DREAM PROJECT

Choosing what to watch on Netflix

The Problem

Is cover art still the best way to pick a movie?

I remember walking up and down Blockbuster aisles, judging movies by their covers. I used to be obsessed with "Hellraiser" (still haven't seen it; how *did* he get those pins in his head??)

Despite all the innovation that got Netflix to where it is today, it has essentially replicated that in-store experience in its current UI. But as we scroll through movie covers online, moving quickly to avoid the dreaded auto-play, there's no helpful, knowledgeable movie store employee who can help us find what we're looking for.

The dreaded scrollfest ("let's just take a look…")

So you're sitting with a group, like your family, and you want to watch a movie. You log in. You hastily scroll past your "recently watched" because your parents don't need to know about "Love Island." You ask if anyone has a genre preference. People say things, none of it helpful. You wish you weren't the one with the remote. After several long minutes, the group is either in complete disagreement ("but I *just* watched that") or in polite deference mode ("You pick honey! Whatever you want.") Maybe you end up choosing something you've already seen, and as it plays it dawns on you that your brother is not going to find that joke that's coming up funny at ALL.

Choosing what to watch is kinda the worst.

Not much incentive to try something new

The best choosing-what-to-watch experience usually *necessitates* knowing what you want to watch before you even log in. I'd be willing to bet that most people who start scrolling through the hundreds of options they have on all the streaming services they subscribe to end up just *re-watching* something...maybe 70% of the time? If they do take a chance on something, they can just as easily change their mind and abandon ship.

Netflix knows this, which is why counts 2 minutes as a full viewing of content AND the company is planning to release its "Play Something" feature soon, which essentially replicates tuning into a cable channel (when you log in the software auto-selects and plays a movie based on your data.)
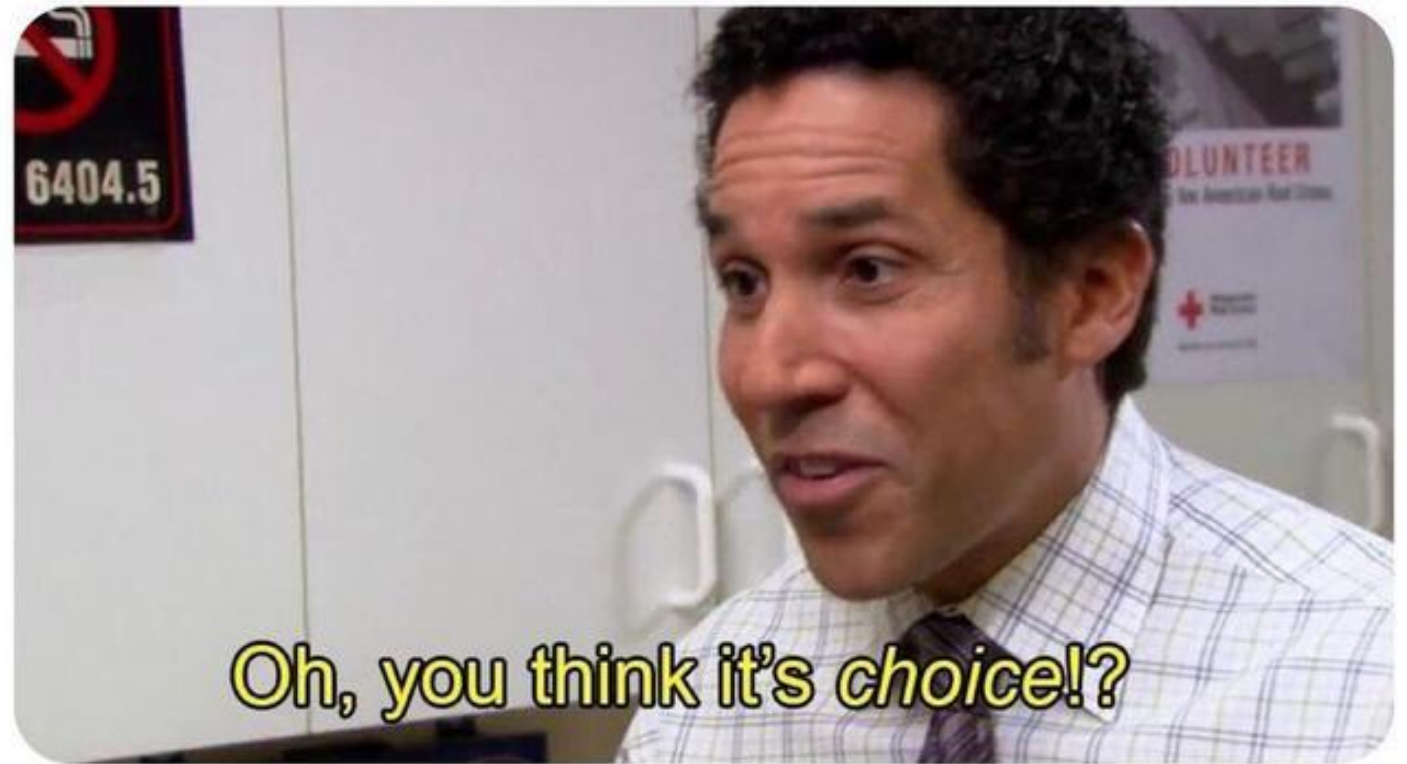
Insights

