GAMES DESIGN BASICS: CAUSAL GAMES & MEANINGFUL PLAY

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8/23/17

DAILY AGENDA

➤ Administrative:

    ➤ 6325 Students choose time/day for Workshop

    ➤ Officially vote on Showcase vs. In-Class Demo

    ➤ Other business?

➤ Go over Game-Play Vlog and Prototype Assignments in detail

➤ Highlight and discuss Salen and Zimmerman reading in terms of Two Dots

GAMEPLAY VLOG AND PROTOTYPE ASSIGNMENTS

➤ Game-Play Vlog [Assignment Sheet](#)

  ➤ What Not to Do: [Walkthrough](#); [Tutorial](#); "[Stream of Consciousness Gameplay](#)"

  ➤ Instead: focus on questions on Assignment sheet that aim to describe game in terms of its design, and in relationship to the readings

➤ Prototype [Assignment Sheet](#)

CASUAL GAMES

➤ For this class, we will define casual games as those with simple rules, minimal environments, but increasing complexity in game play;

➤ These are games that may be played "casually" and do not require the level of commitment to play that long-form strategy games require;

➤ There may be a narrative, but it is likely very loose / does not govern game play as such; [Two Dots Narrative](#)

➤ Often puzzle-based

➤ Examples: Two Dots; Alto's Adventures; Braid

MEANINGFUL PLAY: "THE GOAL OF SUCCESSFUL GAME DESIGN"

➤ "Meaningful play emerges from the interaction between players and the system of the game, as well as from the context in which the game is played" (S&Z, 33).

➤ S& Z Identify 2 Types of Meaningful Play:

1. Descriptive of the way games operate, emerging from "the relationship between player action and system outcome" (34).

2. Evaluative of the way meaning is constructed between actions and outcomes, emerging when "the relationships between actions and outcomes in a game are both discernible and integrated into the larger context of the game" (34).
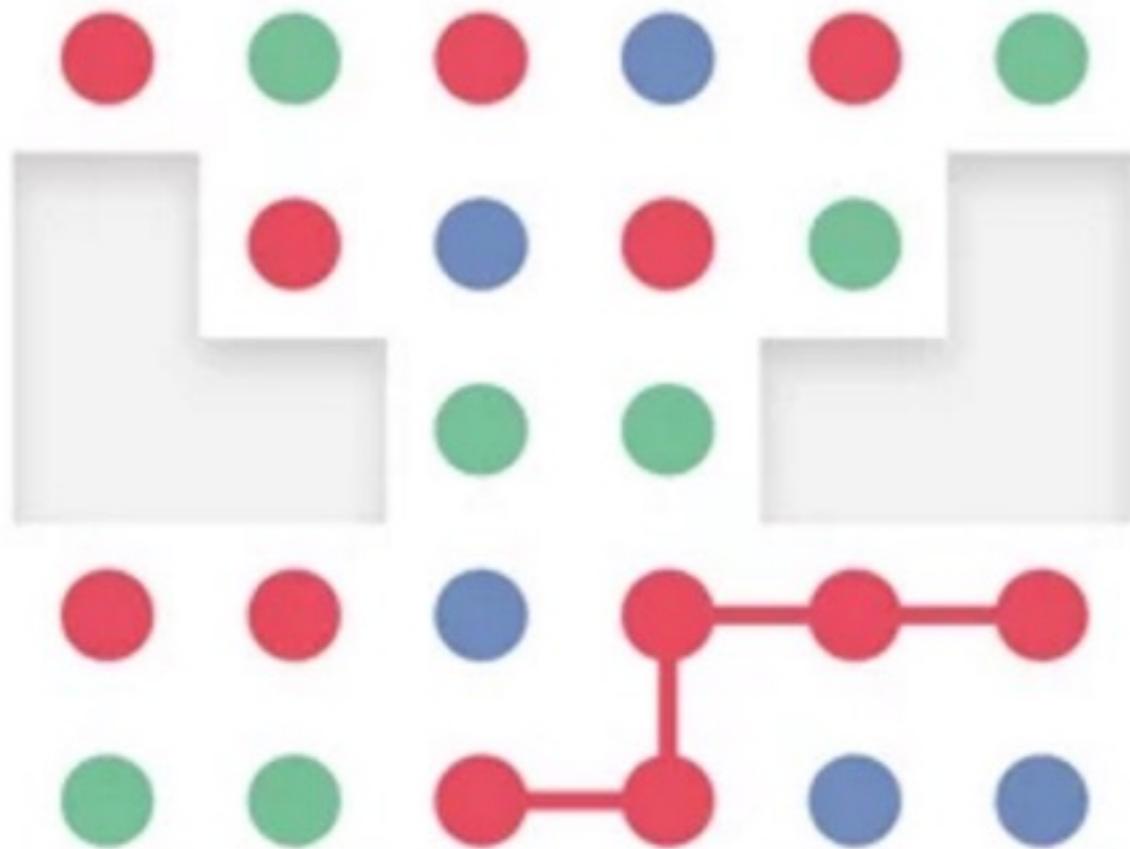
Descriptive Meaningful Play in Two Dots

