Standing Up for the Unmeasurable in a Data-Driven Design Process

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Not everything that can be counted counts and not everything that counts can be counted.

— OFTEN ATTRIBUTED TO ALBERT EINSTEIN

Data can make us
see more clearly.

S.M.A.R.T

OKRs.

A/B-tests.

Survival of the fittest has turned into survival of the measurable.

The act of measuring can cause unintended consequences.

Performance management in hospitals has been linked to higher mortality rates.

“…over reliance o senior staff on the hospital’s PMS led to an organizational culture focused on doing the system’s ‘business’ (e.g. hitting performance targets), resulting in patient neglect and high mortality rates.”

— FRANCO-SANTOS, OTLEY 2018

“Make low mortality rates a performance target!” → can lead to lower acceptance of severe cases.

Avoiding unintended consequences with performance management systems can feel like trying to clutch water in your hands—the harder you grip, the faster it slips through your fingers.

Hitting all the targets but missing the point.

As we become more driven by data, can we lose touch with some of our core values?

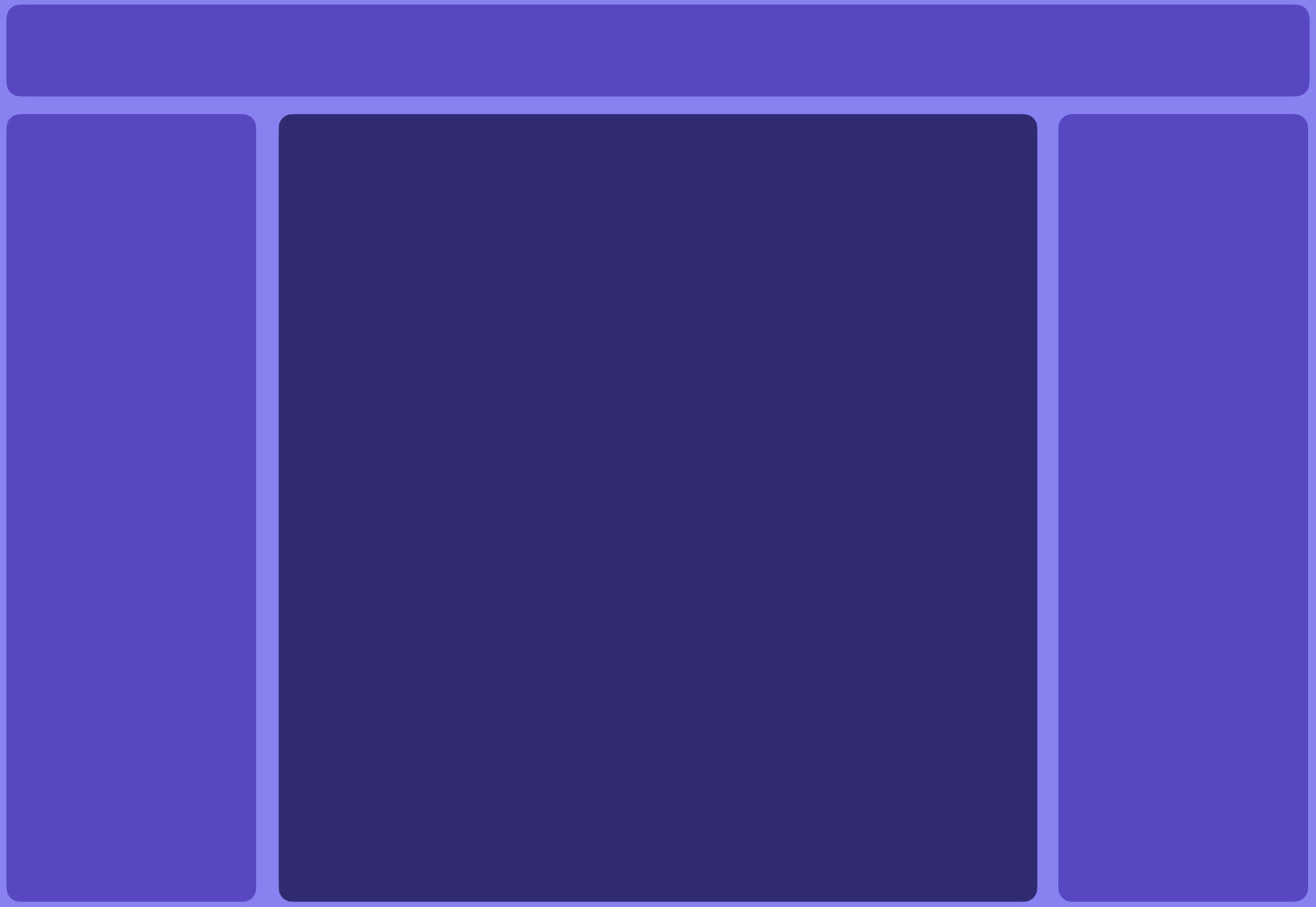
We aren’t measuring “good design”—we’re measuring clicks & taps.