2 viewer modes

Today's streamers seem to have 2 main modes:

Mode 1 is about comfort: it's been a long day, and we want to get out of our heads and check in with familiar faces and easy storylines. This is when we re-watch, because the stuff we already know and love is just so *available,* and trying something new isn't an emotional risk we're willing to take right now.

Mode 2 is about expansion as opposed to...contraction, or the way that re-watching (or even new-but-still-familiar content) actually *shrinks* our world instead of opening it up. Mode 2 is about movies we've heard we "should" watch. It's about stories that challenge us, or that make us feel more than just *good*. For a lot of us, it's in our best interest to spend more time in mode 2; we just need some help getting there.

Netflix (and the industry) is leaning into Mode 1

It's one of those tricky things. I would never advocate that we deny people their pleasure and relaxation, especially given the state of the world right now. At the same time, our current consumption rate of easy-watching content probably goes *way* beyond our natural inclination.

Content creators know this, which is why there's so much new content-by-algorithm (often in the guise of nostalgia, like Disney remaking all its animated classics.) Sometimes you can even see the algorithm at work. What's "Riverdale" if not the center of the Venn diagram between "Twin Peaks" and Archie comics?
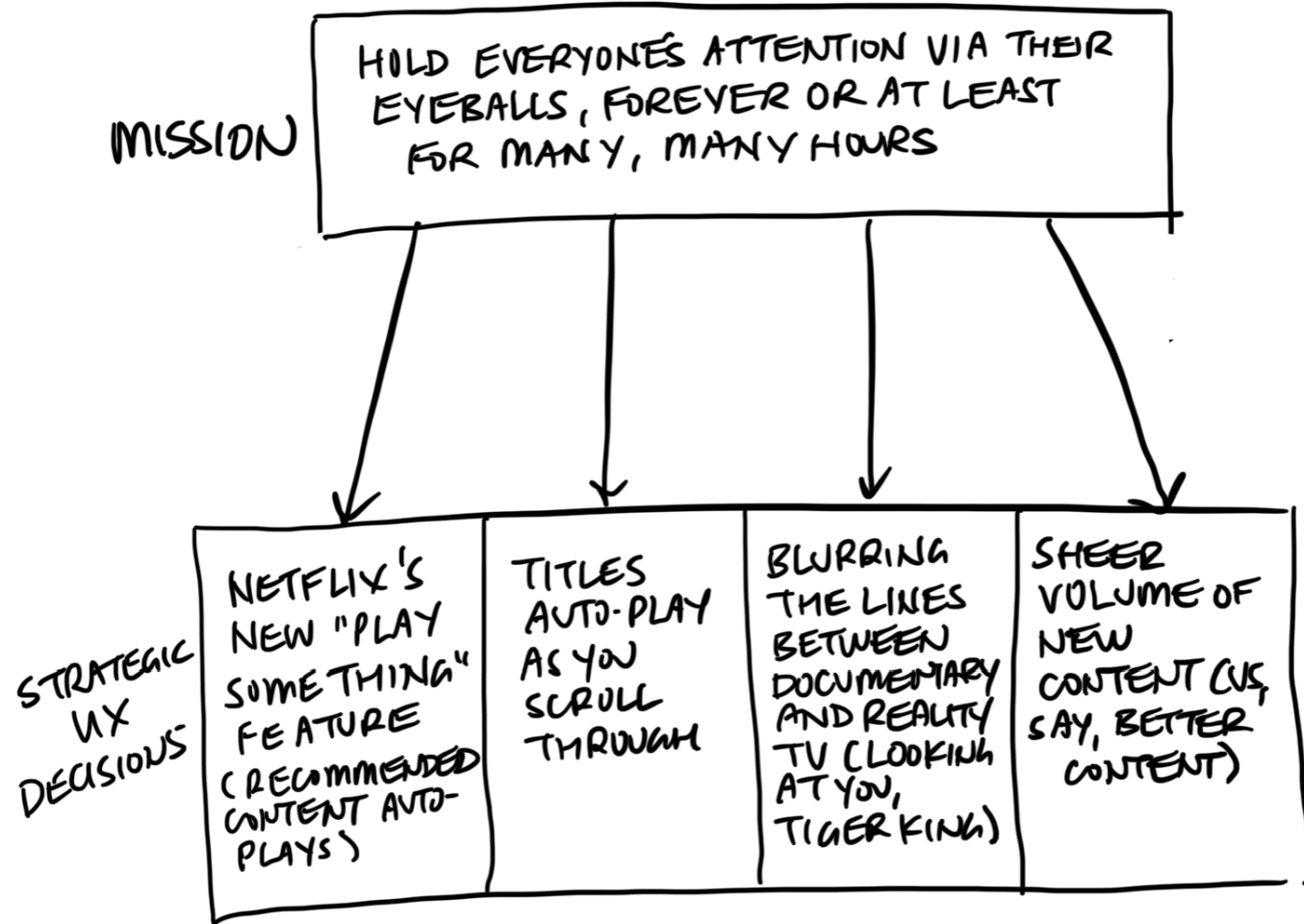
Netflix isn't serving, and is in fact actively *hindering,* our ability to tap into mode 2.
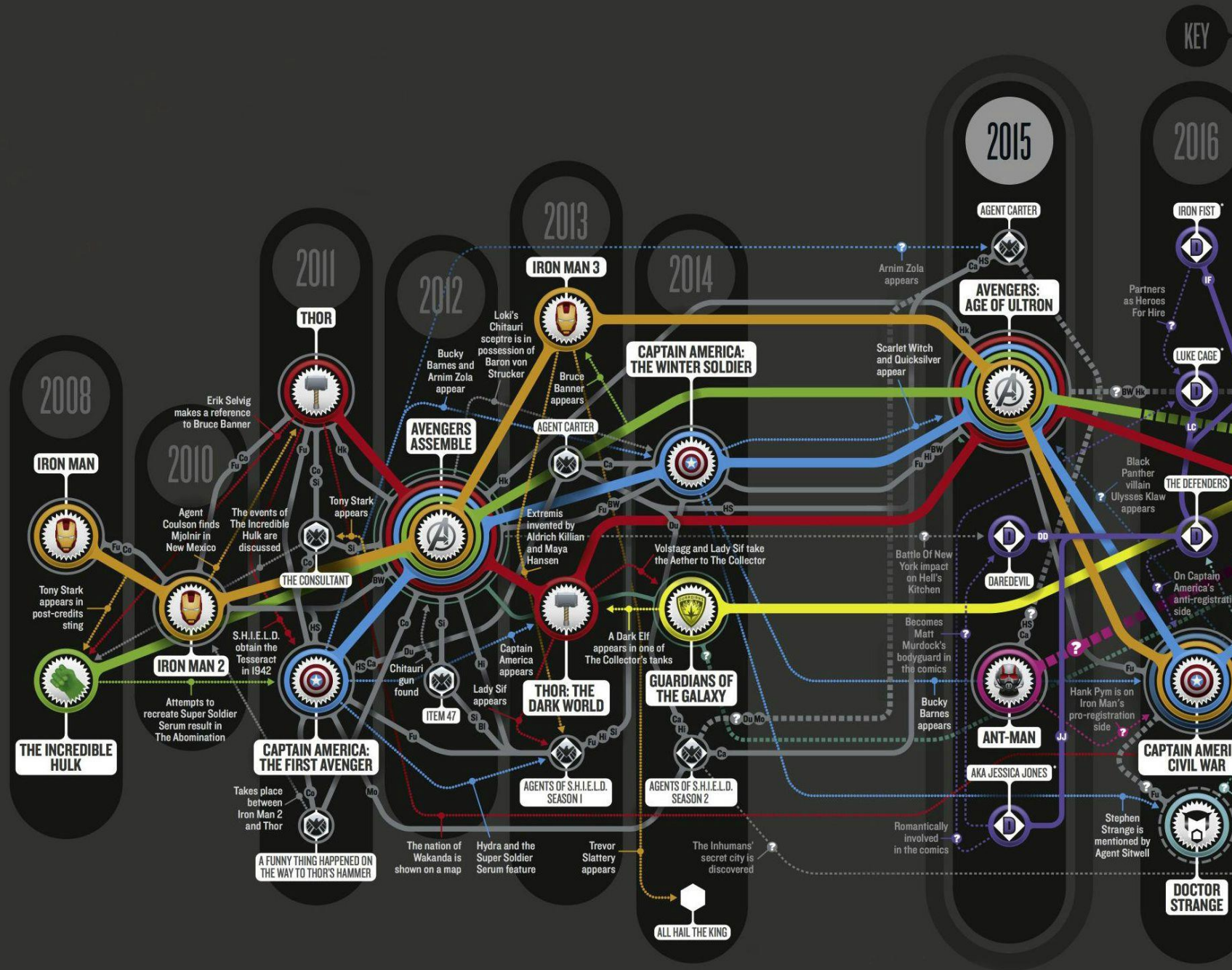
It comes from the top...

