Practical Tools Transitioning Into Leadership Roles

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GOD OF WAR
RAGNARÖK

Santa Monica Studio

Hello welcome!

It is personal

Your weaknesses do not matter

Anyone can do it

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That is me, excuse my programmer art. My artist husband helped with it
Today I am here to talk to you about leadership.

And how it is all about inspiring and guiding others. And yet it is one of the most extremely personal journeys

I am also here to tell you that if you want to be one, Your weaknesses DO NOT matter, you do not have to be 100% on everything

And finally, I will be talking about who can be a leader, SPOILER ALERT, the answer is anyone. Leadership is not about your title or your role, as long as
you have the tools and willingness to work through things, anyone can do it

Is this another leadership talk, then?

Where did I start?

- How am I doing?

- Am I ready?

- How can I better prepare?

So where did I start?

As we started a new project, I did an early check in with myself, "how am I doing?" And as we were building our systems and team for a new project, I was starting to realize that my focus was shifting from me to people around me. Up until this point, it was all about. "how do I improve myself? How do I learn, grow, get better?" But it was starting to also become "How can I help my team? "What can I do to improve our pipelines, workflows to function better as a team? "

Around this time, I was also getting more ownership in the team. I was also being subtly (maybe not so subtly) nudged into that direction by leads/peers. So leadership felt like it could be a natural next step.

So I was asking myself Am I ready?

For responsibilities of a lead ? To move away from code? Do I even know everything there is to know? Am I good enough technically to lead?

And trust me there was A LOT of questions in my mind.

And then if I am going to do this, how can I prepare?What do I need to do? What are my weaknesses? Strengths?

And at this point as every respectable programmer does ...
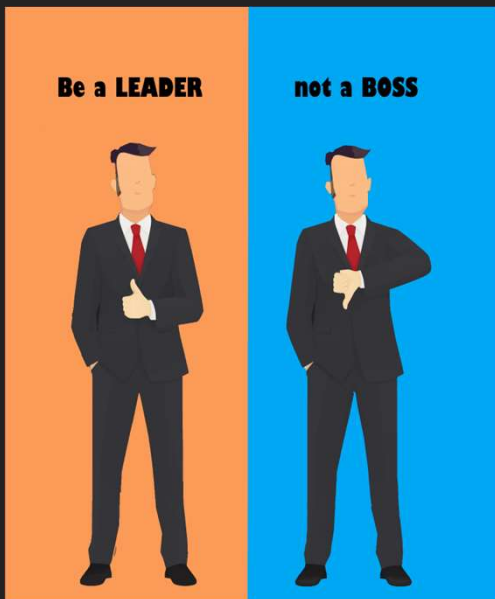
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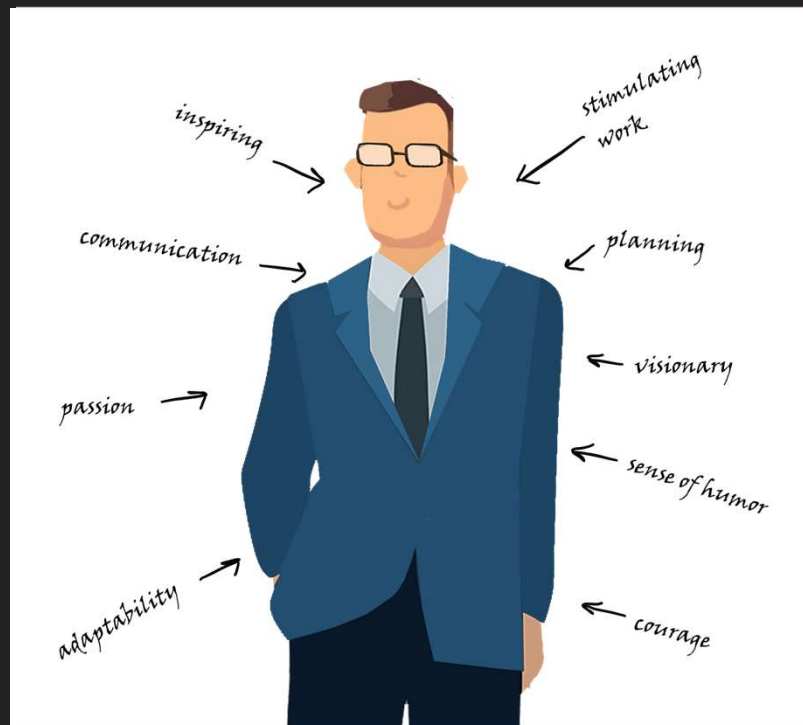# Engine

🔍 How to be a good leader?

Search!

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.... I figured I would start from asking THE internet.

I was not expecting to get much out of it obviously and a more efficient starting point would have been asking around for meaningful resources on the topic (which I did) BUT it was still fascinating to see what is out there.

These are not real results but kind of a compilation of sort of the things I would see. I used comic sans, that should tell you it is fake
It was overwhelming to sort through MANY resources, good and bad. And I struggled to find practical things.
It felt like it was all about these rules and ideals, "qualities of a good leader"

Also notice, it was images of mostly men in suits, (with glasses for some reason). To be fair to internet , there were more inclusive examples too, but just not enough
It built in me this need to fit into this mold of what the mainstream good leader is

