

Designing a Trance: Meditation and Game Design

Robin Arnott, GDC, 2017

WHO AM I?

“It’s important for us to take inspiration from other games, but it's even more valuable to take inspiration from outside of games. The other arts, the sciences, and the natural world can all lead us towards new, marvellous, and beautiful types of game design.”

-Rich Lemarchand

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In which we approach the topic of meditation and sit in silence for a minute or so.

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Chapter 1

*In which we approach the topic of meditation and sit in
silence for a moment or so.*

The Narrative Mind



Mystical Experiences

Mystical Experiences

“Visual impressions are greatly intensified and the eye recovers some of the perceptual innocence of childhood, when the sensum was not immediately and automatically subordinated to the concept. Interest in space is diminished and interest in time falls almost to zero.”

-Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception* & *Heaven and Hell*

Mystical Experiences

Katherine MacLean, Journal of Psychopharmacology

Mystical Experiences Occasioned by the Hallucinogen Psilocybin Lead to Increases in the Personality Domain of Openness
2011

Mystical Experiences

A sense of unity	

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Mystical Experiences

A sense of unity	
An intuitive sense of deep truth	

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An intuitive sense of deep truth	
Sacredness	

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Mystical Experiences

A sense of unity	Positive mood
An intuitive sense of deep truth	
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Mystical Experiences



Chapter 2

We use the wisdom of Dennis Weir's "France Model" to appreciate the multi-layered trances of a MCB.A.

What is a trance?

What is a trance?



self-perpetuating mental loop

What is a trance?

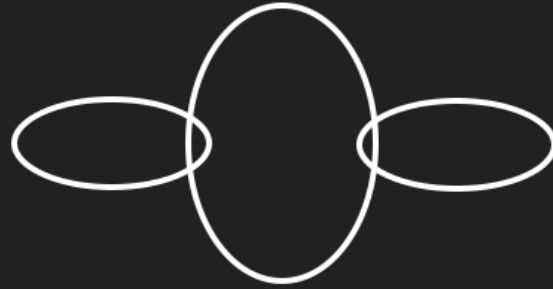
self-perpetuating mental loop

What is a trance?



self-perpetuating mental loop

What is a trance?



network of
mutually reinforcing
self-perpetuating mental loops

What is a trance?

flow?

What is a trance?



What is a trance?



What is a trance?



What is a trance?



What is a trance?



What is a trance?



MOBA Trance



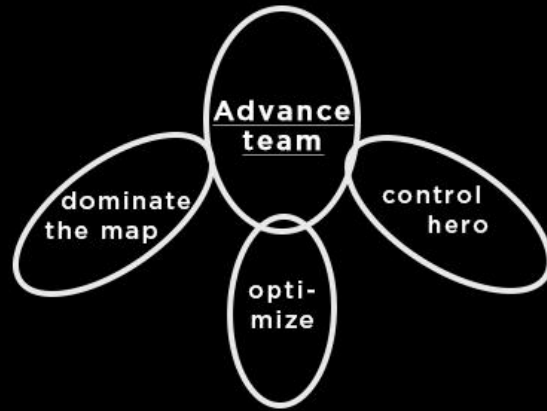
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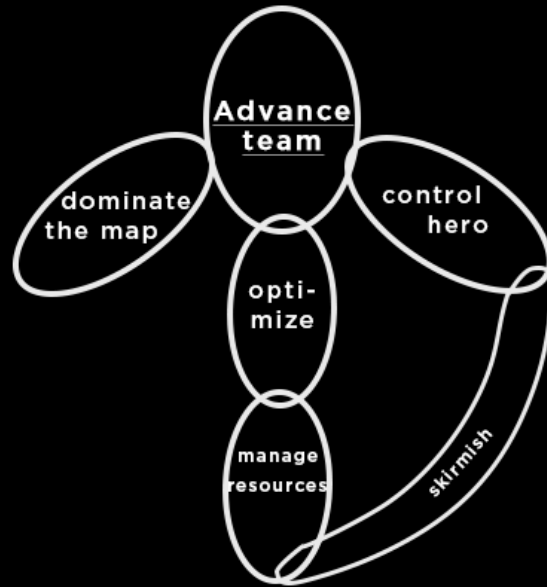
MOBA Trance



MOBA Trance



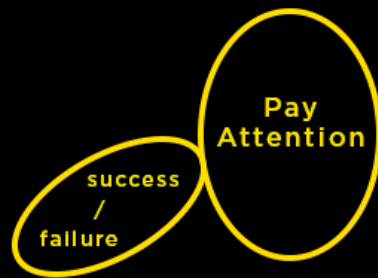
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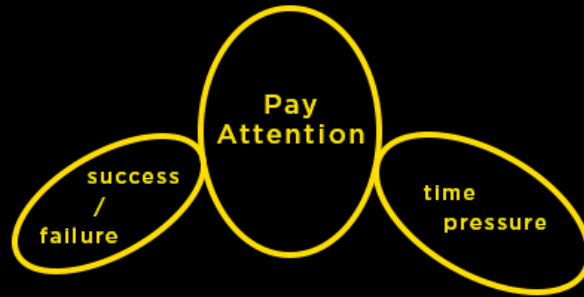
MOBA Trance



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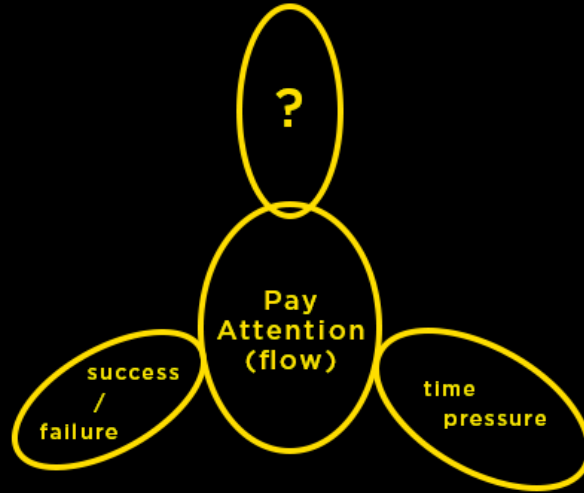
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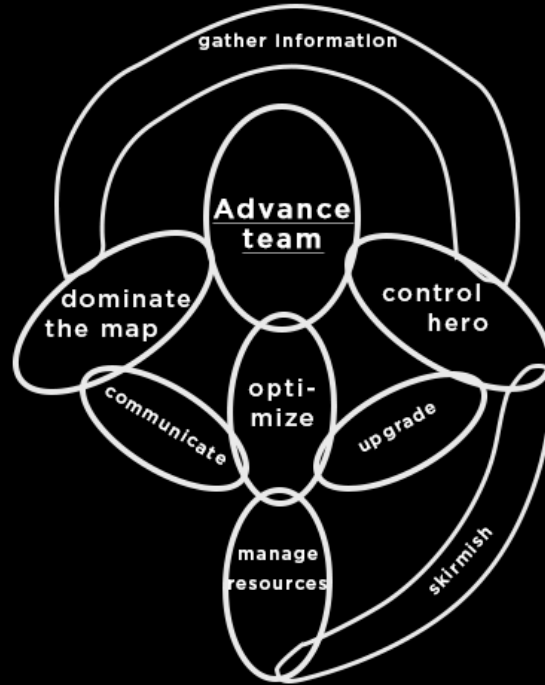
MOBA Trance



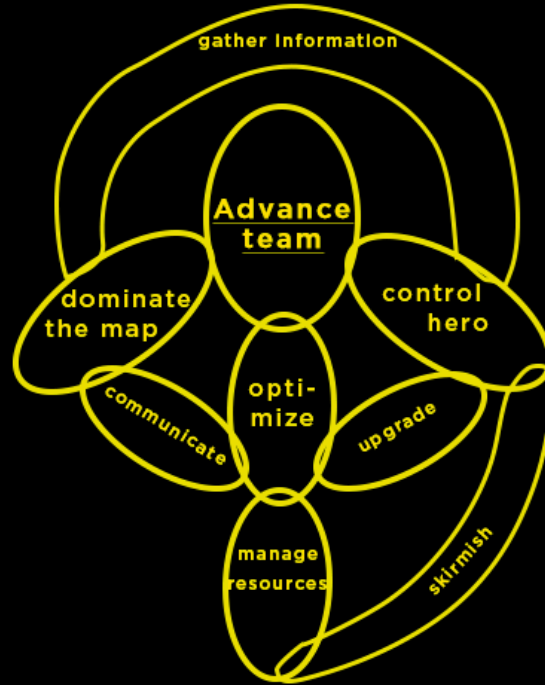
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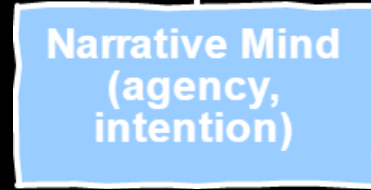


MOBA Trance



MOBA Trance





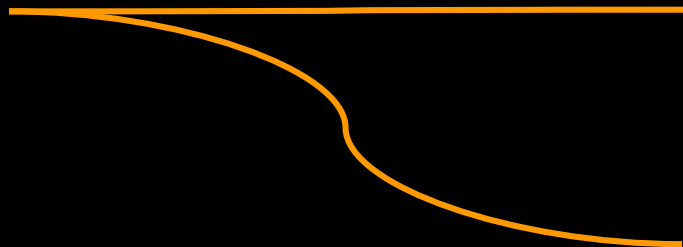
The Self



**Narrative Mind
(agency,
intention)**

Emotional Body

The Self



The Self



**Narrative Mind
(agency,
intention)**



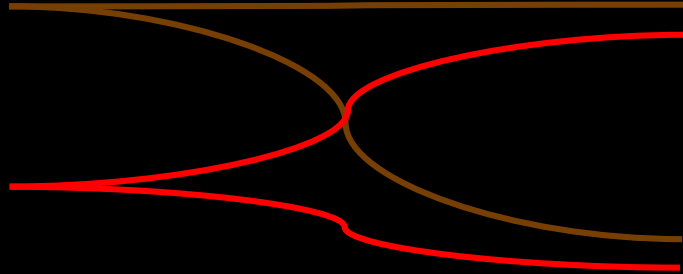
Emotional Body



superficial



subtle



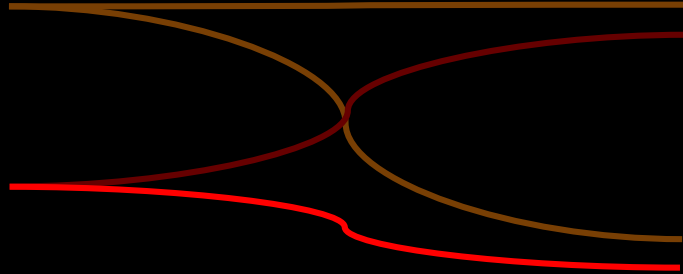
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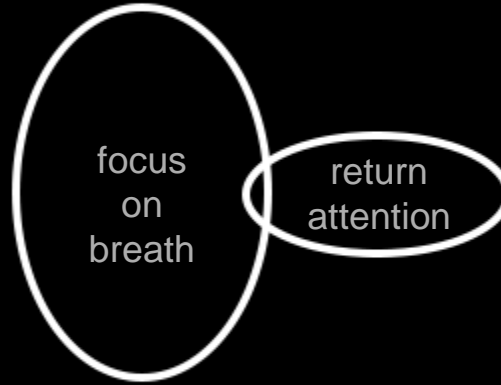
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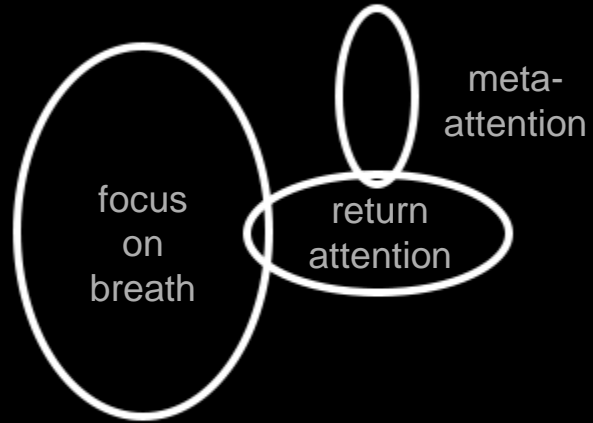
Mindfulness Trance



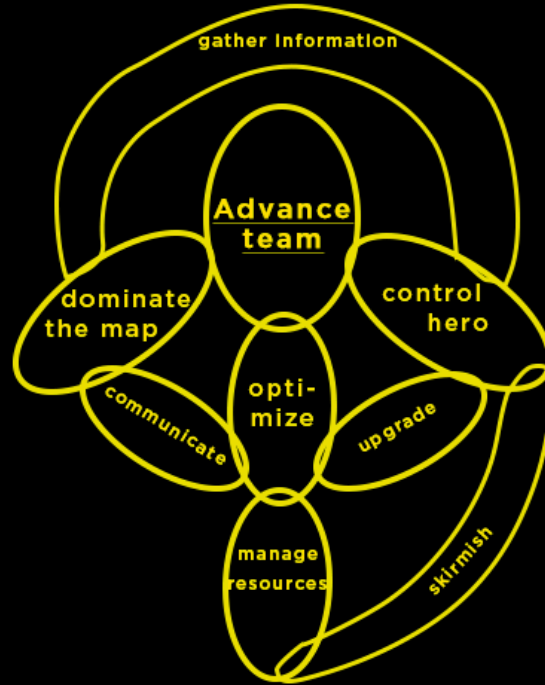
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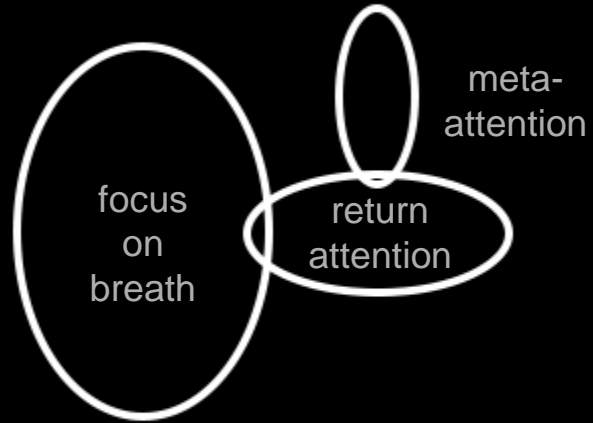
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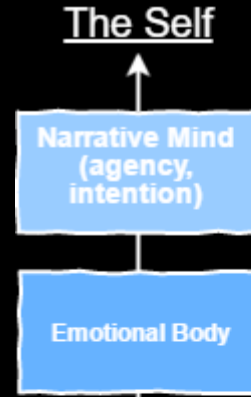
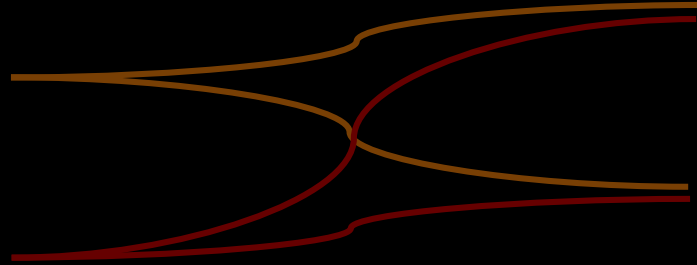


