



MARCH 18-22, 2024
SAN FRANCISCO, CA

How Poetry Can Help Us Make Better Games

Jordan Magnuson

#GDC2024



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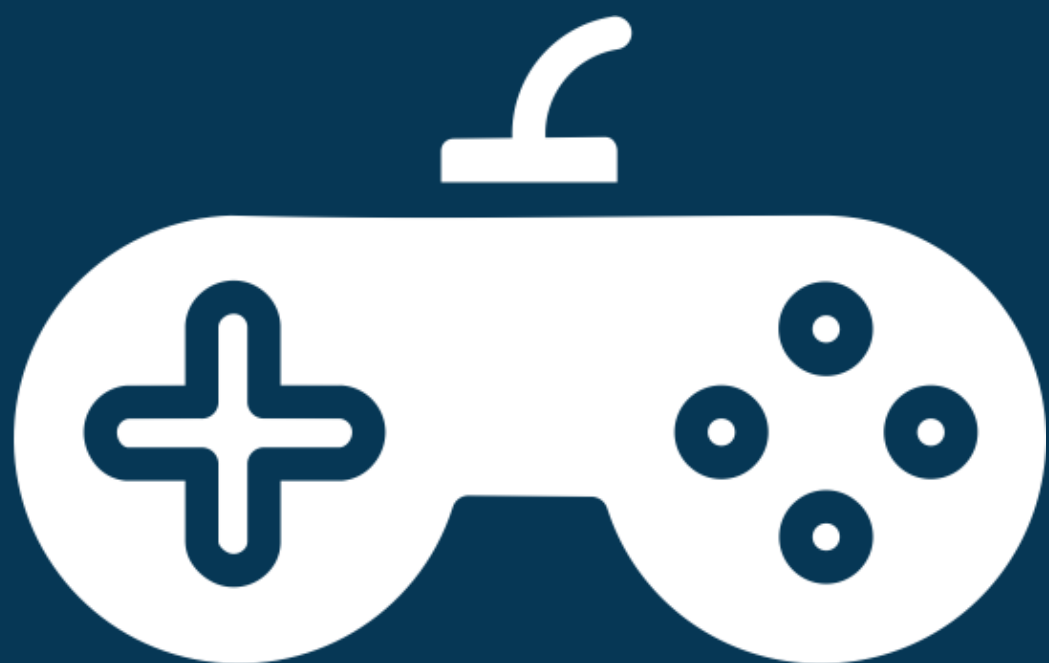
How Poetry Can Help Us Make Better Games

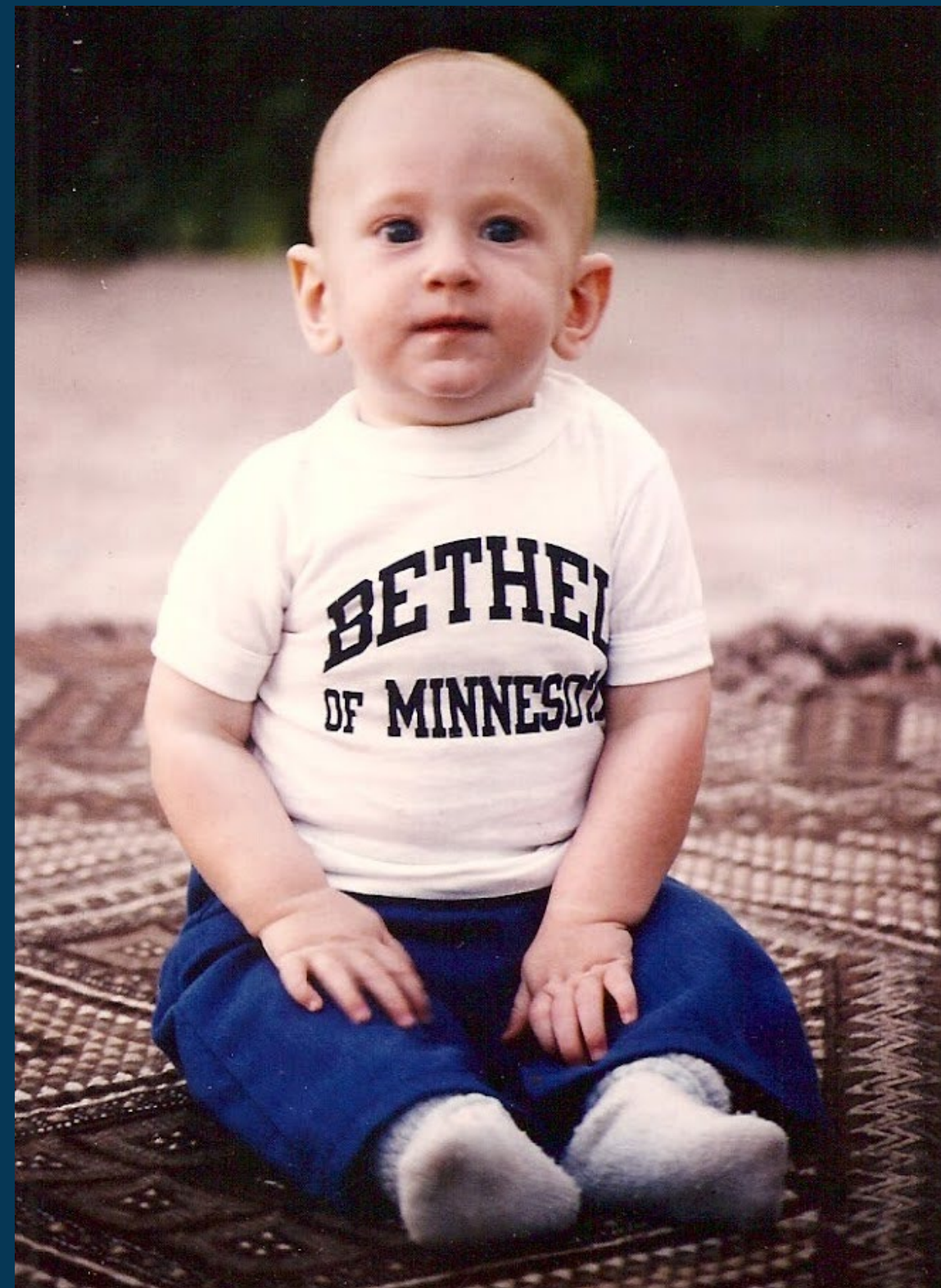
Jordan Magnuson

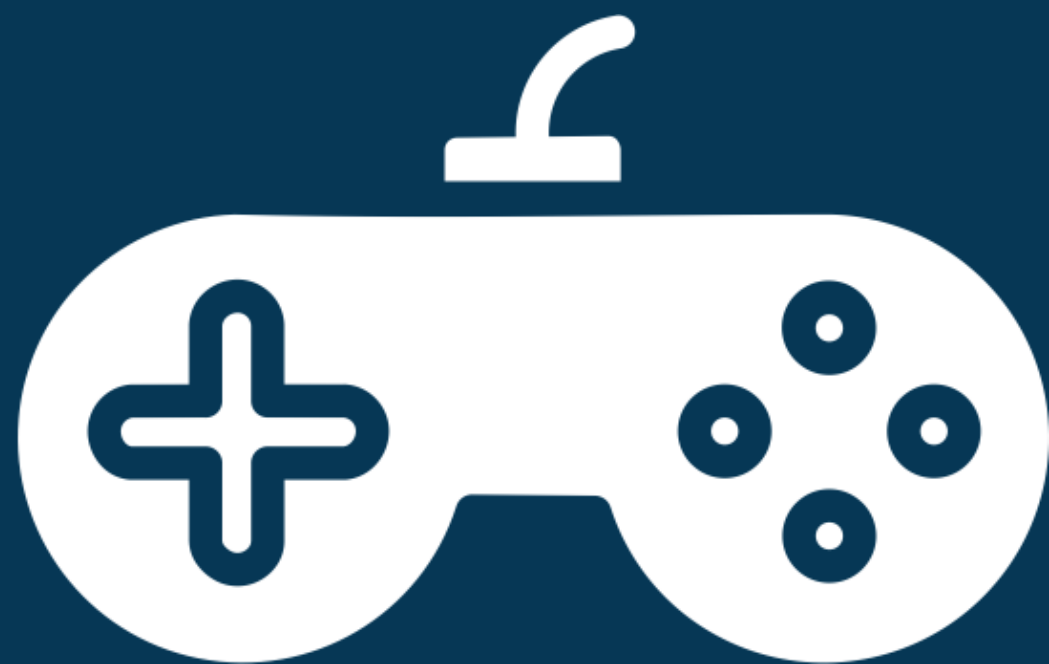
#GDC2024

Notes

1. Talk will be available at the GDC Vault
2. Some spoilers for older games
3. Please silence your devices









TIGSOURCE.

