

Do No Harm: Ethical Design for Emotionally Heavy Games

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About Me



DR. KELLI
DUNLAP

Clinical Psychologist



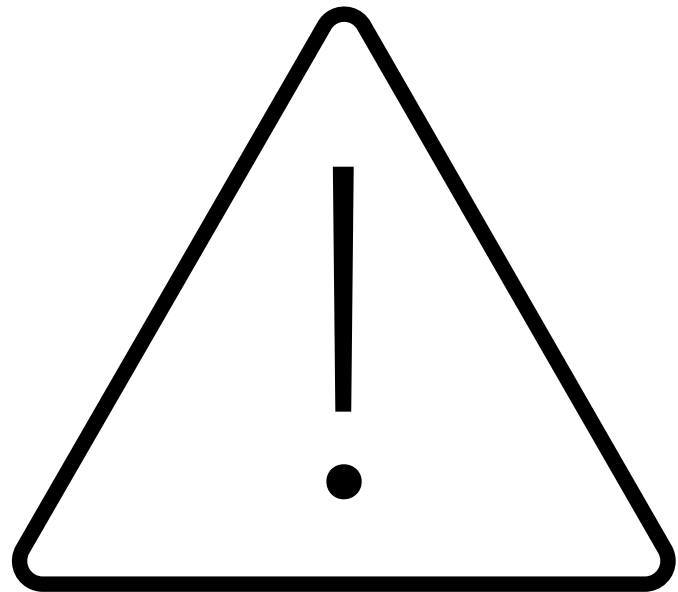
AMERICAN UNIVERSITY
GAME CENTER



Take this.



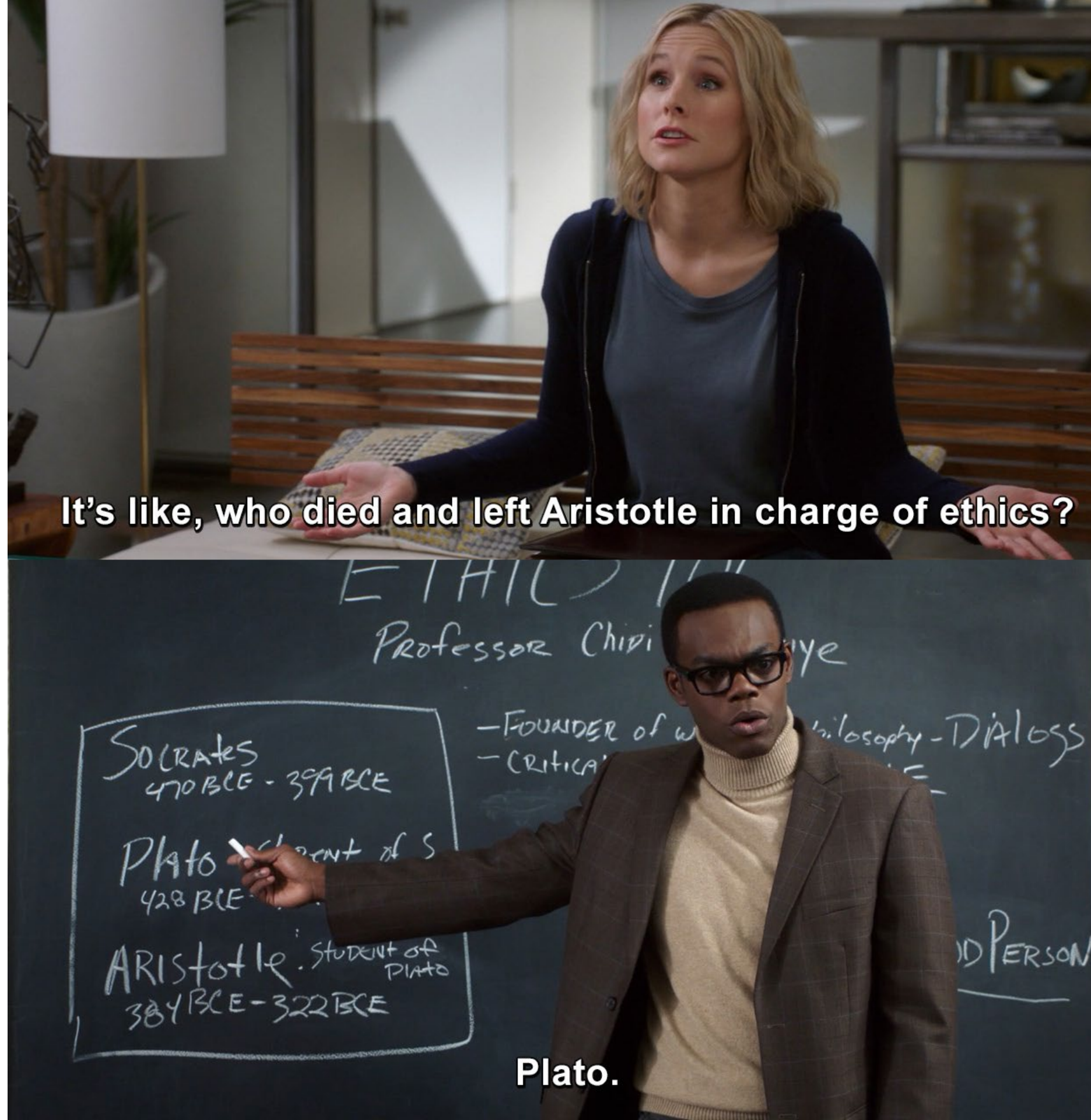
Content Warnings



- Mental illness
- Child death
- Suicide
- War crimes
- Psychological distress

Ethics!

- Ethical design for emotionally intense content
- Mitigating risk of psychological harm



GDC

Ethics in the Game Industry

Celia Hodent, PhD.
Game UX Consultant, Independent

 @CeliaHodent

Blog & Resources:
celiahodent.com

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE
MARCH 18–22, 2019 | #GDC19



VRDC Fall 2016

VR Ethics: How to Not Join the League of Evil

by Suzanne Leibrick (ARVR Academy)
Innovation



GDC Summer 2020

Skill-Building Series: Emotion in Game Design (A UX Persp...

by Celia Hodent (Independent)
Advocacy



GDC Europe 2015

Asking the Hard Questions: Morality in Narrative Design

by Jana Stadeler (Independent)
Design



GDC Summer 2020

Addressing Ethics & Content Responsibility as Game Develo...

by Celia Hodent (Independent)
Advocacy



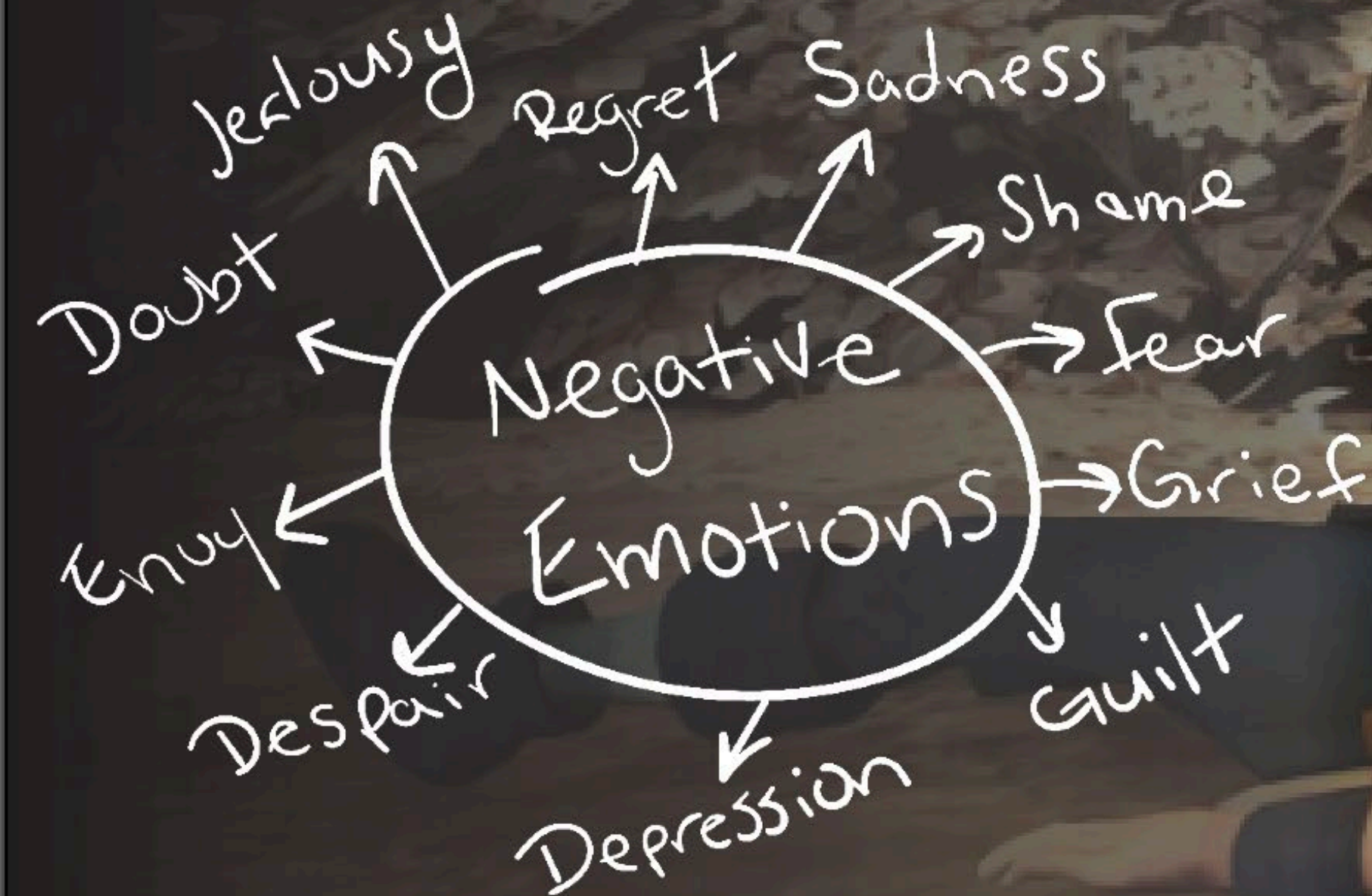
GDC 2017

A Practical Guide for Doing Ethical Player Testing

by Mia Consalvo (Concordia University)
Advocacy



The "Feels"



