

# 404 NOT FOUND

A simple word search game begins to doubt its own meaning, trying to imitate “good games” by adding new mechanics and narratives to please the player.

In the end, it leaves the question to you: Does this count as a meaningful game?

🔗 [Playable Build \(Windows\) & Gameplay Video](#)

Experimental  
Puzzle Game

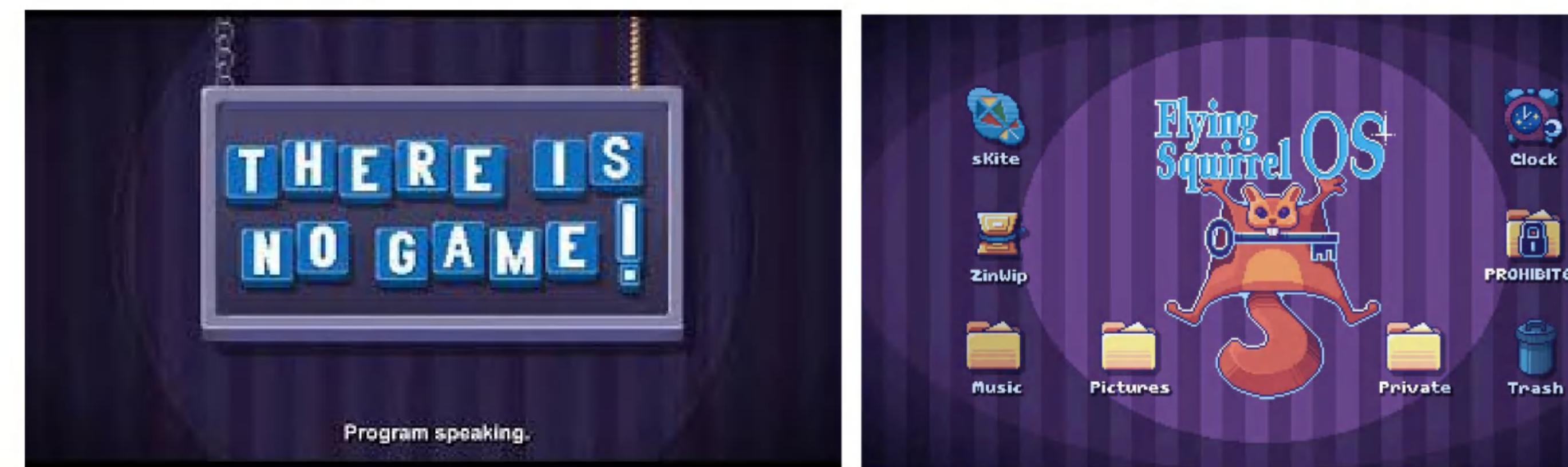
## Background

When I first began studying game design, the central question posed to us was: **what is a game?** The common image of a “real game” often emphasizes playability and challenge, with complex systems, detailed mechanics, and demanding levels. In one of our early discussions on narrative games, my professor pointed out that some people do not regard them as games because they are more like films and lack traditional mechanics. This made me realize that we sometimes think about games through an implicit hierarchy of value, where certain genres are placed at the top while others are seen as less legitimate.



For me, the ultimate goal of a game is not necessarily to provide challenge or add complexity, but to create an experience. That experience can be tense and exciting or calm and simple. Even the most basic forms can convey emotions, create reflection, or leave a lasting memory at a particular moment. That is why I chose to begin with word search—a game I often played in my early days of learning English.

## Reference



As a reference, I looked at **There Is No Game**. The game often forces the player to “mess with” the UI—dragging, clicking, or even breaking interface elements in unexpected ways. At the same time, a witty narrator constantly comments on the player’s actions, turning ordinary interactions into moments of humor.

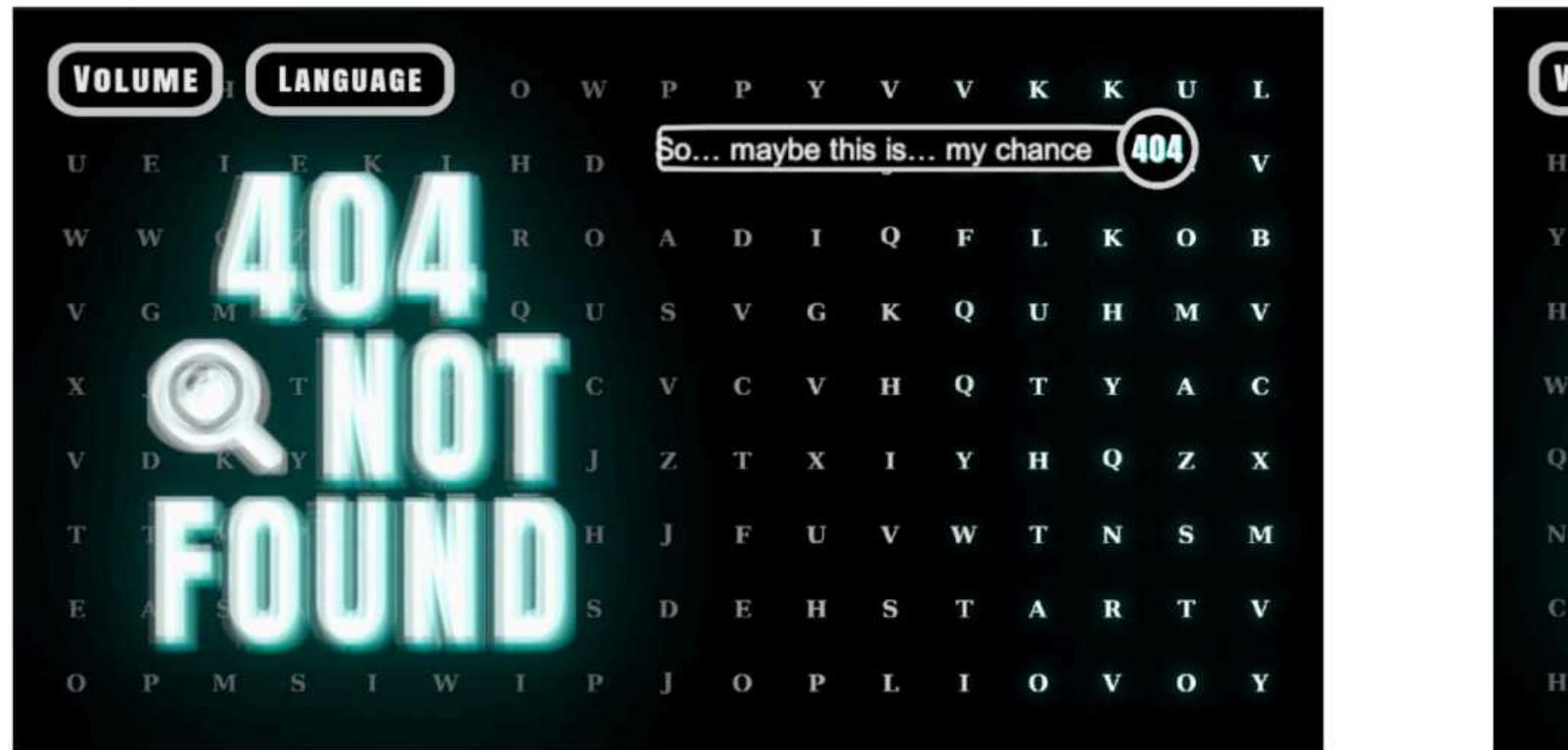
## Narrative Design

This game is based on word search, but I wanted it to go beyond its traditional form and respond to the common view that it is trivial.

The first level is simple and classic, while later ones slowly add features often seen in “good games”, like hidden hints, story elements, and game feel. But these parts are made in awkward or clumsy ways, as if the game is trying too hard to copy others. I wanted players to feel its doubt and desire to be liked. It keeps trying to prove its worth, and sometimes its over-effort becomes frustrating. In the end, it asks the player, “Do you think this is a meaningful game?”