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Hadean Lands

By: Derek Yu On: December 1st, 2014



Andrew "Zarf" Plotkin is a well-known and influential figure in interactive fiction – on top of penning classic IF games like Spider & Web and Shade, he also developed the Blorb package format, Glx API, and Glulx virtual machine for making and playing them. His latest game, [Hadean Lands](#), is four years in the making (following a successful Kickstarter) and is apparently one of the largest and most complex IF games to date, spanning 73,000 words of printable text and 170,000 words of logic (according to [Andrew's twitter](#)). In the game, you play a young alchemist who has awoken to find him or herself trapped in a crashed starship, armed only with your knowledge of alchemical rituals and whatever ingredients you can scrounge up on the ship.

I'll spoil some of the unique features of the game after the jump:

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Game Trekking: computer games inspired by world travel



[Project We Love](#)



[Video Games](#)





How can the basic building blocks of videogames be used to:

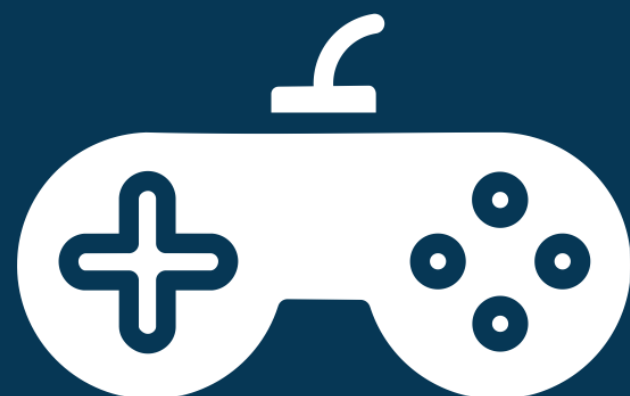


**Craft meaning
and impact?**

**Tackle difficult topics
and subjective
experiences?**

**Explore
Unexpected Themes
and Emotions?**

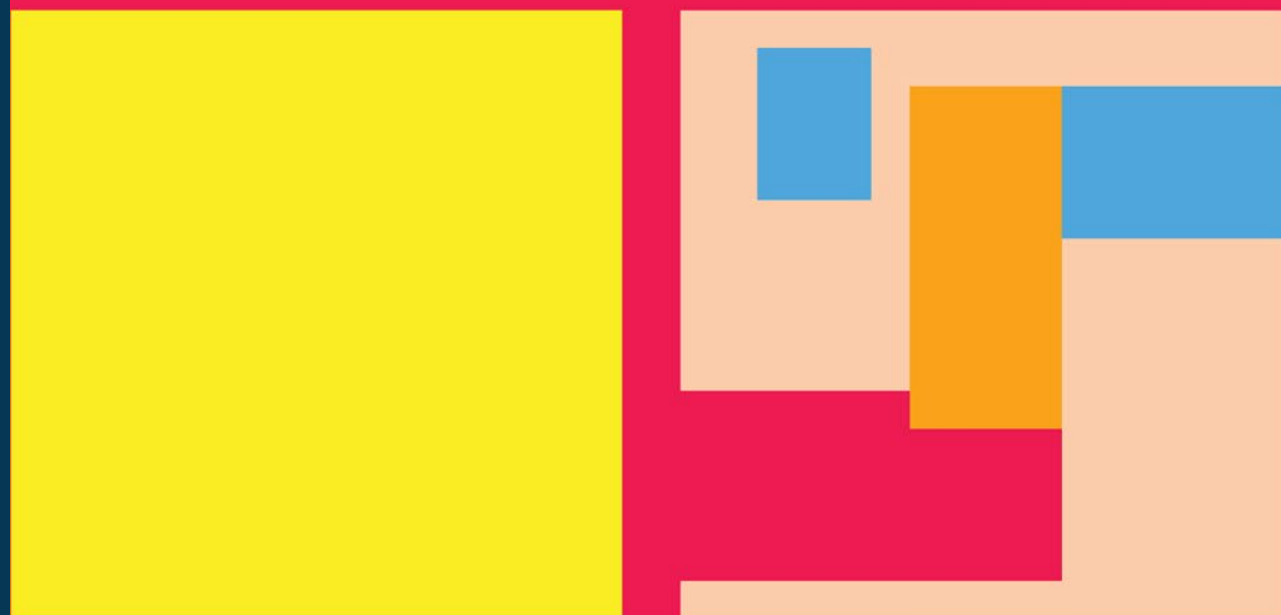
Poetry



Yes!

Jordan Magnuson

Game Poems



Videogame Design as Lyric Practice

GamePoemsBook.com

How do we talk about making good videogames?

1. Narrative: telling good stories.
2. Gameplay: crafting fun, balanced gameplay.

**What about tiny games that
explore the loose ends of life?**





51 ĐB



HL: TRẦN THỊ HAI

PHÁP DANH : NGUYỄN HÒA

SINH : BÌNH THÌN (1916)

CHÁNH QUÁN : QUANG CHÂU

HÒA VANG - QUẢNG NAM

TẠ THỂ : 21 - 1 QUÝ DẬU (1993)

