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The Alchemy of the Player and the Game: Creating and Embodying Mental Health Meanings in Digital Games

by
Jeff Nicklas

DISSERTATION
Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

Sociology

in the

GRADUATE DIVISION
of the
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN FRANCISCO

Approved:

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Chair

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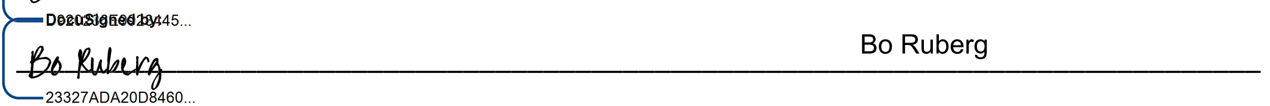
Bo Ruberg

Committee Members

“Even in darkness, the wonder and beauty of this world never leaves, it is always there, just waiting to be seen again.” – Senua, *Hellblade: Senua’s Sacrifice* (2018)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In sitting down to write these acknowledgements, my reflections spurred an unexpected emotional response at the immense and never-ending support network that kept me going and growing.

First and foremost, I thank the participants in this study who shared their time and experiences with me. While the COVID-19 pandemic meant that I was unable to conduct in-person interviews, the online and remote recruitment methods that arose from this meant that I was fortunate to speak with individuals across the world. I am thankful that, despite learning of my research from a Reddit community or Discord server and meeting with me virtually in a Zoom, participants trusted me and embraced my questions with vulnerability and honesty surrounding their mental illness and mental health struggles. Many participants reflected on these interviews as being one of the few times that they spoke openly about their mental health and often remarked that the conversations, themselves, were therapeutic and empowering. I am grateful for the connections that I formed with the 49 participants, some of which I am still in touch with and who continue to check in on how my research is going.

I am forever grateful for Colin Milburn and Bo Ruberg who unknowingly stoked my passion for digital games research and setting me on the path for this work. When I initially began my foray into this Sociology PhD program, I intended, and felt compelled, to pursue questions grounded in ‘hard’ scientific arenas. I had carried an interest in mental health and technologies, motivated to attend UCSF for deeper training on the integration of STS, social sciences, and medicine. Before applying, I considered a study on digital games and mental health because I had personally experience the effects of digital games on my ongoing struggles with OCD and wanted to understand if and how other people experienced these games. However, beginning the

program, and embedding myself on a campus so firmly geared toward biomedicine and technoscience, coupled with learning of my peers' research interests, I felt that digital games would be written off as an invalid site of empirical inquiry. Despite having my own experiences, I still carried and internalized so much shame for this hobby, something reinforced throughout my childhood and into high school. Thus, I pivoted. "I think I'm going to study medical drones!" I remember exclaiming to my cohort mate and friend at one point as I tried to find something that connected my other interests in global health and technology.

Like any good graduate student, I spent most of my first year searching for organizations to follow and listservs to join that aligned with my research interests for networking purposes. This led to the serendipitous receipt of two events in my inbox toward the end of my first year and at the start of my second. "Please join us for a discussion with Professor Colin Milburn and graduate students regarding a chapter from his book Respawn: Gamers, Hackers, and Technogenic Life" read one event headline. "Video Games Have Always Been Queer, a Talk by Bonnie Ruberg" read the other. These immediately piqued my interest! There were other scholars engaging in work at the intersections of digital games, STS, and culture. I felt validated in my own interests and confident that I could propose a dissertation topic and pursue my passion to study and explore the intersections of medical sociology, science and technology studies, and game studies.

I am extremely fortunate to not only have continued to build a relationship with Colin and Bo, but to have these two exceptional scholars agree to be a part of my dissertation committee. Bo Ruberg and Colin Milburn each contributed to my development as a scholar with their knowledge and background surrounding many different facets of games, culture, and society. I am also immensely thankful for them helping me build community and find my 'place' in the

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Words will never fully be able to express my never-ending and heartfelt thank you to Janet Shim, my dissertation chair and academic advisor. Towards the end of my first year, I found myself without an advisor and even more unsure of my 'place' in the program. Janet welcomed me as an advisee with open arms and never ceased to offer her support and guidance as I continued to question my path and find my footing throughout my graduate school journey. As my dissertation chair, Janet taught me new things and guided me throughout the dissertation process. She has helped me become a better academic writer, navigate rejection, learned when to take time to celebrate each success big or small, and continue to believe in my ideas and work when I started to lose sight. There were many times where I felt stuck, and Janet always reminded me of my progress and helped me work through my ideas with patience.

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Becoming completely submerged in the writing process has given me newfound appreciation for the countless friends and family who continually checked in and kept my head above water. First and foremost, to my incredible wife and best friend, Molly Wallner. I am certain that I could not have made it across the finish line without you by my side. You have seen me in every possible form throughout this process—excited during the wins; anxious and defeated at the losses—and yet you never ceased in reminding me why I pursued this and for always making me laugh and smile when I needed it most. I am and will always be endlessly grateful to you for your patience and commitment as I endeavored in this PhD program and I know that being my main support person did not come easy. Thank you for your confidence in me and for being a consistent shoulder to lean on and an ear to listen. To my sweet cats, CeCe

and Dory, for being my coworking buddies during long stretches at my desk and for reminding me to take breaks by flopping down on my keyboard to get some pats. Their presence kept my anxiety and stress in check while navigating the many different phases of this work. It was a terrible loss when CeCe passed away a few months before I finished this dissertation. She was our first cat, and I will love and miss her forever.

To my cousins and close friends, Sara and Rachel, I will forever be grateful for our fun adventures across the Bay Area and beyond and for your encouragement, curiosity, and validation surrounding my work. Perhaps most importantly, thank you for letting me introduce you both to LOST and for the many nights spent together watching episodes that offered reprieve from the weight of this dissertation. To my dear friends Cesar and Rob, thank you for being incredibly supportive friends and my gaming buddies throughout this process! Our semi-regular gaming sessions kept me going and reminded me of my passion for games. Thank you for letting me talk ad nauseum about my work and for lending me your guidance and insights as fellow members of the gaming community. Cesar, thank you for our near-constant Discord chats throughout the days and for making me comfortable and safe in sharing my struggles and uncertainty with you and for your consistent cheerleading and support in return. To Dani, thank you for helping me navigate so much of graduate school and for getting me outside and hiking the Bay Area! To Matt, thank you for being a positive presence in our community, for your laughs and upbeat energy whenever I came to work in the café, and for your supply of incredible pizza.

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sister-in-law, Hannah Nicklas, thank you for introducing and welcoming us to the Bay Area and for your generosity, kindness, support, and laughter over the years. Danny, I especially cherish our brotherhood and our friendship and appreciate the nights we shared gaming and our trips to Mongolian BBQ. How lucky I was to have incredible family close-by throughout this endeavor, and I will cherish your love and guidance forever.

The Alchemy of the Player and the Game:

Creating and Embodying Mental Health Meanings in Digital Games

Jeff Nicklas

ABSTRACT

More than one in five adults in the United States live with a mental illness where it is difficult to access care due to lack of affordable and available mental health services. Discriminatory social and cultural ideologies surrounding mental illness that lend themselves to broader mental health stigma further prevent people from seeking treatment and add to the isolation and exclusion already felt by those grappling with mental illness. Popular media serves as one such arena that can deeply impact stigmatized views of mental health, in whether and how it stereotypically or thoughtfully surfaces and depicts the often hidden and invisible experience of mental illness. Commercially available digital games, those played by hundreds of millions of people in the United States, has a history of leaning on stereotypes that lack depth and exacerbate stigmatizing views toward mental illness. At the same time, digital games can also approach mental health in more thoughtful and nuanced ways and thus might also serve to directly counter and shift perceptions away from harmful and exclusionary stigmatized views toward mental health.

Rather than situating digital games as either 'good' or 'bad' for mental health, this dissertation takes a sociological approach to understanding how people interact with digital games toward broadly crafting meanings and reflections toward their mental health and illness. Using constructivist grounded theory, I conducted 49 in-depth interviews with people who play video games and self-identified as experiencing mental illness, explored digital game content

through close play, and piloted an experimental observational interview method with a subset of five participants.

This study reveals a social alchemy that occurs between players and digital games in ways that affect mental health. I describe how players weave together digital game content and narratives with the lived experiences that they bring into their gameplay, to create an interactive and immersive space to *play* with multiple understandings of and perspectives on mental health. I illustrate how players embody digital game characters and their biographies to reconfigure their sense of self and feel differently outside of their everyday struggles with mental illness. I explore how players used digital games to escape from these struggles but do so intentionally to escape into particular emotions and ways of being that counter specific stressors and symptoms. Virtual embodiment here also involved players inhabiting characters, but at a distance, in order to embed and enmesh their mental health with that of the characters' narratives to experience and interact with similar but separate versions of themselves toward developing compassion and understanding for their own mental health. I next show how players also construe digital game characters as distinct social actors, ones with whom they can build bonds with and find social support related to their mental illness. I describe how finding experiential similarities in digital game characters offers players validation, coping strategies, and an alternative vision for their own futures and do so by not only identifying with character biographies but also viscerally feeling these connections through the simulated experiences produced by digital games' participatory and tactile affordances. Finally, I focus on digital game environments and explore player encounters with their grief and loss. I examine how interactions with grief in game worlds suffused and shaped participants' engagement with games, and in turn, the metaphors and

symbols within gameworlds that players interpreted as related to loss influenced how they understood and made sense of their own loss and grief.

In full, this project expands on sociological, science and technology studies, and game studies literature to analyze interactions with mental health and digital games with a focus on the lived experiences that players themselves bring to these settings. I elucidate the ways in which individuals shape technologies as much, if not more, than technologies socially shape them and illustrate single-player digital games as important arenas for engagement with sense of self in a relatively safe and judgement-free virtual environment away from the mental health stigma and discrimination found in everyday life. This research contributes to ongoing discourse concerning digital gaming's impact on mental health; conversations that tend to villainize games or valorize only those games that are specifically designed to be therapeutic. Instead, it points to the agency of individuals in enmeshing their lived experiences and contexts into existing digital game content and narratives toward crafting an experience wholly unique to themselves. In doing so, the resulting social alchemy allows players to engage with, reflect on, and transform their relationship to their mental health on their own creative terms.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

I was diagnosed with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) in 2018. I had just graduated from my master's program with a great new job, ready to start my career as a qualitative health researcher. A few months in, my anxiety spiked; my mind was plagued with near constant rumination and worrying. I would find myself unable to stop thinking about whether I logged out of my computer after work, locked the door when leaving the apartment, or washed my hands enough. These seemingly simple tasks began to take 20-30 minutes as I would check again and again, repeatedly. They would continue to occupy my mind for hours as I imagined worst-case scenarios. While still able to function, I could not find a reprieve from the stress and catastrophizing that took up the bulk of my everyday life. Eventually, I mustered the courage to find a therapist and begin to delve into what at the time just felt like intense worrying. What unfolded was not only a formal diagnosis, but also a discovery of my family's history with this mental illness, and an eventual decision to start medication to help mitigate the effects of my OCD.