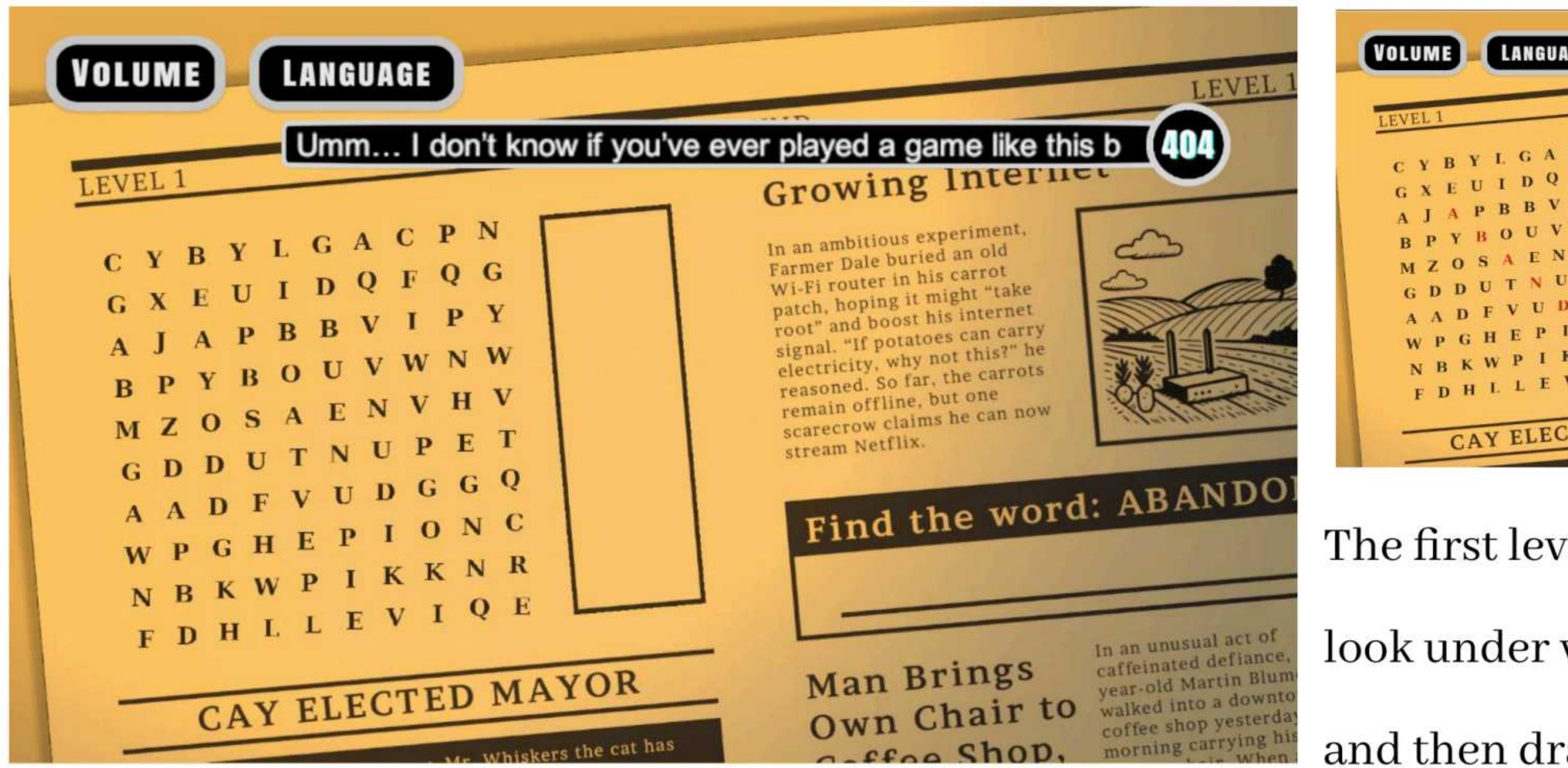
# Game Flow

## Level 0



This is the game's starting screen, but there is no start button.

## Level 1

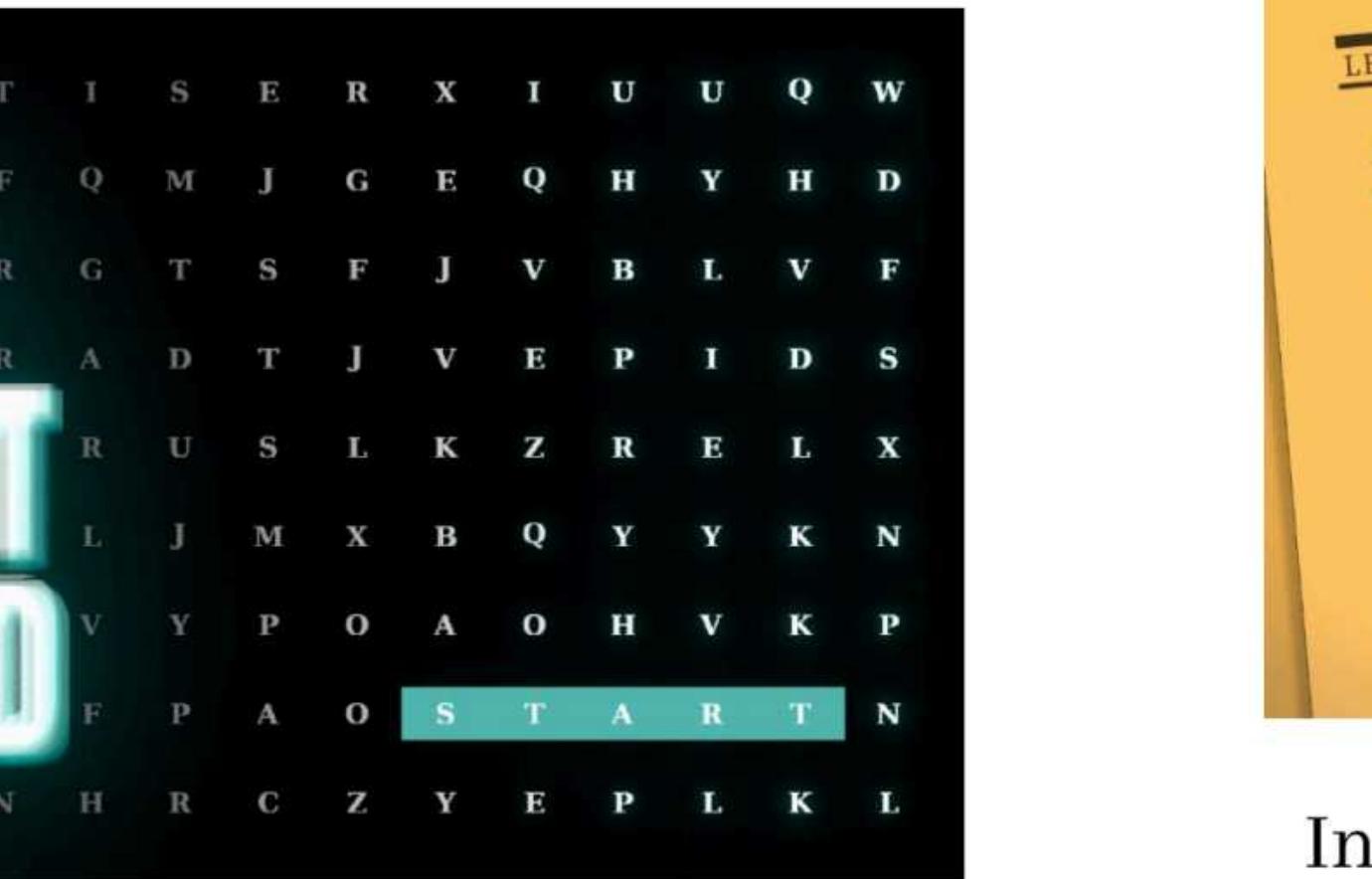


The first level is a traditional word puzzle, so I designed it with a newspaper-like look under warm yellow lighting. The player needs to find the prompted words and then drag them to the submission area on the right to clear the level.



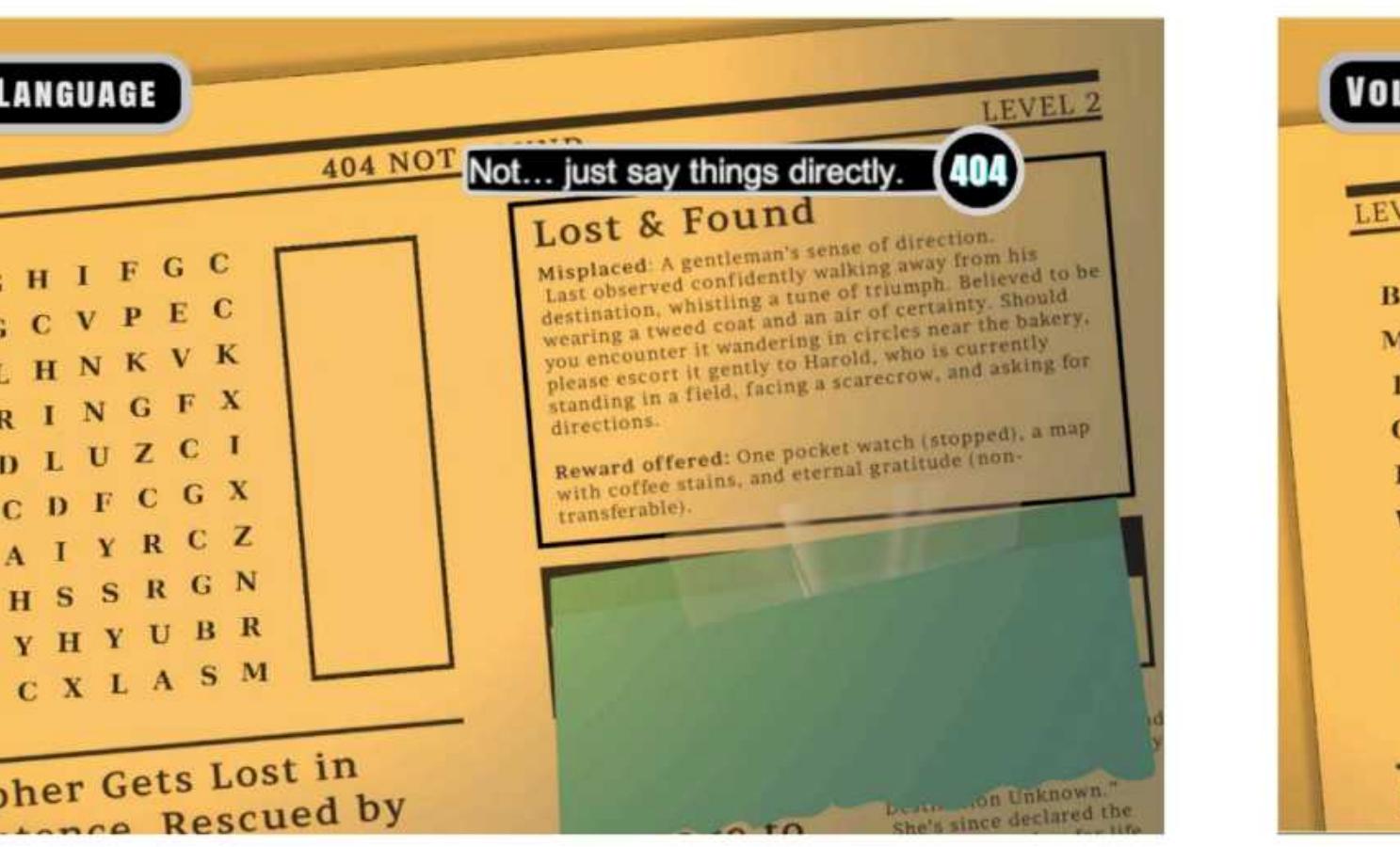
The player needs to find the word "START."