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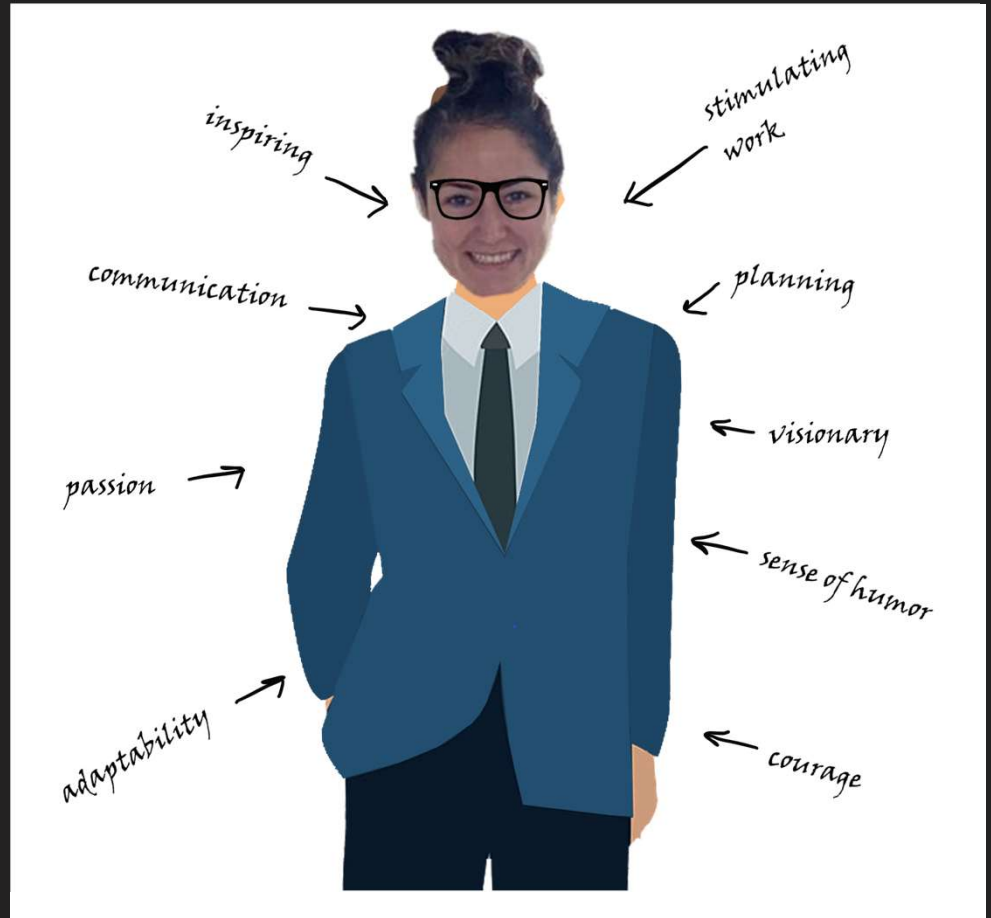
There was me
And this ideal leader
So I thought I needed to be him
Throw in some glasses too, that seems to be working for them
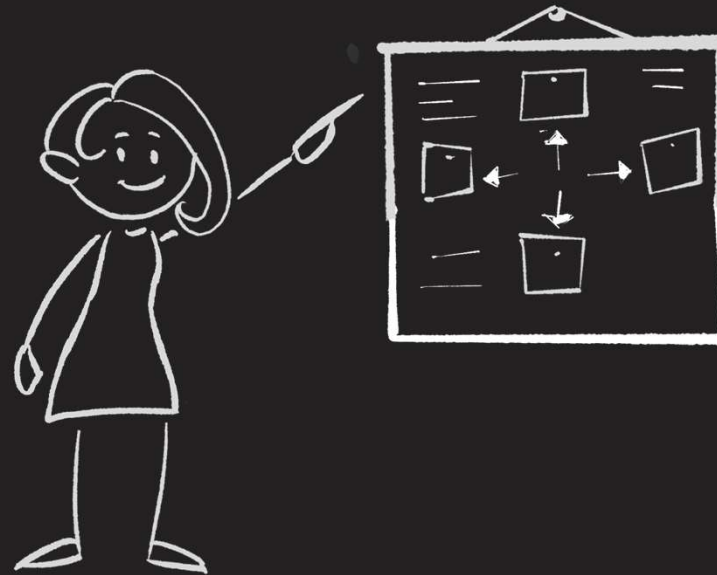
Meanwhile, the project was moving on. I was given the opportunity to drive some features, test the waters and enjoying that kind of work. I was very lucky to be in an environment of support and growth. I had people around me who thought that this would be something I could do even before I ever thought I would be ready. So I got put into a leadership training program, working with a development coach so I do not do internet searches anymore.

But I am aware not everyone get a similar chance. So this is my attempt as being that resource for you, sharing my most important learnings. But I also hope this talk could serve as means to show studios the value of training and coaching their future leaders. Because it sure made a big difference for me.

And What was really interesting about these coaching sessions to me, were that they were not teaching me how to gain all those qualities I would see. It was like a dog training. Told you I would have analogies, bare with me. But when you take your dog to training, they do not train your dog, they teach you how to communicate with your dog so you can train them.

