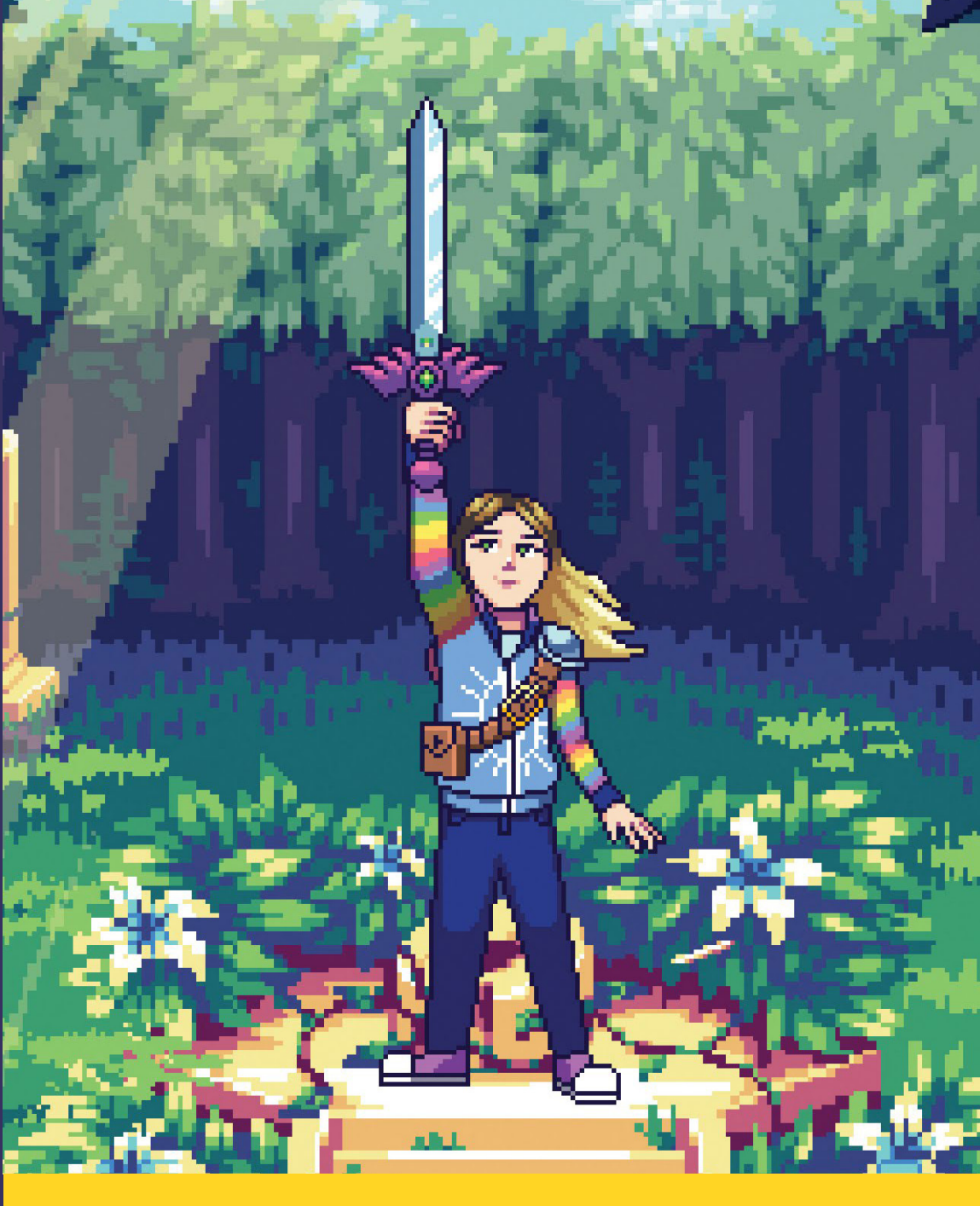


Break the Game

A FILM BY JANE M. WAGNER



POV

DISCUSSION GUIDE





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Film Summary



After coming out as a trans woman, world-record-holding gamer, Narcissa Wright loses her massive fanbase. To win them back, she attempts to set a new record in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, live-streaming every minute of her quest. *Break the Game* is a moving exploration of gamer culture, the realities of online harassment, and the mental health implications of living a digital life.

