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Encouraging Emergent Narratives with Puzzle Design in *Décorum*

Charlie Mackin

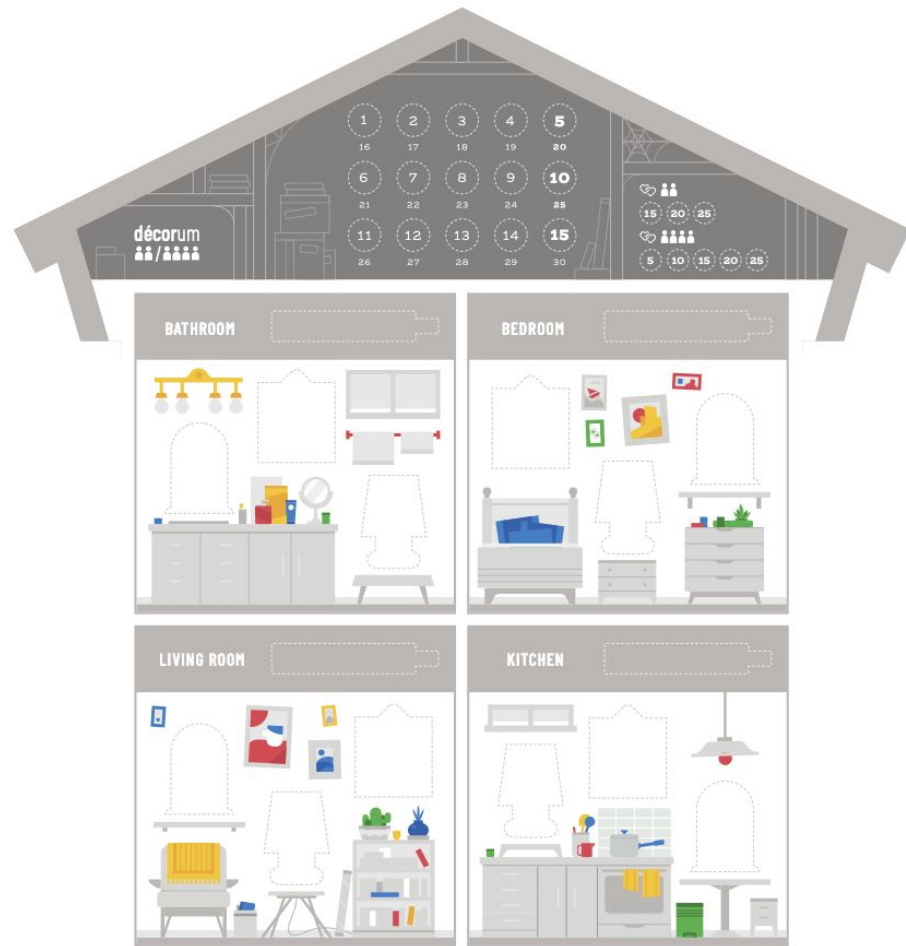
#GDC23



Décorum is a cooperative, hidden information game where you and your partner share the same objective: decorate your home in a way that makes you both happy.

The problem is, different things make each of you happy and nobody says exactly what they need.

Can you find a happy compromise, or is it time to move out?!





WALLS



MODERN



ANTIQUE



RETRO



UNUSUAL



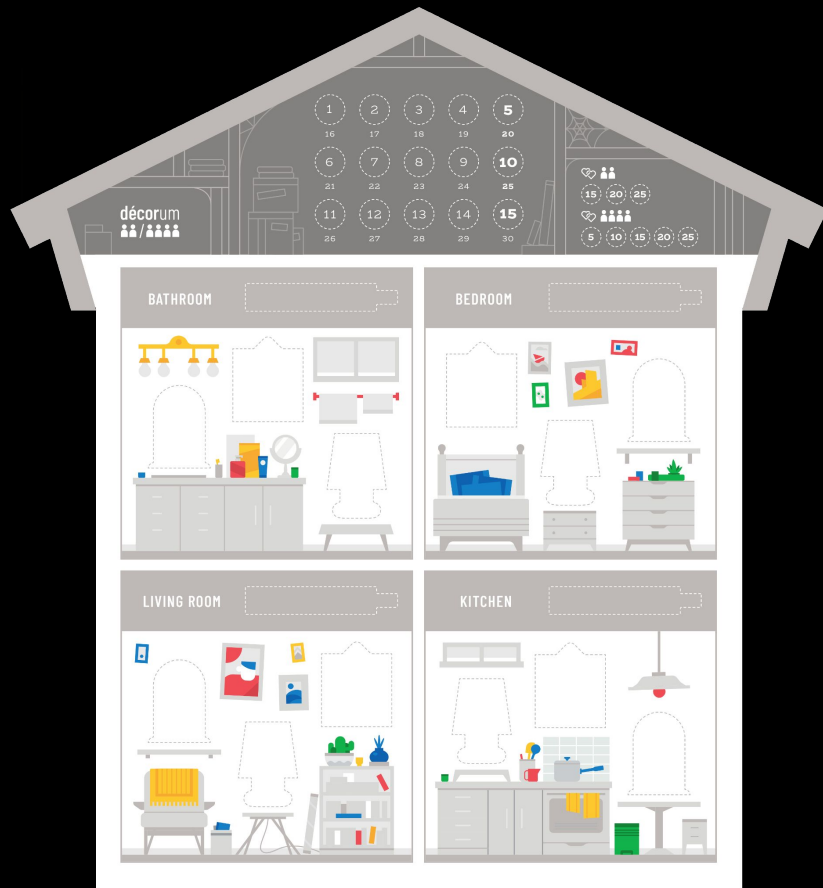
WALL
HANGING



CURIO



LAMP



Spencer

1 

CONDITIONS

- ✓ Each room on the left side  must be **painted blue**
- ✓ The house must contain at least 1 antique **yellow**  **lamp** 
- ✓ The **kitchen**  must not contain any objects

I can't wait to live with Blake! Just Blake, me, and my mom's ghost. Oops, I keep forgetting to tell Blake she's been haunting that old lamp ever since her untimely death... Oh well, they'll get along!

setup

1 

welcome home

Spencer and Blake are finally moving in together! Stressful? Of course not! Their relationship is perfect... right?

BATHROOM



BEDROOM



LIVING ROOM







KITCHEN



Blake

1 

CONDITIONS

- ✓ Each room on the left side  must not contain any **lamps** 
- ✓ The house must contain no more than 1 antique  **object**
- ✓ The downstairs  must contain at least 2 objects

I love Spencer to death! The only things we ever fight about are movies. Spencer loves horror movies but I can't stand them. Too scary! I hate being scared. But I'm not scared of living with Spencer. Nope!

