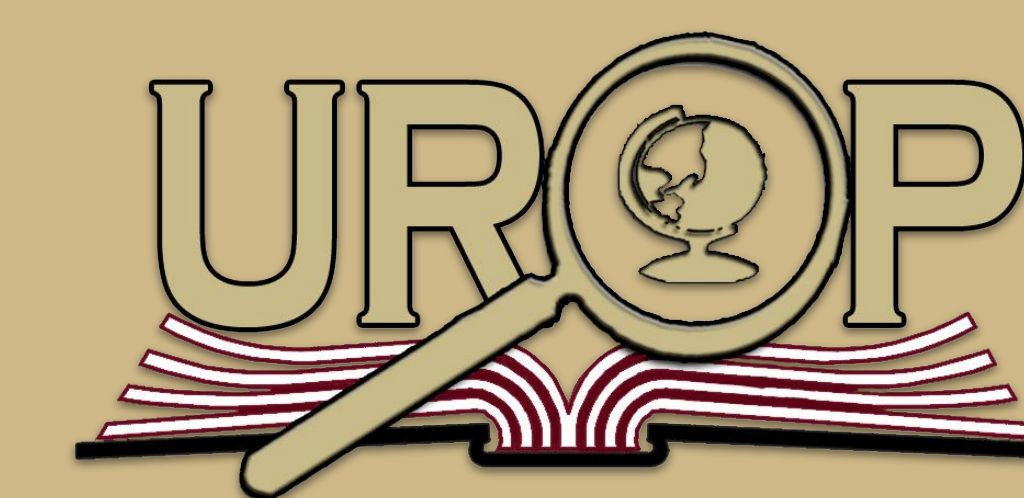




Portrayals of Mental Health in Video Games



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Abstract

Stigmatization influences how a given society **feels** about, **thinks** of, and **acts** toward perceived others. Stigmatizing portrayals of people with **mental illness** as propagated by older forms of media such as television have been well documented, but stigmatization in **video games** remains an area with little research. Building off previous studies, this research involves compiling **video game footage** to be coded for **stigmatizing portrayals** of people with mental disorders. The study is ongoing, but previous research indicates that portrayals of mental health will be **overwhelmingly stigmatizing**, relying on **stereotypes** rather than informed and accurate depictions. This is concerning as the **unique interactive features** of video games make such stigmatization **especially harmful**. However, **notable exceptions** of games with constructive portrayals show implications for **positive social change** driven by interactive media.

Introduction

Media wields **immense power** to influence perceptions of marginalized communities. However, **video games often fall out of the realm of social accountability** for accurate and non-stigmatizing portrayals. This is particularly true in the case of mental health, where video games use asylums, “psychos,” and “insane” characters as plot points or **enemies to be overcome, oftentimes through brute force**. This study examines the complex interplay between interactive media and stigma against those with mental health issues. How, and to what extent, do video games stigmatize? What can be done to create **accurate and socially responsible portrayals**?

Methods

- Games were selected via **steam keyword search**. Words searched included “asylum,” “depression,” and “suicide.” Games were then sorted by whether they actually pertain to mental illness.
- We found **youtube videos without commentary** for each of these games.
- Using that footage, we coded each game for **stigmatizing portrayals of mental health**.

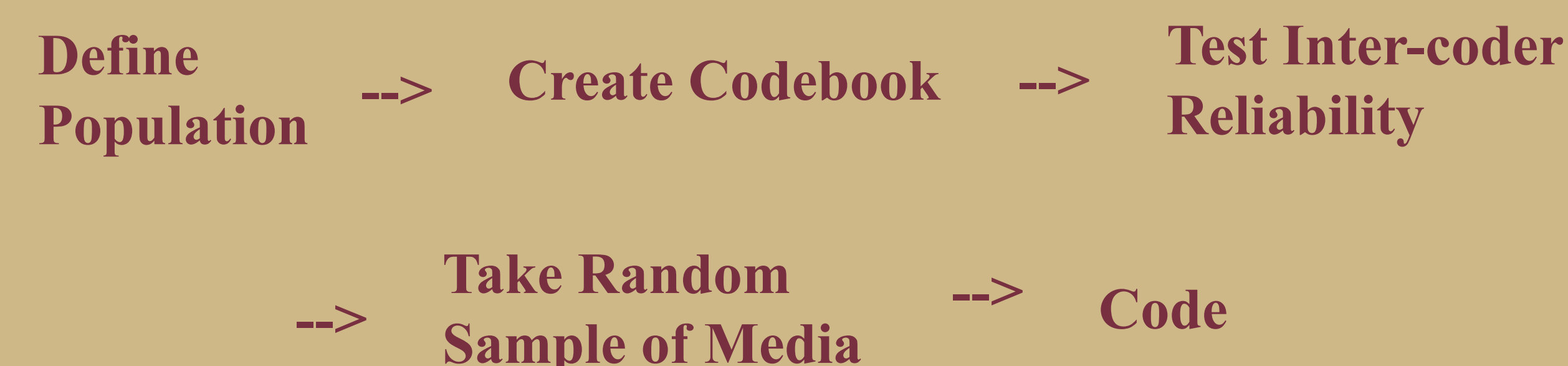


Images from: [Ferrari et al., 2019](#); [The Onion](#)

Methods: What is Coding?