MOBA Trance

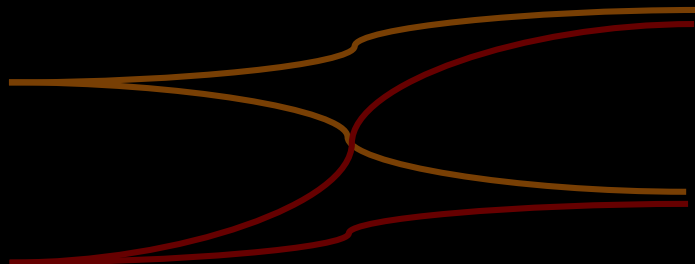


Mindfulness Trance





LEAGUE
LEGENDS



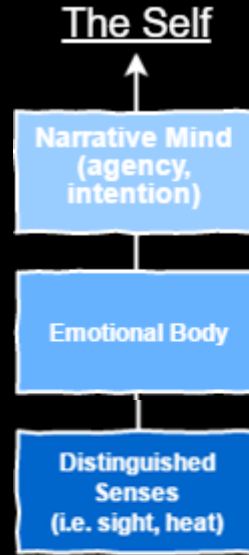
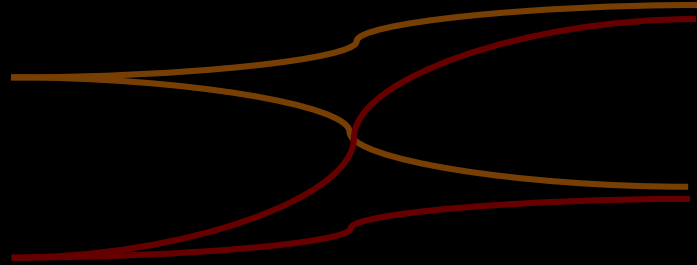
The Self

Narrative Mind
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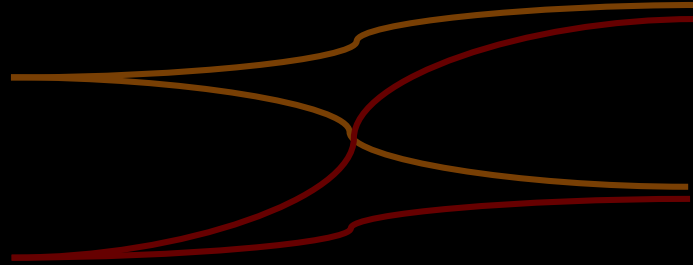
Emotional Body

Distinguished
Senses
(i.e. sight, heat)





LEAGUE
LEGENDS



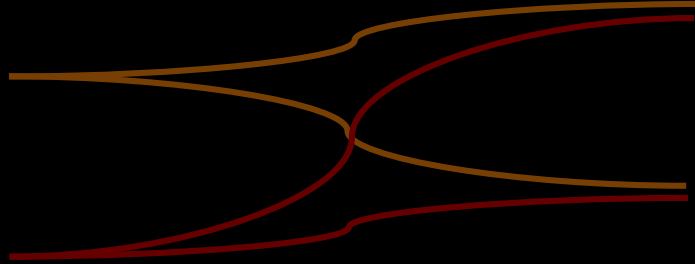
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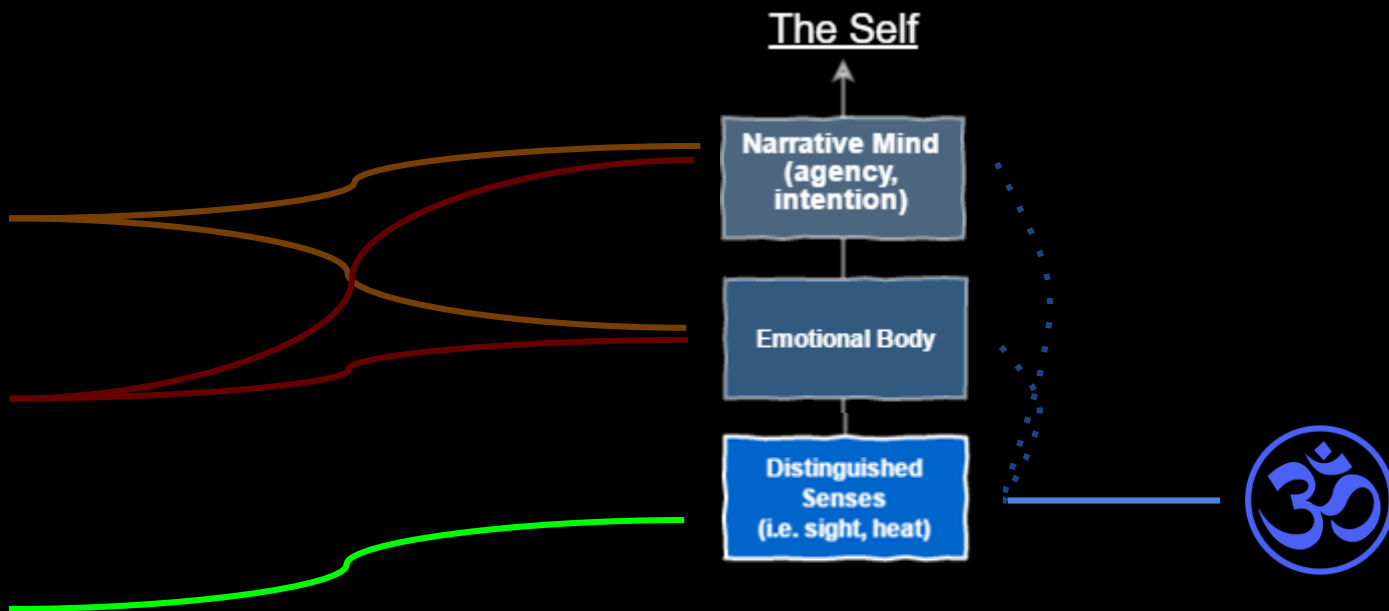
The Self

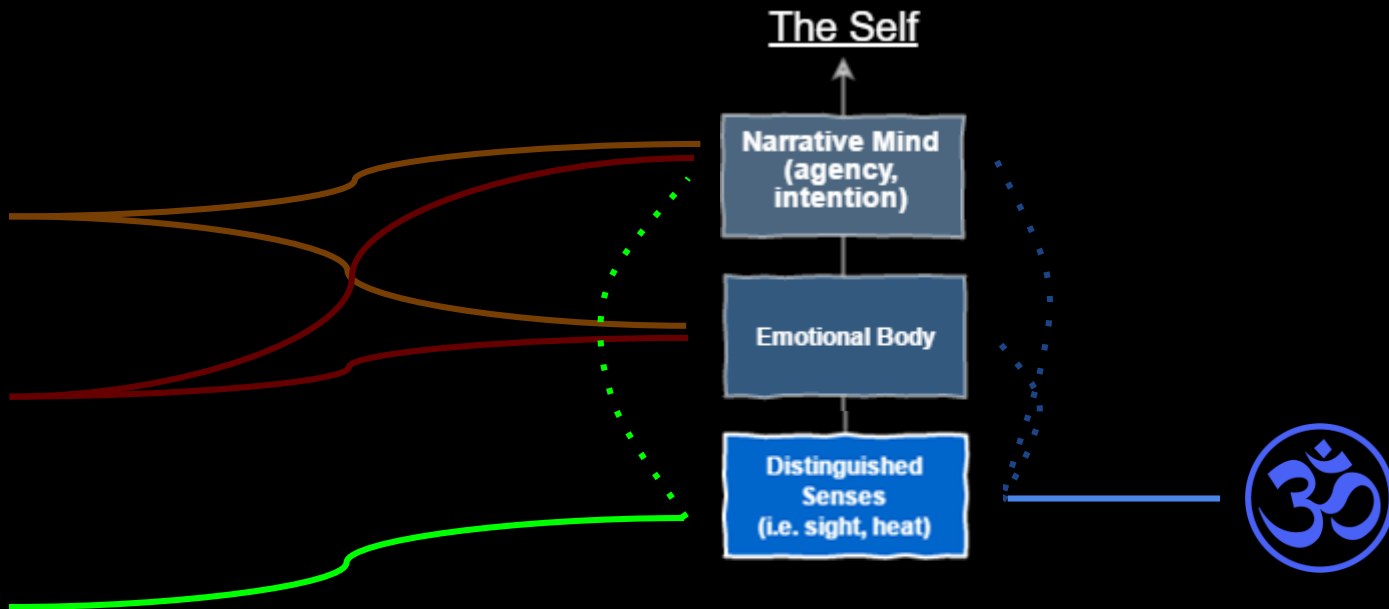
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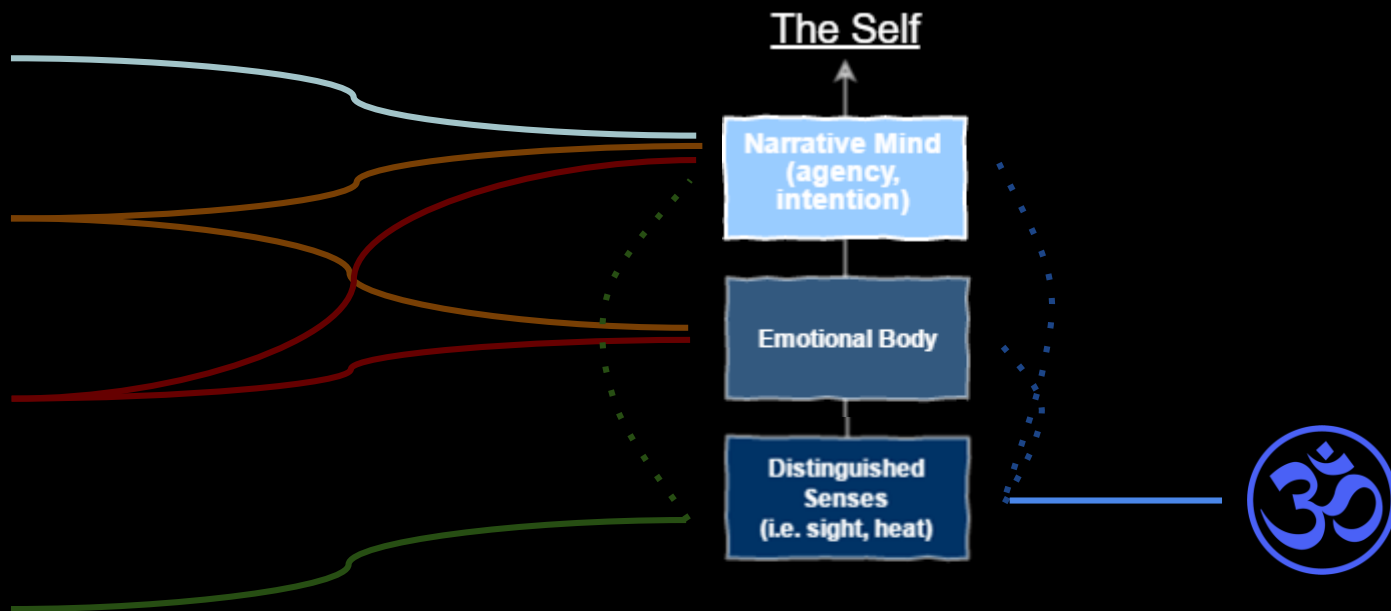
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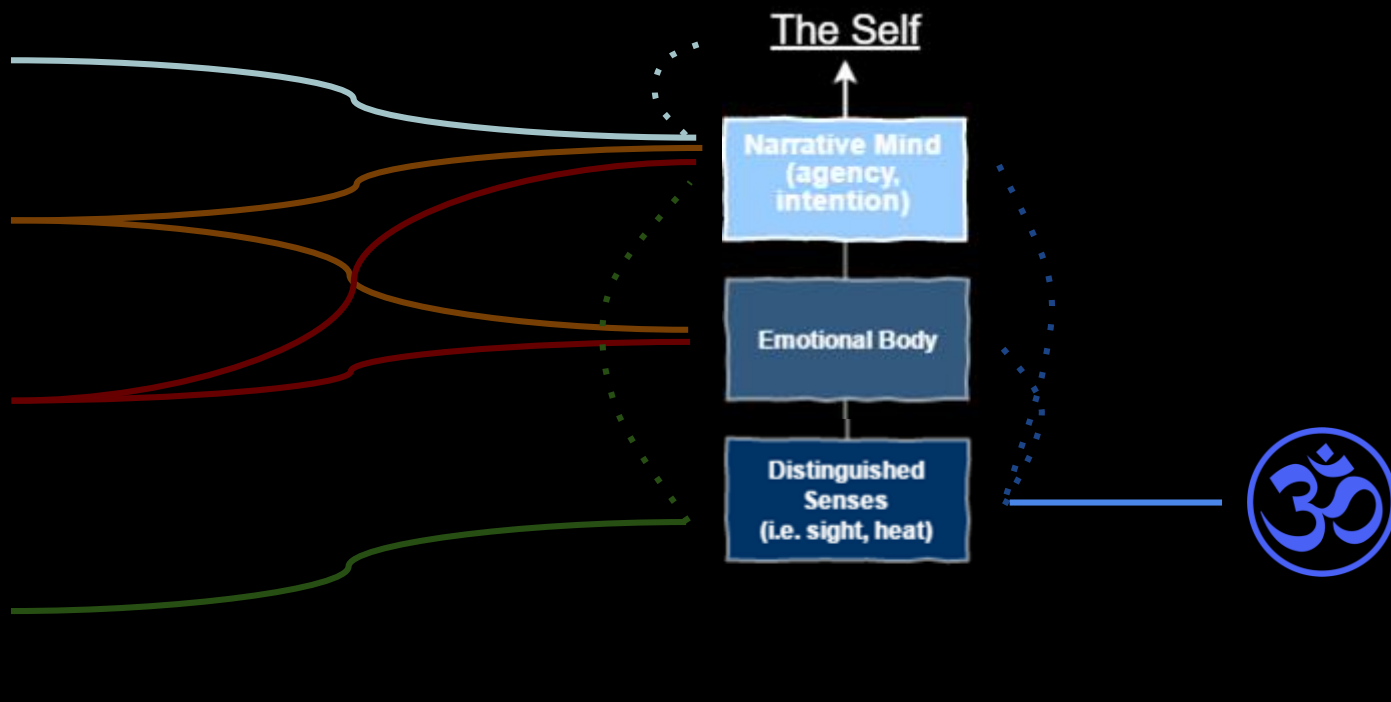
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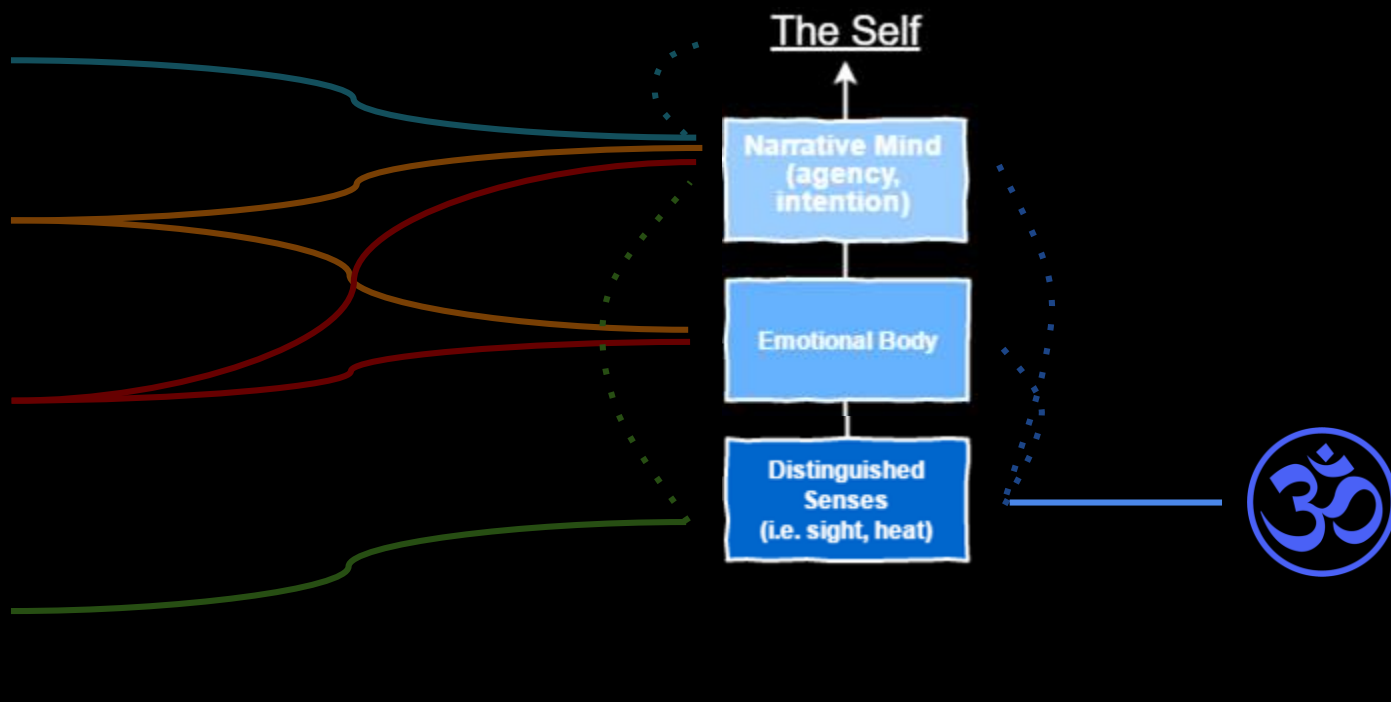