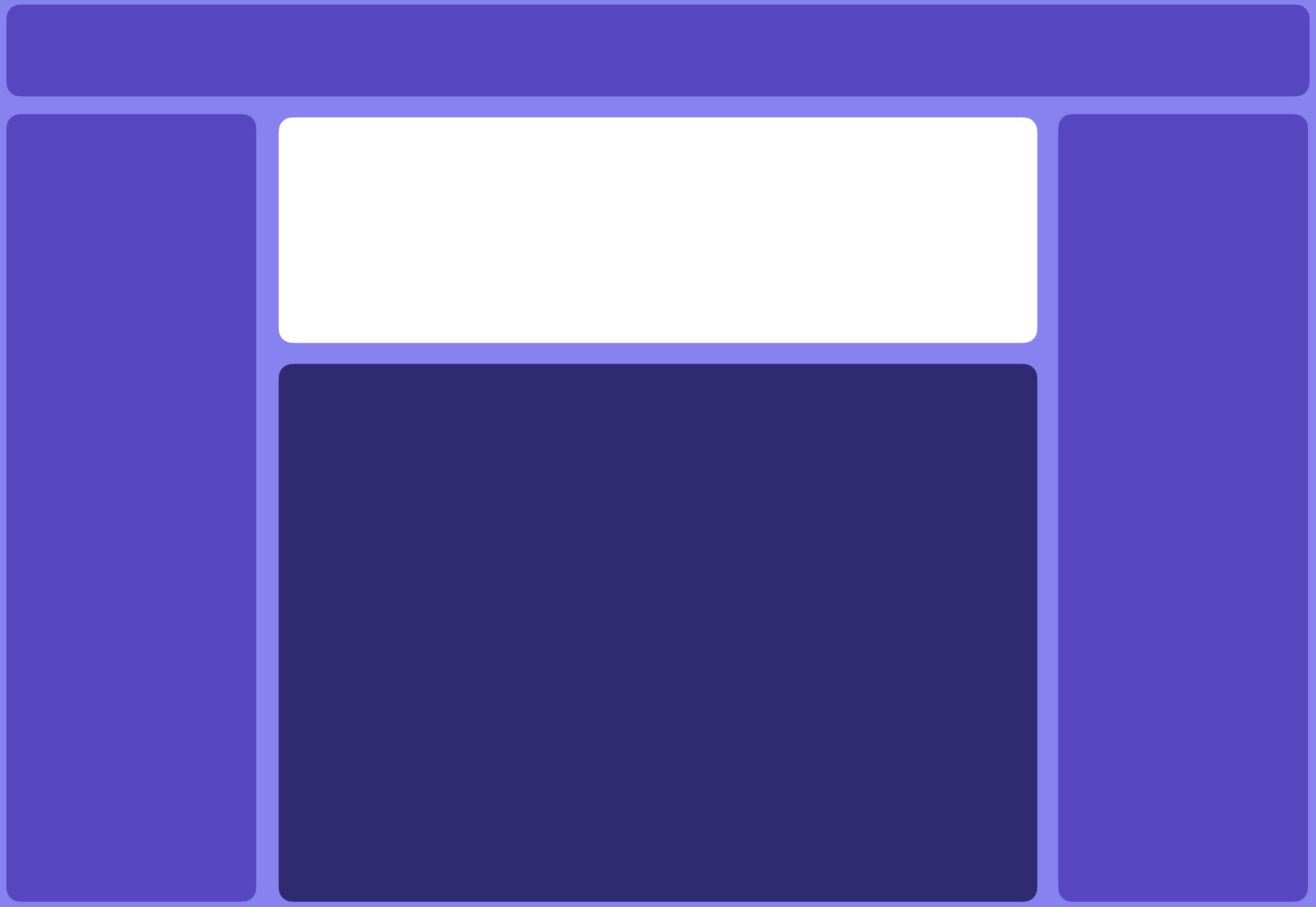
We have a responsibility to stand up for what isn’t measurable.