➤ "the relationship between player action and system outcome"

➤ **Player action**: using the touch screen, a player connects two dots of the same color

➤ **System outcome**: those dots disappear; the dots currently on the board fall into place filling gapes according to certain rules (perceived gravity, etc.); new dots appear in gaps at the top row

Evaluative Meaningful Play in Two Dots

➤ "when the relationships between outcomes and actions are both discernible and integrated into the larger context of the game"

➤ **Discernible**: player action communicated through sound and lines connecting dots; through the falling/ disappearance of dots

➤ **Integrated**: continuing to connect dots in increasingly complex ways will cause more dots to disappear until you pass the level
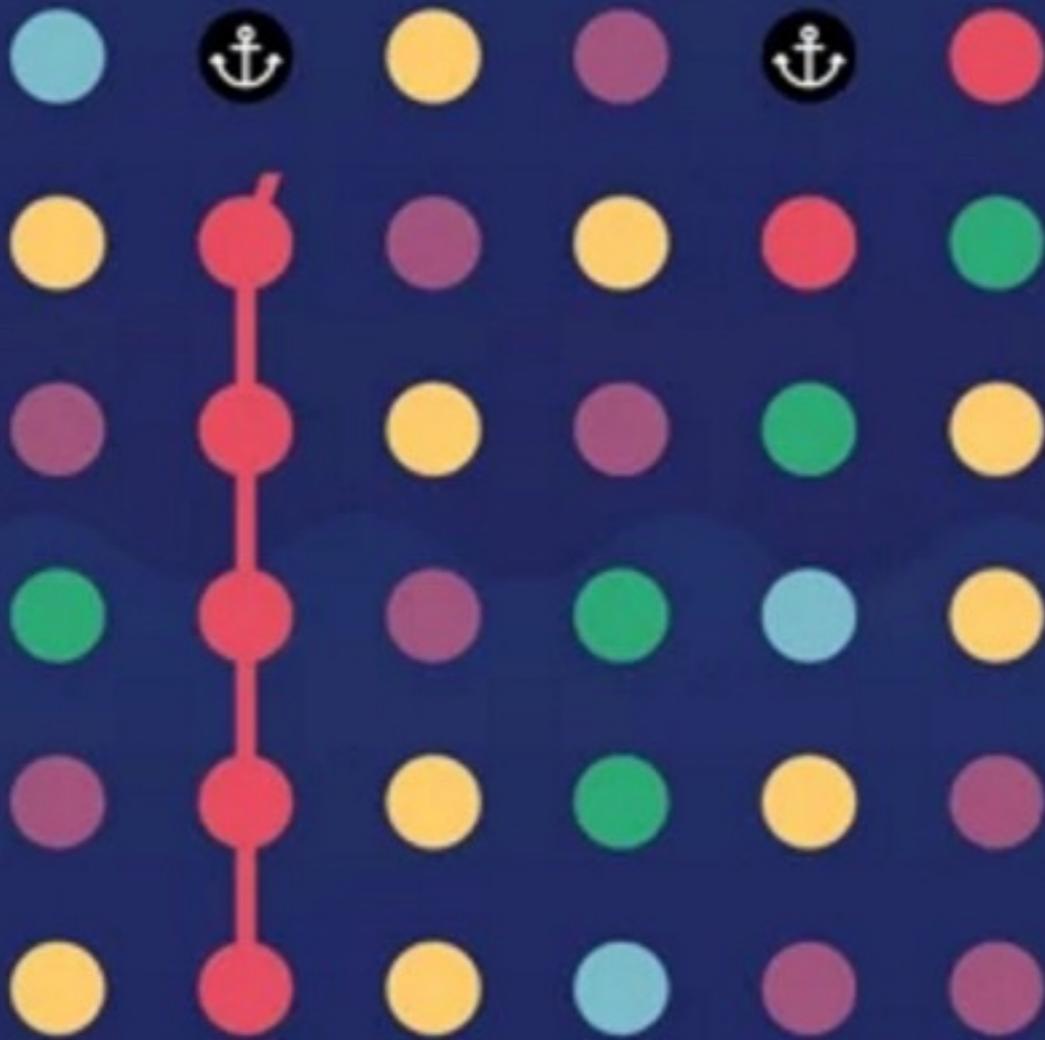
A FINAL NOTE ON DISCERNIBLE AND INTEGRATED MEANING:

"Whereas discernibility of game events tells players what happened (I hit the monster [I connected two dots]), integration lets players know how it will effect the game (If I keep on hitting the monster I will kill it. If I kill enough monsters, I'll gain a level [If I keep connecting dots, they will disappear; if I connect the number of dots at the top in the number of moves allowed, I gain a level; if I connect a square of dots, I can disappear more dots in one move.). Every action a player takes is when into the larger fabric of the overall game experience: this is how the play of a game becomes truly meaningful" (S&Z 35).

SEMIOTICS, MEANING & GAME DESIGN

➤ In Game Design, "design is the process by which a designer [individual or team; Playdots Inc.] creates a context [game world of spaces, objects, narratives, behaviors; Dots, Map, Music, Connection via Touch-Screen] to be encountered by a participant [Player], from which meaning [meaningful play; cultural sense; narrative sense] emerges" (S&Z 41).

➤ For cultural sense, we look to Semiotics, "the study of meaning and the process by which meaning is made" (S&Z 41); meaning made through signs and sign systems

SEMIOTICS IN GENERAL

➤ Based in "signs" which consist of a signifier and a signified (or signifier and referent);

➤ The signifier is a metaphor or symbol that stands in or points to some other concept, object, etc. in the "real world"; the Sign is the signifier and the signified together

➤ A sign always represents something other than itself

➤ Signs are interpreted

➤ Meaning results when a sign is interpreted ([Example](#))

➤ Context shapes interpretation

➤ Signs can transmit implicit (connotative) as much as explicit (denotative) content

SEMIOTICS IN CULTURE

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➤ Signifier + Signified = Cultural Meaning / Sense / Sign

➤ Signifier: Man(specifically: Robert E. Lee, Leader of Confederate Army and figure from American history) on Horse

➤ Signified: Celebration and Support of Values for Confederacy; Important Events/Men in American History; Racial exclusivity;