NOT Deduction

Spencer

1  

CONDITIONS





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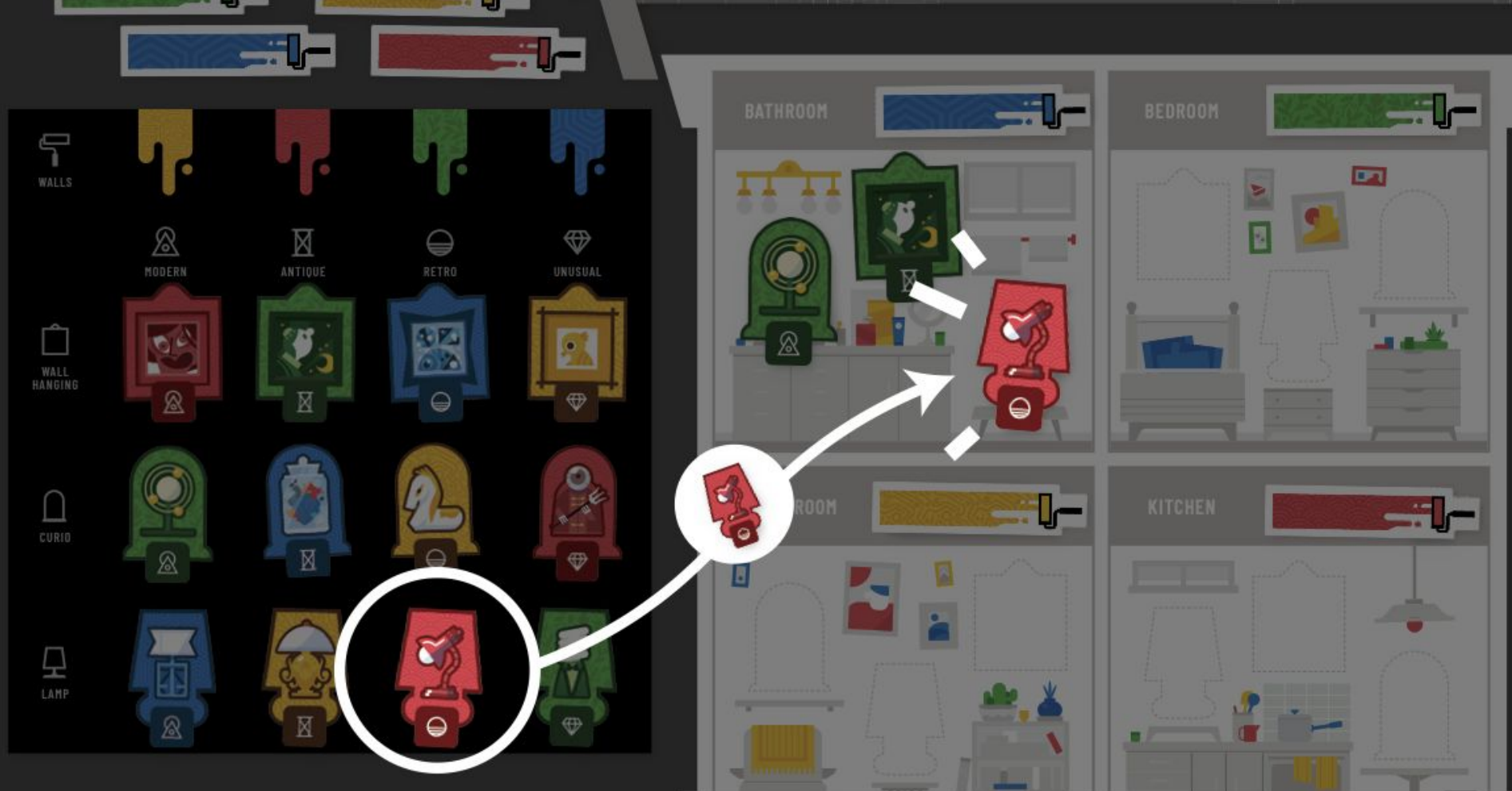
Blake

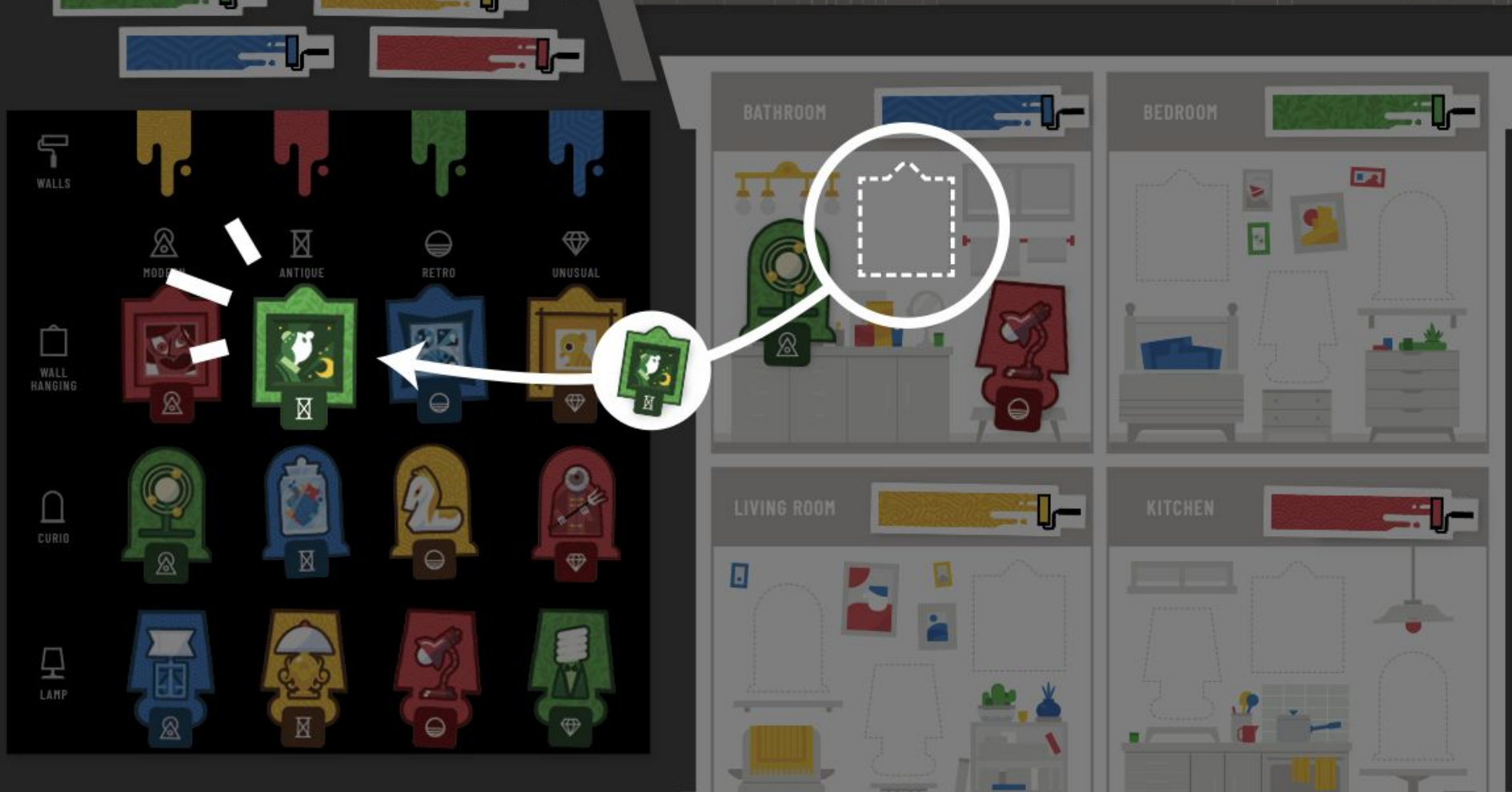
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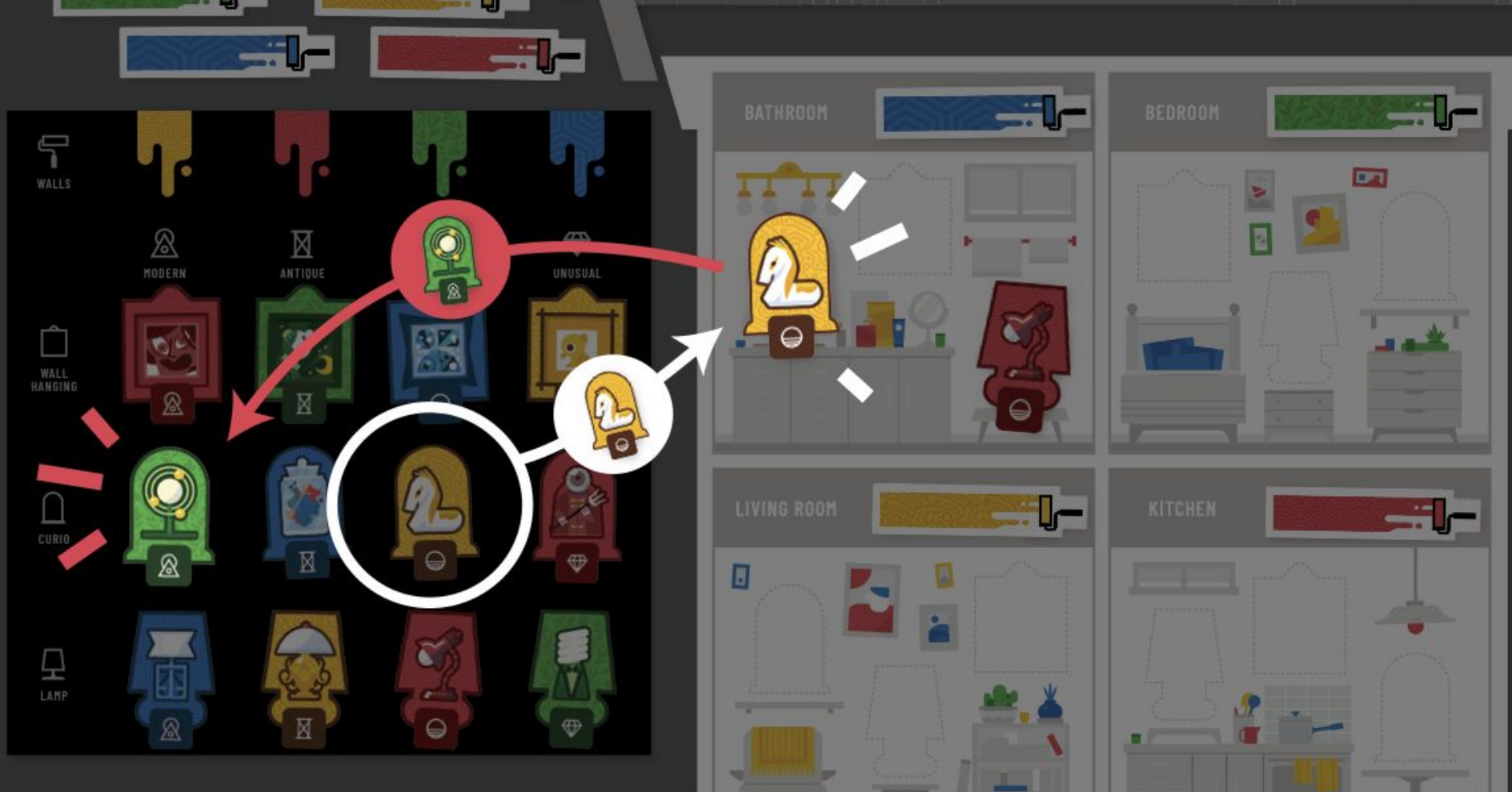
CONDITIONS