In a similar manner, these sessions were not teaching me any behavior, they were about knowing myself better so that I can better help my team.
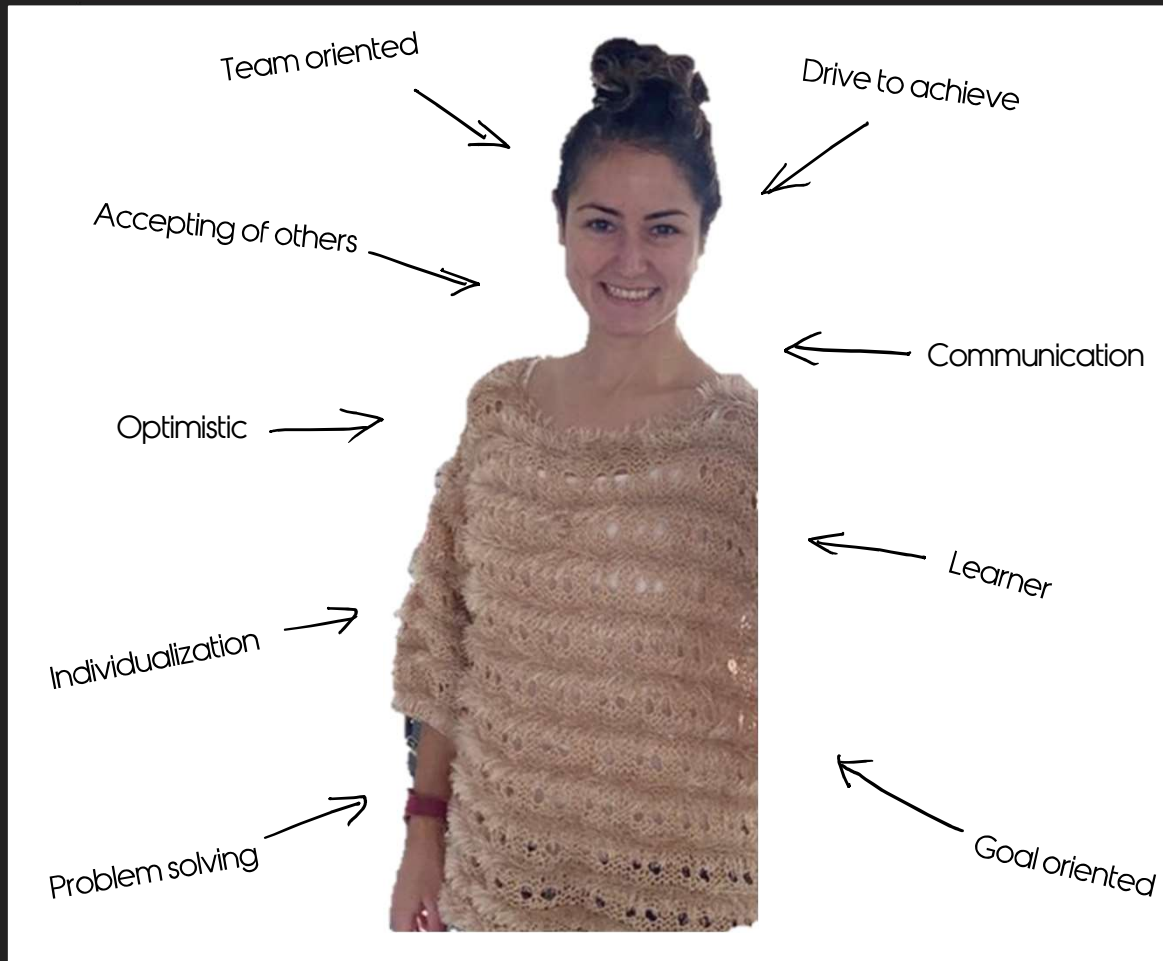
At the end, it was clear to me that I did not need to put myself into this good leader box like I thought I would have to. But instead, I could use the tools it gave to figure out what being a good leader means for me and what it looks like when I embrace my strengths.

But even though I was having all these "aha!" moments of discovering myself and feeling more confident than ever, I still thought I was not ready. The question of "Did I master everything to be able to lead a team of people?" was forever holding me back
But regardless, a time came that I had to…

Jump off that plane!

Or find someone to push you off

...Jump off that plane

I remember having this conversation with our coach about not being ready and her saying

"It is like skydiving, at some point you need to jump off the plane" to which I responded going

"well I actually I did that and it was scary looking down and letting but the good thing is when you are doing it for the first time you actually have someone to push you off if you hesitate for too long"

And she asked me : "Then why don't you find someone to push you off?"

And that kind of stuck with me, this idea of looking out mentors to give you that last push. So I urge you to think about that if you are at the edge of the plane looking down

And shortly after this conversation, while I think I still had a lot to learn to get ready, I was pushed off. And here is what I learnt after that jump along the way

Find ways to get feedback

Make the feedback your priority

Feedback is your friend

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Feedback is your friend. Kind of a cliché, I know but it really is.

So, at this point the very first action item I could suggest: Find ways to get feedback

- If your current environment does not have a regular pipeline delivering feedback for individuals :

    - If you are a lead/ getting ready to be a lead: a good first initiative is to establish one. It is crucial for your team to get feedback but it is also crucial that you get feedback from your team

    - If you do not have the means to do so, individually seek out and ask for feedback from people. Try to make it focused, ask questions that helps them talk to both your strengths and weaknesses. You can even do this in addition to your regular reviews if you wish

You got the feedback, now what? Make it your priority, it is one of the best tools to help you learn about yourself. But It is also crucial for you track your progress as you grow.

And I acknowledge, it can be a daunting task sorting through it. You need to find a good balance between two extremes :

    - Disregarding important feedback because you do not agree, or you do not like.

    - Taking every little thing into account. There is going to be one off callout, feedback without context of that specific case etc.

You need to focus on finding patterns across multiple feedback, things that come up again and again and focus on those

So it is very likely out of this exercise will come out your strengths and your weaknesses. So how do you deal with it? ...

How to deal with your ~~weaknesses?~~

I CAN'T DO THIS

I AM DOING THIS

lizandmollie

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▰ Get comfortable with progress

▰ Focus on the end goal

... How do you deal with your weaknesses?
Well first of all, we will start by talking about them as things you need to work on, not weakness. It is about the mindshift.
Quick story time about one of the things I had to work on. One piece of feedback that I consistently got over the years : "Be more vocal in meetings, Be more assertive. voice your opinions more."
No matter how much I was trying, I kept getting the same feedback. I am a problem solver, a fixer. This was a problem and I had to fix it. And I was frustrated
Two mindshifts that helped me :
1. Get comfortable with getting this feedback as long as you know you are making progress. It wont go away overnight, or maybe it will always remain your one blindspot. That is OKAY Make piece with the fact that this might be one thing that you need to work on for a long time
2. Instead of focusing on the reasons, Focus on end goals. I could have talked about my reasons, how I had a language barrier, How I was the only woman in the room most of the time, How I felt and imposter syndomre. But the reason did not matter. After some healthy venting, it was a lot more productive to switch my thinking to plans to reach my goal instead of mulling over what happened. (And this actually is a good tool for your personal life as well)
But what does the road to your goal look like ? How do you take those steps towards your goal?