➤ So what does this sign mean?
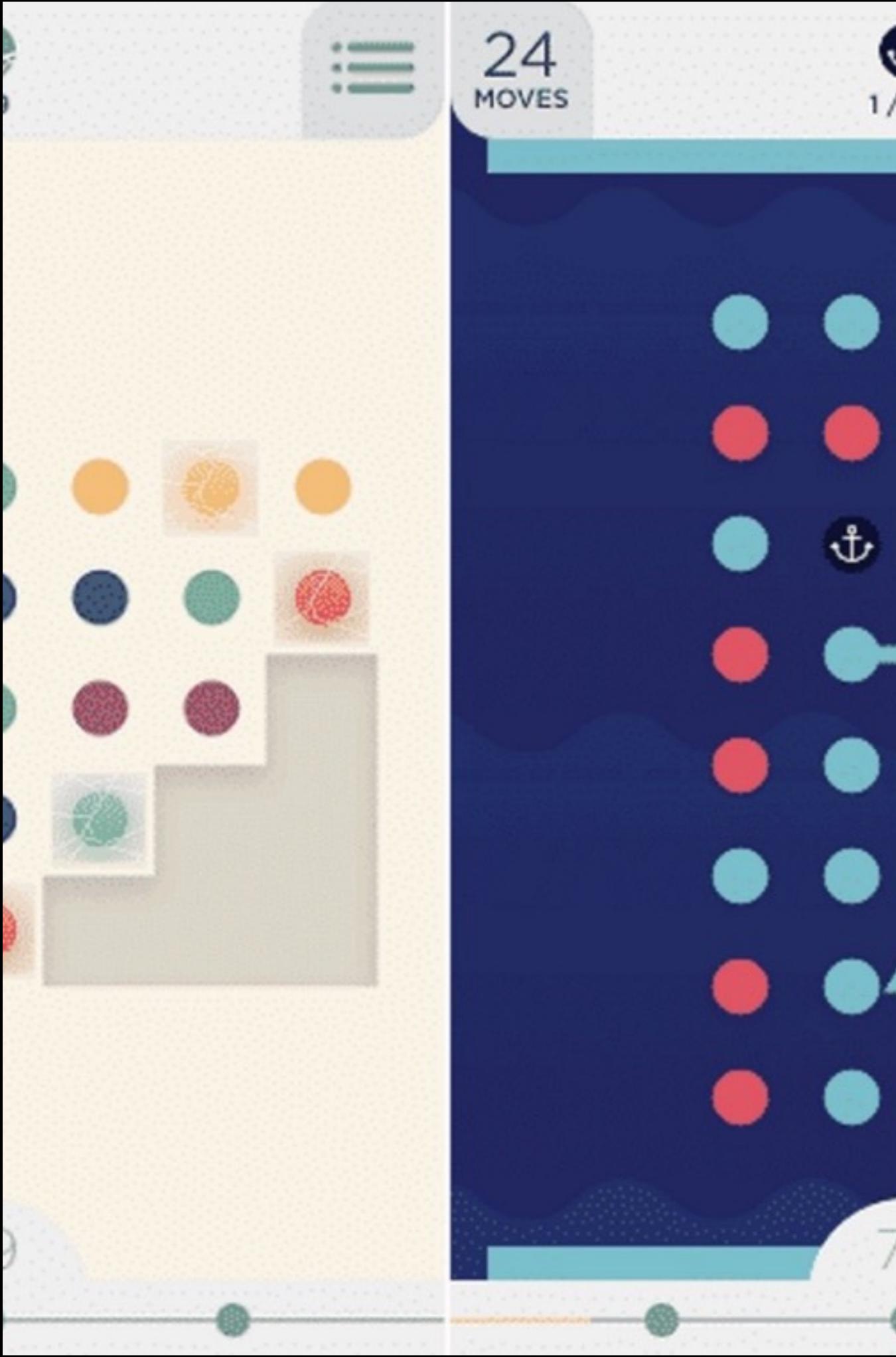
SEMIOTICS IN TWO DOTS

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➤ Sign / Meaning = Signifier (Thing on the Screen) + Signified (What the thing on the screen points to in terms of action and outcome)

➤ Signifier: Dot of a specific color; similarly colored line connecting dots; black dot with anchor image on it; dot obscured by square;

➤ Signified: Dot can be connected with other dots that color; dots will disappear; this dot needs to get to the bottom; this dot needs three connections to crack the "ice"

FINAL NOTES ON SEMIOTICS

➤ Every game communicates meaning through semiotics;

➤ Signs are ultimately Metaphors —> One thing stands in for and describes another

➤ Meaning results from the interpretation of a sign;

➤ A sign's interpretation is context-dependent;

