



Santa
Monica
StudioTM



Playtesting God of War

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Assistant Producer
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Jeet Shroff

Gameplay Director
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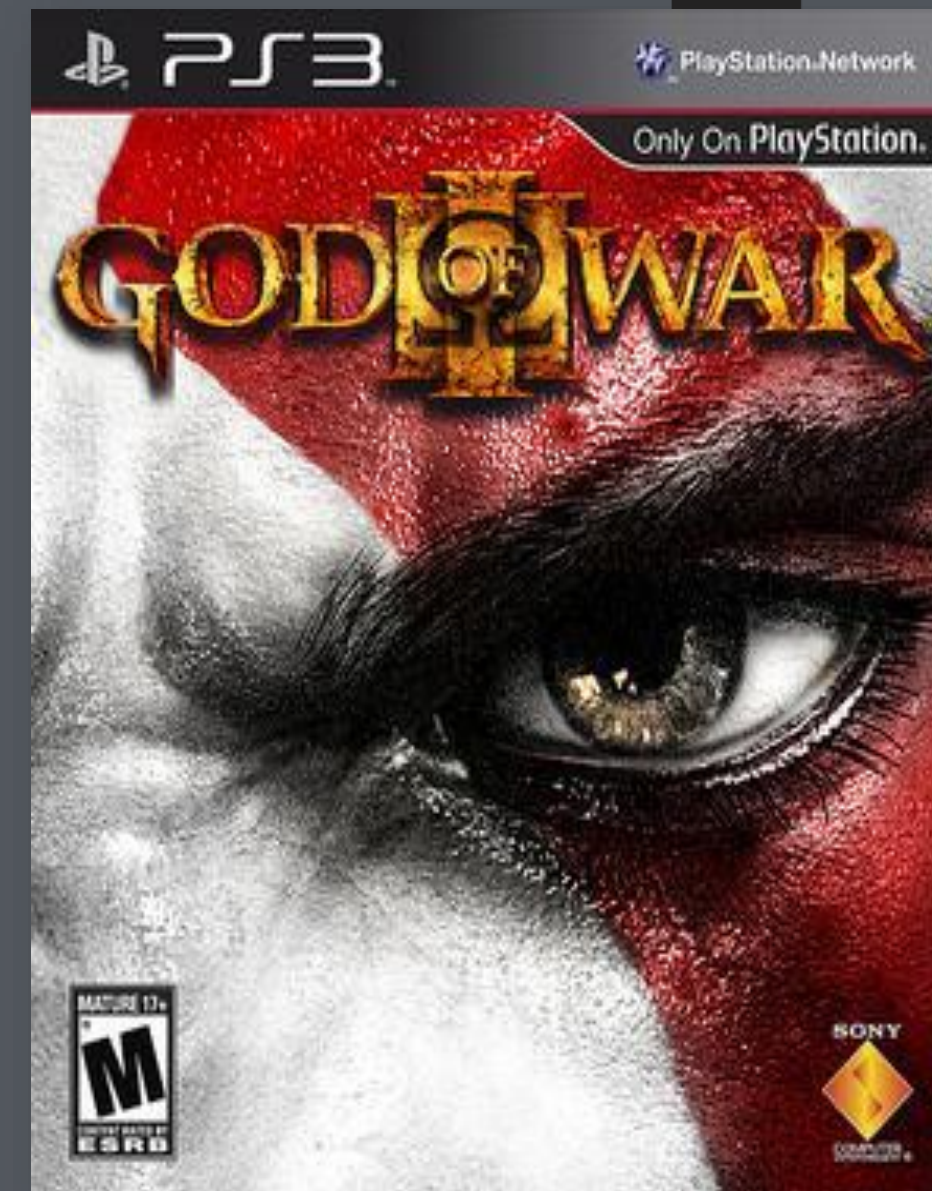
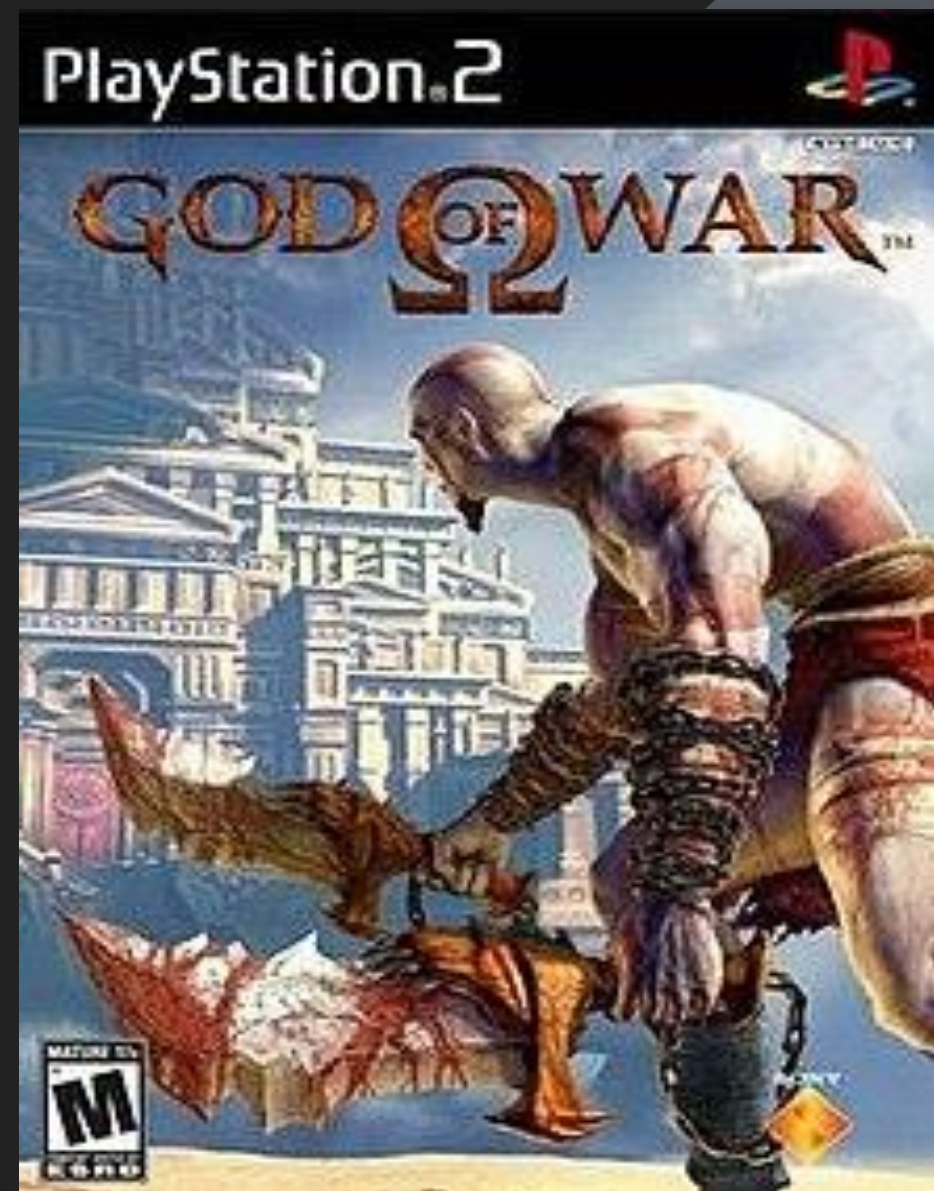