WHO AM I?

Starting Points

Starting Points

Who am I asking my player to practice being?

Starting Points

Who am I asking my player to practice being?

What structure of trances can continuously support that practice?

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What structure of trances can continuously support that practice?

How is my gameplay setting up and reinforcing those autonomous loops?

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Who am I asking my player to practice being?

What structure of trances can continuously support that practice?

How is my gameplay setting up and reinforcing those autonomous loops?

How is my gameplay, or the player's existing habits, *interfering* with the trance structure I'm trying to help them cultivate?

What This All Means

By understanding trance, videogame designers have a unique skillset and a unique opportunity: to design trances that are as complex and powerful as a MOBA, but operate on the pre-personal level of meditation to alter player consciousness temporarily and create a permanent psychological impact.

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We can create digital psychedelics.

What This All Means

“The drugs of the future will be computers.

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- Terrence McKenna, 1990

What This All Means

Technodelics

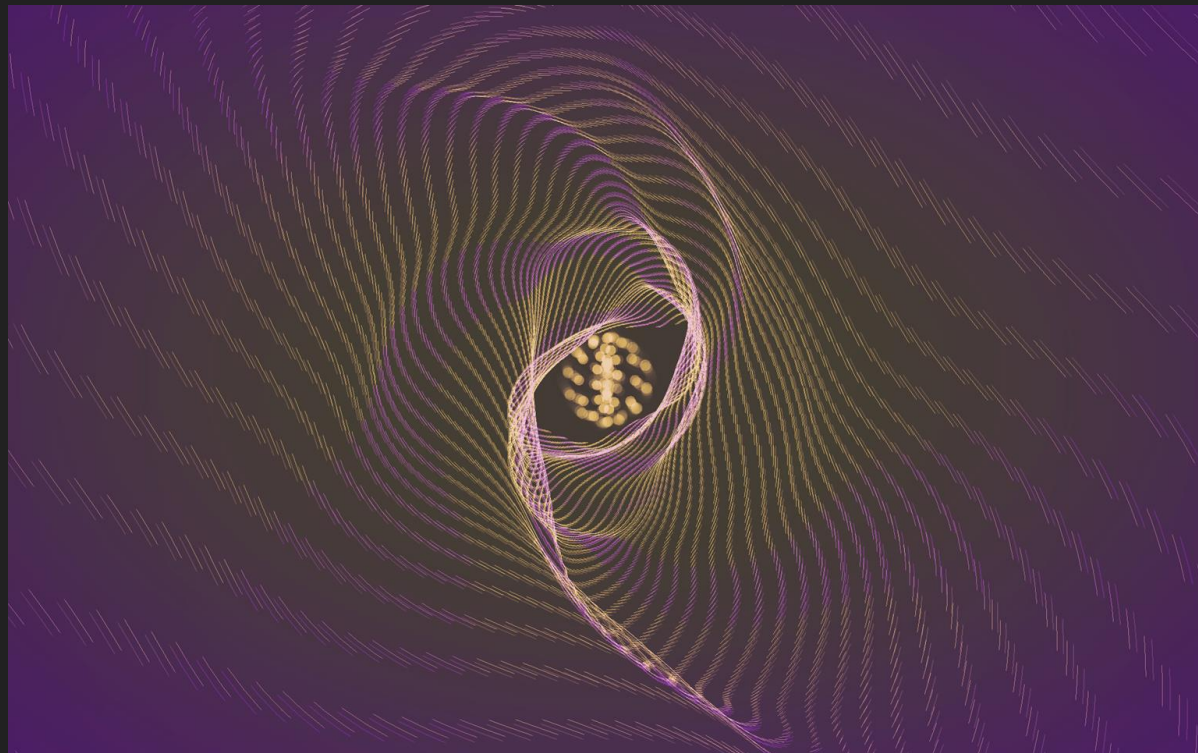
Chapter 3

Recollection of the trance-design of SoundSelf

Playing With the Habits of Self



SoundSelf







SoundSelf Trance



SoundSelf Trance



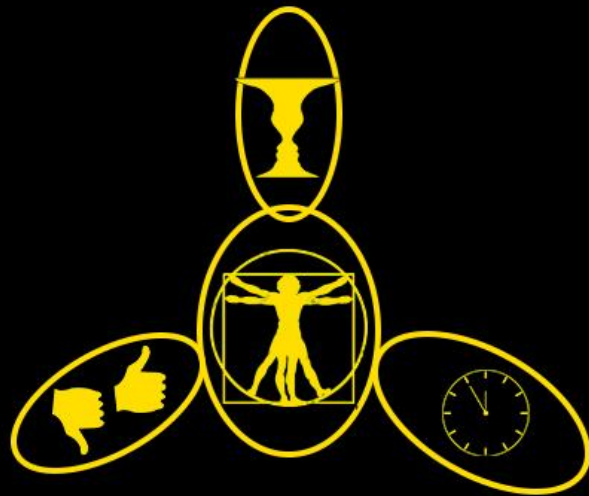
SoundSelf Trance



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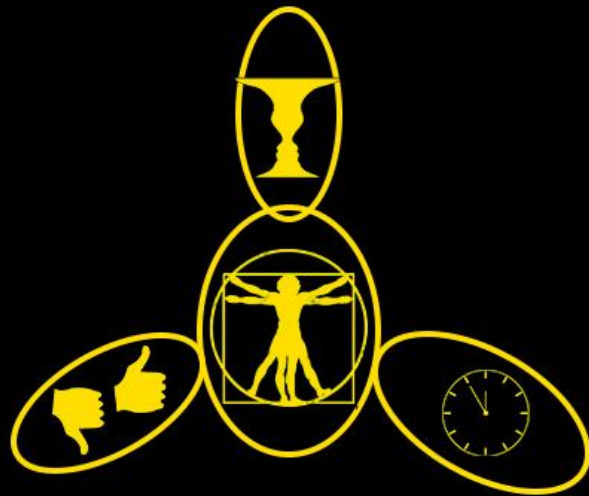
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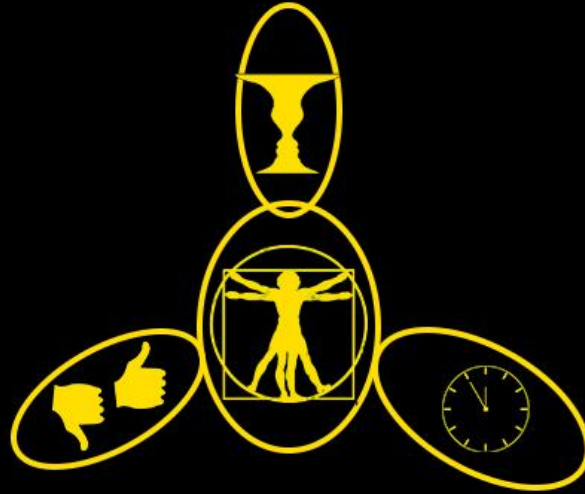
MOBA Trance



SoundSelf Trance

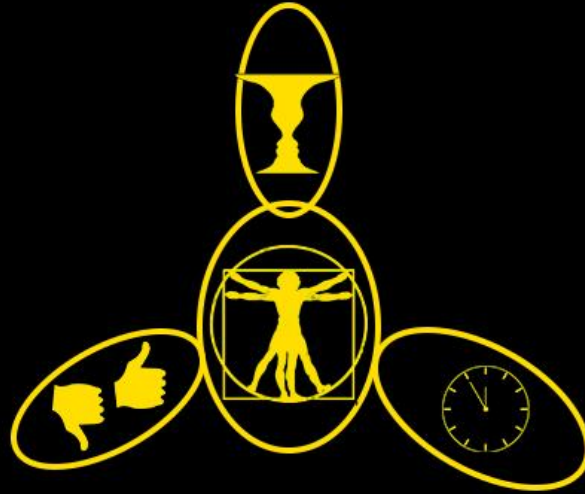


SoundSelf Trance



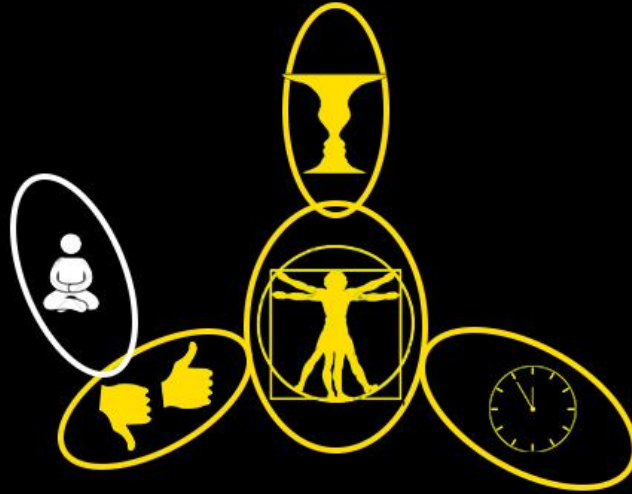
dissolution

SoundSelf Trance



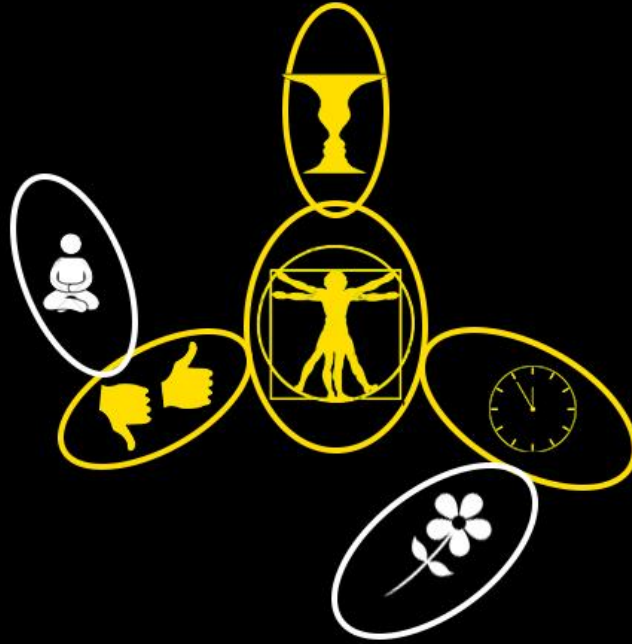
dis-illusion

SoundSelf Trance



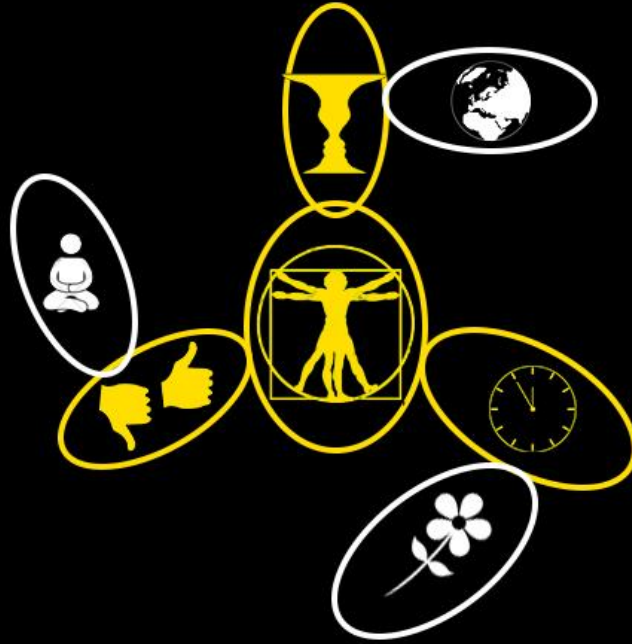
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SoundSelf Trance