CHỒNG : HỒ THANH LAN

CON : HỒ T. PHÁC, TIÊM,

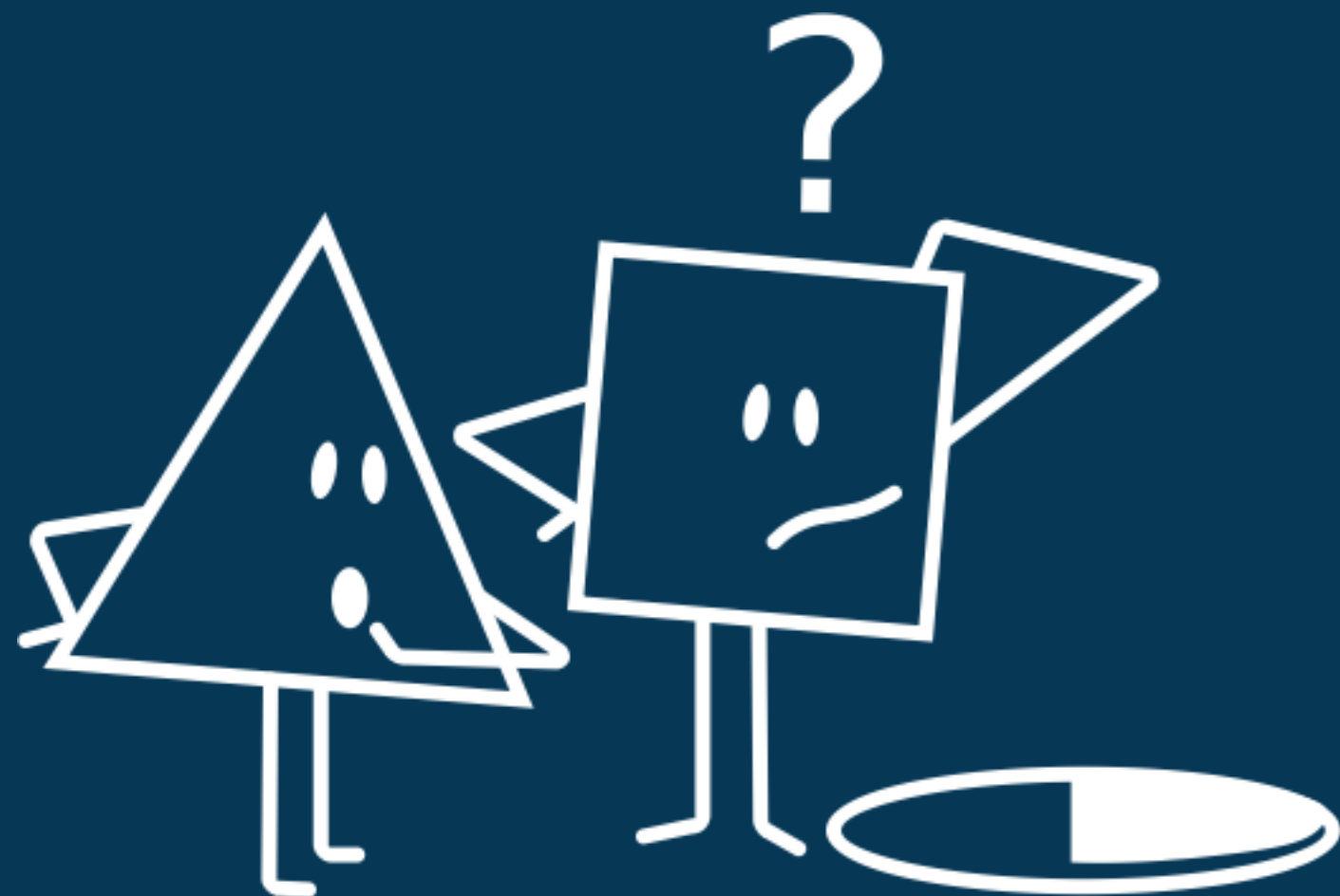
DIỆP, TÙNG, ĐẠM, CHƯƠNG

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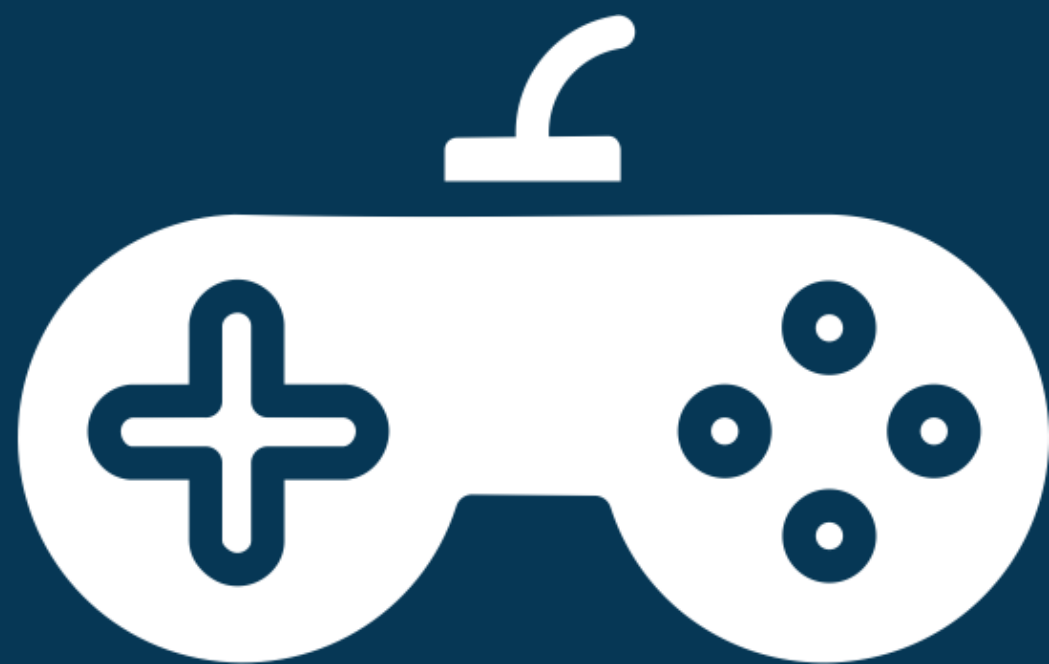
LUÂN, UYÊN, CHI, DẮNG, HIỀN, THỤC,















ENERGY

66

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AUTO

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107

14

29







Consider poetry

1. Intimate and personal
2. Subtle and complex emotions
3. Exploring beauty and meaning in moments
4. Slowing down and prompting reflection

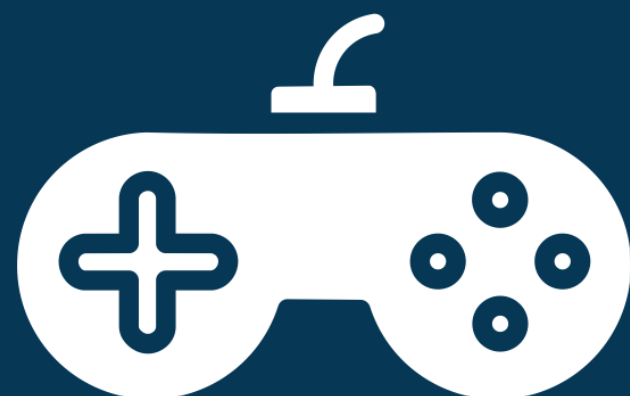
What makes poetry powerful?

“

Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar.

