



GAME NARRATIVE  
SUMMIT

# Why We Care: The Narrative Burden in Creating Empathy

Heidi McDonald  
Senior Creative Director, iThrive Games

GDC

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE® | MARCH 19-23, 2018 | EXPO: MARCH 21-23, 2018 #GDC18

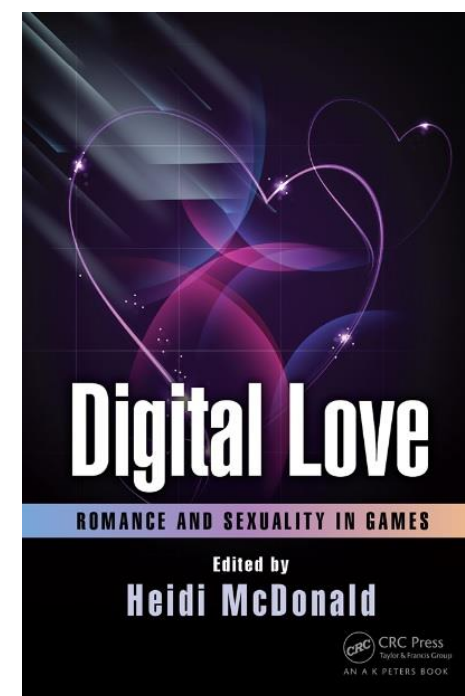




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PLAY TO YOUR STRENGTHS

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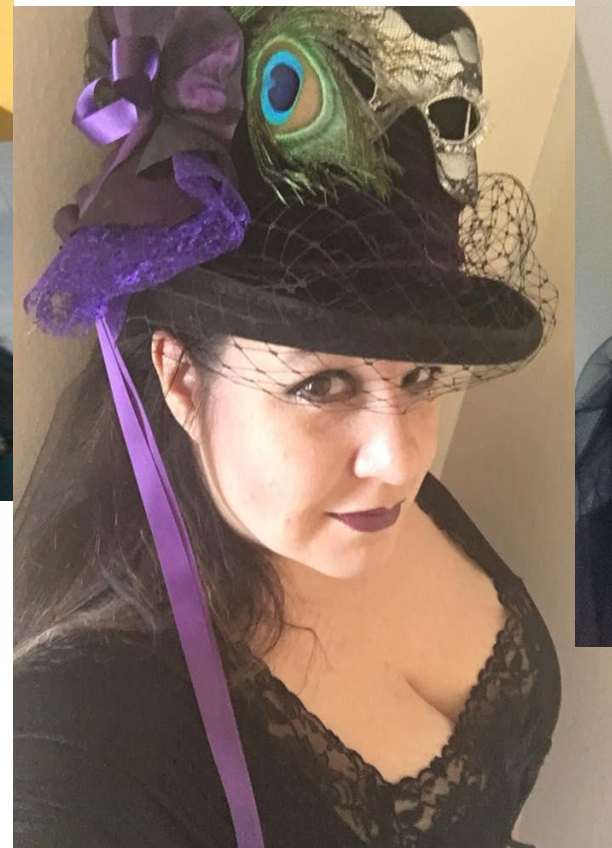
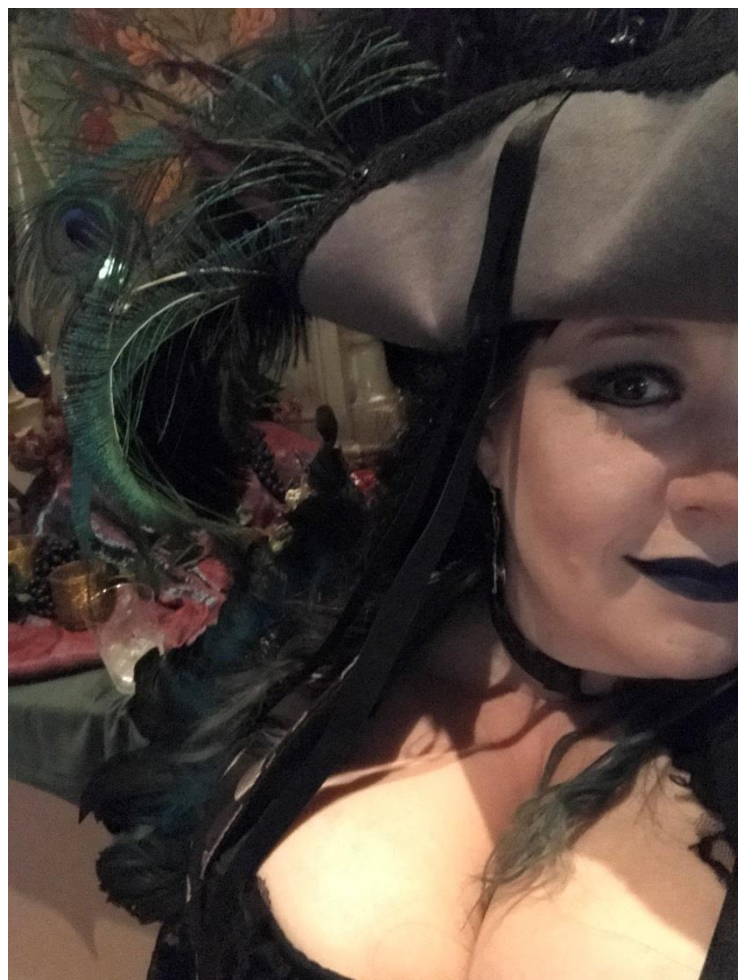
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# Mission

**Empower teens to thrive  
with great games**







**Design Hive Think Tanks**

**Design Kits**

**Game Jams**

**Developer Consults**

**Developer Workshops**

**Research**

**Game Design Studio**

**Educator Partnerships**

**Blog and Curation**

**University Projects**





## Where Heidi Lives

**Design Hive Think Tanks**

**Design Kits**

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UCI IRVINE



(Yale)



HIGHER EDUCATION  
VIDEO GAME ALLIANCE

DEPAUL  
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# EMPATHY







## Can video games promote empathy?

CBC Radio · March 6, 2017

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## Psychology Today

### How Videogames Can Promote Empathy

There's an upside to pro-social videogames

Like 0

Posted Sep 27, 2011

### Video Games Can Boost Empathy



01/6/17 Michelle Bertoli & Heidi McDonald

[www.ithrivegames.org/blog](http://www.ithrivegames.org/blog)

### Science News

from research organizations

### Violent video games found not to affect empathy

Study finds no link between long-term playing of violent video games and changes in empathetic neural responses

Date: March 8, 2017

Source: Frontiers

Summary: The link between playing violent video games and antisocial behavior, such as increased aggression and decreased empathy, is hotly debated. In a recent study the long-term effects of playing violent video games were investigated. This study found that empathy is not blunted by playing such games long-term.