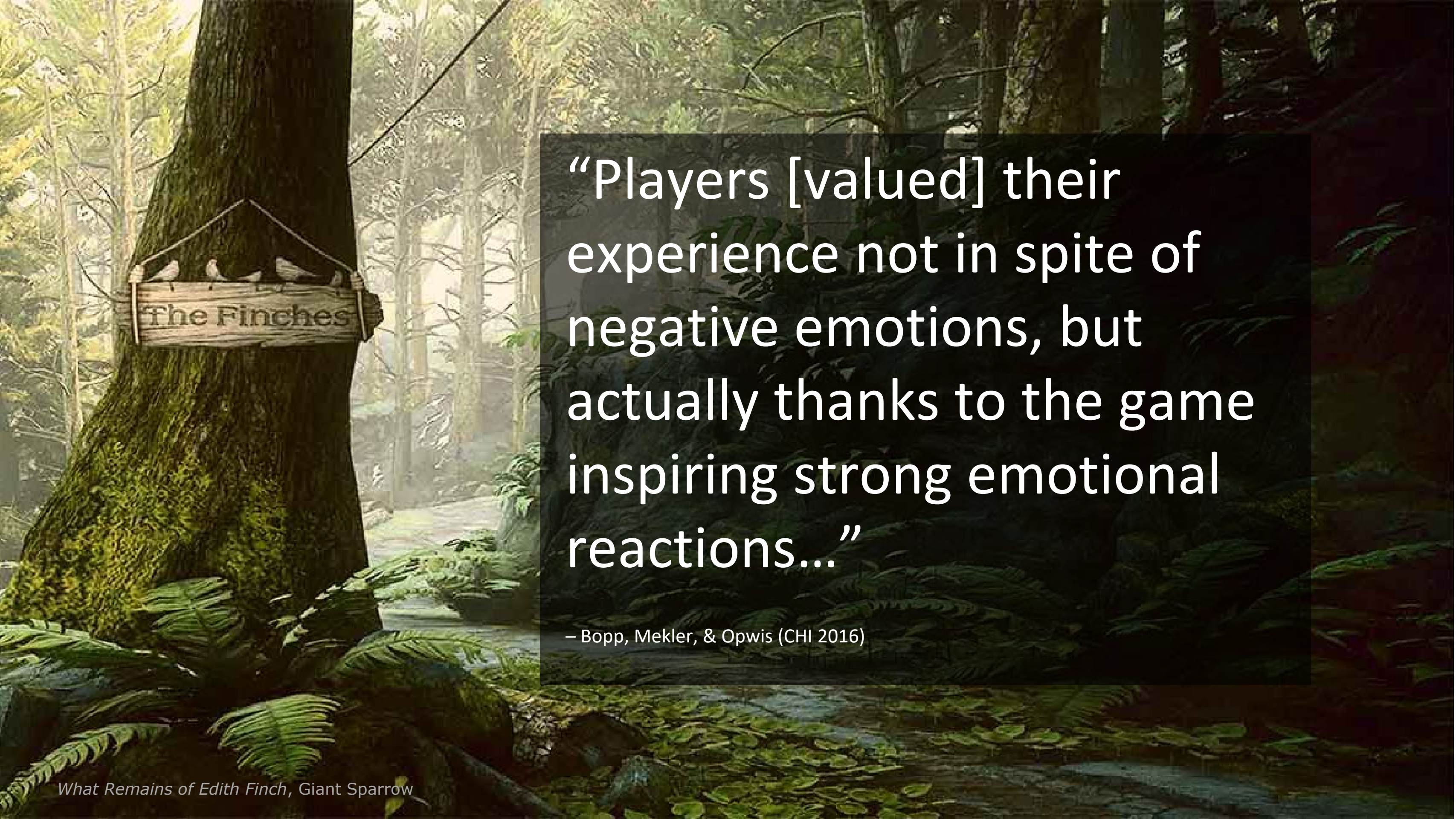
Unpleasant Emotions in Games

Previous Research:

- Uncomfortable interactions¹
- Negative emotions^{2,3}
- Emotionally moving moments³
- Emotional challenge^{3,4}
- Uncomfortable experiences⁵



1. Steve Benford, Chris Greenhalgh, Gabriella Giannachi, Brendan Walker, Joe Marshall, and Tom Rodden. 2012. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2207676.2208347>
2. Marcus Carter and Fraser Allison. 2019. Guilt in DayZ. In *Transgression in Games and Play*, Kristine Jørgensen and Faltin Karlsen (eds.). MIT Press, 133–152.
3. Julia Ayumi Bopp, Elisa D. Mekler, and Klaus Opwis. 2016. <https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/2858036.2858227>
4. Tom Cole, Paul Cairns, and Marco Gillies. 2015. DOI:<https://doi.org/10.1145/2793107.2793147>
5. Gowler, C. P. R., & Iacovides, I. 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3311350.3347179>



“Players [valued] their experience not in spite of negative emotions, but actually thanks to the game inspiring strong emotional reactions...”

— Bopp, Mekler, & Opwis (CHI 2016)

- 1 Heal
- 2 Help
- 3 Repair
- 4 Hack
- 5 Cheers
- 6 Follow
- 7 Move
- 8 Sorry

[E] NAMEOF [P] NAMEOFPLAYER [V]

[E] NAMEOFPLAI [P] NAMEOFFP [V]

[E] NAMEOFFPLAYER [P] NAMEOFFPLAYER [V]

 **WARNING**

OUT OF BOUNDS

00:28

RETURN TO BATTLE

ZURBAN AMP STATION

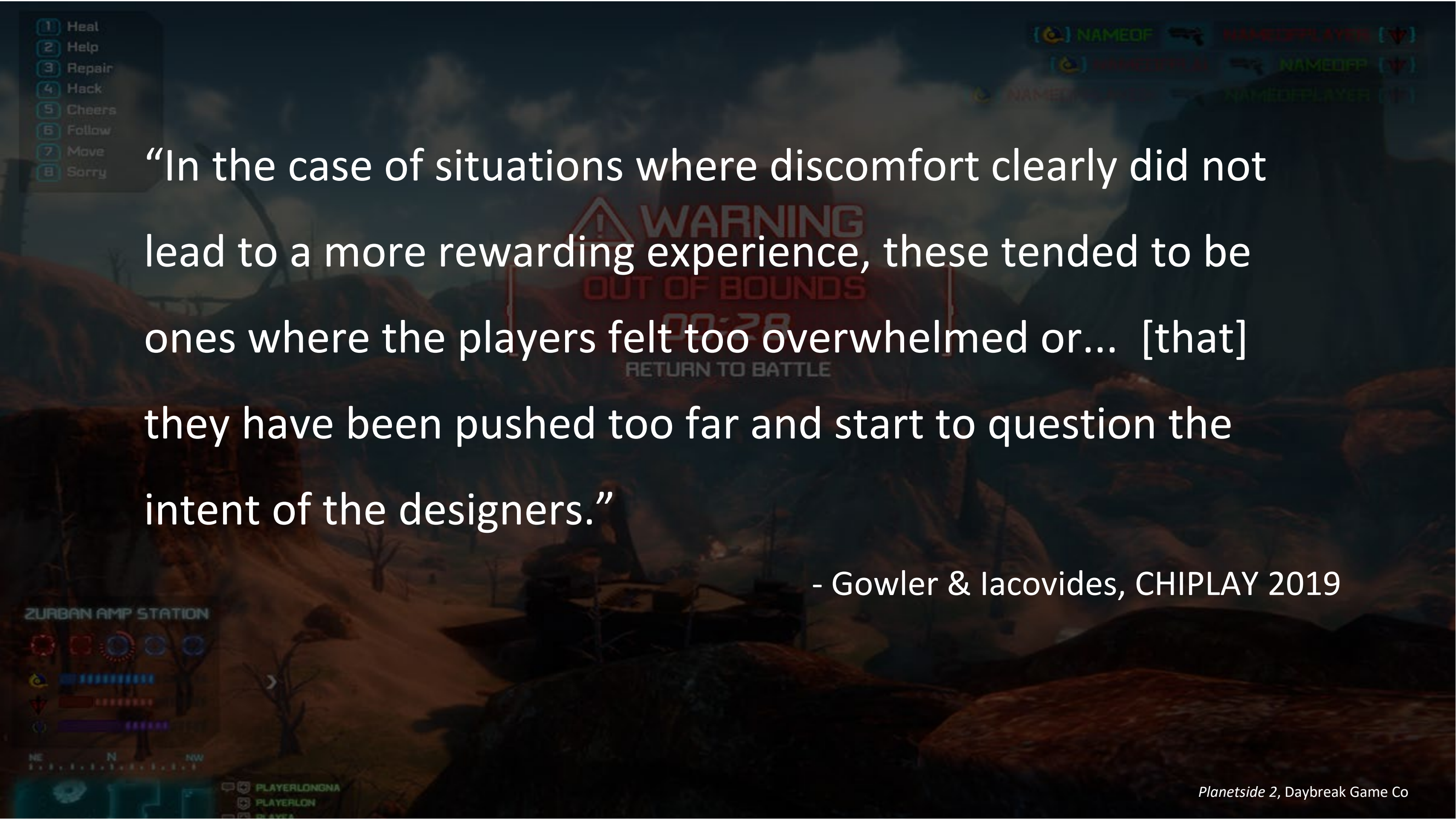






NE N NW

- PLAYERLONGNA
- PLAYERLON
- PLAYERA



“In the case of situations where discomfort clearly did not lead to a more rewarding experience, these tended to be ones where the players felt too overwhelmed or... [that] they have been pushed too far and start to question the intent of the designers.”

- Gowler & Iacovides, CHIPLAY 2019

A screenshot from the video game 'Rise of the Tomb Raider' showing Lara Croft in a jungle setting. She is standing on a wooden platform, looking down at a large pile of rubble and debris. The scene is filled with ancient stone structures and lush vegetation. Two text boxes are overlaid on the image: a red one on the left and a green one on the right.

Psychological
Distress

Challenging
emotional XP

ETHICAL PRINCIPLES OF PSYCHOLOGISTS AND CODE OF CONDUCT

Adopted August 21, 2002
Effective June 1, 2003
(With the 2010 Amendments
to Introduction and Applicability
and Standards 1.02 and 1.03,
Effective June 1, 2010)

With the 2016 Amendment
to Standard 3.04
Adopted August 3, 2016
Effective January 1, 2017

5 General Principles

(Aspirational)

84 Ethical Standards

(Enforceable)

ETHICAL PRINCIPLES OF PSYCHOLOGISTS
AND CODE OF CONDUCT

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION AND APPLICABILITY

PREAMBLE

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

- Principle A: Beneficence and Nonmaleficence
- Principle B: Fidelity and Responsibility
- Principle C: Integrity
- Principle D: Justice
- Principle E: Respect for People’s Rights and Dignity

ETHICAL STANDARDS

1. Resolving Ethical Issues

- 1.01 Misuse of Psychologists’ Work
- 1.02 Conflicts Between Ethics and Law, Regulations, or Other Governing Legal Authority
- 1.03 Conflicts Between Ethics and Organizational Demands
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- 1.05 Reporting Ethical Violations
- 1.06 Cooperating With Ethics Committees
- 1.07 Improper Complaints
- 1.08 Unfair Discrimination Against Complainants and Respondents

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- 2.02 Providing Services in Emergencies
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- 3.04 Avoiding Harm
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- 10.09 Interruption of Therapy
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AMENDMENTS TO THE 2002 “ETHICAL PRINCIPLES OF PSYCHOLOGISTS AND CODE OF CONDUCT” IN 2010 AND 2016

Boundaries of Competence (2.01)

Avoiding Harm (3.04)

Informed Consent (3.10)

Competence in Psychology

2.01c Boundaries of Competence:

Psychologists provide services, teach, and conduct research with populations and in areas only within the boundaries of their competence, based on their education, training, supervised experience, consultation, study, or professional experience.