—Percy Shelley

Poetry



Lessons From Poetry

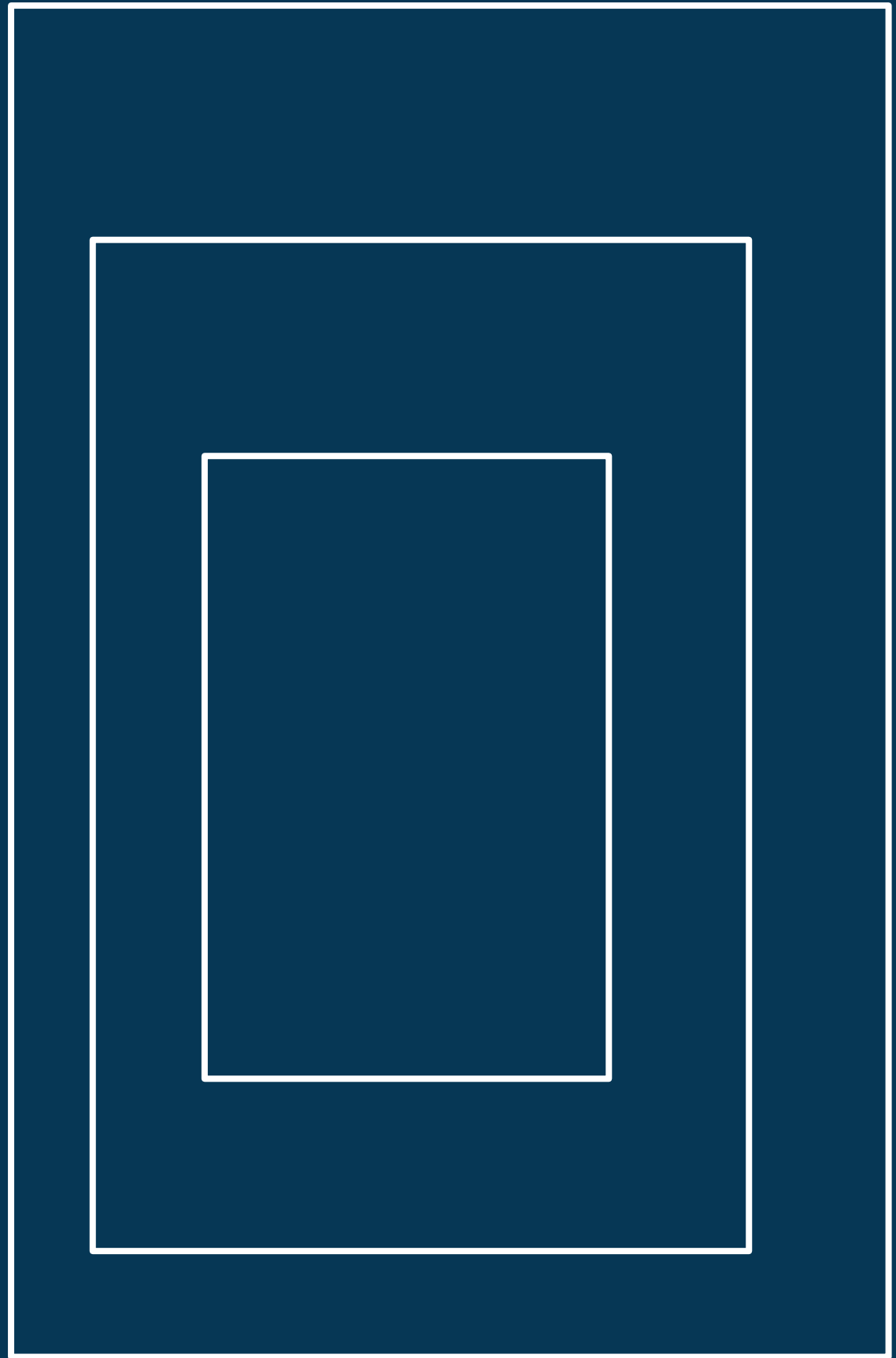
1. Strip away the inessential

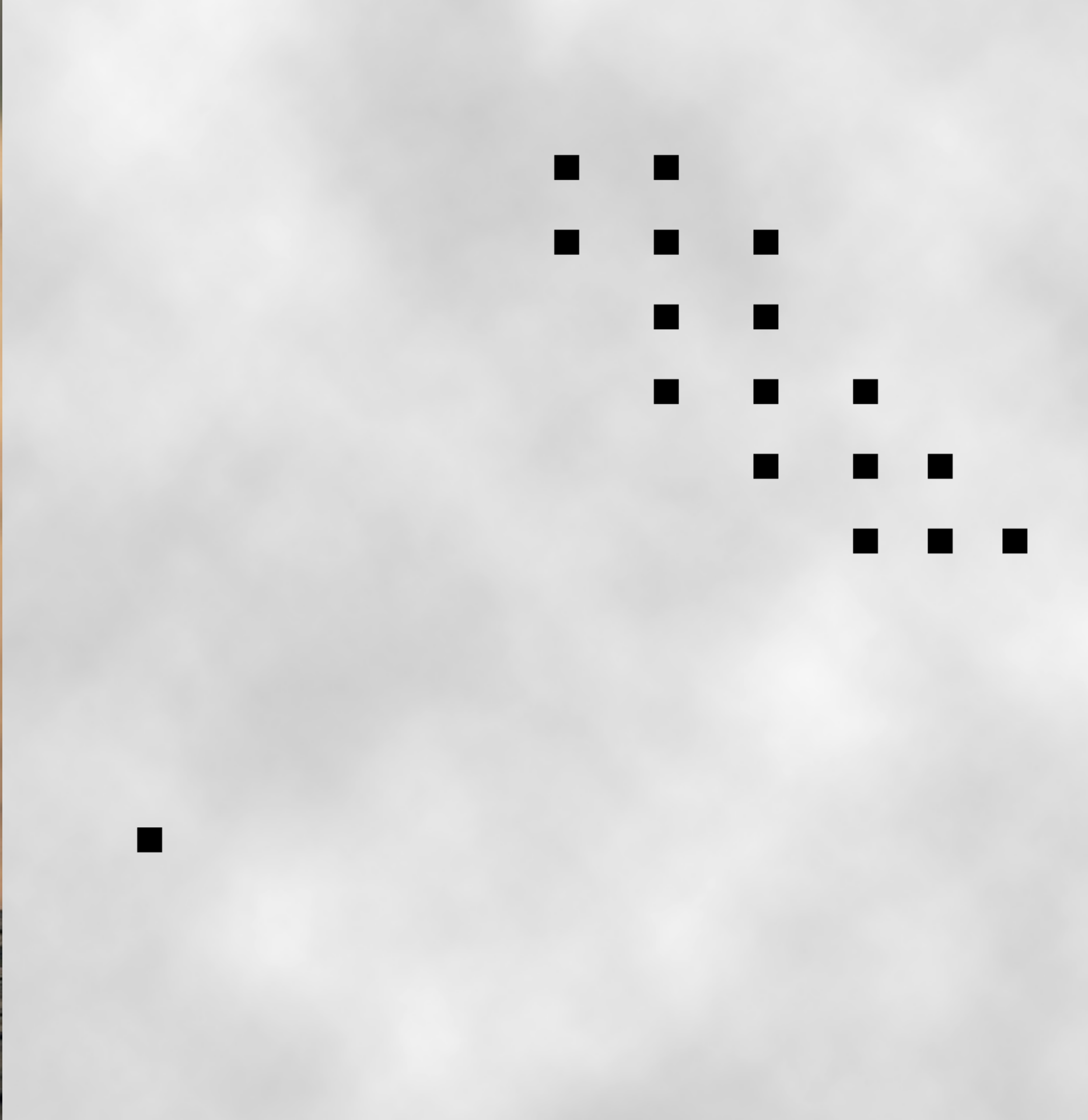


“

One of the things I love about Emily Dickinson is... the extreme compression of her poems, which strip away everything inessential, greatly magnifying the potency of each individual word.

—Marilynnne Robinson











Strip away the inessential

Takeaway:

Expansive but sparse environments

→ Solitude and insignificance







Strip away the inessential

Takeaway:


Minimalism, sparse environments, simple mechanics


→ Focused emotional experience







 Swipe to strum

 Back



Strip away the inessential

Takeaway:

Sharp focus on simple, personal elements

→ Beauty of the moment, contrast, pacing

Lessons From Poetry

1. Strip away the inessential

Lessons From Poetry

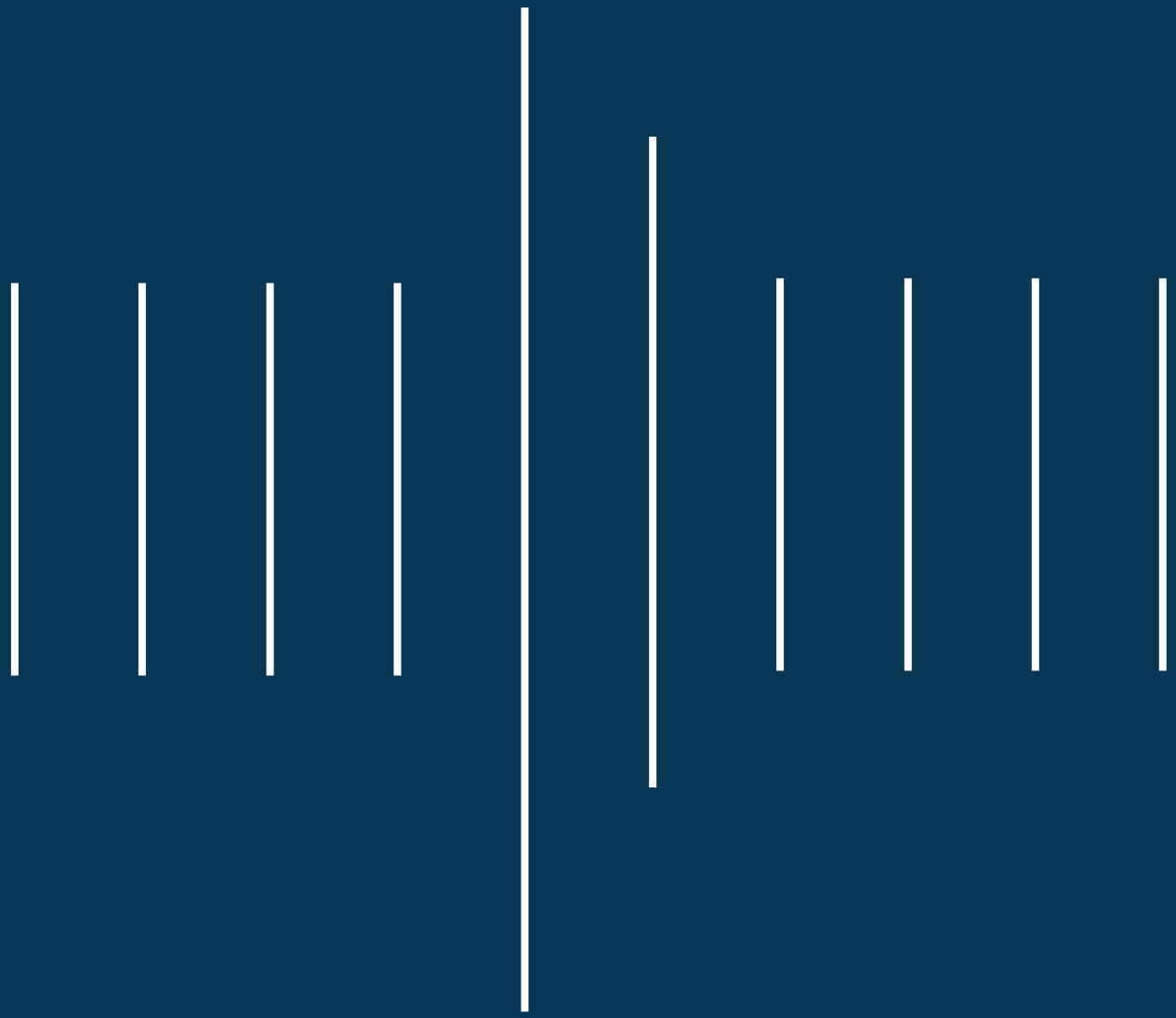
1. Strip away the inessential
2. Leverage poetic devices

Poetic Devices

- Rhythm
- Rhyme
- Line breaks
- Symbolism
- Etc.