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Heidi McD (GDCing is Believing) @Death\_Bow · 22h

@dukope Hey, for a GDC talk: when you made Papers, Please were you specifically focused at all on making "a good empathy game?"



1



Lucas Pope

@dukope

Following

Replying to @Death\_Bow

I wanted to make just a good game. The mechanics/setup came first but were primed for building empathy. I leaned into it once I saw the potential.  
(Good luck with the talk)

8:20 PM - 12 Mar 2018





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**“We just wanted to make  
the kind of game that we  
ourselves would want to  
play.”**

***~Ian Dallas***







**“What if, ten years from now, this is being taught in Game Design 101, not because ‘it’s good for you’ but because it’s just good game design?”**

*~Ian Schreiber*





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**“I am the god of  
ketchup and  
slingshots, and  
you suck at  
*Cuphead*.”**

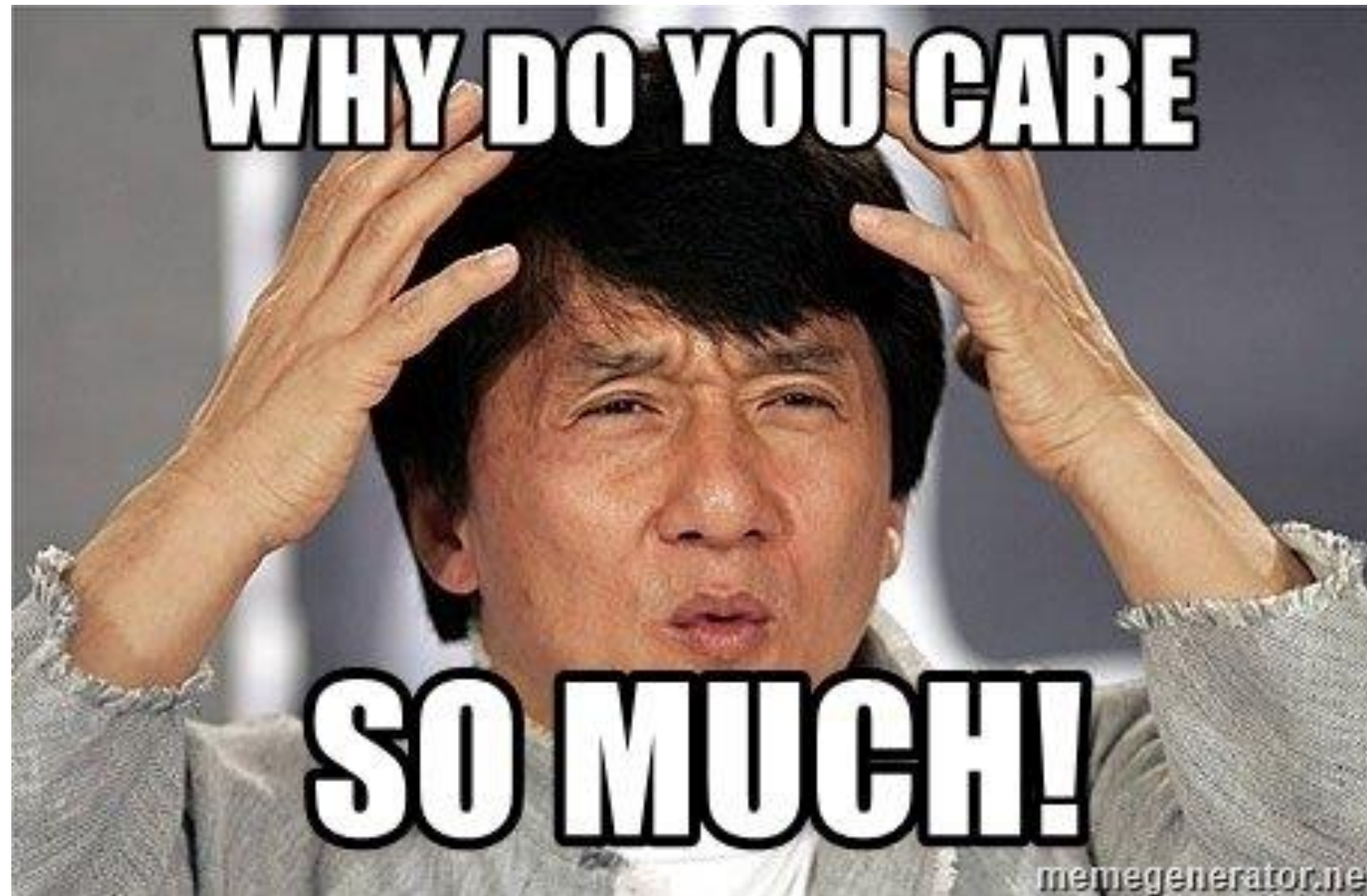
***~Ian McDonald***





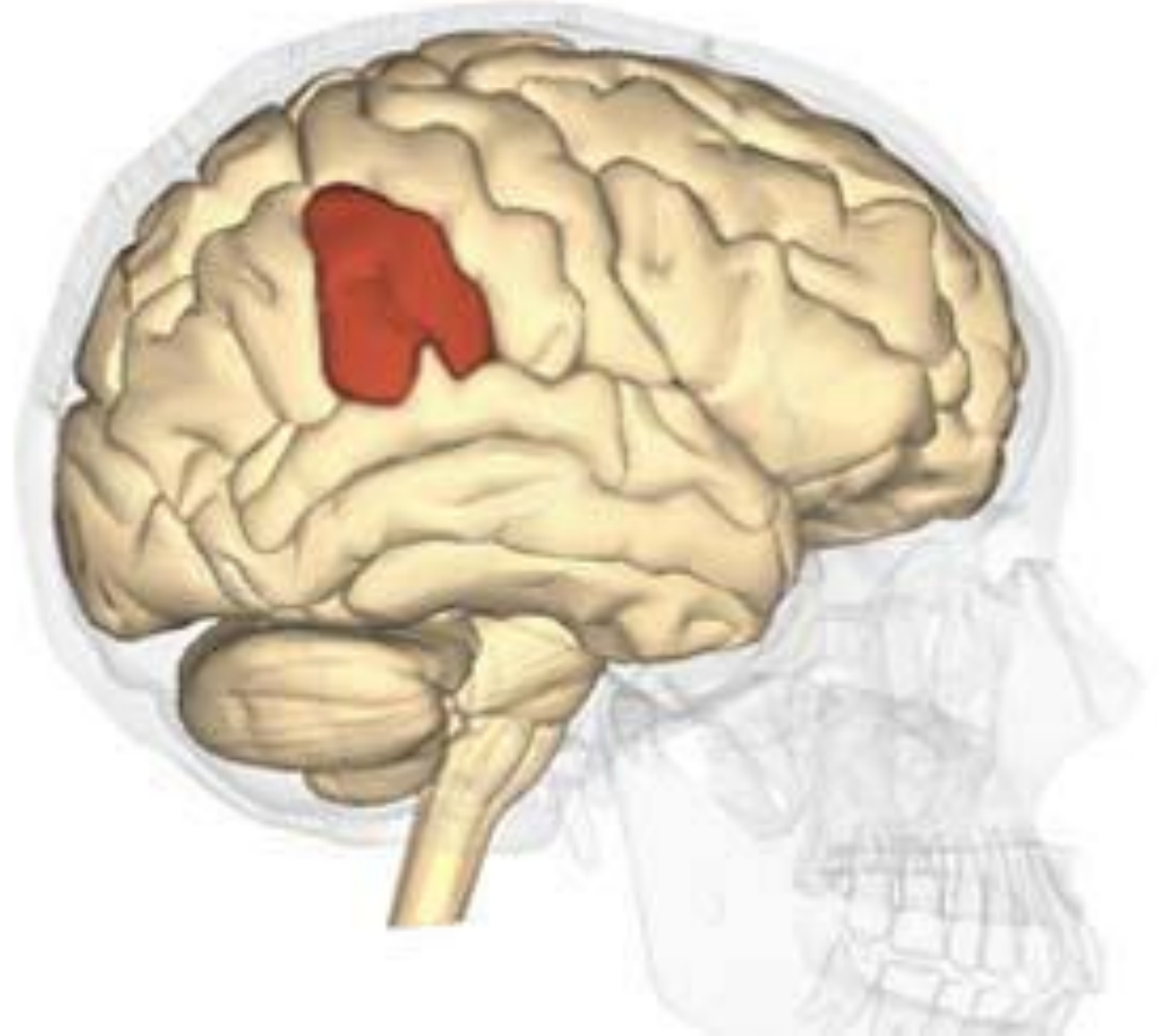


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# right supra marginal gyrus

Source: Max Planck Institute for  
Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences







# right supra marginal gyrus



Source: MTV when it still  
played music





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right  
supra  
marginal  
gyrus







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# right-pointed Super Mario gyro