Using This Guide

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection and designed for people who want to use *Break the Game* to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues, and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit <https://communitynetwork.amdoc.org/>.

Tips and Tools for Facilitators

Here are some supports to help you prepare for facilitating a conversation that inspires curiosity, connection, critical questions, recognition of difference, power, and possibility.

Share Community Agreements

Community Agreements: What Are They? Why Are They Useful?

Community agreements help provide a framework for engaging in dialogue that establishes a shared sense of intention ahead of participating in discussion. Community agreements can be co-constructed and created as an opening activity that your group completes collectively and collaboratively. [Here is a model](#) of community agreements you can review. As the facilitator, you can gauge how long your group should take to form these agreements or whether participants would be amenable to using pre-established community agreements.

Opening Activity (Optional): Establishing Community Agreements for Discussion

Whether you are a group of people coming together once for this screening and discussion or a group whose members know each other well, creating a set of community agreements helps foster clear discussion in a manner that draws in and respects all participants, especially when tackling intimate or complex conversations around identity. These steps will help provide guidelines for the process:

- **Pass around** sample community agreements and take time to read aloud as a group to make sure all participants can both hear and read the text.
- **Allow time** for clarifying questions, make sure all participants understand the necessity for the agreements, and allow time to make sure everyone understands the agreements themselves.
- **Go around in a circle** and have every participant name an agreement they would like to include. Chart this in front of the room where all can see.
- **Go around two to three times** to give participants multiple chances to contribute and also to give a conclusive end to the process.
- **Read the list aloud.**
- **Invite** questions or revisions.
- **Ask** if all are satisfied with the list.

COMMON CONCEPTS & LANGUAGE

Cisgender

When a person's gender expression and identity match the sex they were assigned at birth based upon their visual genital structures.

Cyberbullying

Embarrassing, harassing, doxxing, or generally sharing negative content about another person via online or virtual platforms. Cyberbullying can take place on social media, through forums or website postings, email, text message, or in video games.

Doxxing

Sharing another person's personally identifiable information online without their consent, often with the intent to harass, scare, or otherwise harm them.

Escapism

Diversion or distraction from uncomfortable feelings or thoughts, often through entertaining or fantasy-related activities (games, books).

(Feeding the) Trolls

Trolls (slang) are individuals who choose to

engage in cyberbullying or online harassment practices. They commonly post deliberately inflammatory or provocative commentary, intending to incite an emotional reaction from others. "Feeding the trolls" is a slang phrase used to describe responding to trolls or replying to trolling posts, thus giving them attention and a platform to have an emotional influence over the individual.

Harassment

Physical or verbal behavior that creates an uncomfortable, hostile, or unpleasant environment. Harassment online can include things like unwelcome direct messages, hate raiding, verbal spamming the same messages repeatedly, trash talking, doxxing, swatting, and more.

(Hate) Raiding

In a "raid," a streamer brings their viewers into the chat of another streamer, typically to bring support to the next streamer and encourage viewership in a network

of streamers. Hate raiding is when a streamer intentionally brings viewers into another streamer's live stream in order to harass, troll, or bully the receiving streamer.

Internalized transphobia

Discomfort or disgust with one's own transgender identity that comes from taking on society's negative views of transgender people.

Parasocial relationships

Relationships where an individual in the audience becomes attached and feel as if they know a performer, character, or public figure. Parasocial relationships can involve varying levels of interpersonal interaction, like a subscriber or viewer chatting with a streamer on Twitch. The viewer feels as if they personally know the streamer, yet the streamer typically has less awareness and attachment to the viewer in return.

Self-harm

Verbal or physical behavior that is intended to cause harm to oneself. Self-harm spans a range of severity, from self-shaming and negative self-talk to physical self-injury that can escalate to life-threatening levels. It is important to share any urges to self-harm, or self-harm behaviors, with a mental health professional.

Speedrunning

Playing a video game with the intent to complete objectives in the shortest time possible. Typically, speedrunning includes rehearsals or practices prior to record-breaking attempts, where the speedrunner will plan routes and memorize game content to optimize their playthrough times.