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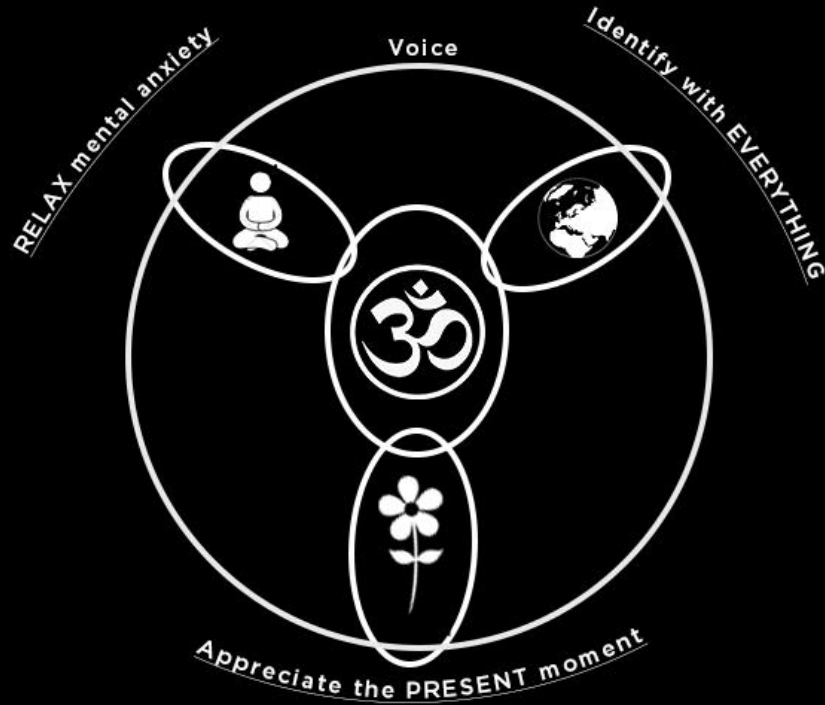


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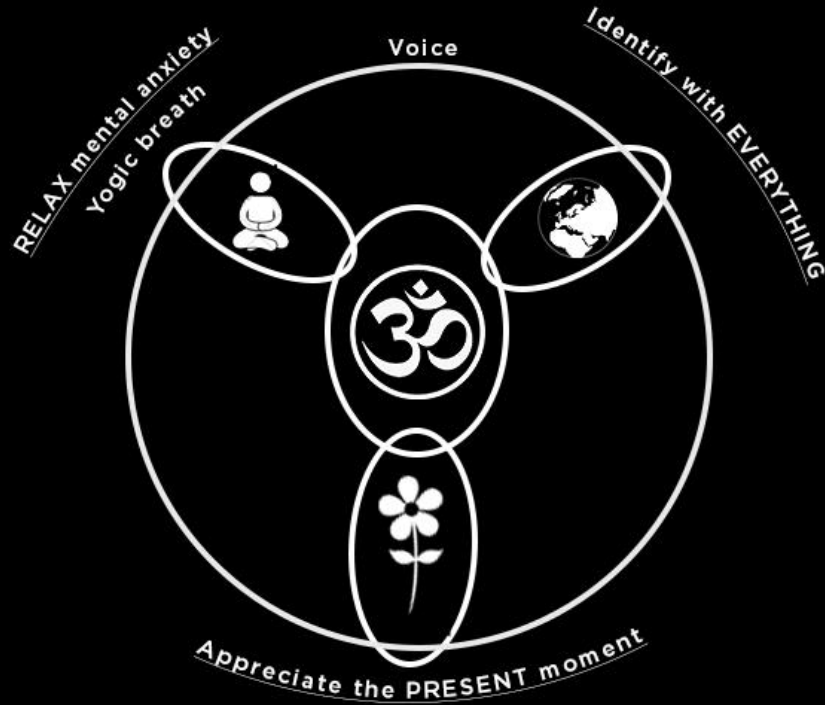
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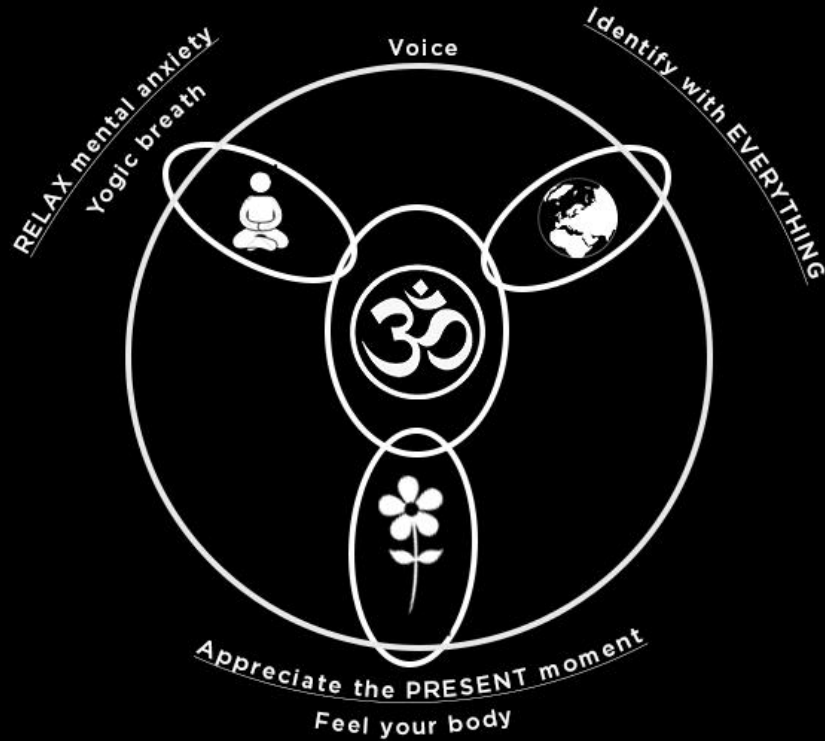
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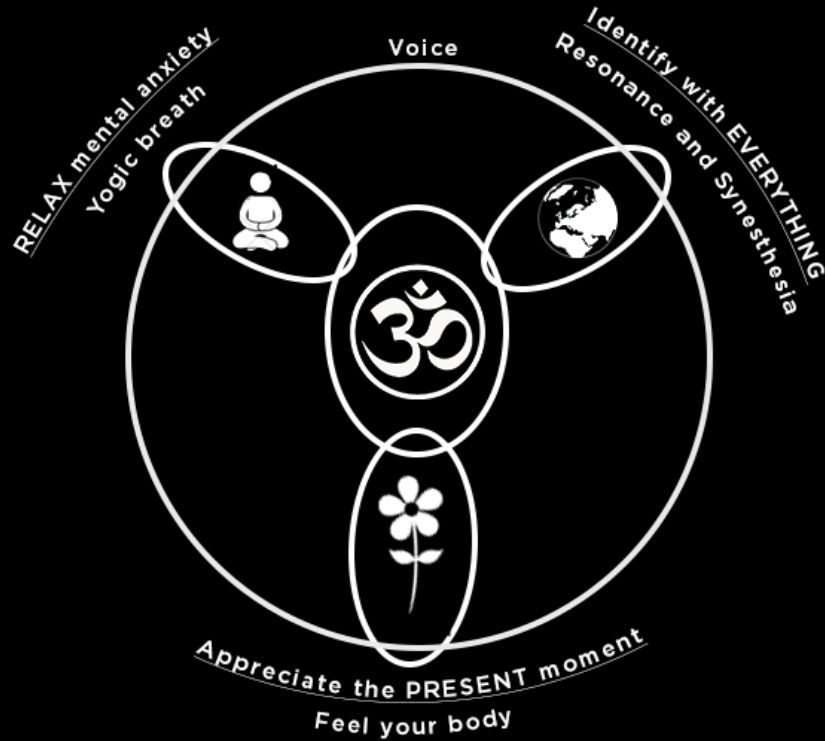
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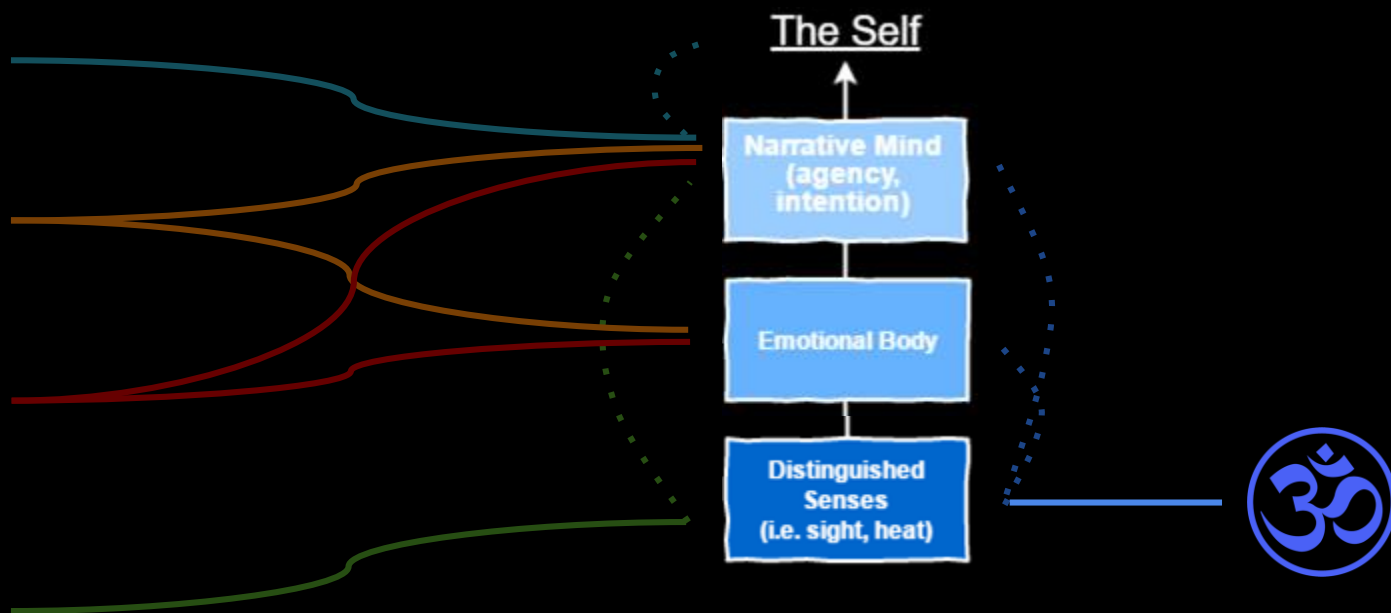