# Parietal lobe

**Interprets language**

**Interprets signals**

# Frontal lobe

**Personality, behavior, emotions**

**Judgment, planning, problem solving**

**Speaking and writing**

**Intelligence, concentration, self awareness**







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# COMPONENTS OF EMPATHY

PERSPECTIVE  
TAKING

EMOTIONAL  
REGULATION

EMOTION  
CONTAGION

CONCERN  
FOR OTHERS

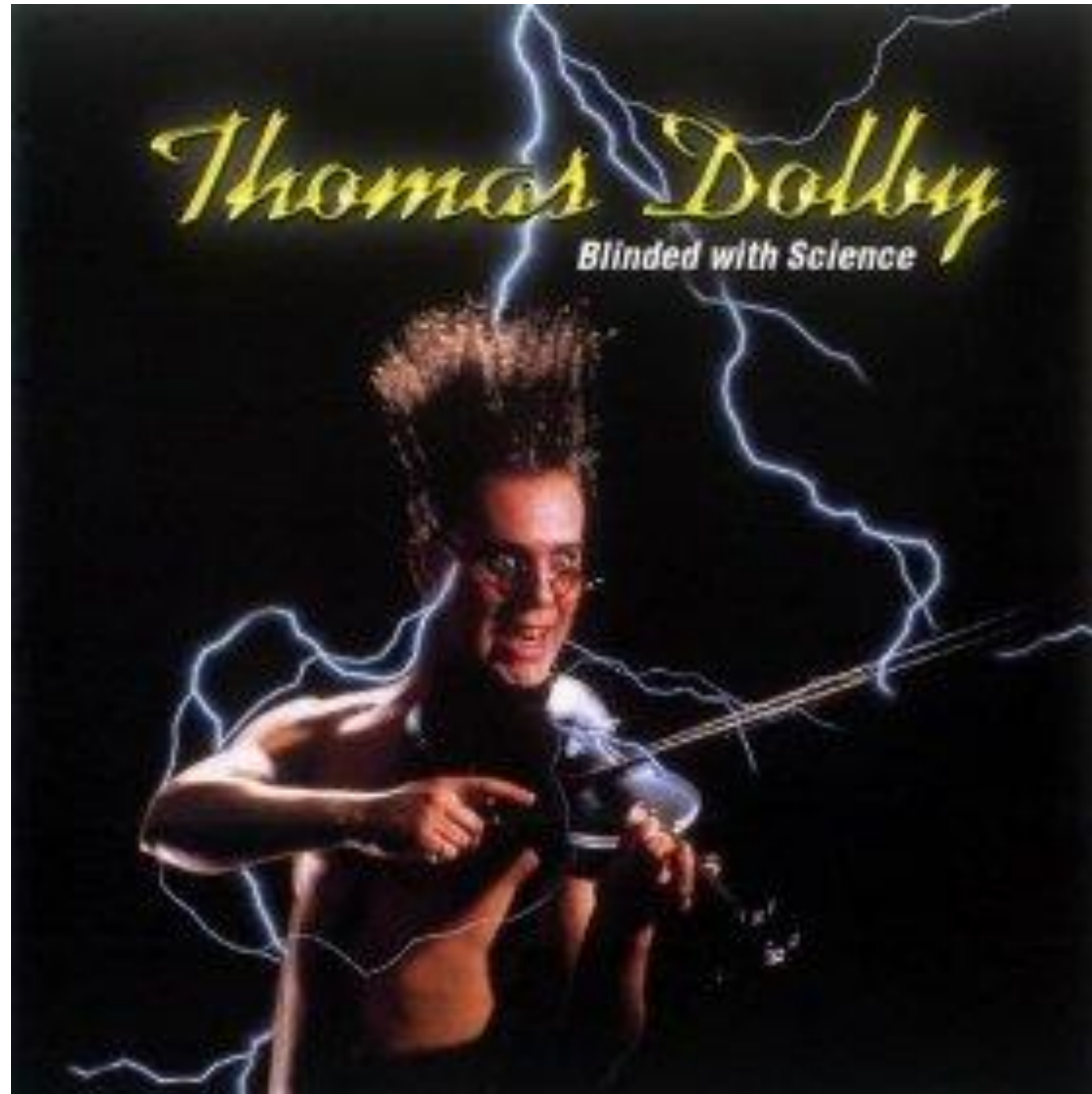