Despite my therapist and many workbooks attempting to assure me that OCD was common, I still felt alone and ashamed. I felt embarrassed whenever a coworker would ask if everything was okay when I returned for the ninth or tenth time to make sure the office door was locked. I felt shame for taking prescription medication, feeling that it reinforced my perceived failure or weakness. I felt afraid and angry, wanting nothing more than for my OCD to be cured and my mind rid of the endless loop of worry, fear, and shame, but knowing deep down that I would live with this mental illness for the remainder of my life.

During this diagnostic journey, video games were an important activity and space to find some respite, to tune out the world and the constant barrage of mental worry that I sustained

every day. I had played video games since early childhood, and they served as a way for me to maintain and create new bonds. Typically, I would try and play multiplayer games with my brother on the weekend and single-player games during the week to wind down after stressful days. It was around this time that I started to hear about a game called *Celeste*.[1] A two-dimensional game utilizing pixel art, *Celeste* seemed like an opportunity to take a nostalgic trip to my childhood, where I grew up on classic two-dimensional games like Super Mario Bros., while engaging in something new, fresh, and developed for the modern era. I heard it had an engaging and emotional storyline, but I was more interested in playing a game that required precision and focus, something that I could more fully immerse myself in as a means of momentary escape. Instead, and unexpectedly, I found that the story and gameplay resonated deeply with my mental health struggles and journey at that time.

In *Celeste*, players control the protagonist Madeline as she leaves her life behind to attempt to climb the dangerous and mysterious Celeste Mountain. As she climbs, she meets a cast of characters in the game's many surreal environments, such as Oshiro, the ghost of a long abandoned alpine hotel that is cluttered with stacks of decrepit books, shimmering impassable blocks and spikey walls. Players use movement, jumps, and dashes to move from screen-to-screen and level-to-level, navigating around and through obstacles and puzzles (see Figure 1.1).

[1] Throughout this dissertation, all game titles will be referenced in italics.

Figure 1.1*. A typical platforming screen in Celeste where players must jump across moving platforms and avoid the tendrils on the walls and ground (screenshot taken by author)*

The gameplay and environment coalesce around Madeline's own journey with anxiety and depression. Her story is conveyed through conversations that she has with herself and other characters, such as a moment around a campfire with Theo, a friend she meets along the climb, who asks Madeline to talk about her depression (Figure 1.2). Madeline's mental health also emerges in metaphorical ways, such as with the appearance of Madeline's doppelganger, aptly named Badeline, who acts as a manifestation of Madeline's anxiety and self-doubt, continually chasing and criticizing Madeline throughout the game.

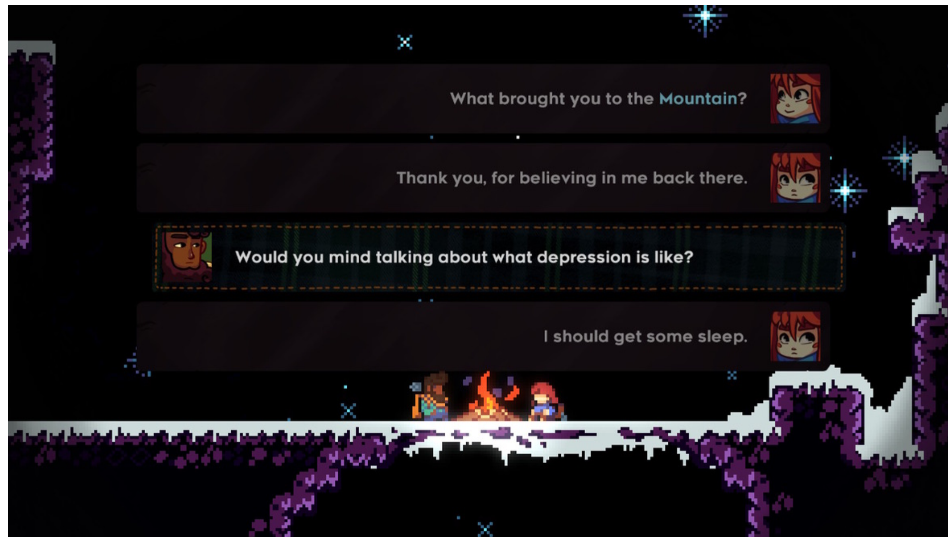

Figure 1.2. *In one moment in* Celeste, *protagonist Madeline and her new friend, Theo, talk about depression by the campfire (screenshot captured by author)*

Celeste poignantly merges its gameplay and story, with the most prominent example being in the game's sheer difficulty. As mentioned, the game asks players to employ precise movement and jumps, where every twitch of the thumb stick and press of a button can mean the difference between completing a screen or falling and having to start over. Just as Madeline and the player struggle to climb the mountain, she also struggles through her mental illness. Towards the end of the game, Madeline almost reaches the top of Celeste Mountain only to be thwarted again by Badeline who causes Madeline to fall to the bottom where she began. Badeline appears next to Madeline, who, after her long and arduous journey, pleads with Badeline to help her reach the top, rather than continue to hinder and block her path. This leads to another chase; however, this time, it is the player chasing Badeline. Catching up with Badeline leads to an emotionally charged scene where Madeline convinces Badeline that they need each other to reach the top of the mountain. They embrace (Figure 1.3), then Badeline fades, and the words "Level Up" appear on the screen, cleverly evoking classic gaming vernacular to signify

Madeline's growth and learned strength throughout her journey and the acceptance of her once critical and fearful self. Players are then granted an additional dash, allowing them to use this move twice in mid-air before touching the ground. This embrace and its accompanying move are ultimately what is necessary to reach the peak and complete the game.

Figure 1.3. *Towards the end of the game, Badeline fades as they embrace and Madeline "Levels Up" (screenshot by the author)*

I was shocked by this ending. My interpretation was that Madeline, who initially set out to run from her anxiety and depression, came to understand these conditions as a part of her self. As the game ended, she realized that she did not need to flee her mental health. Instead, accepting aspects of her mental illness gave her strength and courage, qualities that I not only saw but *felt* through the new gameplay mechanic of a double dash. As I continued to reflect on my interactions with *Celeste*, its narrative, and gameplay, I too began to understand my relationship with OCD differently. While previously I was filled with fear and anger over potentially having to live with this illness for the remainder of my life, I found more space to accept and feel compassion toward myself and my mental illness. It did not need to be something

to run away from, but something to embrace as a part of myself and my identity. In the years since, I still struggle with my OCD and likely will for years to come, but I have continued to feel less shame and find reprieve through therapy and medication, and through unexpected encounters with games like *Celeste*. Madeline's journey helped me understand more about my mental health, and even begin to re-constitute aspects of what I thought were part of my illness, such as how my worries can in fact motivate me to approach the world around me with more care and consideration.

* * *

More than one in five adults in the United States live with a mental illness, with young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 having the highest prevalence of mental illness, yet the lowest use of mental health services (National Institute of Mental Health 2023). Nearly 1 in 8 people globally experience mental illness that largely goes untreated (World Health Organization 2022).[2] An estimated 164 million Americans live in areas with a shortage of mental health professionals, and on average have an eleven-year delay between the onset of mental illness symptoms and seeking and receiving treatment (National Alliance on Mental Illness 2023). While structural issues like a lack of affordable and available mental health services significantly impact access to mental healthcare (Coombs et al. 2021), discriminatory social and cultural ideologies surrounding mental illness further prevent people from seeking treatment, and add to the isolation and exclusion already felt by those grappling with mental illness (Thornicroft 2008).

[2] The COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbated the prevalence of mental illness. In the U.S., 20% of adults reported the pandemic significantly impacting their mental health (NAMI 2023). In the first few months of the pandemic, for example, rates of anxiety and depression significantly increased by 7% in the United States (Vahratian et al. 2021). Similarly, rates of mental illness, depression, and anxiety symptoms increased by about 25% globally (WHO 2022).

Mental health stigma stems from and exacerbates discriminatory ideologies and further makes invisible those suffering from mental illness. Stigma arises when behaviors and lived experiences fail to live up to socially and culturally constructed assumptions, expectations, and values (Goffman 1963). Stigma is encountered externally as others perceive and interact negatively towards a stigmatized person, and internally when the stigmatized person internalizes and condemns themselves based on the behaviors of others (Goffman 1963). Mental health stigma also has redounding consequences: For someone to receive treatment for mental illness, they often need a diagnosis, which becomes a stigmatized mark that "jeopardizes the life circumstances of people with mental illnesses by harming their employment chances, social networks, and self-esteem" (Link, Phelan, & Hatzenbuehler 2014:50). That is, the medicalization of mental health, rather than reducing stigma, can exacerbate both external and internalized stigma because seeking care and treatment can more formally and publicly label someone as having a mental illness, increasing the potential for discrimination and ostracization (Link, Phelan, & Hatzenbuehler 2014). Stigma then compounds mental illness symptoms and stressors by making it more difficult to connect with others and find support.

Popular media can deeply impact stigmatized views of mental health, in whether and how it stereotypically or thoughtfully surfaces and depicts the often hidden and invisible experience of mental illness (Anderson 2003; Lindsey 2014). Digital games, as one such form of popular media, have a history of leaning on stereotypes that lack depth and exacerbate stigmatizing views toward mental illness (Buday et al. 2022; Ferrari et al. 2019; Kasdorf 2023). A recent review by Buday and colleagues (2022), in which they examined representations of mental illness and psychiatry in games since the early 2000s, found that three-fourths of their sample featured negative and harmful depictions, for example, using mental illness to build horror or to present

characters as broken or different. Digital games' interactivity can build harmful representations directly into the gameplay, such as in games like *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* and *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* that use sanity meters to change player perceptions in-game as their characters become more 'insane' (Lindsey 2014). In these instances, simplistic and reductionist representations of mental illness, captured as 'sanity,' is exclusively detrimental where it impedes on player progress and success.

At the same time, digital games can also approach mental health in more thoughtful and nuanced ways. *Celeste*, as I described above, begins as Madeline desperately attempts to flee from her depression and anxiety, and ends with her transformed relationship to mental health, coming to terms with it as core to herself. In *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, the titular protagonist Senua struggles with psychosis and grief that alters how she and the player perceive and encounter the game world as they embark on a journey toward accepting and finding ways to recast her mental illness. Notably, Senua's inner voices—conveyed through the game's use of binaural audio (a recording technique that creates the illusion of three-dimensional sound)—are often portrayed as critical but are sometimes helpful too. *Hellblade's* developers even worked with community members who experience psychosis and neuropsychiatrists to ensure that they were accurately capturing and representing the lived experience of psychosis.