Your strengths are also a part of your feedback

Scuba Diving Method

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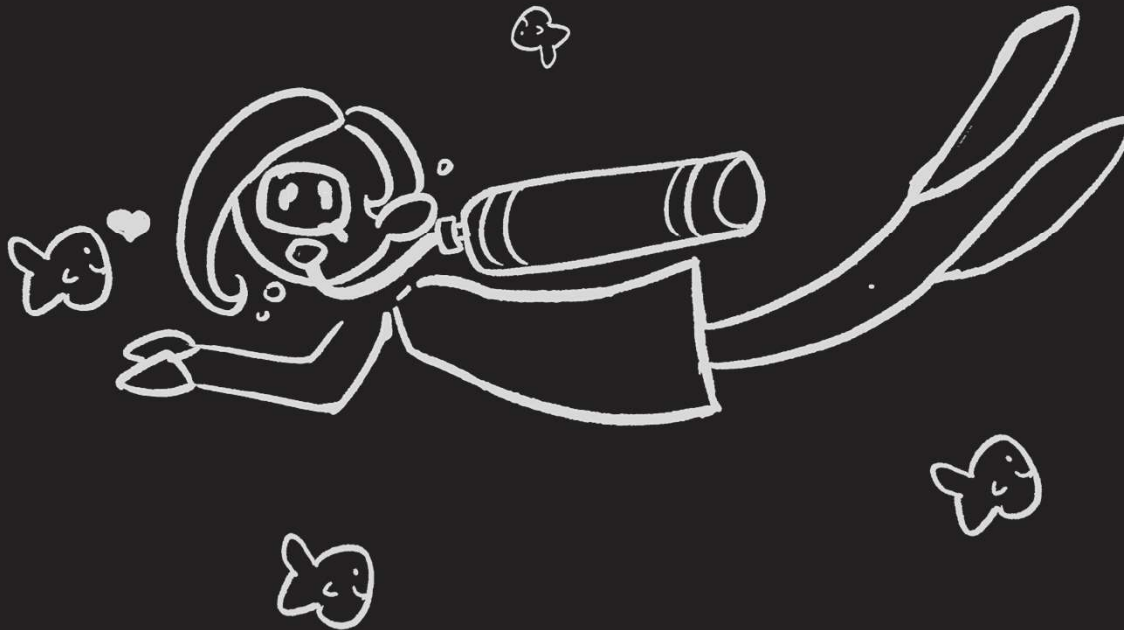
It starts with remembering : Your strengths are also part of the feedback

For me, the points in the feedback were things I knew I was expected to do, but I didn't feel comfortable. I felt like I was not being myself. But what if I did not have to be a different person all of a sudden, but instead looked at your strengths and think if you can apply them to do this in a different way?

And this idea reminded be of something:

I spent majority of my summers in childdhood in the sea and I loved it. And the water in Mediterranean is crystal clear and you see the fish all around you all the time. And I was very very afraid of fish As I got older, I decided I need to do something about it so I started scuba diving. All of a sudden, I was swimming around fish and all kind of other sea creatures. And I was fine. BUT I was still afraid of fish. The only difference was that when I was in my scuba gear, the fear went away. I did that for years. Slowly worked my way up to a point I am okay without scuba gear swimming around fish. There are still times where I get uncomfortable if I see a lot of fish when I am swimming, but soooo much better.

The point of the story is that : you need look for ways you can do the things you are expected to, in ways that feels comfortable for you. I call this the Scuba Diving Method. You heard it here first, I pin this term!

For me : I had strengths in written and 1:1 communication. So I started doing that, I would ask people if we can discuss things offline later. Or prefer to send an email with all the information. Write down notes for myself before meetings so I am prepared what to say. and I started slowly building up that muscle of being more vocal with my ideas. So find your own scuba gear

Build Partnerships

Gain visibility
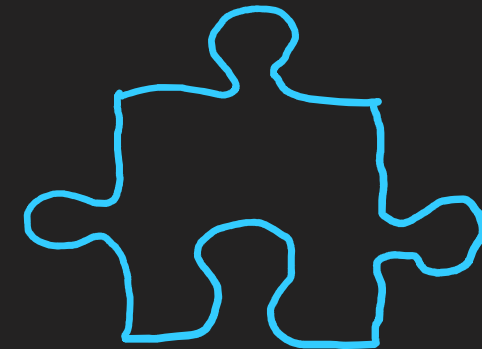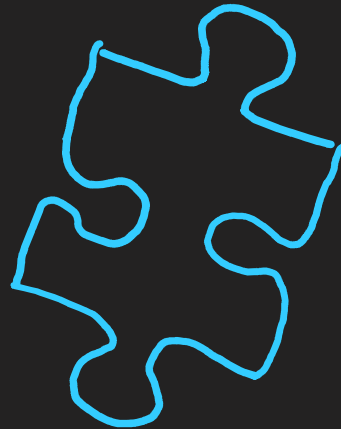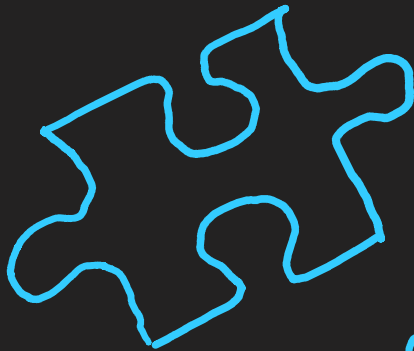
Think about 3 people you work with the closest

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And do it knowing that you do not have to be or can be the best at everything. That is OKAY too. That is the best thing about being part of a team, you can build partnerships with people who are really good at the things you are not. It is like puzzle pieces coming together.

Another good thing about building these partnerships is that it gives visibility into the work that you do. Lets face it, often times you would wish your work to speak for itself but most of the time that is not the reality. Having these relationships creates opportunities for people to see that day to day.