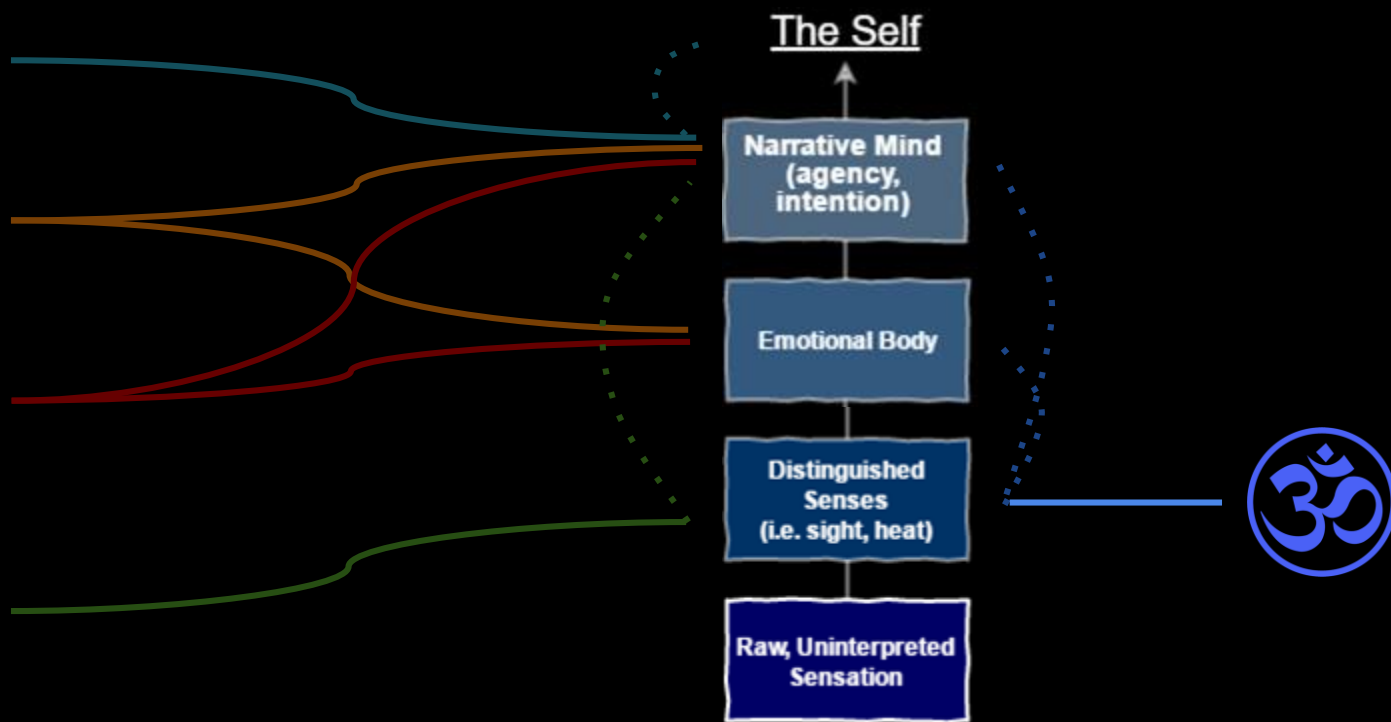
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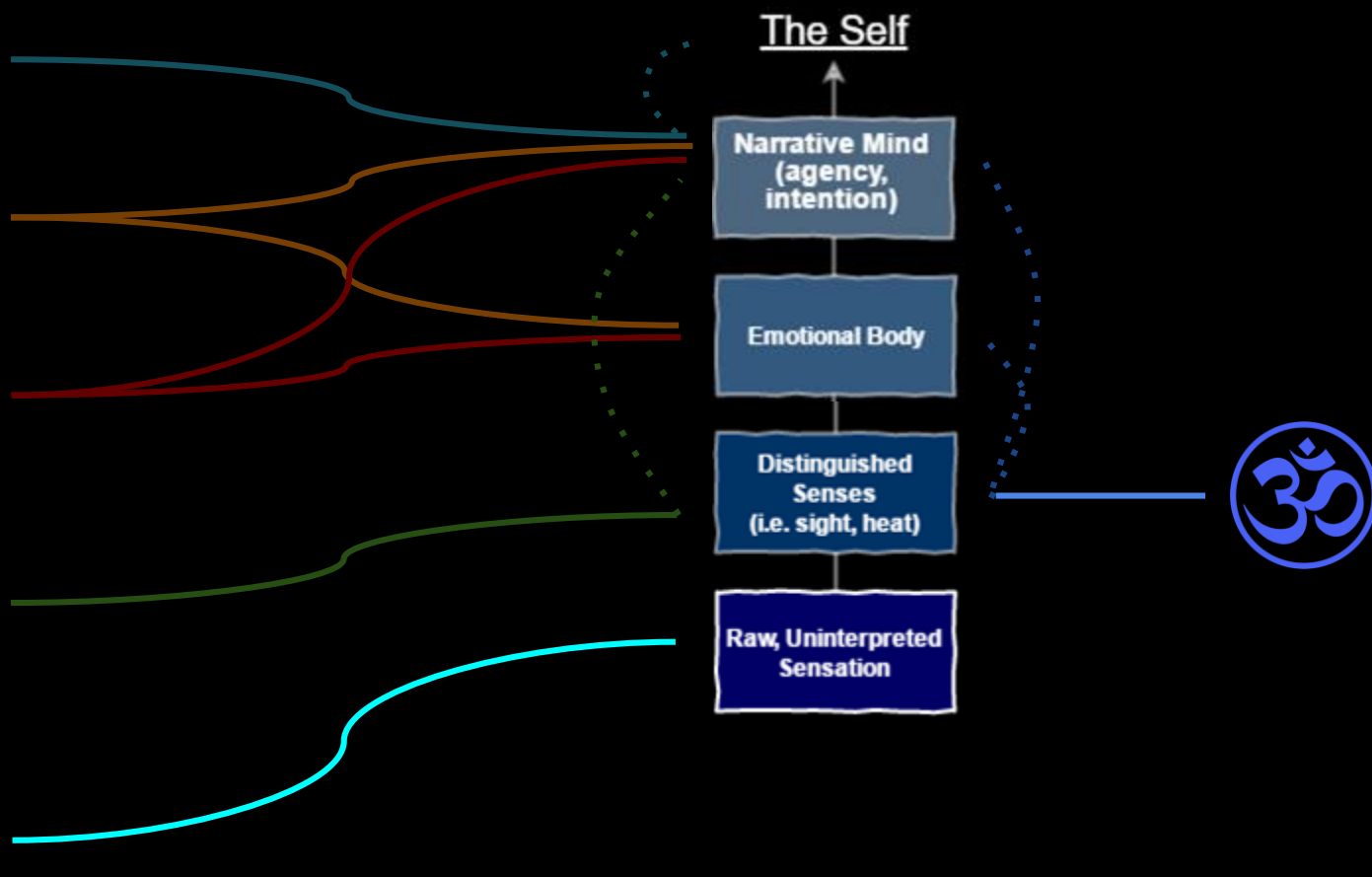


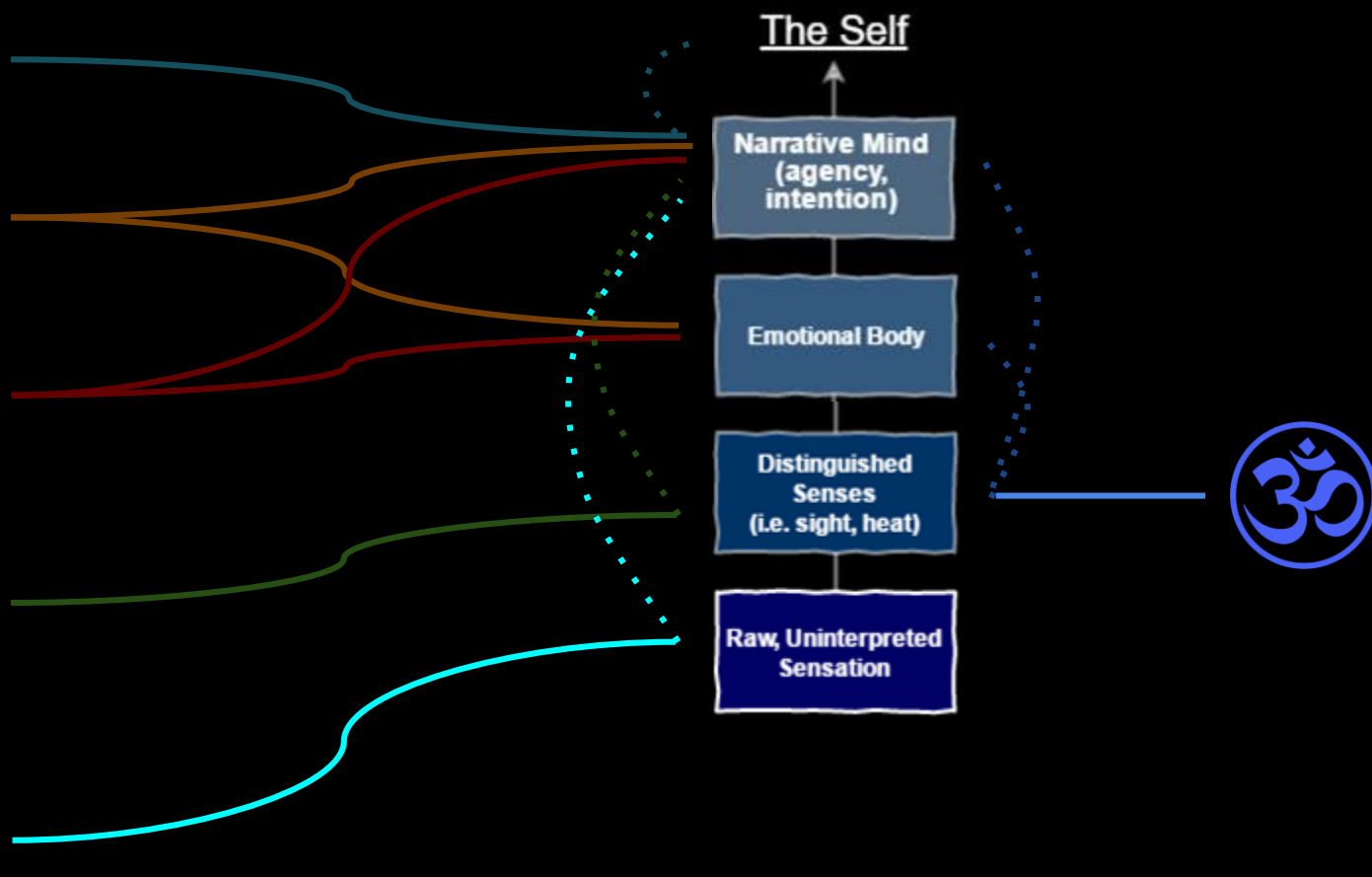
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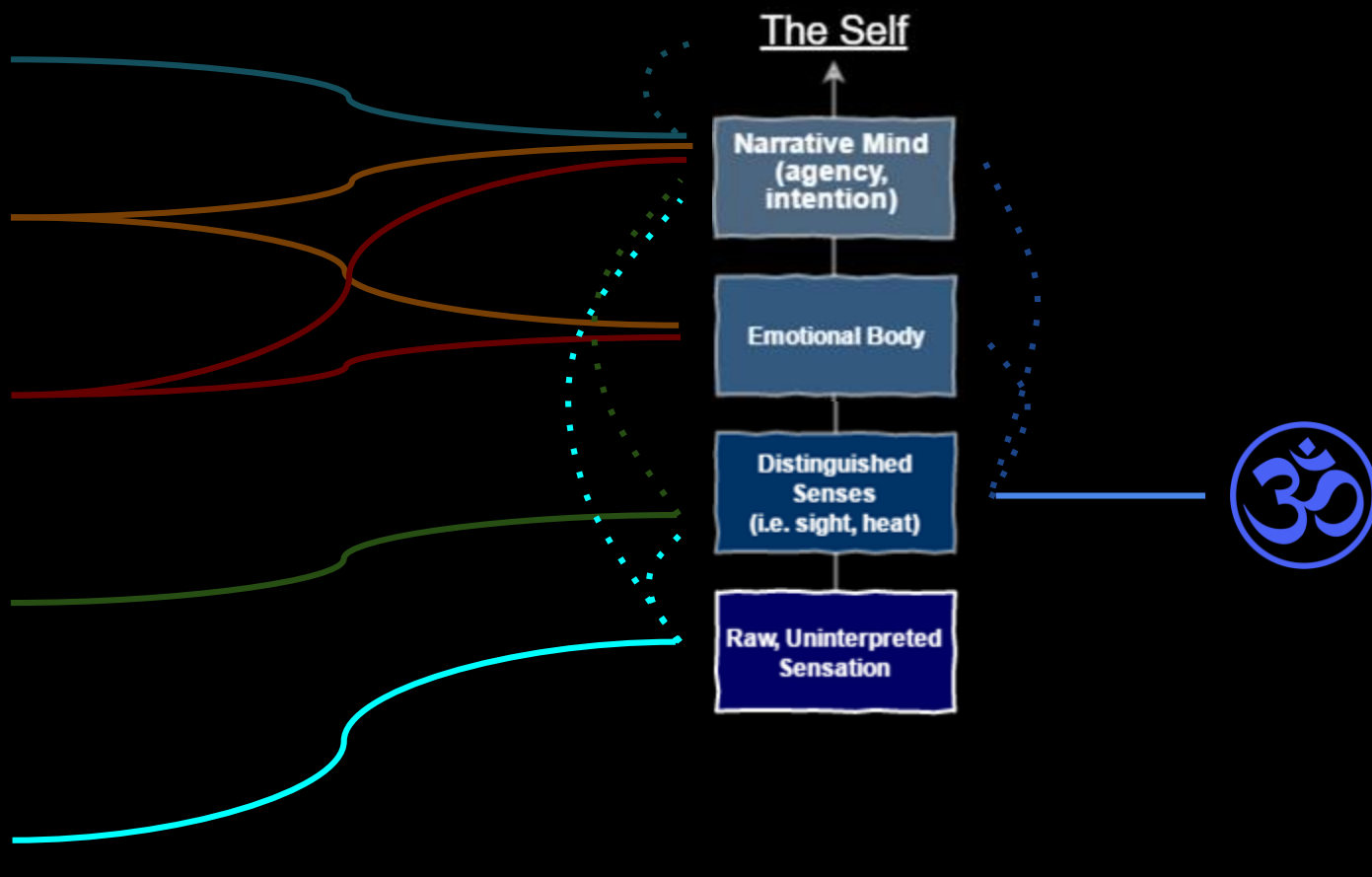