Swatting

Making an illegal and false report to law enforcement about an individual in an attempt to have armed law enforcement show up to the individual's address. This form of harassment is sometimes done

while an individual is live streaming so the perpetrator can see the results of their call.

Transgender

When a person's gender identity, and sometimes gender expression, do not match the sex they were assigned at birth.

Transphobia

An umbrella term used to define a socially or culturally-rooted prejudice towards people who identify as transgender, or who generally do not fit binary (masculine or feminine) cisgender roles. It is expressed through fear, hatred, and discrimination, and results in oppression, prejudiced policies, and unsafe experiences for those who do not fit cisgender binary roles.

Twitch

An online live streaming service where streamers share live and on-demand video content (video games, sports, conversation, crafting), while their viewers can interact with them in real time through text chat.

Viewers can support streamers through paid subscriptions, and some streamers are eligible for ad revenue from their streams.

Suicidal ideation

Thoughts that you would be better off dead, that the world/others would be better off without you, or that you want to die. Having thoughts about suicide does not always mean one will act on them, but it is important to share these thoughts with a mental health professional.

Participants

Narcissa: Champion speedrunner and primary participant in *Break the Game*. She attempts to establish speedrunning record for *The Legend of Zelda: Echoes of Wisdom*.

D-Girl: Musician, gamer, and Narcissa's girlfriend.

Online Gaming Community: People who connect to Narcissa via the platform, Twitch, to witness her attempts at speedrunning.

Key Issues

Break the Game is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people who want to explore the following topics:

- Online communities
- Gender identity & transphobia
- Parasocial Relationships
- Online hate and harassment
- Swatting/Doxxing
- Depression & Mental Health

Background Information

Value of Online Connections

Online spaces, including gaming and streaming platforms, provide opportunities for individuals to build relationships and form communities. Though these opportunities have been a cornerstone of internet activity for decades, the value of online gaming specifically to build and support communities became clearer to the broader public during the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic. Research has found that people report playing video games provides them opportunities for cognitive stimulation and socialization, and can reduce feelings of stress and anxiety. Playing video games together allows people to build relationships through shared experiences, with many online games offering opportunities for team building as players work towards shared goals. Though watching a stream is less interactive than playing a game together, the live chat options on stream allow for real-time communication between the streamer and viewers participating in chat. In the film, we see Narcissa engaging in a conversation with members of her audience, including back and forth between multiple viewers. Researchers Sheng & Sanjay found that active participation in streaming communities offers opportunities for conversation and mutual self-disclosure through common topics of conversation, as well as frequent, low-stakes interaction. Notably, as the size of communities increases, the opportunities for casual and meaningful interaction with a consistent subset of individuals (necessary for relationship-building) decreases.

Opportunities for online community building may be particularly important for individuals who hold marginalized identities and may not have the option to build such connections in person (due to geographical limitations or safety concerns). Online streaming platforms allow individuals opportunities to build communities with others, as well as provide opportunities for increased representation of their identities. Trans individuals make up a very small portion of the population in the US, with only .05% of adults identifying as transgender in a 2022 study carried out by University of California's Law School. As a marginalized community, members of the trans community are subject to regular harassment and stigma at school, work, and in their home communities. Though online spaces are not free from identity-based harassment, they can provide a safer, and more accessible way to connect for many trans people and individuals with other marginalized identities. As an example, in *Break the Game*, we see Narcissa build a friendship and then romantic relationship with D_Gurl, another trans woman who lives in a different state than Narcissa. This non-virtual romance was made possible through their connection that was established and cultivated from within an online community.

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Transphobia and Online Harassment

Unfortunately, mirroring society, transphobia and anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiment is rampant in many online spaces, as are other forms of online harassment and hate. A history of poor moderation in many online spaces, relative anonymity of online users, and the reflection and amplification of discriminatory social norms makes these experiences more common. In recent years, many communities and companies have made efforts to increase the safety of online spaces, including through community guidelines, automatic moderation strategies, and player reports.