I am by nature very team and people-oriented person, so I have realized I have been doing this subconsciously my whole life. But I understand it might not come as naturally for everyone as it did for me.
So how do you know who to partner with? Where do you start?
Stop and think right now about 3 people you work with the closest? What would you say they are strongest at ?
Do any of them match with something you need to work on?

Personal Values and Vision

Vision

Values

Empower

Inspire

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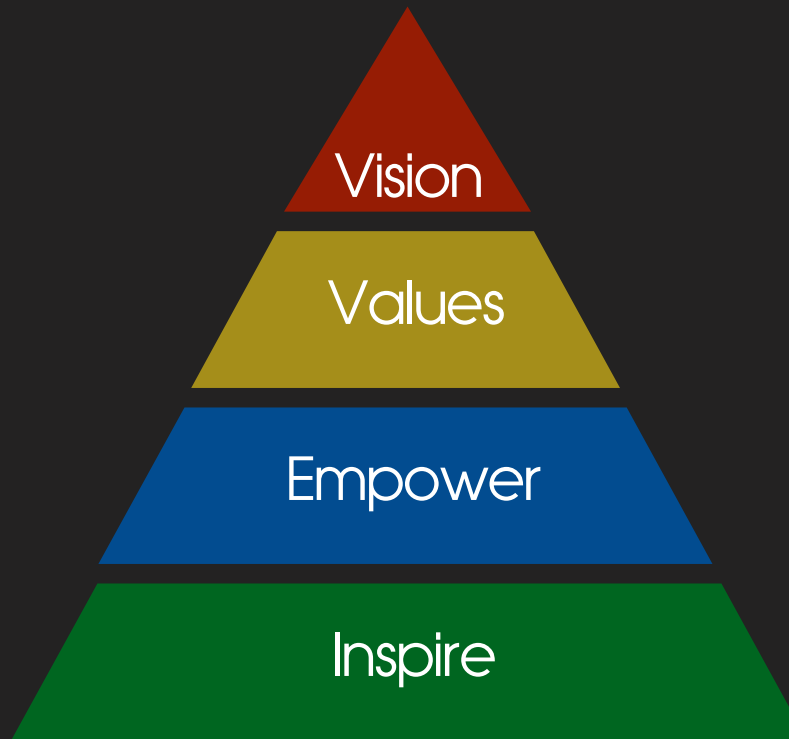
Here is another one that caught me by surprise: Creating your personal values and vision statement.

It was surprising because both in my joke internet search and in legit training videos I watched I would see stuff like this and cringe

It felt a bit ingenuine and I could not see how it would help me. But it did! Not only it ended up being one of the tools that helped me learn more about myself, but it also served as an amazing guiding light at the times where there was no right or wrong answer but a decision needed to be made.

Personal Values and Vision

What you do and why you do it

"I create immersive worlds so that the players around the world can connect to the story"

"My vision is to change the world for the better, one step at a time"

"I am a problem solver and I thrive when I can use that skill through my code to help people"

"I am a thoughtful leader who creates safe environments for their team so that they can all feel welcome"

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There are different ways to crafting them. I will take you through some express process now, but I suggest you take your time later and pro tip : this is actually something you can find some good resources with an internet search. I had tested it out for you .

Here we go :
How do you craft your vision statement? I think of the Vision statement as : explaining what you do and why you do it in 2-3 sentences
Start by asking yourself questions like what was your proudest moment? How do you want others to feel around you? To come up with things like :
It can be big, small, any format.

And your values can actually also help you get to your vision statement too. But how do you figure out your values?

Personal Values and Vision

What are the 5 most important things for you in life?

Accountability	Self-respect	Frugality
Integrity	Adaptability	Improvement
Generosity	Uniqueness	Self-reliance
Courage	Assertiveness	Exploration
Gratitude	Support	Family
Well-being	Open-mindedness	Flexibility
Sustainability	Personal growth	Quality

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And for your values :
You can start with a list, make a long list and narrow down. You can cheat and look for 50 most common values and narrow down for yourself. First down to 15, then to 10... Until you get down to 5.
You have to pick! the exercise of narrowing down will help you really dig into what sits at the core of your decisions.

Personal Values and Vision

Curiosity

Playfulness

Empathy/Kindness

Trust but support

Strive to grow

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My values ended up being these 5 :
And I hope people who know me are looking at this and thinking "yeah, that is her"
Because that is how I felt when I finally had them down, it was a gratifying moment
And you can expand on them, write down what each means to you. I did it for mine

And I will give you a quick example of how they helped me

Letting go of your hands-on work

Trust but support : Believe in the abilities of the people and give them room to use their skills. But also, be there when they need support, lean on each others' strengths

One of the things you need to learn and navigate as you transition into leadership roles is :
The amount might change depending on where you are. But for the most part, you are not there to do the work anymore, you are there to guide your team to do the work.
And it can be tough at first. People do the things in ways you would not, there might be missteps. It is like you were driving the car and you are now in the back seat. And you feel like it is out of your control, And If things do not work out, you are still responsible at the end!But look at what I had as one of my values:
This was not about me being a lead, this was how I grew up in my family. I knew how I felt when I was on the receiving end of it. And when I applied this to my leadership, it was important to me that my team felt this way too
So this helped me reframe things in my mind.
I was not in the back seat, I had called shot gun and I was the navigator. I trust the driver, but I am there to draw the path; course correct when needed. I am still a part of the process, just in a different role, a role that I had consciously chose
So all that is to say : You do not know at what point your values and vision might help you, but trust me they will!
Write it down, put it on your wall, save it on your phone, memorize it. Whatever works for you
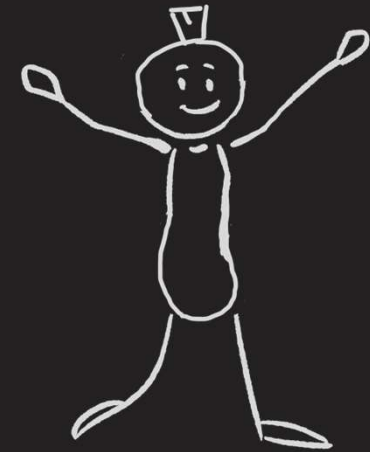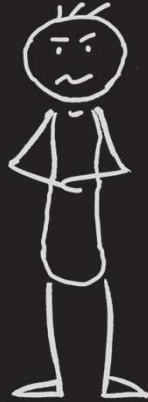
Now what?