PERSPECTIVE  
ENGAGEMENT

EMPATHETIC  
ACCURACY





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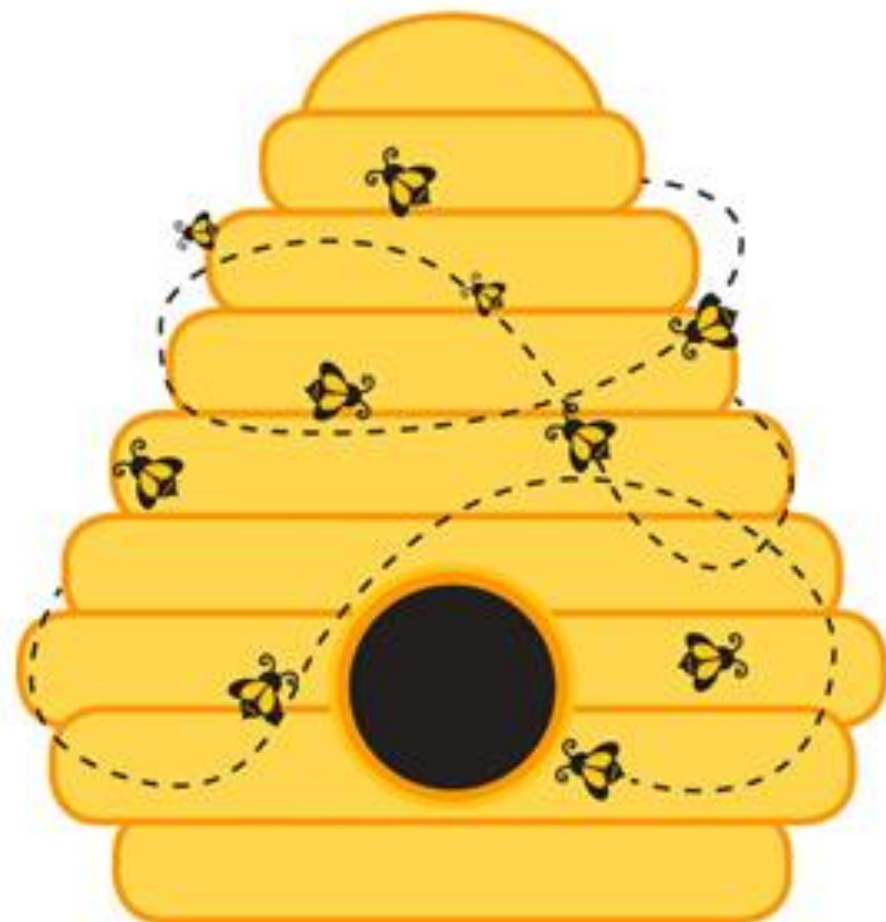
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# Design Hive



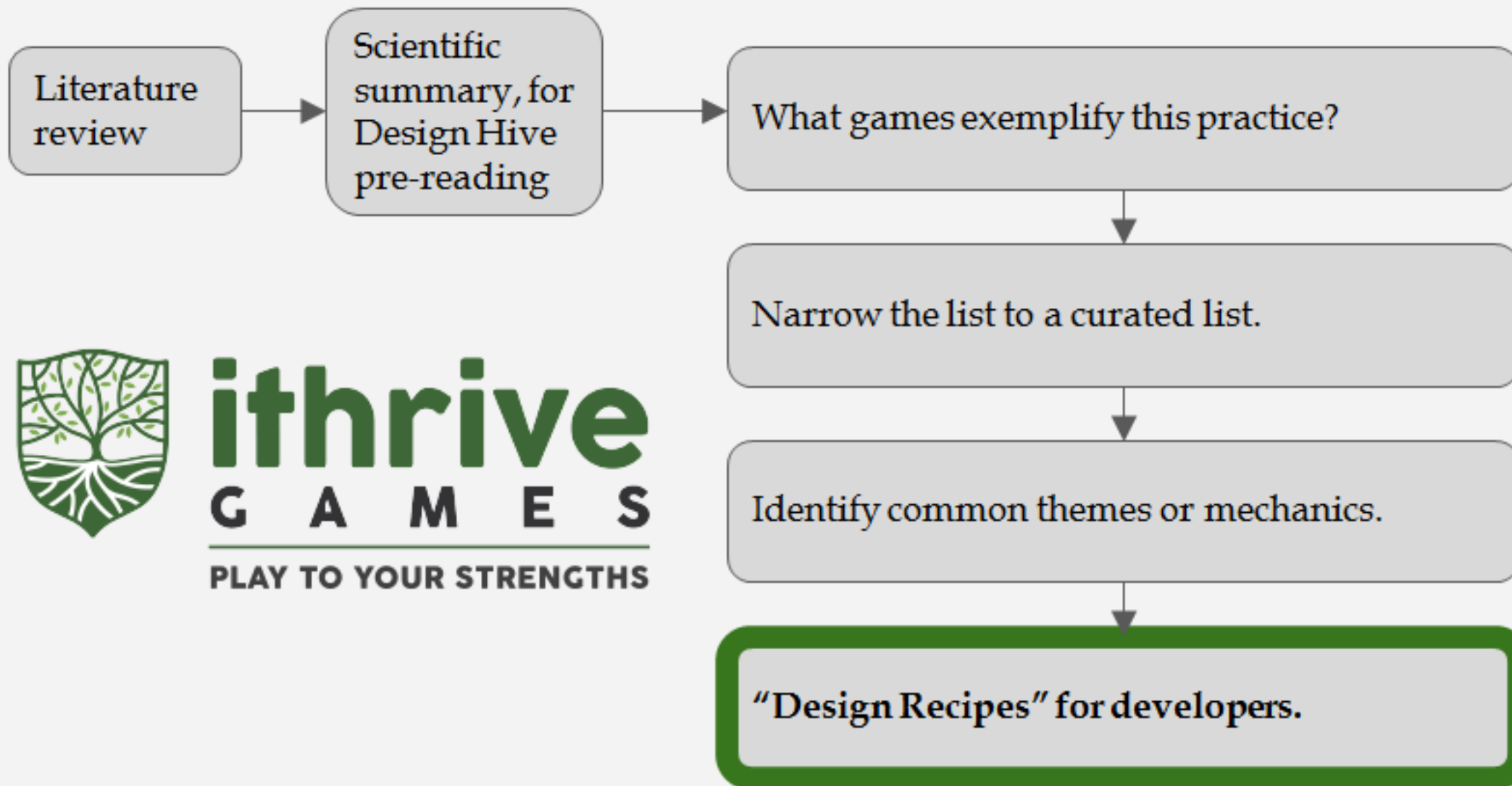
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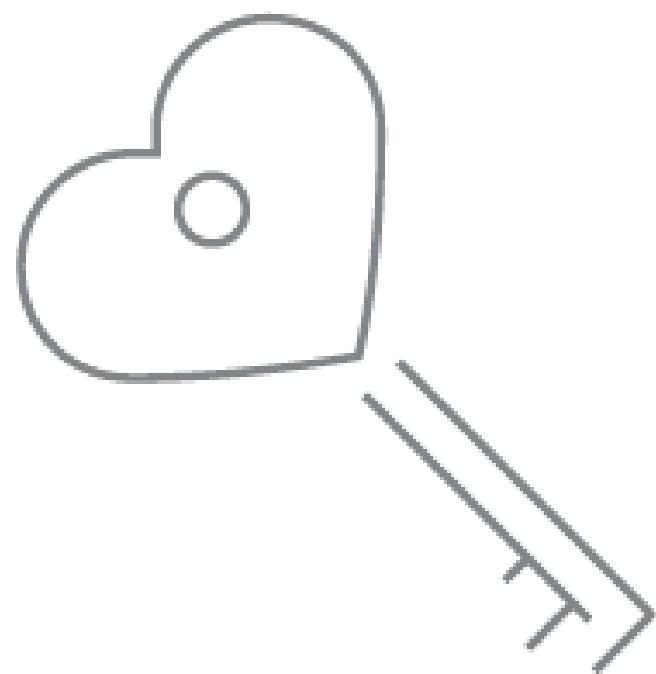
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# EMPATHY IN GAMES