The above games are all commercially available and can therefore be purchased and played by any of the 212 million people who play digital games regularly (Entertainment Software Association 2023). Because of their relative accessibility and entertainment appeal, commercially available games hold therapeutic promise toward mental health outcomes (Colder Carras et al. 2018a; Kowal et al. 2021). Research in this area tends to center the general aspects of commercial games that might benefit mental health, such as how they provide focus or the

ability to connect and play with others (Colder Carras et al. 2018b). Research specifically examining the thoughtful and accurate portrayal of mental illness in games like *Celeste* or *Hellblade* primarily draw on content or textual analysis (Austin 2021; Fordham and Ball 2019) or on aspects other than their mental health content, like their challenge or structure (Hefkaluk, Linehan & Trace 2024; Meakin 2021). Few studies have qualitatively investigated how players encounter digital games and create meanings from their interactions toward their mental health.

In this dissertation, I offer an account of the social alchemy that occurs between players and digital games, in ways that affect mental health. Players weave together digital game content and narratives with the lived experiences that they bring into their gameplay, to create an interactive and immersive space to *play* with multiple understandings of and perspectives on mental health. This arises distinctly through how players come to and feel themselves in digital games. Throughout this dissertation, I explore the particularities of digital game interaction and immersion. I analyze player connections to digital game characters; how players both feel themselves embodying these characters and forming bonds with them as distinct social actors toward catharsis and the reconfiguration of mental health relationships. I also explore broader digital gameworlds to understand how player navigation and expression in game environments better allow them to create meanings and frame their processing and emoting of trauma and grief. I ultimately argue that rather than digital games simply being 'good' or 'bad' for mental health, players use games to produce and inhabit of a world of their making, one where they can find and feel reprieve, validation, and metamorphosis in their mental health removed from the stigma and antagonism that are routinely faced in everyday life and sociocultural ideologies.

In this Introduction, I set the stage for my exploration of the social alchemy of digital games and mental health. First, I situate digital games as social and cultural objects and articulate

how even single-player games—that is, games one plays alone—become rich sites for interactions with the self and both broader and personal relationships to mental health. Then, I describe the theoretical perspectives that I leverage throughout this work. I am interested in and offer an in-depth exploration of the elements that allow players to feel themselves and their mental health in their gameplay. In this section, I introduce and discuss concepts of interaction and immersion and illustrate their sociocultural embeddedness and meaning-making possibilities. Next, I provide an overview of the methodological landscapes for this dissertation, highlighting the methods used, participant demographics, and my own positionality in this work. Finally, I end this chapter with an overview of this dissertation's empirical chapters.

Theoretical Framing

This dissertation is informed by several theoretical frameworks that situate digital games as social objects and understand how players' lived experiences of mental health shape, and are embedded in and influenced by, their gameplay. First, drawing on symbolic interactionism, I use theoretical work that investigates the construction and ordering of everyday reality and how a sense of self arises internally and socially through interactions with human and non-human actors. I also lean on sociological perspectives on narrative to demonstrate the role and importance of stories in making sense of reality and understanding health and illness. These concepts help frame my analysis of the social and communicative aspects of single-player gameplay.

Then, I introduce the two key theoretical concepts—interaction and immersion—that I leverage throughout this dissertation. These terms often appear in popular discourse describing digital games and gameplay. Here, I deconstruct these broad terms and conceptualize more specifically the ways in which they help shape players' subjectivities and the meanings that they

produce in these games. I also describe how attending to interactivity and immersivity offer rich ways to analyze and understand how players come to feel themselves as meaningfully inhabiting these worlds, and in so doing, reflect on their selves and engage with their mental health.

Digital Games as Sociological Objects

Several concepts in the symbolic interactionism literature and its application to the study of digital games provide a framework for this project. Below, I first describe theories of the social self and connect them to my study of how players situate, modify, and reflect on their sense of self during gameplay. Then, I explore frame analysis as a way to understand the blurry social and cultural boundedness of digital games, and how players draw from their lived experience to interpret their gameplay as pertinent to their mental health. Finally, I explore the sociology of narrative as it relates to health and illness and its attention to the importance of storytelling for making sense of the world, and its utility for analyzing players' narrative involvement in digital games.

The Social Self

Blumer (1993) suggests that our sense of self is critical in the process of interacting with and interpreting the world. To understand reality, meanings must be ascribed "in the light of the situation in which" we are placed and "the direction of [our] action" (Blumer 1993:5). We must have a self and see ourselves as an object in the world to act and react toward things and others (Mead 1970). Our sense of self arises from social interaction and is constructed through how others and objects act toward us (Mead 1970). We discern ourselves "not directly, but only indirectly, from the particular standpoints of other individual members of the same social group, or from the generalized standpoint of the social group as a whole to which he belongs" (Mead

1970:383). That is, we create a sense of self from the internalization of interactions with others and objects, as well.

Thus interaction, and in turn, communication, are key components in the construction of the self. The self is socially constructed from how we communicate with others and respond to ourselves in relation to the everyday interplay between ourselves, objects, and others (Mead 1970). The meanings derived from these interactions become internalized and contributes to the creation of a self in relation to the social world in which a person is embedded. For example, the meanings invested in clothing can relate to gendered identity, and thus dressing a certain way might confer, reinforce, or resist broader social norms and expectations. In this way, our selves are always formed socially, with or without directly acting and reacting toward other people; even "an absolutely solitary self" is a social self as we internally interpret the world around us that is made meaningful through symbolic interactions (Mead 1970:384).

Digital games emerge as a space for the formation of the self through interactions with and interpretations of social and cultural symbols in-game and those brought to the game by players. A player's context and perspective frame how they enter a digital game, where they then interact with digital objects that carry their own symbolic weight. Like Mead's (1970) solitary social self, this is not predicated on shared co-presence or face-to-face interaction (Deterding 2009), as a game's content and narrative always already embodies social and cultural values that players infer, interpret, and sometimes modify. In single-player games, players sit, ostensibly alone in their rooms, and yet interact with an array of social and symbolically meaningful objects and situations that they connect to their sense of self and to the world around them, beyond the game.

Frame Analysis

Goffman (1974) defines frames as a mechanism through which we order and interpret events, situations, and activities, and that these frames are constructed in interactions with others. As we approach a situation or object, we draw on multiple frames simultaneously that together produce the situation or object as meaningful, as something we can understand, interpret, and act towards. Frames become a way to form an understanding of what is happening in a situation as we can draw on similar and different social, cultural, and personal frames for comparison (Crawford 2009). A digital game is its own frame, one that "organizes the gaming encounter into a nested structure" where players enter games and understand that they are gaming (Deterding 2009:2). The subsequent ways in which players make sense of and familiarize themselves with gameplay and game content are shaped and interpreted by the overlap and intersections of other broader social and cultural frames (Crawford 2009). That is, a digital game is "constructed from the building blocks of the social and natural world in which it is located" (Crawford 2009:13).

Players enter games, understand them as distinct frames, but also interpret them by drawing on interconnected sociocultural frames. As they interact within these spaces and interpret the game's content, rules, and structure as relating to and representational of broader frames, players make sense of and internalize the meanings of their gameplay as they come to feel themselves interacting with their own sense of self. This is in part because games increasingly tell rich and often complex narratives that are themselves framed by and imbued with sociocultural meanings. Next, I examine the process of storytelling through a sociological lens to understand the relevance of narrative as one such frame that constructs reality and shapes encounters with health and illness and in digital games.

Sociology of Storytelling

Storytelling is a key tool to frame and understand much of everyday reality and the sense of self (Ricoeur 1991). Ricoeur (1991:73) suggests that our lives are "rendered more intelligible when they are applied to narrative models." That is, not only do we interpret our lives and sense of self using stories, but these stories come to hold additional influence as they draw on socioculturally established frameworks for storytelling. We might, for example, understand graduate school as a hero's journey to push through to successful completion.

Storytelling shapes how we encounter health and illness; we come to make sense of, for example, disease, debility, or wellbeing through the constructing of narratives that evoke broader social and cultural framings of what it means to be healthy or sick (Bury 1982). The interactions between lived experience and the sociocultural construction of health narratives reveal how health, illness, and stories connect with our sense of self as we internalize expectations and perceptions of our bodies and health dependent on larger narrative constructions of wellbeing (Charmaz 1983; Bury 2001). Narratives can function to rebuild a sense of self through therapeutic emplotment, that is, the creation of stories to make sense of and motivate the healing journey (Mattingly 1994). When encountering illness, the subsequent "biographical disruption" threatens "the relations between body, mind and everyday life" (Bury 2001:264). One's sense of self can be so greatly intertwined with conceptions of what it means to be healthy that illness can destroy the sense of self as individuals "experience diminished control over their lives and their future" (Charmaz 1983:169). As illness can take away a person's ability to enact dominant cultural and social expectations and values, like individuality, it can lead to a loss of self and identity as illness limits the ability to fulfill highly valued ideals.

Digital games have benefited from the largest commercial and creative success in digital narratives (Murray 1997/2017). As embedded in specific sociocultural milieux, digital game narratives like others stem from specific ways in which stories are more broadly structured. They also act as a medium through which to convey particular values, beliefs, and messages that impart on and influence the player throughout their gameplay. Games that tell stories about mental health do so from certain vantage points that can reinforce or resist broader mental health framings and values. While narratives influence the gameplay experience, players also actively participate in the construction of game stories, bringing their "own cognitive, cultural, and psychological templates to every story" (Murray 1997/2017:46). That is, players invoke their own sociocultural perspectives in their gaming encounter, shaping and interpreting these narratives through their own lenses.

Taken together, digital games are not inherently and wholly meaningful in and of themselves, but are socioculturally influenced by those who make them, consume them, and the broader milieux in which they arise. Science and technology studies scholars (Winner 1980; Latour 1992; Braun 2014) and posthumanists (Braidotti 2013; Bryant 2007) have long asserted the social dimensions of technologies, that they are extensions of sociocultural values shaped by and that modify, contort, and change those that use them. In this dissertation, I focus on the players, as they encounter games with socially and culturally specific narratives, characters, and gameplay, and imbue them with personal contexts and histories. In doing so, I suggest that players construct for themselves a unique space to experiment with, reflect on, and literally play with understandings of and relationships to their own mental health and illness. In this way, digital games are inextricably linked with everyday life (Malaby 2007; Consalvo 2009; Calleja 2012). To be sure, they are separately bounded and distinct spaces, but ones that embed and are

embedded within the social, cultural, and political contexts that players bring to them (Malaby 2007). Thus, when players pick up and enter a digital game, they immerse themselves in and interact with new and wholly different worlds that at the same time carry, communicate, and intersect with many aspects of daily lived experience. Next, I examine more closely these interactive and immersive forms of engagement.