So you know how to get and process feedback, you are building partnerships. your scuba gear is setup, your personal vision and values statement is ready. All of these serves as things to make you more aware of your self , your actions, your thoughts.

But Now what? We have not even talked about the most important part of the leadership:

Treat others how *they* want to be treated

Treat others how you want to be treated

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Your team!
You also need to know your team, people you work with. Take a close look at how you communicate with them
Everyone knows that the Golden rule is : treat others how you want to be treated
But I would like to talk about the Platinum rule : treat others how they want to be treated
That might sound off for some. But I can offer you a way to think about it:
If you went to foreign country and you need to order food. if your waiter does not speak English, you would try to find a way to communicate, to translate it in a way they can understand
So you need to learn the language of the people you work with, learn their communication style
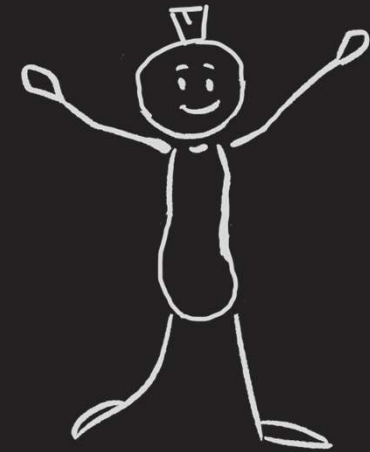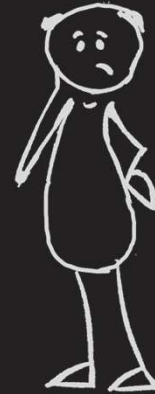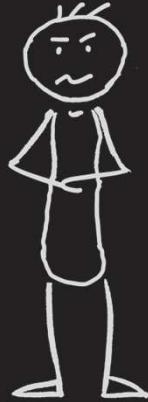
Treat others how *they* want to be treated

Treat others how you want to be treated

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And there are different methods you can go about doing this.
- If you would like to be methodological about this, there are tests out there (like HBDI, Meyers Briggs or DiSC) that you and your team can take.
These thinking style assessment tools can help identify each individual's preferred approach to emotional, analytical, structural, and strategic thinking and can give a common reference point to your team. These kind of tests also a great tool for you to get to know yourself better
- But even without any tests, if you pay attention and ask questions to your team, to the people you work with you can in time figure out their preferred method.
But also keep in mind that these are not always as straightforward. Communication and conflict resolution are skills you are going to have to master in time. There is no one superior method, different problems under different circumstances might require a different approach. What matters is that you can start ahead when you know the person you are interacting with.

- Optimize your time. Delegate

- Trial and error. Adapt

- Observe. Listen

Before we get to the end of our time here, I also would like to quickly touch on couple things that I think would be helpful to do more of as you transition OR prepare yourself for a leadership role in the future.
Optimize your time : Not only you should manage your time better but also start thinking about optimizing it for yourself and for your team.
Start getting comfortable with delegation! This goes back to the point of letting-go. It might be difficult at first, but start getting comfortable now, send that bug to someone else
Experiment with different approaches. Test what works, what does not. Keep what works, but do not be afraid to change and adapt them as circumstances change. It will happen, you will make mistakes. Accept when you make one, what is important is that you move forward learning from them.
Observe and listen: Observe the leaders around you, the ones you think are doing a good job. Watch them in action. Watch even the leaders you would consider not doing a good job. What in their behavior you think is not working? What are they really good at? Observe your team. And listen. Make space for them
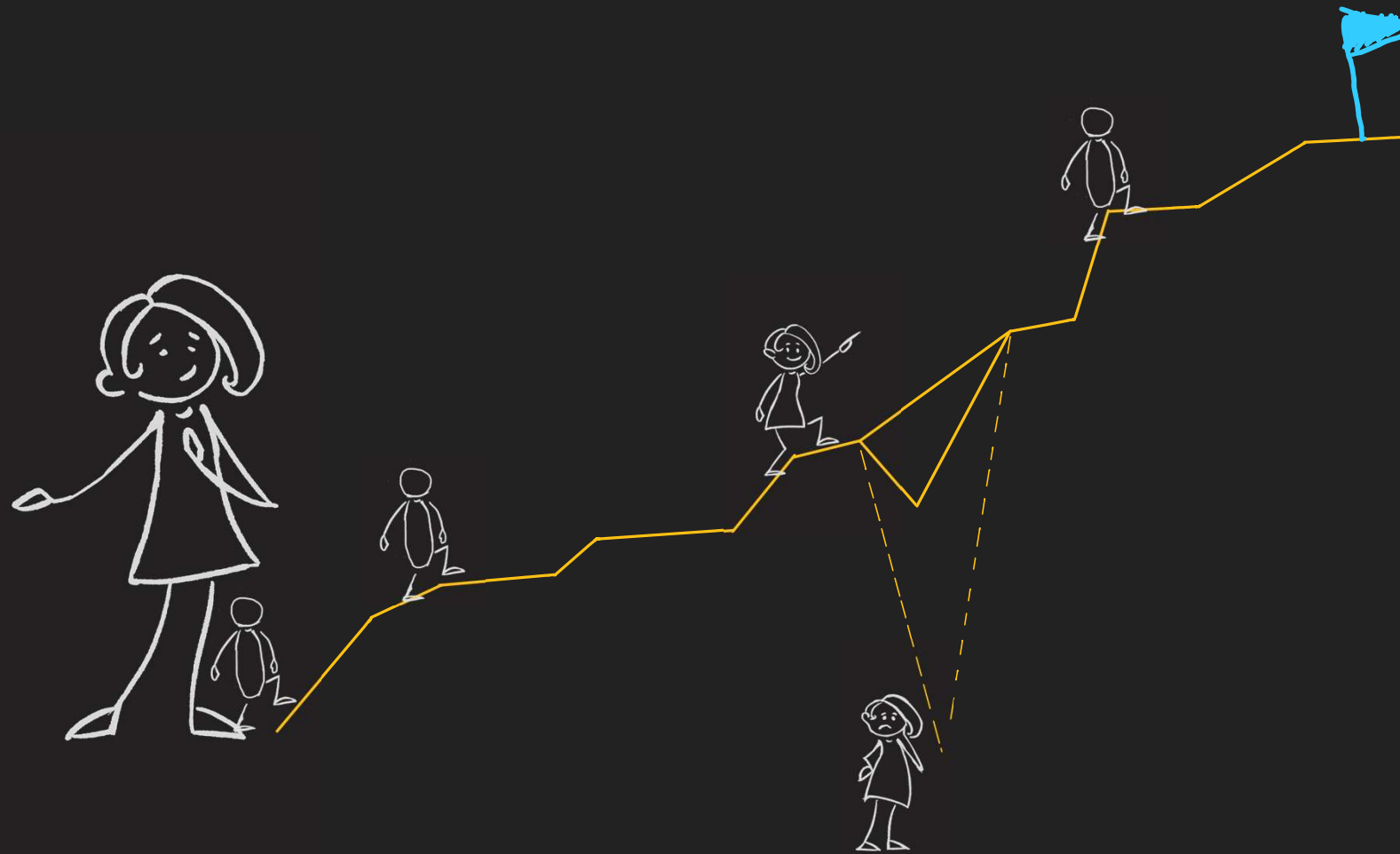
I shared with you today bits of my leadership journey and major breakthroughs I had at how I approach things.
Remember, It is an ongoing learning experience
And I have come to believe that, no one has got it all together, everyone is just at a different place in their journey.
I am actually starting to think there is not even a final location
As a matter of fact, there are sometimes pitfalls.