Netflix can continue on its current path, seeing its only real competitor as "sleep" (per its former CEO), overwhelming people with content created because an algorithm said the topic was trending. Or Netflix can invest in a better user experience, recommit to movies and shows as art first and attention vehicles second, and develop algorithms that help people act in their own best interest.

There is no immediate financial incentive to do this, but Netflix ignores these truths at their peril. Take Meta FKA Facebook: when a tech company has too much power over our habits and the way we spend our time, and when it effectively *rewires* our innate behaviors by addicting us to screens *and* monetizing our attention, the the stakes are that much higher. These companies become responsible for things they never even thought about, like mental health or the future of democracy. Netflix is, right now, at the point where Google was when they decided to drop "don't be evil" from their mission.

MISSION — HOLD EVERYONE'S ATTENTION VIA THEIR EYEBALLS, FOREVER OR AT LEAST FOR MANY, MANY HOURS

STRATEGIC UX DECISIONS:

- NETFLIX'S NEW "PLAY SOMETHING" FEATURE (RECOMMENDED CONTENT AUTO-PLAYS)
- TITLES AUTO-PLAY AS YOU SCROLL THROUGH
- BLURRING THE LINES BETWEEN DOCUMENTARY AND REALITY TV (LOOKING AT YOU, TIGER KING)
- SHEER VOLUME OF NEW CONTENT CVS, SAY, BETTER CONTENT)

Ideas: New Features

"Help me choose"

Even if you don't buy any of that, you can probably agree that choosing what to watch could be a better experience (instead of the ordeal that it is right now, caused by the *absence* of an experience.)

Netflix's forthcoming "Play Something" feature (tagline: "we'll do the work for you!) is based on an assumption that I'm not sure is true: just because people hate scrolling through options (a problem Netflix created!), that doesn't mean they don't want to be involved at *all* in choosing what they want to watch!

I suspect that people *are* in fact willing to give input, if it's minimal, clearly acted on, and actually fun. What follows is a lil idea on that score, designed to make you feel like the Netflix "member" you're paying to be.

Who's in the room?

Watch history isn't the sole indicator of what you want to watch next. Who you're with at watch-time is critical info that is currently completely exogenous to Netflix's dataset.