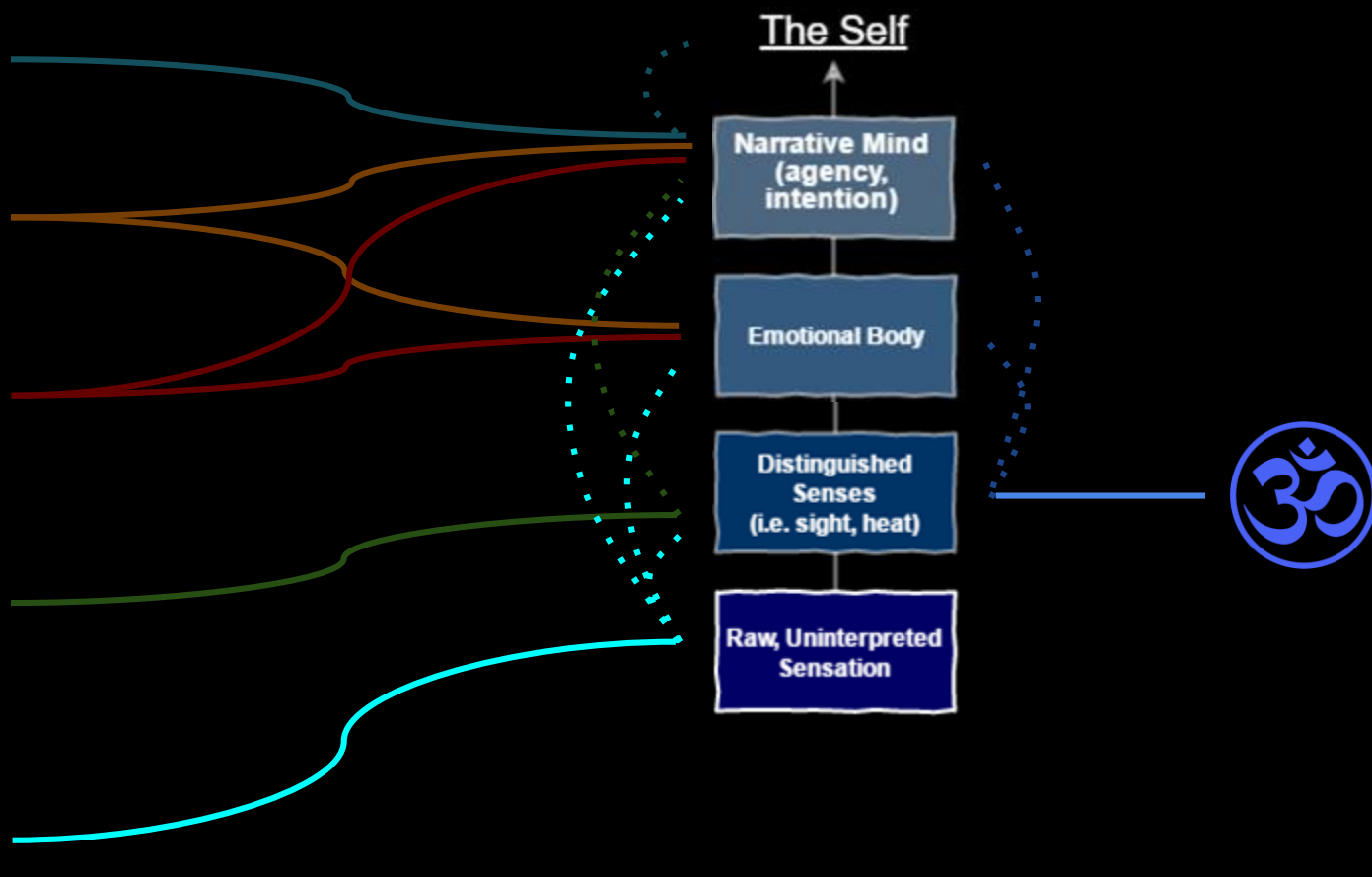


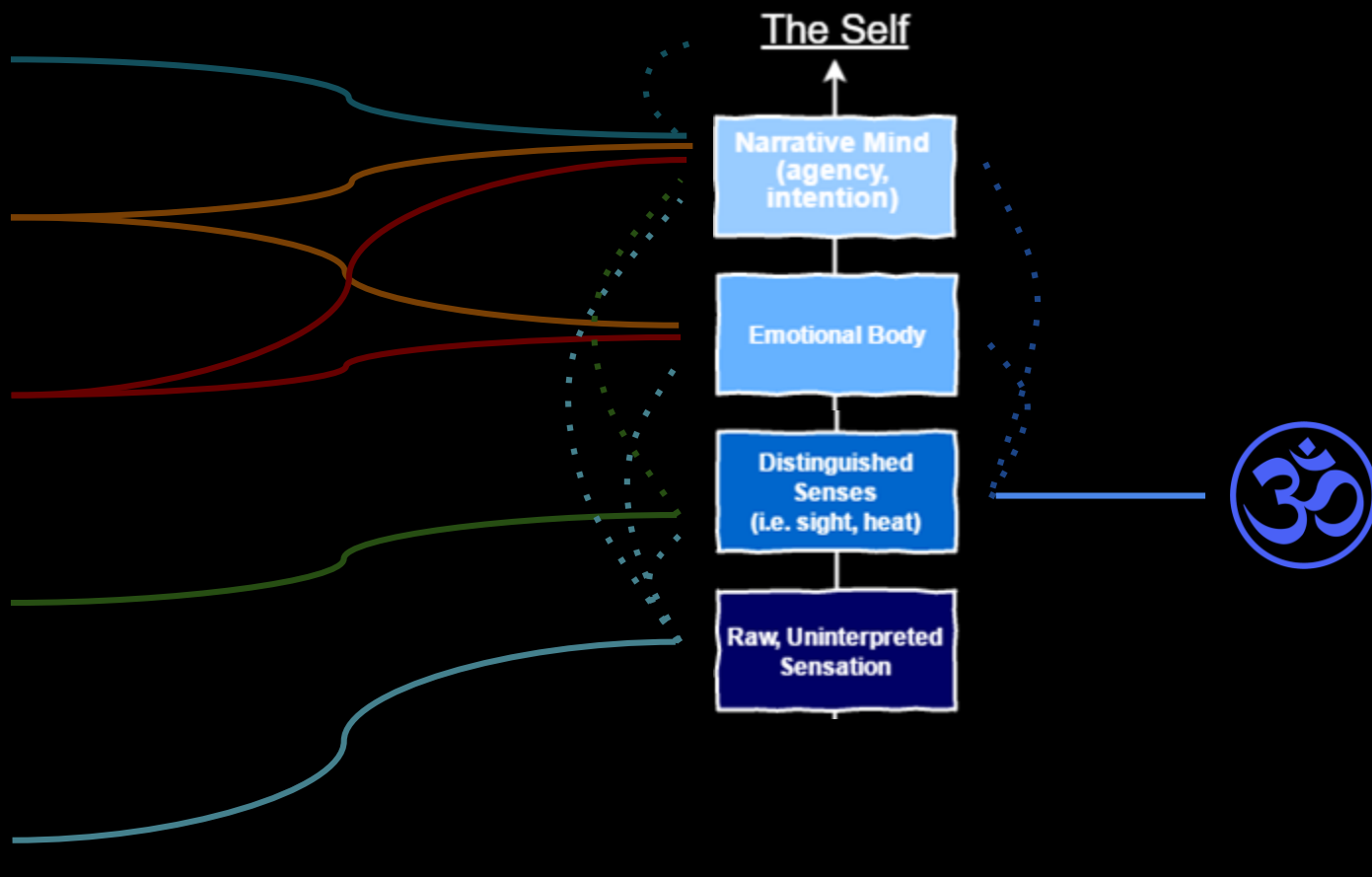


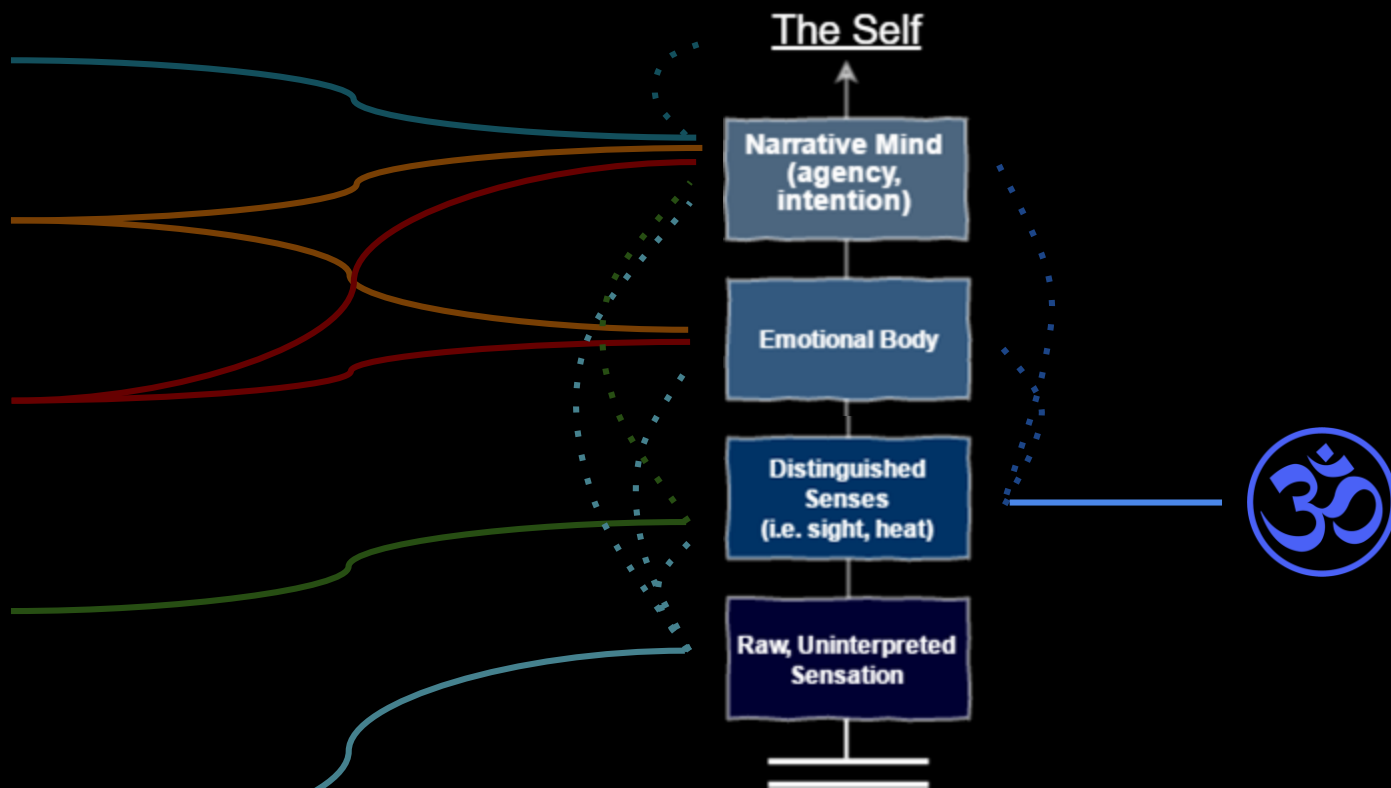












Does it Work?

A sense of unity	Positive mood
An intuitive sense of deep truth	Transcendence of time and space
Sacredness	Ineffability

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Chapter 4

Conclusions

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Bring attention back to the present moment.

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Be kind.

Resources

Transformative Technology Conference

Sofia University: Transformative Technology Lab

Consciousness Hacking Meetup Groups (there's one in SF tomorrow night!)

Burning Man Festival

Science and Non Duality Conferences

“The Way of Trance” by Dennis Weir

SoundSelf (BETA!)

soundselfgame.com/workbook.pdf (or at end of the slides pdf on the vault)

Designing a Trance:
Meditation and Game Design
Supplemental Workbook, GDC 2017

Robin Arnott
@videodreaming
robin@soundselfgame.com

“The computers of the future will be drugs.
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-Terrence McKenna, 1990

Understanding Trance

Most of us gathered at GDC have experienced both the light and shadow of the entrancing power of videogames: We have completely lost ourselves in their worlds and systems. We have continued to practice them in our quiet and hypnogogic moments for days, even years, after we last set down the controller. Without knowing it, game designers wield a power matched only by hypnotists and musicians.

If we wish to wield the full force of this power, we must seek to understand the mechanisms that both perpetuate and dissolve trances. If we wish to wield that power responsibly, we must craft our trances with humility and intentionality, fully knowing that our failure to do so will only surrender our discipline to the unconscious trances that we carry with us like a shadow.

What is a trance?

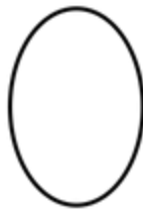
Intuitively we often recognize when we are or have been entranced. It seems like a shift in consciousness, pausing our most habituated experience of reality to temporarily cast us into something *different*.

“I was so entranced by that game that the whole world faded away.”

“The music swallowed me up. I was in a trance, so involved in the beat that it wasn’t until the end that I remembered who I was”

“I’m sorry I treated you that way. I was so fixated on being right. It’s like I’m only now coming out of a trance”

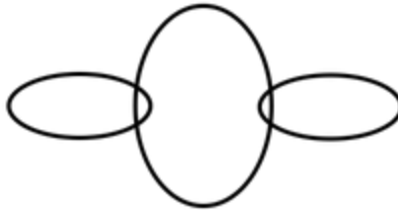
Dennis Weir’s book *The Way of Trance* provides a simple and practical model for identifying and applying trance: A trance is an autonomous mental¹ loop.



¹ I use the word “mental” here as shorthand: As we will see, trances occur on far deeper layers of our reality than just the mental.

When we have repeated or practiced anything with enough regularity that it persists autonomously, a trance has begun. Think of a trance as being like one of those gyro-balls that are used for exercising your hand muscles: Once the ball *gets* going, it seems to *keep* going without additional conscious input - it seems to draw the necessary energy to keep spinning from your muscles *directly* without the need for “your” guidance. Now, imagine being so distracted that you’ve forgotten you’re holding the gyro-ball: you don’t recognize the energy you are unconsciously feeding it until your arm gets so tired that you are forced to put it down. In this example, our body has become entranced by the gyro-ball. Fortunately for us, though, this is a trance we can easily initiate when it serves us, and terminate when its work is done.

However, simple trances are not sufficient to describe the extant power of videogame trances. A simple trance tends to evaporate rather quickly. To understand and use the trance model, we must instead use “complex” trances.



Not just an autonomous mental loop, this complex trance is a *network* of *mutually reinforcing* autonomous mental loops. Each supporting loop sustains the primary loop, and often these trances are so interdependent that as soon as one evaporates, it is quickly re-initiated by its supporting trances. Thus, like water spiralling down a drain, the shape of the trance may subtly change over time, but the overall structure will persist as long as it is fed the energy to do so.

We experience trances in many ways:

A hypnosis trance occurs when our consciousness warps to complete a trance structure that is established and maintained by external stimuli. All videogames are external objects that implicitly define the structure of consciousness to emerge when met by player psychology.

A meditation trance is a trance structure that emerges from discipline, without external influences to persistently maintain the structure of the trance - instead the meditator builds up their own trance structure.

A flow trance is probably the most common trance form discussed in game design. Flow trances are tight feedback loops between actions and the outcomes of those actions. When we are in *flow*, our consciousness is structured to witness all of our experience in relationship to a particular task, and to hone our behavior to meet the needs of that task with elegance and efficiency. Structures of consciousness that do not serve the task (often mental narration) are temporarily shed. Flow trances can be hypnotic or meditative.

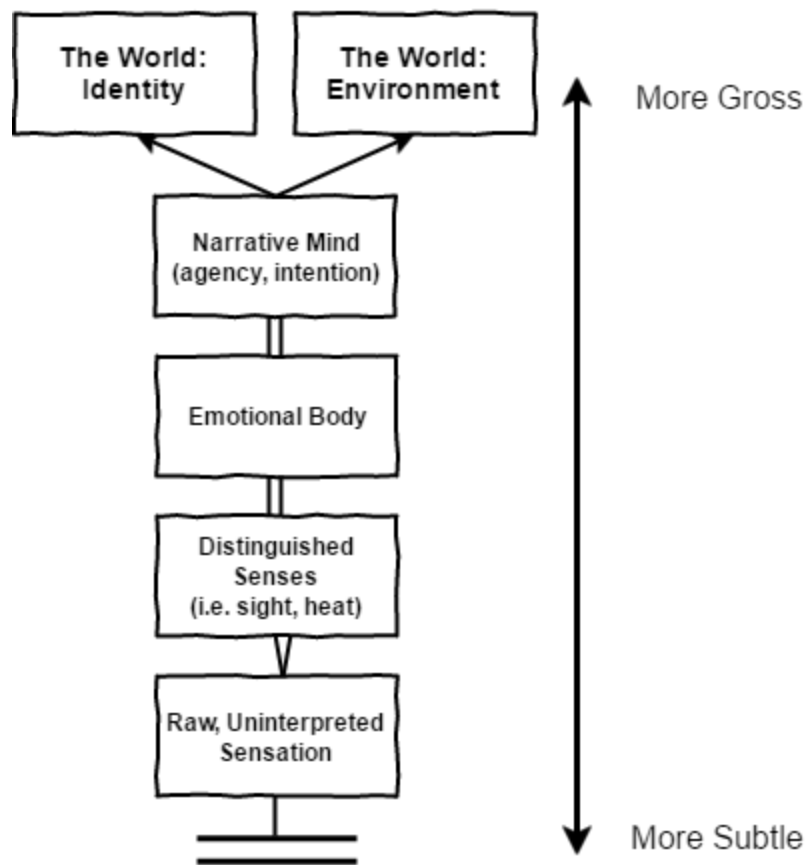
Habits are stable and persistent trance structures, usually perpetuated unconsciously once they are picked up or programmed - though they can of course be developed deliberately.