I have recently had an experience that made me feel like I was here (see the drop). I almost bailed out of this talk. Did not matter how much progress I made or the way ahead, all I could see was this…

" ... I seek out challenges and face them with a sense of playfulness. I learn from it and move onto next adventure, always looking to enjoy the journey. "

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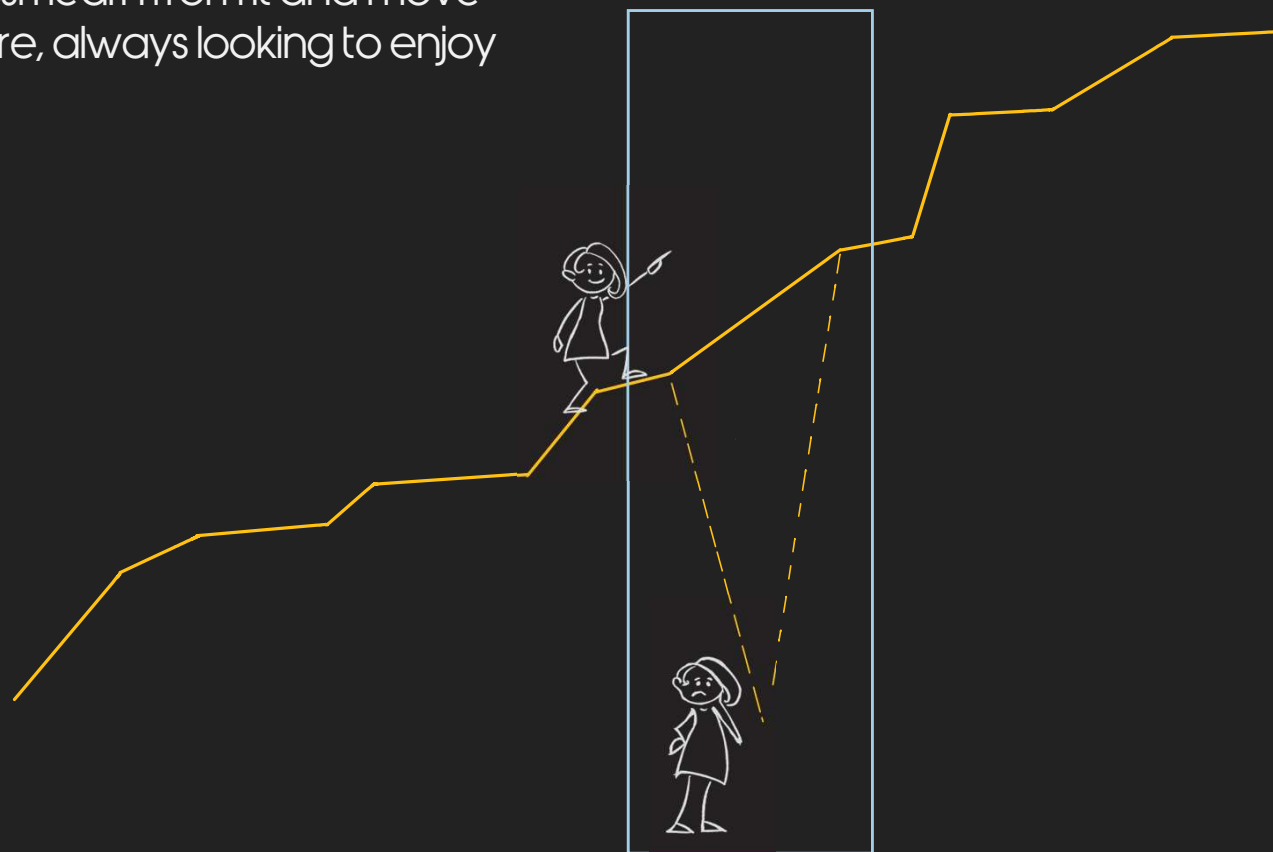
Then and opened these slides to make that call and I was reminded of my own advice. I was supposed to see the progress I made instead of focusing on one fallback.

