

# Complexity is a rhetorical resource missing from public discourse.

## Play can revive it.

### From communication to participation: Inviting public contributions to complexity through play

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Introducing

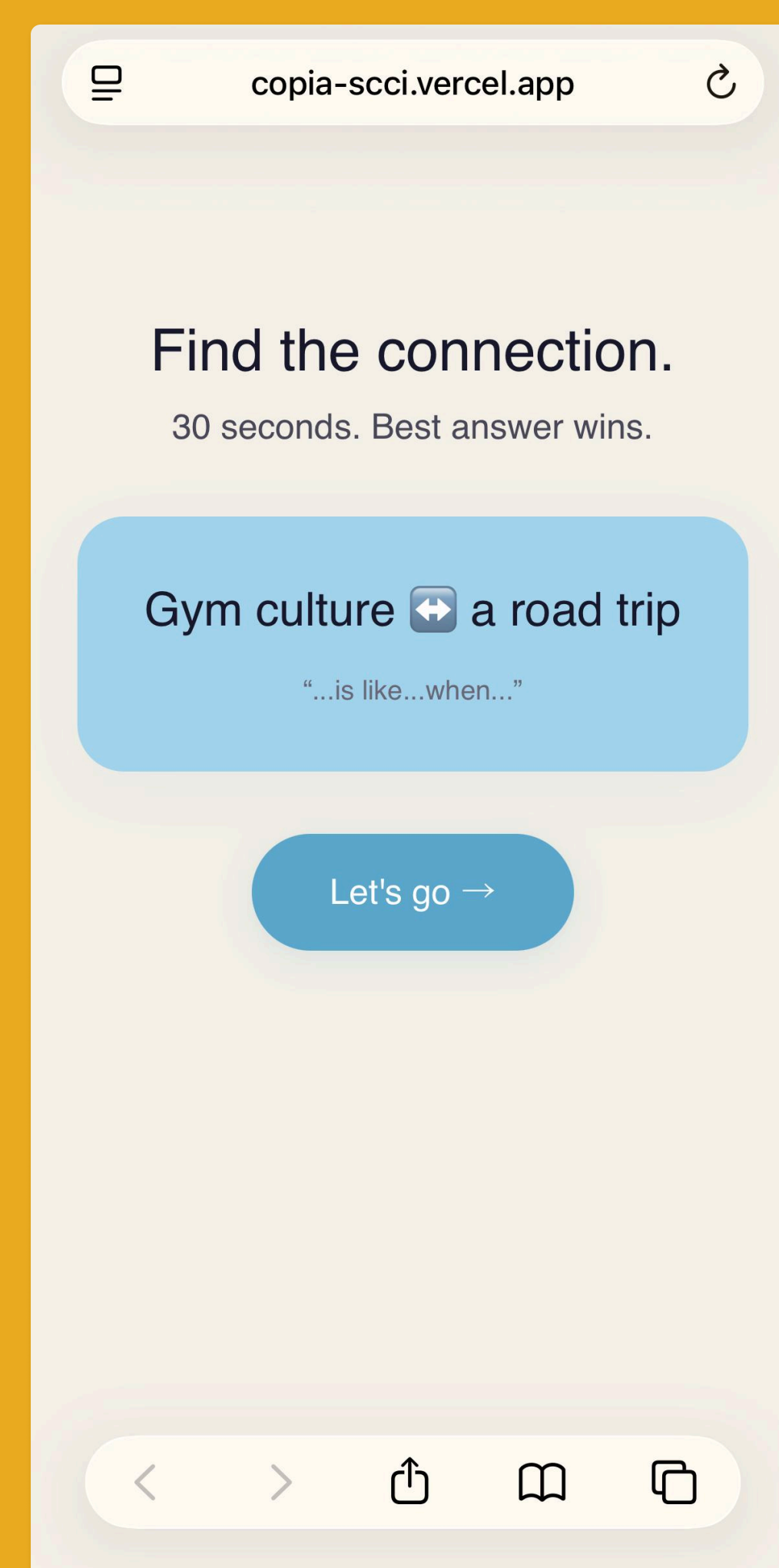
# Copia

A party game of abundant perspectives.

Same topic, different lenses. Unexpected angles win.

