

GDC

March 20-24, 2023  
San Francisco, CA

# “Soft” Skills Are Hard!

Acing the non-technical interview questions

Sonia Michaels

Department Chair, Humanities and Social Sciences

DigiPen Institute of Technology

#GDC23

# About me:

- I've been teaching professional communications (and English!) for 30+ years, 15 of those years at DigiPen Institute of Technology.
- I've given numerous talks at GDC, PaxDev, and other conferences, focusing primarily on game industry career development and on the importance of the Humanities and Social Sciences to game education. I'm currently finishing up my three-year term on the Board of Directors of the IGDA (International Game Developers Association).
- My core goal as an educator and career development professional is to empower students and early-career gamedevs to extend their career longevity, resist crunch and burnout, and improve their industry from within.
- I'm going to have to talk really really fast today!

# On today's agenda:

- Why “soft” skills are anything but soft!
- Managing interview stress and anxiety.
- Preparing responses for various interpersonal question types, so you can give interviewers the information and insights they need.
- Conquering challenging questions by treating them as opportunities rather than fearing them as traps.
- Interviewing the interviewers: asking questions that will improve your chances of earning an offer.

# “Soft” skills are hard!

- I hate the phrase “soft skills”!
- Being a good communicator, working well with a team, etc. will often be the most challenging aspects of your job.
- Don’t list these skills as résumé/CV “filler”—you don’t need filler.  
**I promise!**

# Debilitative vs. facilitative stress:

- Debilitative stress and worry can be paralyzing. Try to re-focus this energy on your interview preparation, rather than dwelling on worst-case scenarios.
- You made it onto a short list! This is not a guarantee, but it's a good sign.
- Thorough preparation is the best possible use of your energy.
- Your responses should make it clear how you will contribute, rather than talking about how great this job would be for you. Shifting the focus away from yourself may also help reduce your anxiety about the process.

# Creating your interview strategy:

- The achievements on your resume will be the same set of achievements you talk about at your interviews, so you already have a blueprint for success.
- Make a “master document,” select anecdotes carefully for various question types, and prepare a short list of key words and phrases to guide yourself through each story.
- Practice telling your stories with enough detail to set the scene and make them interesting, but without a lot of “window dressing.”
- Don’t memorize entire responses! These are your stories to tell, so a few key words should be enough to get you rolling.

# What do they *really* need to know?

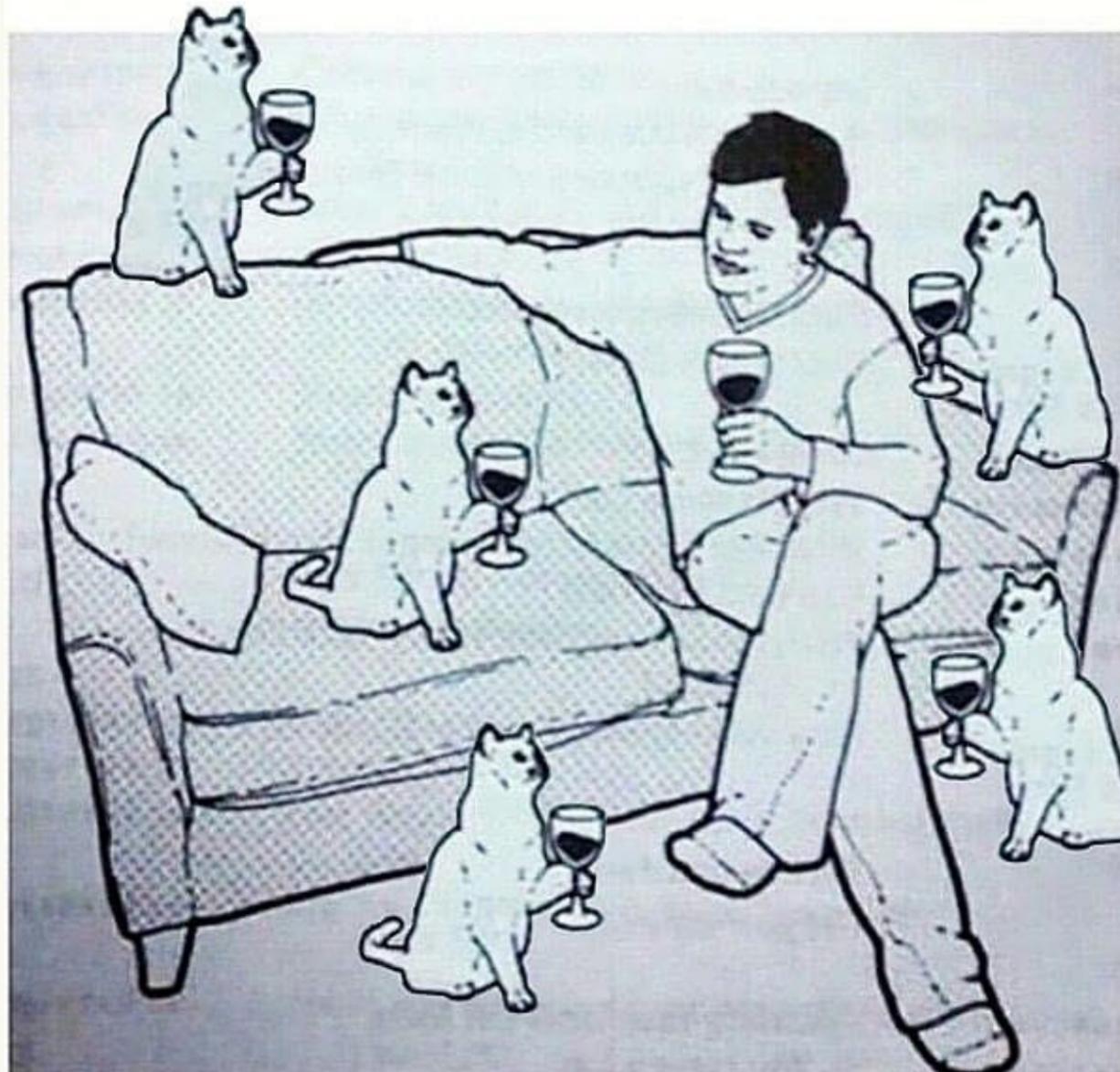
- The interpersonal elements of an interview help interviewers understand what sort of employee and team member you will be. They also give you the chance to present your own “career narrative.”
- These questions give you opportunities to demonstrate your values, priorities, self-awareness, resilience, empathy, and commitment to personal and professional growth.
- **Always consider the question behind the question.**