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# ithrivegames.org

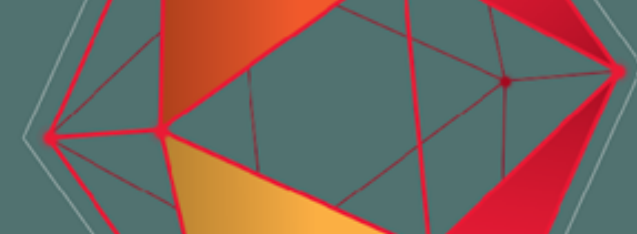






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# COMPONENTS OF EMPATHY

PERSPECTIVE  
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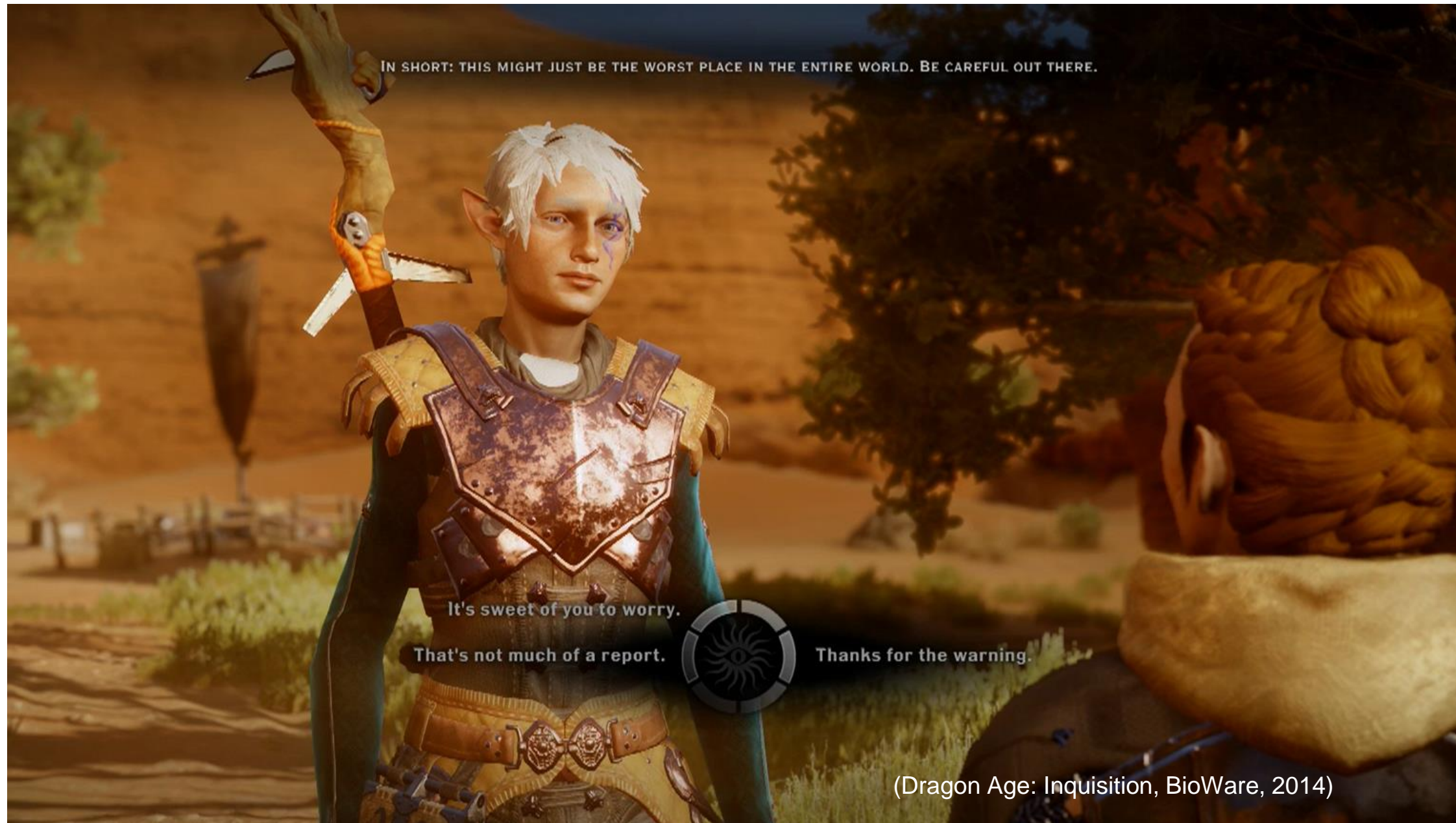
## Emotional Regulation







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## Perspective Taking

### Mechanics



### Mechanics + Story



### Story





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# Empathetic Accuracy



(Dragon Age: Origins, BioWare, 2007)







# Empathetic Contagion

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(Mass Effect 2, BioWare, 2010)







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(Game of Thrones, Telltale, 2014)





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# Perspective Engagement







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**“What makes a game meaningful?”**





Source:  
Doris  
Rusch

## Co-Authorship

Little imposed structure
Paidia based (rules are suggested, but win condition doesn't depend on following them)
Limited set of mechanics
Focused on exploration, self-assessment, discovery, decision making
Player assesses progress based on self-defined (implied) goals
Lack of enemies. Challenge but less based on conflict / fighting.
Difficulty is more emotional / cognitive than mechanical
No points for points sake
Allegorical story that relates to deeper themes of human condition rather than story as immersion gimmick

## Authorship

Lots of structure
Ludus based (must follow rules to win)
Broader range of mechanics
Focused on acquisition and attainment
Strong feedback reinforcing imposed game goals
Enemies, conflict
Dexterity / twitch skill
(visible) point systems
Busy work: keeping the player in constant activity for activity's sake
Story as gimmick to create plausible world (e.g. Assassin's Creed: story to justify "game death" within the fiction of the game)

