

pick up with  
calm down the  
squad leaders

# A Theory

# of Fun



- Give AI-ST's too
- Powerful?
- Ops mtg @ 2pm

• Doodle more

The other day I played a typing game on popcap.com...  
I got really far and did really well, and there came a  
point where I got bored.



Water.  
← honest.

Then I played Bookworm on the same site.  
I quit when I saw that I was fighting the tide.



Water.  
← honest.



People are amazing pattern matching machines.



**Look at the places we can find a face**

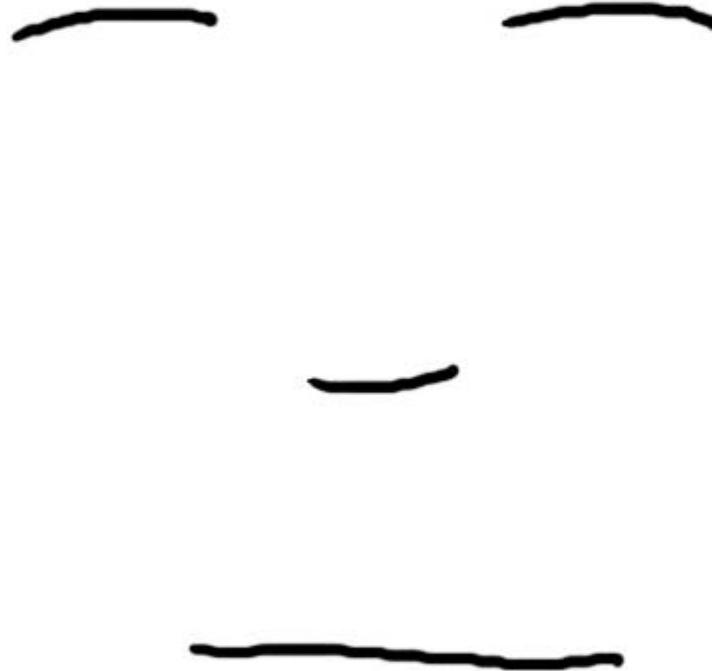
Oh, Raph's just being pedantic again...

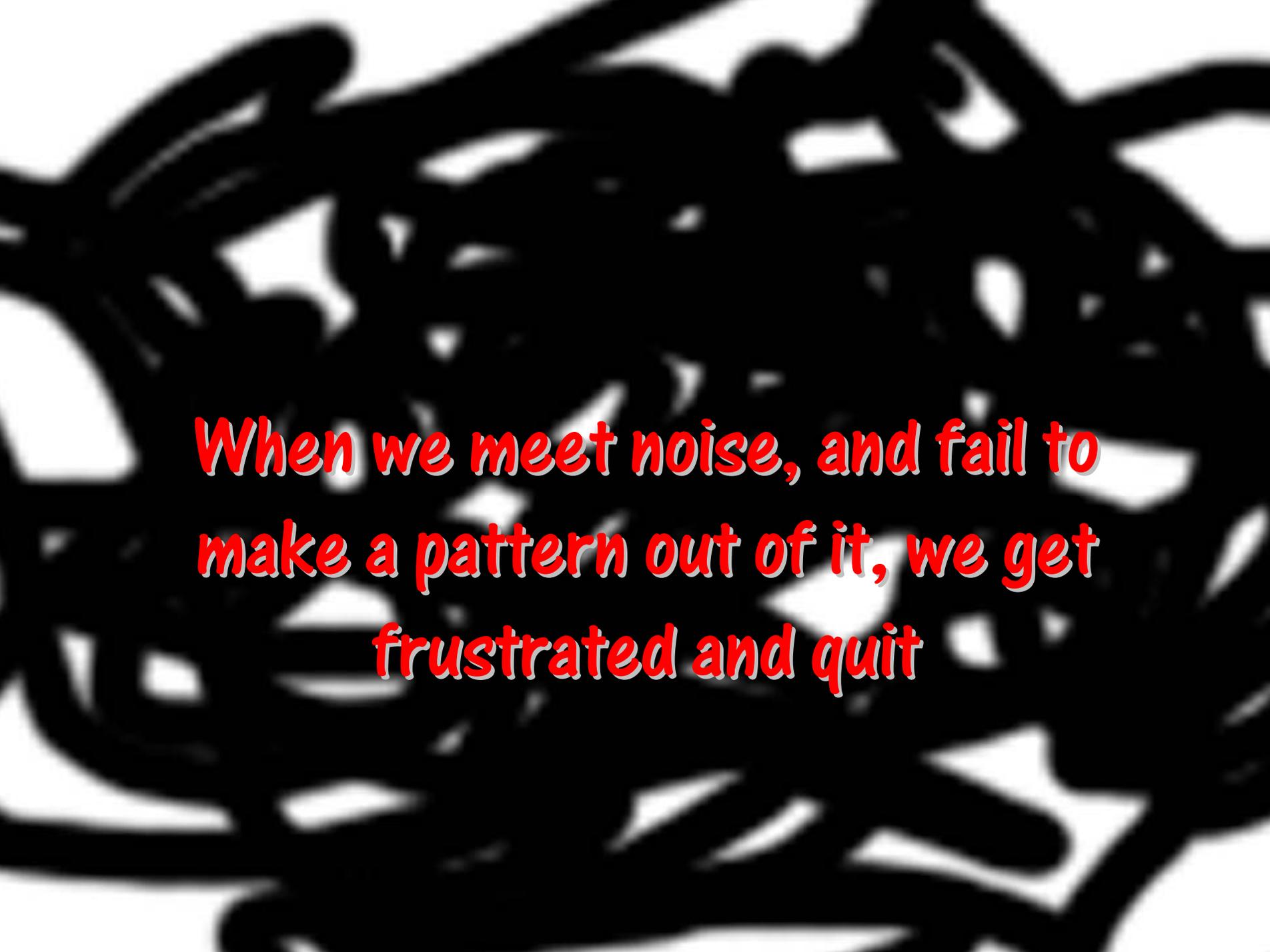


In fact, we tend to see patterns where there aren't any

(BLA  
BLA  
BLA)

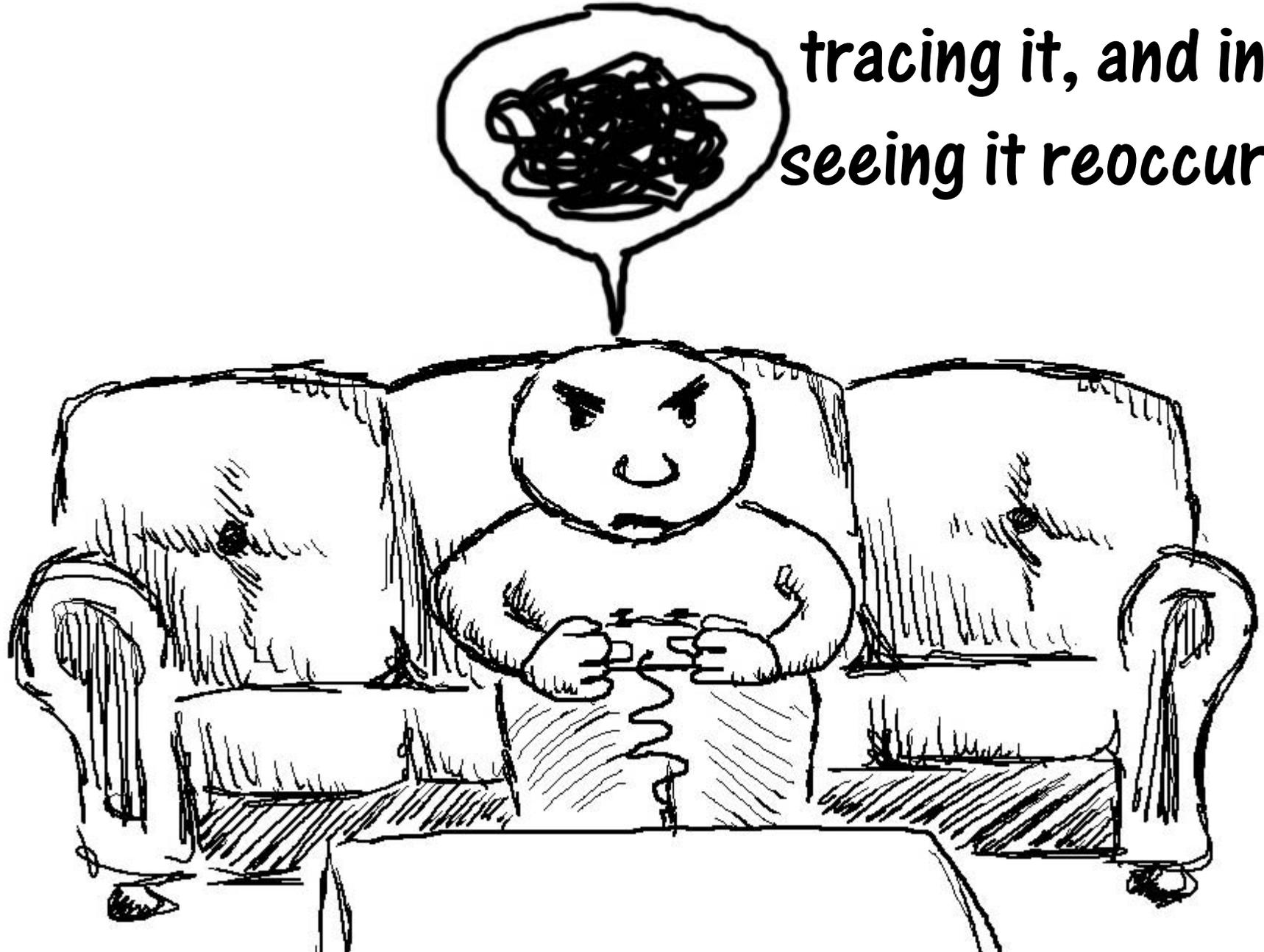
When we grasp a pattern, we usually  
get bored with it and iconify it