Kevin Keeker

Principal UX Researcher
Sony Interactive Entertainment







Challenges





Challenges

New **vision**



Challenges

New **vision**

New and **Old** player expectations



Challenges

New **vision**

New and **Old** player expectations

Difficult development reality

Development

Expectations

Vision



LONG Journey From Pre-Production to Alpha



LONG Journey From Pre-Production to Alpha

“Is this even God of War anymore?”



LONG Journey From Pre-Production to Alpha

“Is this even God of War anymore?”

“...and more importantly, is it any good?”



LONG Journey From Pre-Production to Alpha

“Is this even God of War anymore?”

“...and more importantly, is it any good?”



LONG Journey From Pre-Production to Alpha

It wasn't fun



We needed to **accelerate.**

Were we properly **validating** our work?

A decorative border composed of a grid of small squares, each containing a red and white geometric pattern, surrounds the central text.

But Playtests!?



The Problems



The Problems

Playtests weren't telling us any **new** information



The Problems

Playtests weren't telling us any **new** information

No **global** process

A screenshot from the video game God of War. Kratos and his son Atreus are standing on a rocky outcrop, looking out over a vast, snowy mountain range. The landscape is covered in snow, with some evergreen trees and patches of yellow autumn foliage. The sky is a pale blue with soft, white clouds. Kratos, on the right, is a large, bald man with a beard and red tribal tattoos on his back and shoulder. He wears a dark, fur-lined tunic and a large, ornate metal pauldron on his right shoulder. Atreus, on the left, is a young boy with dark hair, wearing a dark, fur-trimmed tunic. He has a bow slung over his shoulder and a quiver of arrows on his back. Two comic-style speech bubbles are overlaid on the image. The first bubble, coming from Atreus, contains the text "THIS GAME IS BIGGER THAN I WAS EXPECTING". The second bubble, coming from Kratos, contains three dots "...".

THIS GAME IS
BIGGER THAN I
WAS EXPECTING

...



The Valley of Doubt

We don't need it

Waste of time

It's too late

What about stability?

What if it doesn't help?



HORIZON
ZERO DAWN™

HORIZON

ZERO DAWN



Mathijs de Jonge
Game Director



Lambert Wolterbeek Muller
Lead Producer



You have to go **ALL IN**





Process

Why Playtest? • Goals • Test Frequency • Test Types • Data

A decorative graphic consisting of a grid of colored rounded squares. The top row has five squares in shades of dark red, red, and light yellow. The middle row has two squares, one light yellow and one red, followed by the text. The bottom row has five squares in shades of dark red, red, and light yellow. A horizontal bar at the bottom is divided into five segments of the same colors.

Why Playtest?



Why Playtest?

Validate our implementation



Why Playtest?

Validate our implementation
by getting **actionable** data



Why Playtest?

Validate our implementation
by getting **actionable** data
to make the game more **fun**

Playtest Goals





Playtest Goals

Need to be **clear** and **measurable**



Playtest Goals

Need to be **clear** and **measurable**

Need a **strong** production backbone



Playtest Goals

Need to be **clear** and **measurable**

Need a **strong** production backbone

Need a way to measure **success**



Test Frequency

Test Frequency

April

Su	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
						1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	UT1	29
30						

May

Su	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	PT - 3		13
14	15	16	17	18	UT2	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31	27	28	29
30						

June

Su	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
				1	UT3	3
4	5	6	PT - 4			10
11	12	13	14	15	UT4	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	UT5	

April

Su	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
						1
2	3	4	PT - 5			
9	10	11	12	13	UT6	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	UT7	29
30						

Projected

8 Unguided Playthroughs

15 Usability Tests

August

Su	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
		PT - 6				5
6	7	8	9	10	UT8	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	UT9	26
27	PT - 7					

September

Su	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
	PT - 7					2
3	4	5	6	7	UT10	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	UT11	23
24	PT - 8					30

October

Su	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
1	2	3	4	5	UT12	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	UT13	21
22	PT - 9					28
29	30	31				

November

Su	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
			1	2	UT14	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	PT - 10				UT15	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30		



Test Frequency

There's **always** another playtest



Test Frequency

There's **always** another playtest

Consistency is key



Test Frequency

There's **always** another playtest

Consistency is key



Test Frequency

There's **always** another playtest

Consistency is key

Each test **builds** upon the last

Test Types





Test Types



Test Types

Unguided Playthroughs



Test Types

Unguided Playthroughs

Usability Tests



Unguided Playthroughs

Finds the Pain Points



Unguided Playthroughs

Finds the Pain Points

Looks at the **whole** game



Unguided Playthroughs

Finds the Pain Points

Looks at the **whole** game

With as **little** interaction as possible



Unguided Playthroughs

Finds the Pain Points

Examples:

Overall pacing

Narrative comprehension

Difficulty balancing

Economy and Progression tuning



Usability

Deep Dive



Usability

Deep Dive

Isolates the **root** cause of the issue



Usability

Deep Dive

Isolates the **root** cause of the issue

Conducted in **small** sessions



Usability

Deep Dive

Examples:

Leviathan Axe

Blades of Chaos

Atreus in/out of combat

Boat

Off-Screen Indicators

UI

Arena Combat



Meaningful Data



Meaningful Data

How we asked for it



Meaningful Data

How we asked for it

- **Undirected** = Volunteered



Meaningful Data

How we asked for it

- **Undirected** = Volunteered





Meaningful Data

How we asked for it









- **Undirected** = Volunteered
- **Directed** = Asked by us



Meaningful Data

Undirected Feedback

Plyrs Subtracted from OVERALL undirected

- 4  XPL (Valkyries, Realm Tears) too difficult
- 2  Misc. bugs (red sap bug, etc.)
- 2  Finding resources
- 1  Some enemy attacks hard to read (ranged attacks)
- 1  Off-screen indicator hard to track in combat
- 1  Finding angle to through axe at objective
- 1  Boring boss battles
- 1  Frustrating that Kratos auto-descends after kicking chain down

Directed Feedback

Categ	Major Game Elements
Combat	Combat Enemy difficulty
World	World Health Pickups (Number, Location)
Combat	Combat Unarmed Combat
Combat	Combat Camera Control
World	World Using the Compass
World	World Using the Map
World	World Climbing, Leaping, Traversal

Meaningful Data

Undirected Feedback

+ ADD - SUB

Directed Feedback

Categ	Major Game Elements
Combat	Combat Enemy difficulty
World	World Health Pickups (Number, Location)
Combat	Combat Unarmed Combat
Combat	Combat Camera Control
World	World Using the Compass
World	World Using the Map
World	World Climbing, Leaping, Traversal


Plyrs Subtracted from OVERALL undirected

- 4 █ XPL (Valkyries, Realm Tears) too difficult
- 2 █ Misc. bugs (red sap bug, etc.)
- 2 █ Finding resources
- 1 █ Some enemy attacks hard to read (ranged attacks)
- 1 █ Off-screen indicator hard to track in combat
- 1 █ Finding angle to through axe at objective
- 1 █ Boring boss battles
- 1 █ Frustrating that Kratos auto-descends after kicking chain down

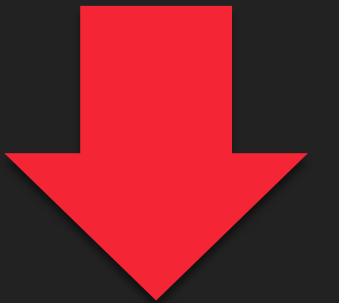
Meaningful Data

Undirected Feedback

Plyrs Subtracted from OVERALL_undirected

- 
- 4 █ XPL (Valkyries, Realm Tears) too difficult
 - 2 █ Misc. bugs (red sap bug, etc.)
 - 2 █ Finding resources
 - 1 █ Some enemy attacks hard to read (ranged attacks)
 - 1 █ Off-screen indicator hard to track in combat
 - 1 █ Finding angle to through axe at objective
 - 1 █ Boring boss battles
 - 1 █ Frustrating that Kratos auto-descends after kicking chain down

Meaningful Data



Directed Feedback

Categ	Major Game Elements	% Add	Plyrs	% Sub
Combat	Combat Enemy difficulty	40%	8	<div><div></div></div> 45%
World	World Health Pickups (Number, Location)	40%	8	<div><div></div></div> 20%
Combat	Combat Unarmed Combat	65%	13	<div><div></div></div> 20%
Combat	Combat Camera Control	20%	4	<div><div></div></div> 15%
World	World Using the Compass	35%	7	<div><div></div></div> 15%
World	World Using the Map	35%	7	<div><div></div></div> 10%
World	World Climbing, Leaping, Traversal	40%	8	<div><div></div></div> 10%



Meaningful Data

Simplifying helped us build **consensus**



Meaningful Data

Each department wants
different data!



Breaking it Down

Playtest Goals – Clear and measurable

Playtest Frequency – Stick to it

Test Types – Use to your advantage

Meaningful Data – Consider who it's for

Experiences

A dark, atmospheric illustration of a person in a small boat on a river, surrounded by large, gnarled trees and a cave entrance. The scene is dimly lit, with a small fire or light source in the boat illuminating the water. The word "Experiences" is written in large, white, sans-serif font across the center of the image.



Fantasy and Function



Fantasy and Function

Unguided Playthroughs validated **Fantasy**

Usability validated **Function**

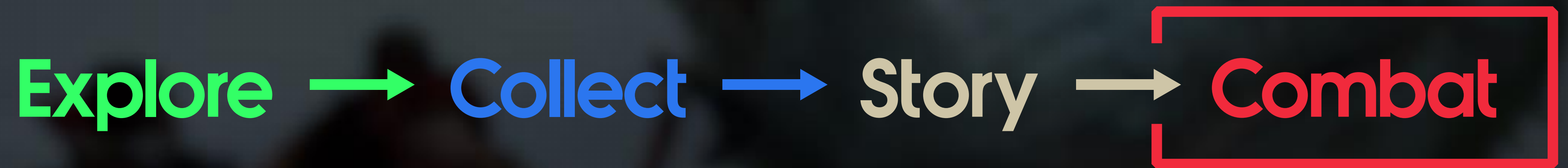
A cinematic scene from the movie "How to Train Your Dragon". Two Vikings, one with a bow and arrows and the other with a sword, are on the edge of a wooden boat. They are looking up at the massive, close-up head of a dragon. The dragon's eyes are glowing orange, and its mouth is slightly open, showing sharp teeth. The background is a misty, grey sky.