Interactivity

Digital games enable players to tinker with, influence, and express themselves through their interactions and reactions. Digital games are “possibility spaces” which “refers to the myriad configurations the player might construct to see the ways the processes inscribed in the system work” (Bogost 2007:42). Like other computing technologies, digital games contain processes that allow players a range of possible actions, termed affordances, that define and constrain player engagement (Norman 1999; Vyas, Chisalita, and van der Veer 2006). Players can choose particular actions from the affordances provided, and can then expect a response to those actions; in this way, digital games function as input and output devices. For example, games might allow players to fast travel across the map, effectively teleporting between locations to get right to the next quest or objective, or provide players the option to travel on foot which can create opportunities for a sense of exploration and dynamic events. These development decisions create distinct interactive possibilities where a player’s engagement with and interpretations of these affordances shape their subjective gameplay and become a means to express themselves in these gameworlds (Bogost 2007).

Thus, interactive affordances can create a sense of agency, the power to take meaningful action to manipulate and modify digital games (Stang 2019). Player actions alter the gameworlds around them, whether through something as simple as finding a key to unlock a new area or

deciding to destroy an entire town, an action that might influence how characters perceive and react to the player impacting the remainder of their gameplay. This feeling of interactive agency affords players additional opportunities to create meanings from a game, this time at the mechanical level, as these important in-game decisions lead to changes in the game's storyline. Players' cumulative reflections on and interpretations of the consequences of their actions throughout their gameplay then shape the messages and meanings they glean from the game's narrative landscapes.

Coles and Gillies (2021) suggest that by situating interaction and narrative alongside players' emotions and subjectivities, digital games give players what they call interpretive fictional agency. This form of agency is about "giving players the tools to *conceptually* explore the [plot] as predetermined by the developers (usually in a single-player experience) rather than mechanically explore a set of systems" (Coles and Gillies 2021:200, emphasis in original). That is, instead of players' perception of gameplay as engaging with a set of rules and structures, they come to feel a sense of ownership over the fictional world and the direction of the plot. Coles and Gillies' (2021) refined exploration of agency centers the players' subjectivity and interpretative frameworks in their interactions with the game's story and the role that they play in it, rather than merely experiencing the narrative passively for what it is. Players' sense of agency and interactivity bring them closer to the worlds and narratives that they play through and adds to other immersive opportunities to shape and reflect on their mental health.

Immersion

As players imbue game environments with their own contexts and perspectives, they create and immerse themselves in a space to explore, piece together, and sit with aspects of their mental health. Digital games afford players the opportunity to be transported into new and unfamiliar

worlds with near limitless realistic or fantastical narrative and artistic potential (Murray 1997/2017). The sense of immersion allows players to explore and inhabit realized living and breathing environments (Calleja 2011). Through navigating a vivid and sensory environment rich in audiovisual fidelity and tactile feedback, players come to feel present, or a sense of 'being there' inside of games and gameworlds (Tamborini and Skalski 2006; Weibel and Wissmath 2011). As players spend more time with digital games, their awareness of a game's technological mediation fades and they feel as if they themselves are *in* these worlds. The combination of presence and interaction produce in players a sense that game narratives are about them, where their "actions genuinely make things about the player true in the fiction of the video game" (Robson and Meskin 2016:167). Through presence, gameplay comes to feel real for the players who engage in them, creating in games a space that is transformed by the interactive meanings produced from the social alchemy of their lived experience, their gameplay, the game's fictional details, and its narratives.

To some degree, all fictional media is interactive and immersive. People turn pages as they read a book and press buttons on their television remote to find the stories that they want to consume. Books are 'page turners' as readers get lost in them. Going to the theater transports viewers to the worlds of cinema or stage acting. Digital games, however, add additional layers of interactivity and immersivity. Games ask of players to nearly always be interacting with their worlds and driving the narrative forward, where "the kind of interaction involved is *required for generating the playing itself"* (Robson and Meskin 2016:172, emphasis in original). In the context of mental health, as players come to feel themselves in these worlds and that the stories being told are about them, a process of social alchemy takes place where players combine gameplay with interpretations and perspectives that draw from their mental health experiences

and broader sociocultural framings. Games then afford players the opportunity to literally *play* with their mental health and is the result of a combination between their lived experience and game content that transforms their gameplay into a space to interact with versions of themselves and their mental health.

Research Methods

In this dissertation, I draw on the qualitative methodology of constructivist grounded theory to guide data collection and analysis (Charmaz 2014). Grounded theory is a systematic yet flexible approach to investigating and generating theoretical explanations for social phenomena. Grounded theory "invokes iterative strategies of going back and forth between data and analysis" that guides and influences each step of the research process (Charmaz 2014:1). Thus, I designed broad initial research questions and aims, allowing me to remain open and follow exploratory directions as my data and themes evolved throughout data collection.

Constructivist grounded theory approaches research as a process co-constructed between researcher and participants. The researcher is I an active participant in the research process where they conceive, think about, and direct empirical attention. As researchers, our situatedness, contexts, and perspectives inform the approach and theories that are constructed from our research. Constructivist grounded theory calls on researchers to not falsely assume an objective standpoint, but rather to reflect on our own interests and biases that we bring into the research endeavor and remain cognizant of those while thinking through the data and emergent themes.

In particular, I come to this project aware of how my own experiences with and perspectives on mental health and games influence my motives surrounding this research. As I mentioned at the start of this chapter, playing *Celeste* helped tremendously to lessen the internal stigma I felt and reframe my perspectives of my OCD. Yet I constantly felt that I needed to keep

my enjoyment of games a secret, given how often I saw games devalued by friends and popular culture as being frivolous and isolating. This motivated the broader questions and aims of this dissertation, and I am aware then that my desire to demonstrate the value of digital games permeates this work.

Constructivist grounded theory has helped me remain reflexive and intentional throughout this work. I designed interview guides broadly, allowing participants to discuss any experiences and topics about digital games and mental health without a focus on their 'positive' or 'negative' effects. I also reflected on the ways in which I could bring some of my own lived experiences into each interview to help build rapport, while remaining cautious to not let that influence what participants wanted to discuss. Many participants assumed that as a researcher I approached this topic without any shared fondness for or history with games, so I would often briefly describe my gaming history or connections to particular games as a means to connect with participants. I would also provide participants the opportunity to ask me questions, and many had to do with how I came to this topic and thus allowed me to share some of my encounters with games. While I am cognizant this may have shaped participant perceptions of me and the overall research topic, I remained intentional throughout this work and did not assume participants shared in my experience or that similar experiences with mental health diagnoses or even similar games were 'shared' by participants.

Participant Recruitment and Data Collection

In this dissertation, I integrate two qualitative methods, in-depth semi-structured interviews and close playing, into my analysis. I also piloted a third qualitative method of docent gaming interviews.

Table 1.1. Participant demographics

Demographics	N=49 (%)

Gender	
Non-binary/Third gender Female Male Prefer to self-describe (He/they & Agender)	3 (6%) 15 (31%) 29 (59%) 2 (4%)
Race	
Asian or Asian American Black or African American Hispanic or Latine Multiracial Other White	2 (4%) 2 (4%) 5 (10%) 4 (8%) 6 (12%) 30 (61%)
Sexuality	
Gay or Lesbian Bisexual Other Straight or heterosexual No response	2 (4%) 11 (22%) 9 (18%) 25 (51%) 2 (4%)
Age	
18-24 25-44 45-64	28 (57%) 20 (41%) 1 (2%)

In-depth interviews

This study includes 49 in-depth interviews with people 18 years or older who play digital games and identified as having a mental illness or as someone who struggles with mental health.[3] Just over half (62%) of the racial, gender, sexuality, and age representation in my sample are white, straight young adult men (see Table 1.1); this reflects the common conception of individuals who play digital games. I anticipated difficulties recruiting a large enough sample because of the stigma surrounding mental illness, and thus purposefully kept my eligibility

[3]At the outset of this study, I planned on recruiting and speaking with developers and staff who work on digital games about mental health. I sought to understand the creation process, and explore questions related to how these games are designed and the mental health and broader lived experiences of those that design them. However, this proved a challenging experience. Due to the relative protective nature of game development, coupled with the harassment and attention that studios can garner from their fans, it is difficult to find relevant contact information and make entrée into those spaces. After identifying studios of interest, I first attempted to contact them through the general or publicity focused email addresses that were often the only available means of contact. I also attempted to direct message different staff members via social media. I heard back from one studio who declined the request, and otherwise no other studio or staff responded to my requests. I therefore suspended these efforts and focused on recruiting and interviewing player participants.

criteria very broad, and included anyone who had lived experience with mental health and gaming. At the same time, 19 participants (39% of my sample) identified as a person of color, 21 participants (43% of my sample) identified as female or non-binary, and 13 participants (27% of my sample) identified as non-heterosexual, and thus I was able to capture a range of experiences and perspectives.

Further, the COVID-19 pandemic led to remote and virtual recruitment and data collection. However, this also gave me the opportunity to speak with participants and gather perspectives on mental health and gaming across a range of geographies: In addition to participants in the United States, I also spoke with people in Europe, South America, and South Asia. This allowed me to both broaden my sample and capture shared experiences of certain aspects of mental health and games, notably that many encounter mental health stigma, difficulties accessing mental healthcare, and identify similar games as relating to their mental health.

Participants were recruited through a combination of my social networks and various online gaming communities on Reddit and Discord. As I came to this project with my own perspective on games about mental health, I started with communities of those games. I contacted moderators for approval on r/hellblade,[4] r/celestegame, and r/gris, before posting a study recruitment flyer[5] to these spaces. After initial recruitment efforts, I expanded my search by identifying other games, such as *Firewatch* and *Night in the Woods*. Again, with moderator approval, I posted my research flyer on these Reddit community pages and Discord chats.

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[4] In an interesting recruitment moment, I posted my flyer and message to the *Hellblade* Discord community, and was immediately met with accusations of my being a bot. I spent a not insignificant amount of time trying to convince the community that I was indeed a human!

[5] My recruitment flyer briefly described the study, eligibility criteria, incentive, and a short list of example digital games about mental health. This list was meant to illustrate the kinds of games that I had identified, but participants were encouraged to bring any games that resonated with them, and many discussed ones not on this list.

Prior to each interview, participants were sent an informed consent form, that I reviewed at the start of each session, ensuring that they understood the key elements and provided participants with the opportunity to ask clarifying questions before agreeing to participate. Following each interview, participants were asked to complete a short demographics survey sent via Qualtrics. I chose to collect this information after the interviews, feeling it was important to first build rapport with participants before asking for further personal information.

Interviews were designed to explore three categories: gaming life history, mental health, and the intersections between digital games and mental health. Interviews began with an account of how participants first started gaming and why digital games were important for them and their lives. Then, in the mental health section, I asked participants to describe their overall mental health experiences, any formal diagnostic journeys, and their encounters and interaction with care. Finally, I had participants describe the role that digital games have played for their mental health. When scheduling each interview, participants were asked to come with one or two games about mental health that they had interacted with and would want to discuss. Then, in this final section of the interview, I asked participants to describe these games, where and how they identified mental health content, and the ways in which the game connected or related to their own mental health and understandings (see Appendix A for the full interview guide). Interviews ranged from 60-90 minutes and participants were given a $25 incentive to thank them for their time.