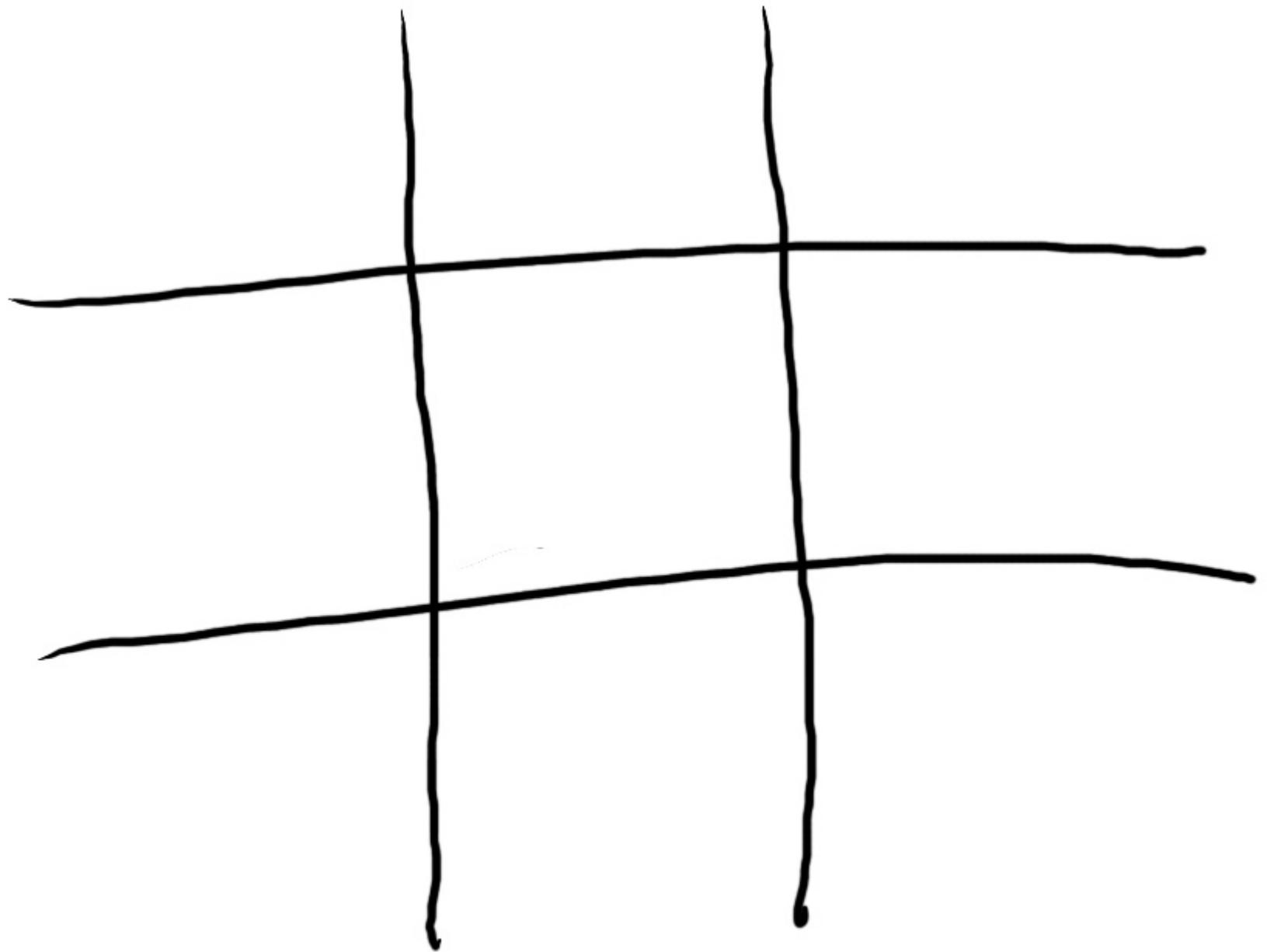




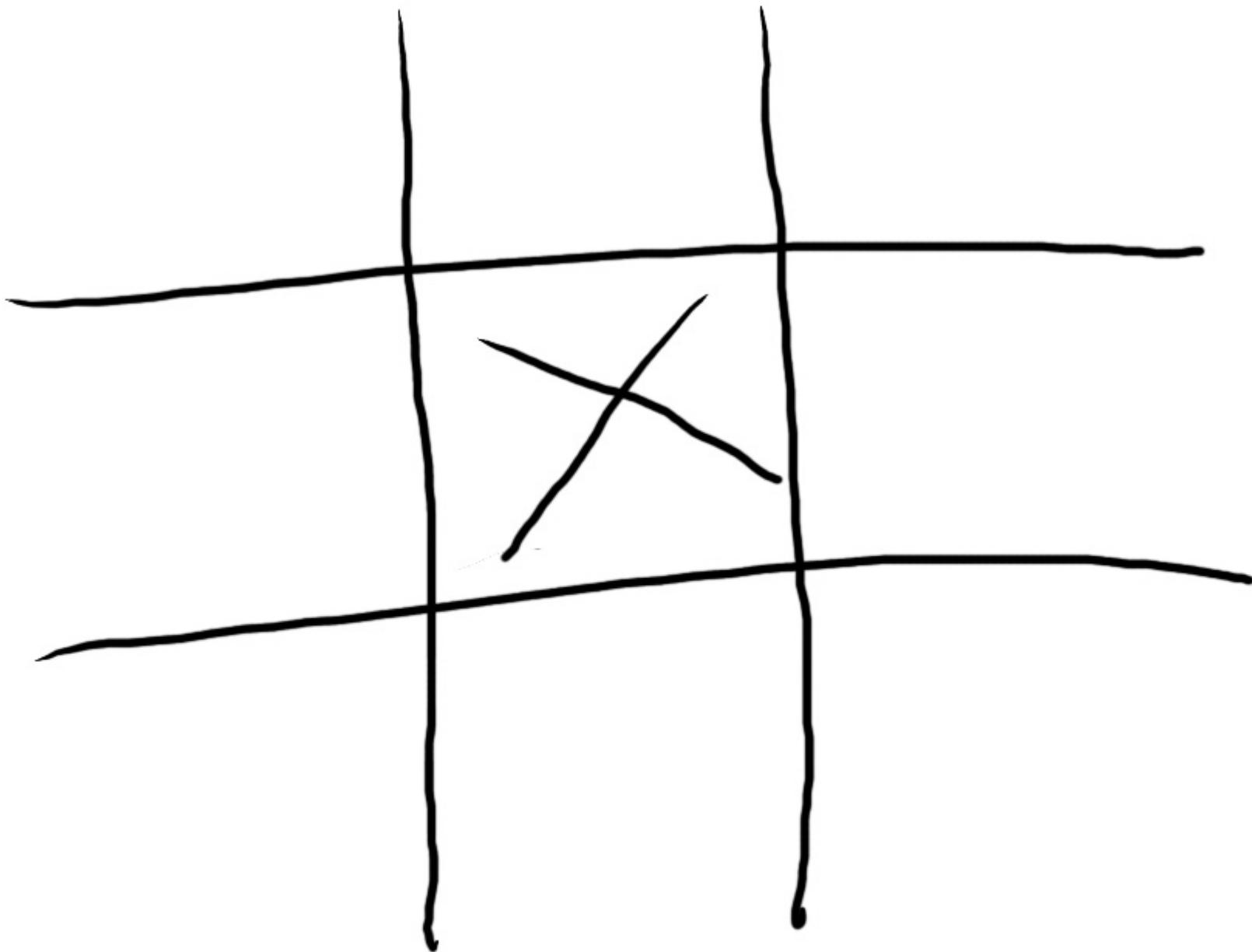
**When we meet noise, and fail to  
make a pattern out of it, we get  
frustrated and quit**