Once selected, it turns into a button that can be clicked to enter the next level.

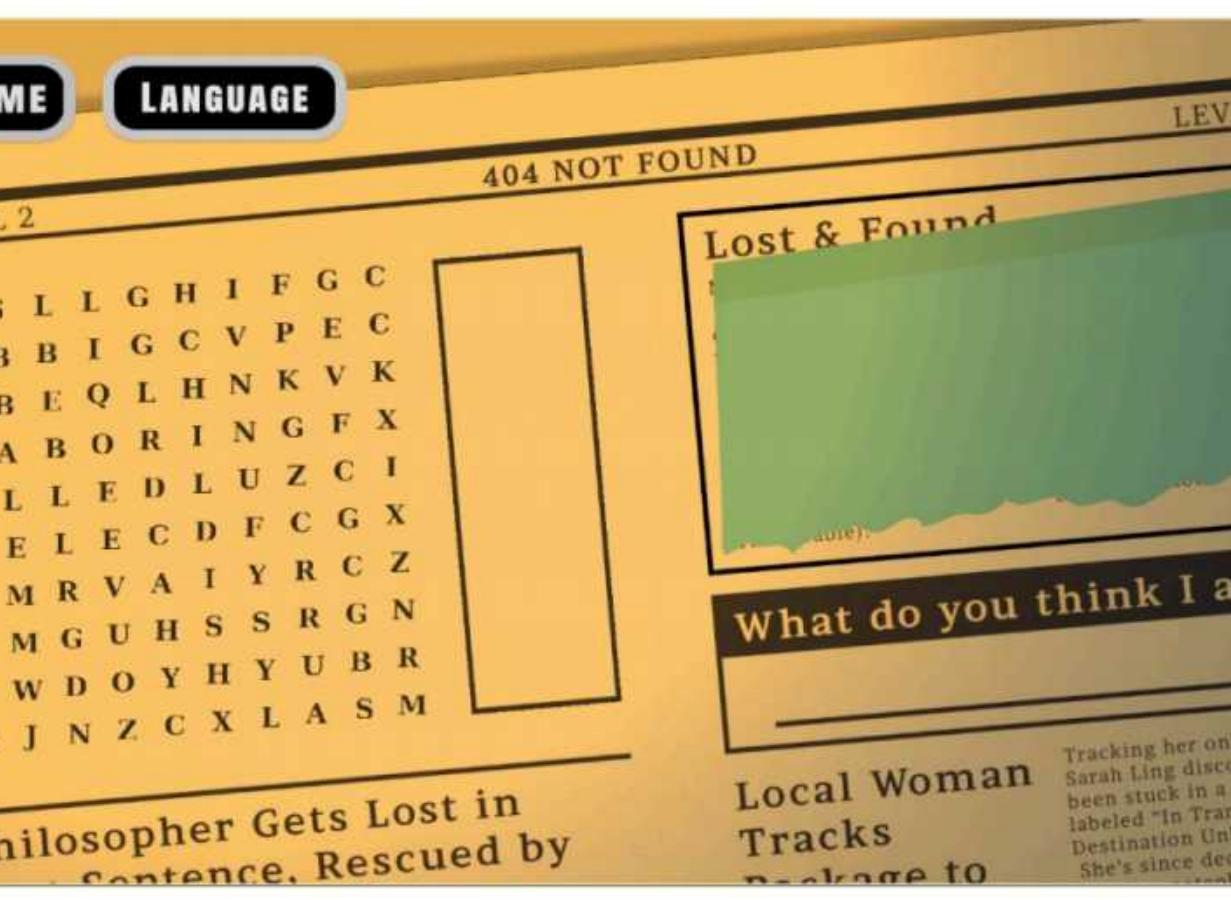


Once selected, it turns into a button that can be clicked to enter the next level.

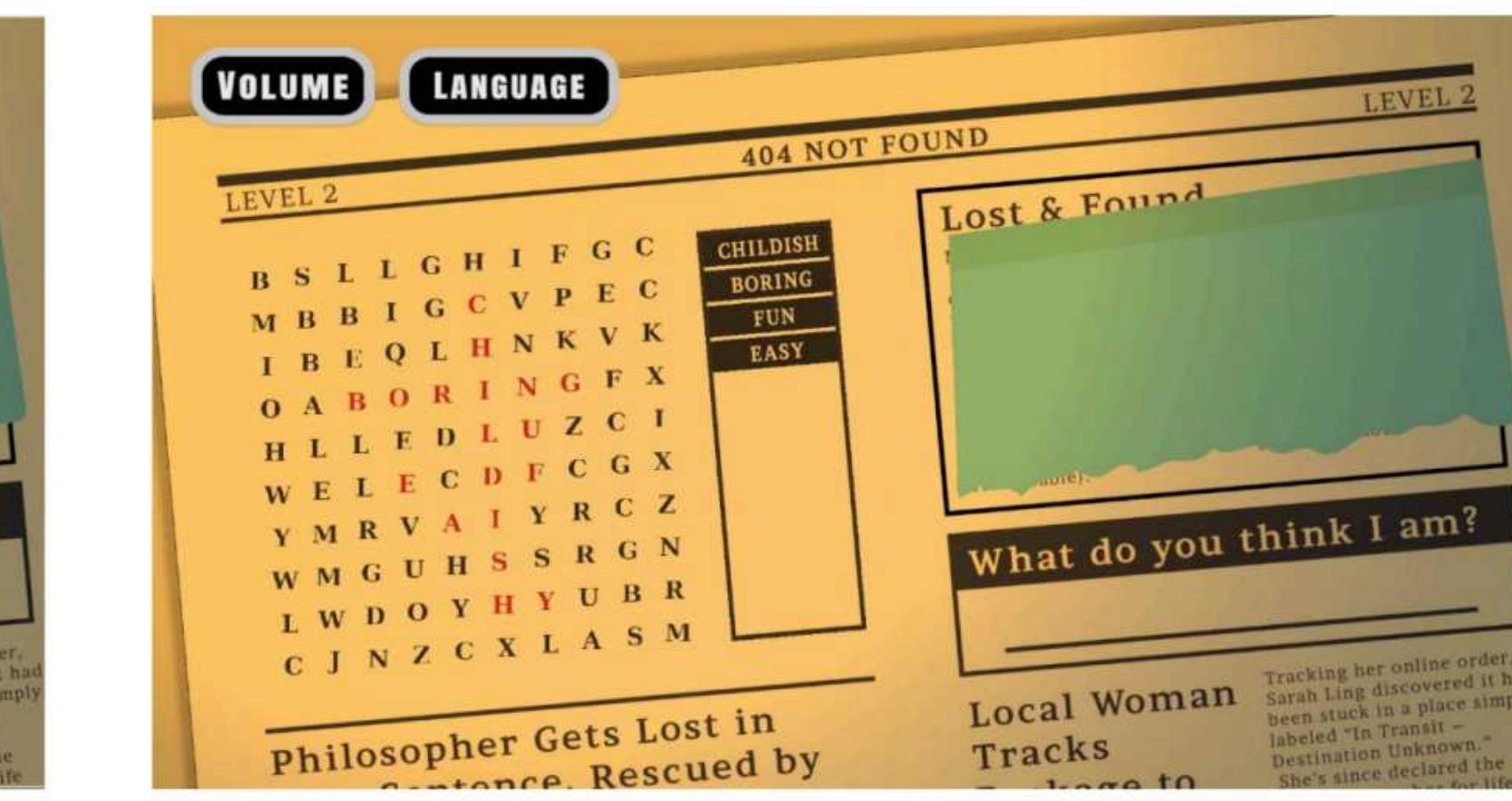
## Level 2



In this level, the game's self-awareness uses implicit hints, though in a slightly misleading way.



The player tears off the sticky note to reveal a request to find a word describing the game.