This study was approved by the UCSF Human Research Protection Program's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Any names used to refer to participants in the text are pseudonyms. Participants were given the option to select their own pseudonyms, and if they did

not have a preference, I would choose one for them often drawing and adapting from their favorite digital games.

Close Playing

I conducted a content analysis of five digital games that I identified as containing mental health content and that participants mentioned in interviews: *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, *Celeste*, *Gris*, *Night in the Woods*, and *Neverending Nightmares*. For each of these games, I utilized the method of close playing (Chang 2010). Close playing extends close reading by considering the unique forms of engagement that digital games afford and asks researchers to pay "attention to more than just the content of the game…more than just the mechanics, and more than the graphics. Rather it is an attention to how all of these things are in articulation or antagonism" (Chang 2010:no page). Close playing requires interrogation of how all the various components of a game, such as the gameplay, mechanics, and story, interact and produce particular reflections for the researcher.

Each gameplay session lasted between one and two hours. The number of sessions for each game differed depending on length and the reflections that surfaced throughout. *Hellblade*, for example, as one of the longer games took five sessions to complete, compared to *Neverending Nightmares* which took two sessions. While playing, I would keep detailed notes, pausing the game throughout to document the actual gameplay, how I felt about the game, and my reactions to different moments. At the end of each session, I would translate my notes into a richer analytic memo, expanding on the thoughts and reactions surrounding my gameplay.

Close playing helped inform my interviews with participants, as I was better positioned during my conversations to probe and expand on participant experiences with different games as they arose. Second, close playing helped me better weave together participant sentiments and my

analytical thinking around game content. For example, when investigating grief and loss in Chapter 4, close playing helped me intersect my own interpretation of *Gris'* symbolic representation of bereavement with participant experiences and allowed for a richer illustration of the game and of their experiences. Finally, close playing of particular games and game moments were triggered by what participants said, where I went back to those moments and used the method to better understand their reflections. For example, parts of my playthrough of *Hellblade* was shaped by my thinking around analyzing participants' experiences of virtual embodiment. As participants described becoming Senua through feeling the weight of her actions and the sound design of *Hellblade's* world, I returned to the game to pay closer attention to the audio, controller vibrations, and haptics as Senua fell from ledges and swung her sword, and memoed about my interpretation of and reactions to these gameplay moments. I could better emplace myself in both Senua and participants' experiences to flesh out my own understanding and analysis of what they were telling me about during our interviews thus bringing me closer to the data in the process.

Experimental Method: Docent Gaming Interviews

Finally, I conducted follow-up interviews with a small subset of participants. These interviews, which I called docent gaming interviews, were adapted and modified from Chang's (2017) docent method. Chang (2017:611, emphasis in original) developed the docent method to explore linkages between place and health where "each research participant acts as a docent who guides researcher [sic] on [a] walking interview *to* and *around* specific sites of interest in their lives that are significant and shape the phenomena of interest." Briefly, the docent method involves a three step process where the researcher and participant first meet to set the stage and plan, hold the guided docent walking interview second, and then finally engage in a wind-down

interview to reflect on the experience (Chang 2017). The docent method links place-based research with grounded theory, moving with participants through their lived experiences with various places to explore the nuances of their everyday life while also exposing the deep relationships that we form with our environments and the role those relationships play in our health.

While the docent method was originally devised to walk alongside participants through physical places, I adapted it to accompany my participants in their navigation of gameworlds and environments. I followed up with half of my participants to invite them to a docent gaming interview, and five agreed to participate. These participants were asked to come to the session with a digital game—either one we discussed during the initial interview or a different one—that they could play on their computer or on a console and stream the gameplay for me to observe. Participants could choose which section of the game to guide me through; some participants opted to load a particular level (or levels) while others chose to start at the beginning of the game.

Docent gaming interviews began with a brief semi-structured interview before participants started their gameplay. Serving as the warm-up to the gaming observation session, itself, participants here were asked why they selected the game for these interviews, how it resonated with their mental health, and specific characters, moments, or mechanics that were important to them in these games. Then, the docent gaming observations were structured around, 'thinking aloud,' an approach typically found in usability testing (Nielsen 2012). Using this approach, participants were encouraged to talk throughout their gameplay and describe the actions that they were taking, why they were taking those actions, and any thoughts or feelings that arose connecting their gameplay to their mental health. Further, throughout my observations

I would ask participants to explain different moments and choices. Finally, wind-down interviews were conducted at the end of the session and included a brief discussion to allow participants to describe and reflect on the overall interview and how they felt about sharing and talking about their mental health through their gameplay.

After completing five docent gaming interviews, I decided to not pursue further recruitment due to technical issues with the screen sharing. The games' frame rates were low, causing the gameplay to stutter and appear fragmented making it difficult for me to view and analyze the gameplay footage as participants played them. The docent gaming interviews that I did conduct revealed interesting insights, however. For example, I accompanied one participant, Gamer, as he began with creating a character in *Dark Souls* to role play as what he defined as a 'helper' character. After getting through the introductory section, he waited outside of boss fight arenas for other players to summon him so that he could fight alongside and assist them. Gamer described how the game, and its gameplay loop of repeatedly trying and failing, resonated with his depression, and as he imagined others who have played this game also struggling through its difficulty he felt less alone and validated his mental health.

In another example, Alicia played through different chapters in *Hellblade* and narrated their distinct connections to her mental health. In one of the later chapters, I observed as Alicia traversed the aptly named Sea of Corpses, a nightmarish landscape that sees Senua battling through hordes of enemies. As Alicia struggled to dodge and parry oncoming attacks, she described interpreting this level as symbolizing Senua at her lowest point and yet also her persistence to push forward. As Alicia fought wave after wave of enemies, she noted seeing player complaints online about it feeling long and tedious, and remarked that this scene

resonated with her for this very reason because her struggles with mental illness felt to her like long and tedious battles that are extremely difficult to overcome.

The preliminary Insights gathered from this pilot docent gaming interview method were intriguing and motivating. I therefore hope to continue to develop this method, resolve the technical issues with screen sharing and recording, pilot conducting these interviews in-person, and potentially employ it in future studies.

Data Analysis

Analysis also followed constructivist grounded theory. I began with line-by-line coding, primarily using words that reflect action (e.g., "relating to a character," "interpreting narrative about grief," "challenging mental health stigma"). Initial coding was mostly open-ended, while also shaped by my own understanding of gaming and findings in the literature on digital game engagement (e.g., "escapism," "strategy and skill," "power fantasy"). Next, I engaged in focused coding, merging like codes and shaping the codebook around those initial codes that were most salient in organizing data about gameplay and mental health. I also coded data by specific digital games, allowing me to more easily export and code by different games as they intersected with participant experiences. This produced a codebook of approximately 55 codes and 80 games. Using the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA,[6] I coded each transcript using this codebook.

I engaged in in-depth analytic memoing following each interview to further think through the relationships between digital games and mental health surfaced by participants. I also routinely memoed throughout data analysis as I pulled and reviewed excerpts for specific

[6] MAXQDA was chosen specifically for its ability to align interview transcripts with video footage so that with the docent gaming interviews, I could better code participant reflections and conversations alongside noting those connections with their gameplay.

individual and intersecting codes. To develop the findings reported in the empirical chapters ahead, I drew on data coded with the following: "encountering grief," "escaping through games," "inhabiting game characters," "community and validation," "normalization of mental health," "gaining new perspectives," "learning and experimenting," "relating to stress and anxiety," "feeling(s) while gaming," "mental health experiences," "mental health in rules and systems."

A Note on Positionality

As Haraway (1988:590) notes, researchers design questions and approach their studies and analysis from their own perspectives—a "view from somewhere"—and I am no exception. My identity and positionality played a large role in how and why I approached this research and built connections with my participants.

I have been playing digital games for nearly all my life, and even before I could play them myself, I watched my brother play. I also have worked professionally as a researcher in the digital games industry. And as I noted at the outset of this chapter, I too have struggled with mental health. My knowledge and lived experiences with both gaming and mental illness have informed my opinions and concerns about the dominant discourse surrounding the relationship of games to mental health. One could argue that this may skew my approach to this research, however I view it as a strength. My experiential knowledge surrounding digital games and mental health helped me approach interviews compassionately and non-judgmentally. I believe that this helped participants be comfortable and open with me about their experiences. For example, knowing that mental health is a difficult topic for many, I always prefaced my questions with statements assuring them that they only needed to share what they were comfortable with during our conversations. I constantly sought to intentionally and explicitly normalize discussions of mental health in the interviews to counter the pervasive stigma

surrounding mental illness. I value that all my participants were open and forthright about their mental health. This included participants who identified as cisgender white men, who comprised 62% of my total sample and who arguably are subject to a particular form of mental health stigma that is often rooted in gendered, heteronormative, and ableist ideologies. My participants themselves recounted how dominant narratives that valorize masculinity, strength, and health made it more difficult for them to speak about and seek help; their willingness to be vulnerable with me and share their experiences with mental illness thus actively countered these marginalizing cultural discourses.

Chapter Overview

In this dissertation, I am concerned with how players bring and interact with their own lived experiences in digital games, and how these encounters affect their everyday life with mental health outside of these games. I am particularly interested in single-player games as players ostensibly encounter these games alone; such games therefore become an interesting site of inquiry to investigate how immersion into fictional interactive technologies allows for the active creation of stories that shape and influence health and sense of self. I explore different dimensions of this focus through three empirical chapters.

Chapter 2 begins with an application of a theory of virtual embodiment to analyze participants' sense of becoming digital game characters, and what virtual embodiment means for their understandings of and relationships to their mental health. I argue that games offer multiple kinds of virtual embodiment. I first illustrate participants' intentional escapism into game characters, game structures, and gameplay to seek out particular feelings and different ways of being. Then, I argue that participants encountered what I call *distanced* virtual embodiment. This arises through the felt sense of becoming digital actors whose similar biographies allow

participants to try on and experiment with different perspectives, while remaining aware that these biographies were distinct, and were not their own. This distanced embodiment afforded participants an important measure and sense of safety, that in turn facilitated their reflections about their mental health and enabled them to confront aspects of their own mental health through these characters.

In Chapter 3,[7] I draw from social network theories to describe a different kind of relationship that players form with the characters that they play as. I explore how players form bonds and connections with these characters not only through identifying with the characters' biographies and narratives, but also through interactions with the characters and witnessing how they respond to the environments and challenges around them. I argue that participants conceptualize characters as experientially similar others and receive a kind of social support through these relationships. First, I found that participants encountered characters with similar mental health experiences and felt validated and less alone their own lived mental health. Second, I describe instances where participants witnessed how characters navigated stressors and the coping strategies they used, and in turn, participants copied or adapted these strategies for themselves. Finally, focusing on the final acts of digital games, I illustrate how participants crafted alternative visions for their own futures out of how game characters' stories conclude. I use these findings to extend the concept of experientially similar others and propose that players conceptualize game characters as what I call *experientially simulated others*. This concept situates digital game characters as experientially similar, but adds that the bonds that participants form with them extends beyond identification with others' biographies to how participants

[7] This chapter is written as a standalone manuscript that is currently under review.

viscerally feel these connections through the simulated experiences produced by digital games' participatory and tactile affordances.