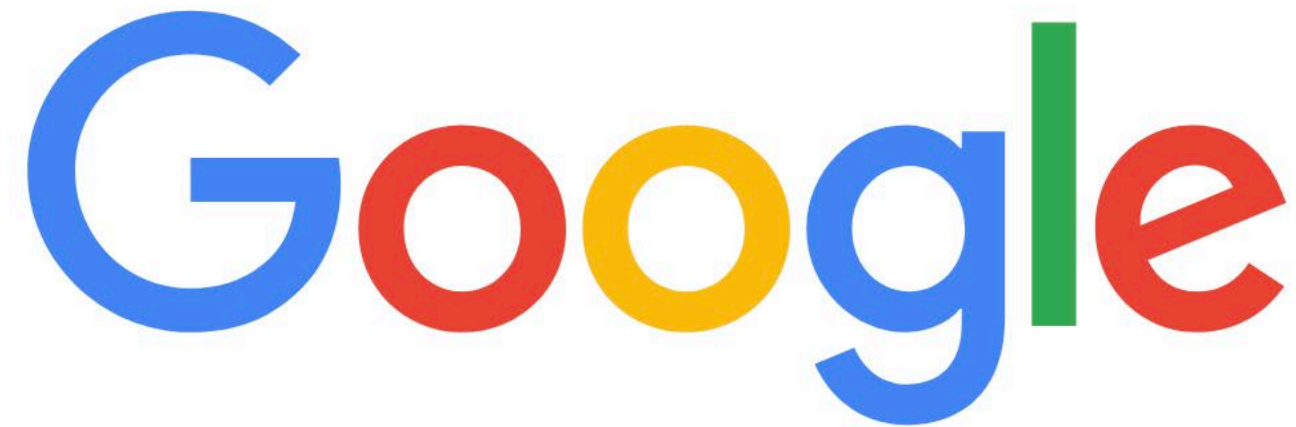
Only practice what you've been trained in.

Competence in Game Design

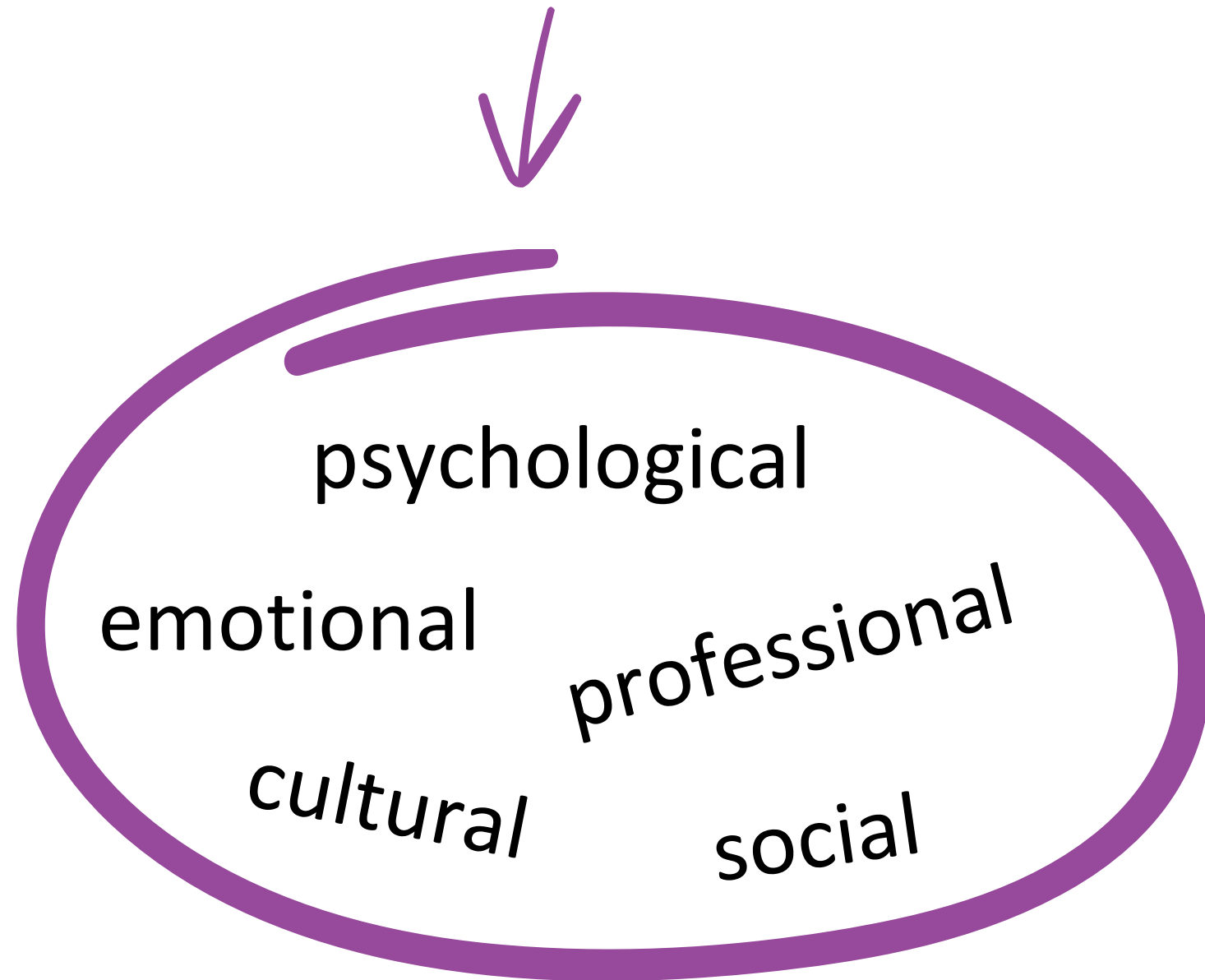
- Know and respect the limits of your / your team's knowledge, judgement, qualifications and capacity

Competence in Game Design

- Know and respect the limits of your / your team's knowledge, judgement, qualifications and capacity

The Google logo is displayed in its standard multi-colored font, centered on the slide.A search bar with a magnifying glass icon on the left and a microphone icon on the right. The text "what is depression?" is entered, with "is depression?" highlighted in blue.

Competence in Game Design



Competence in Game Design



Competence in Game Design

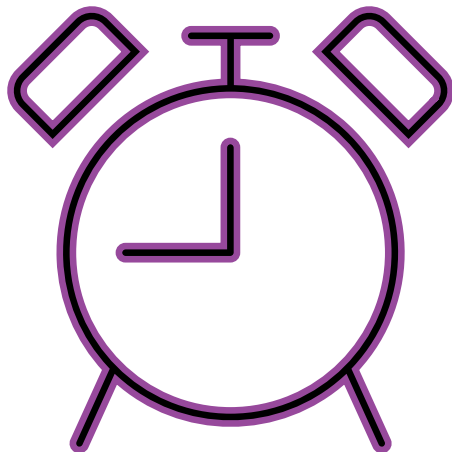
- Know and respect the limits of your / your team's knowledge, judgement, qualifications and capacity

Key question: Does the team possess the skills, knowledge, and experience to treat the subject matter with dignity, respect, and authenticity?

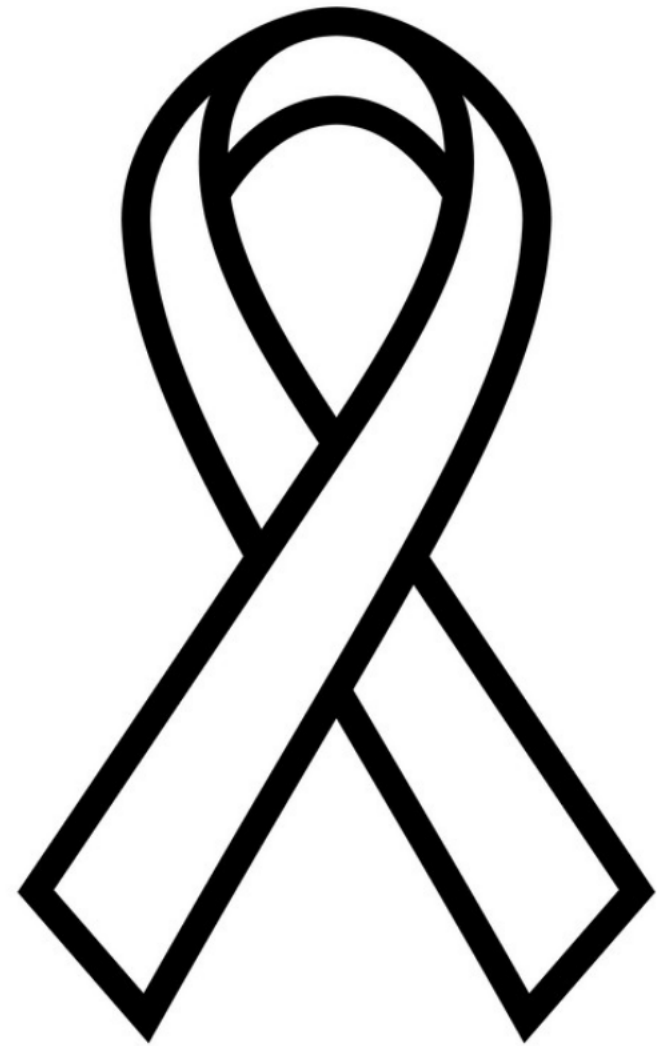
Competence in Game Design

- Know and respect the limits of your / your team's knowledge, judgement, qualifications and capacity

Time to Consult:



- ✓ Topic exceeds scope of competence
- ✓ Feature vulnerable populations
- ✓ Depict events or situations that have a reasonable potential to elicit strong emotional reactions



CONTENT WARNING:

Discussion of psychosis, including voice-hearing
and visual disturbance



HELLBLADE™

SENUA'S SACRIFICE

HELLBLADE™
SENUA'S SACRIFICE
A PS4™ GAME
AVAILABLE ON
PS4™





Professional Consultants

Professor Paul Fletcher

Hisham Ziauddeen, PhD

Professor Charles Fernyhough

Professor Elizabeth Ashman-Rowe

Mental Health Advisors

Michael Lafond

Kathy Jones

Tracey Bartlett

Jenny Esson

Rachel Waddingham

Eoin Kelly

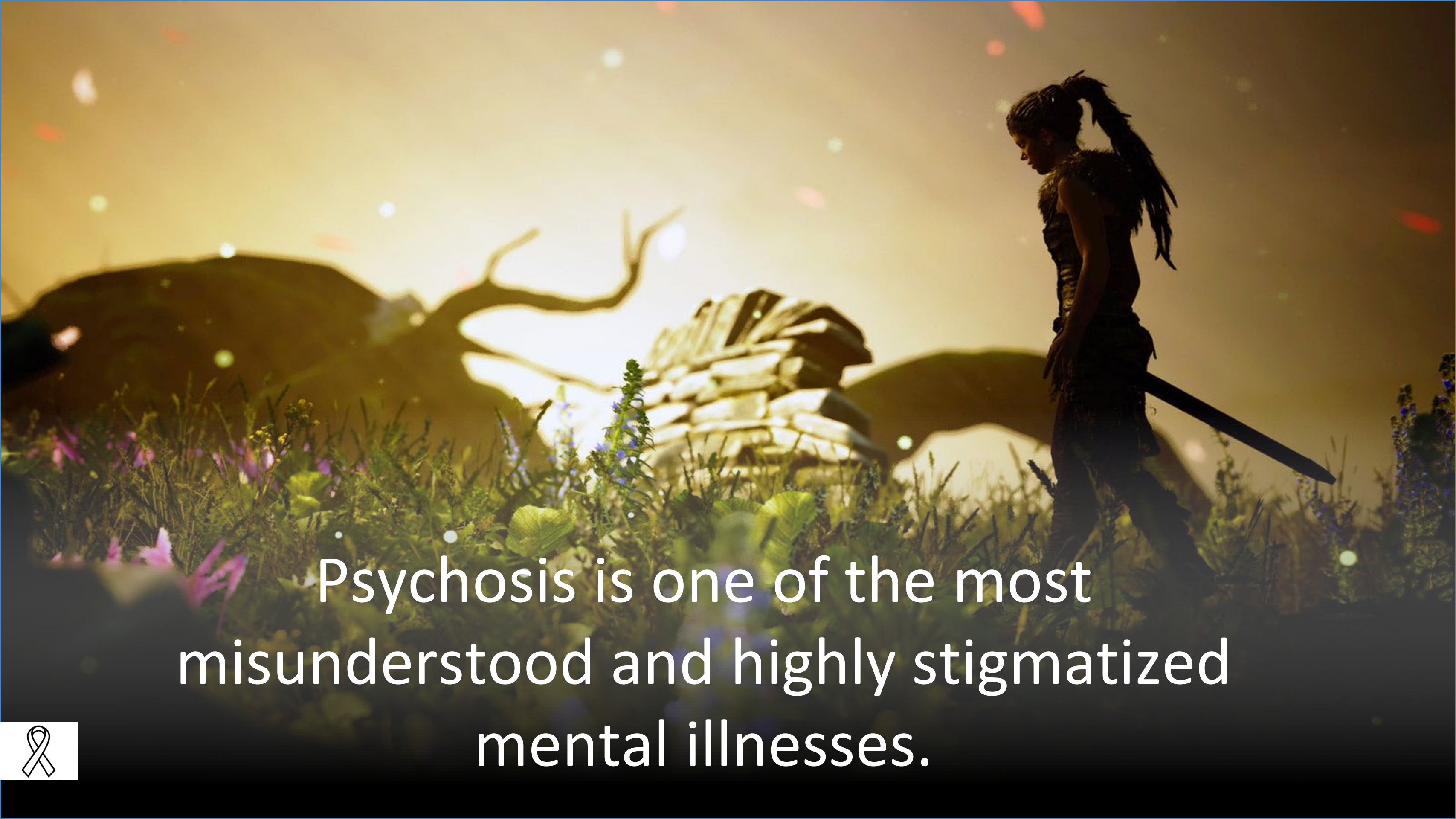
Nikki Mattocks



“Everything is in bits. Like a photograph that’s torn and put together again.”

“Sometimes the world appears like a kaleidoscope and it can be beautiful.”



A woman in a dark, feathered costume with a long sword, standing in a field of purple flowers at sunset. The scene is bathed in a warm, golden light from the setting sun, which is visible in the background. The woman is looking down, and the overall mood is somber and contemplative.

Psychosis is one of the most
misunderstood and highly stigmatized
mental illnesses.



Avoiding Harm



Avoiding Harm in Psychology

3.04 Avoiding Harm:

Psychologists take reasonable steps to avoid harming their clients/patients, students, supervisees, research participants, organizational clients, and others with whom they work, and to minimize harm where it is foreseeable and unavoidable.

Do no harm; minimize harm if harm is unavoidable

Avoiding Harm in Game Design

- If intentionally evoking unpleasant emotions such as grief, loss, shame, guilt, or regret:

there is an inherent potential for harm

Avoiding Harm in Game Design

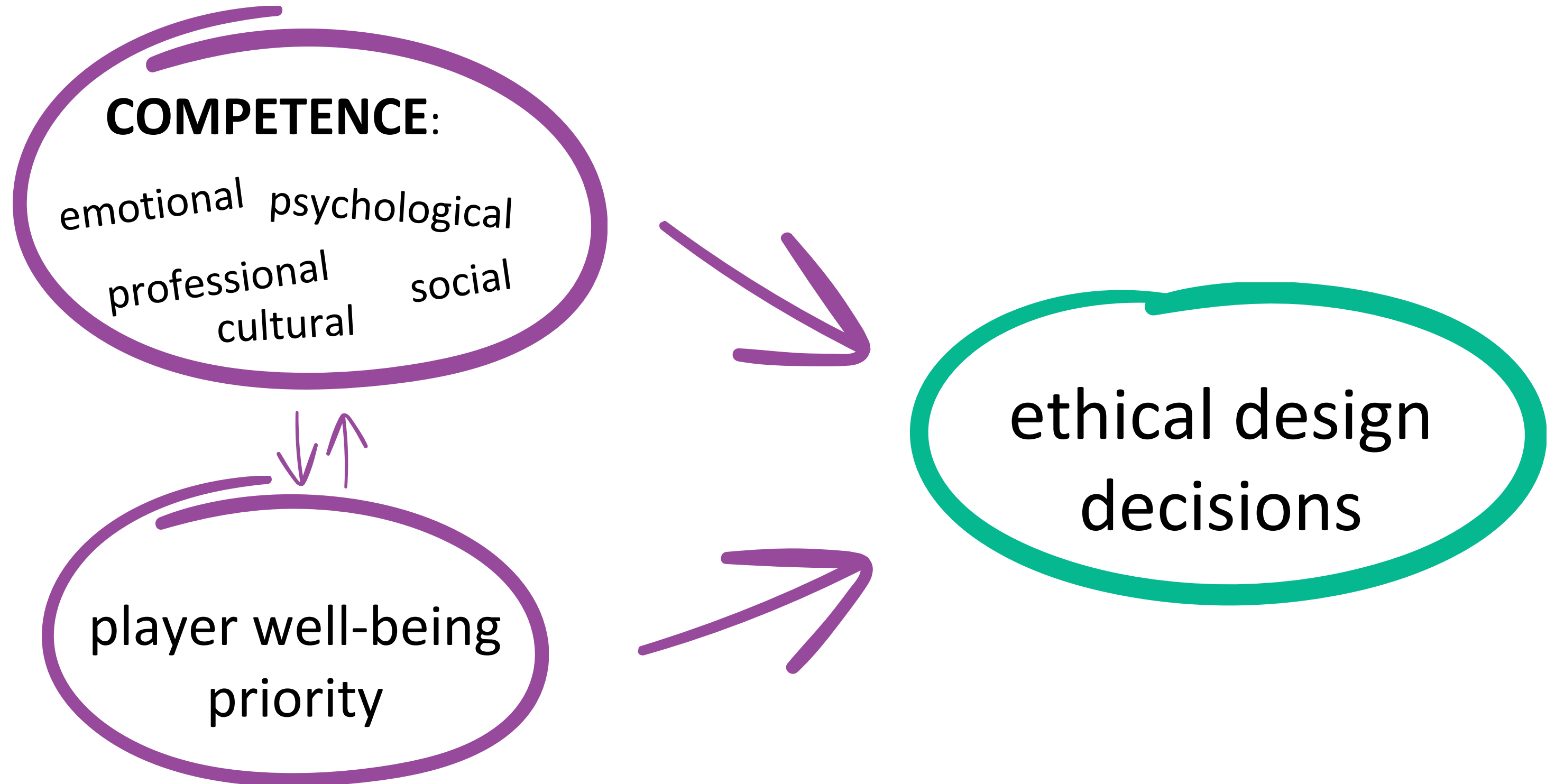
- If you are intentionally creating situations designed to evoke unpleasant emotions such as grief, loss, shame, guilt, or regret **there is an inherent potential for harm**

Ethical Practice: Take steps to **minimize the risk** of harm and/or harmful impact

Avoiding Harm in Game Design

- Strategies for minimizing risk and impact:
 - Informed consent
 - Competence
 - Prioritizing player well-being

Avoiding Harm in Game Design





CONTENT WARNING:

Discussion of suicide, suicide stats, &
and suicide depiction in-game

LIFE IS STRANGE







I've been bullied too.

Y

I wanted proof.

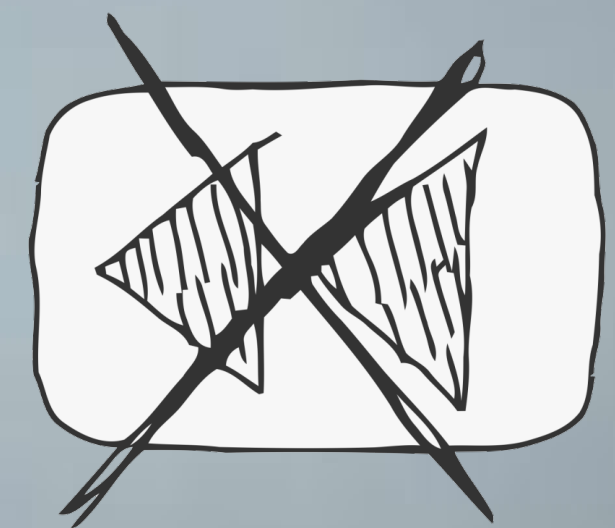
X

B

I was scared.

A

I had no idea.



This action will have
consequences...

I've been bullied too.

Y

I wanted proof.

X

B

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A

I had no idea.


Suicide Stats:

- 10th leading CoD in the US
- 2nd leading CoD for ppl 10-34
- LGBTQ+ youth 5x more likely to attempt suicide

Suicide Stats:

- 10th leading CoD in the US
- 2nd leading CoD for people ages 10-34
- LGBTQ+ youth 5x more likely to attempt suicide
- 85% of people know someone personally who completed suicide
- Guilt and self-blame are very common reaction to suicide loss



A cinematic scene from the video game Life is Strange. Two female characters, Chloe and Rachel, are standing on a rooftop in the rain. Chloe, on the left, is wearing a grey hoodie and a black bag. Rachel, on the right, is wearing a dark jacket and a blue skirt. They are looking at each other. The background shows a cityscape with buildings and trees, all blurred by the rain.

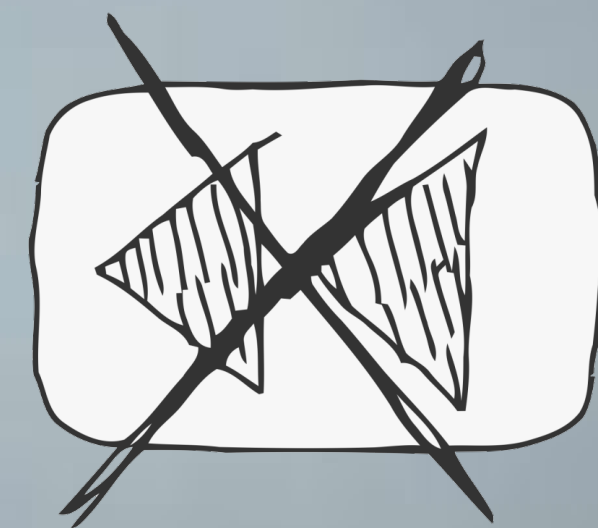
“I should have
seen the signs.”

“I should have
done more.”

“If only I had said
the right things.”



Insert content
warning here



This action will have
consequences...

I've been bullied too.

Y

I wanted proof.

X

B

I was scared.

A

I had no idea.