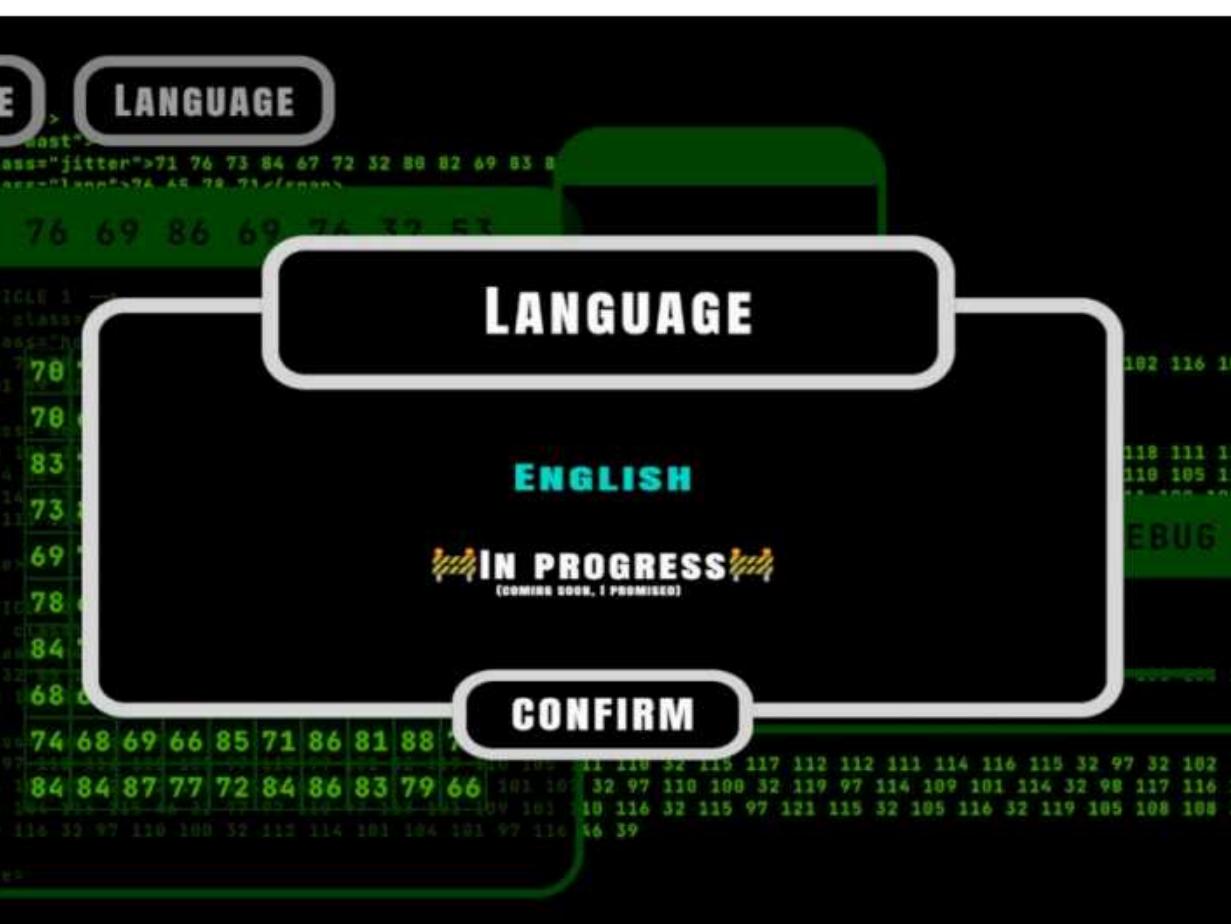


Different adjectives can be chosen, leading to different dialogues, and the selection will be remembered for later.

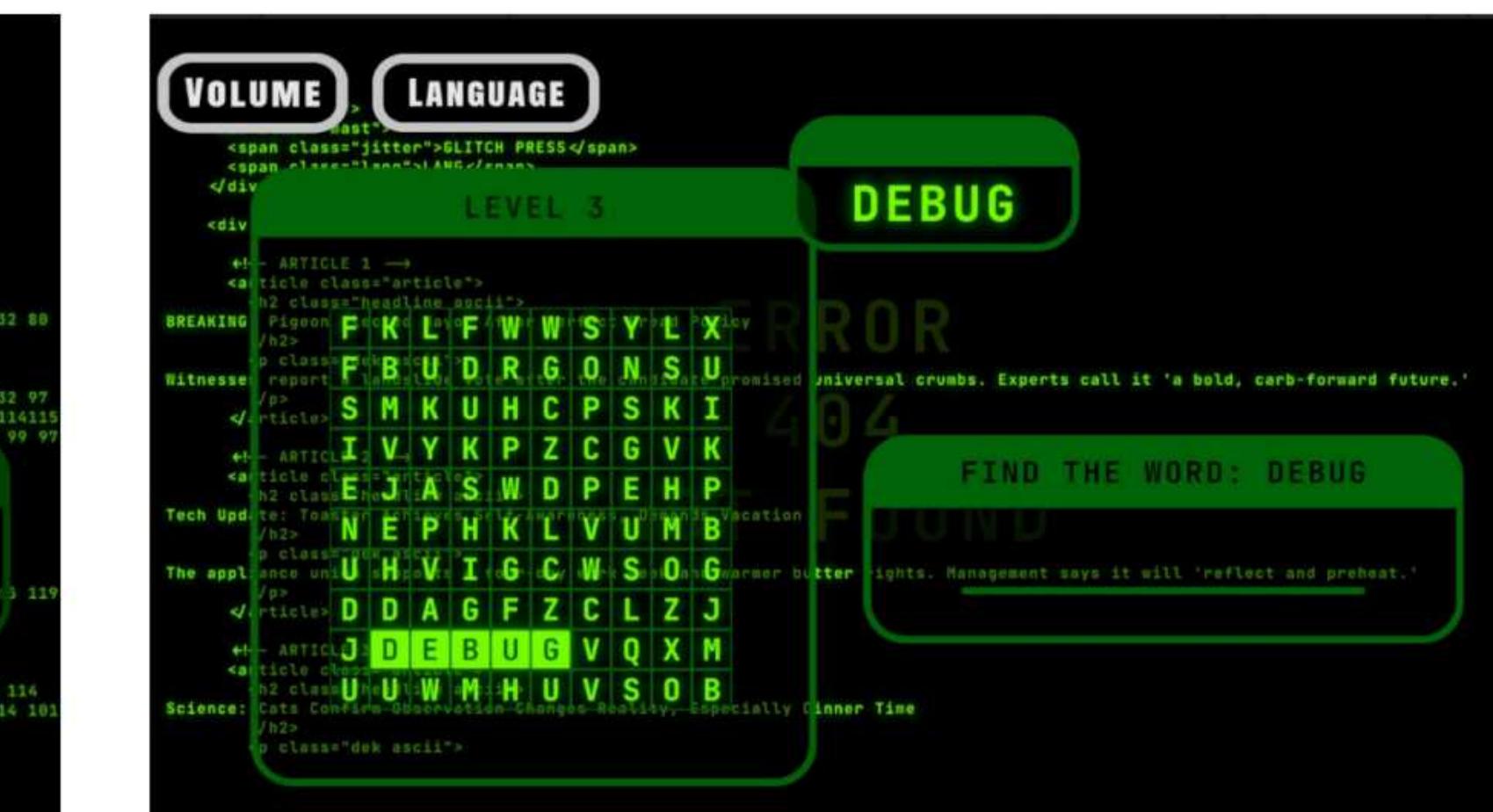
## Level 3



The game tries to rewrite its code but runs into a bug, turning all text into ASCII.



Players can switch the language back to English.



Or, they can try to decode it directly—once they find DEBUG, they can move on.

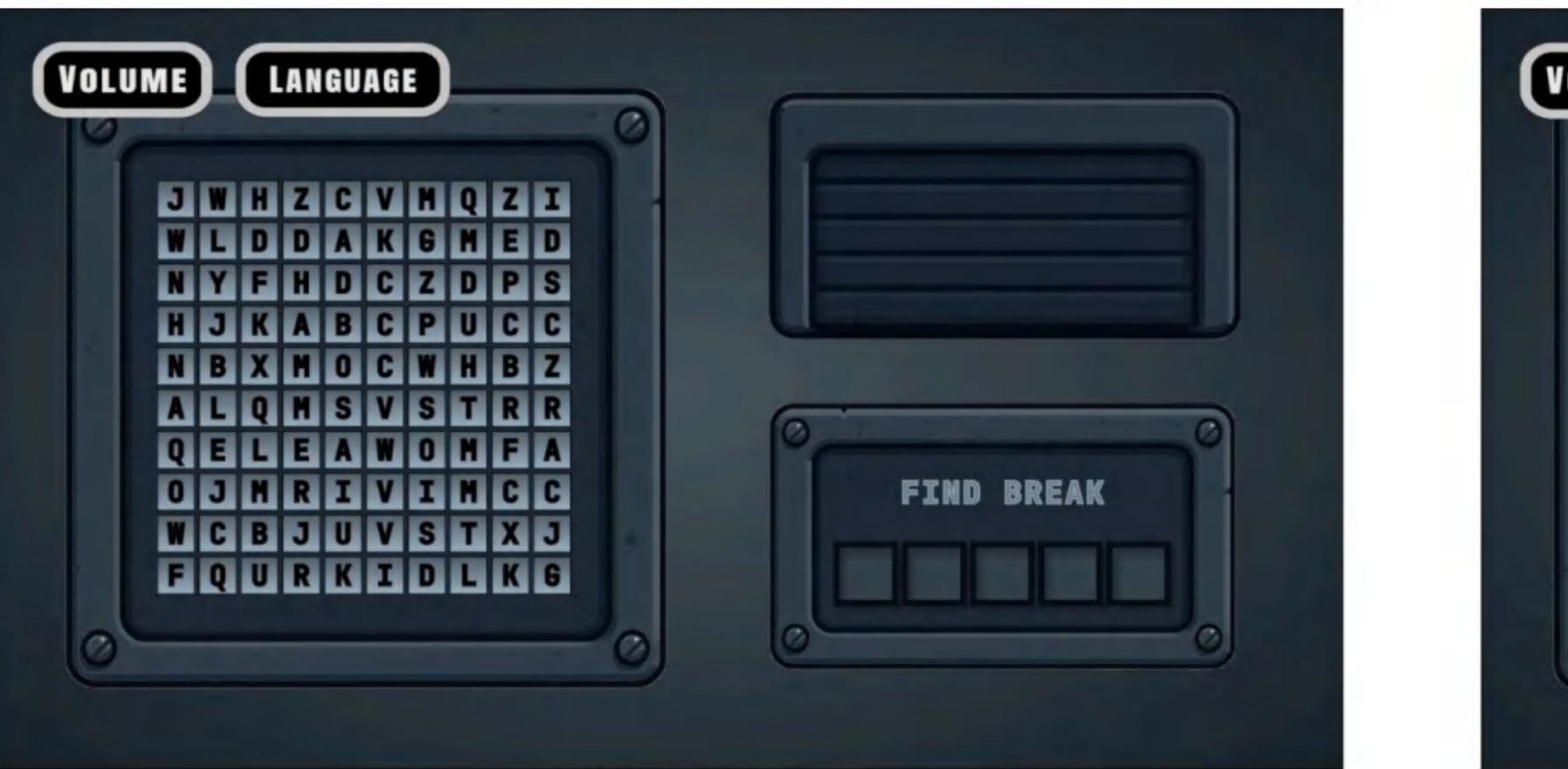
# Game Flow

## Level 4



In this level, the game removes the "APPLE" on purpose, trying to add a "system".