More research is required here, obviously, to vet these assumptions, but I'd be willing to bet that it's one thing to find a new show to binge-watch with your partner, and another entirely to pick a family holiday movie. Let's start by asking, at the very least...
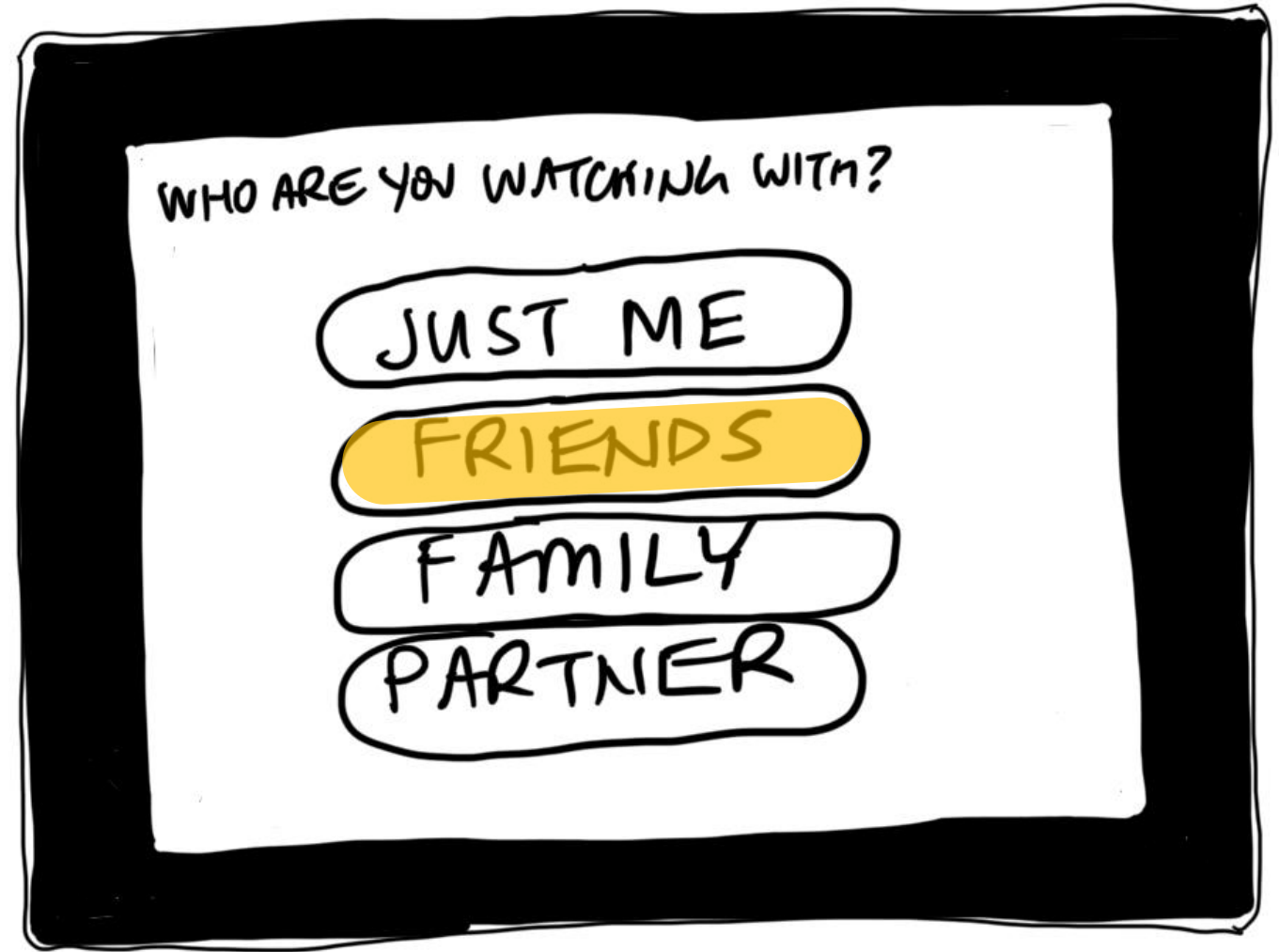
What's the vibe?

Rough day and you need to cry about it? Rough day and you need to forget about it? Without delving into how you're feeling, we can gather information on how you *want* to feel (this lets us serve mode 1 and mode 2, but puts them on more equal footing.)

Emojis or symbols help clarify these fairly abstract modes (adjacent to genres, but more about the impact of the content than its theme or category.) We'd need to test if these resonate, and which are the right ones, and all that jazz.