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## Concern for Others

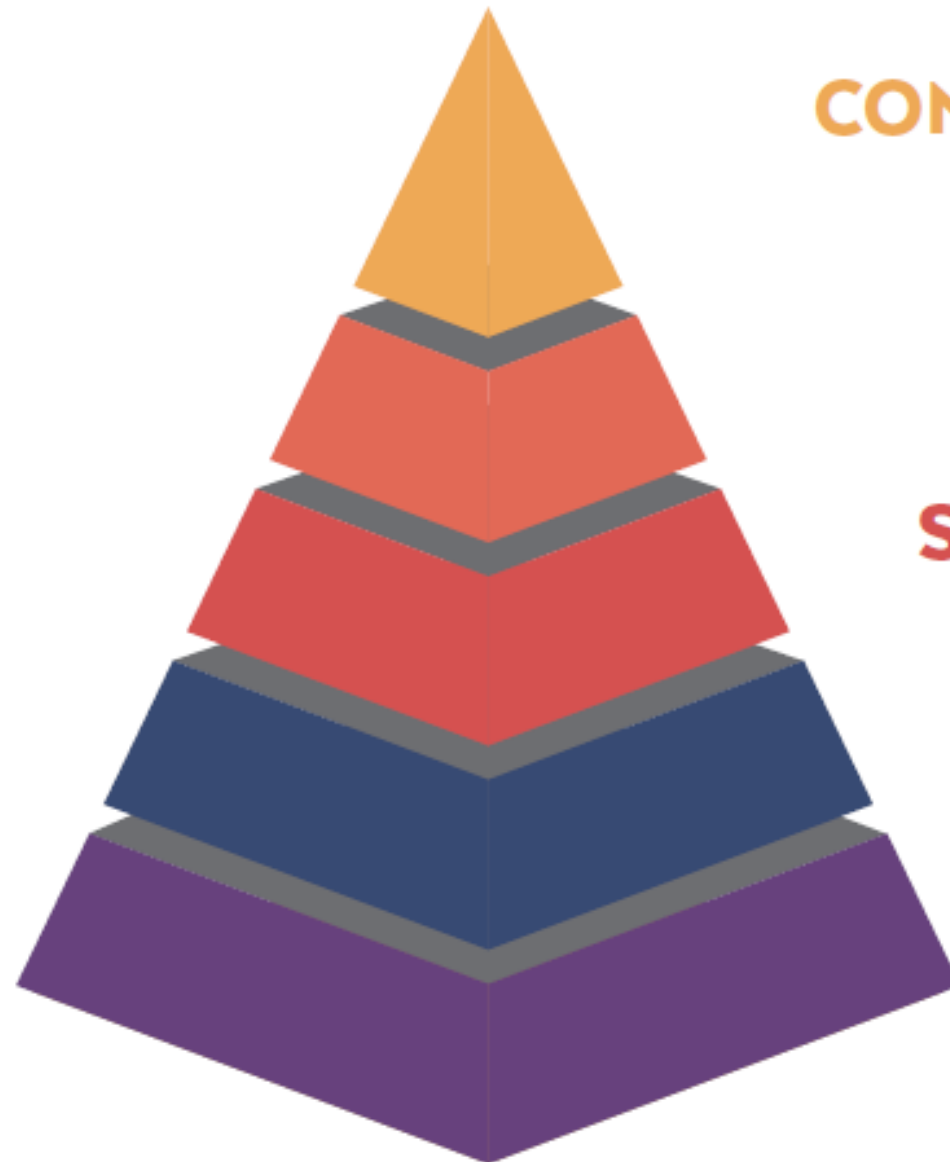






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# THE PYRAMID OF FEELS



**COMPASSION**

Empathy put into action.

**EMPATHY**

Empathy is about bringing people closer and sitting with another in their discomfort. "I know what it feels like and you're not alone."

**SYMPATHY**

Feeling sorrow for someone else's misfortune. Sympathy is about pushing people away, creating distance between yourself and the discomfort.

**PITY**

"Sucks to be you."

**APATHY**

"I don't care how you feel."

Source: Kelli Dunlap, PsyD,  
iThrive Games





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## EMPATHY



Acknowledge both your own and other people's emotions

## SYMPATHY



Suppress your own and other people's feelings

## EMPATHY



"I can understand how it feels. It must be really hard."

## SYMPATHY



"Poor you"

© Lifehack







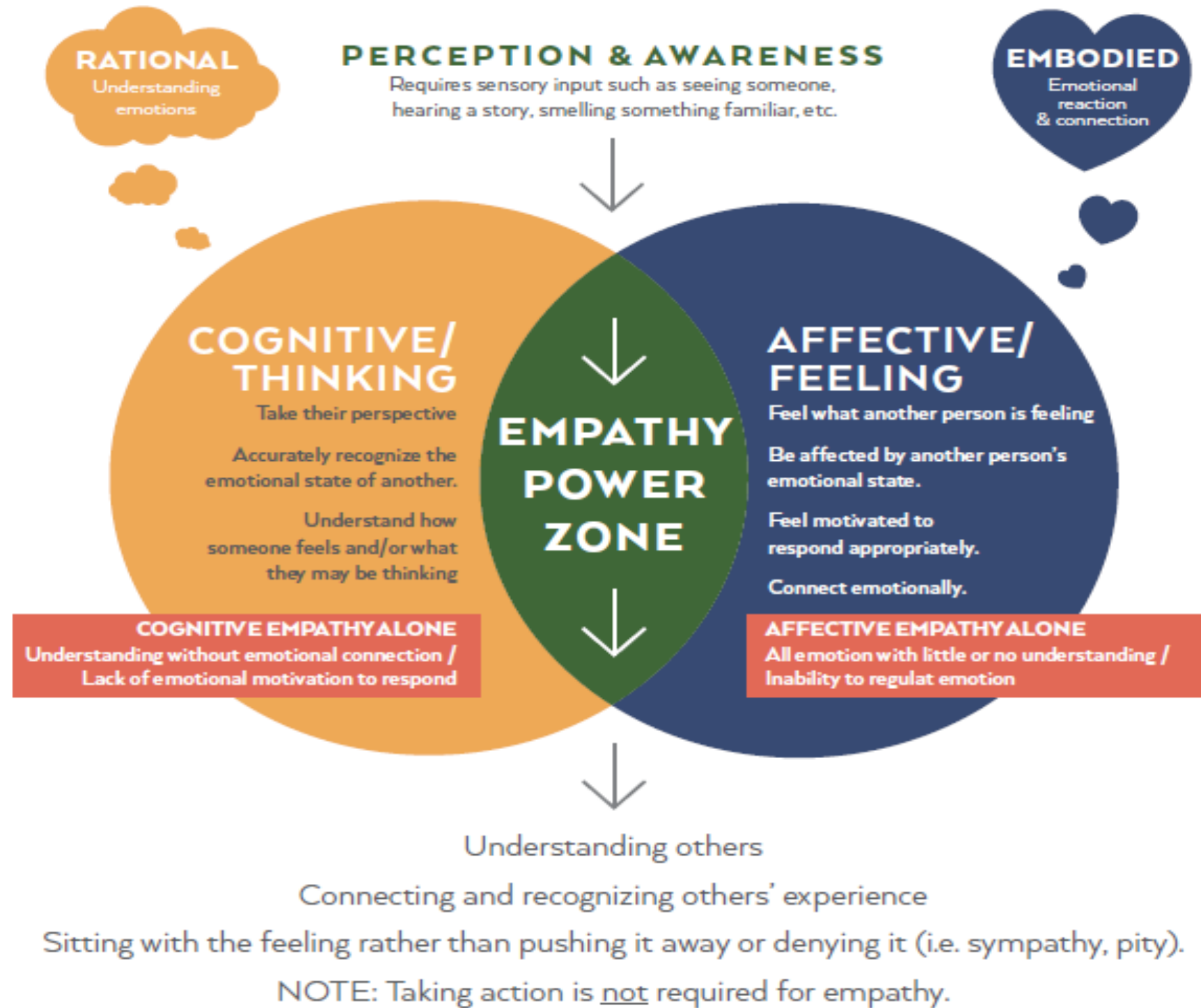
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Busted!