;



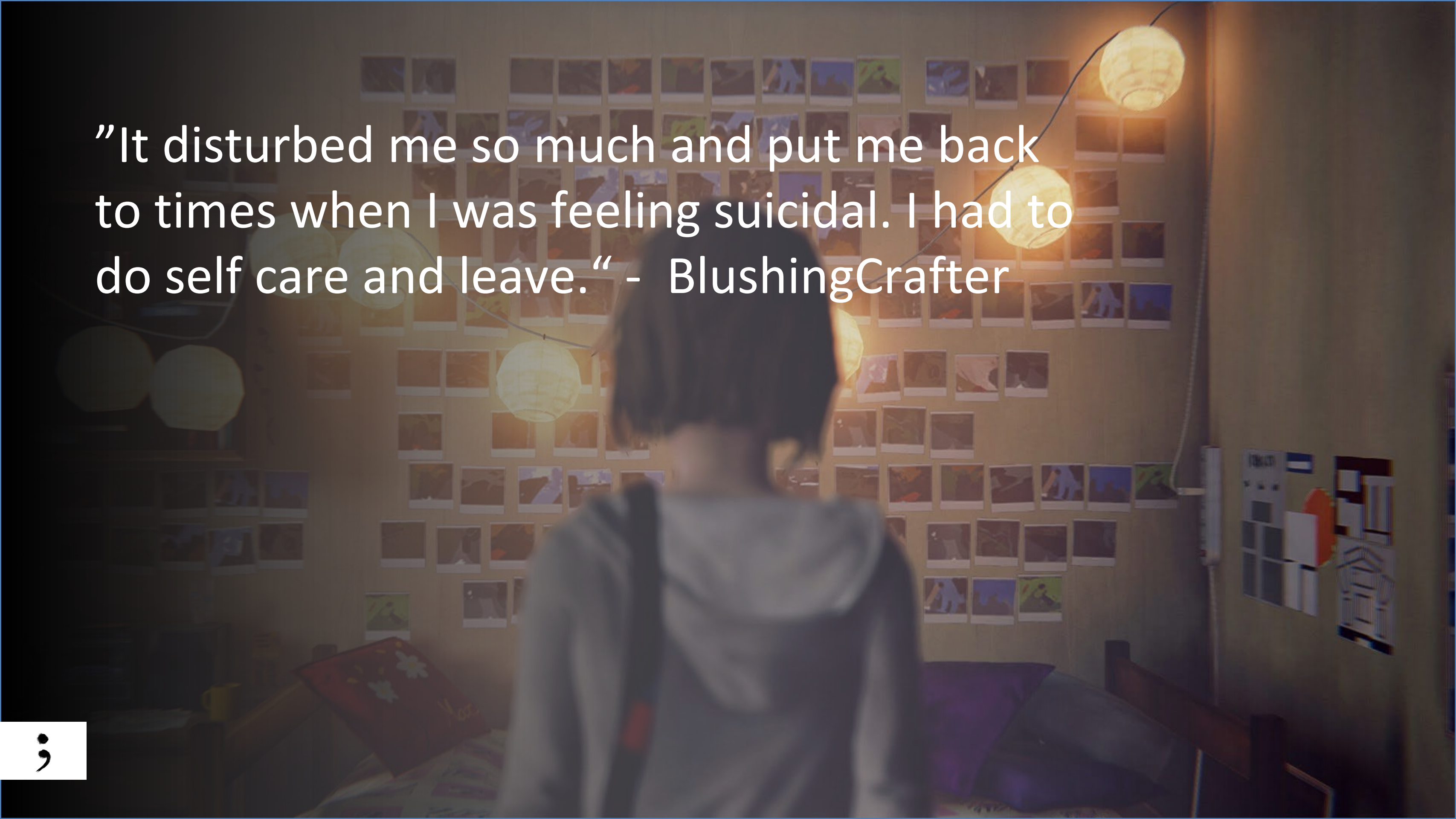
"Should Life is Strange have TW?"

"No. The scene with Kate would not have the same impact if you knew it was coming."

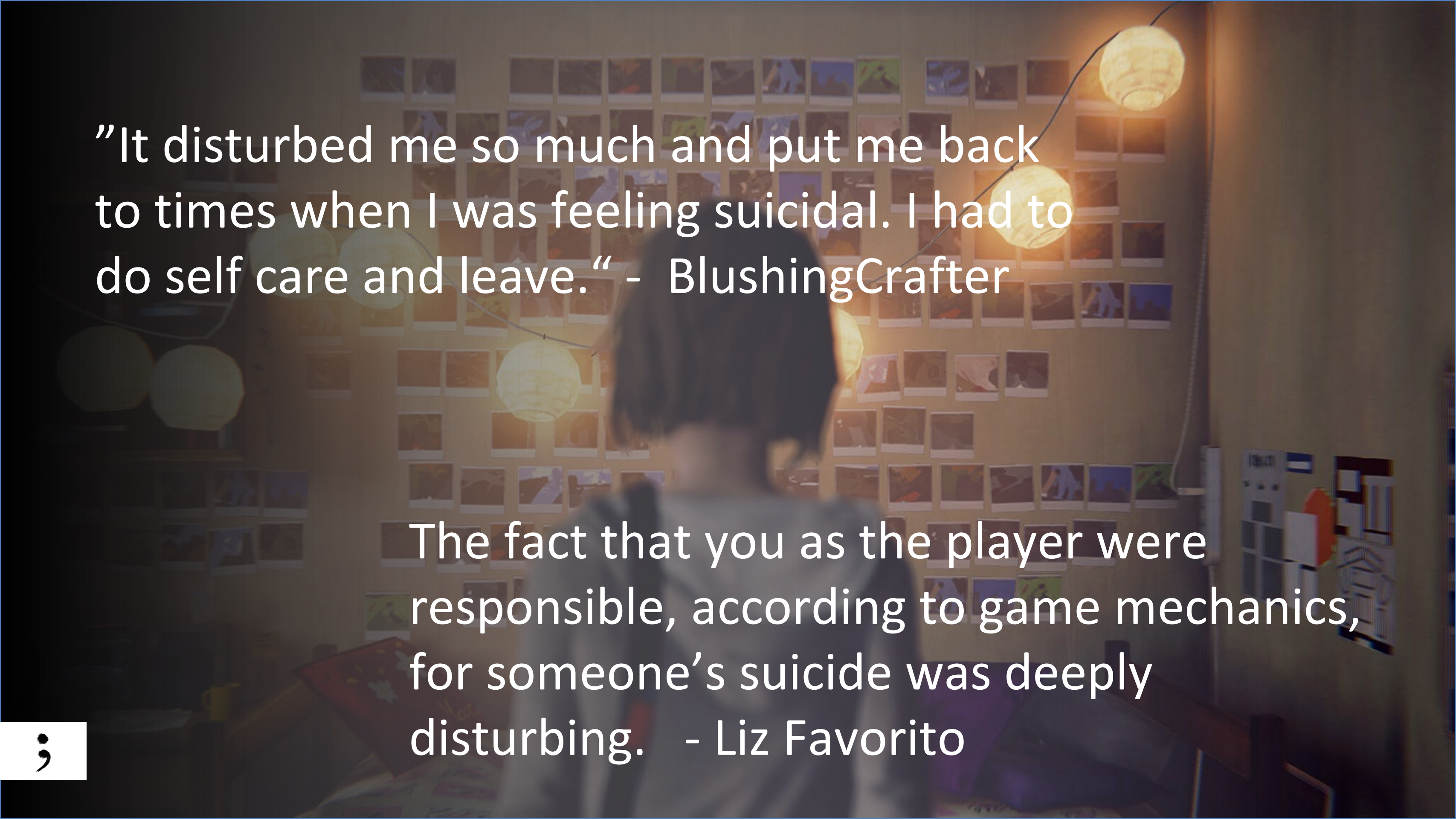
Trauma is not a
plot twist

;



A person with dark hair, wearing a grey hoodie, is seen from behind, looking at a wall covered in many small Polaroid photographs. The room is dimly lit, with warm light from several spherical paper lanterns hanging from the ceiling. The photos on the wall appear to be of various landscapes and abstract scenes. To the right, there are some papers or small posters pinned to the wall. The overall mood is contemplative and nostalgic.

“It disturbed me so much and put me back to times when I was feeling suicidal. I had to do self care and leave.” - BlushingCrafter

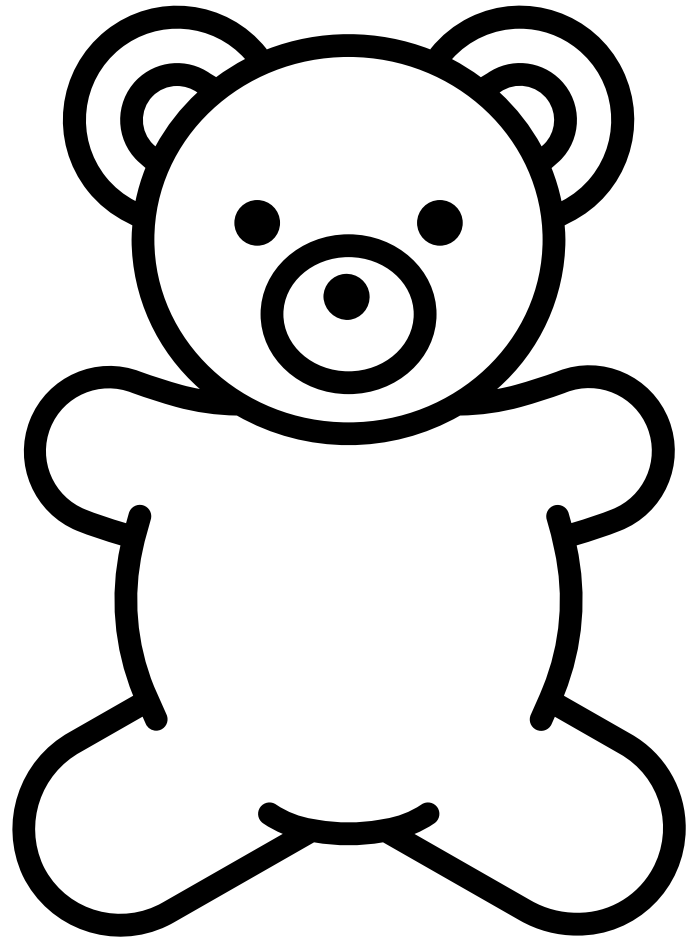


“It disturbed me so much and put me back to times when I was feeling suicidal. I had to do self care and leave.” - BlushingCrafter

The fact that you as the player were responsible, according to game mechanics, for someone’s suicide was deeply disturbing. - Liz Favorito

