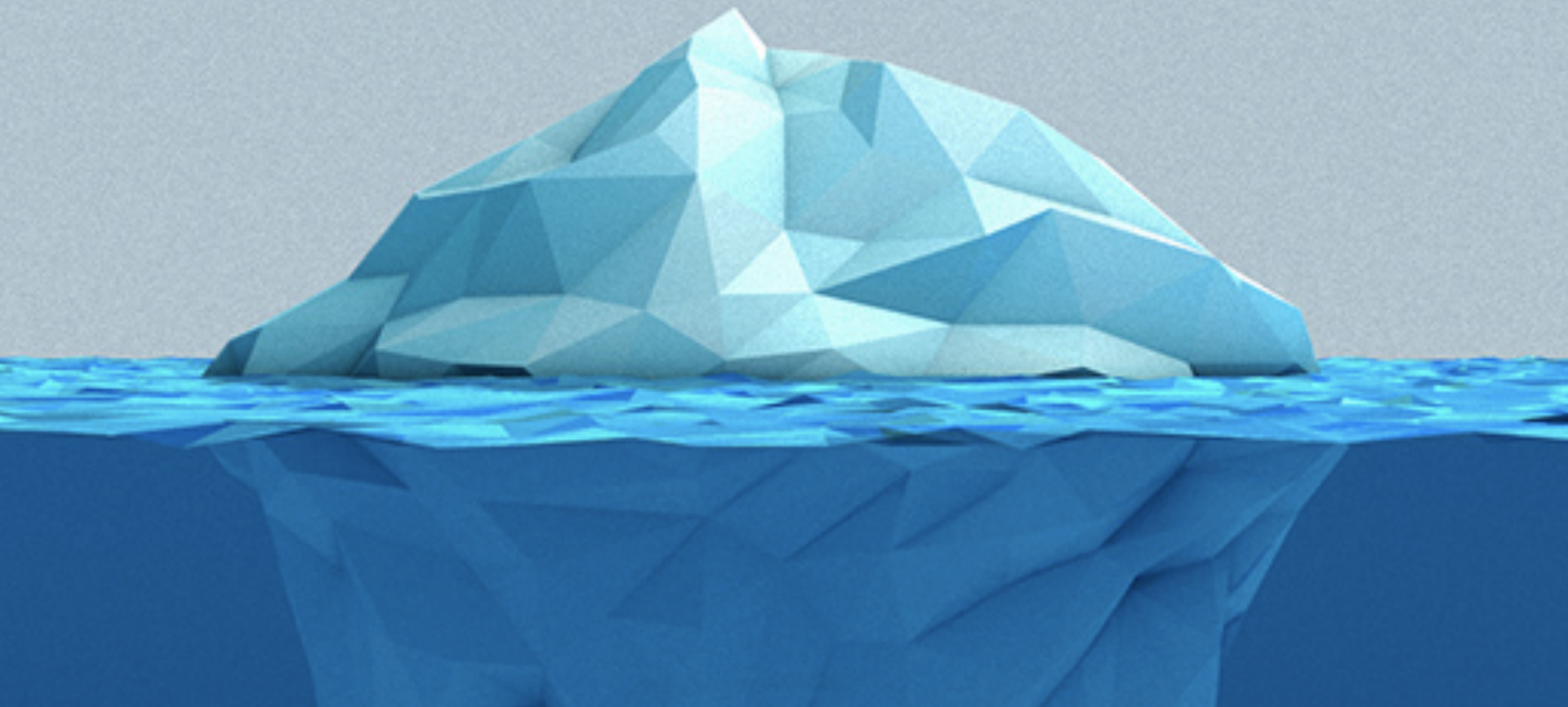– first impressions matter

•a lets play

•seeing it on someone's screen on the bus

•seeing a screenshot on tumblr

•launching the game and seeing the loading screens

•a friend drunkenly ranting about it last night

some things that are marketing whether you like it or not

IF YOUR GAME IS AN ICEBERG, MARKETING IS THE 10% OF THE ICEBERG
THAT STICKS UP OUT OF THE WATER