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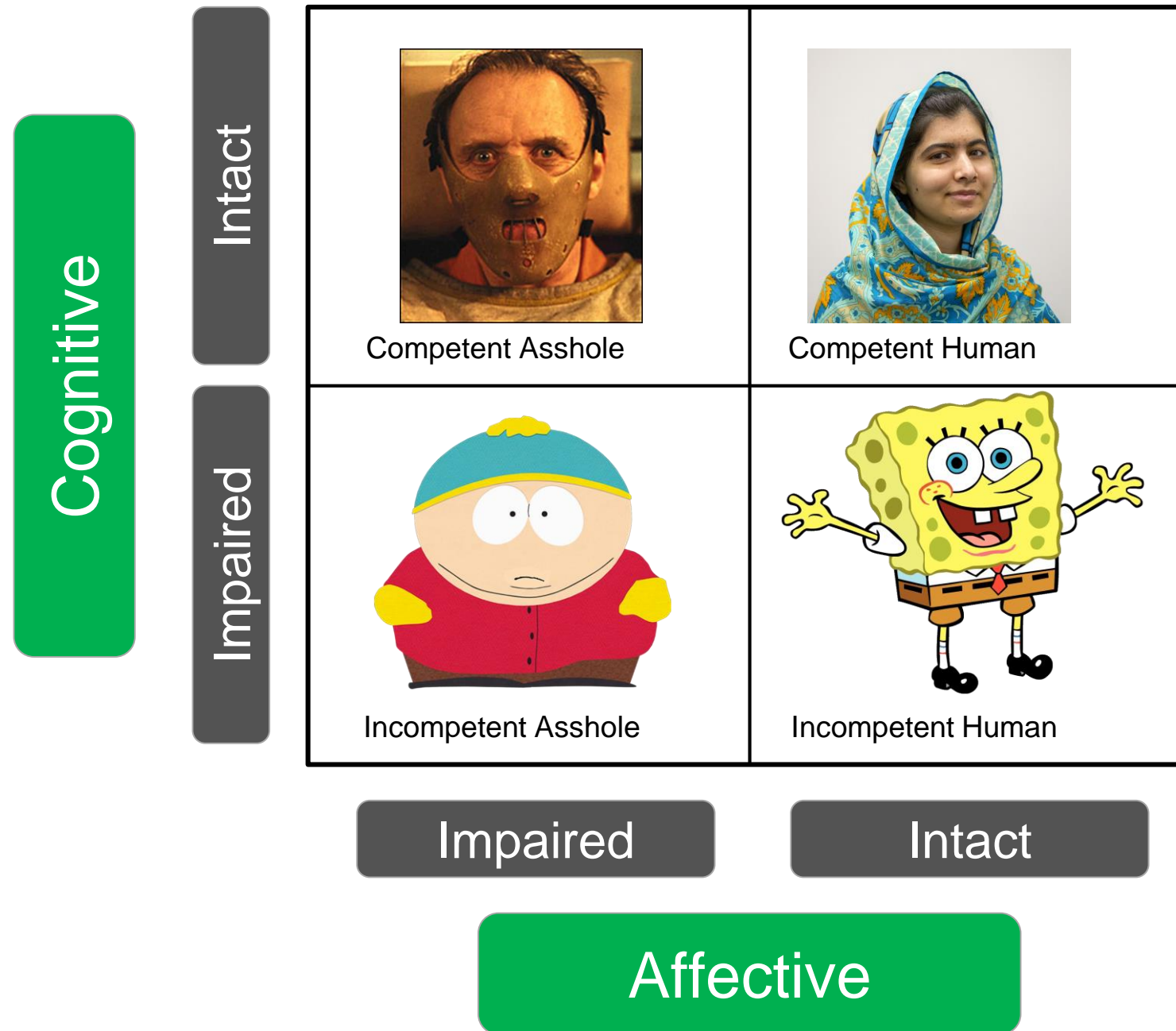
Source: Kelli Dunlap, PsyD,  
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***“The personal is universal,  
and the universal, personal.”***

**~Toiya Kristen Finley**





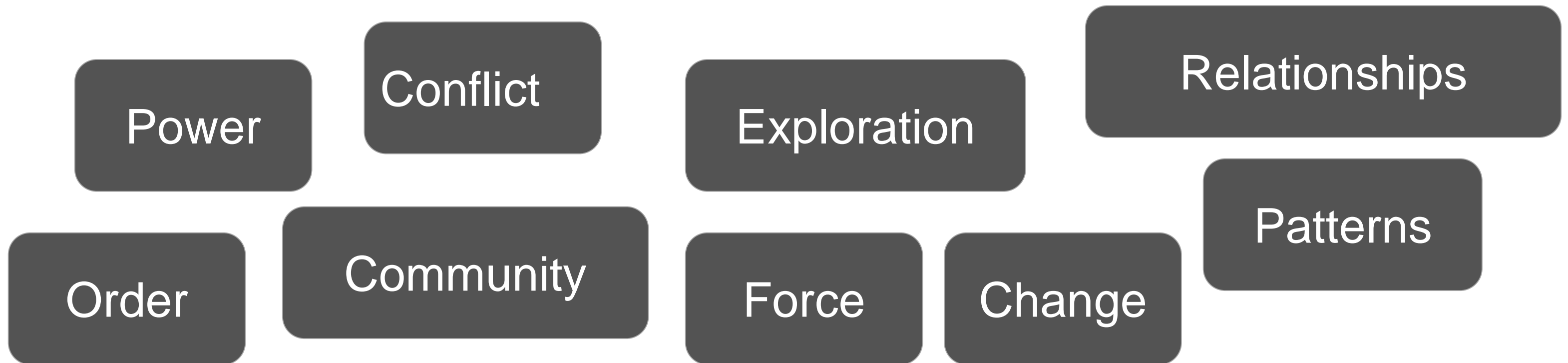
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*“Universal Themes imply ideas about the human nature and the relationship of human beings to themselves, each other, and the universe.”*