Boat

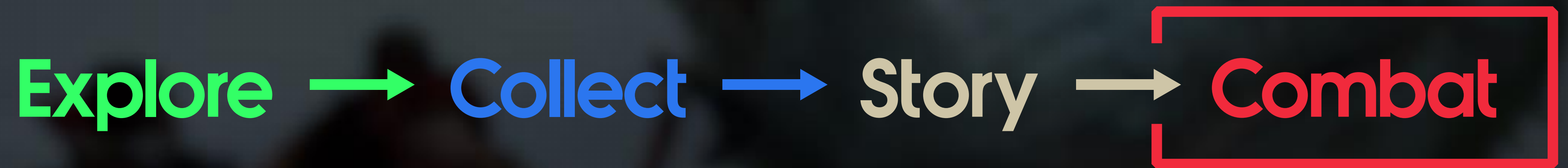
Boat Pillars

Explore → Collect → Story → Combat

Boat Pillars



Boat Pillars







Game

Cal200_Shore	Son00
Cal100_Hub	Boat00
Cal080_Global	Draugr 00
Cal250_FootHillsLH	Brok00
Cal270_CalderaLH	Fanatic00
Cal075_Lighting	
Cal225_RiverPassLH	
Cal235_BoatTraining	

Build #214.2 (p4 #1757349)
Hostname: 10.30.8.20

GPU 23.6 ms / 24.2 ms
CPU 47.4 ms / 37.1 ms
ALL 21.7 fps / 46.1 ms
(Cur/Max) DMAMem: 2693520/10339344 (6.5) (2399) (0/69632 dbg) (0/0 Single) PBMem:706056/3622344 (8.4),

0:41:22
58708



Combat?



Boat Feedback

FANTASY ... Why so much boat?

FUNCTIONAL ... Slow and difficult to control

Boat Feedback

~~— FANTASY ... Why so much boat? —~~

FUNCTIONAL ... Slow and difficult to control



Boat Updates

- General speed tuning
- Control and feel improvements
- Camera adjustments
- Dock points on map





537m
< S >



Takeaway

Boat



Takeaway

Boat

Be careful reacting to feedback,
especially if the **design intent** isn't fully
realized

Final Boss





Baldur: You still need to pay for the lifetime that you stole from me.





Atreus: He saved your life!



Kratos: Only a parent can understand.



Takeaway

Freya & Baldur



Takeaway

Freya & Baldur

Be willing to **listen**

The Olive Pizza Guy

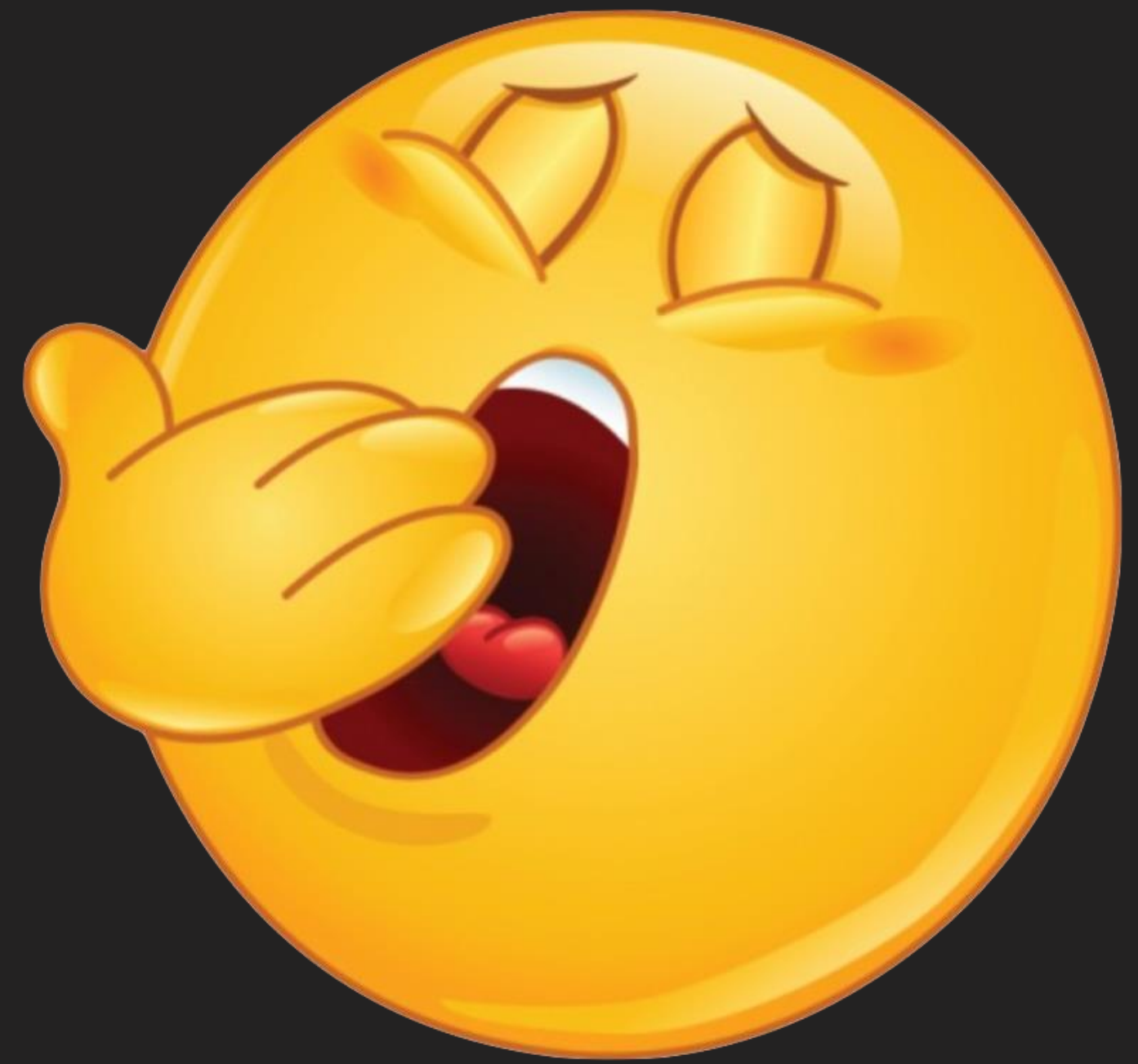


What did you think about my new game?