What Remains of
**Edith
Finch**





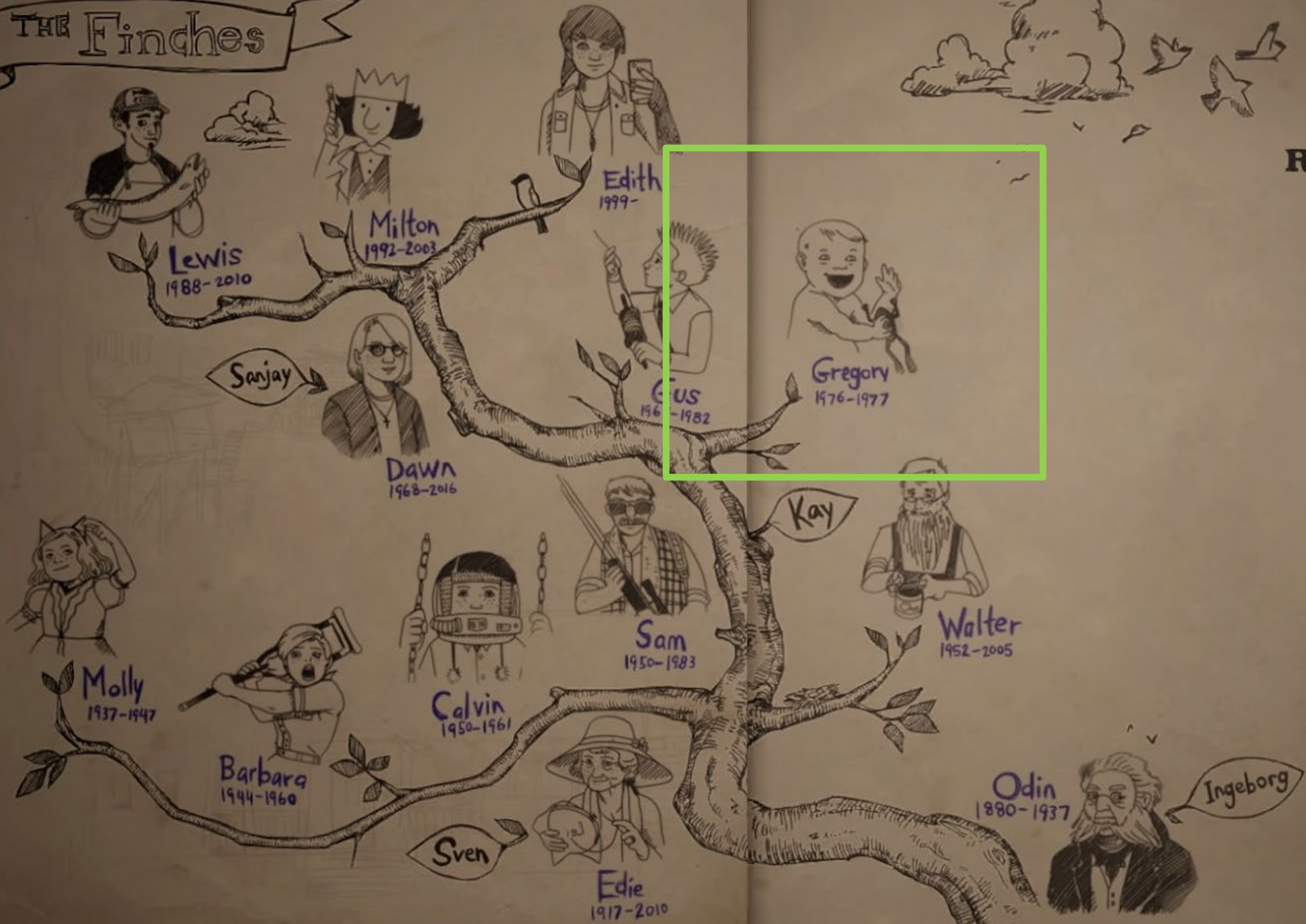
CONTENT WARNING:

Discussion of in-game death of an
infant / child loss

M... ch
A... ch
N... ch
y... ch



THE Finches



- Play**
- Options**
- Replay a story**
- Credits**
- New Game**



I know how silly it sounds



“Oh God,
please don’t make
me do this.”



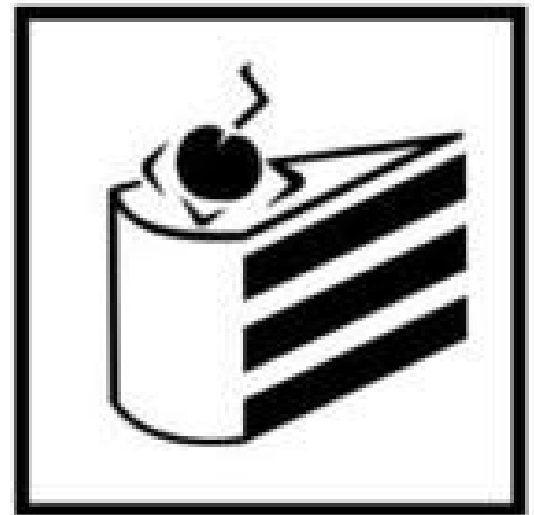
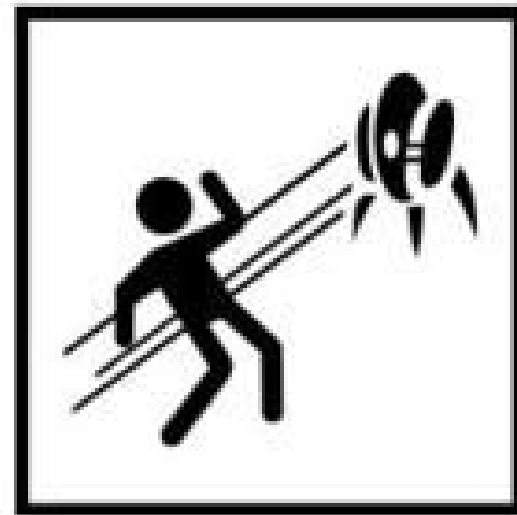
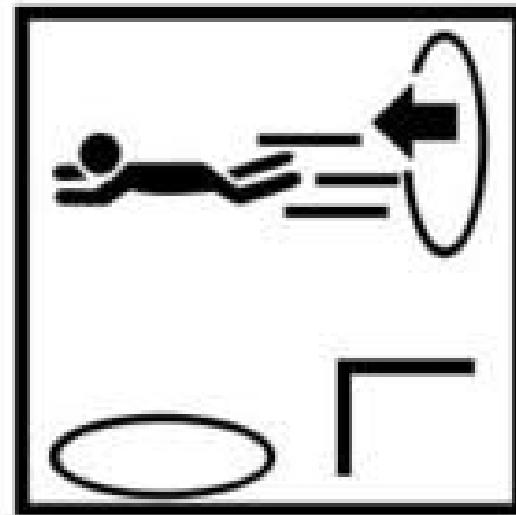
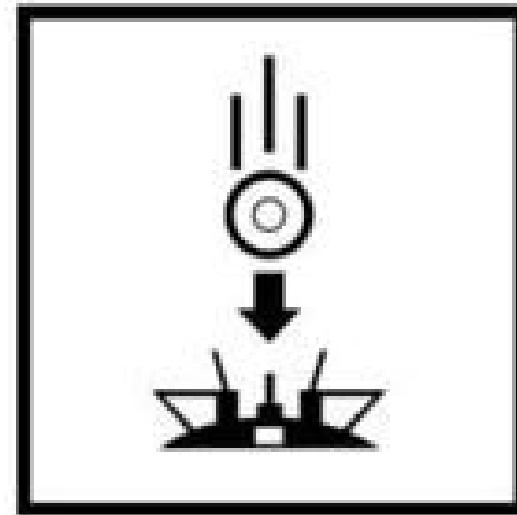
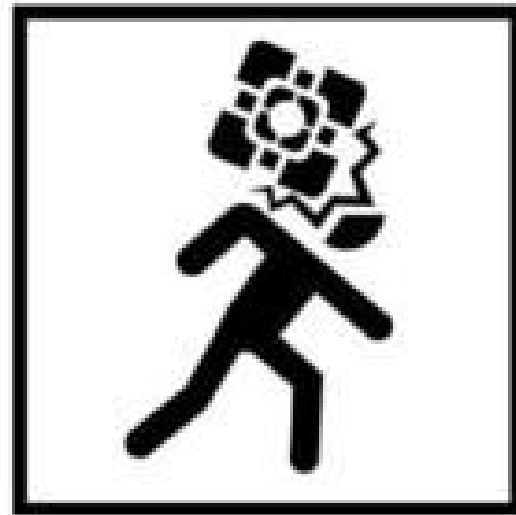
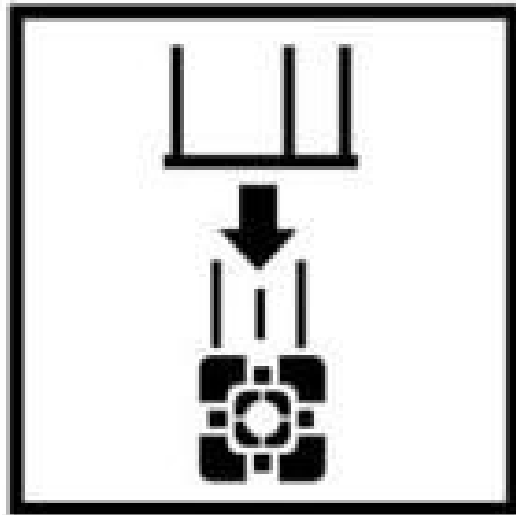




“I wish I could have
skipped it. I wish I’d
never played it.”



Informed Consent



Informed Consent in Psychology

8.02 Informed Consent to Research:

psychologists inform participants about (1) the purpose of the research, expected duration, and procedures; (2) their right to decline to participate and to withdraw from the research once participation has begun; **(3) the foreseeable consequences of declining or withdrawing;** **(4) reasonably foreseeable factors that may be expected to influence their willingness to participate such as potential risks, discomfort, or adverse effects;** (5) any prospective research benefits; (6) limits of confidentiality; (7) incentives for participation; and (8) whom to contact for questions about the research and research participants' rights. They provide opportunity for the prospective participants to ask questions and receive answers

Informed Consent in Psych & Games

In Psych:

(4) [participants have a right to know about] reasonably foreseeable factors that may be expected to influence their willingness to participate such as potential risks, discomfort, or adverse effects;

In Games:

Players have a right to know about content that could potentially be disturbing or cause distress.

FACE THE MONSTERS WITHIN

Fantasy Violence
Language

PRE-ORDER THE PHYSICAL EDITION
MARCH 2



WWW.LIMITEDRUNGAMES.COM

SEA OF SOLITUDE: THE DIRECTOR'S CUT ©2019-2021 JO-MEI GMBH. PUBLISHED BY QUANTIC DREAM. QUANTIC DREAM IS A TRADEMARK OF QUANTIC DREAM SA. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. NINTENDO SWITCH IS A TRADEMARK OF NINTENDO.



Content Warning:

The following video contains material that may be harmful or traumatizing to some audiences.