Source: Texas Association  
for the Gifted & Talented





Source: San  
Diego State  
University

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• abundance/scarcity</li><li>• abuse of power</li><li>• action vs. apathy</li><li>• beating the odds</li><li>• beauty</li><li>• coming of age</li><li>• corruption</li><li>• courage</li><li>• effects of the past</li><li>• faith</li><li>• fall from grace</li><li>• family</li><li>• fate</li><li>• fear</li><li>• fear of failure</li><li>• freedom</li><li>• friendship</li><li>• greed</li><li>• hate</li><li>• heritage</li><li>• heroes</li><li>• honesty</li><li>• innocence</li><li>• justice</li><li>• love</li><li>• loyalty</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• manipulation</li><li>• mothering</li><li>• nature</li><li>• need for change</li><li>• obligation</li><li>• parent-child relationships</li><li>• peace</li><li>• peer pressure</li><li>• perseverance</li><li>• Power of the mind vs authority</li><li>• prejudice</li><li>• price of progress</li><li>• pride</li><li>• quest for knowledge</li><li>• religion</li><li>• revenge</li><li>• secrecy</li><li>• security/safety</li><li>• seizing the moment</li><li>• survival</li><li>• the overlooked</li><li>• the road not taken</li><li>• war</li><li>• winners and losers</li></ul> |
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Relationships

Order

Exploration

Change

Patterns

Community

Force

Conflict

Power







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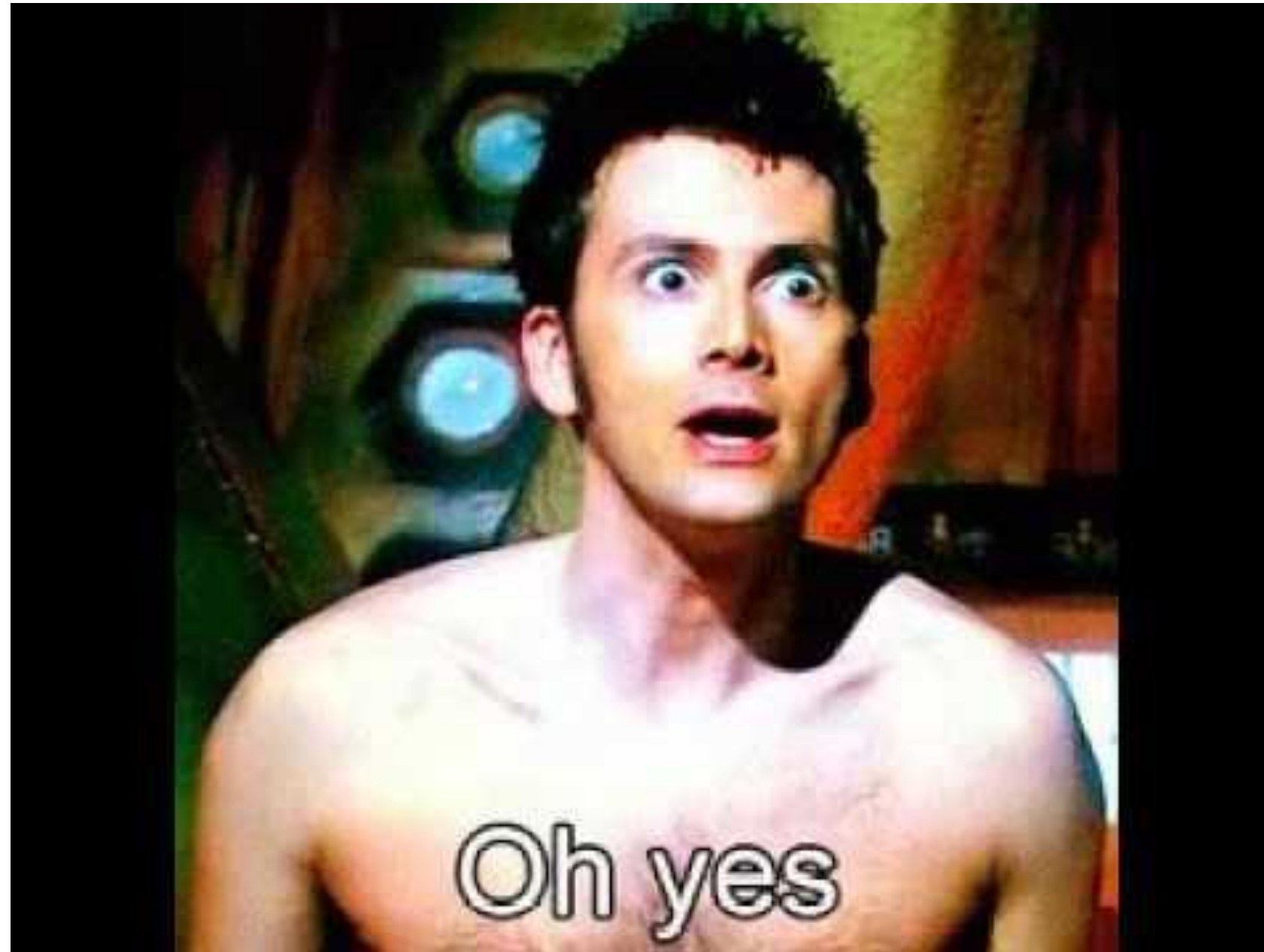
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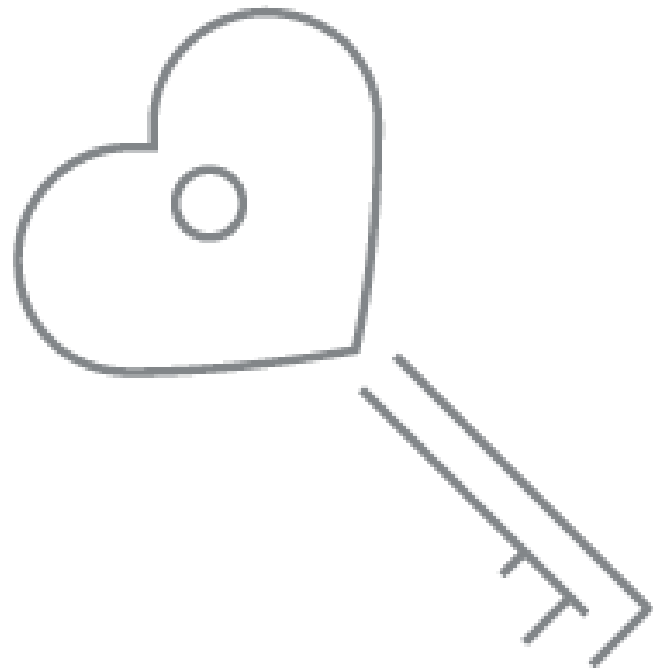






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# Thank you!

[www.ithrivegames.org](http://www.ithrivegames.org)

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