Once we see a pattern, we delight in tracing it, and in seeing it reoccur

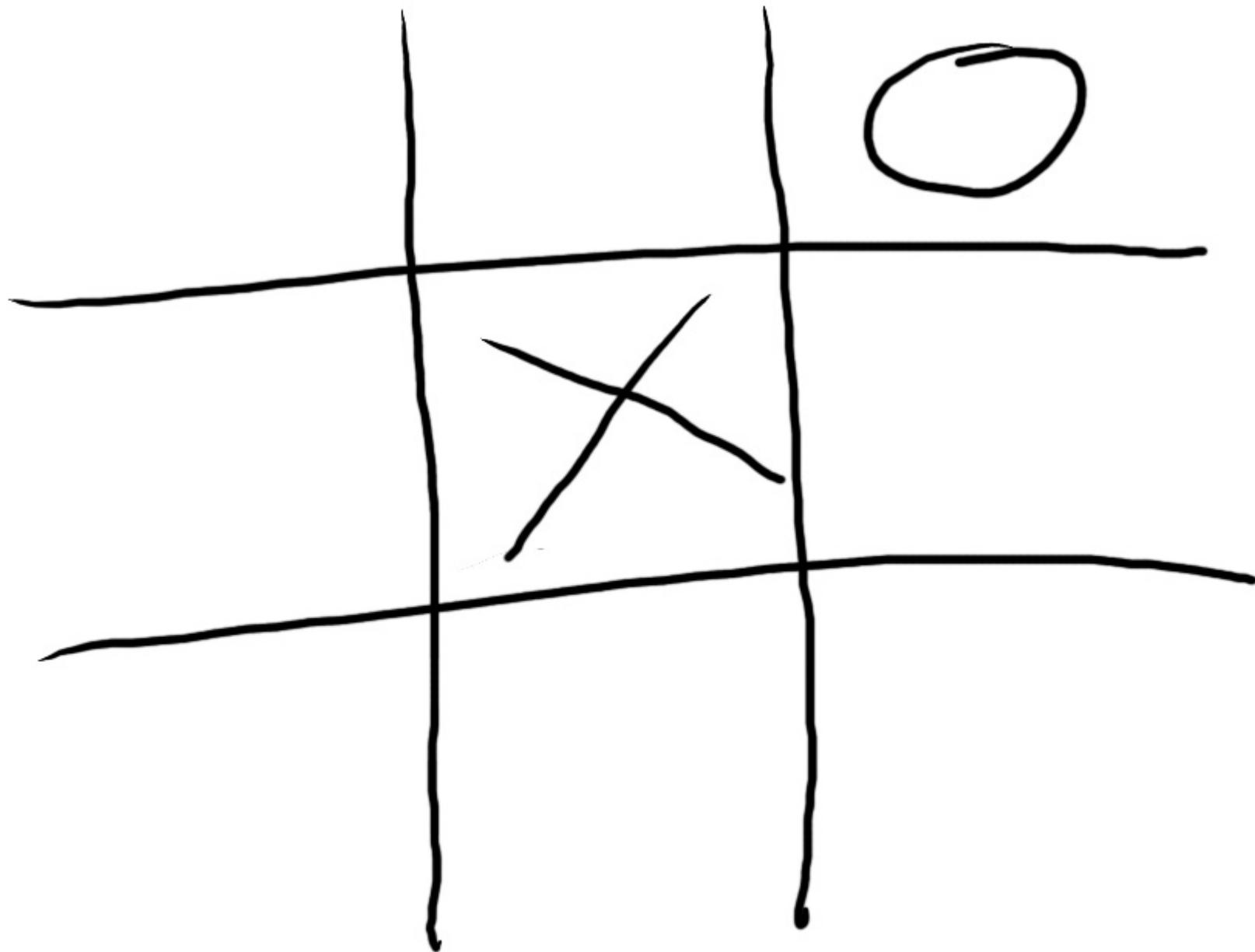




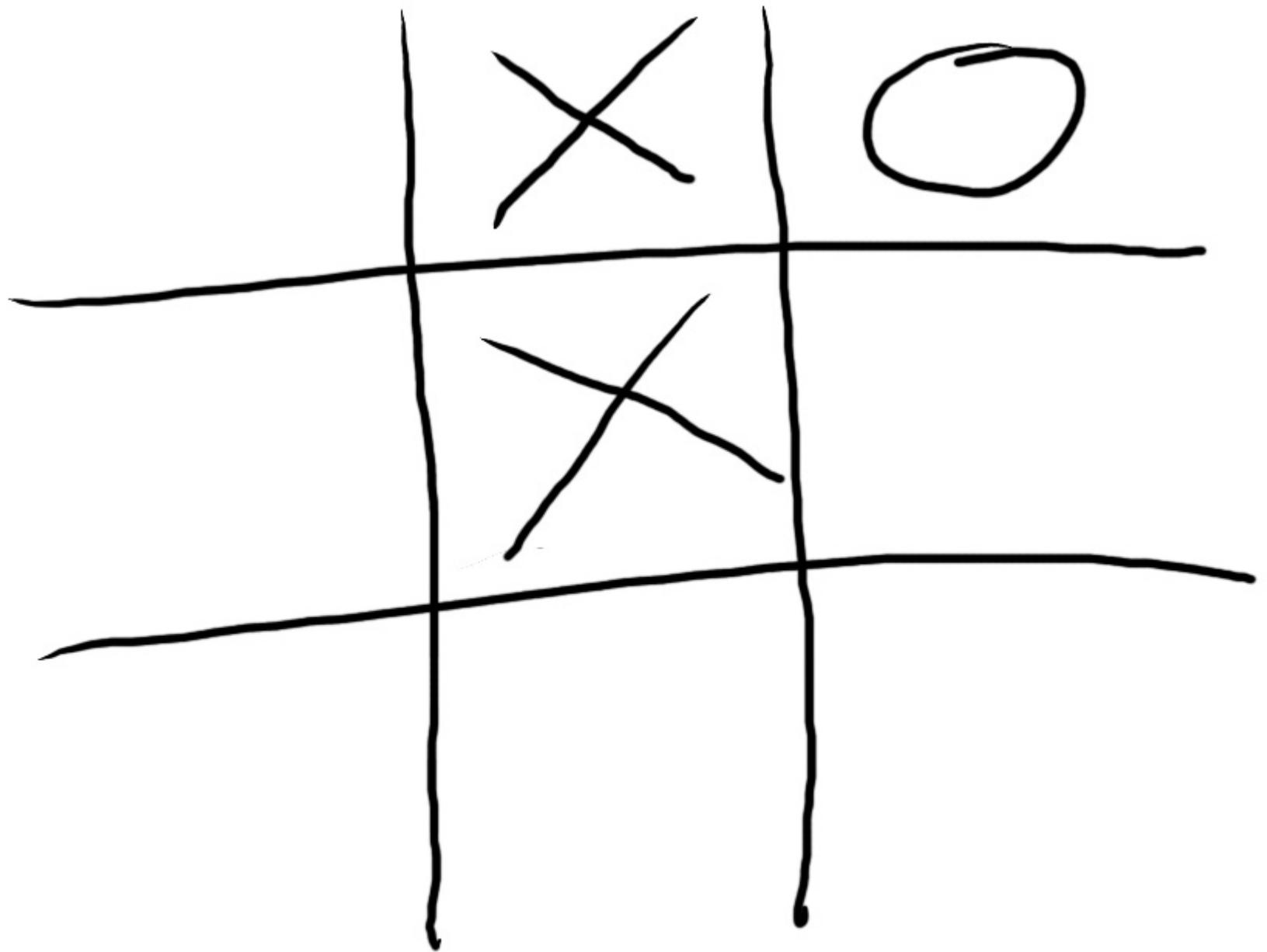
**What's fun is exercising your brain**



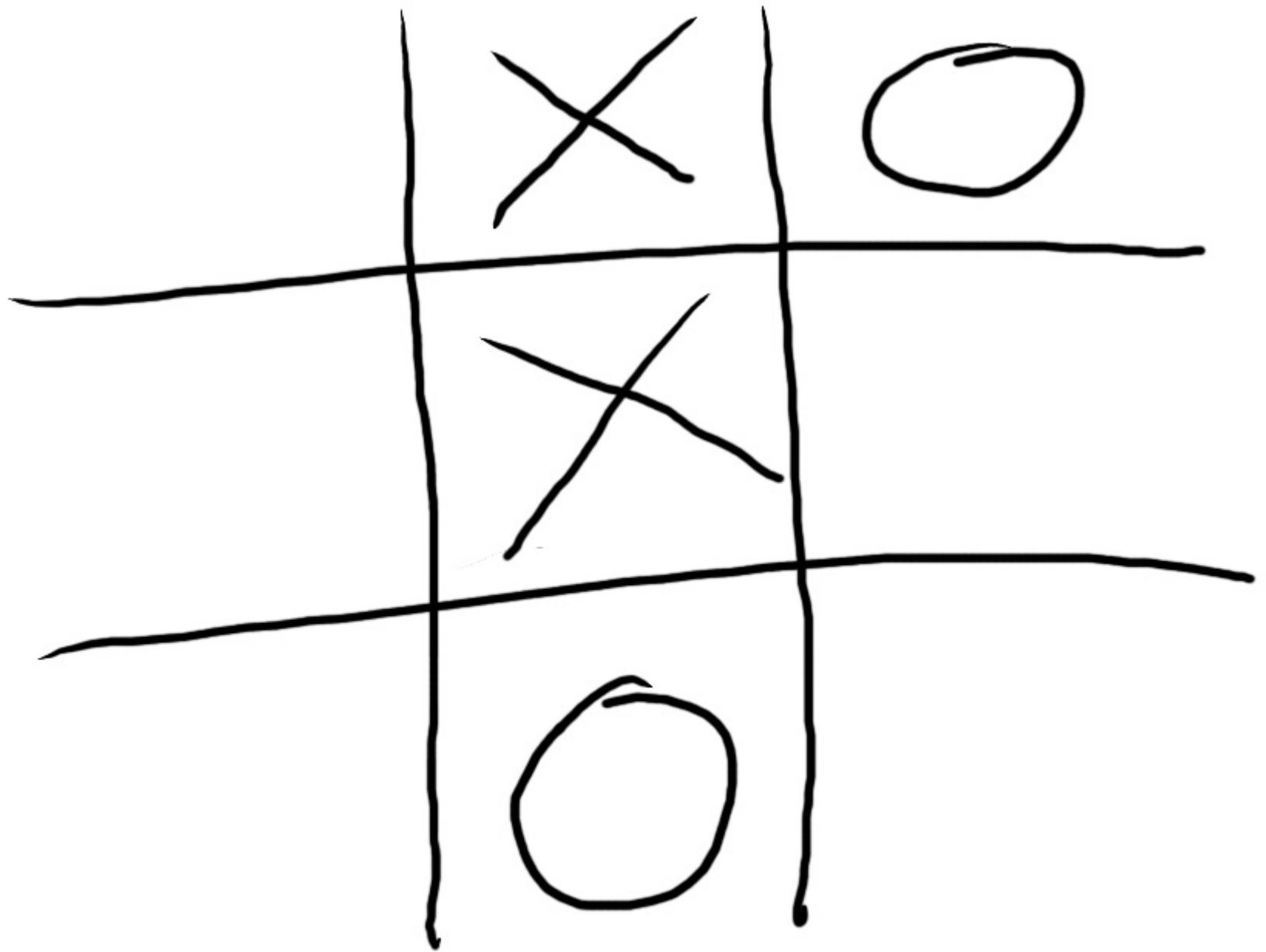
*Games are puzzles*



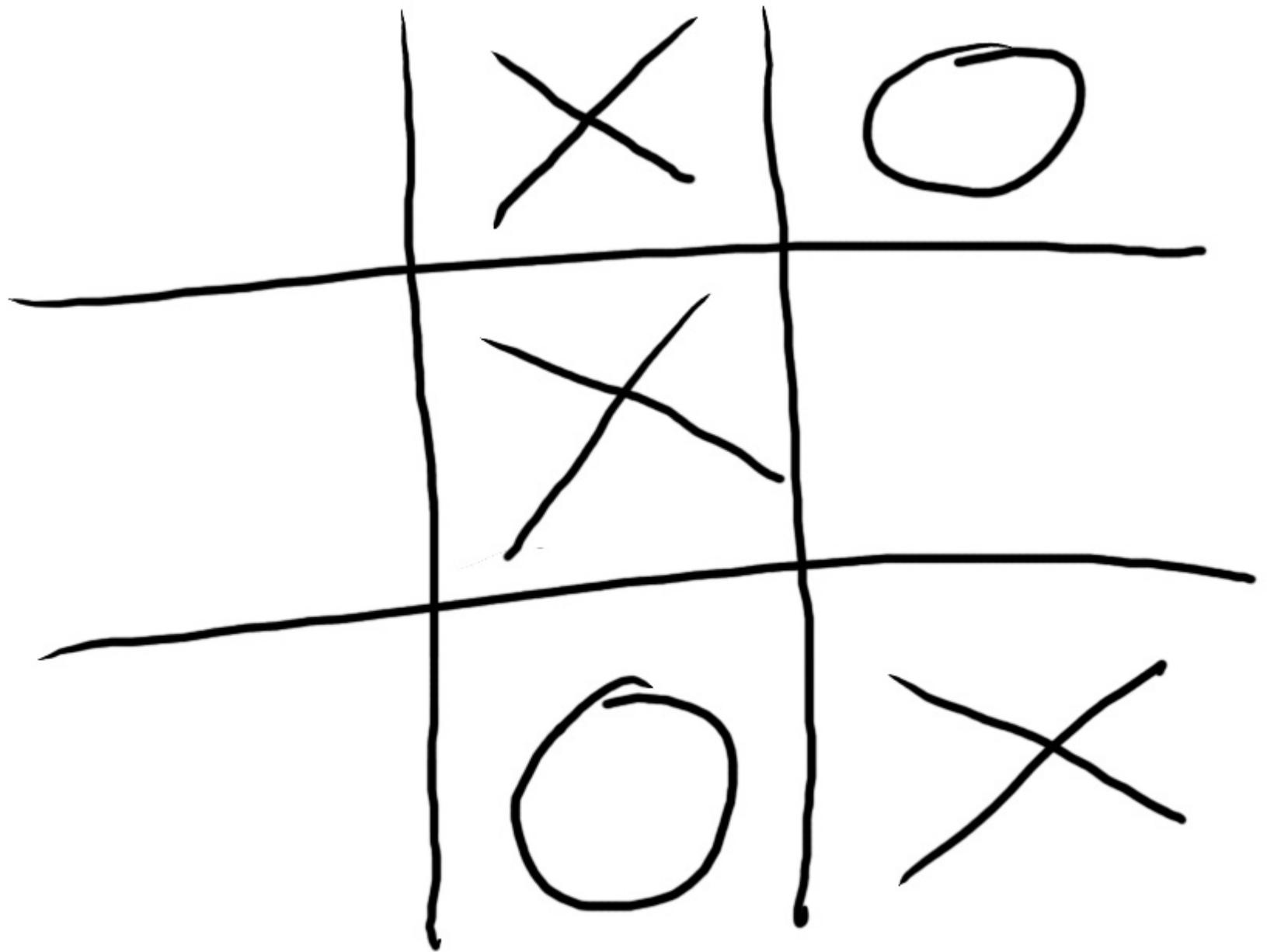
—they are about cognition,



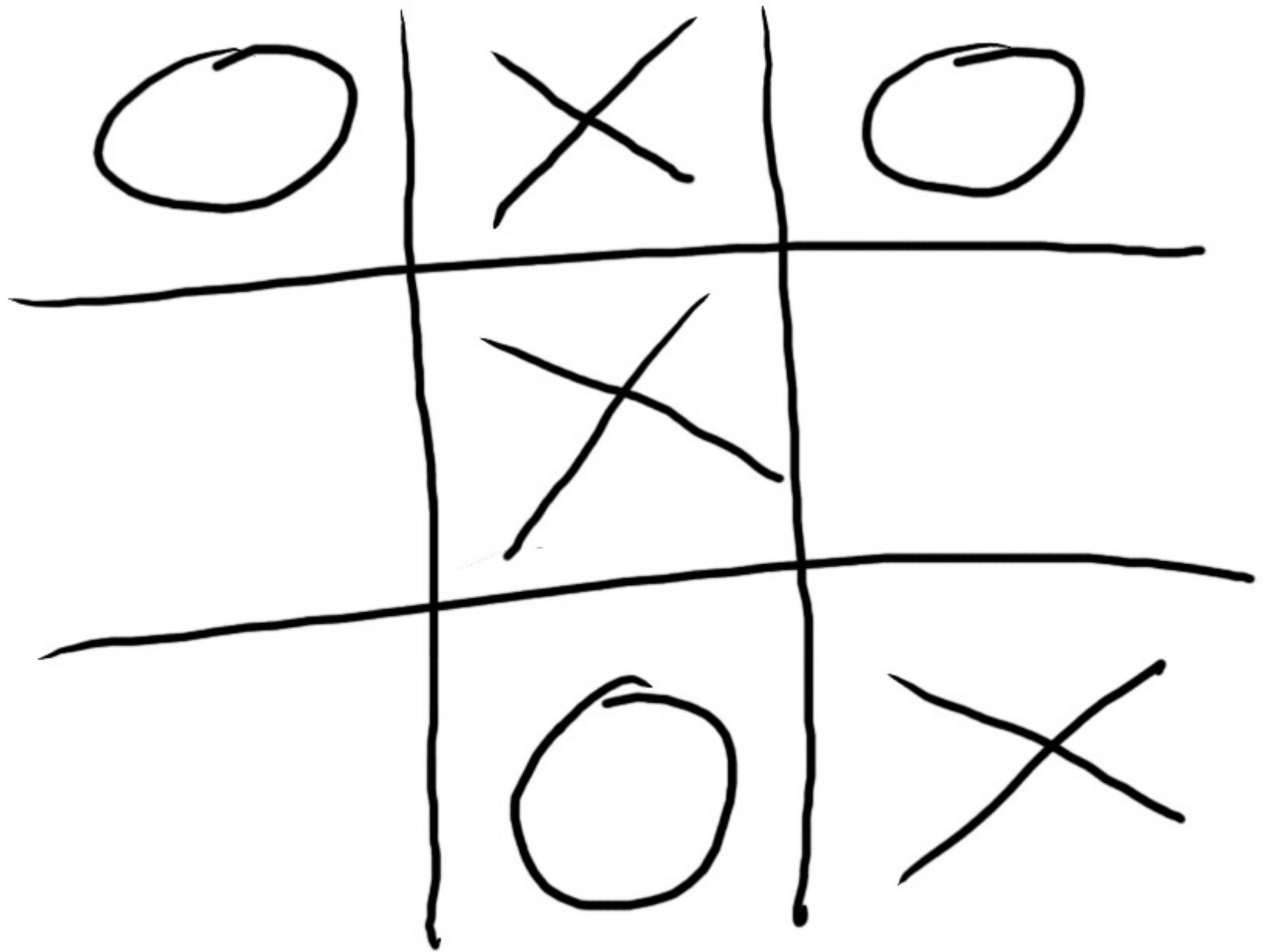