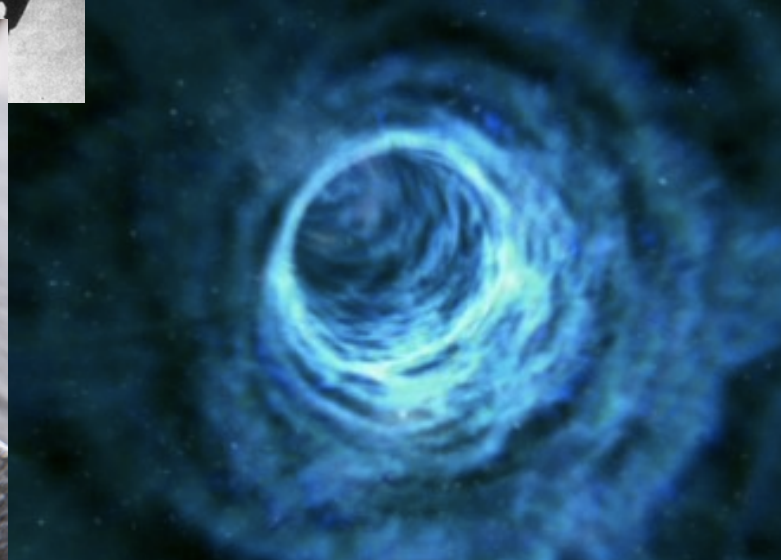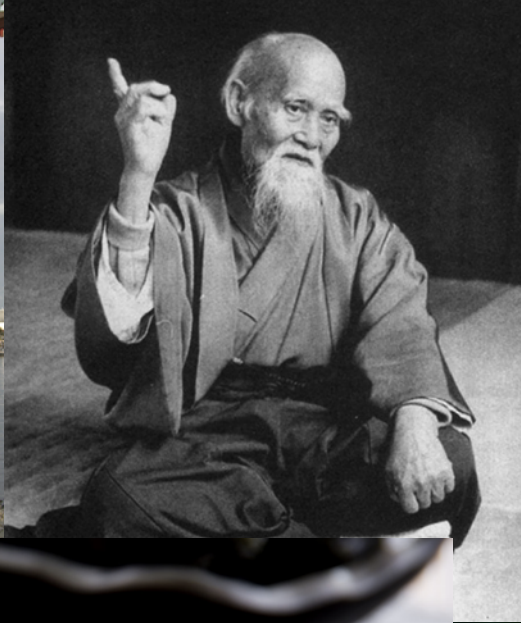
EXPOSURE

– exposed part of the iceberg is called STRANGELY ENOUGH: EXPOSURE

EXPOSURE DESIGN

- marketing, then, is EXPOSURE DESIGN
- EXPOSURE DESIGN is super important
- by definition it is the ONLY way people get into the strange world inside your game
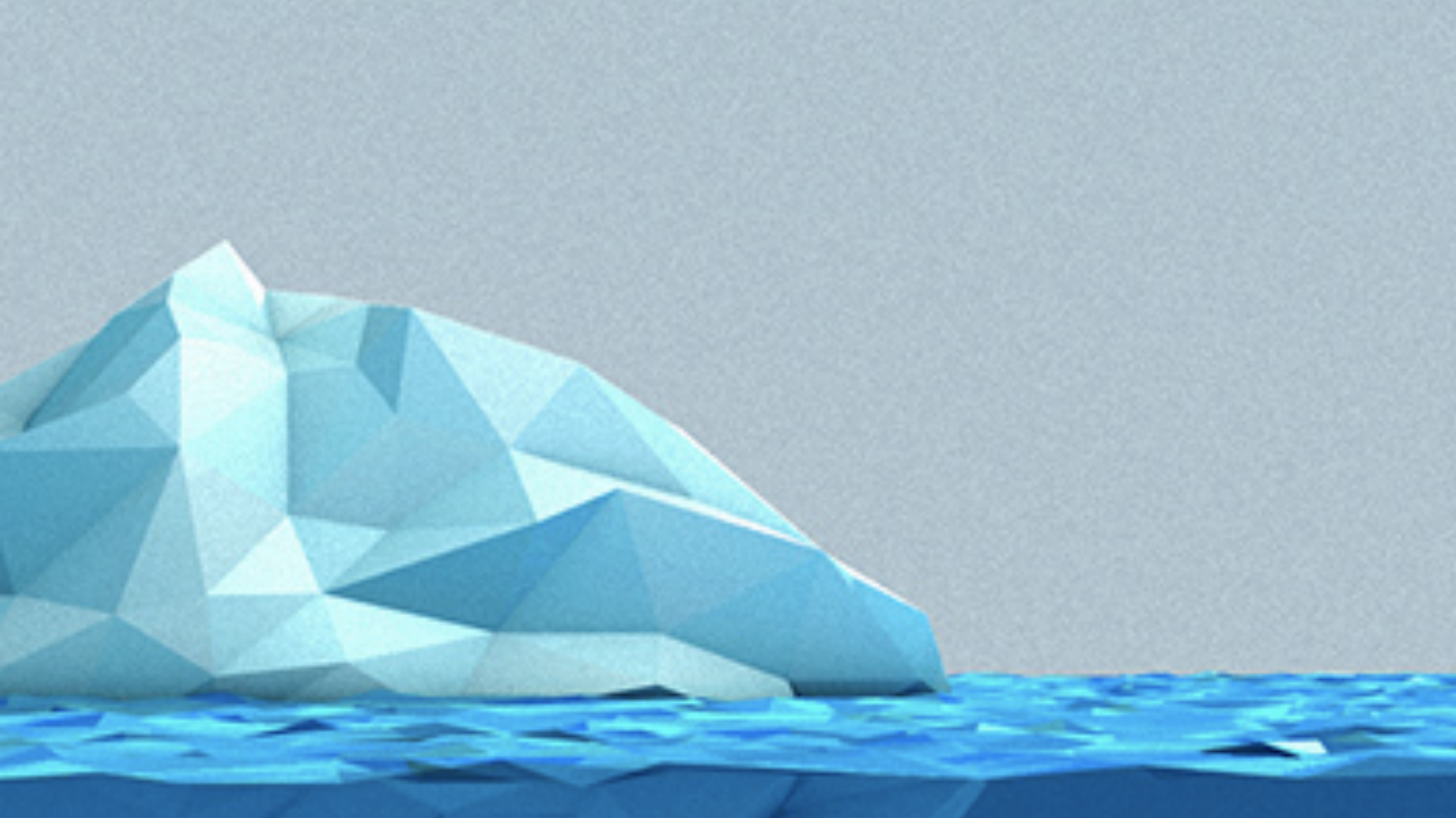- EXPOSURE DESIGN is the idea that you CAN and SHOULD design that little visible portion