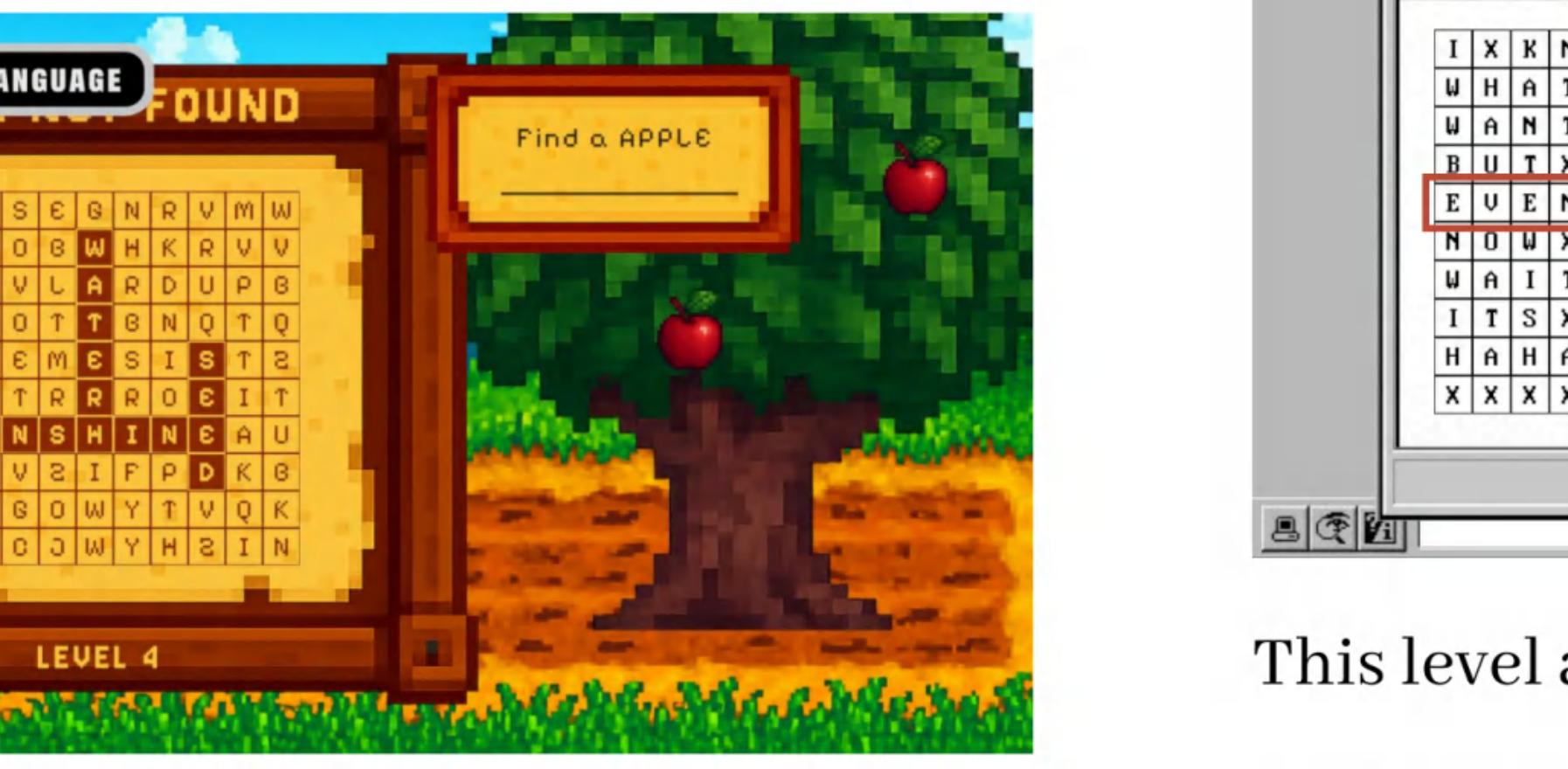
## Level 5



In this level, the game removes the target word again, this time trying to add a sense of "game feel".

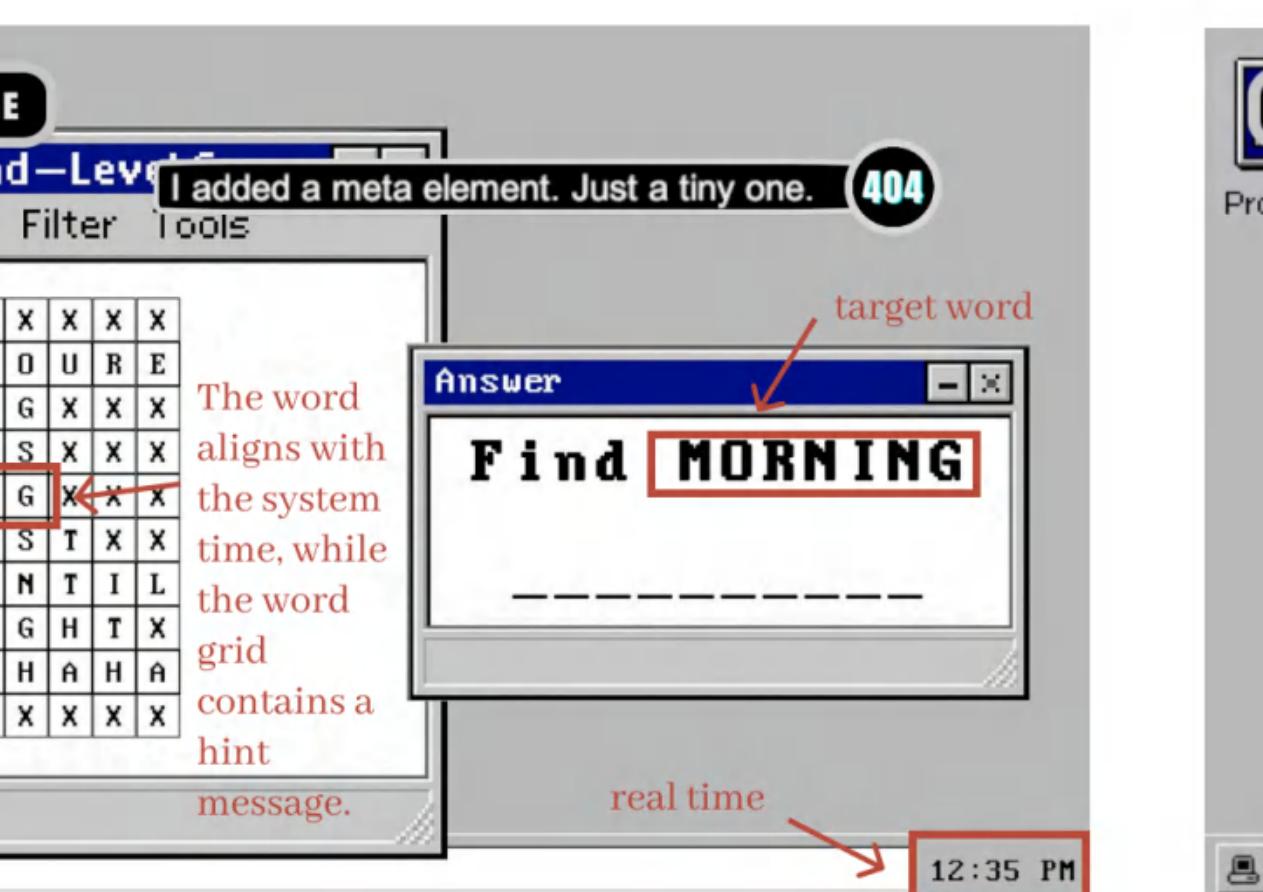


The player needs to find the words Seed, Water, and Sunshine, then drag them onto the field to make something grow.