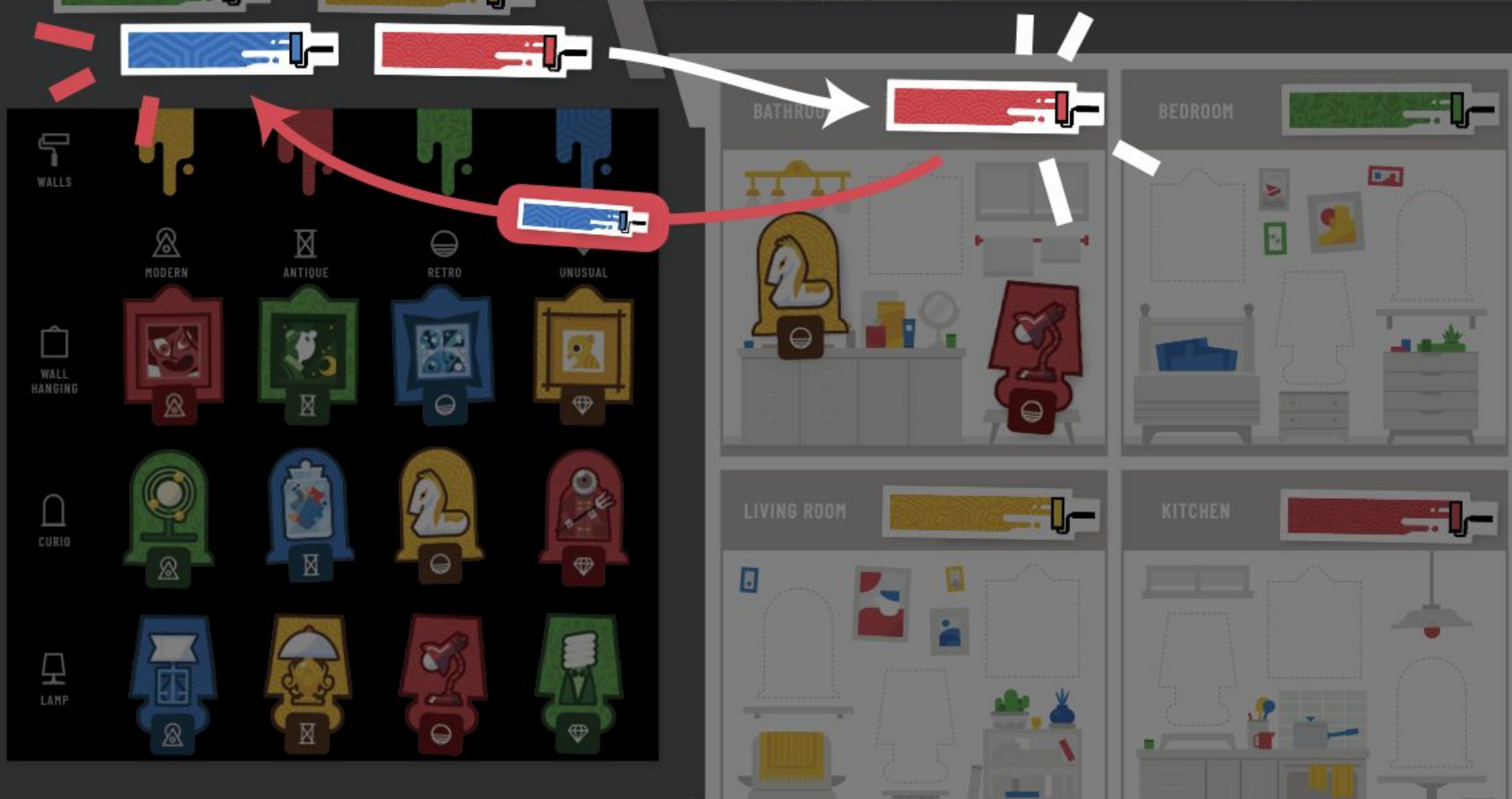
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I love Spencer to death! The only things we ever fight about are movies. Spencer loves horror movies but I can't stand them. Too scary! I hate being scared. But I'm not scared of living with Spencer. Nope!