Platforms like Twitch offer opportunities for success through monetization of streaming, but online harassment looms as an ever-present threat. Trans, femme, and gender-nonconforming creators face significant gender norm policing by viewers. Moderation is left to the streamer - electing trusted individuals to watch their chat as the streamer manages live streaming. Community becomes the crux of success, and the readily available communication between streamer and viewer makes harassment and rejection a possibility every time they hit *Go Live*. When people choose to make streaming their primary form of income, being trans can negatively impact their ability to sustain gainful employment on the platform.

In Narcissa's situation, transitioning after developing a significant viewership had a huge impact on her audience numbers. She went from a peak viewership of nearly 20,000 viewers down to a low of about 20. Many streamers find that changing their streaming handle, like from Cosmo to Narcissa, has a negative impact on viewership - along with any shift in content choices like switching what they play or how they stream. Like Narcissa, many streamers find that choices to change aspects of their brand, engagement, or content can be a risk to success.

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Parasocial Relationships

Parasocial relationships between viewers and the streamers they follow can be challenging to navigate for many streamers. In these relationships, the viewers know as much information as the streamer chooses to share (often including information about appearance, relationship status, gender/sexuality, and other pieces of identity shared through appearance and background), while the streamer knows very little information (if any) about viewers. Though these relationships can fulfill some social needs for both parties, they include inherent power imbalances, do not meet reciprocal relationship needs, and can be relatively fragile.

The viewer or audience member may feel as if they have a personal connection with the streamer despite a lack of relationship reciprocity. Sometimes, interpersonal relationships can develop out of parasocial relationships if the public figure reciprocates and develops a deeper connection with the viewer.

Specific to streaming, streamers face unique parasocial relationships where there is an opportunity to interact with their audience with regularity. Boundaries become a vital resource for all parties involved, especially the streamer - as personal disclosures become a sort of currency for attachment - creating feelings of intimacy without mutuality in this setting. Subscribers choose to invest in the person they have gotten to know, and research indicates that personal callouts to or interactions with chatters increase the likelihood of feelings of bonding for those audience members.

Streamers and content creators have tools to set transparent expectations and boundaries through their platforms - for example, Twitch allows streamers to create a set of rules that viewers must accept prior to chatting for the first time. Similarly, communicating expectations to audience members can help prevent probing questions or crossing personal lines that streamers don't wish to cross. Sometimes, learning how to set those expectations can be a trial by fire; in the film, Narcissa's boundaries with her chat shift as she seeks further engagement and develops a romantic, yet largely public, relationship with a particular viewer. While this turned out to be successful for them, streamers can discover mixed results in connecting reciprocally with chatters due to online anonymity and the threat of stalking, harassment, and other forms of dark participation.

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Mental Health, Routine, and Balance

When an individual is experiencing depression, it's common for them to engage in avoidance and isolation behaviors that may further or deepen their symptoms - for example, cancelling plans with friends due to feelings of overwhelm, which then leaves the person feeling more isolated and alone. When a depressed person continually cancels plans or doesn't respond to messages, their friends and family may reach out less, which deepens the chasm between the individual and their social support. Similarly, when someone is in a regular exercise or eating routine, they may find it easier to keep up with the routines, even when feeling down or depressed. If someone gets out of the routine - because of a move, illness, or other disruption, it can be harder to get back into the routine. The longer someone is out of a routine, the bigger and bigger effort it seems to get back into it.

In Narcissa's story, we see and hear about a pattern of isolation, lack of exercise, and inadequate nutrition. For example, her mother expresses concern that Narcissa hasn't met her neighbors and has no interest in connecting with people offline, and D_Girl is seen talking on stream during a visit with Narcissa about her meal choices and lack of variety.

Exercise, adequate nutrition, and social connection are all core components of psychological well-being, but when someone is experiencing a mental health challenge like depression, engaging in these practices can be incredibly challenging. There is an effective intervention for depression called behavioral activation that can be used by itself or as a component of other treatment. With the support of a therapist, this intervention helps an individual identify and re-engage with valued activities and behaviors, and reduce avoidance and isolation behaviors. It's important to note that this intervention is tailored to the individual - making blanket recommendations that someone "try yoga" or "eat more broccoli" are unlikely to be helpful.

Video games can be part of a healthy routine and support mental health in several ways. Games are designed to be fun and engaging, allow players choices, and for players to succeed! As such, playing video games can support people's sense of autonomy, competence, and control - all factors important for psychological well-being. Video games can support individuals developing a growth mindset, as they can provide safe opportunities for practice and failing. In the film, we see Narcissa practice and problem solve different aspects of *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* as she works towards her record-breaking time goal.