➤ Context is directly related to "structure" —> The rules or guidelines that articulate how signs may be combined (dots of one color may only be combined with dots of that same color; diagonal connections are prohibited)
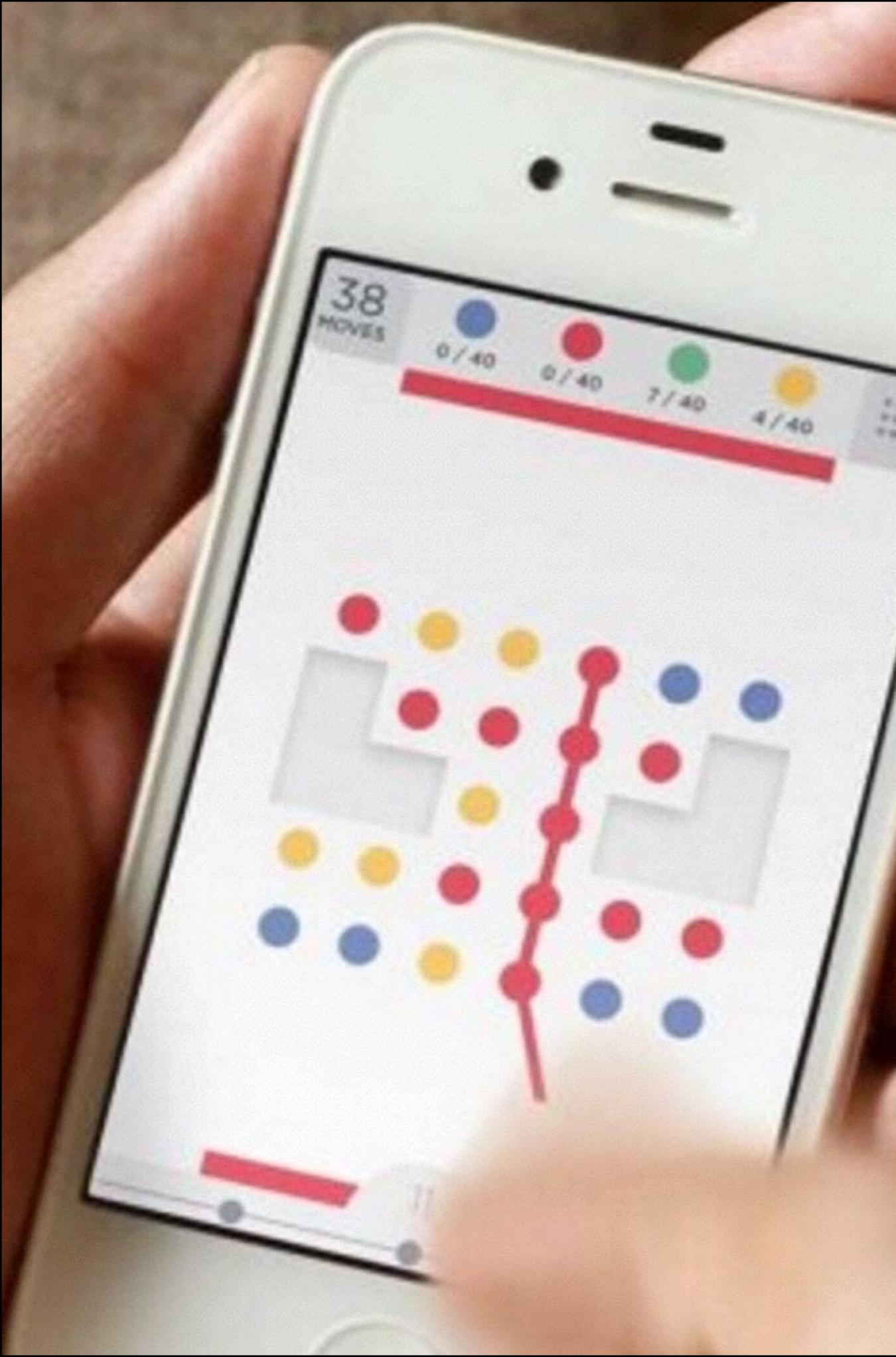
SYSTEMS

➤ All Games are systems: "a set of parts that relate to form a complex whole" (S&Z 50).