In Chapter 4, I explore a final facet of the social alchemy between players and digital game environments, this time focused on experiences of grief. I examine how interactions with grief in gameworlds suffused and shaped participants' engagement with games, and in turn, the metaphors and symbols within gameworlds that players interpreted as related to loss influenced how they understood and made sense of their own loss and grief. I argue that the sense of 'worldness' that arises out of gameplay provides players with space and time to interact with and interpret games in ways that reflected their own loss, situating grief as an experience that is often socially and culturally repressed, silenced, and complicated. I describe two key aspects of games that participants noted facilitated their engagements with grieving and loss: First, I describe the flexible and somewhat open-ended narratives and gameworlds that allowed participants to directly graft their own grief onto both the overall playthrough and the seemingly small but equally impactful gameplay moments. Then, I explore how these games provide an emotional space for participants where they can not only feel their sadness but infer validity for these feelings from the games.

I conclude the dissertation by summarizing the findings, discussing theoretical contributions, practical implications, and plans for future work.

CHAPTER 2: "TO PUT IT ON SOMEONE WHO ISN'T YOU, BUT IS YOU:" HOW INTENTIONAL AND DISTANCED VIRTUAL EMBODIMENT AFFECTS RELATIONSHIPS TO MENTAL HEALTH

Before Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice *begins, I'm met with a dark screen and some text.* "WARNING," *it reads,* "This game contains representations of psychosis. People with experience of psychosis as well as professionals in psychiatry have assisted in these depictions." *This message provides a link to a website created by the game's creators,* Ninja Theory*, to learn more about psychosis and mental health. I press A on my Xbox controller to select* "New Game" *and wait as the game loads. As the blackness fades, the screen lights up and the camera is moving slowly over a body of water approaching a figure in the distance. The camera gets closer, and I notice I am approaching a lone woman paddling atop a large, felled tree seemingly carved out to serve as a canoe of sorts. I recognize this woman as Senua, the game's titular protagonist.*

A voice-over narrator asks, "Hello, who are you?" *The narrator goes on to welcome me,* "You are safe with me. I'll be right here, nice and close so I can speak without alerting the others." *She continues,* "Let me tell you about Senua. Her story has already come to an end but now, begins anew." *As the camera pans around Senua, I notice what appears to be a severed head in a burlap pouch attached to Senua's hip. The pouch moves while new voices speak,* "What is that? The head is breathing. She's getting close." *The scene continues as I watch Senua paddle off from the main body of water into what appears to be a small river. This moment serves as the opening credits, and names and titles of those who contributed to the game's creation scroll across the screen. I am struck that the first individuals listed have the titles* "Mental Health Advisor" *and* "History Advisor." *This signals to me the importance this game places on its focus on psychosis and historical accuracy.*

Eventually, Senua reaches shore, sliding the large tree she had been paddling onto the sandy beach. The narrator's voice says, "Maybe you too have a part to play in this story," *while I am given control of the game. I move Senua across the beach and into the forests beyond. I then hear other voices in the surroundings, speaking to each other, and begin to discern that these might be internal voices that Senua hears, and that now, as a player in this world, I too also hear.*

As I continue to play, I see what Senua sees and am interacting with her world. With headphones on, I too hear the voices surrounding her, questioning her, and my every move and action. I feel the vibration in the controller as Senua drops from a tall ledge, and again as Senua slashes her sword at enemies and kicks them away. With Senua, I see symbols in the world and use them to solve puzzles; I see and must fight against Viking enemies nearly twice Senua's size. I see Senua move, jump, and fight, but also, I am moving, jumping, and fighting. Through the game's introduction to me as part of Senua's story and the feedback of my actions as I control her character, Senua embodies my authorship of the story, and I embody hers.

Introduction

In this chapter, I explore participants' embodiment of digital characters and the role this plays in their relationships with and emotional experiences connected to their mental health and

illness. As players step into these digital games, they experience what I argue is a form of embodiment. Like my interactions with *Hellblade*, participants both direct and come to embody the actions of characters in these games, solidifying the felt sense that players themselves effectively *become* these characters. The participants whom I interviewed described directly inhabiting these characters and experiencing their worlds, and these episodes of being transported into other bodies and biographies had important effects on their mental health and sense of self. Specifically, the felt sense of embodiment allowed participants to escape into their characters' journeys in search of specific feelings. And, through these characters, participants could explore and try on similar yet distinct mental health narratives. These embodied interactions with games and characters helped participants develop self-compassion and understanding of themselves.

Exploring participants' felt sense of becoming game characters first requires an understanding of how characters are construed as something, and someone, to embody. Game scholars offer the concept of 'virtual embodiment' to capture what it means to control a character in digital space (Alton 2017; Bayliss 2007; Crick 2011; Taylor 2002). This arises as players take control of digital bodies in the form of avatars and characters which serve as the locus of player navigation and exploration (Taylor 2002). In this chapter, I use the concept of virtual embodiment as a fruitful lens to explore how participants connected to characters, and articulate with greater specificity players' experiences inhabiting characters. I argue that through single-player games, participants find a ready-made and convenient means to virtually embody other biographies; characters with pre-written narratives and backstories lower the hurdle through which to feel a sense of becoming these characters. This better allows participants to evoke their mental health experiences through their gameplay in combination with the particular narratives

and emotions already existing in these worlds and characters. This emerged in two distinct ways. First, I argue that through virtual embodiment, participants could escape into these worlds. In contrast to debates that center escapism and dichotomize it as either contributing to harm or to a helpful reprieve from everyday stress, my analysis suggests that participants intentionally seek games to escape *into* particular feelings and experiences that relate to their mental health. Second, I find that this embodiment involves both a sense of becoming *and* of being at a distance, and as distinct, from these characters; participants saw their biographies as similar to yet not their own. This dual character then had two effects: on the one hand, similar biographies allowed participants to try on and experiment with different feelings and perspectives, and on the other hand, players were acutely aware these biographies were not their own, and so could simultaneously interact with and reflect on a version of their own mental health narratives through these characters in a easier and less-confrontational arena. This form of what I call *distanced* virtual embodiment helped participants build self-understanding and compassion for their own journeys.

Below, I describe the characteristics of digital games that scholars argue contribute to a sense of virtual embodiment, namely immersion, interaction, and characters' corporeality. Then, my findings explore two distinct encounters with virtual embodiment as related to participant mental health. First, participants inhabited digital game characters as a form of escapism. Rather than solely escaping from daily stress, I argue here that participants sought to embody specific game characters and gameplay mechanics to intentionally counter and feel differently connected to their mental illness and mental health struggles. Then, I examine distanced virtual embodiment and the ways in which this experience enabled participants to more safely engage with their

mental health by interacting with versions of themselves separately through digital game characters.

Virtual Embodiment

Virtual embodiment provides players with a means to feel "rooted in the virtual environment" where "there is a material thing (albeit a digital one) that finds itself located in a space and moves through it, engaging in some way with objects and with others it encounters" (Taylor 2002:44). Three aspects of games are particularly integral to the accomplishment of virtual embodiment: immersion, interactivity, and digital bodies. In Chapter 1 of this dissertation, I described existing perspectives on immersion and interaction and, below, summarize them briefly to bring them into conversation with the findings I explore in this chapter. Then, I explore the literature that theorizes virtual embodiment as made possible through the ways in which characters themselves come to feel alive through their narrative presentation and digital bodies; they are programmed with degrees of corporeality that better allow players to feel emplaced in characters and ultimately in these gameworlds.

First, immersion refers to a sense of 'being there' in digital games, and how that feeling arises from entering, exploring, and learning what is possible in these unfamiliar environments (Murray 1997/2017). Importantly, immersion leads to a felt sense of presence, or the loss of awareness of the mediating technology that shapes players' subjectivities in digital games (Tamborini and Skalski 2006). Virtual embodiment scholars suggest that because players experience digital games through characters, they also come to feel a co-presence with the characters themselves. That is, players inhabit characters phenomenologically and feel as if they themselves are also experiencing the content of the game, rather than solely perceiving their interactions as mediated through the characters (Alton 2017; Bayliss 2007; Crick 2011).

Second, players feel as if they become digital game characters because they interact as them during gameplay. It is through characters that players learn the possible actions within a game's world (Bogost 2007; Tamborini and Bowman 2009). Interaction is then both a distinct feature of digital games media and one of the prominent elements that can contribute to the sense of virtual embodiment. Players feel embodied in characters as they act as them, and the game in turn reacts to those actions (Alton 2017). This feedback loop creates a sense of meaningful interaction and emplacement, that player actions impact their and their character's place in the game. While this is happening in-game, the player also physically feels and cognitively apprehends the effects of their actions: they press buttons, feel the haptic responses in their controllers' vibrations, and engage in problem-solving and decision-making that translates into certain character actions and reactions to the gameworld around them.

At the same time, players also contend with what the characters afford them. Characters are programmed with a "suite of characteristics, functions, and narrative backgrounds" that define and constrain the available interactions afforded to the player (Bayliss 2007:5). What might seem a constant tension between player and game as the player tries different actions to discover whether they may or may not be possible, is in fact experienced as a progressive sense of embodiment. Players learn how to act in accordance with the character's range of possible actions, and then eventually come to think mostly or only in those terms. Further, those actions align with the fictional worlds in which they take place, serving to enhance the felt sense of presence and believability of those worlds to the player (Murray 1997/2017). That is, as players continue to interact and become familiar with the game's controls, possibilities, and affordances, their awareness of their own physical and cognitive actions fade. Through the combination of immersion and interactivity, players "form an embodied relationship with the avatar in the

gameworld through their habitual mastery of the control device in the actual world" (Crick 2011:267). Players feel as if they themselves are the ones interacting in the world, and the world is in turn reacting to the players.

Finally, players are more readily able to embody characters because characters come to feel alive and corporeal. This is accomplished through characters' bodily and narrative presentations as they increasingly convey complex human-like stories and emotions, and players are made aware of character bodies in some form. With technical and graphical advancements such as voice acting and motion capture, characters are animated and brought to life by human actors who serve to "bring actual, human bodies into a direct relationship to the aesthetics of video game bodies," and these more human-like aesthetics of characters enhance their corporeality (Anderson 2016:19). Digital game characters are also made to feel corporeal because they can walk, run, jump, experience pain, and die (Anderson 2016). Further, whether through third or first-person perspective, players are made aware that they are inhabiting and controlling another body. With a third-person perspective, players always see their character, as the camera is fixed behind or above them (Anderson 2016). In a first-person game, players see and interact directly through the eyes of the character and yet are reminded that they inhabit these bodies when they see their character's hands while moving, their face and body when looking in a mirror, or fully see their characters act during a cutscene (Crick 2011).