**and learning to analyze patterns**



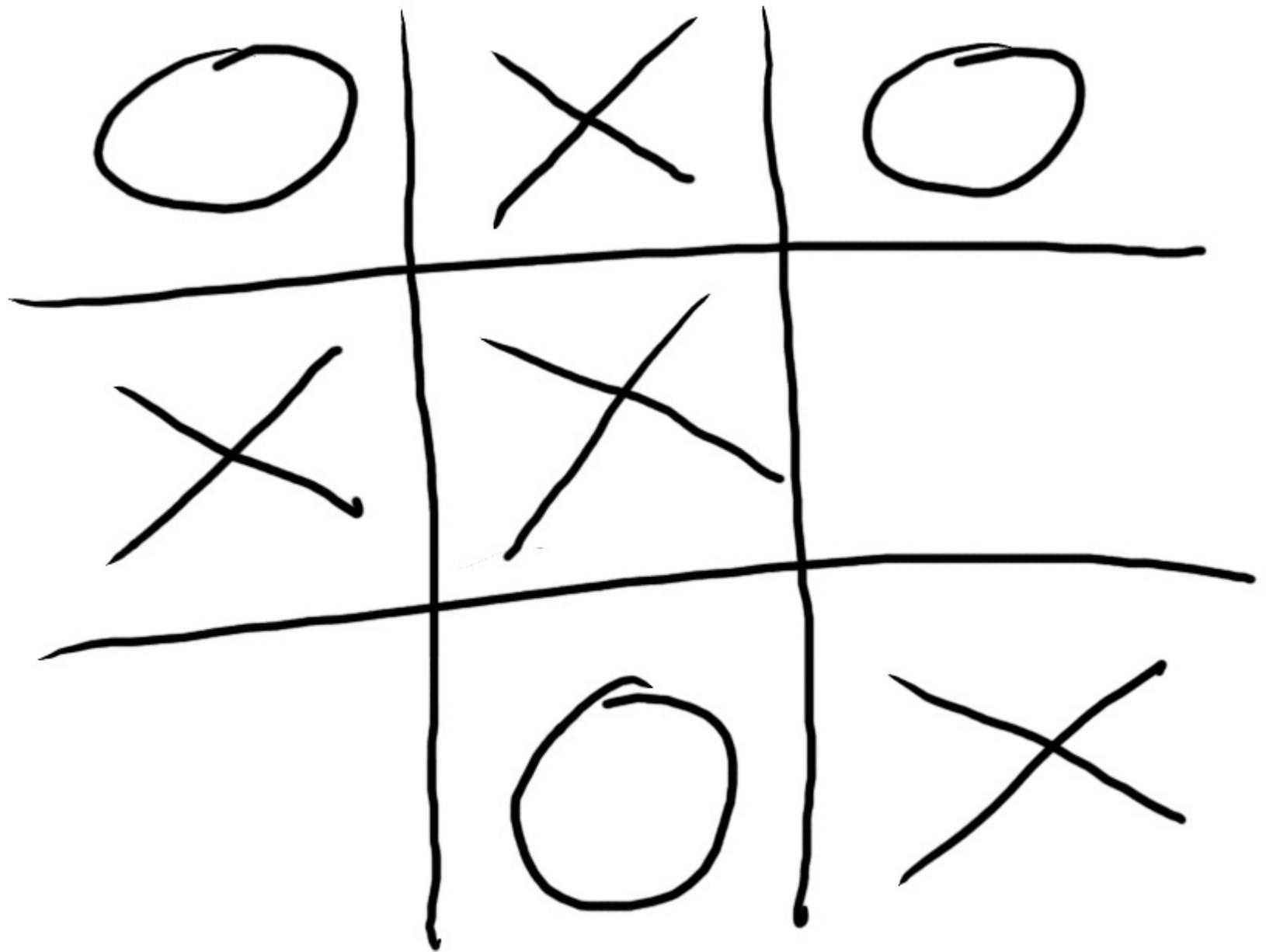
*When you're playing a game,*



*you'll only play it*



*until you master the pattern*



*once you've mastered it*

O	X	O
X	X	
	O	X

X		O
O	X	X
	X	O

O	X	
X	X	O
O		X

O	X	O
X	X	
	O	X

O	X	O
	X	X
X	O	

	O	X
X	X	
O	X	O

O	X	O
X	X	
	O	X

O		X
X	X	O
O	X	

O	X	
X	X	O
O		X

O	X	O
X	X	
	O	X

O		X
X	X	O
O	X	

	X	O
O	X	X
X		O

The game becomes **boring**.