We have a responsibility to measure better.

Be the fiercest critic of data-driven design processes, yet insatiably curious about how we can measure better.

A common scenario.



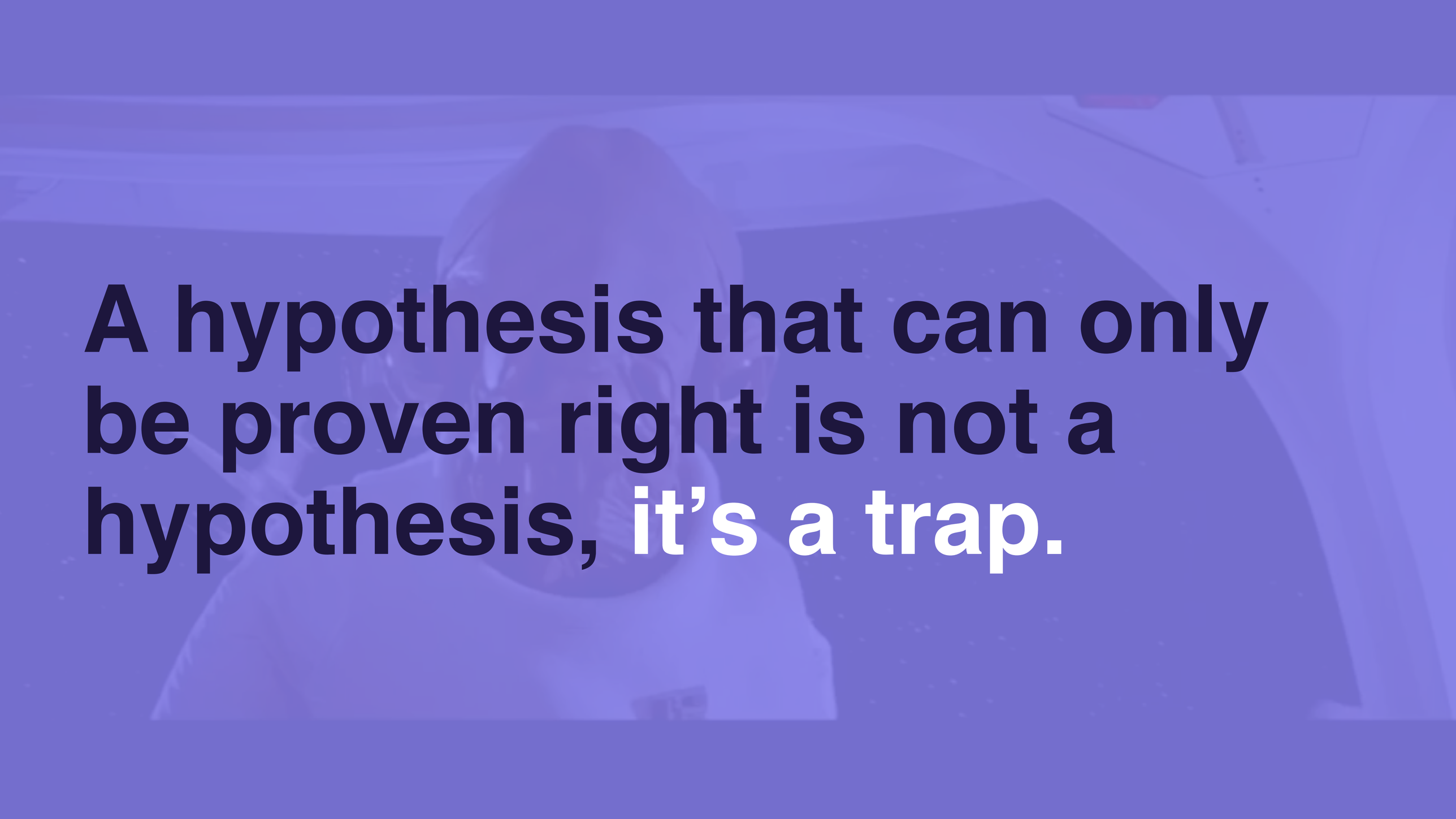


Buy now

STATED HYPOTHESIS

“By featuring our offer at the top of the app we will increase sales, which will increase revenue”

Measure sales →
any increase in sales will prove the hypothesis right.