➤ 4 Elements that constitute a system:

1. Objects (dots);

2. Attributes (colors; ice; fire; anchor; etc.);

3. Internal Relationship amongst objects (position of one dot to another on the screen);

4. Environment (iOS, Android, touch-screen mobile device and game world)

➤ Systems may be formal, experiential, or cultural

TWO DOTS: A FORMAL SYSTEM
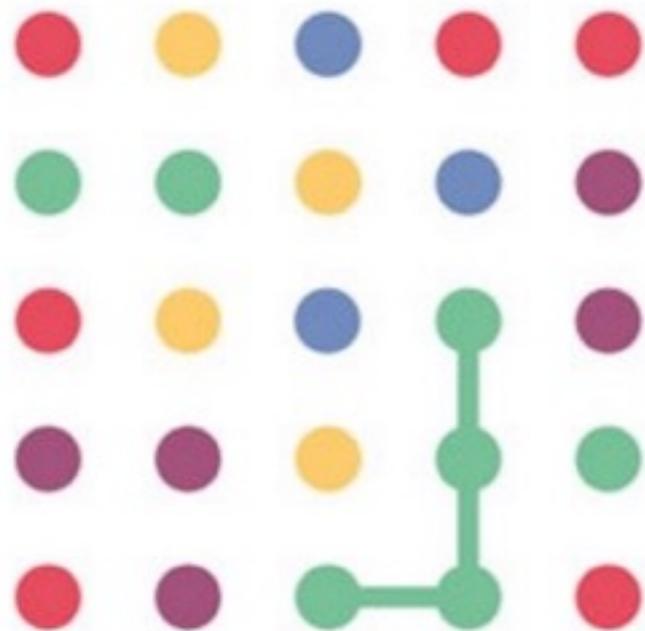
SIMPLY CONNECT DOTS

➤ Formal System: The system and its 4 elements described/understood in terms of its rules (described previous slide);