– a little piece that bears a HUGE design burden
– gate, teacher, temptation, restaurant menu
– marketing is the outer layer of the weird psychic playground you are trying to share with people

– EXPOSURE DESIGN is a fundamental part of building a commercial game
– also not a question that can be fully answered before working on the game
– (any more than you can write a full GDD for an emergent or experimental game)
– Building is designing, and vice versa
– BUT... exposure design should still be a consideration from day 1

•does it communicate the game's buyable shape?

•does it differentiate itself from other games?

•does it speak clearly to the game's audience?

SOME WAYS OF INTERROGATING EXPOSURE DESIGN

- EXPOSURE DESIGN is really difficult
- but it is also very easy to test
- EXPOSURE DESIGN is NOT about explaining your whole game in 5 seconds
  - it's weirder than that... trying to communicate an essential experience, not mechanics

•does it communicate the game's buyable shape?

•does it differentiate itself from other games?

•does it speak clearly to the game's audience?

there's a reason this list didn't include "over-explain everything"

because you are trying to communicate an essential experience, not just mechanics or story, exposure design varies WILDLY and WIDELY from project to project

DIFFERENTIATION

- differentation in exposure design has even more pressure
- what will make someone's eyes or ears or brain stop and rest before moving on?
- what will engender a desire to talk about the game and share it with friends?

IN A WORLD OF INFINITE ICEBERGS, WHAT MAKES YOURS SO SPECIAL?

WHATEVER THAT QUALITY IS, IS IT APPARENT IN THE BIT THAT POKES OUT OF THE WATER?

- sometimes it is tempting to think things like:
    - well my game will speak for itself, or
    - i guess everyone knows about it already
- cheng infinity hypothesis
- tom francis 0% steam

- PLATONIC SCOPE
- INVERSE PYRAMID [MVP]
- CREATIVE RISKS [DIFFERENTIATION]
- EXPOSURE DESIGN

– it's so tempting to think of marketing as something you do LATER or something EXTERNAL to your game
– it is an integral and natural part of your game design