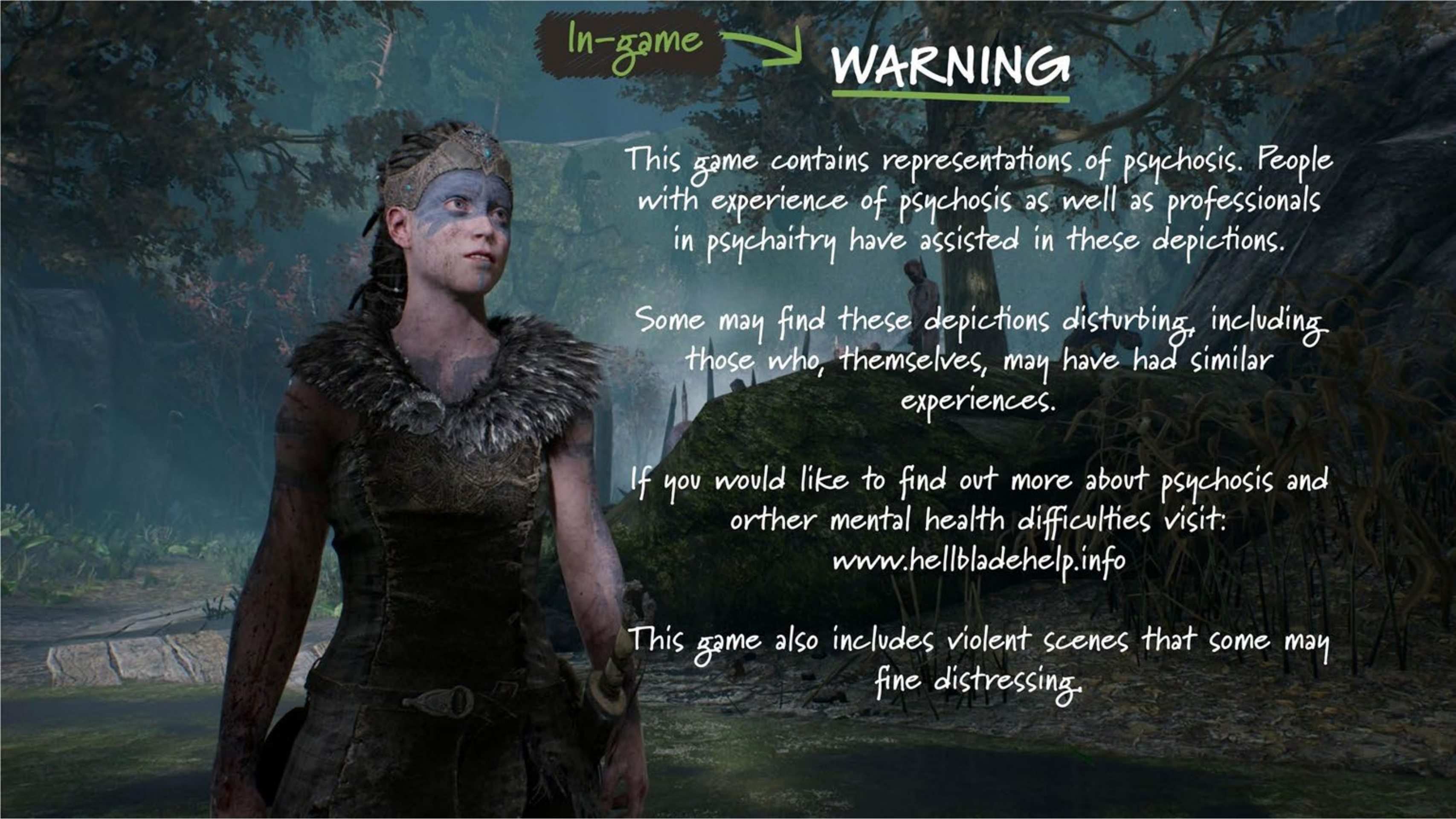
WARNING

This game contains representations of psychosis. People with experience of psychosis as well as professionals in psychiatry have assisted in these depictions.

Some may find these depictions disturbing, including those who, themselves, may have had similar experiences.

If you would like to find out more about psychosis and other mental health difficulties visit:
www.hellbladehelp.info

This game also includes violent scenes that some may find distressing.

A character from the game Hellblade: Senuo's Journey, a woman with blue face paint and a fur collar, stands in a misty, dark forest. The background shows a path leading into the distance with another figure visible in the fog.

In-game

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vulnerability

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Additional t.w.

In-game

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Additional t.w.

Continue?

Informed Consent in Game Design

Anatomy of a Good Content Warning

- ❑ In-game
- ❑ Specific
- ❑ Vulnerable players
- ❑ Support
- ❑ Additional considerations
- ❑ Affirmative consent

Informed Consent in Psychology

8.02 Informed Consent to Research:

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Informed Consent in Psych & Games

In Psych:

(3) [inform participants about] the foreseeable consequences of declining or withdrawing;

In Games:

Give players opportunities to opt out without punishment or negative impact



Makarov: Remember - no Russian.

DISTURBING CONTENT NOTICE

Some players may find one of the missions disturbing or offensive. Would you like to have the option to skip this mission?

(You will not be penalized in terms of game completion.)

Yes, ask me later

No, I will not be offended



Good

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SPECIAL OPS

MULTIPLAYER

Good

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(You will not be penalized in terms of game completion.)

Yes, ask me later

No, I will not be offended

A+

"FOR THE RECORD"

M

?

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No, I will not be offended

A+

Good

MULTIPLAYER



M

?

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Some players may find one of the missions disturbing or offensive. Would you like to have the option to skip this mission?

(You will not be penalized in terms of game completion.)

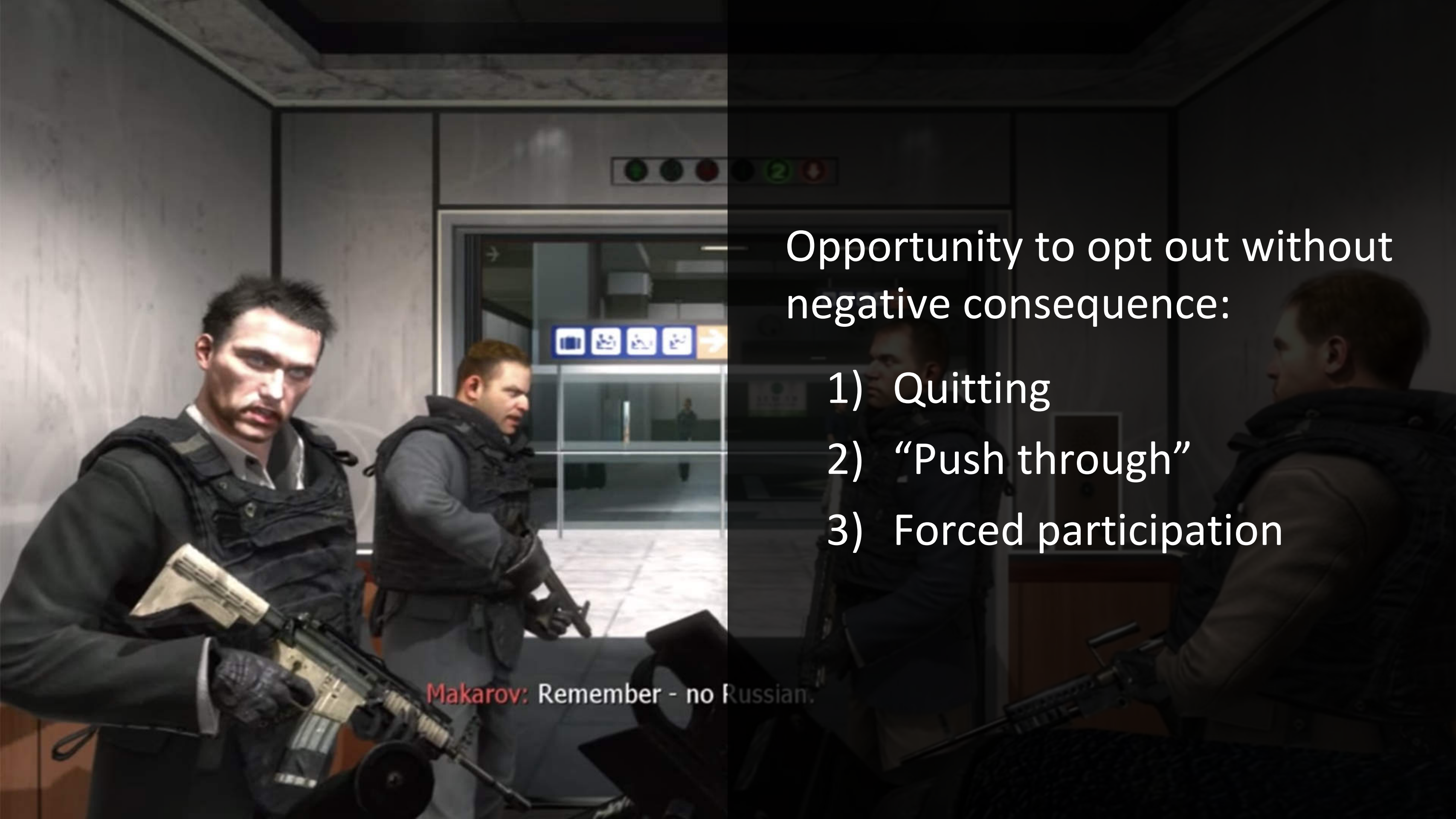
Yes, ask me later

No, I will not be offended

Good

A+

UGHHHHHHHH



Opportunity to opt out without negative consequence:

- 1) Quitting
- 2) “Push through”
- 3) Forced participation

Makarov: Remember - no Russian.

Recap:



I'M... I'M A GOOD PERSON,
RIGHT?

Ethical guidelines can help us design experiences that enrich and engage rather than distress and distance

ETHICAL PRINCIPLES OF PSYCHOLOGISTS
AND CODE OF CONDUCT

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION AND APPLICABILITY

PREAMBLE

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

- Principle A: Beneficence and Nonmaleficence
- Principle B: Fidelity and Responsibility
- Principle C: Integrity
- Principle D: Justice
- Principle E: Respect for People’s Rights and Dignity

ETHICAL STANDARDS

1. Resolving Ethical Issues

- 1.01 Misuse of Psychologists’ Work
- 1.02 Conflicts Between Ethics and Law, Regulations, or Other Governing Legal Authority
- 1.03 Conflicts Between Ethics and Organizational Demands
- 1.04 Informal Resolution of Ethical Violations
- 1.05 Reporting Ethical Violations
- 1.06 Cooperating With Ethics Committees
- 1.07 Improper Complaints
- 1.08 Unfair Discrimination Against Complainants and Respondents

2. Competence

- 2.01 Boundaries of Competence
- 2.02 Providing Services in Emergencies
- 2.03 Maintaining Competence
- 2.04 Bases for Scientific and Professional Judgments
- 2.05 Delegation of Work to Others
- 2.06 Personal Problems and Conflicts

3. Human Relations

- 3.01 Unfair Discrimination
- 3.02 Sexual Harassment
- 3.03 Other Harassment
- 3.04 Avoiding Harm
- 3.05 Multiple Relationships
- 3.06 Conflict of Interest
- 3.07 Third-Party Requests for Services
- 3.08 Exploitative Relationships
- 3.09 Cooperation With Other Professionals
- 3.10 Informed Consent
- 3.11 Psychological Services Delivered to or Through Organizations
- 3.12 Interruption of Psychological Services

4. Privacy and Confidentiality

- 4.01 Maintaining Confidentiality

- 4.02 Discussing the Limits of Confidentiality
- 4.03 Recording
- 4.04 Minimizing Intrusions on Privacy
- 4.05 Disclosures
- 4.06 Consultations
- 4.07 Use of Confidential Information for Didactic or Other Purposes

5. Advertising and Other Public Statements

- 5.01 Avoidance of False or Deceptive Statements
- 5.02 Statements by Others
- 5.03 Descriptions of Workshops and Non-Degree-Granting Educational Programs
- 5.04 Media Presentations
- 5.05 Testimonials
- 5.06 In-Person Solicitation

6. Record Keeping and Fees

- 6.01 Documentation of Professional and Scientific Work and Maintenance of Records
- 6.02 Maintenance, Dissemination, and Disposal of Confidential Records of Professional and Scientific Work
- 6.03 Withholding Records for Nonpayment

- 6.04 Fees and Financial Arrangements
- 6.05 Barter With Clients/Patients
- 6.06 Accuracy in Reports to Payors and Funding Sources
- 6.07 Referrals and Fees

7. Education and Training

- 7.01 Design of Education and Training Programs
- 7.02 Descriptions of Education and Training Programs
- 7.03 Accuracy in Teaching
- 7.04 Student Disclosure of Personal Information
- 7.05 Mandatory Individual or Group Therapy
- 7.06 Assessing Student and Supervisee Performance

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- 8.01 Institutional Approval
- 8.02 Informed Consent to Research
- 8.03 Informed Consent for Recording Voices and Images in Research