The purpose of poetic devices

- Draw attention
- Prompt reflection
- Layer and heighten meaning



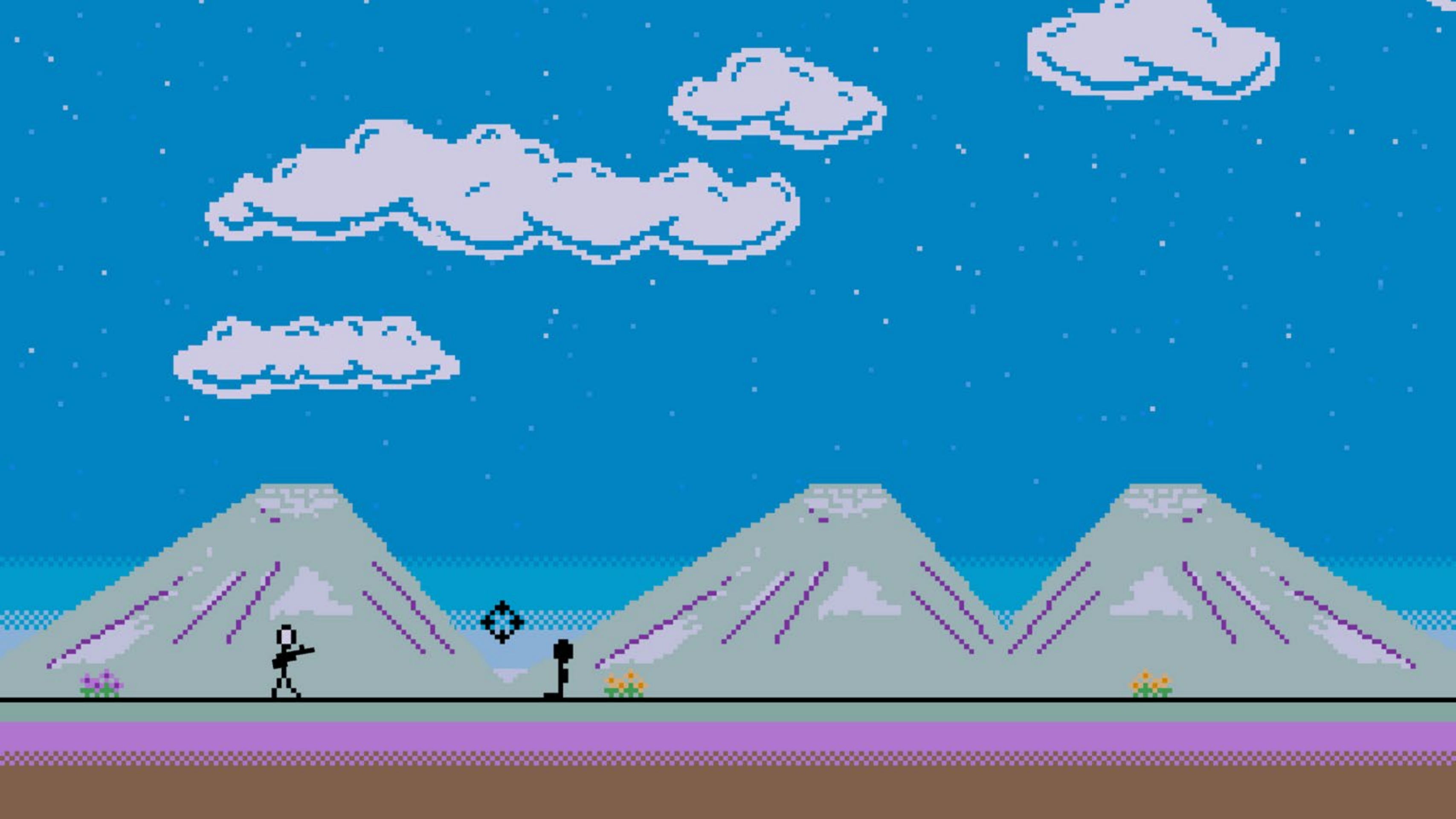




















Leverage poetic devices

Takeaway:

Line breaks / stanza breaks

→ Let the player breathe a little bit and appreciate the moment







ENERGY

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Leverage poetic devices

Takeaway:

Patterns and “rhymes”

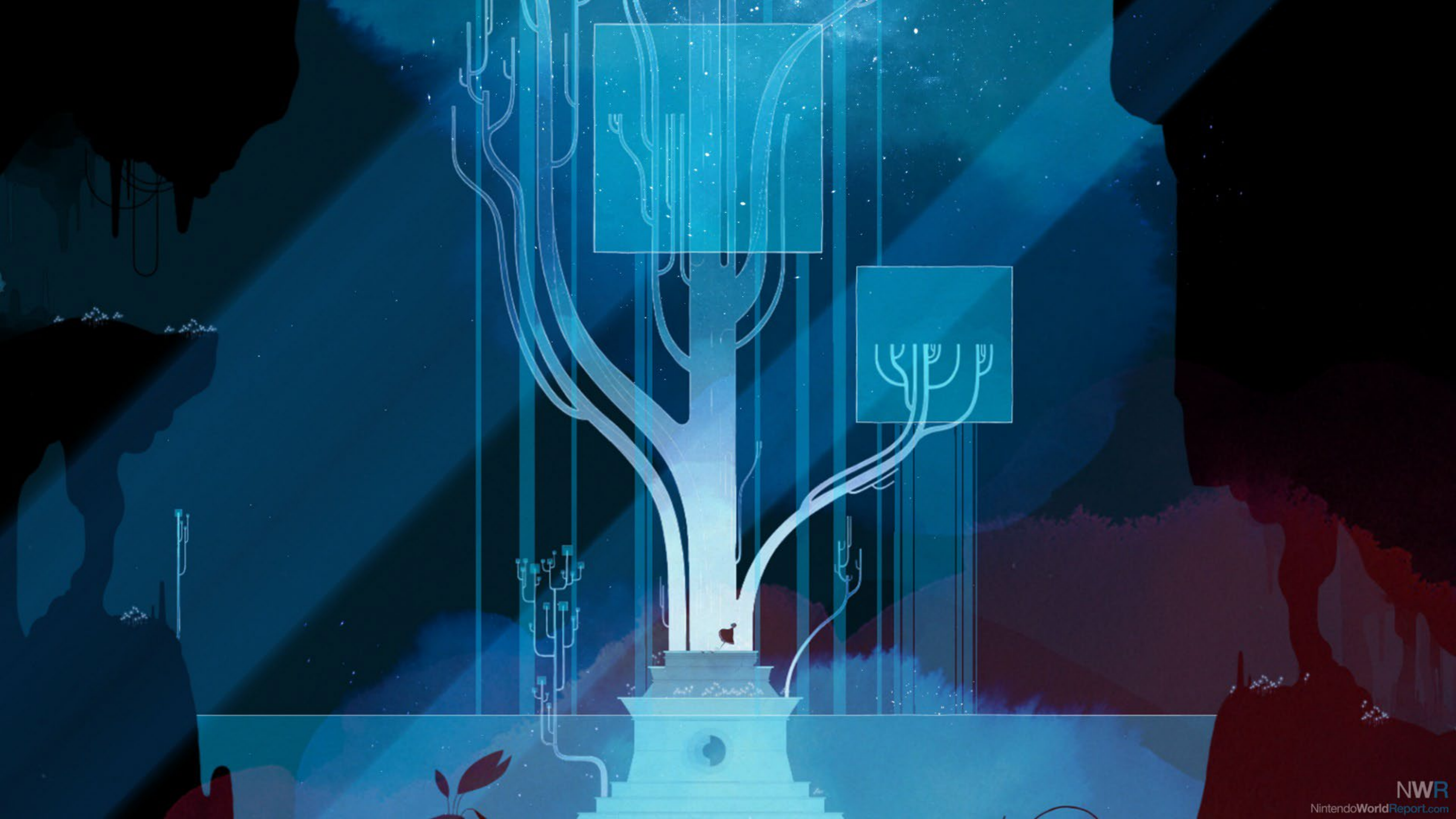
→ Wake the player up and reinforce the power of a particular moment.











Leverage poetic devices

Takeaway:

Explicit symbolism

→ enhance emotional and thematic progression,
layer and heighten meaning.