O	X	O
X	X	
	O	X

X		O
O	X	X
	X	O

O	X	
X	X	O
O		X

O	X	O
X	X	
	O	X

O	X	O
	X	X
X	O	

	O	X
X	X	
O	X	O



O		X
X	X	O

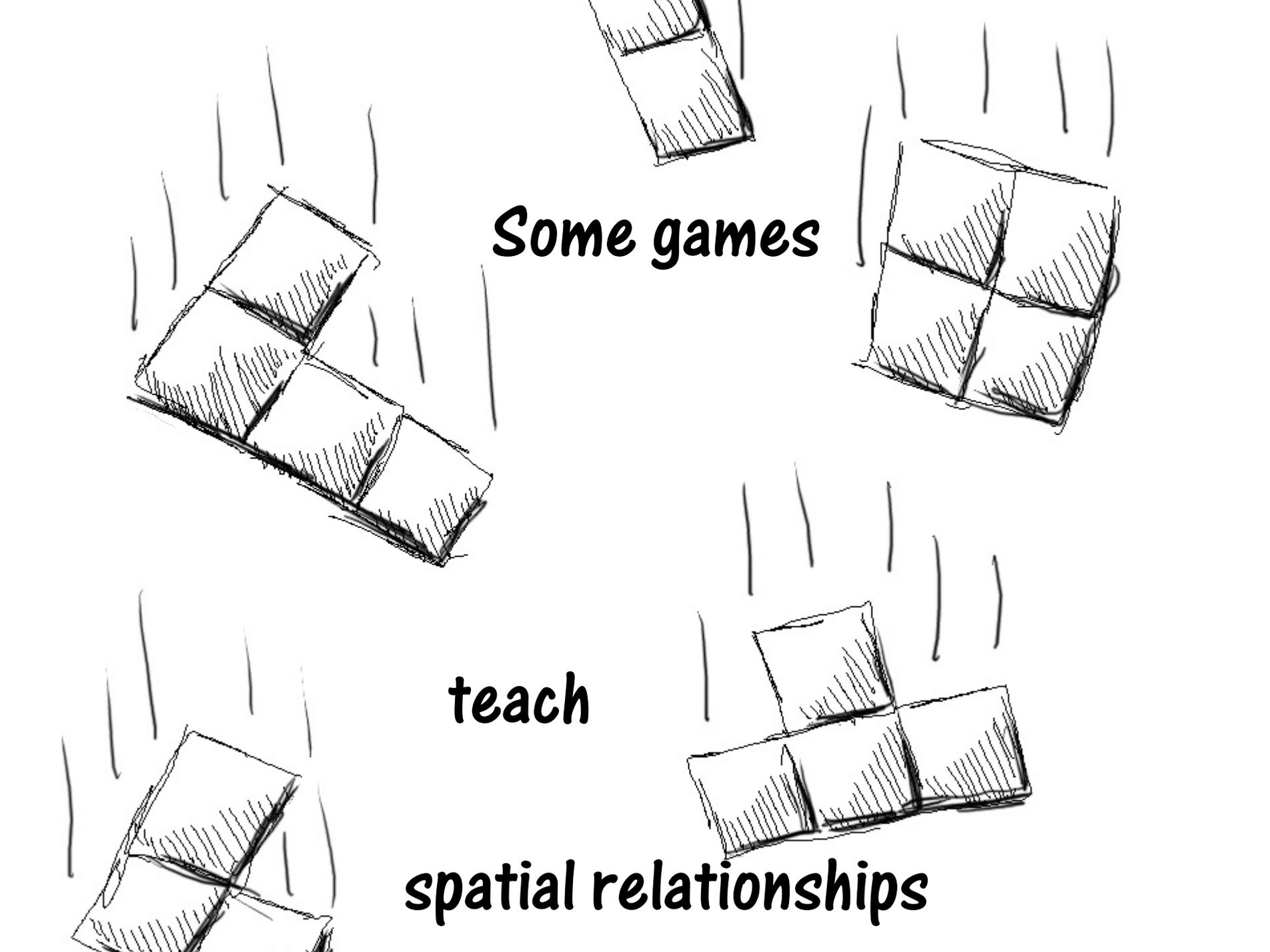
O	X	
X	X	O
O		X

O	X	O
X	X	
	O	X

O	X	
X	X	O
O	X	

	X	O
O	X	X
X		O

**Basically, all games are edutainment**



**Some games**

**teach**

**spatial relationships**

MONY  
E3100

0>61

WORLD  
1-2

TIME  
26.1

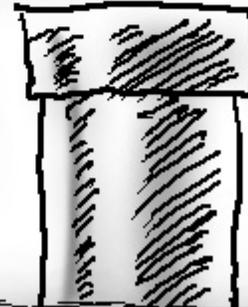
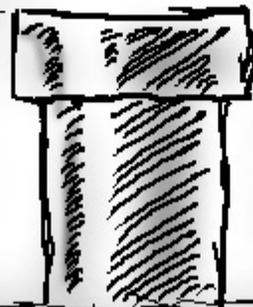
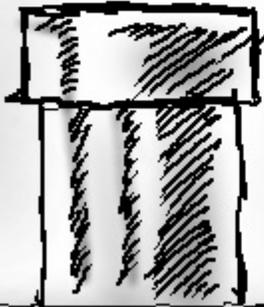
Some games

teach you to



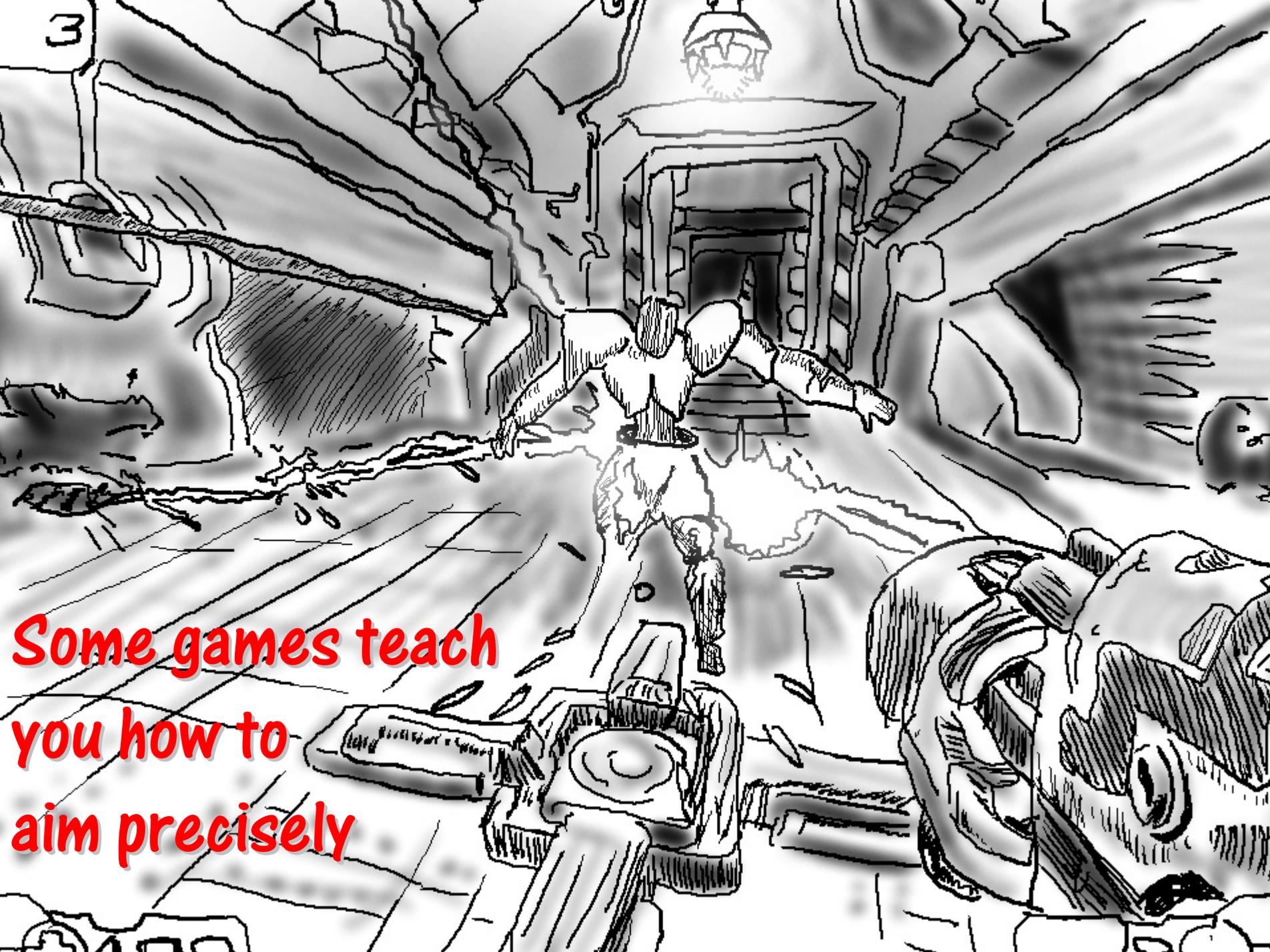
WELCOME TO WARP ZONE!

explore



3

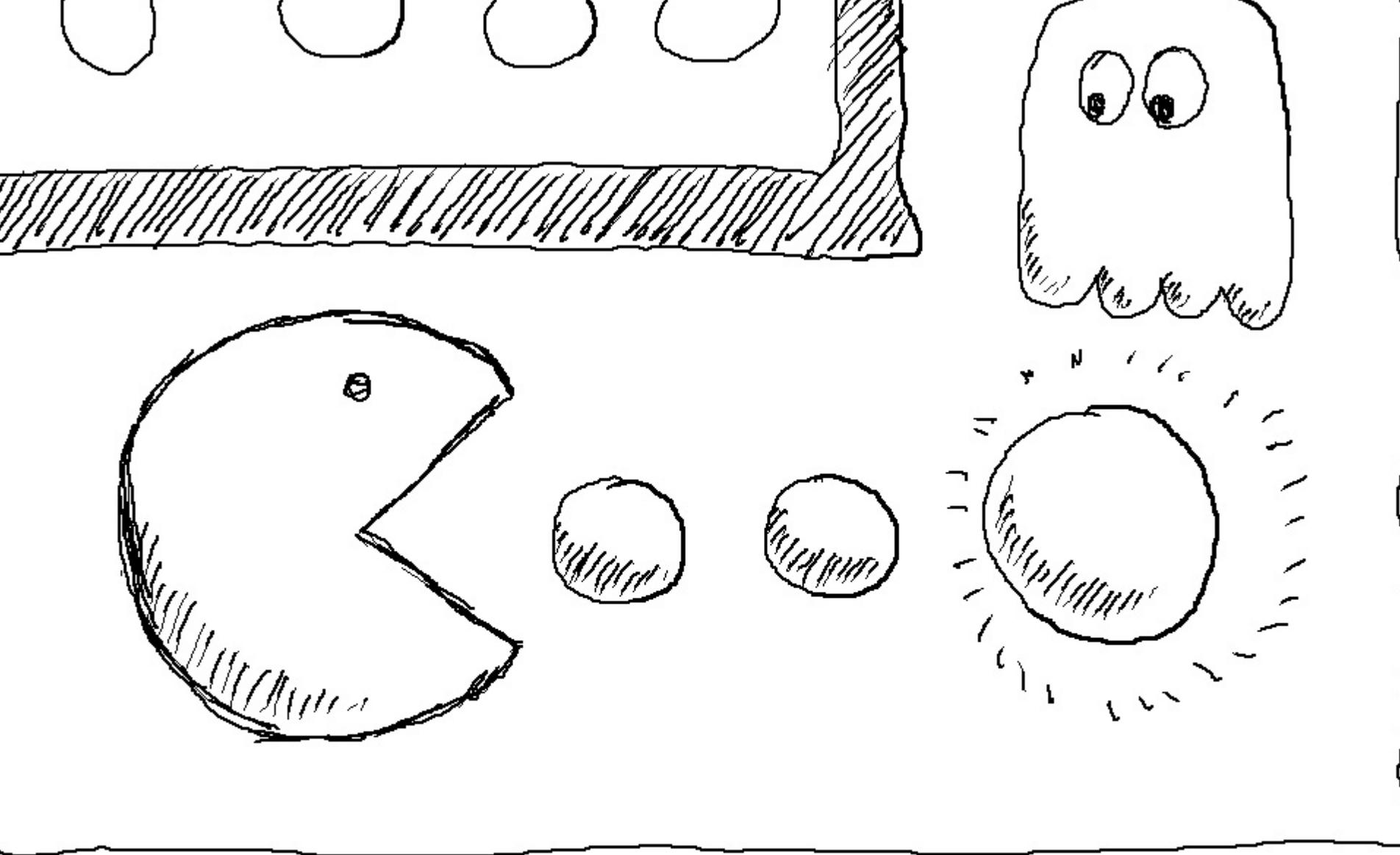
Some games teach  
you how to  
aim precisely



**We're very good at seeing past fiction.**

This is why gamers are dismissive of the ethical implications of games - They don't see "get a **blowjob** from a hooker, then **run her over.**"





They see a **power-up**.