I could imagine a group having fun with this. Maybe I just have weird friends.
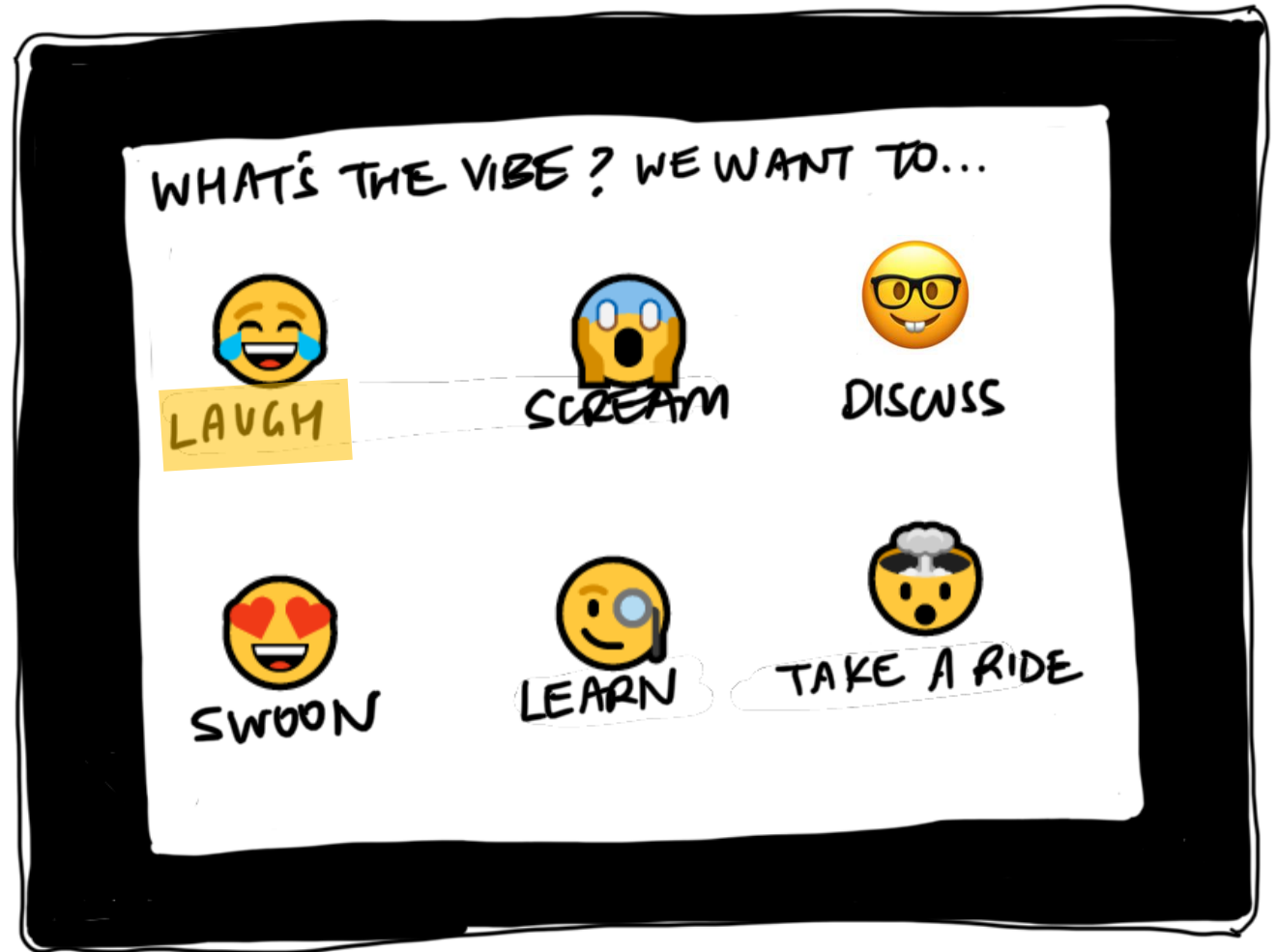
Watch history, but smarter

Now let's ask about watch history, but instead of using an algo to burrow deeper into our ourselves, let's smash two options together to create something new.

The Strategy

As the streaming leader, Netflix sets the tone...

What should it mean to be a company at the intersection of content creation (film) and technology?

Instead of helping us collapse in on ourselves, Netflix can set the standard for a good content experience. It can devote its significant technological power to the art of storytelling. It can develop best-in-class personalization algorithms that help people *evolve*.

Strategy is, after all, about making *choices*.

MISSION

BE THE PREMIER DESTINATION FOR STORIES THAT MOVE US AND THAT MOVE US FORWARD.

STRATEGIC MX DECISIONS

BECOME A PLATFORM FOR TRADITIONALLY MARGINALIZED VOICES, EMPOWERING THEM TO CREATE ART ON THEIR TERMS, AND NOT JUST EDUCATIONAL CONTENT FOR THE WHITE "MAINSTREAM"

TASTEFUL CHOOSE-YOUR-OWN-ADVENTURE CONTENT (À LA BANDERSNATCH)

AR/VR-POWERED EXPERIENCES ON-LOCATION (MOVIE ESCAPE ROOMS?)

MINI FILM FESTIVALS WITH HYPER SPECIFIC THEMES AND VIRTUAL WATCH PARTIES