

January 28, 2022

**Welcome again to the Unfinished newsletter, where we explore key issues at the intersection of tech, ethics, and society. I'm Damon Beres.**

Today: What Wordle could teach us about the future of the web, and some eye-popping news about the crypto economy.

Did someone forward you this email? [Sign up to receive your own copy here.](#)

## What we're thinking about

The digital world beyond apps, push notifications, and other hallmarks of the modern era.

■ First, a fun fact: According to [an interview in TechCrunch](#), 2 million people now play Wordle, visiting a simple website once a day to puzzle out a new five-letter word. Once they've guessed the word, that's it for the day. A new puzzle is loaded up at midnight.

■ (I got [today's Wordle](#) in two tries 😎 .)

■ Josh Wardle, the engineer behind the game, [told the New York Times](#) he made Wordle to give his partner something to enjoy. He attributes its viral success to a kind of artificial scarcity: "The breakthrough, he said, was limiting players to one game per day. That enforced a sense of scarcity, which he said was partially inspired by the [*New York Times*' online game] Spelling Bee, which leaves people wanting more, he said."

■ “Scarcity” is an interesting word in the context of digital applications. There’s really no reason a digital asset like a Wordle puzzle *has* to be limited, of course—and indeed, there’s already at least [one site that apes the concept](#) and lets you play as many times as you want—but there’s an undeniable appeal to the one-and-done structure of the game. When folks share their scores on social media, everyone in their network knows they’re competing with the same rules, so to speak: If you were one of the precious few who got “knoll” in just a couple of guesses earlier this week, rather than the six it took me, you had total bragging rights.

■ Virtual scarcity is one of the big ideas behind technology like [NFTs](#): Put very simply, blockchains allow for the creation of unique digital assets that can be used in online transactions. People might debate the merits of owning a bundle of code associated with, say, [a digital trading card created by Budweiser](#), but you get the idea.

■ Wordle’s demonstration of digital scarcity doesn’t have anything to do with the online economy, per se, but it has everything to do with ethics. There are genuine principles underpinning this simple game: It’s programmed to do one basic thing without endlessly engaging you, there are no ads, and as Wardle told the *Times*, “It’s not trying to do anything shady with your data or your eyeballs.”

■ Wordle’s achieved monumental success with those principles—no gross growth hacks required. As the product designer Alex Rodriguez [put it on Twitter](#), “Every app is fighting for [its] life with push notifications and growth hacks, meanwhile Wordle is right there having us do our daily pilgrimage to a mobile website.”


■ The technologist Anil Dash elaborated on Rodriguez’s tweet [with his own](#): “People love the open web because they know they can have agency & control over the experience, and they know it’s still a place where people make things that have heart & soul. Even if they can’t articulate it, they can just tell.”


■ Wrapping it up, the tech writer [Clive Thompson wrote in OneZero](#) that because Josh Wardle “wasn’t asking people to log in or to create accounts or use an app store — and because he did this as part of a gift economy— Wordle has none of the creepy tracking that soils most of our digital fora. Hell, you can play Wordle in incognito mode if you want. The game doesn’t give a crap about who you are, identity-wise.”

👉 **The bottom line**

Wordle is a modern online product that actually points backward and forward in time. It's a kind of digital pastoral that recalls an era of the internet before seemingly every interaction was defined by the intrusive data-tracking apparatus of social media giants, when people intentionally navigated to bookmarked websites rather than tapping on whatever struck them from an endless News Feed. And it's a sample of the "decentralized" online paradigm many people want to materialize in web3—it's just a simple, independent website, delivering value to a devoted fanbase.

## Money, money, money

 Speaking of digital scarcity, speculators are spending millions of dollars on virtual plots of land in the so-called "metaverse," [Maxwell Strachan reports in Motherboard](#). "The artificial scarcity coded into many metaverses has frustrated some blockchain purists who want the new digital world to create a truly fairer, more decentralized version of Earth. It can instead feel, at times, like an even more commodified and consumerist version of the reality humans naturally inhabit, in which a few power players are already dominant, and passion and hucksterism can look the same."

 [In the Wall Street Journal](#), E.B. Solomont and Katherine Clarke report on massive real estate investments from "newly minted crypto-millionaires and crypto-billionaires, who have either invested in or have helped build the infrastructure that enables digital currency."

## Thank you for reading!

Follow Unfinished ([@byUnfinished](#)) and me ([@dlberes](#)) on Twitter for ongoing chitchat on the changing web.

Have a great, restful weekend.

Damon + the Unfinished team

Project Liberty, 888 Seventh Avenue, 16th Floor, New York, New York 10106

**[Unsubscribe](#) [Manage preferences](#)**