As previously discussed, connecting online with others can support relationships and overall mental well-being. However, Narcissa's relationship with streaming demonstrates some ways in which streaming can be part of an unhealthy cycle.

When individuals are experiencing depression or other mental health challenges, they can have a harder time making decisions that will support their health and well-being in the long term, and may need more support from a mental health provider, or their family and friends. In the film, we see Narcissa engage in a wider variety of activities when she's visiting with D_Girl than when she's on her own which speaks to the importance of connection, community support, and care for one another in difficult times. Despite stigma around mental health struggles, it is important to recognize that in times of difficulty, everyone needs support and a helping hand.

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OPENING ACTIVITY

Before the film

As your group settles in to watch this film, it is important to acknowledge that there are themes of mental health struggles and online harassment that might be upsetting for the audience. Validate that it is okay to experience a wide range of emotional reactions to the documentary; taking care of ourselves is important during this experience.

Encourage your group to reflect on the following questions as a pre-watch self-check-in:

- Notice your current feelings. Can you identify 1-3 feelings for yourself? (*You can provide them with an emotion-labeling resource like <https://feelingswheel.com/>*)
- If identifying emotions is difficult, what can your body tell you? Ask yourself...
 - Are you feeling warm? Cold? If a specific temperature, are there particular parts of your body experiencing this sensation?
 - Is there tension in a particular part of your body?
- How is your posture? Consider shifting to a body-respectful position for your comfort.
- Do you feel hungry? Thirsty? If appropriate to the setting, consider having a quiet snack or hydrating beverage.
- When was the last time you used the restroom? Consider a quick restroom break to be more comfortable during viewing if you need it.

OPENING ACTIVITY (cont.)

If you identified any uncomfortable emotions, try this helpful grounding practice:

Identify the following in your immediate surroundings:

- 5 things you can see around you
- 4 things you can touch around you
- 3 things you can hear
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you can taste

Encourage the group to take care of themselves as they watch the film, meeting their needs and respecting their feelings and bodies. If they notice strong emotional reactions, validate one another's feelings and respect each other's needs. Encourage the group that if they need to step out of the room or shared space to protect their mental health, it is okay to do so—and that mental health resources are ready at the end of this guide if they need them.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen. You could pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion. Alternatively, you could ask participants to share their thoughts with a partner before starting a group discussion.

- What message(s) did you take away from your experience of this film?
- What was the most surprising part of the film for you? In what ways? Why?
- Were there any individuals in the film you related to? What aspects did you relate to or not relate to?

Quantity and Quality

In the film, Narcissa expresses a goal to hit 20,000 viewers/subscribers. We don't see conversation around what kind of viewers or community she's looking to build—in fact, she sometimes engages with people who say mean things with the express goal of driving more content to her page, even if it's negative, as the negative views still count towards her goal numbers. Though some of Narcissa's streaming community is incredibly positive and supportive, she receives regular hate and harassment, which has been found to negatively impact mood and self-esteem. Narcissa spends much of the film seeking to re-acquire and even exceed her previous streaming goals, and she's focused on the number of viewers, not the community itself.

Narcissa speaks about being stuck engaging with negative and hateful comments, with the idea that this negative engagement is better than no engagement. Sometimes individuals engage with negative comments, or go back to unhealthy relationships, because those relationships reinforce negative beliefs the person holds about themselves.

- What do you think would have changed about her story if Narcissa's goals were related to the type of community she was building instead of the numbers of viewers?
- What are some qualities or characteristics of healthy communities?
- What kind of societal or financial pressures may have kept Narcissa focused on quantity of viewers over the quality of relationships?
- Have you ever gotten so caught up in a goal that you made decisions that you later regretted? What informed that experience? What was your motivation? If given the opportunity, what would you do differently and why?
- What are some practices you can engage in to regularly interrogate your “why” or your motivations that drive you in your life? Why might a practice like this be useful?