- ☐ 1. Awesome!
- ☐ 2. Very Awesome!
- ☐ 3. Awesome Sauce!
- ☐ 4. Awesome-tacular!
- ☐ 5. All of the above!

to play my game a

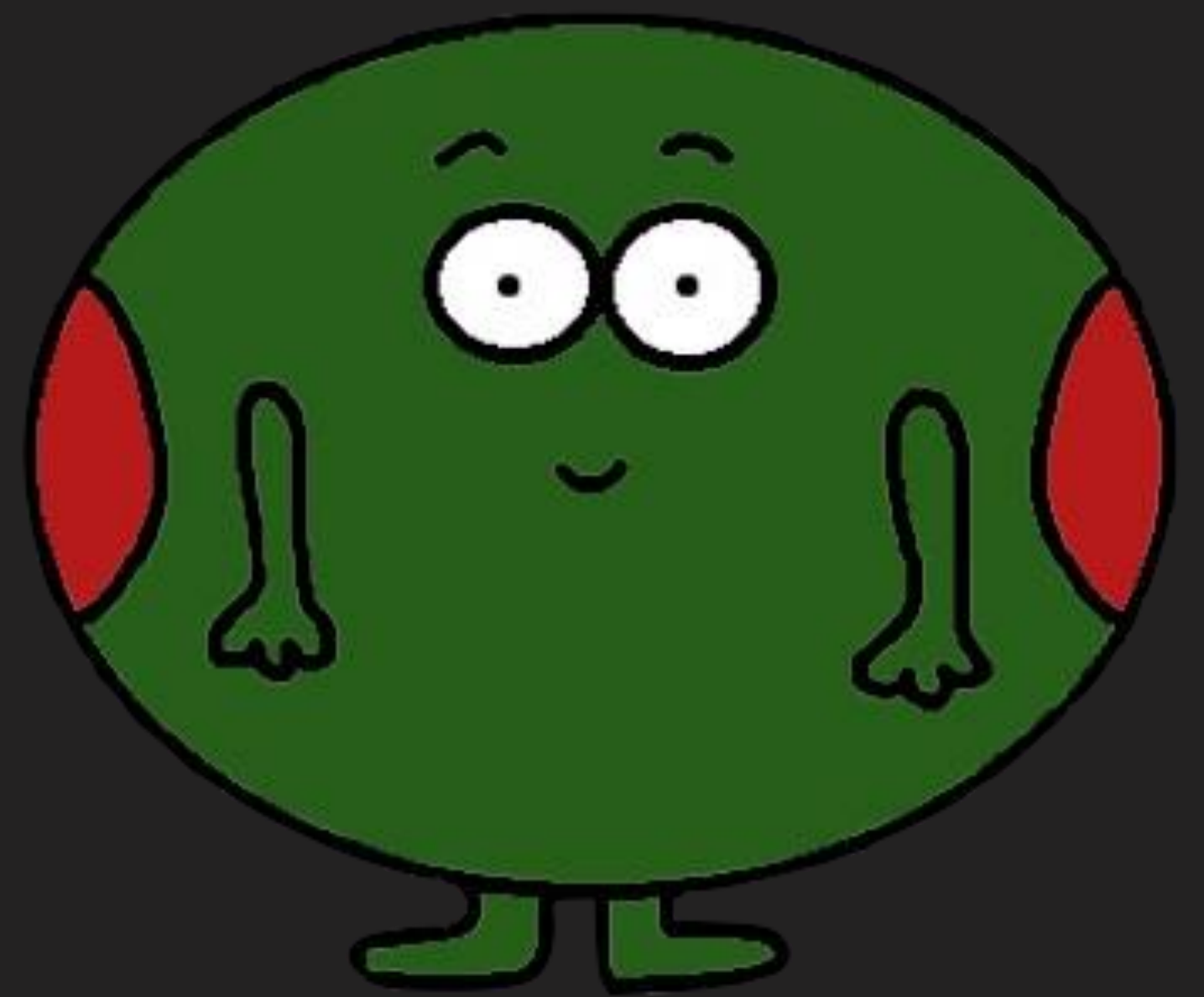
**“The Puzzle Solving
is a BORE”**



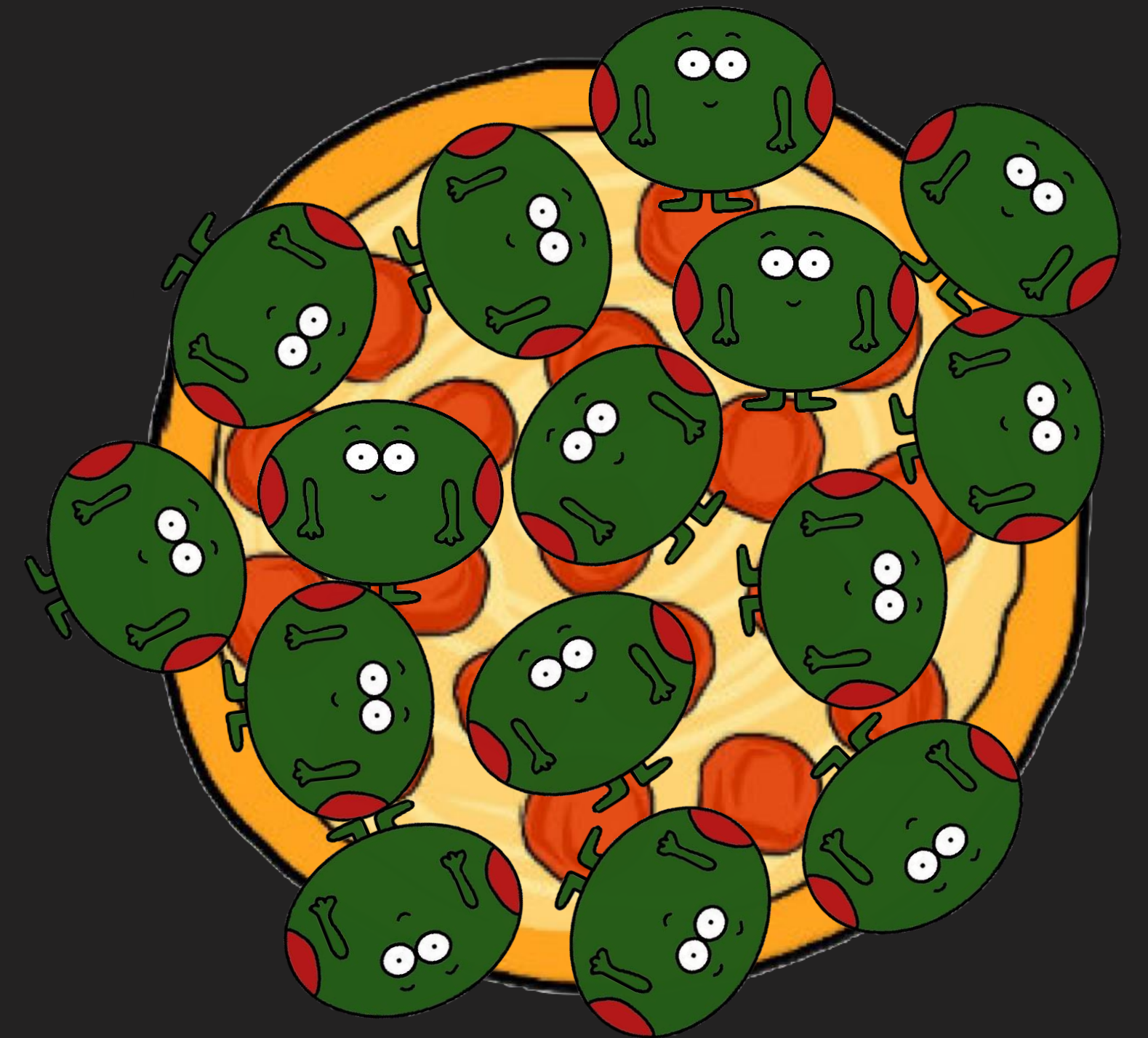
**“Imagine you ordered
a Meat Lover’s Pizza”**