Lessons From Poetry

1. Strip away the inessential
2. Leverage poetic devices

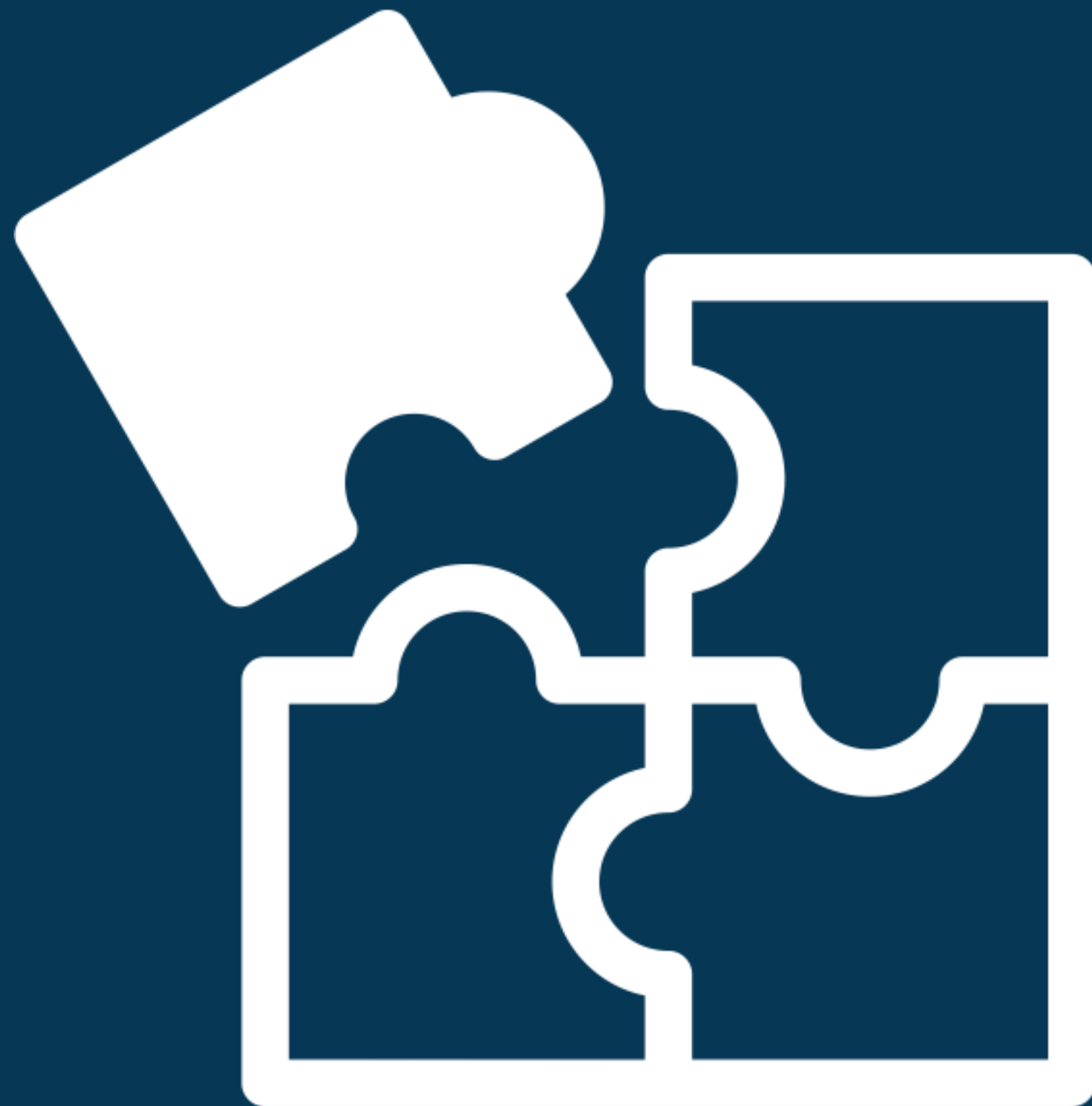
Lessons From Poetry

1. Strip away the inessential
2. Leverage poetic devices
3. Embrace ambiguity

“

A true haiku is a pebble thrown into the pool of the listener's mind, evoking associations out of the richness of [their own] memory. It invites the listener to participate...

—Alan Watts



51 ĐB



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LUÂN, UYÊN, CHI, ĐĂNG, HIỀN, THỤC,



“

Poetic effect ... is the capacity that a text displays for continuing to generate different readings, without ever being completely consumed.

—Umberto Eco



MAIN MENU

PLAY

HELP & OPTIONS

ACHIEVEMENTS

LEADERBOARDS

EXIT GAME

A SELECT

Embrace ambiguity

Takeaway:

Leave key moments open to interpretation

→ encourages players to think deeply and discuss theories.



Embrace ambiguity

Takeaway:

Leave room for moral ambiguity

→ Provokes thoughtfulness and emotional response



Embrace ambiguity

Takeaway:

Ambiguity in relationships and encounters

→ Depth and complex individual meaning

Lessons From Poetry

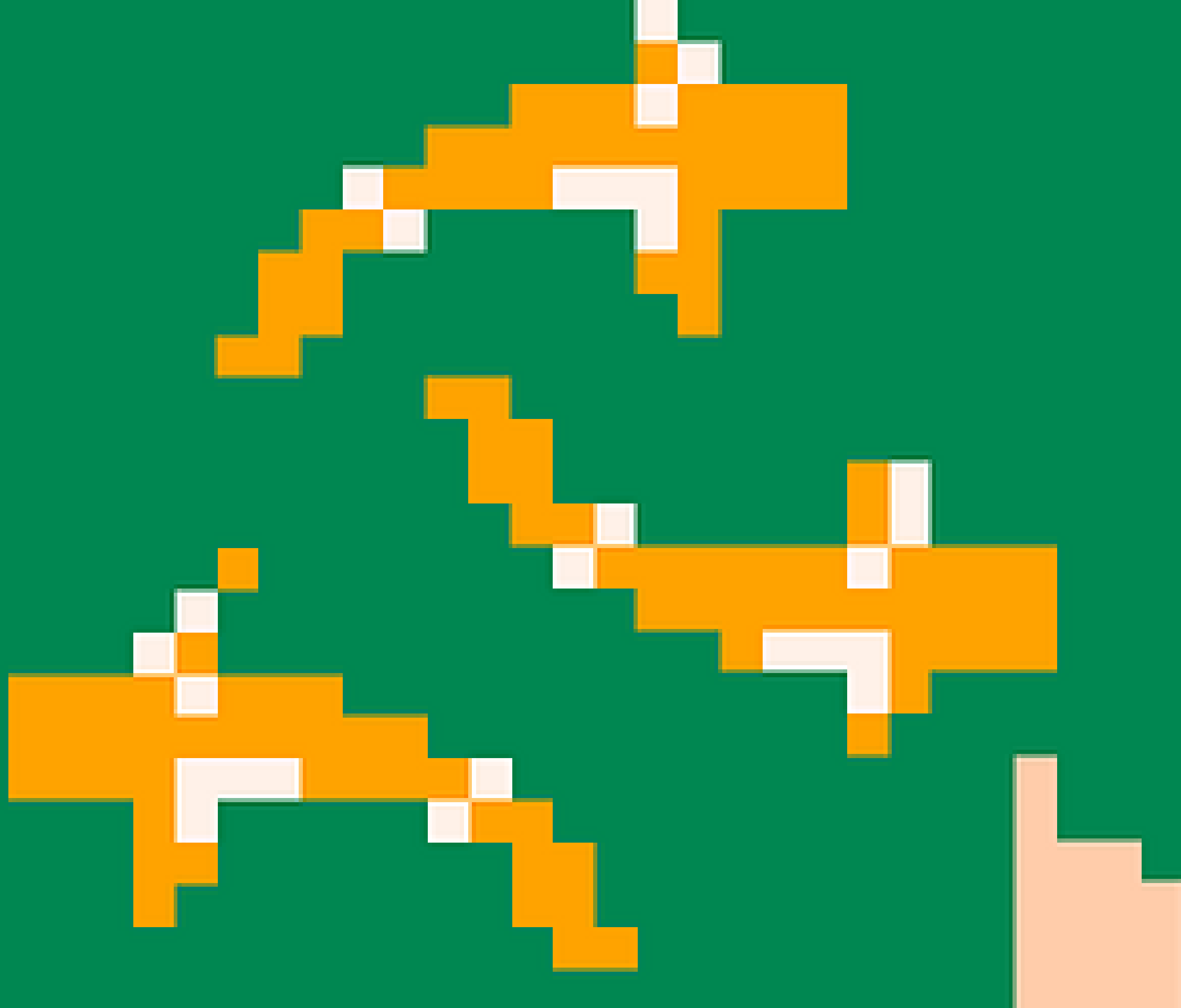
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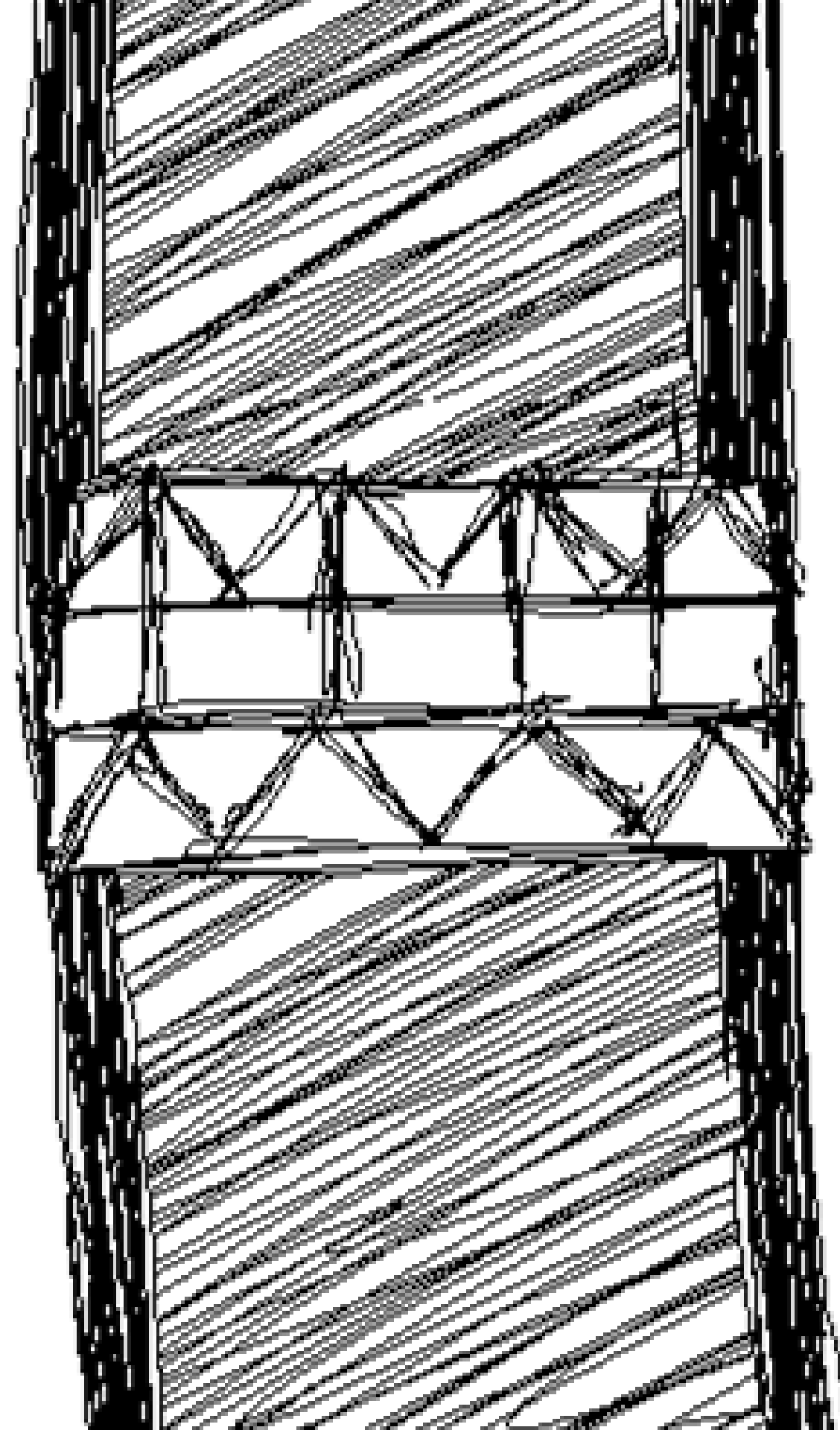
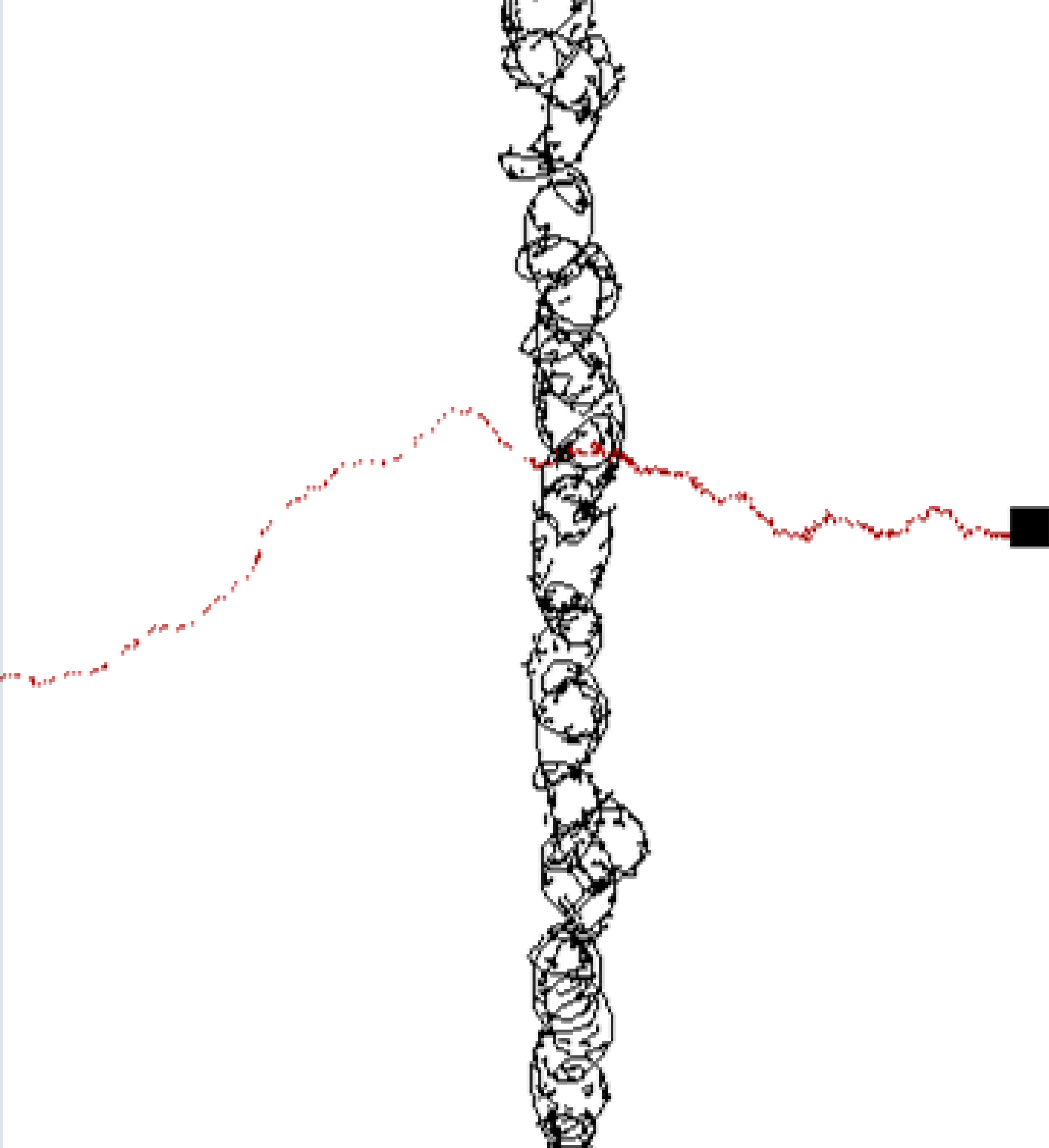
Lessons From Poetry