As critics of games, of course, we can see other patterns. 😊



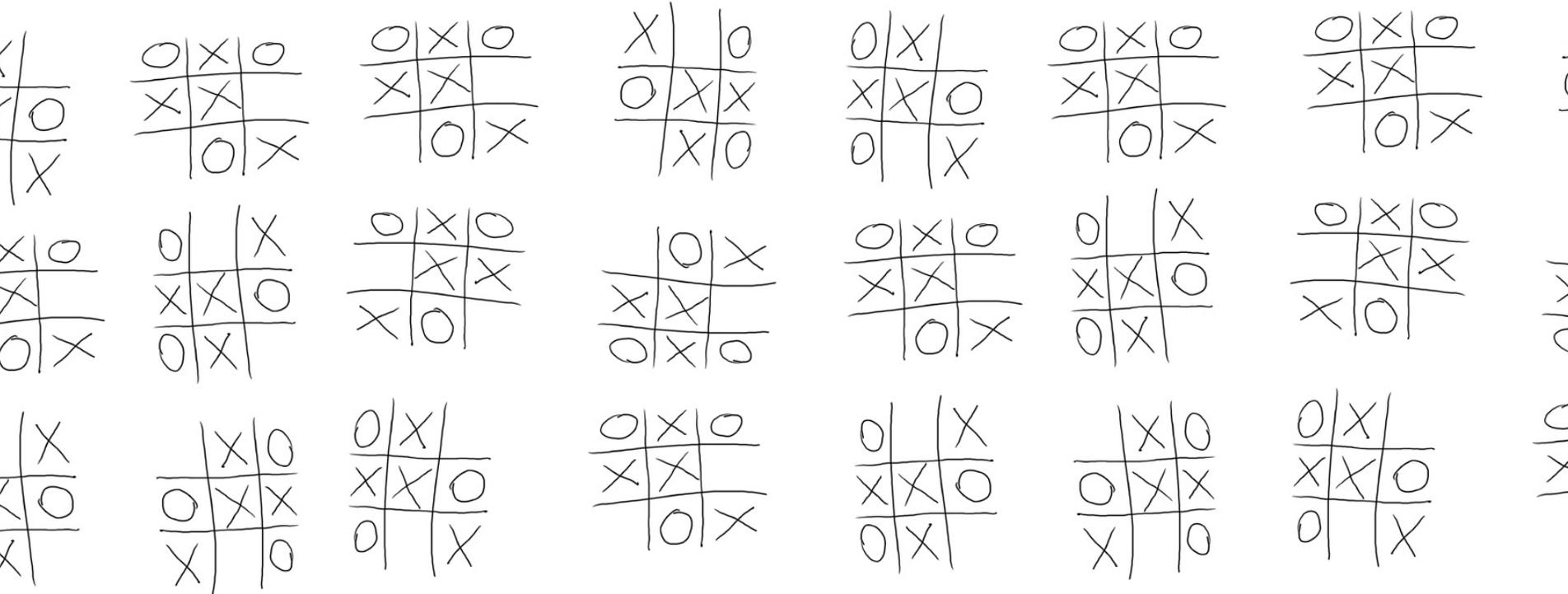
cheat!  
macro  
MULE  
grind.  
HACK  
exploit  
BOTTOM  
FEED

Players seeking to advance in a game will **always** try to optimize what they are doing.

If they are clever and see  
an optimal path—**an  
Alexandrine solution to a  
Gordian problem**—they’ll  
do that instead of the  
“intended gameplay.”

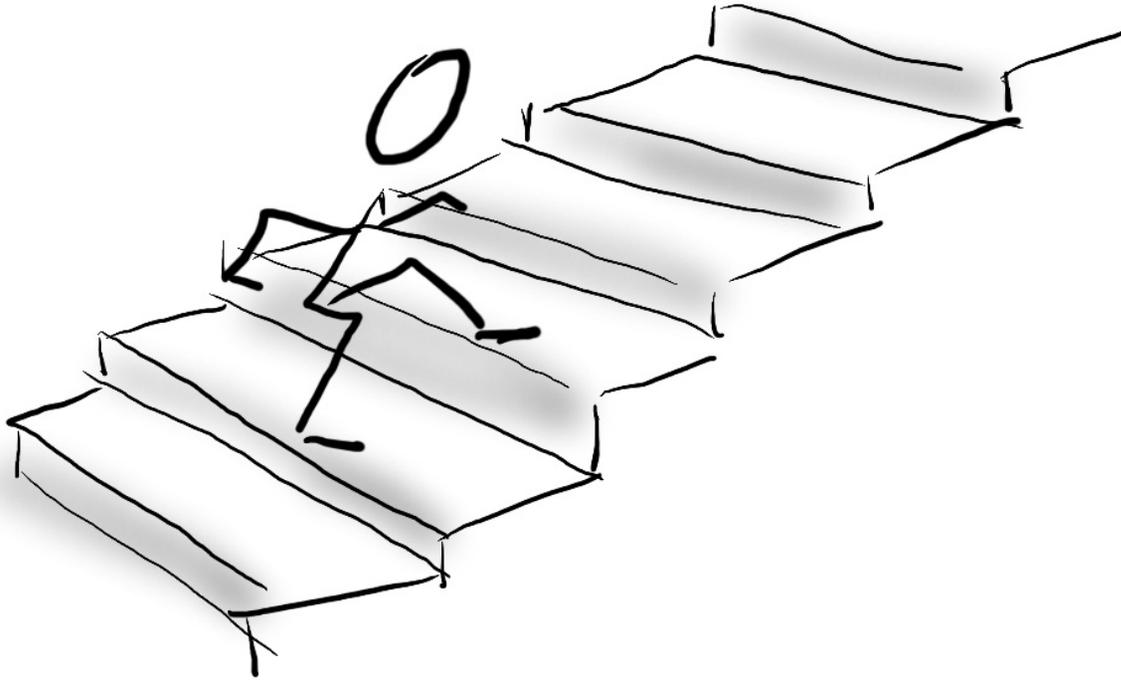


**They will try to make the gameplay as predictable as possible.**

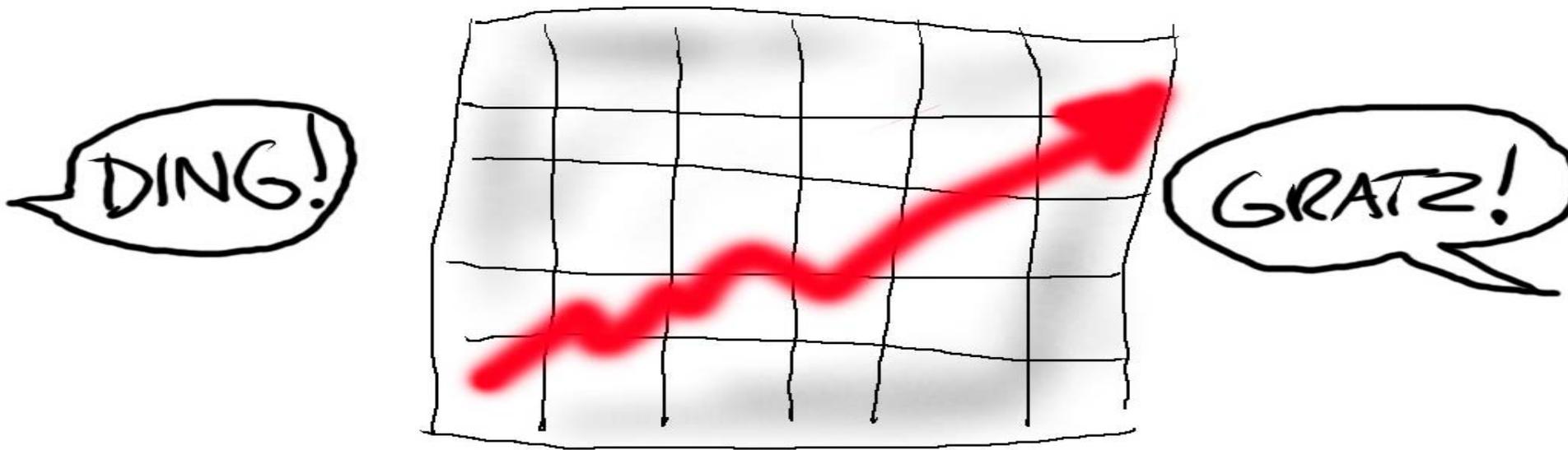


**Which then means it becomes boring,  
and not fun.**

**In the real world, we call this “security”  
and “steady jobs” and “sensible shoes”  
and “routine.”**

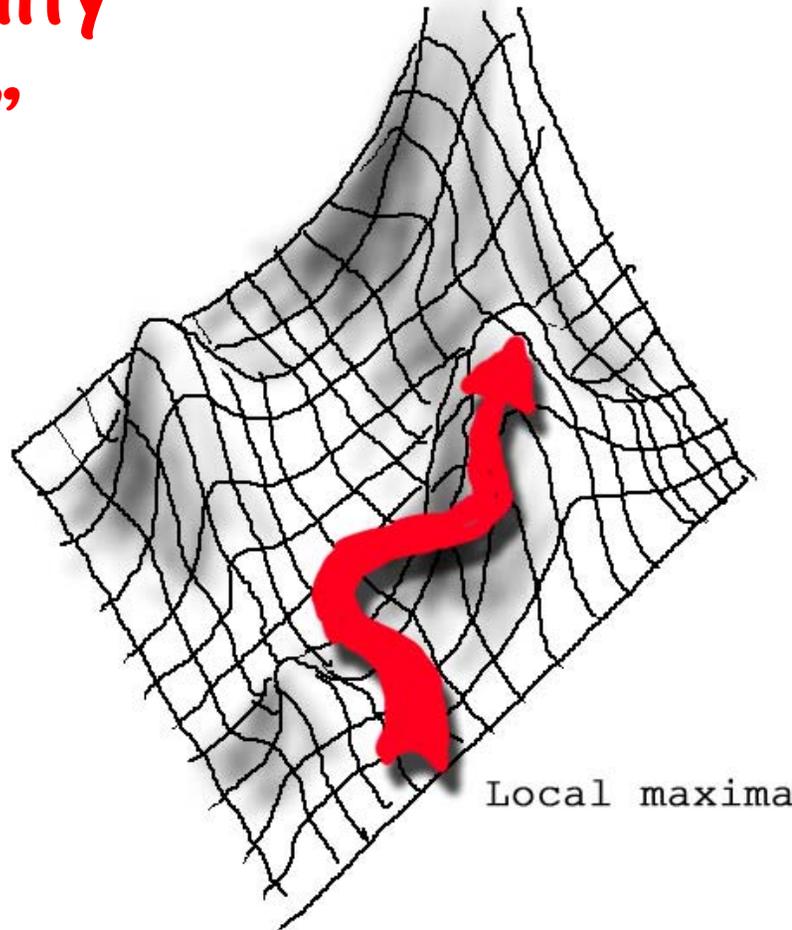


**Call it a treadmill, if you want.**



As gamemakers, **we are fighting a losing battle against the human brain**, which always fights to optimize, assembly-line, simplify, maximize ROI.