POSITIVE

“I love it!”

“That makes me happy.”

“I was hoping you’d bring that back!”

NEGATIVE

“I hate it!”

“That’s the worst.”

“But that was my favorite...”

NEUTRAL

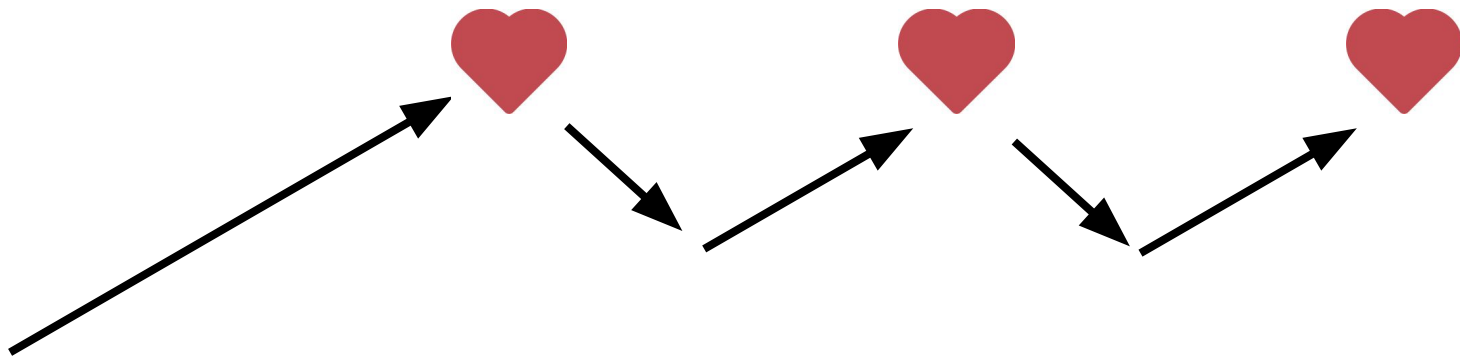
“I’m neutral to it.”

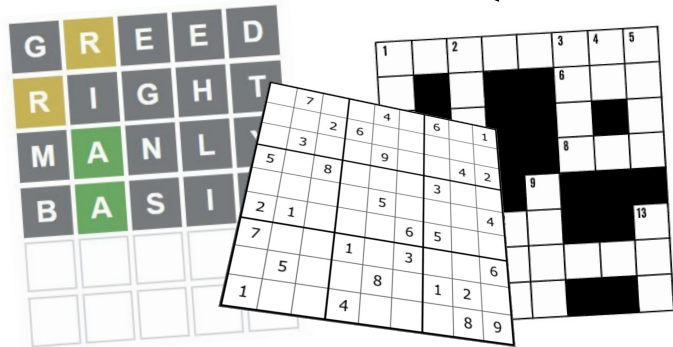
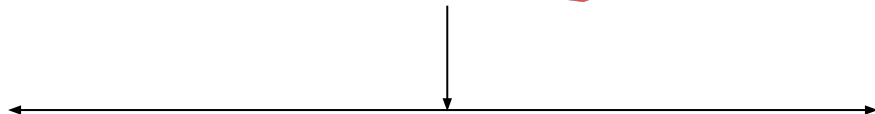
“I don’t really care about that.”

“Meh.”

Goal

Take players through a narrative arc with their partner where they go from being passive aggressive and at odds, to both feeling fulfilled and closer.



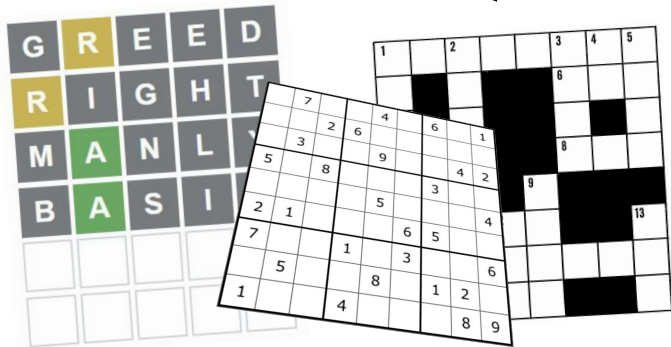


No Narrative Puzzle Games

No characters

Streamlined mechanics

Could be re-themed easily

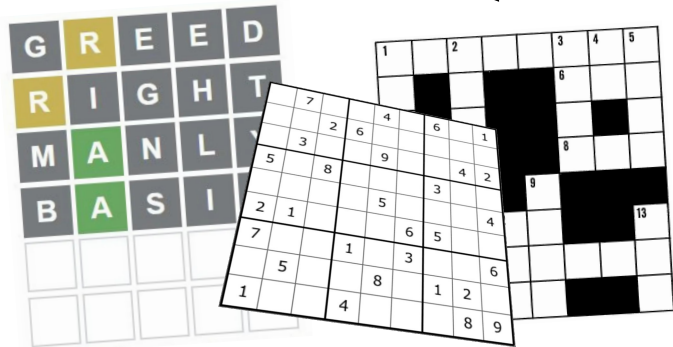


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Narrative Heavy Roleplay Games

Scripted characters

Collaborative story building

Mechanics aligned with theme

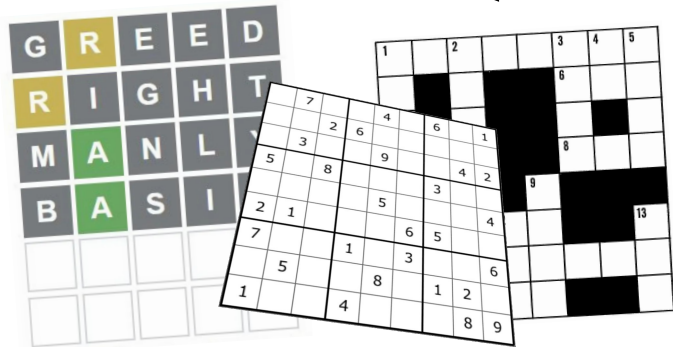


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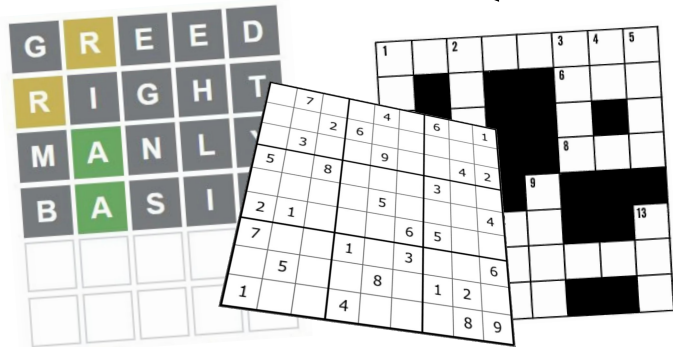