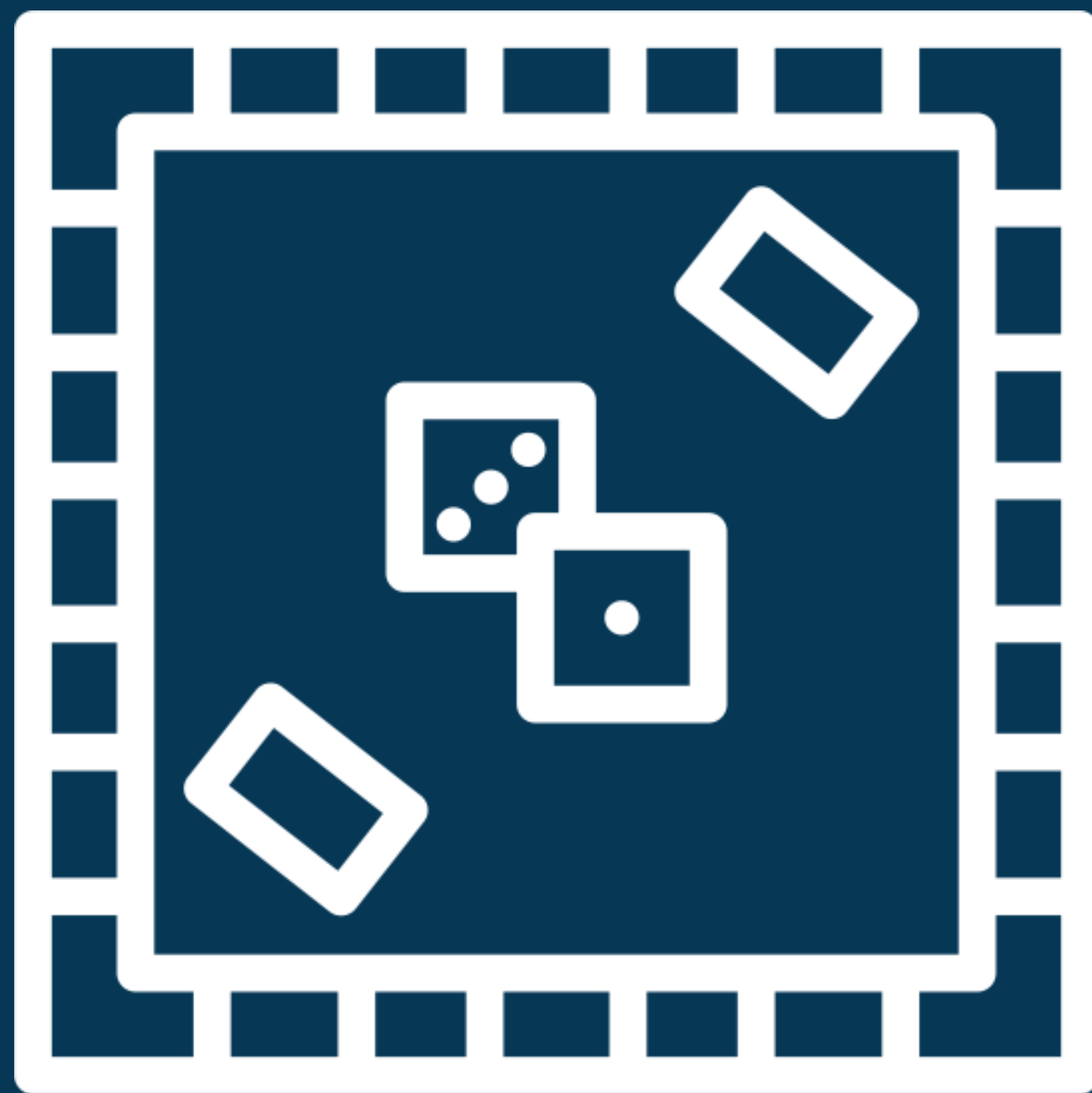
1. Strip away the inessential
2. Leverage poetic devices
3. Embrace ambiguity
4. Reimagine “fun gameplay”

**Poetry offers a different perspective
on “play”**

... that can help us reimagine “fun”







MDA

(Mechanics / Dynamics / Aesthetics)

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**Balanced Fun = Assumed
Design Goal**









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Reimagine “fun gameplay”

Takeaway:

Don't limit yourself to perfectly balanced or traditional gameplay

→ Consider interesting asymmetry, interesting rhetoric, poetic resonance, etc.