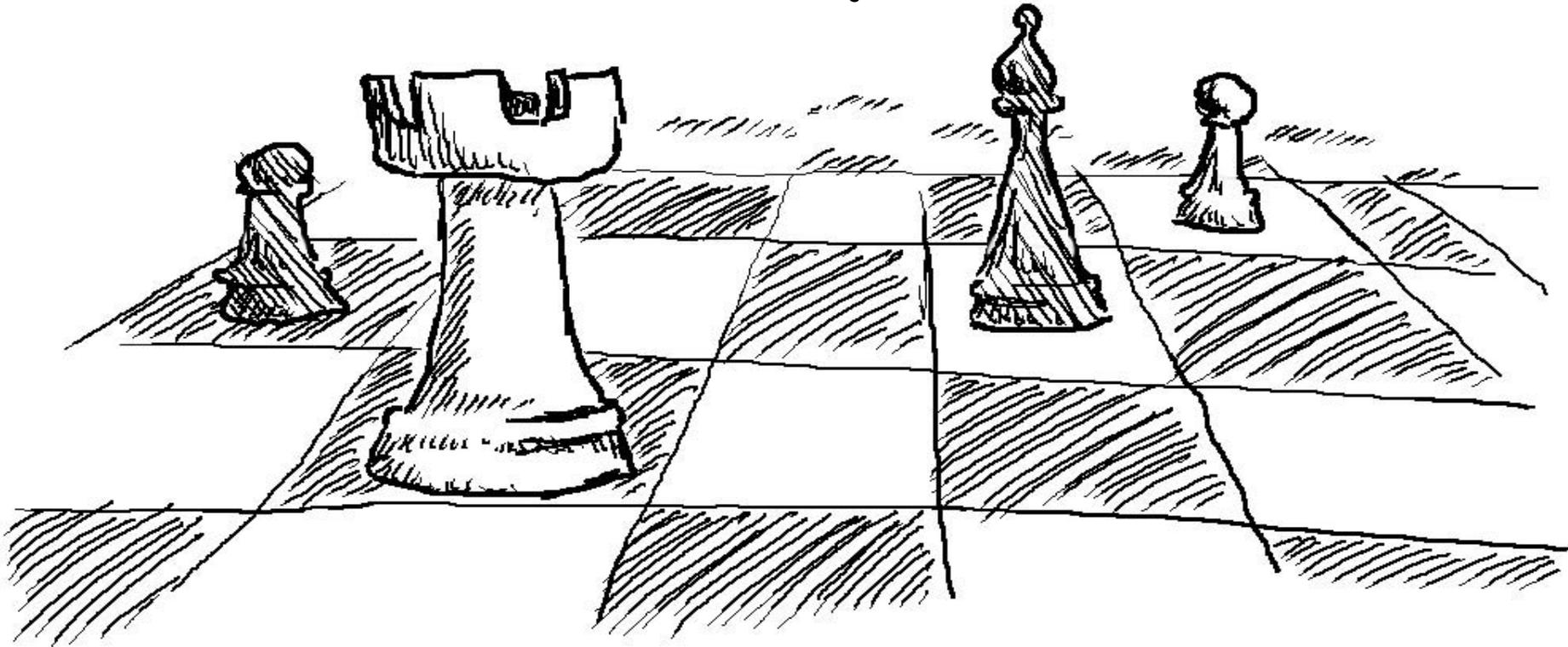
If I were Will Wright, I'd say that **“Fun is the process of discovering areas in a possibility space.”**



Local maxima



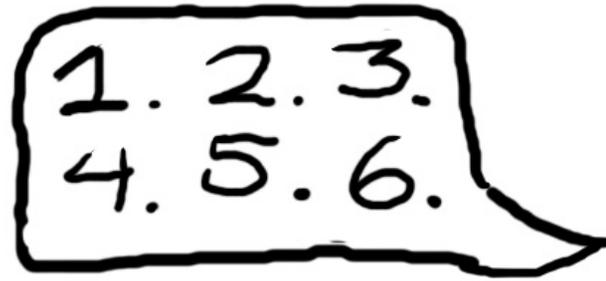
Most long-lasting games in the past  
have been competitive, because they  
lead to an endless supply of similar yet  
subtly varied puzzles.





1.1.1.  
1.1.1.

Instanced spaces in massively multiplayer games are a designer's attempt to **maintain control** over the puzzles that players are solving



1. 2. 3.  
4. 5. 6.



Larger minimum feature sets  
in online worlds are about  
**increasing the permutations,**  
the possibility space.

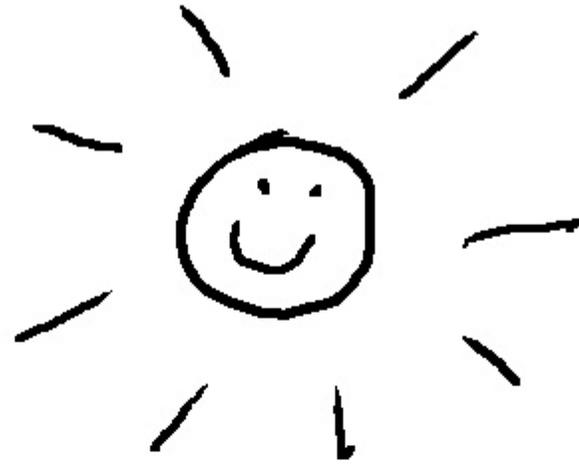
We talk so much about **emergent gameplay**, non-linear storytelling, or about **player-entered content**. They're all ways of increasing the possibility space, making **self-refreshing** puzzles.

(INSERT CARTOON HERE.)

We also often discuss the desire for games to be **art**—for them to be puzzles with more than one right answer, puzzles that lend themselves to **interpretation**.

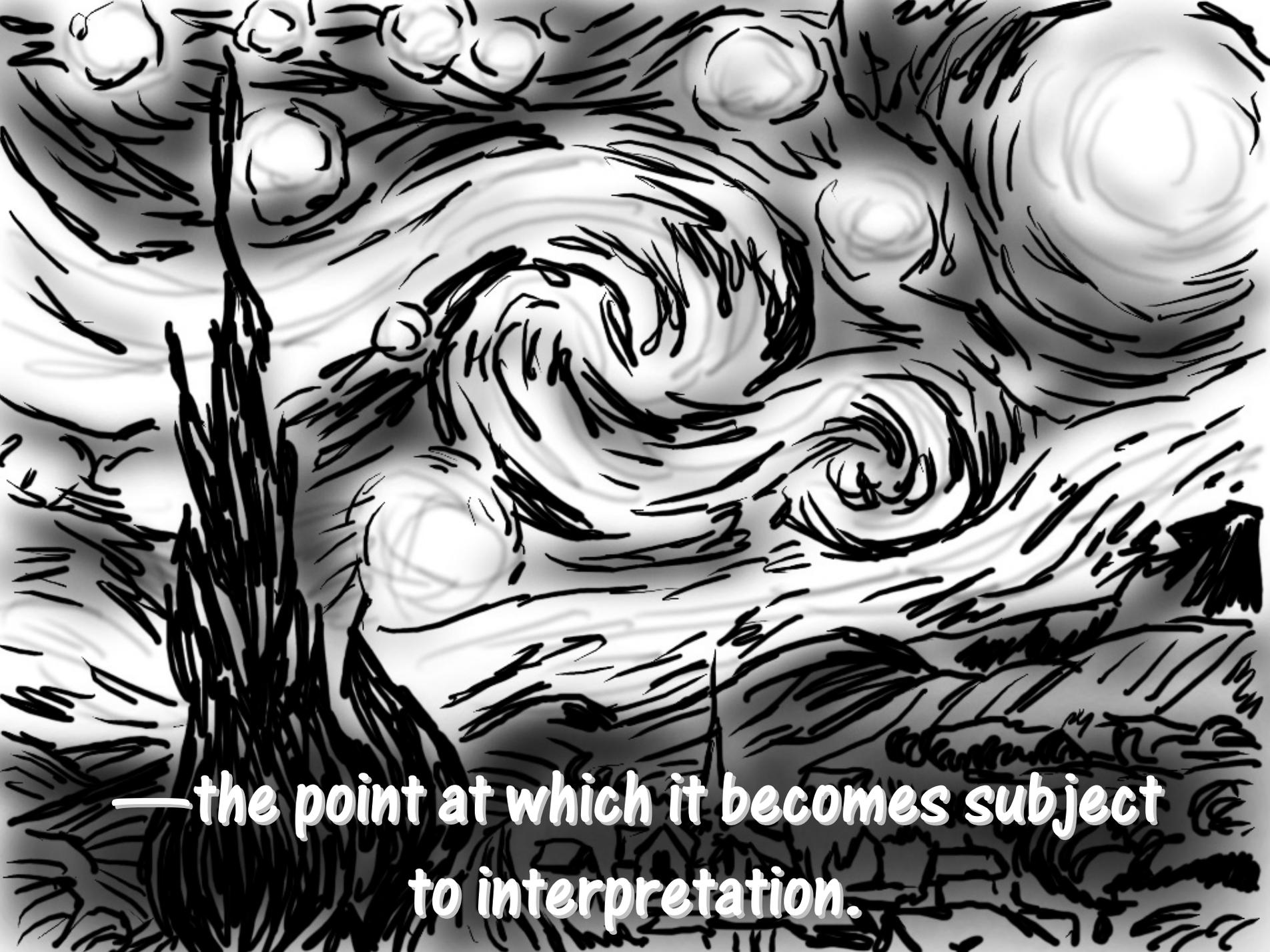
To be, or not  
to be— that is  
the question.

That may be the best definition of when  
something



ceases to  
be craft  
and when it  
turns into  
art





— the point at which it becomes subject  
to interpretation.