Together, character backstories, their animations and voices stemming from real humans, and their corporeal bodies enable players to feel themselves becoming a distinct and "separately embodied" actor (Bayliss 2007:5). Players are emplaced in and made aware of their characters' bodies, ones that increasingly represent and reflect human-like movement, emotion, and dialogue. As players virtually embody characters, then, they experience a simultaneity: They feel

the boundaries between themselves and the game fade as they embody characters and discern themselves as acting within a game's world and story, while at the same time inhabiting characters that are construed as distinctly embodied, ones with their own narrative and backgrounds that shape the possibilities and subjectivities of players.

In this chapter, I extend previous research that suggests that virtual embodiment allows players to "embody themselves in unfamiliar ways" (Taylor 2002:55) and experiment with their sense of self (Alton 2017; Bessière, Seay, & Kiesler 2007) by exploring specifically how players embed and play with their mental health through the biographies of the characters that they inhabit. I argue that players participate in the construction of new feelings and narratives for themselves as they encounter and integrate their own stories within the journeys and experiences of their characters; this then influenced participants' understandings of their mental health and, sometimes, changed their approaches to it.

Intentional Escapism: Tailoring Gameplay Toward Specific Feelings and Experiences

Participants described and felt a sense of stepping into games and fully becoming the characters that they control and their experiences reflect existing descriptions of virtual embodiment (Alton 2017; Bayliss 2007; Crick 2011; Taylor 2002). Here, I offer a more granular look at how participants experience virtual embodiment in relation to their mental health. Participants felt that games were a place to "get lost in" and "explore a completely different thing." They explicitly drew on the language of escapism in describing their own experiences: Games afforded participants the opportunity to "completely escape from" and "drown out" the world around them and "take me out of my own life for a little while." For my participants, then, many used games to escape from their jobs and everyday life, citing games as a way to relax and "just not worry about what was making me feel bad or stressing me out." At the same time,

however, some participants questioned whether escapism "was the healthiest thing," recognizing that escapism "can be unhealthy if people do it a lot." Participants therefore recapitulated a broader debate between those who contend that using games to escape increases the risk for gaming addiction (Giardina et al. 2023; Hagström and Kaldo 2014; Narayan Subudhi et al. 2020), versus others who assert the value of escapism in mood management and stress relief (Kosa and Uysal 2020; Stenseng, Falch-Madsen, and Hygen 2021).

Yet, my findings suggest that participants found the escapist nature of games to be more than just an emotional and mental reprieve. Participants sought out particular games and gameplay to counter specific stressors and emotional struggles. They described engaging with games in a way that "tailors the escapism to the type of feeling that I'm trying to escape" and playing games to escape into and feel, for example, "fairness and joy." Participants therefore practiced what I call *intentional escapism*, a kind of deliberate and strategic engagement with aspects of games and their designs in relation to their everyday mental health. Much as Calleja (2010) found, my participants shape the kinds of gaming encounters they wish to have to be *both* escapes as well as responses to the weight of their social and cultural realities and mental health; thus, their relationships to games are anything but frivolous. Rather than a binary between games as a space of play completely removed from reality, players' lived experiences "invariably informs, to different degrees depending on circumstance, the experience of the game" (Calleja 2010:342).

In what follows, I first describe player inhabitation of characters as a means to escape into and embody games' structure and design; characteristics of games like pursuing and completing set objectives and a clear ending directly countered the lack of structure and control that participants faced in everyday life with mental illness. Then, I shift toward how players'

sense of virtual embodiment afforded them the opportunity to become digital game characters and to feel differently, while reflecting on the meanings surrounding this sense of inhabitation in the context of their everyday encounters with depression, low self-esteem, lack of control, and feelings of disempowerment. Both embodying game design and structures and the characters that inhabit them were facilitated by the immersion that came with being in a digital space embodying a distinct narrative where players allowed themselves to more fully become these characters.

"I find myself wanting to play games when things in my life feel out of control"

Players' embodiment of game characters provided a means to escape into and embody the structure and definition of game spaces. By engaging in games that are defined by rules, affordances, and objectives, participants could inhabit gameplay that offered a sense of control that was often lacking in everyday life. These periods of feeling in charge and in control curbed their stressors and mental health symptoms and brought participants a sense of calm and reprieve.

Dalton described playing *A Short Hike,* a game in which players control a small, anthropomorphized bird named Claire who visits and stays with her aunt on an island to, according to Dalton, "get away from her … stressors she has in the real world." In the opening moments, *A Short Hike* alludes to Claire's life back home as her aunt tells her, "it will be good to get away from the city and take a break from everything else going on." *A Short Hike* exudes calm and serenity, as players control Claire to hike around an island rich in a pleasant and soft color palette, calm music, and the inability to fail (i.e., players cannot die or 'lose'). Further, there is only one main objective that players pursue at their own pace: to reach the top of the highest mountain on the island. Throughout the island, players can find and collect feathers that

serve as stamina points, allowing Claire to climb for longer. Players only need a handful to reach the peak, but they can spend time exploring any part or the entire island to collect every feather if they so choose.

Dalton was initially drawn to this game because of its theme of escapism: "There's definitely a part of me that likes this idea of escaping to a new place to get away … from your stressful life to go to somewhere else where you can just relax for a bit." Just as Claire sought to escape her daily stresses by going to this island, Dalton also sought to escape into and inhabit games like *A Short Hike* to find reprieve from their struggles and stress. Dalton explained to me that in their career as a veterinary internist, they frequently engage in "emotional conversations with the pets' owners who are stressed out, dealing with life and death," and having to balance "a lot of ambiguity" and "open-endedness" when diagnoses are not always clear, or medicines do not always work. Dalton described how games provided them with a major and much needed counterpoint to their workdays:

> Video games don't have that [ambiguity]. Like, you know when you have beat a game, you know when you have got this next achievement, there are a fixed number of feathers to collect, there's a fixed number of places to go … I think *A Short Hike* is a good example of that. It's a short game, that I knew that I could finish, that I knew I'd reach the end of, and actually be able to tick something off of a list as opposed to my day-to-day life, where I don't often get to do that.

Dalton found themselves turning to games where "there's more control, and there's a sense of completion and achievement" particularly "when things are bad in my life…things in my life feel topsy-turvy and are out of my control." Games like *A Short Hike* provide defined endpoints and checklist-like tasks, such as collecting a certain number of feathers, that offer players struggling with uncertainty a beneficial sense of structure, closure, and accomplishment.

Red similarly sought digital games for an opportunity to immerse himself in a world that he could focus on. Red struggles with bipolar disorder and as an "ex-drug user" he found that "it's

better for me to try to play video games instead of abuse drugs" to manage the symptoms of his condition. For him, games effectively countered some of the specific symptoms he experienced during periods of mania:

> I get fairly paranoid at times. I think people's out to get me and it's easy to just focus on the game instead of what's going on in the outside world. Just focus on my mission through the game. Be like, "Okay, if I can get through this mission," and I just try to get as immersed in it as possible, imagine what it would be like if it wasn't a video game, but I was actually living out whatever's going on in the game.

Red felt fully immersed in these worlds, feeling as if he himself was experiencing what was happening on the other side of the screen. Digital games that provide structured activities, such as a mission with an overarching goal and a defined beginning and end offered Red a kind of immersive focus, allowing him to tune out the world and stress around him, particularly during more intense moments of struggling with symptoms of his mental illness.

Alex too found himself seeking digital games that provided opportunities to "not be me." Throughout middle and high school, Alex developed social anxiety due to classmates who bullied him and made him feel unsafe; a lack of help from his teachers or guidance counselors further exacerbated his sense of vulnerability. Alex felt he could not "talk to anybody about [anything] because obviously it's not going to help me. So, I kept a lot of it to myself for a very long time and it was very internal." The internalized uncertainty Alex felt around who could be trusted and who to befriend led him to "getting depressed" and "feeling burnt out at the people that I had surrounded myself with." Now, in professional settings, Alex continues to suffer from social anxiety: at work, he "didn't want people to be mad" at him and so would have a "very hard time saying no … and set[ting] boundaries," which further compounded the internal stress and anxiety he navigated daily. Alex stated that his anxiety leads to mental burden where he will

> constantly either play possible situations in my head beforehand and decide what I'm going to do. Or think back on a past situation that I wasn't prepared for and be like 'Oh

> that, I really should have handled that better.' I would've acted different if I had more information.

This kind of rumination can be detrimental for anxiety and depressive symptoms (Nolen-Hoeksema 2000).

Alex intentionally escaped to feel differently from his everyday stress through playing *Life is Strange*. This is a game that attempts to mimic aspects of real conversations where players interact with characters, and must choose from a selection of pre-written responses to keep the conversation going. For Alex, someone who is "always worried about what I will say [and] and how it'll affect people," *Life is Strange* offered a "fun" alternative where "you get decisions and you make them in a split second" but "not actually have to deal with [social decision-making] in real life." This game therefore provided Alex with an opportunity to escape into a world and feel the effects of decision-making and playing out situations without judgment or real-world consequence:

> Games … give me that moment to have all of the information that they're giving me and to have an ample amount of time to make that decision … it allows me to remove myself from a situation and analyze something else. And that tends to help with my anxiety.

The implications of intentional escapism for Alex are two-fold. The mechanics and structure of digital games like *Life is Strange* recreate aspects of social interactions that normally cause Alex stress and anxiety but in a stress- and judgement-free environment. Digital games also provide structured access to information that offers Alex reprieve from his near constant rumination; instead, he can play with reflections of these situations in games but with the power to sit and make decisions instead of fixating on the 'what ifs.'

"To be another person and do these different things that I could never do in real life"

In addition to the temporary reprieve provided by the experience of control and structure described above, digital games also afforded participants the opportunity to encounter heroic,

fantastical, and empowering narratives and emotions as they embodied characters with distinct personalities, histories, and perspectives. Participants described entering games to "become somebody else for a little bit" and "just for a few hours…be somewhere else and be someone else." They were motivated not just to escape, but rather to experience becoming these characters in ways that held deep meaning for them and directly impacted their everyday emotional and mental health.

Jordan, for example, reflected on time spent with his cousin playing *The Last of Us*, a single-player game where players control a father, Joel, as he navigates and fights his way through a post-apocalyptic America. In the *Last of Us*, Joel as a character needs to be confident and assertive, and to improvise on the fly, in order for Ellie, the girl accompanying him on this journey, and him to survive. Jordan described "being able to become Joel" who was "this … bearded, 9mm wielding, zombie-killing badass." Jordan reiterated multiple times being "able to become this person" who "wasn't me. That wasn't me at all." Yet, embodying Joel, connecting with him as a character through the actions in the game, allowed Jordan to

> do these different things that I could never do in real life that sort of made me realize I can take aspects of this person. I can be more confident. I can be more assertive. I can be more creative if I allow myself to. And being in the shoes of these characters and these games that I fell so in love with allowed me to realize that.