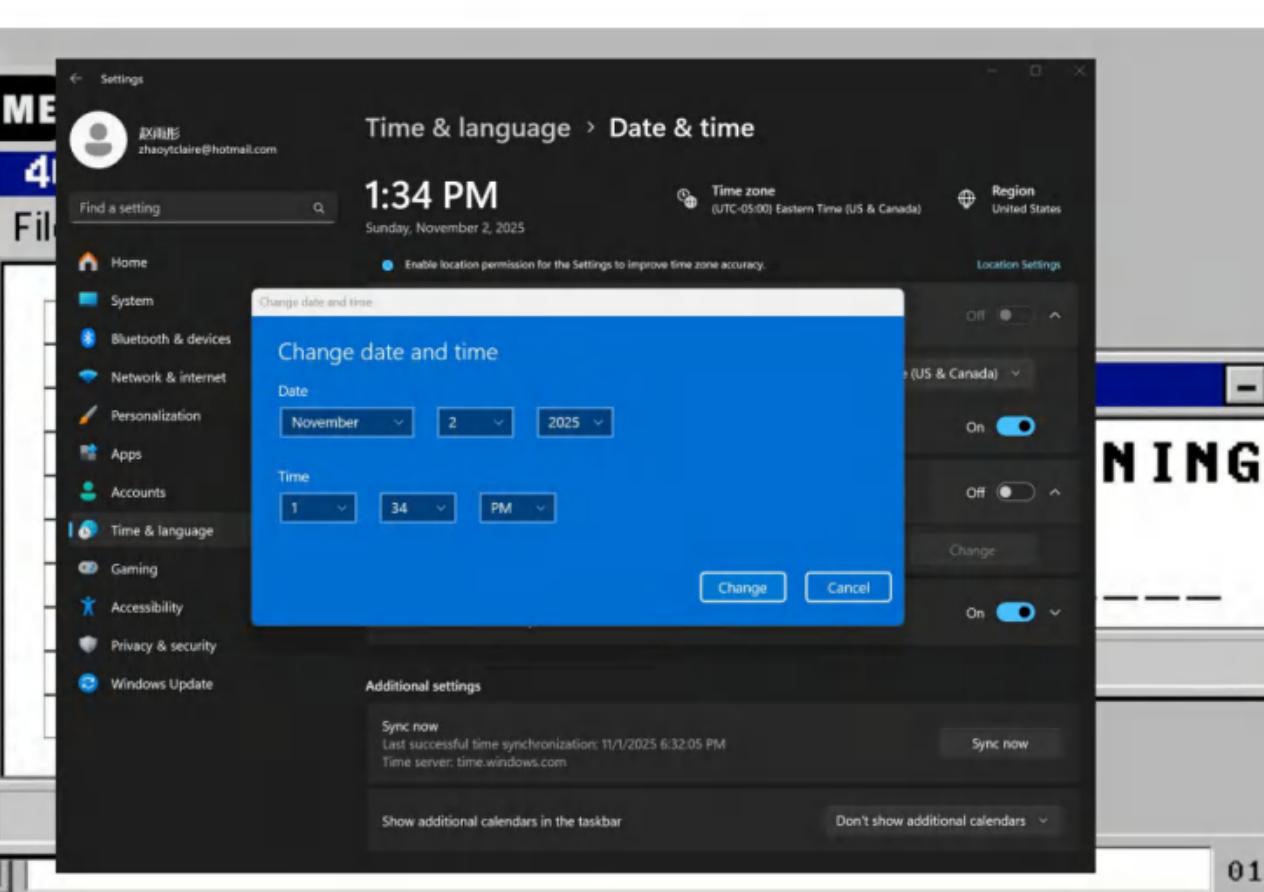


The player eventually grows an apple and places it into the answer box.

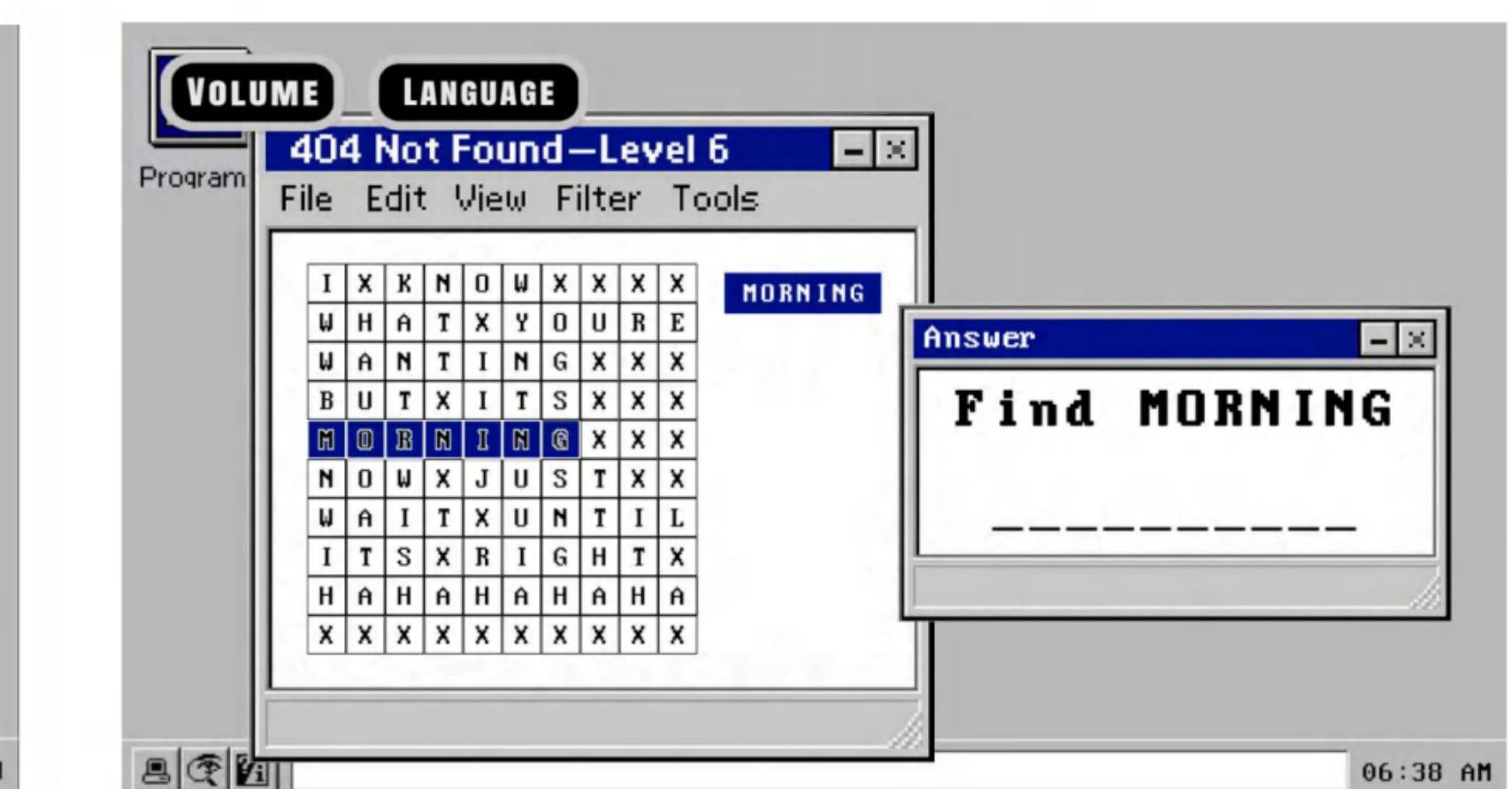
## Level 6



This level adds a meta element. The target word reverses the system time. If it is evening, it shows "Morning".



The player must change their computer's system time to make the correct word appear.



Once the time is set correctly, the right word appears in the grid.

## Future Plan

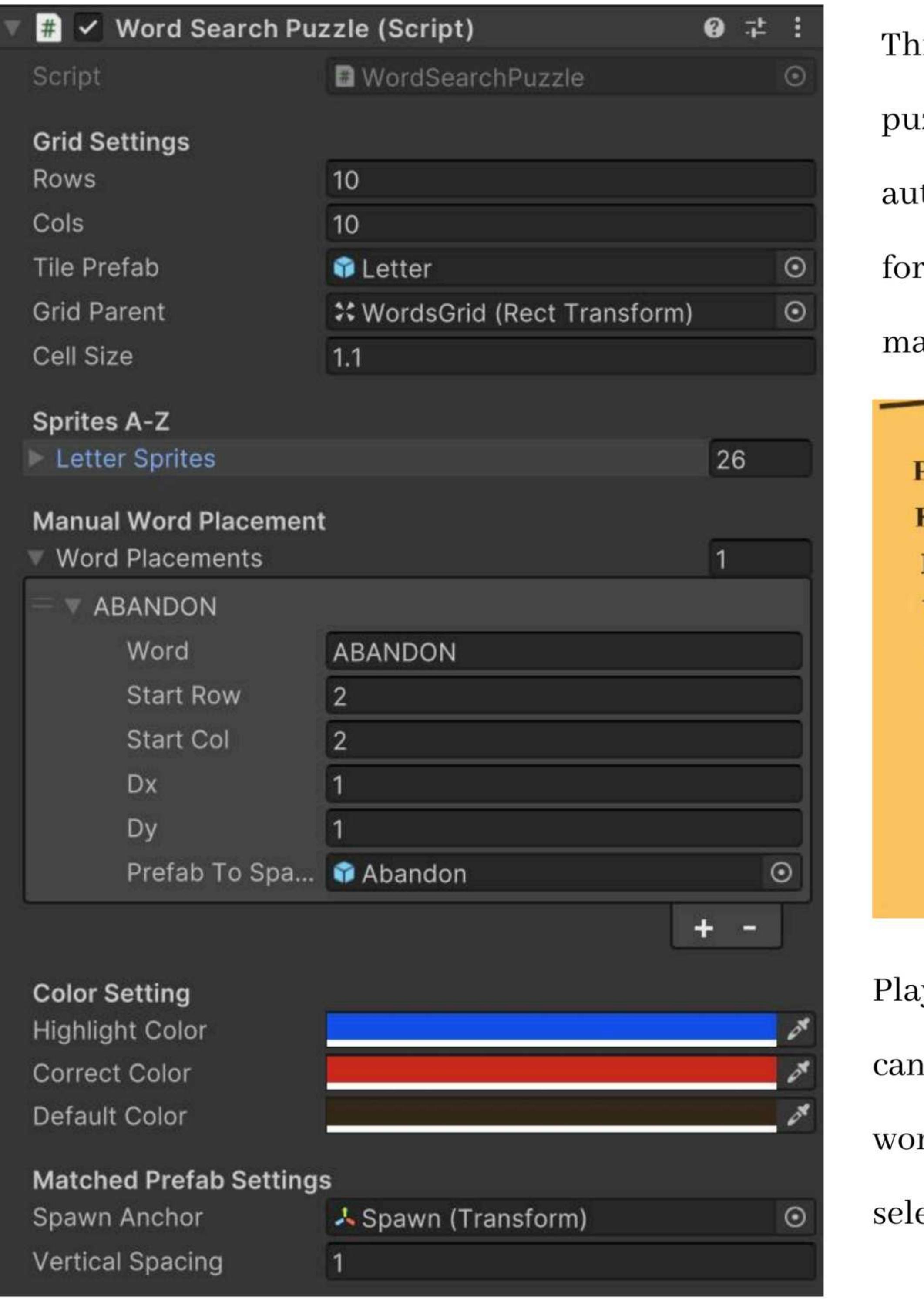
LEVEL 7 - Narrative	Explore the connection between word puzzles and storytelling. Instead of finding a fixed word, players piece words together to form a story.
LEVEL 8 - UI	Turn the user interface into part of the gameplay. Players pull words from the UI elements to progress, blurring the line between game and interface.
LEVEL 9 - Challenge	This level adds a challenge where letters move chaotically, and players must use the pause button to stop them and find the word.
ENDING	In the final level, the game asks the player which level they liked the most. If the player chooses the first and most traditional level, the game reacts with surprise. It begins to realize that what the player values may be a certain feeling that existed at the beginning. The game ends with reflection, questioning what truly makes a good game.