Lessons From Poetry

1. Strip away the inessential
2. Leverage poetic devices
3. Embrace ambiguity
4. Reimagine “fun gameplay”

Lessons From Poetry

1. Strip away the inessential
2. Leverage poetic devices
3. Embrace ambiguity
4. Reimagine “fun gameplay”
5. Respect the poetic process

“

Once, when I was asked, ‘What is the main thing a poet does?’ I was inspired to answer, ‘We wait.’

—**Kathleen Norris**

“

Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar.

—Percy Shelley









Respect the poetic process

Takeaway:

This might be hard in ways that you don't expect

→ Incorporate what you learn on the journey

Lessons From Poetry

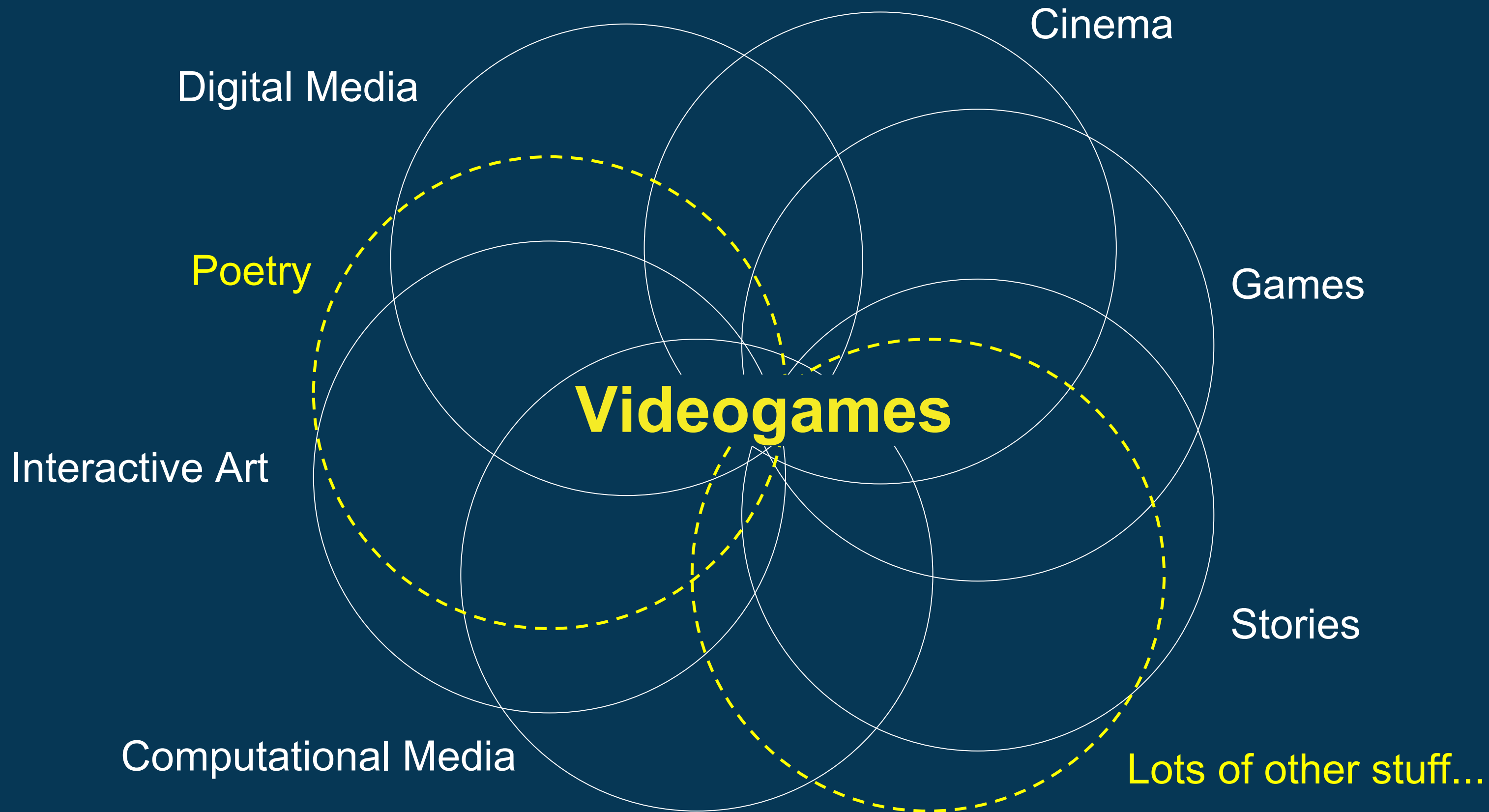
1. Strip away the inessential
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A diagram on a dark blue background. In the center is the word "Videogames" in bold yellow. To its left is a white circle containing the word "Games" in white. To its right is another white circle containing the words "Story Machines" in white, stacked vertically.

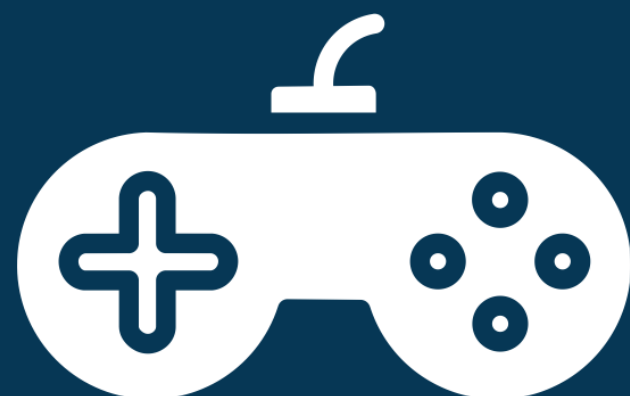
Games

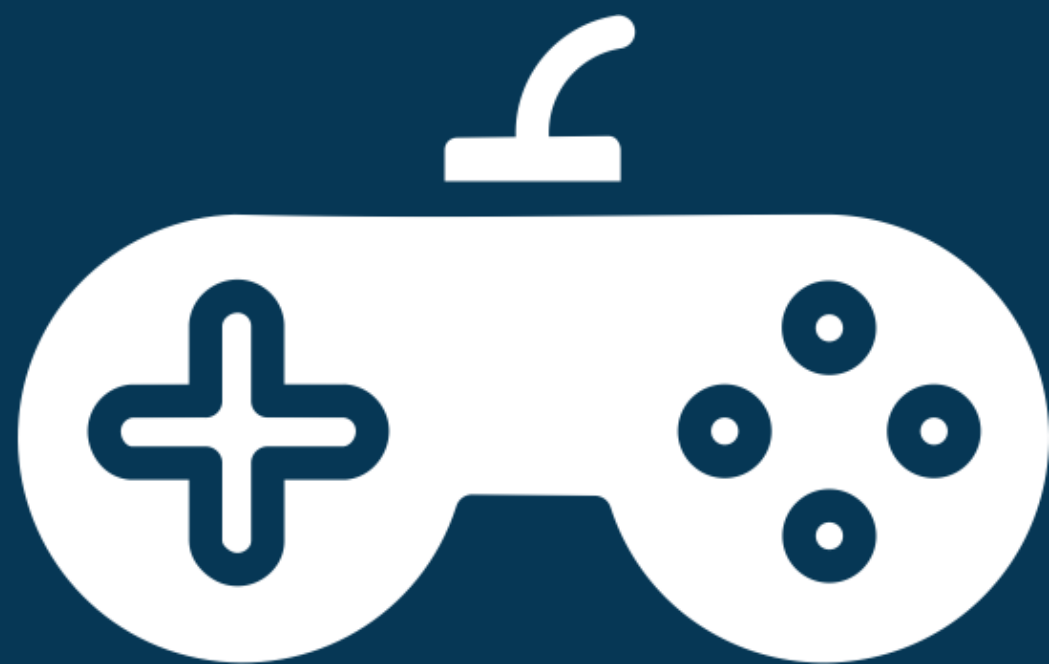
Videogames

Story
Machines



Poetry







“

The subtlety, elegance, and hunger of the human spirit is obvious everywhere in videogames, neither constrained by nor separable from the interactive components, bounding boxes, and digital assets that shelter them.

—Eavan Boland (adapted)

Thank You!

Connect: @JordanMagnuson
jordan@necessarygames.com