- PLATONIC SCOPE
- INVERSE PYRAMID
- CREATIVE RISKS
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ok real quick summary!! these are our main pre-game considerations when we're greenlighting commercial projects at finji
– how good can we get it with the resources we have?
– if we run out of time or money is the project salvageable?
– do we love this idea? does it stand out?
– how hard are we going to have to work to show its coolness to other people?
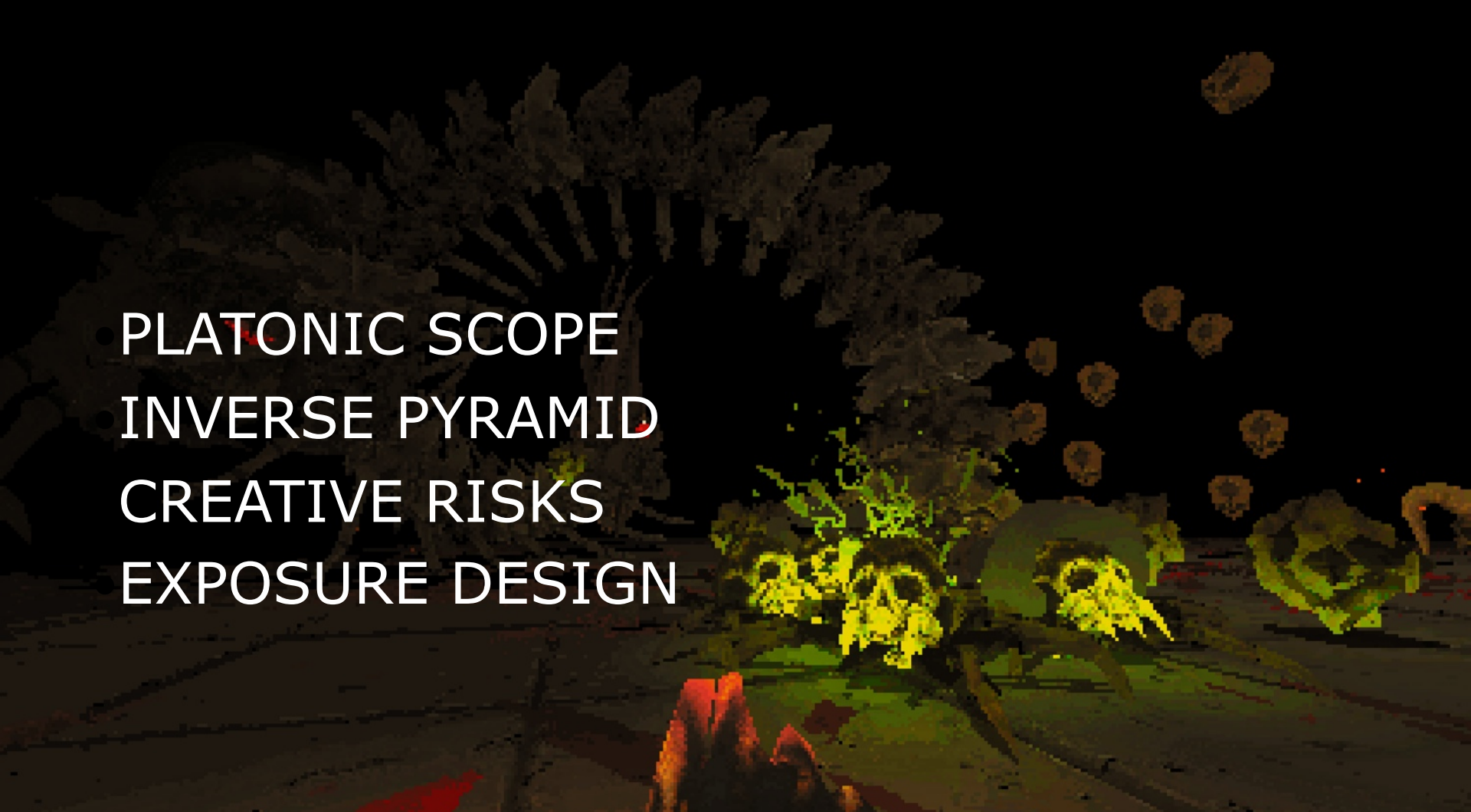
- PLATONIC SCOPE???
- INVERSE PYRAMID???

CREATIVE RISKS

EXPOSURE DESIGN

COUNTERPOINT
i love the creative risks these games take
they're expressive, beautiful, smart

and they are really bad fits for the way *i* build games
i don't know how to manage scope here or what to do if the budget ran low

very very very good fits for these creators though
games that played to their individual strengths

PLATONIC SCOPE
INVERSE PYRAMID
CREATIVE RISKS
EXPOSURE DESIGN

a recent example of a game that in my opinion is taking the right kinds of risks: DEVIL DAGGERS
- requires few moving parts to excel
- adding a new layer to the pyramid works great (e.g. a new enemy type)
- defies some expectations (3D FPS with no levels)
- screenshots are easy to recognize and show many of the cool parts of the game (also easy to make creepy gifs)

now does this mean all arena shooters are a good idea?
no no no
but mix of ingredients and ideas here is very strong

- PLATONIC SCOPE
- INVERSE PYRAMID
- CREATIVE RISKS
- EXPOSURE DESIGN

SO maybe it's not even THAT important that you 'follow' these 'rules'
instead think about what do these things mean...
for you
for your background
for your skills
for your audience
for your creative needs

even MORE broadly, just THINK about ANYTHING
a thing we hear way too often:

"hey we quit our job and invested our life savings in this project
that absolutely completely fails to address ANY of these concerns
and it's halfway done now and we're wondering what the next
step is"

and its like man it is too late for this talk!!

hedge that $hit

hedge early. hedge often.

@adamatomic / @finjico

thanks