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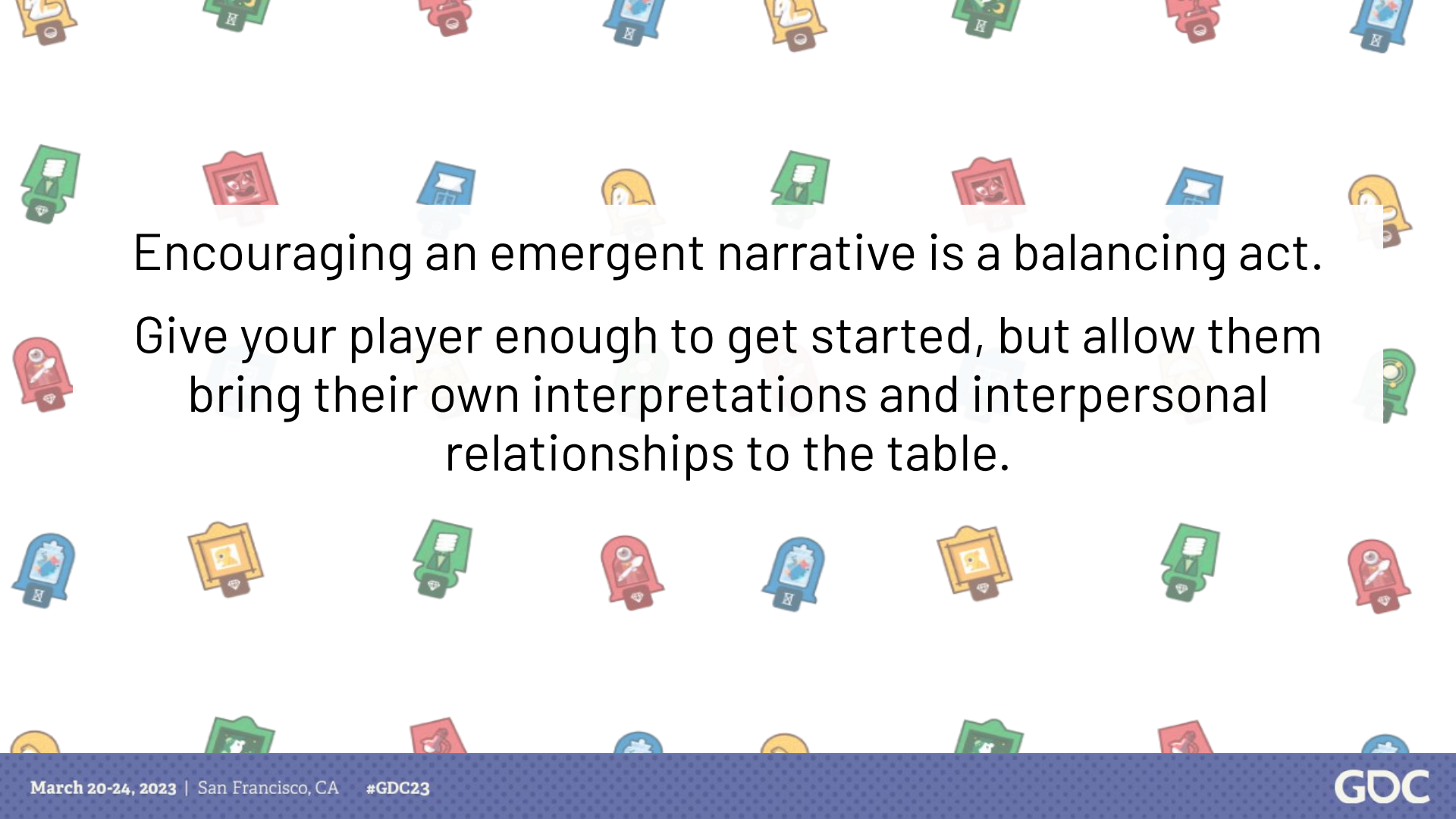
Collaborative story building

Mechanics aligned with theme





- Mechanically simple and aligned with theme
- Cross talk during play with improvisation
- Personal connection to players
- Remember the story as much as the puzzle



Encouraging an emergent narrative is a balancing act.
Give your player enough to get started, but allow them
bring their own interpretations and interpersonal
relationships to the table.

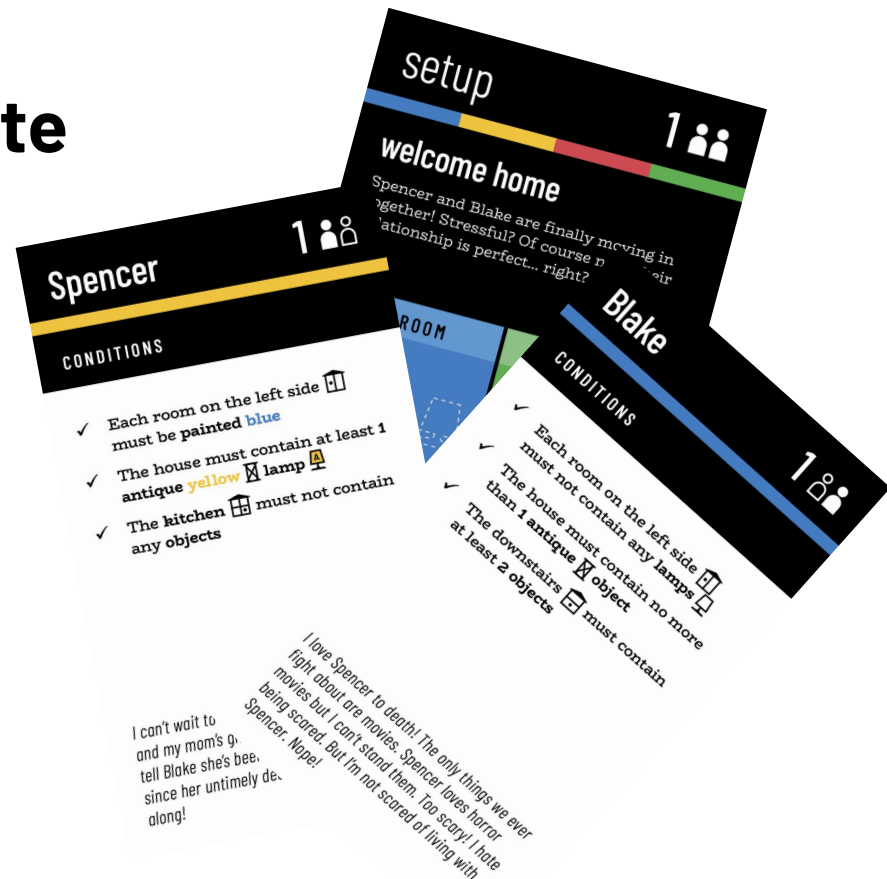
Encouraging Emergent Narrative

- Willing and able to participate (Theme, Set up, Characters)
- Scaffold the narrative (Puzzle design)
- Control the tension (Heart to Heart)



Willing and able to participate

- Theming
- Setup
- Characters



“A game of passive aggressive cohabitation.”

Cohabitation



“A game of passive aggressive cohabitation.”

**How do we get people to FEEL and ACT
passive aggressive?**

Cooperative winstate

+

Limited communication

+

Relatable Situation

= Passive aggressive

POSITIVE

“I love it!”

“That makes me happy.”

“I was hoping you’d bring that back!”