➤ A closed, self-contained system where nothing external to the system can affect what is internal to the system,

TWO-DOTS: AN EXPERIENTIAL SYSTEM

➤ Experiential System: a system of interaction between player(s) and the game

➤ Objects: player and device / player and game as a whole;

➤ Attributes: current state of the game; dots player can control;

➤ Internal Relationship: Player and their response to dots (can include emotional response);

➤ Environment: Mobile device; physical place of playing
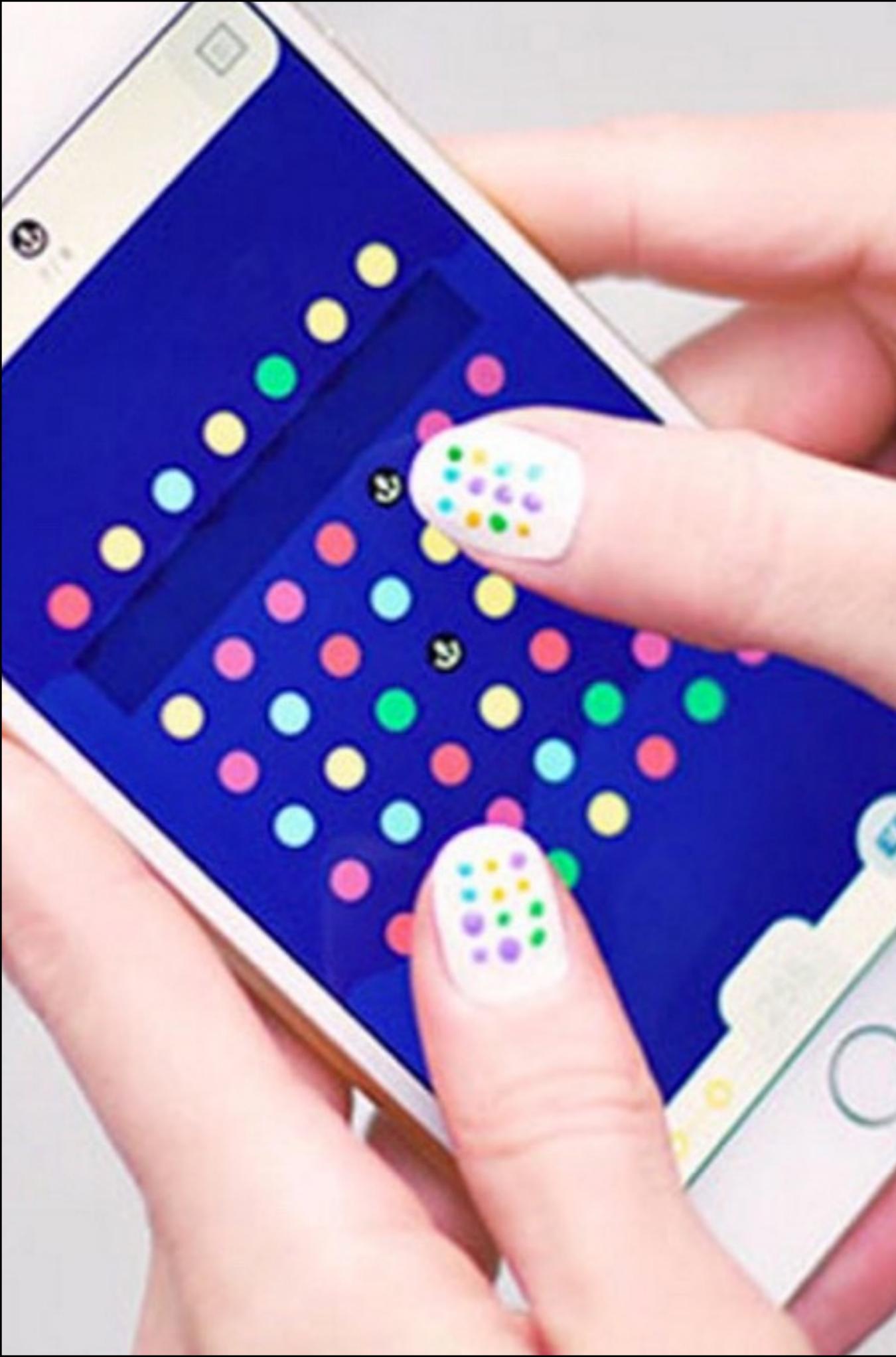
TWO DOTS: A CULTURAL SYSTEM