**We do happen to have various puzzles  
and conundra that are like this.**

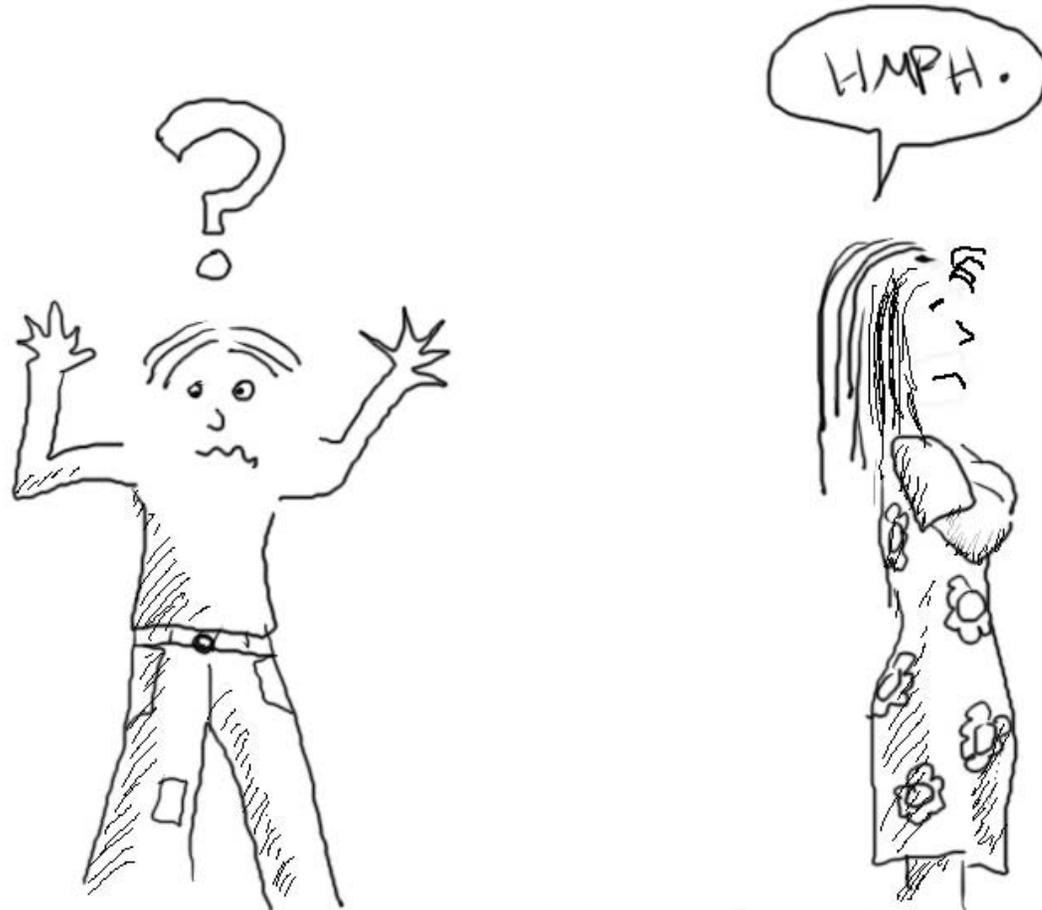
**Try writing a book.**

It was a dark and stormy night.

Or composing music.



# Or understanding your significant other.



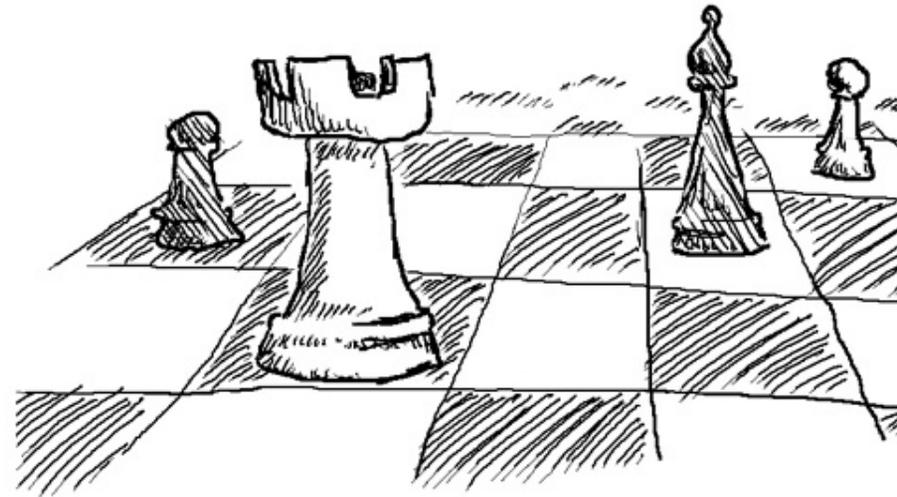
(Did you notice all of these are about communication?)

***Or designing games.***

The point at which our game puzzles approach the complexity of those puzzles is the point at which our art form becomes **mature**.



=



2B  
||  
!(2B)

The gap  
between those  
who want  
games to  
**entertain** and  
those who want  
games to be **art**

To be  
or  
not to  
be...

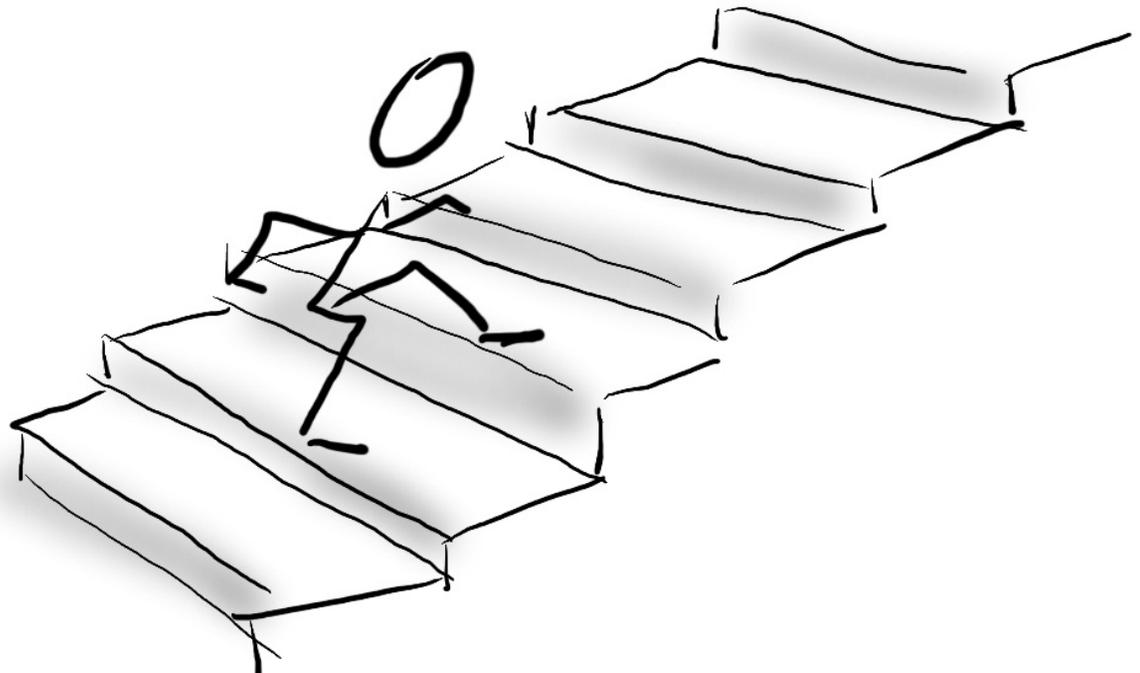
**does not exist.**

Because both entail posing questions—  
tough ones even, ethical ones, even. And

*games will never be  
mature as long as the  
designers create them  
with complete answers  
to their own puzzles in  
mind.*



Even then, there will a class of player who prefers the comfort of **only tackling puzzles they know how to solve.**



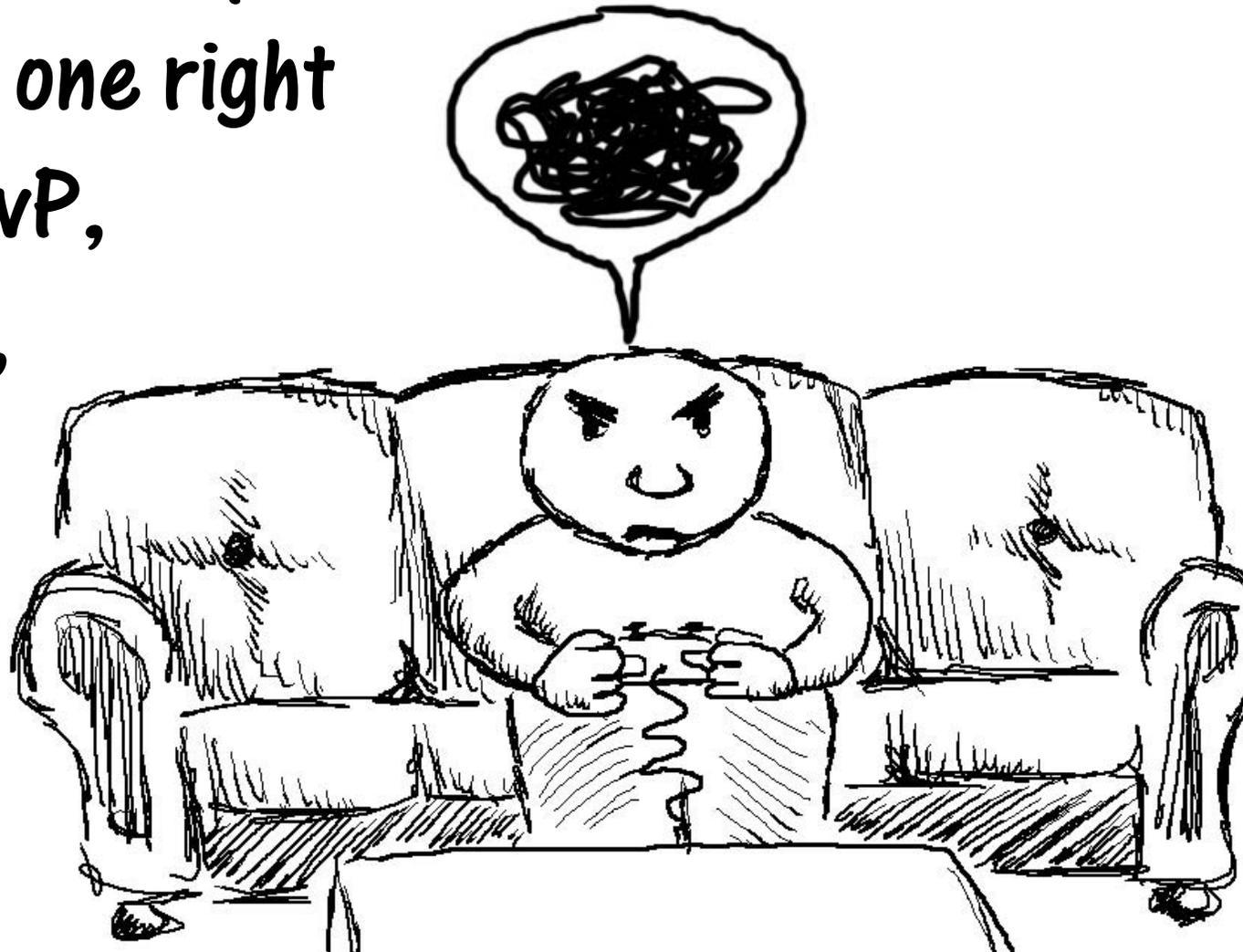
In the caveman days, the wolves got 'em.



These days, we're a bit more  
tolerant—the **job market** gets them  
instead.



So the challenge we all face is to solve our own puzzles that don't have one right answer (PvP, instancing, player-entered content!)



**Until then, all  
our games  
are destined  
to be like tic-  
tac-toe.**