“But when your
pizza arrived there
was more olives
than meat!”



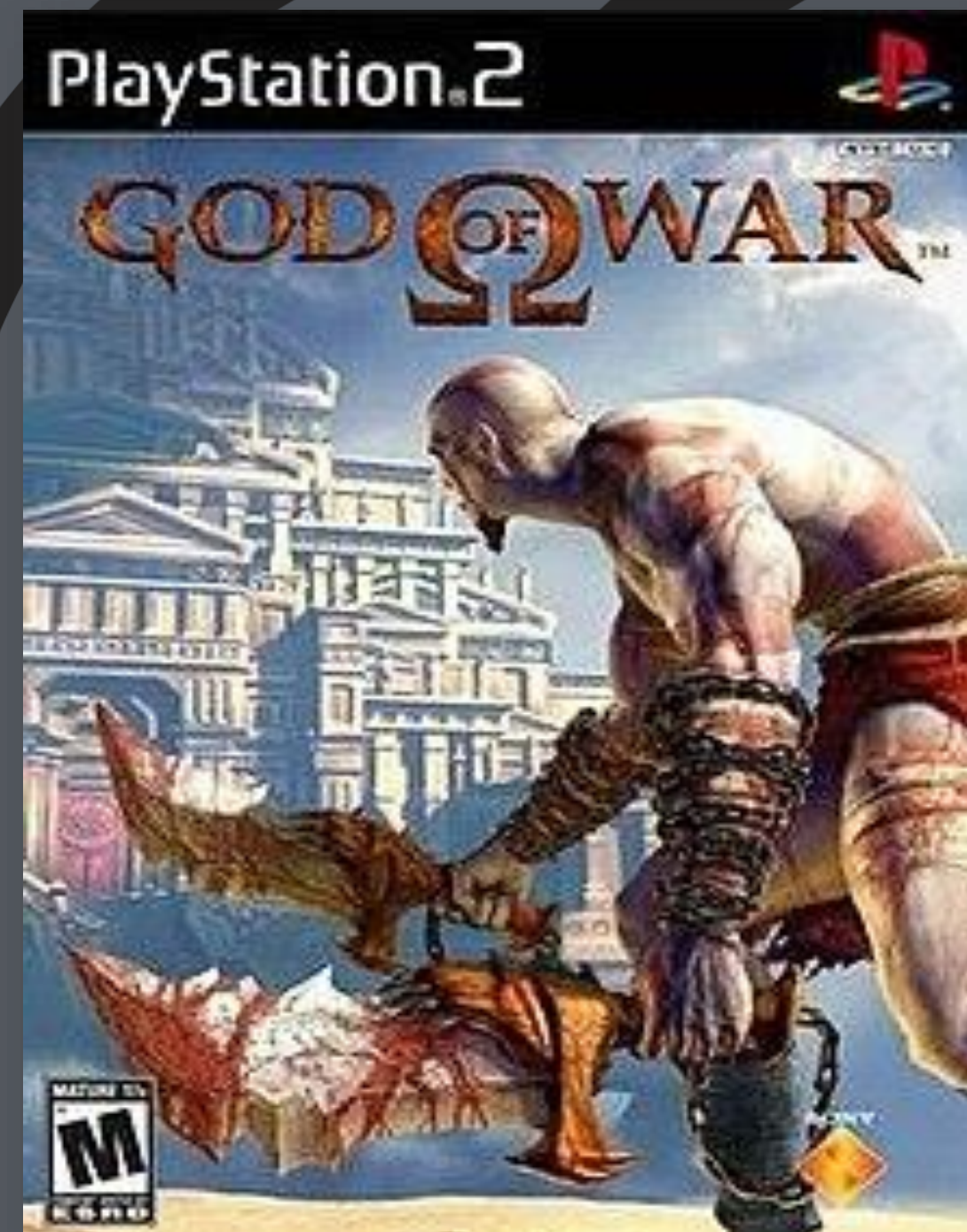
“I went in expecting
lots and lots of action,
lots of meat on my
pizza, but NO”













Takeaway

Olive Pizza Guy

The game might not **resonate** with everyone



Takeaway

Olive Pizza Guy

The game might not **resonate** with everyone

Strategically look at feedback



And then I got a text...



Difficulty Tuning



GOD OF WAR

SELECT DIFFICULTY

GIVE ME A STORY

GIVE ME A BALANCED EXPERIENCE

GIVE ME A CHALLENGE

GIVE ME GOD OF WAR

“Give Me a Balanced Experience” is for players who want an adventure that's reasonably challenging.

GOD OF WAR

SELECT DIFFICULTY

GIVE ME A STORY

GIVE ME A BALANCED EXPERIENCE

GIVE ME A CHALLENGE

GIVE ME GOD OF WAR

“Give Me a Balanced Experience” is for players who want an adventure that's reasonably challenging.