- 8.04 Client/Patient, Student, and Subordinate Research Participants
- 8.05 Dispensing With Informed Consent for Research
- 8.06 Offering Inducements for Research Participation
- 8.07 Deception in Research
- 8.08 Debriefing
- 8.09 Humane Care and Use of Animals in Research
- 8.10 Reporting Research Results
- 8.11 Plagiarism
- 8.12 Publication Credit
- 8.13 Duplicate Publication of Data
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- 8.15 Reviewers

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- 9.01 Bases for Assessments
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- 9.04 Release of Test Data
- 9.05 Test Construction
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- 9.07 Assessment by Unqualified Persons
- 9.08 Obsolete Tests and Outdated Test Results
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- 9.10 Explaining Assessment Results
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- 10.01 Informed Consent to Therapy
- 10.02 Therapy Involving Couples or Families
- 10.03 Group Therapy
- 10.04 Providing Therapy to Those Served by Others
- 10.05 Sexual Intimacies With Current Therapy Clients/Patients
- 10.06 Sexual Intimacies With Relatives or Significant Others of Current Therapy Clients/Patients
- 10.07 Therapy With Former Sexual Partners
- 10.08 Sexual Intimacies With Former Therapy Clients/Patients
- 10.09 Interruption of Therapy
- 10.10 Terminating Therapy

AMENDMENTS TO THE 2002 “ETHICAL PRINCIPLES OF PSYCHOLOGISTS AND CODE OF CONDUCT” IN 2010 AND 2016

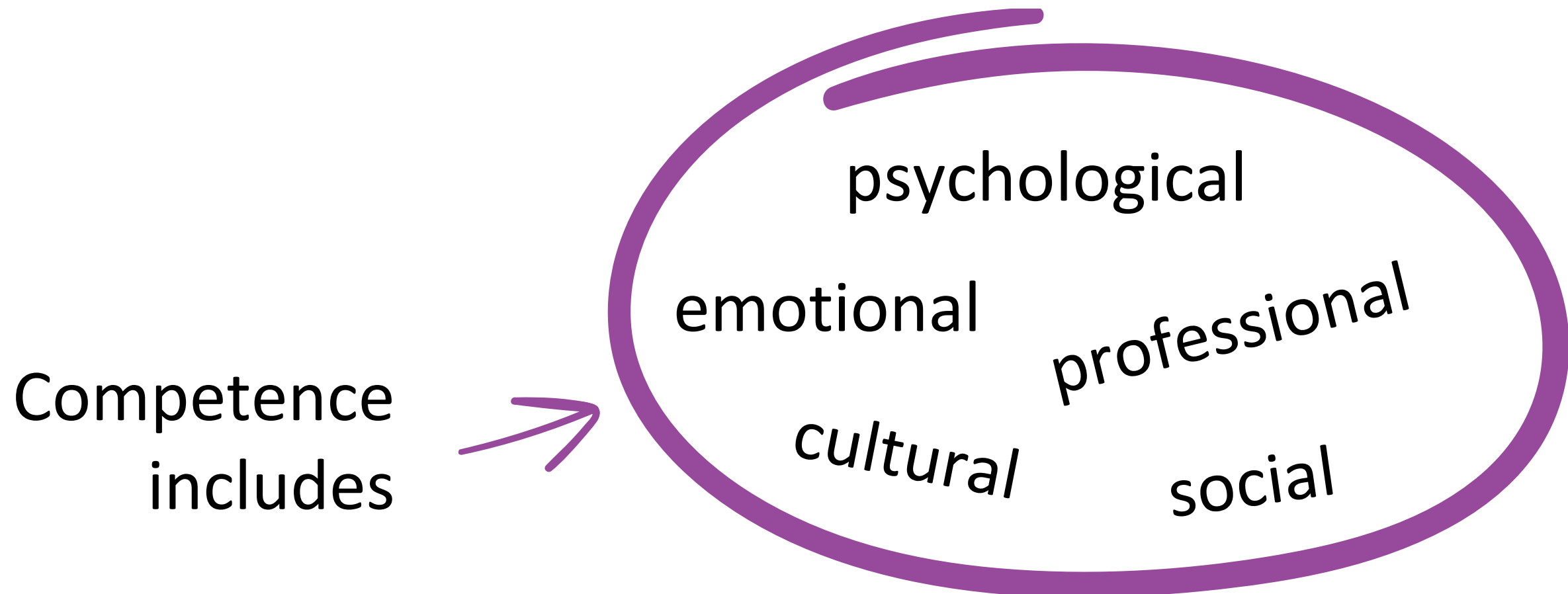
Boundaries of Competence (2.01)

Avoiding Harm (3.04)

Informed Consent (3.10)

Competence in Game Design

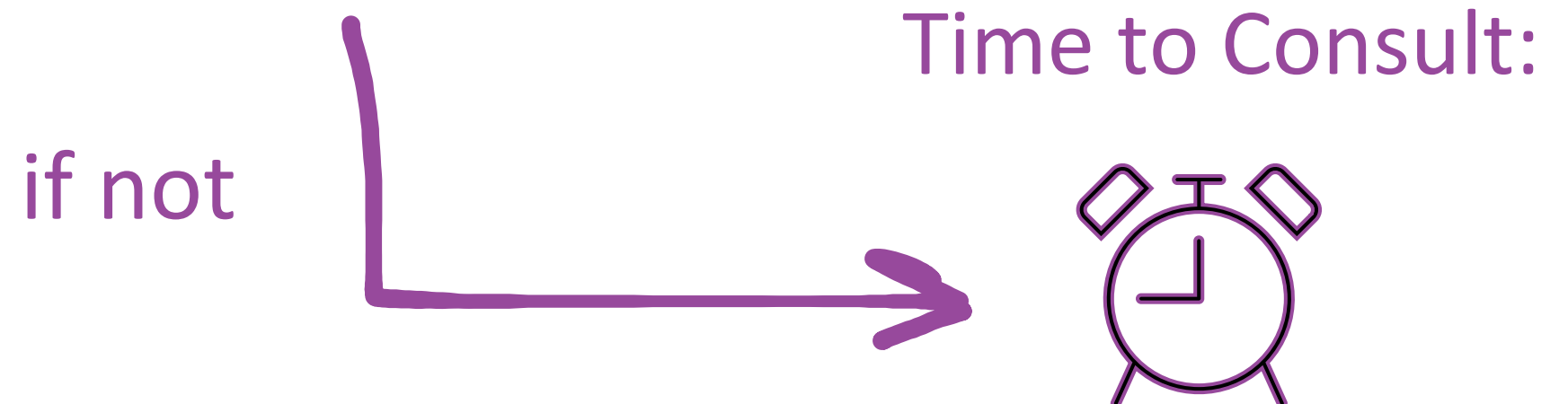
- Know and respect the limits of your / your team's knowledge, judgement, qualifications and capacity



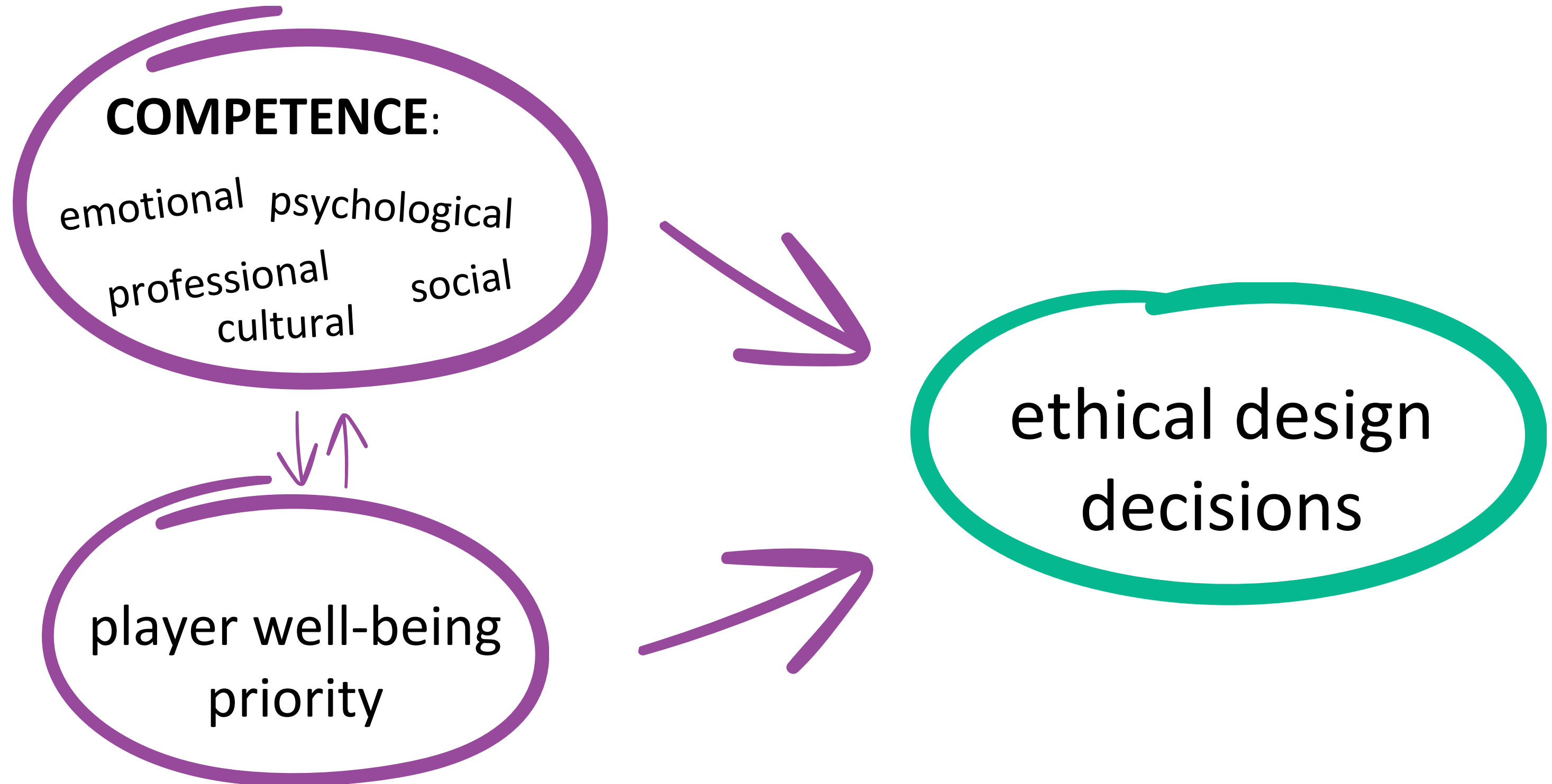
Competence in Game Design

- Know and respect the limits of your / your team's knowledge, judgement, qualifications and capacity

Key question: Does the team possess the skills, knowledge, and experience to treat the subject matter with dignity, respect, and authenticity?



Avoiding Harm in Game Design



Informed Consent in Game Design

Do players have the opportunity to:

- Make informed choices

Content Warnings

- ☐ In-game
- ☐ Specific
- ☐ Vulnerable players
- ☐ Support
- ☐ Additional considerations
- ☐ Affirmative Consent

Informed Consent in Game Design

Do players have the opportunity to:

- Make informed choices
- Take alternate routes



Informed Consent in Game Design

Do players have the opportunity to:

- Make informed choices
- Take alternate routes
- Opt out without consequence

ASSIST MODE

Game Speed	< 100% >
Infinite Stamina	< OFF >
Air Dashes	< Default >
Dash Assist	< OFF >
Invincibility	< OFF >

Do right by our players:
^

~~Do No Harm:~~ Ethical Design for Emotionally Heavy Games

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