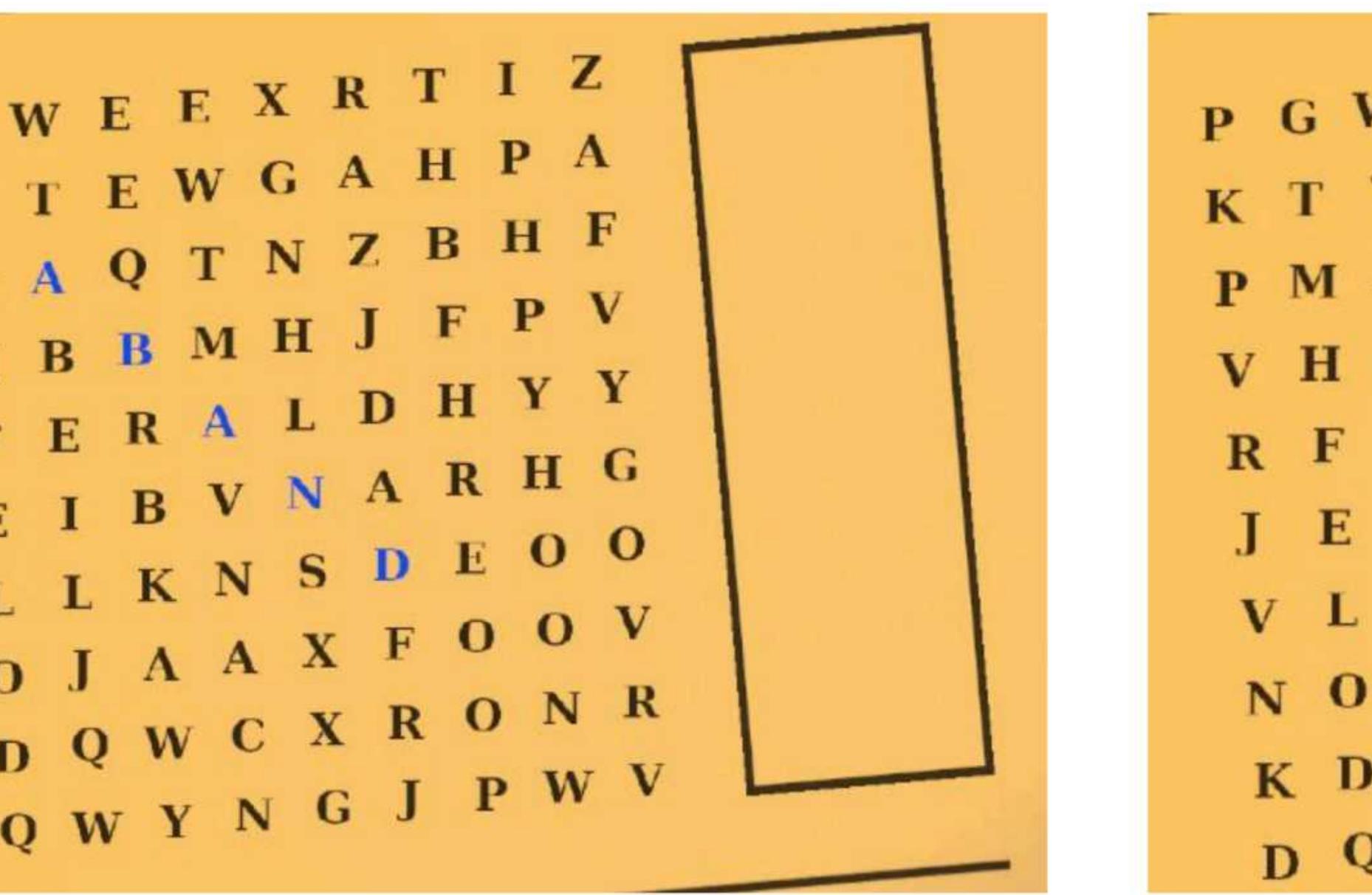
They use the hammer to hit letters and form the word. The screen shakes with a loud sound.

# Implementation

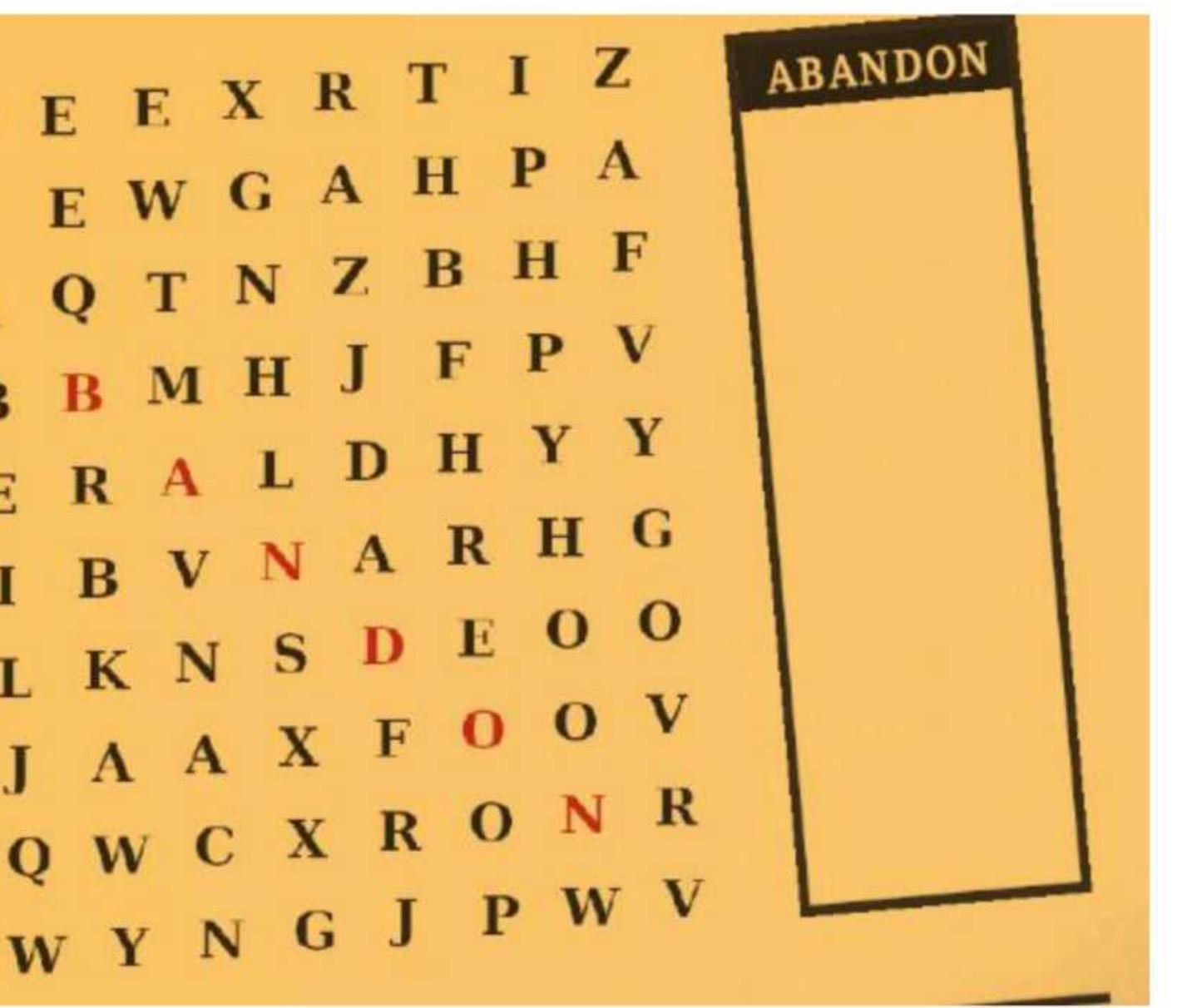
## Word Puzzle



This is a general-purpose word puzzle component. I can adjust different parameters to control the puzzle layout, defining specific words to appear at fixed positions while the rest of the grid is automatically filled. The visual style is also flexible: each level can use different letter sprites, allowing for variety in appearance. The highlight color is customizable, allowing the word selection effect to match each level's design.



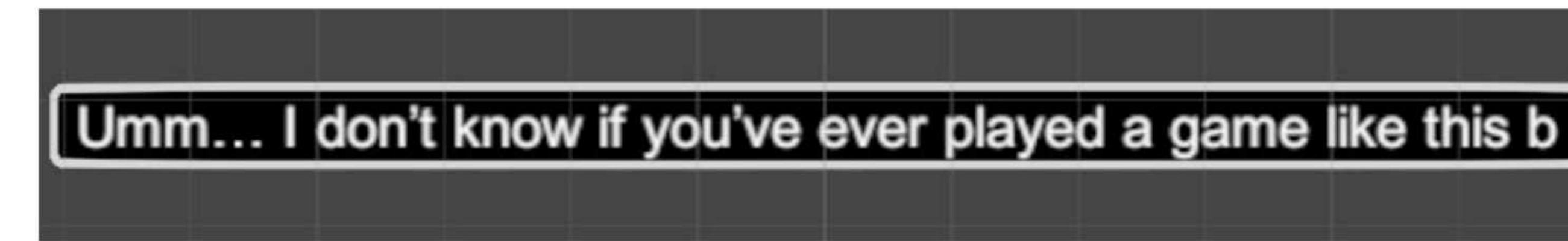
Players press and hold to start selecting. They can drag in any of the eight directions, and the word length depends on the drag. Temporarily selected letters change color for feedback.