A hypothesis that can only be proven right is not a hypothesis, it’s a trap.

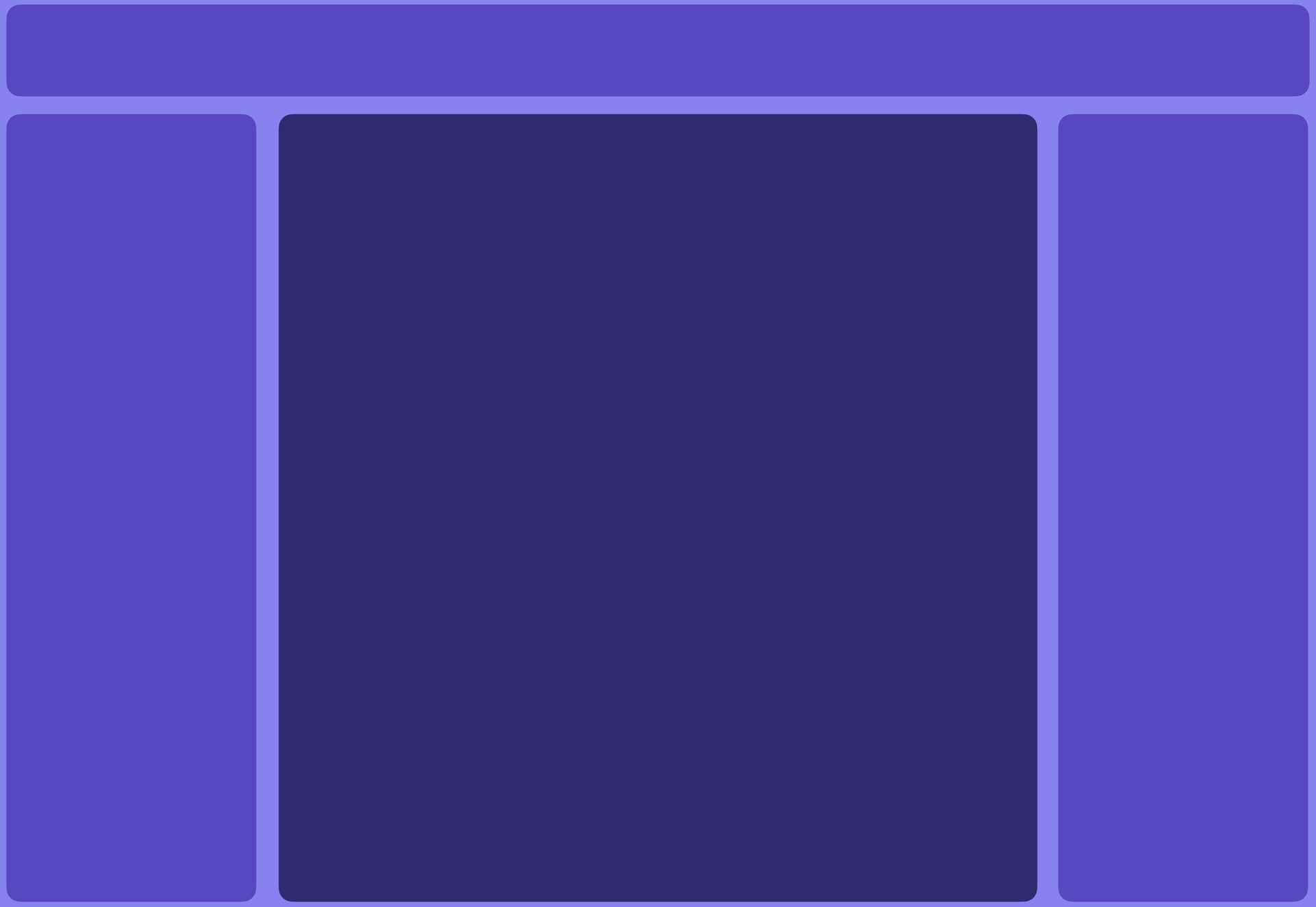
STATED HYPOTHESIS

By featuring our offer at the top of the app we will increase sales, which will increase revenue

ACTUAL HYPOTHESIS

By featuring our offer at the top of the app we will increase sales, which will increase revenue unless retention decreases

A design that introduces friction always risks bringing down vital key metrics that can hurt the bottom-line.