# Strengths and weaknesses:

- Strengths aren't just skill-related—they're also social/interpersonal.
- Be prepared to provide specific examples, rather than just listing a few words. How have these strengths shaped your life to this point?
- When you're asked about weaknesses, provide real examples, but always show how you've worked on them: demonstrate self-awareness and growth.
- Don't use deal-breakers like "I'm always late, haha" or "I get angry easily."
- **A disability is not a weakness!** Also, you are not required to disclose disabilities during this part of the hiring process.

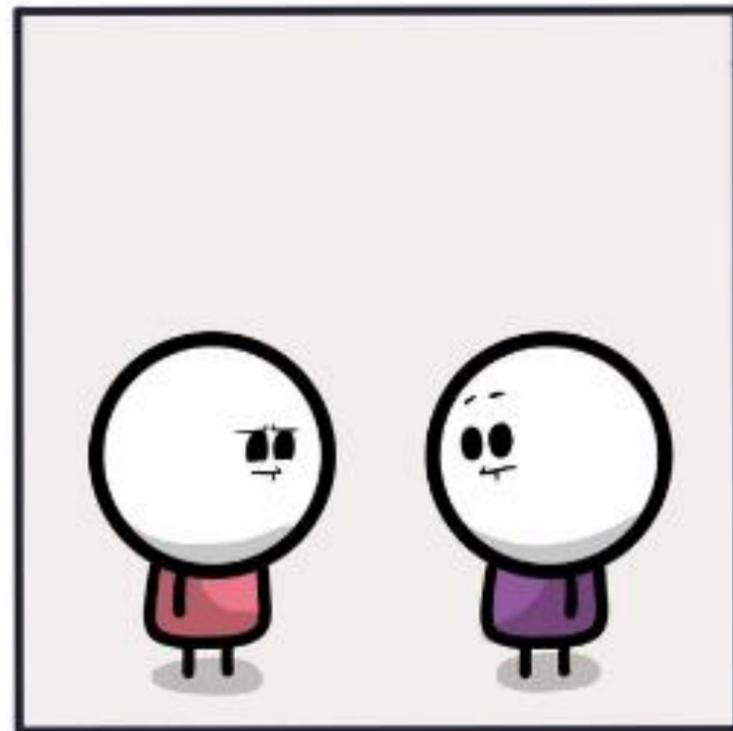
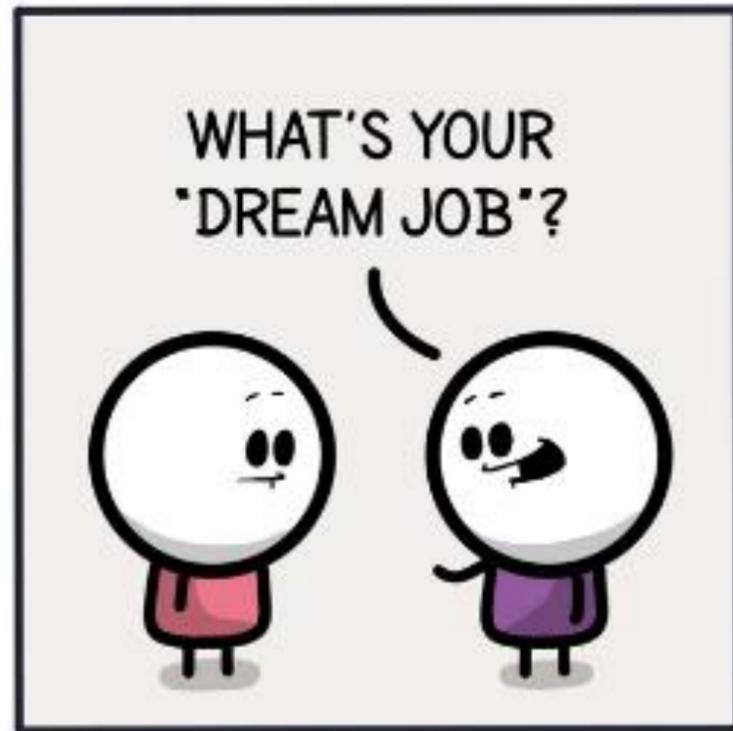
# Goals:

"where do you see yourself in 10 years?"



# Goals:

- The way you talk about your goals will help interviewers evaluate whether you have a realistic understanding of the job and where it can take you.
- It may also reveal whether their studio is the right place for you to achieve the next steps in your career vision.
- Do some research (LinkedIn is a good starting point!) to figure out “what happens next.” Then, break your goals down into chunks of 1-3 years, 3-5 years, and beyond.
- It’s fine to state ambitious goals, as long as they’re realistically reachable within the time frame you’re discussing, and at the company you’re interviewing with.



Comics about work. Made with love & lots of coffee.  
Join [r/workchronicles](#) or follow on [Instagram](#)/[Twitter](#)/[FB](#)

Work Chronicles  
[workchronicles.com](#)

# Situational questions:

- These usually start with “Tell me/us about a time when...”
- Have something ready to go for: strengths, weaknesses, goals, individual accomplishments, team experiences (positive and negative), interpersonal conflicts (peers and supervisors), team conflicts, etc.
- Have backup/alternate responses prepared, just in case.

# Individual accomplishments:

- The way you select and discuss your achievements will give interviewers insight into your priorities and values.
- Try not to slip into a general discussion of whatever project you're discussing—they're considering hiring *you*, not your whole team.
- Don't tear yourself down! It's *their* job to decide whether your skills and experiences are good enough to extend an offer. Humility is good; self-sabotage is not, so get out of your own way.

# Team experiences:

- Take responsibility when it's appropriate to do so; give credit where it's due.
- Never deflect all the blame for a negative team experience onto your teammates, supervisors, or professors. Focus on how you could have handled the situation better.
- Interviewers know that how you speak *to* them now is almost certainly how you will speak *about* them in the future, so don't show them that you're willing to throw people under the bus!

# Failure and conflict questions:

- Every failure or conflict question gives you the chance to tell a growth story:
  - 1) What happened
  - 2) How you dealt with it at the time, and
  - 3) What you learned/how you do things differently now.