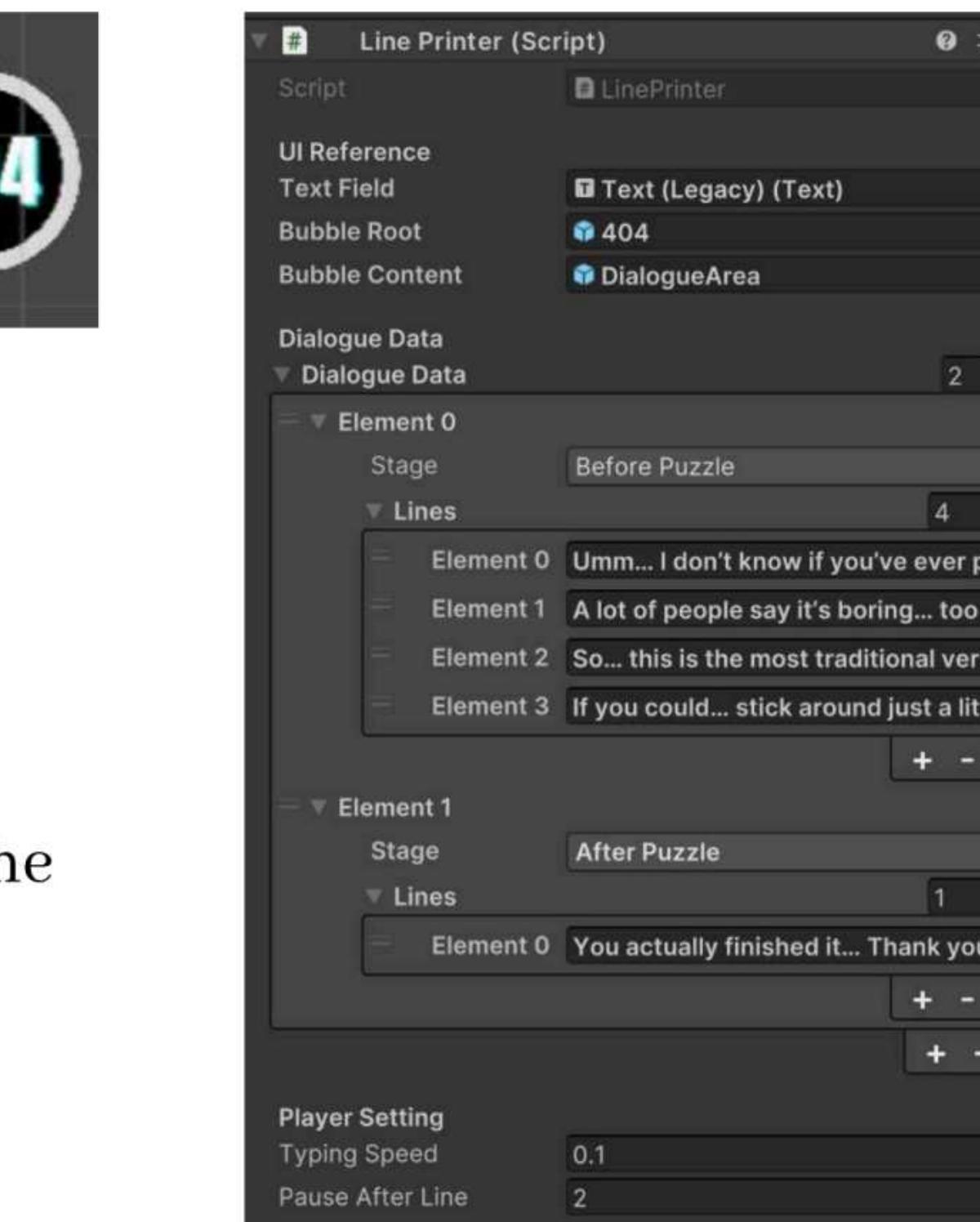
When the player releases the mouse button, the selection ends. If the selected letters form a target word, they permanently change color and generate a draggable word on the right.

Otherwise, the letters revert to their original state.

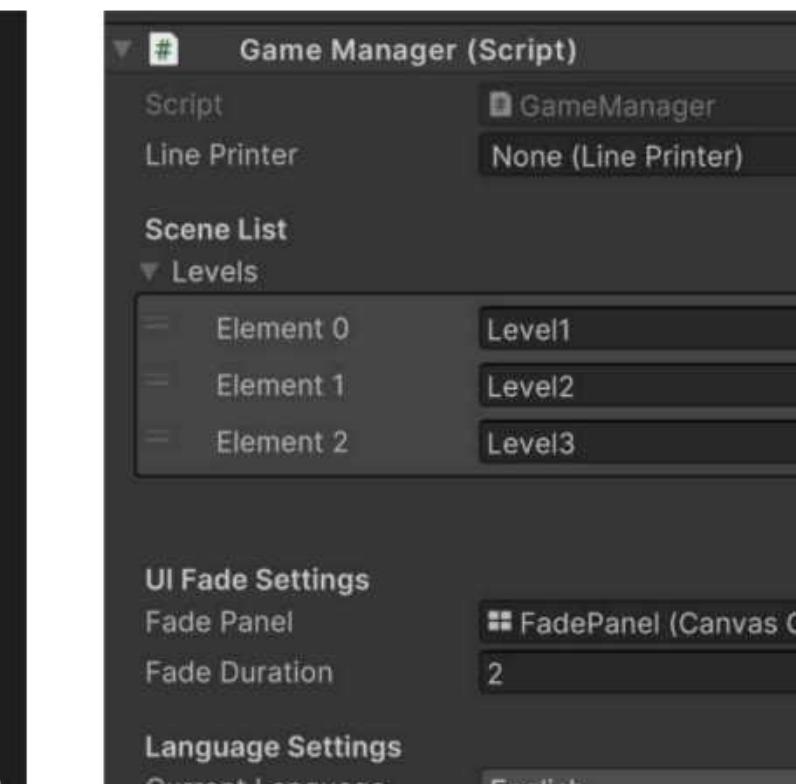
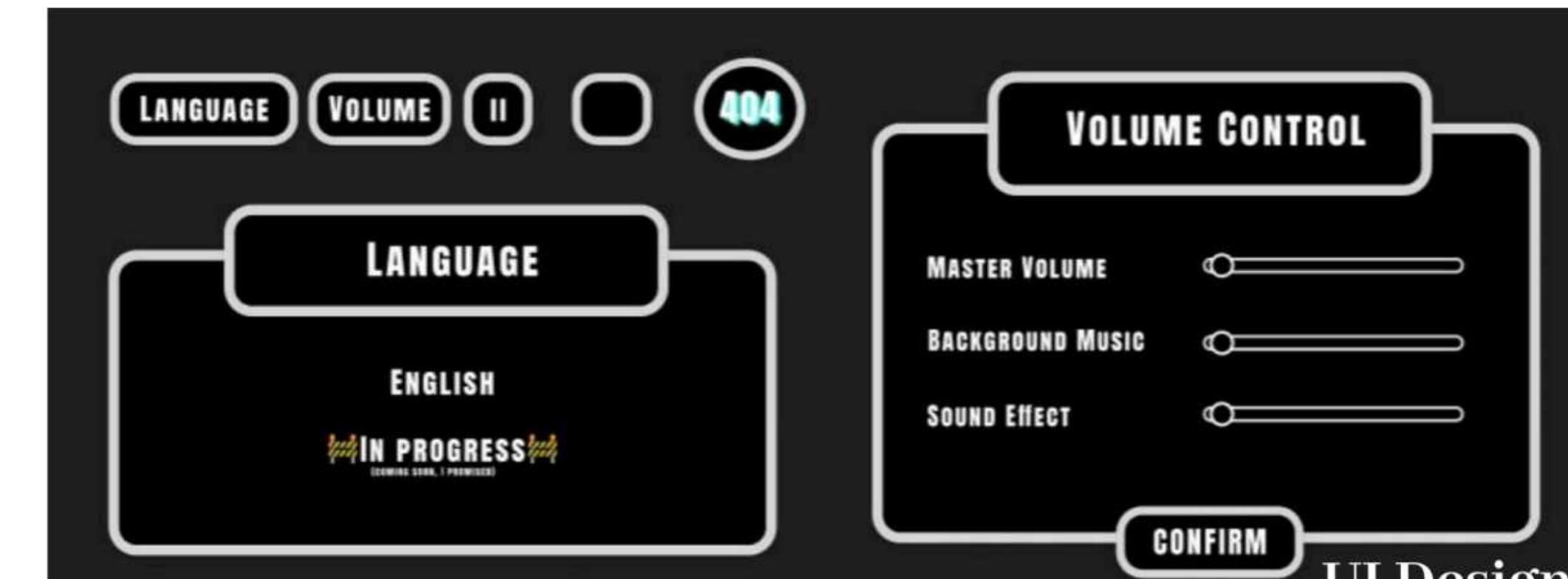
## Line Printer



This is an editable line printer system, designed to support the game's self-awareness. Since the game contains many different levels, each level can have customized dialogue lines. Within a level, the system can deliver different lines depending on the player's stage of progress, and it can also react differently to the player's choices. The text is displayed with a typewriter-style printing effect to enhance the presentation.



## Others



**Game Manager in All Level**  
**Audio Manager in All Level**