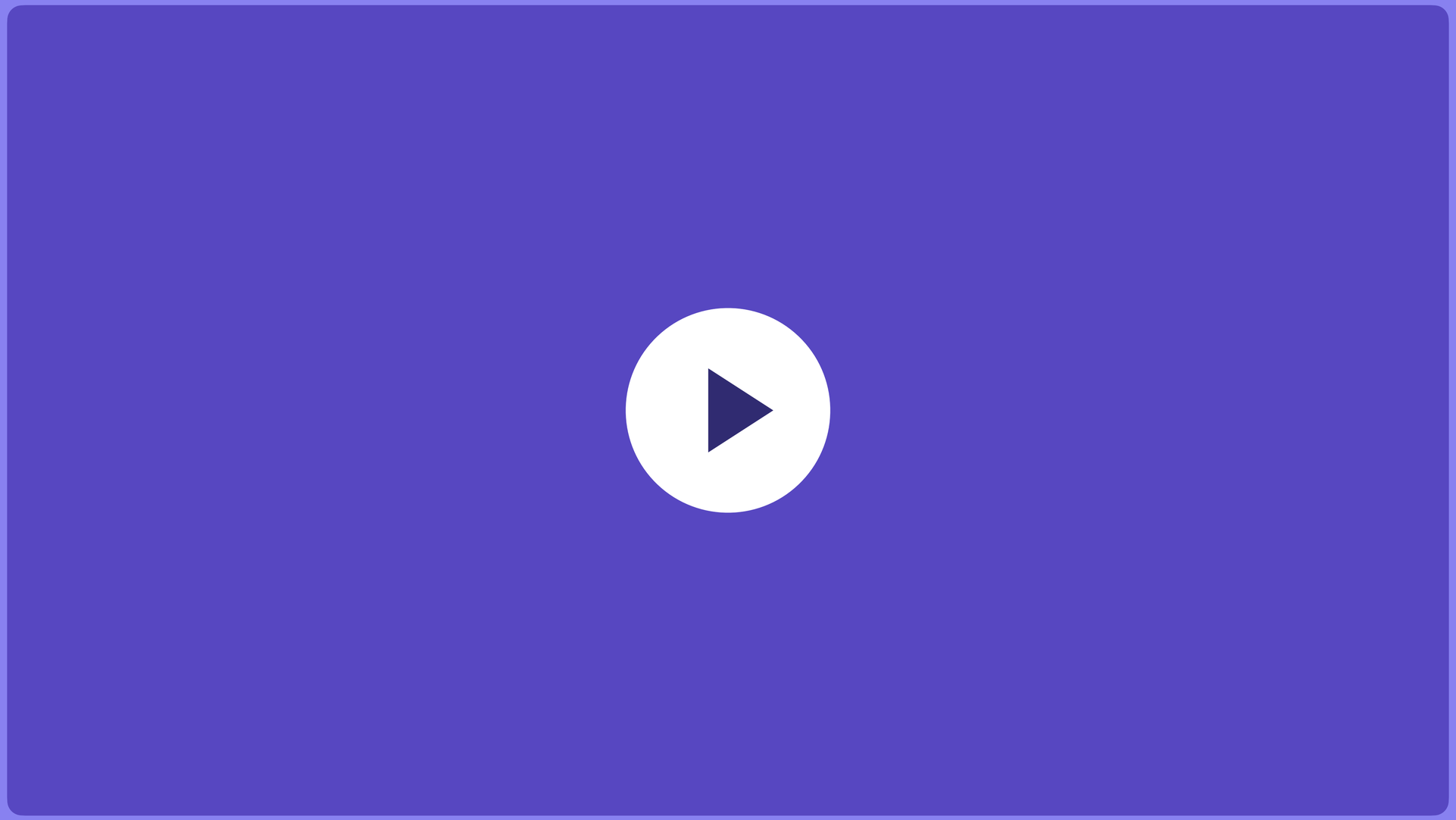


Retention is the best proxy for quality, but it can be difficult to detect meaningful changes.

We often lean on other metrics—such as engagement—that are easier and cheaper to quantify.