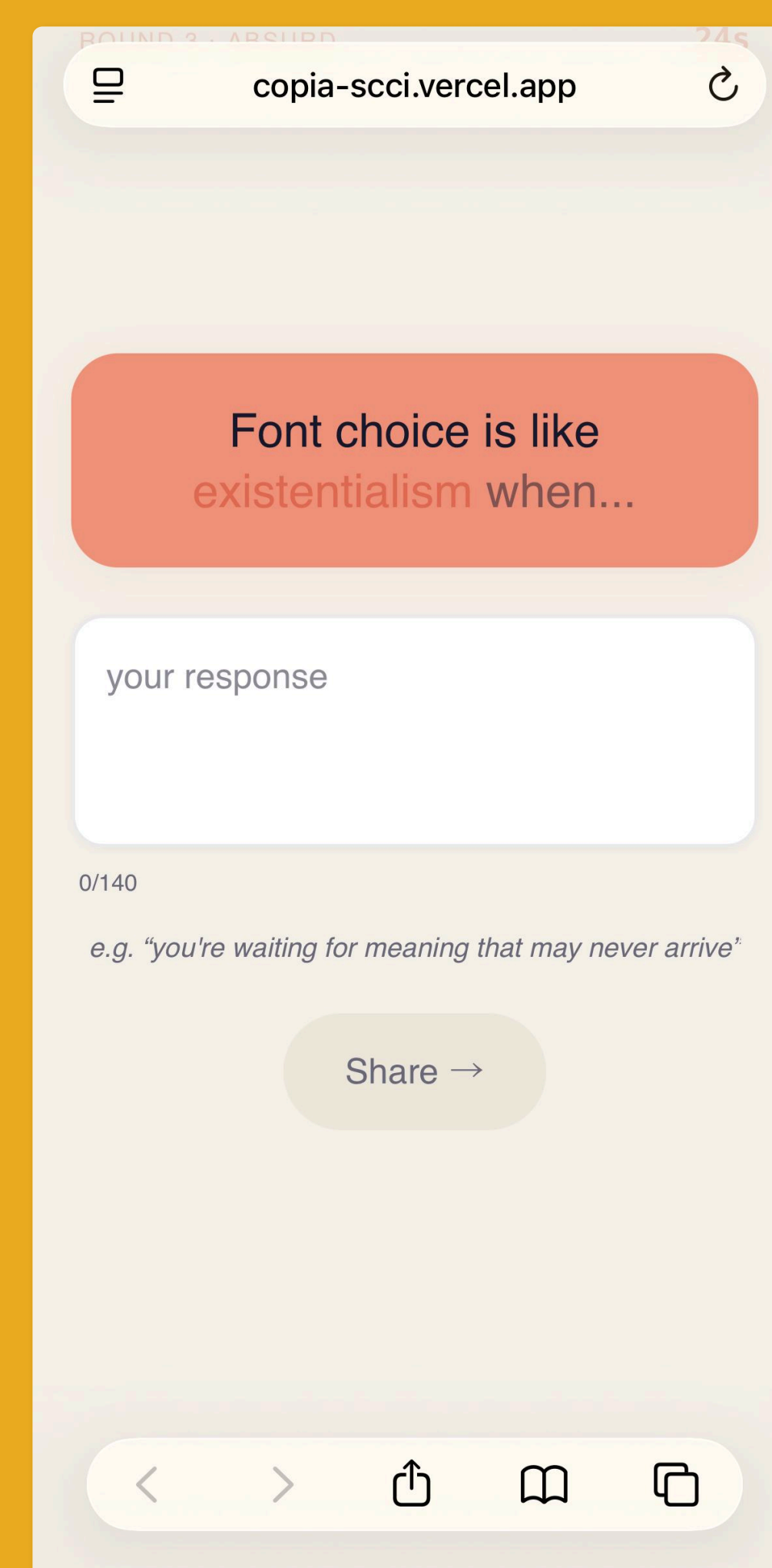


Play the game!