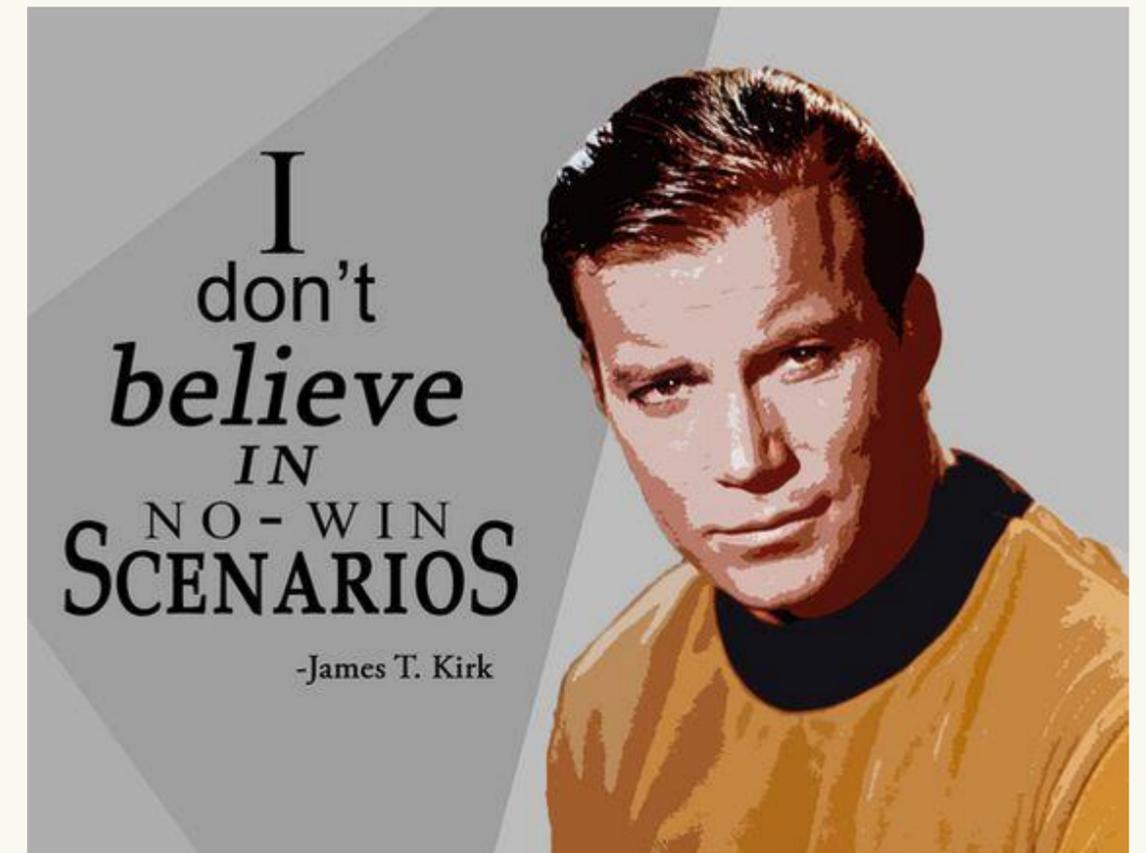


# This is your “redemption arc”!

- If possible, reach back into the past (just a bit) for failure examples—this gives you a chance to show learning and growth over time.
- When discussing conflict, focus on how you reached resolution, or at least made the best of the situation despite its outcome.
- Your approach to contentious situations may reflect on your ability to receive and respond to critical feedback in a professional context. This is important!
- Your responses will also help interviewers assess how stress-reactive you are.

# Problem-solving questions:

- “If you had to decide between X and Y approach, Z days before a firm deadline, how would you determine the best solution?”
- Draw on your previous experiences whenever possible. “When my team faced a situation like this last year, I...”
- These questions may help interviewers understand the way you approach your work, *and* the way you interact with others when faced with a challenge.



# Why do you want to work for us?

- Do your research! Talk to people you know at the company (or people who know people). Read articles and press releases, dig through the website, watch their “about our studio” videos, and so on.
- Prepare a few good points that emphasize how you would be a great fit for this role/this company.
- If you’re already a fan of their work, that’s a good start—now, find some other solid reasons that you would choose to work there. They’re hiring colleagues, not fans.

# Ending on a high note:

- Prepare some good questions for your interviewers. This is an opportunity—don't waste it!
- Don't ask them to discuss active controversies or NDA-protected material.
- Ask about the specifics of the role—responsibilities, team size, interactions with other disciplines, etc.
- If the interviewer is in your field, ask them what they think makes a good designer/ producer/whatever.
- Consider asking if they'd suggest picking up any new tools/skills between now and the start date, to better prepare yourself to excel in the role.

# Power move question!\*

- **“Do you have any concerns about my suitability for this position?”**
- This is a great way to buy yourself one more chance to convince them!
- It will also let you correct any misperceptions they may have of you.
- If you don't like the answer you get, don't respond defensively. Work with them to eliminate their doubts.

*\* Shared with me by Katie Golden of Riot Games & SavePoint Industry Gathering!*

# Shifting the balance of power:

- While interviews can *feel* incredibly disempowering, they present great opportunities for you to improve your chances of getting a job that will be a good match for your skills, goals, and personality.
- You don't have control over the overall process, but you can absolutely influence these interactions in some important ways.
- Your interviewers may be your future colleagues and teammates—they are auditioning you, but you are also auditioning them. If the way they interact with you—or with each other—sends up any red flags, trust your instincts.
- Consider your nonverbal communication as well as what you're going to say—work on appropriate eye contact and confident body language.

# Closing thoughts:

- Your skills and expertise are important; your ability to work well with others in a variety of challenging situations is equally important! Don't underestimate the interpersonal elements of the hiring process.
- You already know the types of interpersonal questions that you may be asked—please prepare for these as thoroughly as you prepare for the more technical portions of your interviews.
- Good luck!

# Thank you!

smichaels@digipen.edu or  
sonia.michaels@gmail.com

@soniaghm on Twitter

/in/soniagmichaels/