Any performance metric will eventually be gambled, manipulated, and diluted of its original value.

A common scenario.



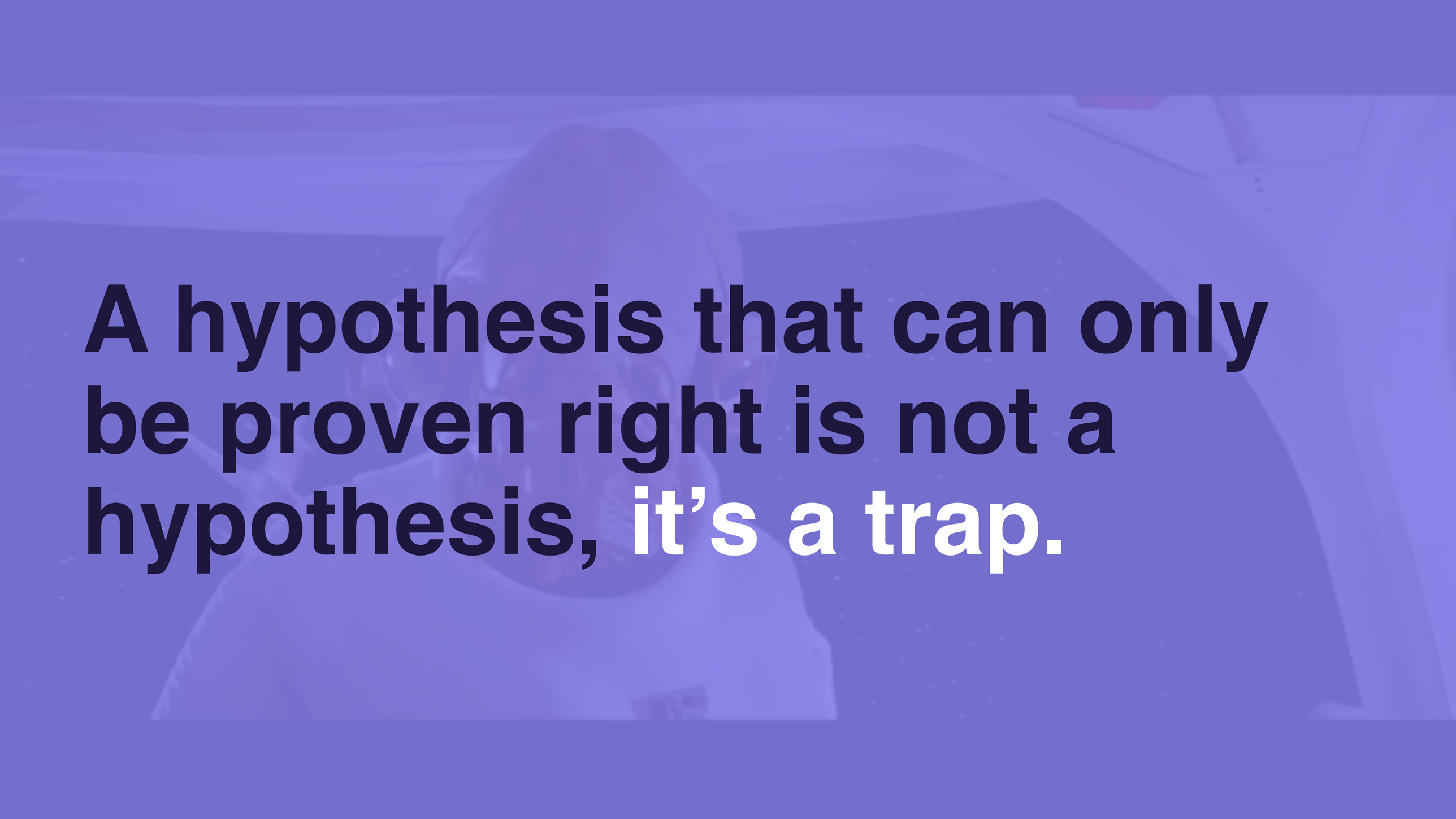
A COMPANY GOAL

Increase engagement (because it correlates with retention)

Autoplay recommended clips →
brings up engagement.