➤ Cultural System: a framework for thinking about games, where the concern is how the game fits into culture at large

➤ Objects: Two Dots as an overall game;

➤ Attributes: design choices and how/when/where game was made (culturally speaking);

➤ Internal relationships: between the game and culture (eg: importance of color; shape); may also relate to narrative and story game tells

➤ Environment: the context of play, cultural as such, "mobile gaming" as cultural phenomenon

FINAL NOTES ON SYSTEMS

➤ Systems may be open or closed

  ➤ Open system: there is some transfer between the system and its environment

  ➤ Closed system: there is no transfer between the system and its environment; the system is entirely self-contained

➤ Formal systems are closed; Cultural systems are open; Experiential systems may be open or closed

INTERACTIVITY

➤ S&Z propose a "multivalent model" of interactivity:

1. Cognitive interactivity / interpretive participation

2. Functional interactivity / utilitarian participation

3. Explicit interactivity / participation with designed choices and procedures

4. Beyond-the-object interactivity / participation within the culture of the object

➤ Designed interactivity is what gives interactivity meaning; and meaningful interactivity is based in player-choice & system-response
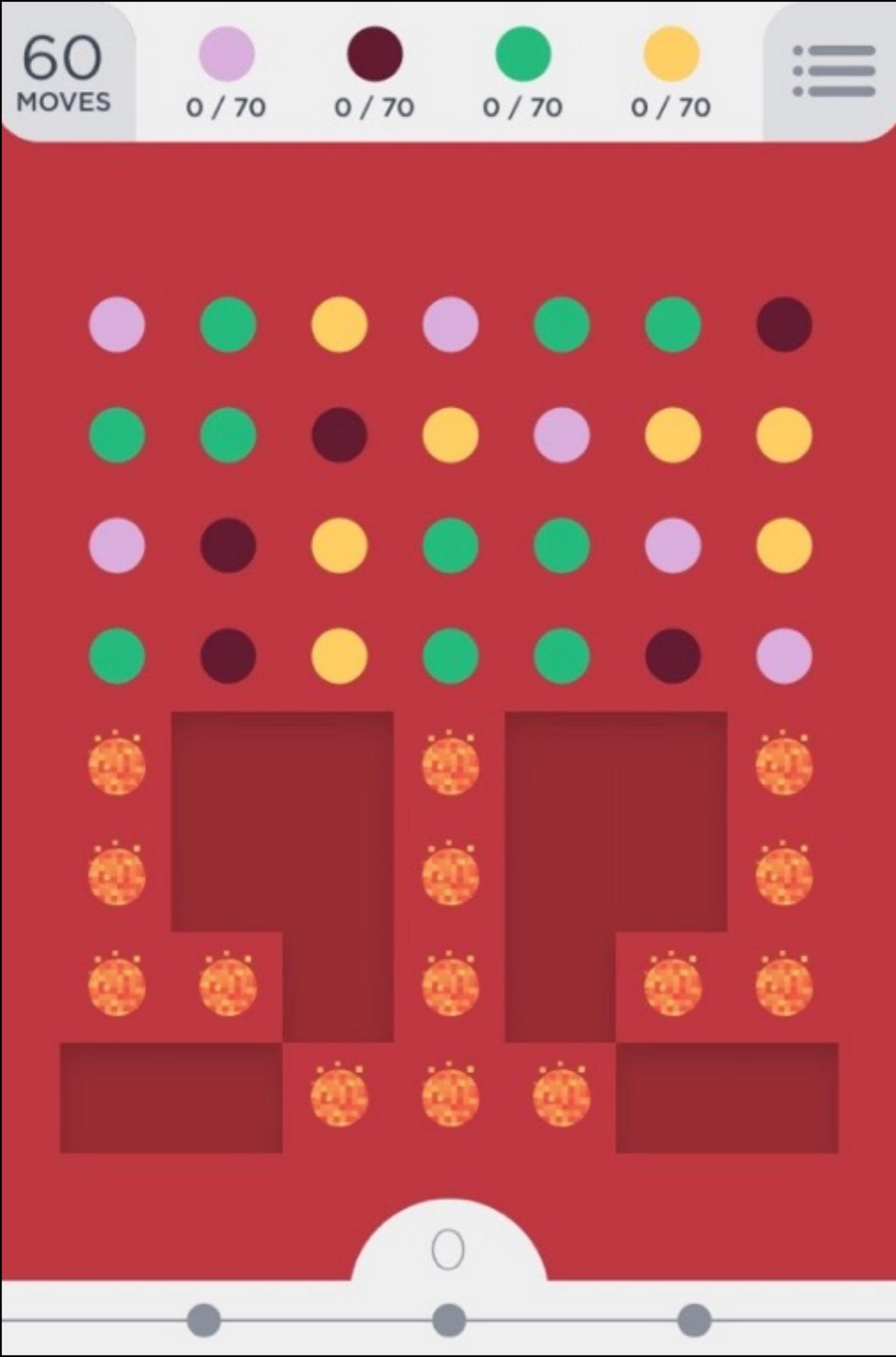
TWO-DOTS AND PLAYER CHOICE

- ➤ Micro, tactical choice: small, moment-to-moment choices a player makes (what dots should be / can be connected at all?)

- ➤ Macro, strategic choice: how micro-choices link together to provide a strategy for the entire game (what connections will be the best for strategizing and moving forward in the game?)

TWO DOTS AND THE ANATOMY OF A CHOICE

➤ "When the outcome of every action is discernible and integrated, choice-making leads to meaningful play" (62).

➤ S&Z's 5 Questions for designing meaningful choice:

1. What happened before the player was given a choice?

2. How is the possibility of choice conveyed to the player?

3. How did the player make the choice?

4. What is the result of the choice and how will it affect future choices?

5. How is the result conveyed to the player?

CHOICE AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO GAME FAILURE

➤ "If your game has a failure to deliver meaningful play, it is probably because there is a breakdown somewhere in the action > outcome chain" (65).

➤ S&Z offer the following common "failure states":

　➤ Decisions seem arbitrary;

　➤ It is unclear what to do next;

　➤ Players lose without knowing why;

　➤ It is unclear what the outcome of an action is