Coding is the process of **carefully examining written works/television shows/videos/audio clips etc.** in order to determine patterns and accrue **quantitative or qualitative data** (Neuendorf, 2017). For this project, we watched thirty minutes of gameplay and marked down whether games had concepts/characters/environments that could be **stigmatizing** to those with **mental health issues**.

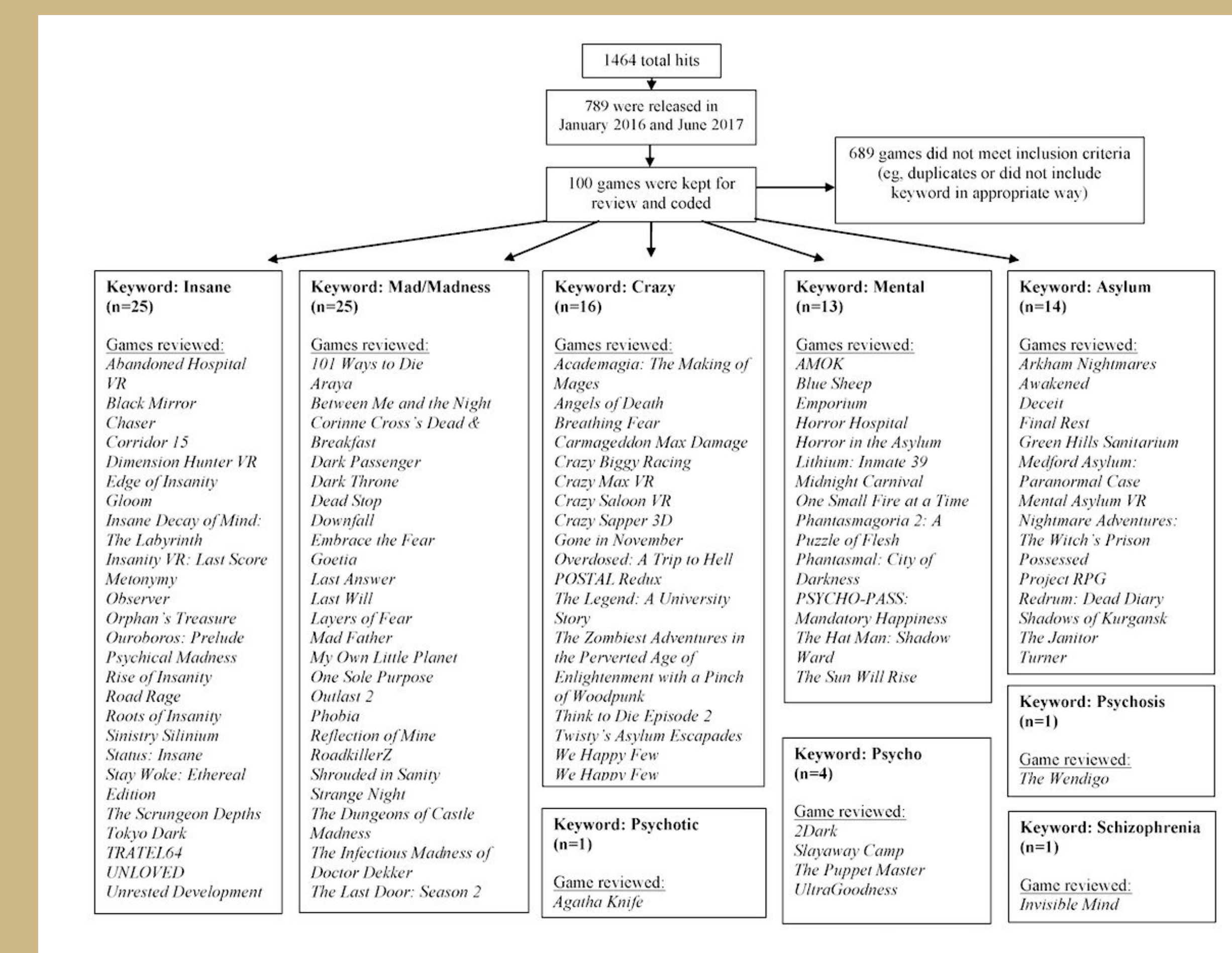
Coding Steps



From: [Neuendorf, 2017](#)

Background

- Mental Health Stigma creates “**otherness**” (Byrne, 2000)
 - That otherness impacts **healthcare treatment**
- Stigma** is perpetuated through media representation (Reusch et al., 2002)
 - Stereotypical representations can portray people with **mental illness as dangerous, violent, or homicidal**
 - “**Rebellious,**” “**childlike,**” and “**free spirited**” portrayals are harmful as well
- Stigma** leads to **fear and discrimination** (Rüsch et al., 2002; Overton & Medina, 2008).
- Negative portrayals are **overwhelming** in both AAA and Indie video games (Ferrari et al., 2019).
- Some games have **informed and positive representations** (Ferchaud et al., 2020)



Video Game Extractions Summary from [Ferrari et al., 2019](#)

Results/Discussion

- Our study is **ongoing**.
- [Ferrari et al. \(2019\)](#) elucidates **possible results**:
 - 97% of video games studied had harmful messaging**
 - Madness, violence, insanity, unpredictability, and survival** were prominent themes
 - Positive depictions were outnumbered by those that were **misleading, harmful, and stigmatizing**
- Some games, like *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* are **constructive, destigmatizing**, and focused on **self-determination** in portrayals of persons with mental illness (Ferchaud et al., 2020).

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