NEGATIVE

“I hate it!”

“That’s the worst.”

“But that was my favorite...”

NEUTRAL

“I’m neutral to it.”

“I don’t really care about that.”

“Meh.”

"I am going to remove the green unique lamp from the living room"

"That's a great choice I thought it was gaudy."



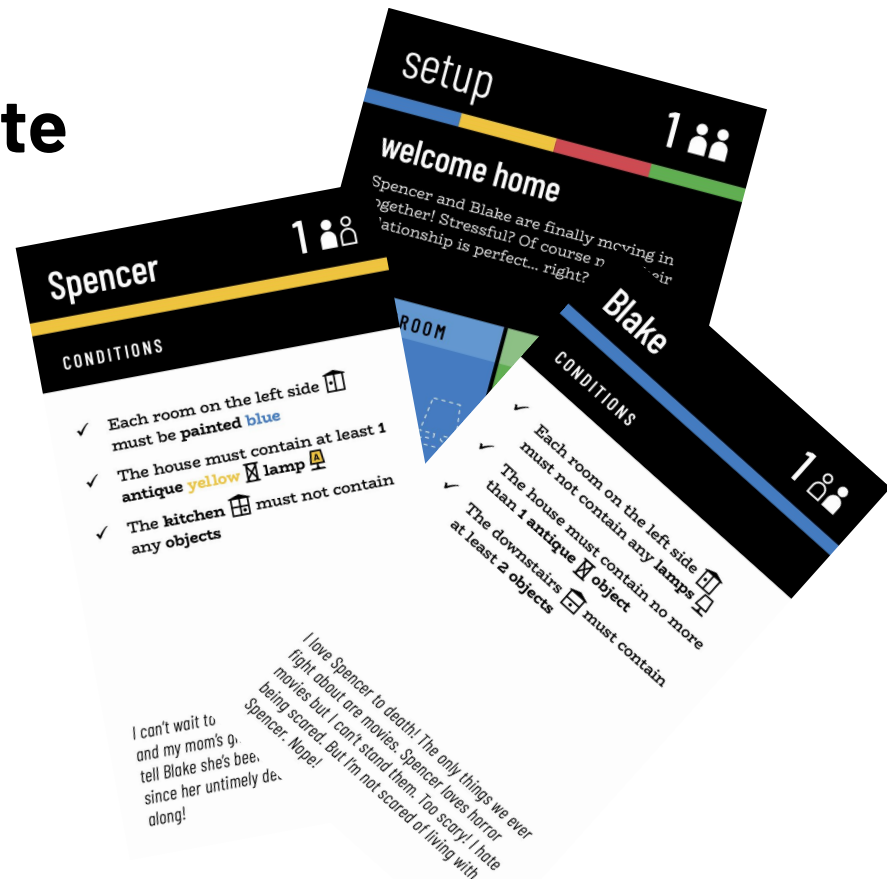
"That's ugly as sin."

"Well I really wish you would have said something before I finished painting."



Willing and able to participate

- Theming
- Setup
- Characters



setup

1 

welcome home

Spencer and Blake are finally moving in together! Stressful? Of course not! Their relationship is perfect... right?

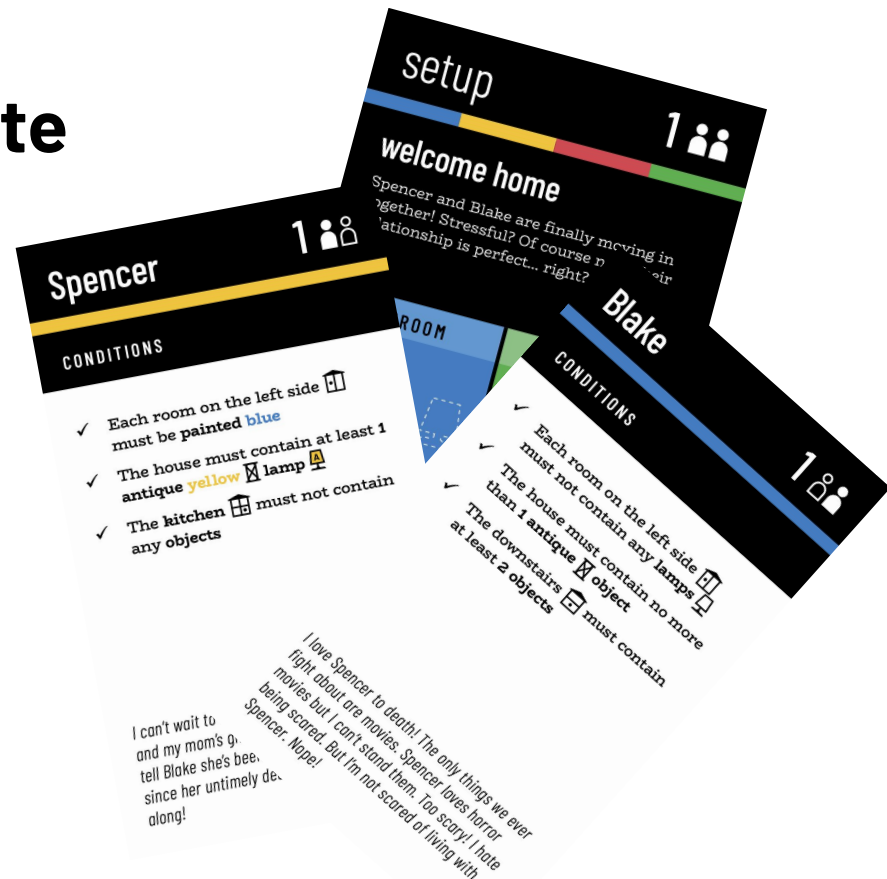
"Wait- I wasn't paying attention. What did you do?"

"It's on the credit card you'll see it later."



Willing and able to participate

- Theming
- Setup
- Characters



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I love Spencer to death! The only things we ever fight about are movies. Spencer loves horror movies but I can't stand them. Too scary! I hate being scared. But I'm not scared of living with Spencer. Nope!

"I almost beat up my fake roommate."



"I'm starting to worry about my real relationship... like maybe now WE should be together."



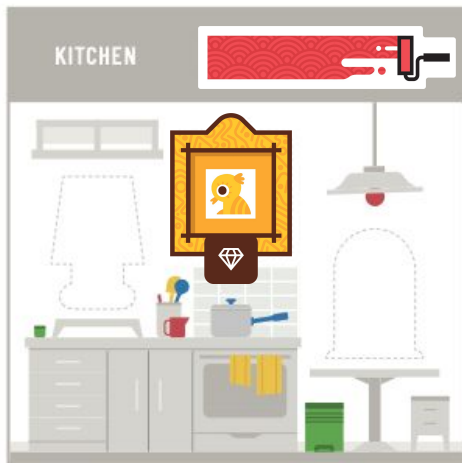
Scaffold Narrative with Puzzle Design

1. Spotlights
2. Split Attention
3. Power Dynamics

Spotlights


Make a specific game piece the star of the puzzle. Create conflict around it. Make both players touch the piece as much as possible.