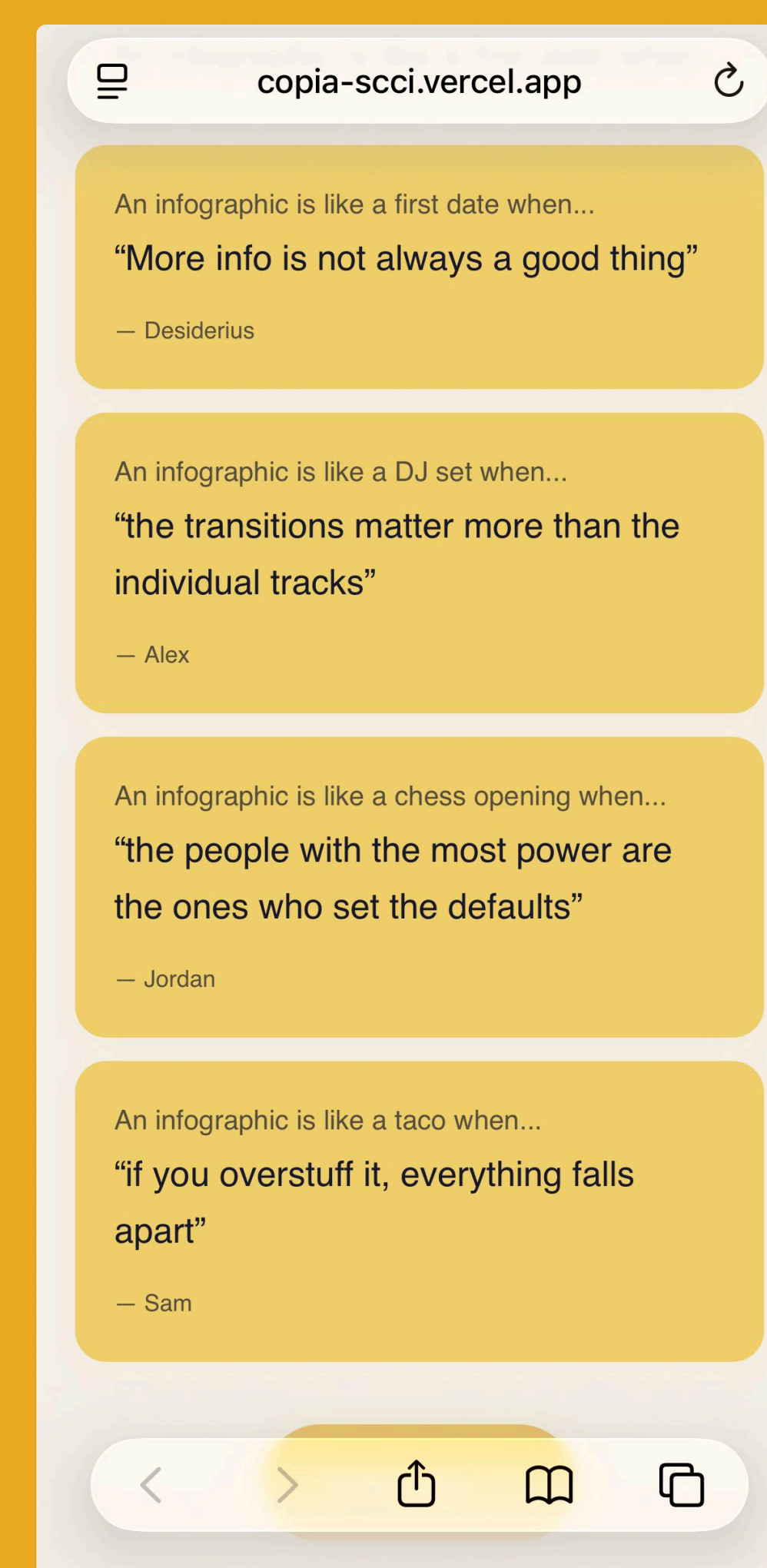
### 1 Choose an angle

Bolder choices can make your perspective pop—if others agree



### 2 Share your perspective

Finish the sentence from experience. When does the angle actually apply?



### 3 Vote for what surprises

Which perspectives made you think "I hadn't considered that"?

#### Highlights

- **The tension:** Simplification increases public access to technical knowledge, but it can undermine the epistemic habits that public judgment requires.
- **Our reframing:** Complexity is a resource that facilitates seeing and knowing together. The public's role is to contribute to complexity it rather than consume it in simplified form.
- **A rhetorical remedy:** Rhetoric has long used play to cultivate the epistemic habits necessary for public judgment. Rhetorical commonplacings models an accumulative approach to collective knowledge making, collating competing perspectives rather than resolving them.
- **We made a game:** Copia, a perspective-sharing party game, modernizes commonplacings: Players generate and exchange perspectives on a shared topic, building complexity tolerance through situated rather than singular answers.

We invite you to play!

#### Background

- In technical communication, complexity exists in tension with access and participation (e.g., Gudi et al. 2021; Santesso et al. 2008). Simplification is cast as a means of engaging nonexperts in technical decisions—but it also carries risks. We focus on the epistemic habits it engenders.
- In what Scharrer et al. (2012) call the "easiness effect," simplification increases reliance on personal judgment irrespective of actual knowledge. At a political level, this epistemic privatization aligns with our present crisis of public judgment: publics either defer to experts or retreat inward, with no means of forming knowledge together.
- Thus a new challenge emerges: promoting accessibility while cultivating **epistemic habits** conducive to public judgment (Vaupotic et al. 2024).
- Drawing on the rhetorical tradition, we frame **complexity as a source of epistemic—and social—possibility** by inviting publics to contribute to it. This entails a shift from communication to participation: from translating complex knowledge for public consumption to engaging publics as inquirers and producers of complexity.

#### Building epistemic habits through rhetorical play

Rhetoric, as the faculty for seeing the available means of persuasion in any situation, is not a body of knowledge but a collection of habits: an eye for similarity, responsiveness to particulars, a capacity to recognize connections and the limits of their applicability. Rhetorical habits have long been cultivated through friendly competition (e.g., disputation) and creative inquiry (e.g., commonplacings). We explore how they can be revived today via play and offer a party game—Copia—as an example.

Copia is modeled after early modern **commonplace books**, wherein compilers gathered diverse perspectives under topical headings to draw on when composing arguments.

Rather than offering one "right" way of seeing (e.g., an average), this **accumulative way with knowledge** trained compilers to work with complexity in the way that public judgement requires: noticing resemblances, considering applicability, and recognizing that any topic can be seen otherwise, so competing possibilities are not an obstacle but a resource.

Copia modernizes this practice, replacing literary excerpts with player-generated perspectives, and the solitary compiler with a community of inquirers.

#### Works cited

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In 1512, Erasmus wrote 195 ways to say the same sentence. Every idea has more angles than you think.