Gender, Community, and Discrimination

The film highlights high points from Narcissa's streaming career when she went by the username Cosmo and presented as male: large audiences, speaking opportunities, hundreds or thousands of people tuning in to watch a speedrun attempt. She reports struggling with the massive disconnect between the large viewership she had access to when she was hiding her gender and presenting as male, and the significantly smaller audience she had after coming out—even when she was performing well as a speedrunner.

- Have you ever had to consider hiding part of yourself to fit into social spaces?
 - What was that experience like? Did you feel safer, better or worse about yourself, etc.?
- Have you ever had to consider hiding part of yourself to feel safer or more able to navigate an ambiguous situation?
 - What was *that* experience like? Did you feel safer, better or worse about yourself, etc.?
- When you express yourself or feel like you are in a safe environment to share your authentic, full self, how does that feel?
- What are some characteristics of environments or people who created conditions for you to express your most authentic self? List them.

- What models or representations in media or in gaming have given you permission to be your authentic self? What aspects of that media, specifically, spoke to you and your identity?
- What are some characteristics or qualities of welcoming and affirming environments? What are some things you or others could offer to create those types of spaces for people?

Mental Health

In the film, we see Narcissa struggle with a depressed mood, feelings of low self-worth, isolation, and difficulty engaging in routines or self-care tasks that might support her mood. Stigma and lack of knowledge about how to support someone who is struggling with depression can increase an individual's isolation from their community.

- What did Narcissa's community do to try to support Narcissa while she was struggling?
 - What strategies seemed to be effective? Why do you think they were effective?
 - What strategies seemed ineffective? What would you have done differently in the future?
- What makes you feel comfortable talking to a friend about depression or other mental health topics?
- If you were feeling depressed, down, or anxious, what would you like your community to do to support you?
- What are some very small choices you might make when you are feeling depressed, anxious, or sad that bring you comfort?

Parasocial Relationships

Narcissa experiences several levels of connection with her viewers via parasocial relationships in the film. While her relationship with D_Gurl was exceptionally close, her other interactions generally reflect more closely to the classic parasocial connections that we have with streamers or other public figures.

Questions:

- What is a parasocial relationship that you can identify that you've developed with a public figure? (For example, a celebrity like Taylor Swift or Beyoncé)



- If that person changed their philosophy or branding, how did that impact you—if at all?
 - What expectations did you have for this person?

- If you were in a situation similar to Narcissa and didn't know anything about the people in your chat, how would you feel about the way they express care or concern?
- Understanding there is no "one way" to respond, how would you react, if at all, to trolls or negative comments in your chat?
- What would you tell a friend who was dealing with online bullying or harassment? How might you show up to support them?

CLOSING ACTIVITY

After the Film

Now that you've watched *Break the Game*, ask the group to engage in a quiet, internal self-check-in again:

- Notice your feelings—have they changed? What emotions can you identify?
- When was the last time you physically moved?
- How is your posture?
- Do what you need to do to feel more comfortable, grounded, and able to engage in the rest of your day.

TAKING ACTION

If the group is having trouble generating their own ideas for next steps, these suggestions can help get things started:

There is currently anti-equality legislation in many states, and many services are inaccessible or unsafe for trans people. Learn more about issues facing trans individuals in your communities.

Examine your own language and consider adjusting it to use more inclusive and gender-neutral terms and titles.

Narcissa's story is her own, and there are many other trans individuals who also have stories to tell! Consider watching and reading stories from other trans individuals.

Volunteer with a trans-focused organization, like [Trans Lifeline](#).

Many people watching this film may not have played a recent video game. Consider trying a game, or watching a stream or playthrough of a recent game.

Watch a Twitch stream of your choice and add to the respectful, positive conversation with a supportive comment.

Resources

Take This A U.S.-based nonprofit organization providing education, resources, mentorship, and community revolving around mental health in the games industry and community.

Safe in Our World A U.K.-based nonprofit organization supporting and fostering mental health awareness within the video game industry.

The Trevor Project A nonprofit organization providing resources, crisis support, and research to the LGBTQ+ community and their loved ones.

Trans Lifeline A peer-support hotline and microgrants nonprofit organization supporting trans people in crisis.

Be An Ally - Support Trans Equality Brief guide by the Human Rights Campaign on practical ways to support the trans community.

Credits & Acknowledgments

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