Takeaways

Difficulty Modes

Get **critical** features in front of playtesters as soon as possible!



Takeaways

Difficulty Modes

Get **critical** features in front of playtesters as soon as possible!

Look at feedback from **all sides**



Takeaways

Difficulty Modes

Get **critical** features in front of playtesters as soon as possible!

Look at feedback from **all sides**

Difficulty does not equal **enjoyment**



All Summed Up



All Summed Up

Playtesting is not meant to question your vision, but it measures how well you **realized** it



All Summed Up

Playtesting is not meant to question your vision, but it measures how well you **realized** it

It takes **time**

Final Thoughts





Final Thoughts

- Live streamed all the tests



Final Thoughts

- Live streamed all the tests
- Playtests reinforced through leadership



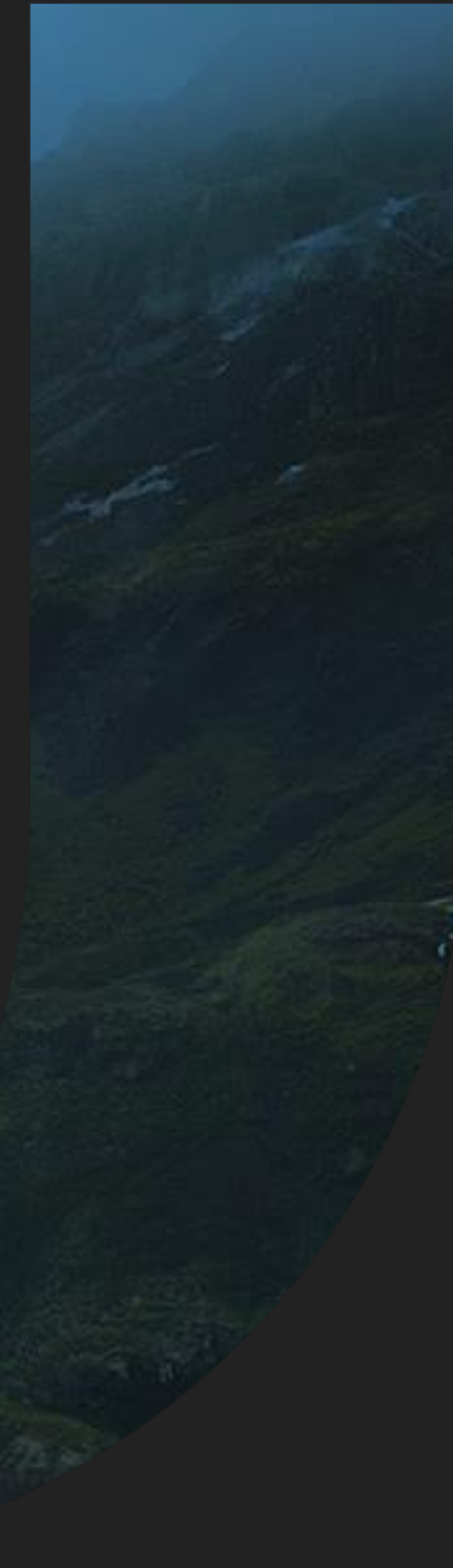
Final Thoughts

- Live streamed all the tests
- Playtests reinforced through leadership
- The relationship with QA is critical



Final Thoughts

- Live streamed all the tests
- Playtests reinforced through leadership
- The relationship with QA is critical
- Reduce barriers for User Research



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GOD OF WAR



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SCHEDULE.GDCONF.COM



BRUNO VELAZQUEZ • Animation Director
God of War: Breathing New Life into a Hardened Spartan • ANIMATION BOOTCAMP
MONDAY, MARCH 18 • 10:00AM - 11:00AM • ROOM 2010, WEST HALL



MELISSA SHIM • Senior Animator
Animation Bootcamp: Animation Tricks of The Trade • ANIMATION BOOTCAMP
MONDAY, MARCH 18 • 4:40PM - 5:10PM • ROOM 2010, WEST HALL



AXEL GROSSMAN • Lead Technical Character Artist
Sony Santa Monica Presents: God of War (Presented by Autodesk) • VISUAL ARTS
MONDAY, MARCH 18 • 4:40PM - 5:10PM • ROOM 3020, WEST HALL



ROB DAVIS • Lead Level Designer
Level Design Workshop: The Level Design of God of War • LD SUMMIT
TUESDAY, MARCH 19 • 11:20AM - 12:20PM • ROOM 301, SOUTH HALL



ERICA PINTO • Lead Narrative Animator
What They Don't Teach You in Art School: Lessons for First Time Leads • ART DIRECTION BOOTCAMP
TUESDAY, MARCH 19 • 1:20PM - 2:20PM • ROOM 2001, WEST HALL



RUPERT RENARD • Senior Programmer
Wind Simulation in God of War • PROGRAMMING
WEDNESDAY, MARCH 20 • 10:30AM - 11:00AM • ROOM 303, SOUTH HALL



RUPERT RENARD • Senior Programmer
Disintegrating Meshes with particles in God of War • PROGRAMMING
WEDNESDAY, MARCH 20 • 11:30AM - 12:00PM • ROOM 303, SOUTH HALL



ED DEARIEN & JEET SHROFF • Assistant Producer & Gameplay Director
Playtesting God of War • PRODUCTION
WEDNESDAY, MARCH 20 • 2:00PM - 3:00PM • ROOM 2001, WEST HALL



KORAY HAGEN • Senior Programmer
The Future of Scene Description on God of War • PROGRAMMING
WEDNESDAY, MARCH 20 • 2:00PM - 3:00PM • ROOM 302, SOUTH HALL



DORI ARAZI • Director of Photography
Creating a Deeper Emotional Connection: The cinematography of God of War • VISUAL ARTS
WEDNESDAY, MARCH 20 • 3:30PM - 4:30PM • ROOM 2005, WEST HALL



JASON MCDONALD • Design Director
Taking an Axe to God of War Gameplay • DESIGN
THURSDAY, MARCH 21 • 10:00AM - 11:00AM • ROOM 303, SOUTH HALL



ERICA PINTO • Lead Narrative Animator
Keyframes and Cardboard Props: The Cinematic Process Behind God of War • VISUAL ARTS
THURSDAY, MARCH 21 • 11:30AM - 12:30PM • ROOM 2001, WEST HALL