Then I leaned on my partners and people who sees the work I do everyday to really calibrate where I was vs where I was feeling.

And I read my vision statement that ended with " ... I seek out challenges and face them with a sense of playfulness. I learn from it and move onto next adventure, always looking to enjoy the journey. "

And I decided to do just that, learn and move on.So I do think these tools are here to help you to not only draw your path upwards, but also pick you up from those drops. They can be the tools for recovery after struggle.

So no matter where you are at with your joutney, I hope that something you heard here today will help you with your own journey

But I would like to point out one very important thing: a lot of what I mentioned here is not really about being in a leadership position or having a team to run. You do not have to have the title yet or ever. these skills are good ones to develop for everyone,

especially people like us in game industry working in cross disciplinary team environments at a very fast pace.

So was this really another leadership talk then, maybe not?
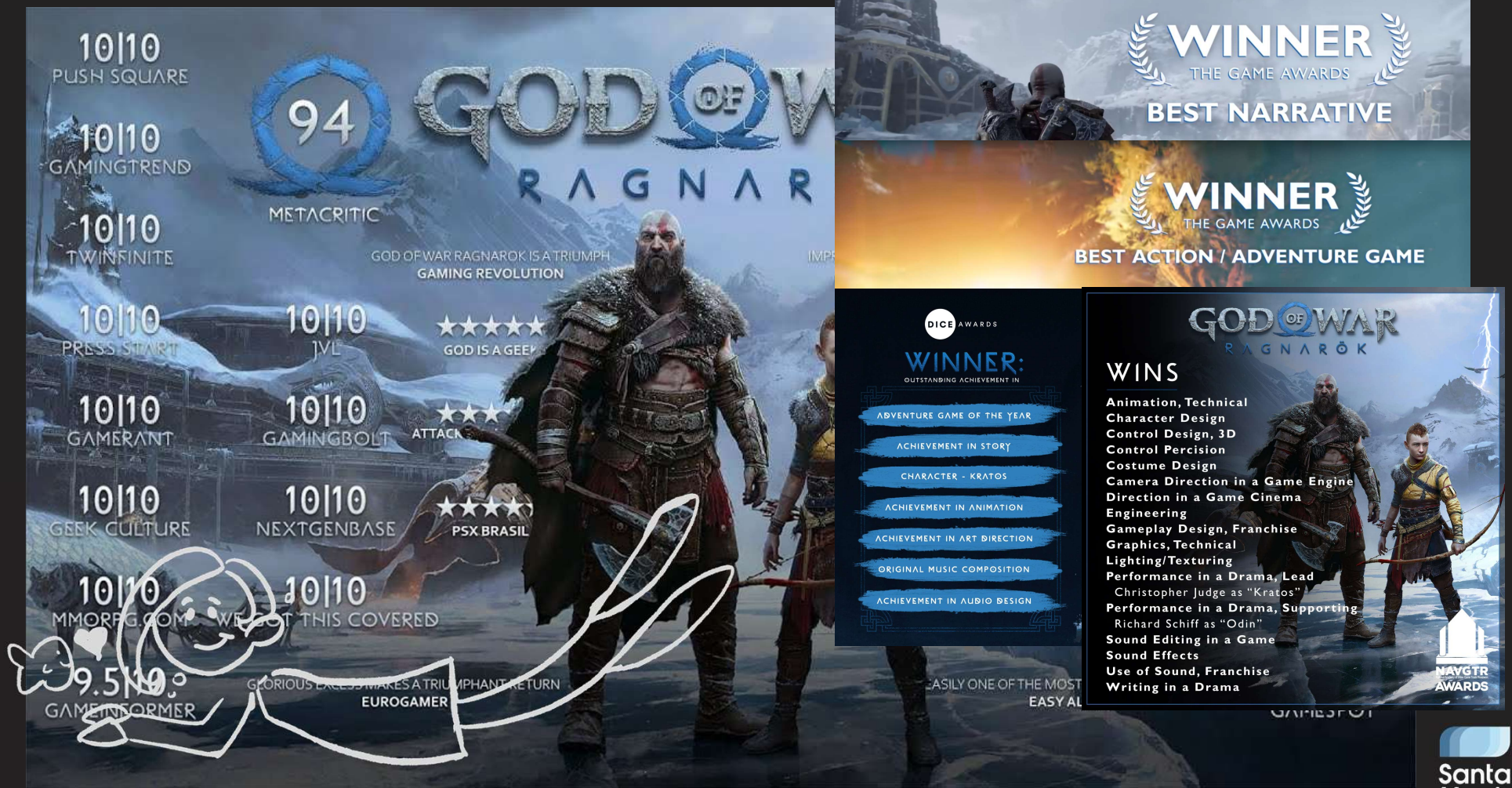
Through the ups and downs, this is where my journey took me. I started working on GOW Ragnarok as an individual contributer ended up leading 2 teams before shipment . it came out in November 2022 (show the scores image), which was thankfully very well received
Making games is difficult. Making games in this scale with this many people is even more so and only possible with a tremendous team effort.
So this is not me taking credit for these scores. I am beyond proud of both what my teams and the whole GOW team achieved

But I would like to believe I played my part in creating an environment for them to do what they do best
I will however take credit and celebrate the fact that last year was the first year I did not get a single "Goksu should be more vocal in meetings" feedback for the first time
So the fish are maybe not so scary after all

Thank you!

Göksu Uğur

🐦 goksu_ugur

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