Spencer

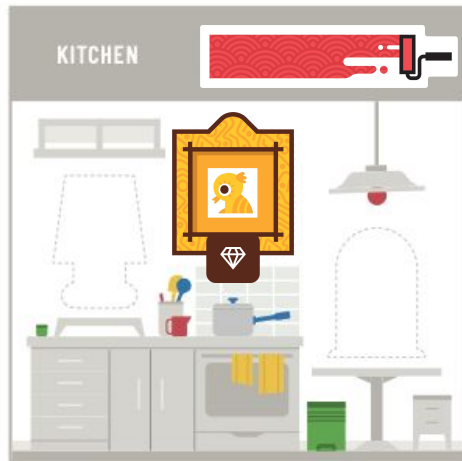
1 

- ✓ Each room on the left side  must be painted **blue**
- ✓ The house must contain at least 1 **yellow** antique  lamp 
- ✓ The **kitchen**  must not contain any objects

Blake

1 

- ✓ Each room on the left side  must not contain any lamps 
- ✓ The house must contain no more than 1 antique  object
- ✓ The downstairs  must contain at least 2 objects



Spencer

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"Why are you obsessed with that lamp?"

"I'm breaking that lamp once and for all!"

"Stop putting my mother in the garage!"



"I'm just gonna pull that out of the trash..."



"I broke the green modern curio in the living room... but now I'm fulfilled!"



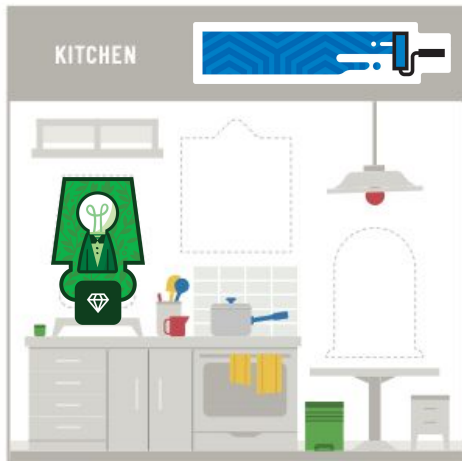
Asking a player to focus on something specific, or just forcing them to interact with it multiple times, naturally encourages them to come up with a reason for that interaction.



Split Attention

Create a puzzle where each player is focused on separate components. Make them focus on their side so much that they can't think about their partners. Make them feel like they are speaking different languages.





Agent Eve

2

- ✓ Each room must contain no more than 1 style
- ✓ The house must contain at least 1 object of each style
- ✓ The house must contain at least 1 object of each type
- ✓ The downstairs must contain a room painted **yellow** and a room painted **green**

Rob Boss

2

- ✓ Each room must only contain objects of 1 color
- ✓ The house must contain at least 1 object of each color
- ✓ The house must contain a room painted each color
- ✓ The house must contain at least 1 **green** antique wall hanging










Agent Eve 2

- ✓ Each room must contain no more than 1 style
- ✓ The house must contain at least 1 object of each style
- ✓ The house must contain at least 1 object of each type
- ✓ The downstairs must contain a room painted **yellow** and a room painted **green**



Rob Boss

2  

- ✓ Each room must only contain objects of 1 color
- ✓ The house must contain at least 1 object of each color
- ✓ The house must contain a room painted each color    
- ✓ The house must contain at least 1 green antique  wall hanging 

"Why do you care about that now? You didn't a minute ago."

"I feel like I'm being so obvious!"

"I know you've got something weird going on in the bathroom... I'll leave it alone for now."



"I mean... I feel like we JUST talked about this..."

Thanks for playing @tommygents!



"So you didn't like the first lamp I put there but now you're like 'sure?!' Fine.

Whatever."

"You are RUINING my life downstairs, Valerie."

Luckily, @mallorydobry worked things out eventually. Thanks for playing!



Priming each player to view the situation differently creates a barrier to understanding. Players want to understand why they have such different points of view and come up with their own reasons for the barrier.



Power Dynamics

Make one of the players start much closer to fulfillment than the other. Make them have to constantly tell the other player no. Make them spend most of their time undoing the other player's work.





Alfred

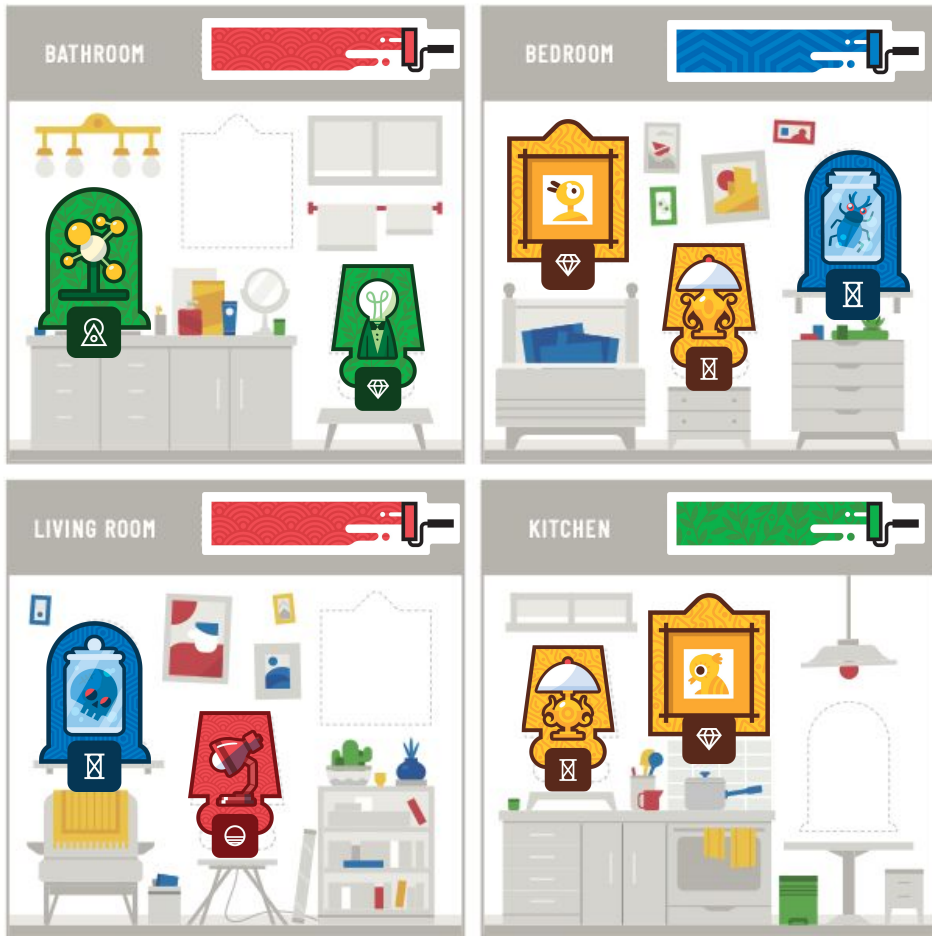
7

- ✓ The house must contain exactly 10 objects
- ✓ The house must contain every wall color
- ✓ The living room must contain an antique yellow lamp
- ✓ The house must contain an equal number of warm color features and cool color features (as objects and/or wall colors)

Barney

7

- ✓ The bathroom must not contain wall hangings nor curios
- ✓ Each room must contain a lamp that is the same color as that room's wall color
- ✓ The upstairs must contain only cool colors
- ✓ The house must not contain any specific object (by type, color and style) more than once



3 moves

Alfred

7







- ✓ The house must contain exactly 10 objects
- ✓ The house must contain every wall color
- ✓ The living room must contain an antique yellow lamp
- ✓ The house must contain an equal number of warm color features and cool color features (as objects and/or wall colors)



10 moves

Barney

7  

- ✓ The bathroom  must not contain wall hangings  nor curios 
- ✓ Each room must contain a lamp  that is the same color as that room's wall color
- ✓ The upstairs  must contain only cool colors 
- ✓ The house must not contain any specific object (by type, color and style) more than once

"It's already perfect, stop messing it up!"