STATED HYPOTHESIS

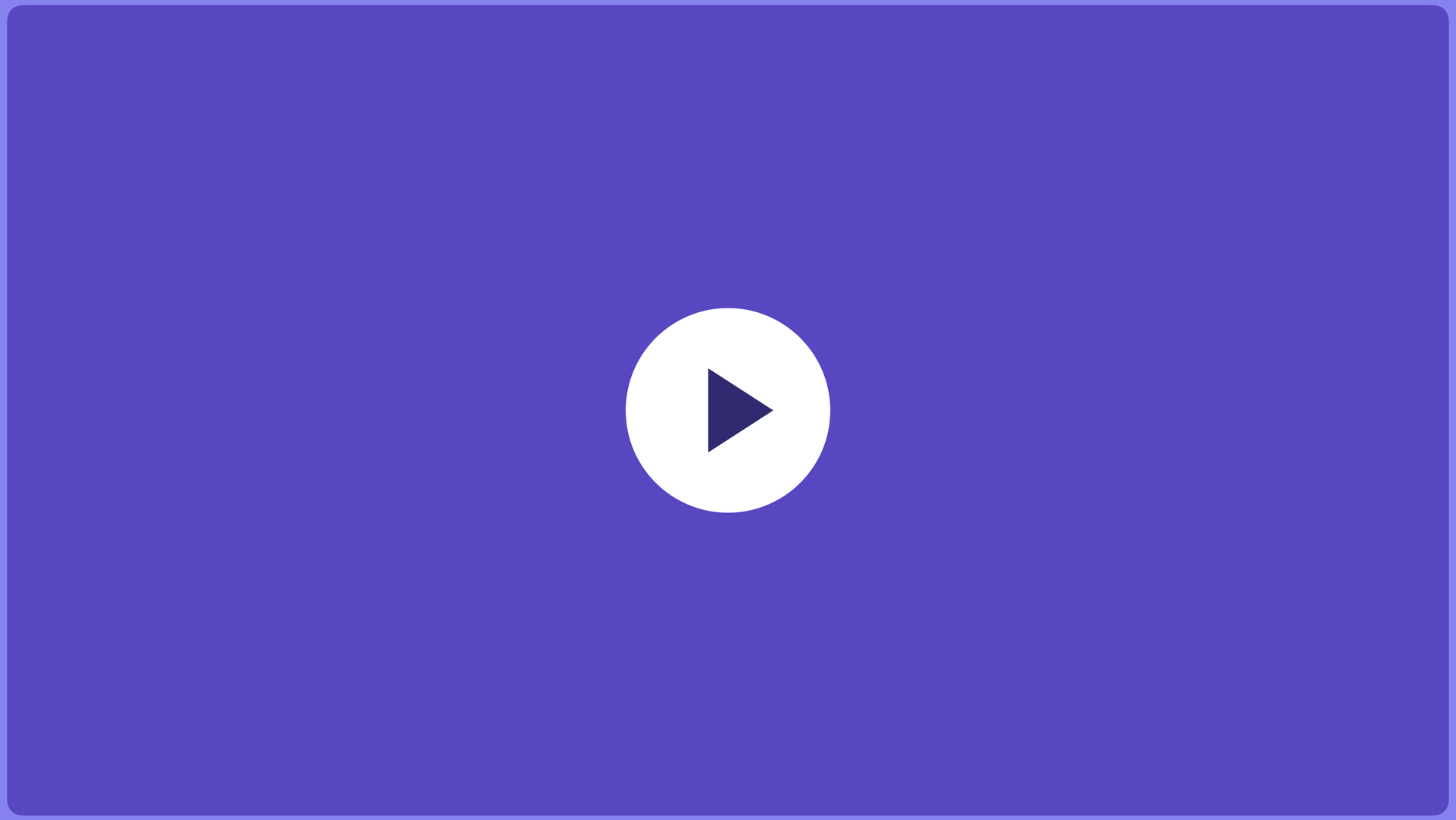
“By auto-playing new recommended clips when a clip has ended, we will bring up engagement”



A hypothesis that can only be proven right is not a hypothesis, it’s a trap.

→ engagement will correlate less strongly with retention, and is diluted of its value as a key metric.

→ you might be bringing retention down (because annoying)



Hitting all the targets but missing the point.

We have a responsibility to ask “Why?” & “At what cost?”

Standing up for your core values can be profitable.

Saying no
can be difficult.

Measure differently.

Measure less.

Measure better.

Don’t forget what brought you into design.

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