Addictions are reactive habits that numb a part of our reality that we would rather not face, or are incapable of facing. A hypnotic trance can easily become an addictive habit if it is not terminated by the program, and the entranced person has some aspect of their experience they are unconsciously trying not to feel. Many game designers are masters of crafting experiences that trigger an ongoing dependency loop. Addiction is the dark side of trance. An easy way to avoid creating addictive trances is to resolve those trances before (or as) the player quits the experience. Unfortunately, many designers judge their work by how persistently the player returns to the experience, confusing habit with value, and may (intentionally or not) craft “hooks” into their trances that don’t let go of the player even when the game has stopped. This sort of design is possessive of the player’s attention and disrespectful of their autonomy.

The Self

Where do trances occur? Of course they occur *here*, in the self. A little bit of introspection, though, reveals a self that is far from monolithic: it is multi-layered, each layer a more complex and “gross” (meaning noticeable, as a globular distortion in a pane of glass would stand out noticeably from the glass itself) expression of the subtler layers beneath it.

There are many models of this layering of self. What I am using here draws from integral psychology, Buddhist conceptions, and my own inward observations. It is adapted to serve as a simplified frame for understanding trance and game design.²



² There are many layers beneath “Raw Uninterpreted Sensation,” but that is as subtle as we will go in this workbook, and honestly about as subtle as I feel confident in describing.

Each layer is itself a massively complex and basically self-contained trance structure acted out by the more subtle layers beneath it. Interfacing with these various layers is as simple as understanding the rules that govern their behavior, and then creating structures that are hypnotically accessible to that layer.

For example: a hero's journey story is intuitively familiar to the narrative mind', which recognizes it as a structure to project identity and environment into. Once the reader has projected themselves into the story thus, they experience the story as themselves, allowing the trance structures of the story to act on all the layers of their being as though they were themselves living it. (See *Appendix 1* for a more comprehensive examination of how each layer's trances act out naturally, and can be hypnotically accessed or subverted)

The trances we design can hypnotically "meet" the player at any layer of the *massively complex trance* we call the "self." Meeting the player on the subtler layers of their being will have rippling effects up through the grosser layers above, but it is much more difficult to steadfastly set trances in the subtle layers because fluctuation in the grosser layers can be extremely disruptive to (and distracting from) the tenuous trances we design for the lower layers. Music is a great tool for stilling the movements of the narrative mind to make deeper layers accessible, just as certainly as words will stir up the mind's addiction to symbolism and understanding.

The Identity and The Environment are "objective" 3rd-person structures, having a material quality of thing-ness: Identity is a symbol of our internal embodied experience and environment is a symbol of what is external to our identity. They are both projections of the mind's habit (remember, a habit is a trance!) of drawing separation, but where that separation actually occurs is extremely malleable! Most videogames, for example, co-opt that habitually drawn boundary to instead separate the avatar (that which I project my sense of agency into) from the game environment (that which seems beneficial, neutral or oppositional to my intention and agency). The unnoticed magician's trick that the game designer pulls off is hiding that the player is actually controlling the whole thing (for example, when you make your avatar jump, you can also be said to be pushing the environment down, and then up again). This layer is the most superficial emergence of duality.

The Narrative Mind is the habit of labeling objects, and then connecting patterns between what we have labeled. It is most superficially observable by the voice in our head (for those of us who think verbally). The narrative mind creates "things" by drawing

boundaries around aspects of our experience. A world made up of “things”, instead of unmanifest abstraction, becomes *understandable* and *manageable*. The more complex and sensible our map of “things” is, the more powerful we seem to be, and the more effectively we seem to be able to navigate the needs of our emotions. Videogames activate the narrative mind whenever they create a “thing” (e.g. an avatar, a goal, a sound, a score, a decision) or whenever they create a relationship between two or more “things.” A super reductive measure of good system design could be how functionally inter-connected the map of “things” is - and hence how complex the trance network is for the narrative mind to spin its wheels on.

The Emotional Body is a structured movement of abstract (non-symbolic) felt energy, as ocean currents are structured movements of water. What we usually call our emotions (love, anger, fear) are actually Narrative Mind compressions of the abstract emotional movement itself - *but* that compression helps us use our narrative map to meet (or compromise, or suppress) the flow of the emotional movement. Through our life, we pick up certain habits of energy movement *generally* favoring predictable sources of pleasure and avoiding predictable sources of pain. All videogames move us through their systems by drawing from our energetic flow habits: a win condition, for example, harnesses the powerful and habituated flow that moves us away from pain and stagnation towards pleasure and reward.

The Distinguished Senses are familiar to us: the qualia of sight, the qualia of sound, the qualia of smell, the qualia of thinking, etc. What we sense as our emotions can be “felt into” to discover a collection of felt sensations: for example, anger can describe a rush of heat to the face, tension in our facial muscles, and an increase in blood pressure.

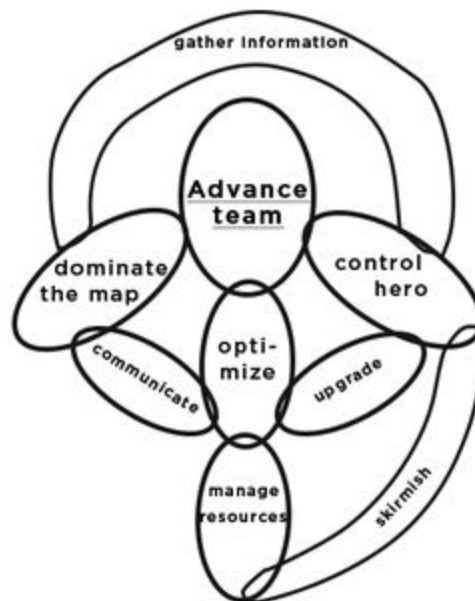
Raw Uninterpreted Sensation describes the unified field of sensory awareness which contains all of the senses together and undistinguished: there is no separation. As far as I can tell, trances on this layer occur subtly as attention, or as the distinction between senses (giving rise to the layer above), or as the habit of distinguishing between see-er and seen. Though this is far enough below the narrative mind where maps like this are drawn that any verbal description of the habits of raw uninterpreted sensation are terribly inadequate.

Applying the Trance Model to the Design of Personal Experiences (*videogames!*)

Videogames have a long history of entrancing players on the objective, narrative, and emotional layers of their being. They do this with the greatest ease when the rules of the game fit like a glove over trances the player is unconsciously carrying with them. Wherever the game implies a boundary - be that a spatial boundary like the separation between objects, or a temporal boundary like a preferred end-state (winning!) - the player's existing habits are invited to see themselves reflected in that boundary.

Let's look at the complex trance of a MOBA like *League of Legends* to see how this happens.

Complex Trance in the Narrative Mind: Advance Team



Every sub-trance in this network reinforces the central loop: ***move forward as a team.***

This is reinforced by the player's **identification with the hero**, which is a simple adjustment of the player's existing habit of identifying with the body/mind. As long as the player understands the controls transparently, this trance takes root effortlessly. It is a

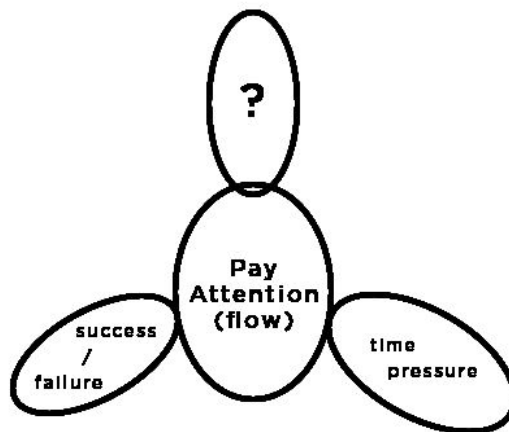
deft re-direction of one of the most practiced, powerful, and flexible trances humans have!

The “advance” trance is further reinforced by the player’s habit of moving their performance over the course of the game towards an **optimum**, making choices now that will cumulatively add power to the team’s forward movement through the course of the whole game. To a good player, this becomes a powerful flow trance.

It is also reinforced by the player strategically working to **conquer the environment**, using all of the “things” that the map has provided to help or hinder the player, including opponents.

These three supporting trances are constant through the game, and we are reminded again and again to come back to them: Every skirmish hones our expression of self through the hero and puts our team’s precious resources (which include gold, health, time, and even attention) on the brink. More importantly though, and more subtly, every single sub-trance in this complex trance is itself reinforced by a complex flow trance in the emotional body:

Complex Trance in the Emotional Body: Pay Attention



All of the trances in the narrative mind are as stable as they are because the player is allowing their attention to be focused on the gameplay in the present moment, guided by three emotional imperatives:

First, the instinctual movement towards pleasure and reward: our failures *hurt*, we *cringe* at our own mistakes and the mistakes of our teammates. Conversely, *it feels awesome* to pull one over on our opponents. This keeps our attention *right here*.

Secondly, the way the game cumulatively builds on the choices we make throughout means that every moment is consequential. We are under a time pressure, and any moment we are not paying attention is a moment ceded to the opponent.

Finally, the tension between what is known and what is unknown adds extra stakes. The more we know about the game state, the more effectively we can behave. So *not* paying attention comes at the direct cost of missing information we could use to push our team to victory.

Notice what's different about trances occurring on this more subtle layer of our self: Unlike trances in the narrative mind, these trances do not (and can not) operate on "things". Where trances in the narrative mind can be focused on the manipulation of symbols over time, trances in the emotional body concern themselves exclusively with the present moment, because that is where our felt emotions are.

Resolving the Trance

The game ends, the player has won or lost, and the structure that was hypnotically organizing the player's attention into this trance promptly drops away, leaving the complex trance itself to gradually dissolve. It will be re-activated in memory many times throughout the day and in the player's dreams, but it is mostly gone. Any trance as powerful as this one can certainly numb ongoing pain in the player's life (isn't that why we call videogames "an escape"?). However, since this trance is neatly contained in a discrete ritual with a beginning, middle, and most importantly an end that elegantly resolves an invitation to invest energy into it, we are unlikely to see an addiction form here.

Mastering Trance

- Given the player's intuition to project their existing habits into my game's systems, how can I warp the player's experience of those habits in a way that is interesting or revealing?
- How can I use the player's existing habits to reinforce the stability of my game's trance?
- What is the core trance I want my player to experience?
- What trances might the player be carrying that destabilize the core trance I wish them to experience? How can I devise a trance structure to disarm or distract those trances that are working against me?

- What trances are my own mechanics encouraging that destabilize the core trance of my game?
- How can I make my game's trance structure more complex and stable without compromising its elegance?
- How are my game's trances changing after repeated play?
- What trances am I carrying with me, as a designer, that are defining the limitations of my game and of the experience my game can offer to others?
- How is my game encouraging trances in the player that could become addictive?
- How can my mechanics encourage trances in the player that root their attention in the present moment?

Applying the Trance Model to the Design of Transcendent Experiences

The technodelic³ designer recognizes that the experience of transcendence occurs with the massive cessation of trances, not the accumulation of trances. The major difference, then, between designing an egoic experience versus a transcendent experience is that the latter uses trance *to disarm* other trances that the player is already carrying with them, especially gross trances that make the witnessing of the subtler layers of being difficult.

For those of you interested in designing technodelics, this is an extremely new space. When I was designing SoundSelf, I was not aware of any other videogame sharing my peculiar ambitions, so the pool of knowledge that I drew from was instead meditation and ritual. Perhaps a decade from now we will have more successes and failures to derive lessons from, but for now SoundSelf is all I can offer. Please read this section with that grain of salt, knowing that I have an inkling of how technodelics might work, but no more than an inkling. The true source of great technodelic design comes from within you, and I only hope this section serves as inspiration. I humbly begin with two guidelines:

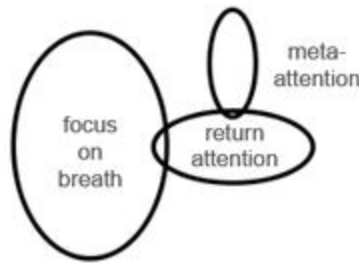
Firstly: trust your intuition and do not take this map too seriously. Getting too heady in the process of designing trances will lead to heady trance-design, anchoring you and the player both in the narrative mind.

Secondly: use your own transcendent experience as a guide. The design of SoundSelf was based on my first awakening experience on LSD. Months later, by following in my memory the series of occurrences that led to the brief shattering of my self, I realized that each of those occurrences could be triggered by clever game design. SoundSelf is a simulation of those occurrences, but not (of course) a simulation of awakening itself.

Meditation is a game. It has mechanics like other games do. The difference between meditation and most games though is twofold: first that the meditation game creates a trance on a very subtle layer of the player's being, and secondly that that trance acts to specifically dissolve trances in the grosser layers of the player's being. A mindfulness

³ I offer the word "technodelic" (the marriage of technology and psychedelic) to describe videogames that are designed to deeply alter a player's experience of consciousness.

meditation's that has the meditator focus their attention on their breath, for example, might have a trance in the felt senses layer that looks like this:



This trance has the player practice, first, noticing their attention and second, returning their attention to the body. By making the player aware of their mental habits, this trance settles down unconscious habits of the narrative mind. Once the narrative mind is settled, the player may then become aware of unconscious habits of their emotional body, which in turn settle.

Additionally, since the mindfulness game has the player's attention return to the body, where felt sensation is, the player practices anchoring their experience in the present moment. The body is a powerful place to design a trance around because our felt experience of the body defies the illusion of separation: the feeling of a flame's heat may occur *to our mind* as first a witness over here, and then a witnessed object over there. But *in our body*, where the sensation is actually felt, we find there is only the sensation, and both witness and object are revealed to be concepts. The more a player *feels* their body, undistracted by mental interpretations of those feelings, the less that player leans on the habitual illusion of separation.

Like meditation games, SoundSelf supports trances on a very subtle layer of the player's being that in turn weaken entranced habits on grosser layers of their being. There's an important distinction between SoundSelf and meditation games like the mindfulness meditation above: as soon as SoundSelf's gameplay structure is removed, the trance dissolves. SoundSelf does not teach the player the discipline required for them to independently access these deep states of consciousness. In that way, it is more like a psychedelic than it is a meditation.

There are plenty of meatspace meditation games that are held together hypnotically! These are kind of like analog technodelics. Group aums are a great example that had a huge influence on the design of SoundSelf. In a group aum, a large group of people assemble and chant together with each individual letting the beauty of the collective sound guide their own voice. The resultant trance dismantles the illusions of separation and control by taking an aspect of the player's experience that is usually driven by

agency (the voice), and letting it be fully in flow with a collective expression that defies individualized experience. The player's voice, instead of being a tool for narrative mind expression, becomes a mechanism for reinforcing the player's full surrender to and trust in the group.