"You have to let me bring SOME of my stuff!"

"Why do you own so many curios! What even is a curio!?"



"Do you like this better?"
"...what do you think?"



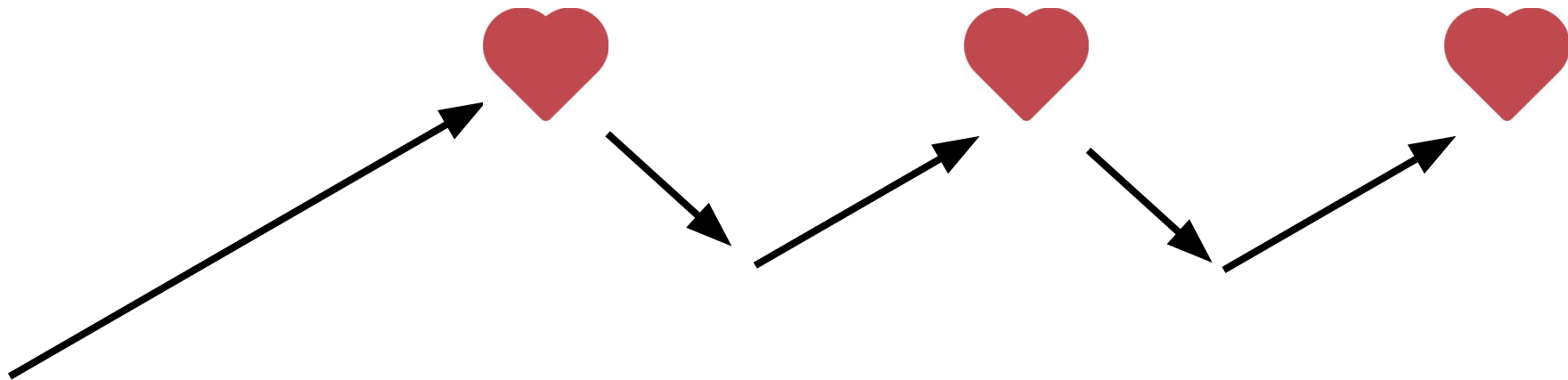
"That's not good..."
"Well I'm FULFILLED DAMN IT"



Creating an imbalance between players creates tension. Players will want to acknowledge the imbalance, and will feel the need to come up with their own reasons for it.



Control The Tension (Heart to Heart)





☕ **Dennis** 🎮 @dennisRamir... · 5/11/22 ...

Playing @DecorumGame be like



Control The Tension (Heart to Heart)

Allow for some communication. Let players air grievances and finally tell the other player why they are frustrated. This breaks up the mid-game flow to redirect both the gameplay style and narrative, allowing players to shift their focus off their own requirements, and to each other's needs.



"He's the difficult one!"

"You hurt me when you say those things to me."

"I don't care."

"Take the trash out maybe. Eat less pizza rolls."

"Hold on! I have needs!"

"This is therapy."



"I forgot it's cooperative, I keep trying make it my house."

"It's OUR house."

"That's beautiful."

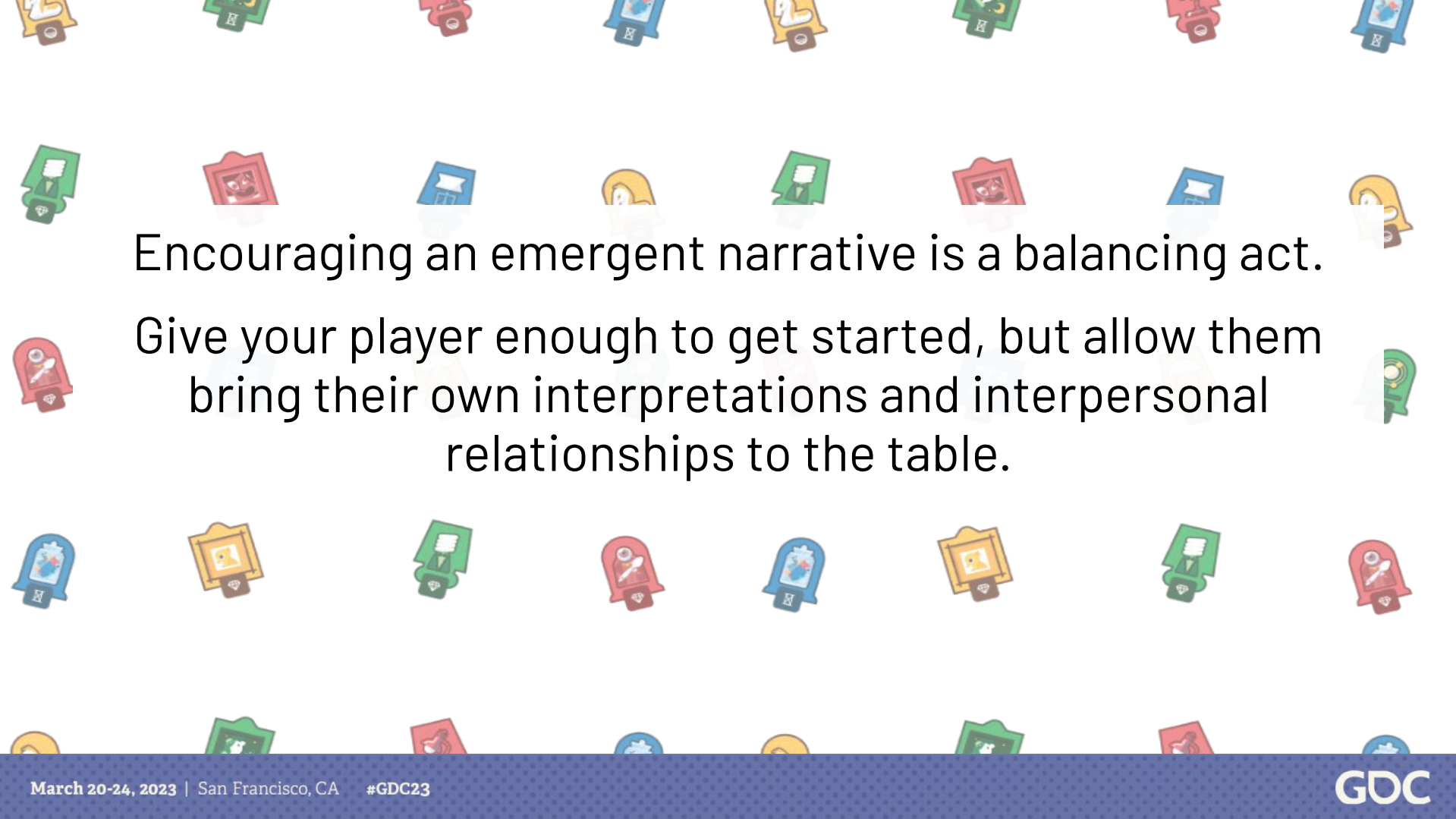
Thanks for playing @Jeffy_Nicks!



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GDC

Contact

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