MIKE NIEDERQUELL • Lead Sound Designer
The Sound Design of God of War • AUDIO
THURSDAY, MARCH 21 • 2:00PM - 2:30PM • ROOM 3002, WEST HALL



SHAYNA MOON • Associate Producer
Shipping Greatness: Practical Lessons from Audio Production on God of War • PRODUCTION
THURSDAY, MARCH 21 • 3:00PM - 3:30PM • ROOM 3002, WEST HALL



HAYATO YOSHIDOME • Sr. Staff Technical Combat Designer
Raising Atreus for Battle in God of War • DESIGN
THURSDAY, MARCH 21 • 4:00PM - 5:00PM • ROOM 2005, WEST HALL



JOSH HOBSON • Lead Rendering Programmer
The Indirect Lighting Pipeline of God of War • PROGRAMMING
THURSDAY, MARCH 21 • 4:00PM - 5:00PM • ROOM 2010, WEST HALL



SEAN FEELEY • Sr Staff Technical Artist
Interactive Wind and Vegetation in God of War • DESIGN
THURSDAY, MARCH 21 • 5:30PM - 6:30PM • ROOM 2005, WEST HALL



CORY BARLOG • Creative Director
Reinventing God of War
FRIDAY, MARCH 22 • 10:00AM - 11:00AM • ROOM 303, SOUTH HALL



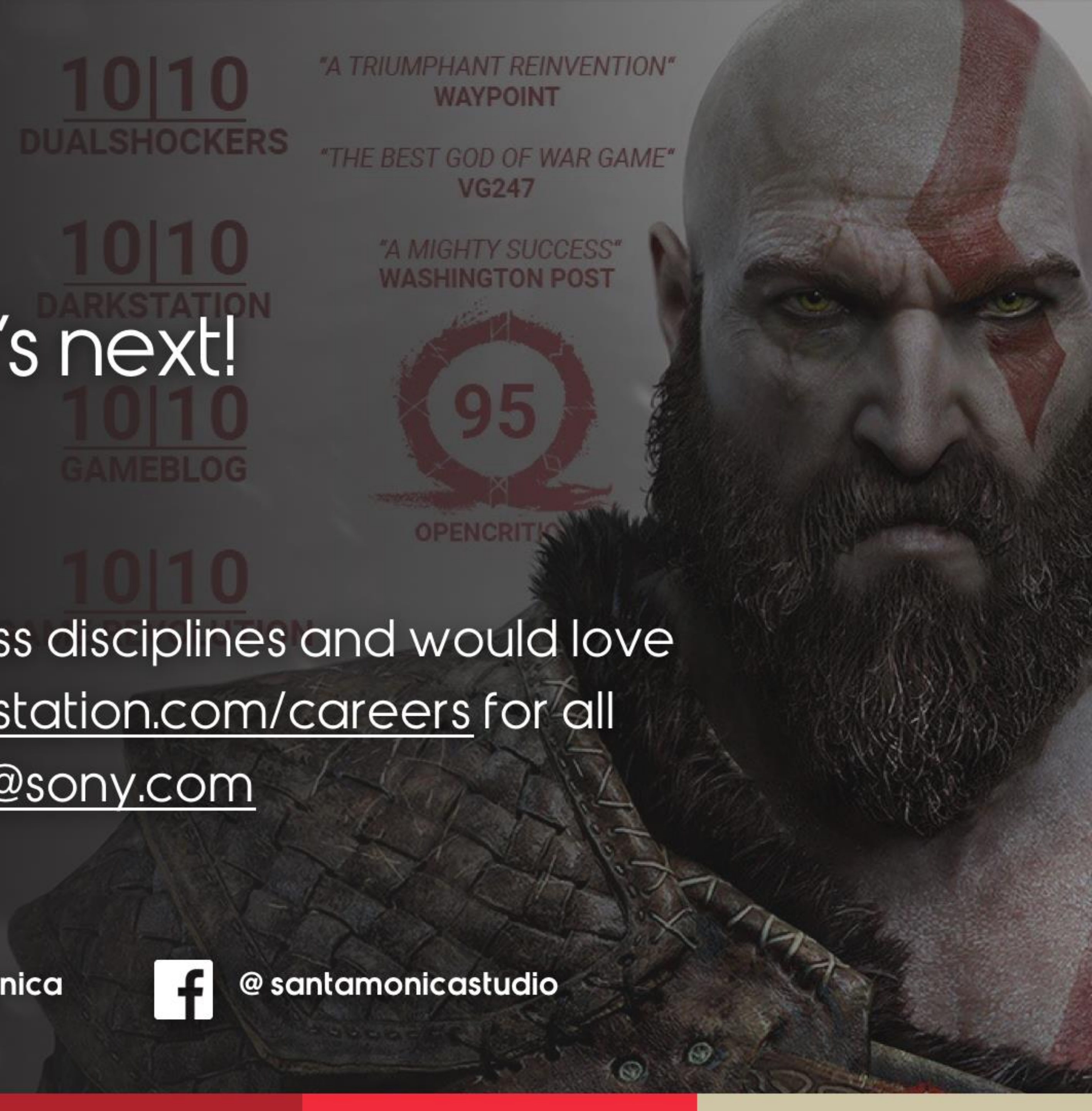
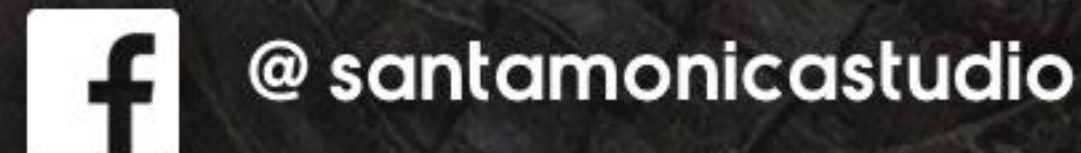
MINIR SHETH & JEET SHROFF • Lead Combat Designer & Gameplay Director
Evolving Combat in God of War for a New Perspective • DESIGN
FRIDAY, MARCH 22 • 1:30PM - 2:30PM • ROOM 2005, WEST HALL



Our journey
Your story

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Q&A

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kevin.keeker@sony.com