Designing a Technodelic: Using Counter-Trances

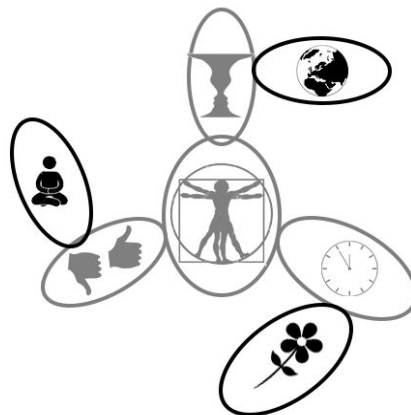
SoundSelf plays like this: the player chants into a microphone with their full exhalation, they breathe in again, they observe the VR experience dance with them, then they repeat the cycle. Superficially this looks very simple, but the trance structure it creates has the benefit of much more complexity (and stability) than a meditation trance or an analog hypnotic trance can support.

When I sit in silence, I notice an ongoing habit that I carry with me: it's basically the habit of being a person. This habit is a hugely complex and very stable trance, but it seems to have three primary supporting trances:

First: the habit of defining some things as good and others as bad. At its most anxious it tries to keep me safe by defining *me* as good while judging *the world* (or some aspect of the world) as bad. This anxiety is the source of many of my emotions, moving me away from what seems bad and towards what seems good.

Second: the habit of imagining time, confusing the present experience of memory for the past and the present experience of imagination for the future.

Third: the habit of drawing boundaries between things and imagining that they are separate, most compellingly as the persistently asserted boundary I draw between what is "me" and what is *not* "me".



The ongoing trance of being a person, and the counter-trances we use in SoundSelf

If this complex trance reminds you of the “pay attention” complex trance we described in the MOBA, that’s because it is! The MOBA is very cleverly using some of the most deeply entranced habits that come with being a human to reinforce its own trance structure! This luxury is not available for the design of technodelics though, since we are trying to dissolve those very trances.

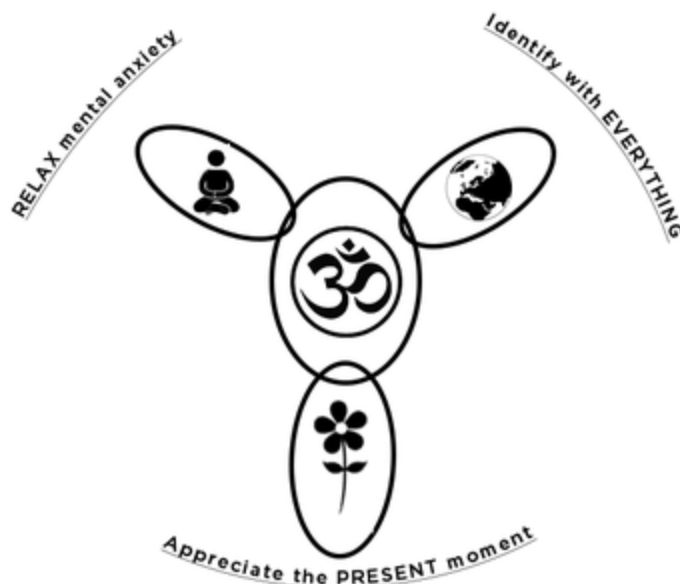
For each of these three supporting trances, we can develop a counter-trance to disarm them.

Disarming the anxiety between good and bad is as simple as relaxation. By making the player feel relaxed and safe, the need to judge good and bad evaporates, and the player can gently recline into equanimity.

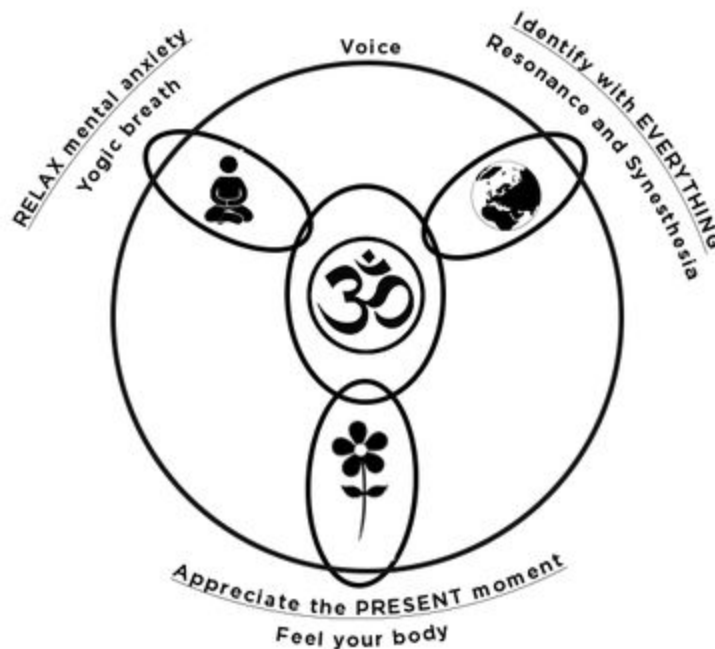
Disarming the experience of time is also a simple task: it is achieved by dis-incentivizing imagining a past or future by making the present that much more appealing. Beauty helps a player relax into appreciating the moment as it is right now.

Disarming the habit of creating separation is a much trickier task because for most people this trance is utterly persistent. The approach we take in SoundSelf is to use the player’s existing experience of identification (“I am what is *inside*”), and redirect that process to include everything *outside* as well. Similar to how a videogame warps the player’s experience of self to include the avatar, we are warping the player’s experience of self to be totally inclusive.

These three disarming strategies together help us assemble a trance.



Let's see how this voice interaction reinforces the three counter-trances: relax, appreciate, and identify with everything.



The voice mechanic has the player practice a slow rhythm of breath with long exhalations. This oxygenates the brain and naturally helps the player's physiology to relax.

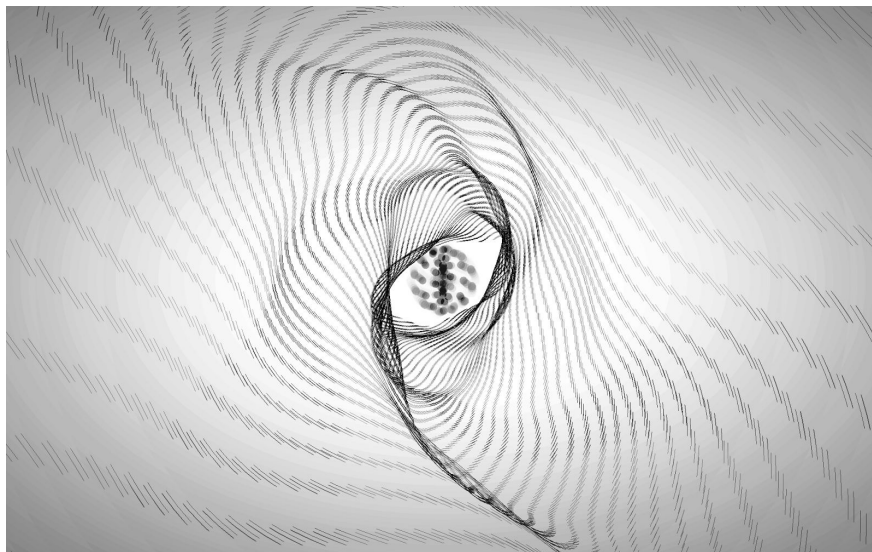
Because the voice is felt in the body, like breath in the mindfulness meditation we analyzed earlier, by repeatedly returning their attention to the sensation of voice the player practices resting attention in the present moment.

Getting the player to identify with everything takes more cleverness. The experience of self is already present in the player's voice, so by playing sounds that harmonically resonate with the voice and then having those sounds survive even when the player is no longer chanting, we extend the player's experience of self to include the game's dynamic soundtrack. By having the soundtrack in turn influence the generative visualization, the player's sense of self extends to include what the player sees in addition to what they hear and feel! If the player's narrative mind and emotional body are both relaxed, a synesthetic thread connects the player's sense of self through their voice to everything they are hearing and seeing. As soon as the narrative mind or

emotional body re-assert themselves though, (“I’m bored!”) this counter-trance dissolves immediately!⁴

Here are some extra steps we take to interrupt habits in the narrative mind so that the subtler trance of extending player identity can take hold:

- Overwhelm the senses with strobing and percussion, so the player literally can’t hear themselves think.
- Keep the visual design entirely abstract, so there’s nothing in the game for the player to easily hang meaning and thought onto.
- Use radial symmetry in the visual design, so that whenever the player’s eyes begin to wander, which correlates with seeking and grasping behavior, the aesthetic naturally returns the player attention back to a resting position in the center.
- SoundSelf’s systems are mysteriously obscured from the player - so while the player does intuit that the systems are intimately responding to them, they cannot understand *how* so cannot effectively effort towards mastery of that interaction, which would reduce whatever aspect of SoundSelf the player learns to master to an abstract avatar.
- We begin the session with a guided meditation.



Abstract, radially symmetrical visual design in SoundSelf

⁴ That this “counter-trance” breaks so easily, if not for the brute force silence-the-mind tactics listed below, hints to me that there are probably far more elegant ways to counter-trance the habit of drawing separation than how SoundSelf does it. It could be argued that this trance doesn’t actually counter the habit of separation, but instead just blows up the “I am” part of duality like a balloon - simulating one-ness instead of actually dissolving the habit of separation.

Some Starting Points for Building Technodelics

- Music is an ancient and powerful entrancing form that has been used throughout history to ritually induce deep “altered” states of consciousness. Building game systems around music is a great way to activate trances in our emotional body and deeper while de-activating trances in the narrative mind.
- Try using subtle inputs. Traditional computer game inputs like buttons and joysticks are designed to extend the player’s agency through binary decisions. If we take input, instead, from the player’s body allows your game to mirror something deep in the player that is illegible to the mind but immediately recognizable to the emotional body and subtler layers of their being.
- Repetition is a powerful tool for programming trance!
- Repetition is a powerful tool for programming trance!

Mastering Trance

- When do I feel most alive? What trances or counter-trances are happening in me in those states?
- What experience can I *not* make accessible with a hypnotic trance?
- How am I playing out an addiction right now? Is there a hypnotic system I could build that would interrupt that addiction?
- How can I adapt my favorite meditation/prayer/ritual practice into a hypnotic structure?
- What am I pretending not to know? Seeing this, what trance is revealed?
- Who do I know myself to be? How am I not acting from this knowing?

Appendix: The Layers of Self

The World: Identity	
Ongoing habits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describing the self, or seeking description of the self (i.e. validation, social purpose, etc.). • Maintained beliefs, opinions, and positions. • Self referential thought.
Activated by	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy • Drama • Morality • Accusation or praise • Role-Play (in fiction or in relationship) • Avatar / Character • Reference to past or present
De-Activated by	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crisis from sudden shift in life circumstances • Open listening and genuine curiosity • Kindness • Mettā (universal love) meditation • Abstract thought • Embodied activity • Flow trances • Giving up control • Genuine humility / reflection on mortality • Genuine apology, or genuine reckoning with shame • Self-forgiveness • Isolation
Feeling into it	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who am I to myself? • Who am I to others? • How do I want others to see me? • What do I love about myself? • What do I wish were different about myself? • What do I believe? • What opinion am I holding onto? • What is my heritage? • What is my biggest secret? • Where was I yesterday? • Where will I be tomorrow? • What will people say about me when I die?
Novel approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have a player empathize with a character or avatar who has a totally different behavioral system or value system to the player • Bring the player into a novel relationship with another person • Activate repressed characteristics - for example by providing a role play that activates power dynamics unfamiliar or uncomfortable to the player • Activate forgotten memories • Provide a context that re-directs how the player expresses themselves from a familiar/automatic expression to a novel/awkward expression.

The World: Environment	
Ongoing habits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weather and Climate • Politics, both macro (who is the president?) and micro (what does Sally think of Paul?) • Our understanding of the flow of nature
Activated by	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Looking around • Thinking about natural or social structures • Superficial curiosity • Education • Dissatisfaction • Zero-sum confrontation • Judgment • Morality • Narrative
De-Activated by	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introspection • Abstract thought • Embodied Activity • Assertiveness • Empathy • Genuine humility / reflection on mortalitye • Forgiveness • Love
Feeling into it	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What's awesome? • What sucks? • Whose awesome (other than me)? • Who sucks (other than me)? • What facts do I know? • Where am I? • What social hierarchies are at play?
Novel approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a world that seems deeply unfamiliar for the player to project themselves into • Embed the player in an unfamiliar social structure • Embed the player in a world with alternative physics or laws

Narrative Mind	
Ongoing habits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drawing separation • Labeling things (creating symbols) • Storytelling (creating identity and environment) • Making intellectual connections
Activated by	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thinking • Information • Questions • Symbolic systems • Language • Confusion • Cause and effect
De-Activated by	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rest • Comfort • Trust • True mastery • Overwhelming or intense sensation (e.g. loud sounds) • Overwhelming or intense emotion (e.g. terror) • Attention on direct experience • Open listening / attention • Genuine curiosity • Rhythm • Embodied activity • Surprise
Feeling into it	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What am I thinking? • What are the things in this room? • How are those things related? • How would I control something, like moving an object from place to place?
Novel approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change what things mean or do • Draw the mind into paradox

Emotional Body	
Ongoing habits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoidance of pain • Movement towards pleasure
Activated by	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional content • Trauma and triggering • Embodied movement • Pain / frustration
De-Activated by	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rest • Comfort • Relief / satisfaction • Equanimous witnessing
Feeling into it	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does it feel to be me right now?⁵ • What is the most powerful feeling in me? • What emotions am I experiencing right now?
Novel approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify emotional habits, then forcefully interrupt them. • Trigger emotional habits, and let them play out in a novel way. • Use existing emotional habits to incentivize novel, unusual, or revealing behavior.

Distinguished Senses	
Ongoing habits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The movement of attention
Activated by	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sensation • Energy movement
De-Activated by	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deep rest
Feeling into it	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does it feel like to see?⁶ • What does it feel like to hear? • What does it feel like to think?
Novel approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make certain sensory experiences occur as a different sense to how it usually shows up (i.e. screenshake can be heard by our sight) • Exploit synesthesia • Redirect felt experience from any sense into new learnable patterns (teach a “6th sense”)

⁵ Try asking the question verbally in your mind, and paying attention to what you notice without coming up, without verbalizing the answer.

⁶ Try just feeling the answer, without interpreting it.

Raw Uninterpreted Sensation	
Ongoing habits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Express into form
Activated by	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Life
De-Activated by	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Death
Feeling into it	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do I exist?
Novel approaches	