Jordan's experiences becoming and feeling different characteristics of Joel in *The Last of Us* offered a reframed approach to his daily life; this in-game confidence and assertiveness could allow him to "get in the head space of I'm not a loser. I'm not lonely … [or] a lesser person." While Jordan generated these feelings from his interactions with and as Joel, he speculated that, outside of the game, he may be able to "just sort of exist within myself and create these things for myself, like confidence."

Another participant, Greg, who suffered from severe depression, talked at length about the "immersive" nature of games and the feeling of becoming Commander Shepard in *Mass Effect*. Taking place in the distant future, *Mass Effect* sees players traveling across space to save the galaxy. At the time he played *Mass Effect*, Greg felt "sort of worthless," "everything was bad and everything was negative," and there was "nothing positive going on in my life." However, Greg's embodiment of Commander Shepard provided a sharp, embodied contrast to his own mental health experiences. Playing as Commander Shepard, Greg went from feeling he had "no way out and everything was low," "to then being this character who literally saves the entire galaxy and everybody idolizes and … everyone around him … want to be part of his life." This was in sharp contrast to "when you have severe depression, you don't have any of those thoughts, that people like you or they want to be around you." As Commander Shepard felt celebrated and surrounded by people, so did Greg. As Greg embodied Commander Shepard, he felt transported into the future world of the game and became the alchemist of its outcomes.

Describing this as a form of "escapism," Greg at least temporarily felt "more successful" and "idolized." Interacting with *Mass Effect* and inhabiting Commander Shepard gave Greg the "chance to just be somebody else." Comparing gaming to film, Greg proffered:

> [Games] gave me an insight that I just couldn't get from film. When you're watching a film, the main character isn't you…I don't ever put myself in the shoes of the main character. And that's what games do, fantastically, is they absolutely transport you, your mind and the experiences of the protagonist of the game.

Greg's ability to feel fully inhabited in these characters, to be "transport[ed]" into "the shoes of the main character" offered him a new perspective and experience that directly countered the struggles he faced with his mental health. In the context of his depression, these momentary feelings provided him with "respite from those feelings of … negative thoughts … [and] rumina[tion]." At the same time, games like *Mass Effect* allow him to escape into a character that

makes Greg feel differently and allows him to experience some positivity that felt all too rare in his daily life.

Another participant, Serena, suffered from "cycles of anxious thoughts" and "full blown panic attacks" that led to a formal diagnosis of generalized anxiety disorder in high school. Now many years after college, Serena had developed a therapeutic regimen that included seeing a therapist, taking medications, having a strong support network in her friends, and notably, playing digital games. Serena described gaming, however, as a "double-edge sword" with regards to her anxiety where "on the one hand it gives me a chance to escape and be who I want to be and connect with other people in gaming communities" but on the other hand, multiplayer games can have "really toxic chats [that] can be really stress inducing." As a woman playing in male-dominated online gaming spaces that often made her "feel uncomfortable," Serena unfortunately is subjected to harassment; at different points in her life, these "toxic" interactions made her "shy away from" from digital games. Yet, Serena noted other games that help her relax and "kind of escape from whatever situation is that's making me nervous." She described enjoying and valuing digital games for allowing her to

> choose who I want to be in a gaming environment. So, I can have magical powers or I can be like a [laughs] little sprite that's just running around. Or I can be a big giant warrior. I can be whoever I want and not bound by the physics of this world.

Digital games gave Serena opportunities to intentionally escape into and virtually embody different characters each with their own distinct capacities and feelings, producing for Serena alternative ways of being, away from her anxiety and stress. Serena found it "super empowering and confidence-boosting to know that I don't have to be the person that I am sitting in front of you and I can be whoever I want." This in turn led to significant personal insights:

> It's pretty cool … I think gaming has opened my mind a little more … I've always thought that I had to kind of fit in this little checkbox … But, I can make more choices and I don't have to be in the little checkbox all the time. And I think gaming showed me

> that besides making me more confident as a woman, as a person, I don't have to fit in a checkbox and that's okay.

While remarks from male gamers often made Serena feel ostracized, she also found games provided her with possibilities to virtually embody characters who were powerful, confident, and/or different. In these ways, digital games helped Serena discover she could resist the "checkbox." She could resist the idea that women cannot be gamers. Her escapism into games demonstrated for Serena that she could be different; she could be confident and explore outside the bounds of what society and others expect of her and find who she wants to be.

In sum, my findings here suggest that while games offer a present and immersive environment where everyday life fades, players' lived experiences shape how they discern this immersion (Calleja 2010). The current rhetoric surrounding escapism, whether as beneficial or harmful, problematically emphasizes digital games as wholly separate and disconnected from everyday life. Instead, I find that participants' mental health informs the kinds of emotions that they seek, and produce, through what I call intentional escapism. Participants found a sense of reprieve and relief in the particular features of gameplay and how game objectives were structured. Digital games offered participants interactions free of constant rumination and self-doubt, defined start and endpoints, and goals that allowed them to discern and embody a sense of control, focus, and accomplishment in a judgment-free space. Participants were not only immersed in the feeling that they, for example, were themselves surviving a post-apocalyptic wasteland or saving the galaxy, but also embodied the feelings of the characters as they undertook these feats—that is, they felt strong, accomplished, and capable. Players embodied and became the very characters themselves. These encounters then served to remediate their depression and low self-esteem.

The findings here offer a granular examination of how exactly mental health meshes with the specifics of gaming escapism. While other research has examined generally how escapism might offer reprieve and beneficial mood management (see, for example, Kosa and Uysal 2020; Stenseng, Falch-Madsen, and Hygen, 2021), here, I illustrate the alchemy arising from directly linking participants' sense of escapism with the mental health experiences that they bring to their gameplay. I demonstrate how reprieve from mental illness does not stem solely from complete distraction and dissociation from these struggles. Rather, participants use digital games to encounter feelings and other ways of being that directly inform how they might want to cope and respond to their mental health. This highlights intentional escapism; that participants seek particular games to escape into and pursue feelings that are directly linked to and offer respite from specific mental health stressors and symptoms of mental illness.

Distanced Virtual Embodiment: Trying on Similar, but Different, Biographies

In the previous section, I explored virtual embodiment as a means for participants to intentionally seek out and produce new and different feelings. Here, I now consider an extension of virtual embodiment through what I call *distanced* virtual embodiment. This refers to the ways in which participants inhabit characters as a means to try on and play with their mental health at a distance through characters' similar yet distinct narratives. Through specifically examining embodiment of pre-programmed characters in single player games, I argue that participants encounter ready-made and convenient access to embodied experiences; these characters, with their separate but shared biographies and emotions, are right there for participants to step into and out of. Participants can inhabit and immerse themselves in similar narratives, effectively putting their experiences onto the characters to then interact with their mental health *as* these characters. This creates and adds a sense of safety. Participants are able to try on, experiment

with, and confront their own mental health and emotional experiences as themselves but less judgmentally through characters. Participants come to reflect on their mental health by connecting with and playing through that of the characters; someone that is them but ultimately separate from participants.

In describing their virtual embodiment, participants reflected on connecting personally to how characters' mental health "journey fit my narrative of my life"; importantly, this connection arose from the felt sense of "being put into the shoes of" these characters. Participants, in this way, evoke a feeling of empathy. While there is an ongoing debate between scholars who assert digital games' ability to help players learn consideration for others (Greitemeyer 2013; Pallavicini et al. 2020; Tong et al. 2020), versus those who argue that this rhetoric minimizes marginalized lived experiences as narratives to be consumed by straight cisgender white gamers (Bollmer 2017; Ruberg 2020), my findings suggest something different. I argue that participants' embodiment of characters generated something akin to empathy *towards themselves*. Participants described how stepping into the 'shoes' of characters allowed them to "introspect and think about things" and "relive these sort of mental health experiences that I'd already had" in a "very safe space." Participants embodied characters to "bring myself along [an] emotional journey … [and to] reconnect with feelings" in a way that feels safer because they are doing so "through that third party of playing along with the story in a game." Thus, I seek to draw attention to a kind of care of the self that participants engendered through their gameplay. Rather than empathy, Ruberg (2020:65) suggest that *compassion* better situates developers' sharing their experiences as a way to give players a sense of "living with" them rather than suggesting to 'know' them. Here, I argue that in connecting their lived experiences with that shared in these games,

participants create self-compassion as they ‘live with’ and experience a version of their mental health through the stories that they connect with and the digital bodies that they inhabit.

Claire described digital games as an “interesting medium” to explore mental health issues and topics because “you’re controlling a character who, it’s you, but it’s not you.” Here, Claire suggests that games allow her to embody characters while never fully becoming them, which allows her to feel as if

> you’re working though [mental health issues]. But at the same time, it’s not as confrontational as if you were actually discussing it in relation to your actual self, because within the context of a game, it’s always steps removed from you. But ultimately, you’re still the one controlling the character and moving through the game.

Claire’s virtual embodiment of the characters that she plays is never total, but “always steps removed.” Yet, her simultaneous control of and distance from characters are the very qualities that allow her to safely reflect on her own mental health through embodying characters and then embrace and accept those reflections. As opposed to something like traditional therapy that often involves more directly engaging with and confronting one’s own psychological issues, distanced virtual embodiment provides an alternative, less threatening interaction that nonetheless provides a means to think about the self through the experiences and control of the actions of an other.

Greg also described a sense of distanced virtual embodiment while playing *What Remains of Edith Finch*. As he explored Edith’s ancestral home where each of her family members had died from a supposed curse, Greg not only inhabited Edith, but also her deceased family members; the game affords players the opportunity to play as each family member shortly through their final moments of life leading up to their inevitable deaths. Each storyline often surfaces mental health themes, such as depression, grief, or trauma, and gave Greg the opportunity “to experience other people’s lives and other people’s stories [and] feel those emotions.”

For example, Greg, a man in his 40s, virtually embodied Edith's grandmother and this sense of occupying an aging body unexpectedly surfaced feelings related to his severe depression and inability to be vulnerable. Greg interpreted that the grandmother was "feeling vulnerable because it was age, basically, but it was a vulnerability that was in her body that she couldn't do anything about. And it's about her acceptance." Embodying the grandmother in her final moments of life and connecting with her vulnerability and acceptance gave Greg a space to connect with and gain release from his own feelings immersing himself in "that cathartic feeling of crying or feeling sad." Since struggling with his severe depression, Greg has been unable to feel vulnerable:

> Because I went through [severe depression], I felt like my defenses are rocked emotionally. I've had relationships since, and I've sort of struggled to properly bring my barriers down to be vulnerable again.

Inhabiting Edith's grandmother and interacting with her own vulnerability provided Greg a safe space to "lower my defenses because they're *not my* defenses" (emphasis added). That is, playing *Edith Finch* offered Greg a chance to

> sample [my] own feelings … secondhand, because you're not emoting about your own life. It's about an imagined life … [and] I find it important to let out those feelings and to feel those feelings [of sadness and crying], just the same as you do the positive ones. That's probably why I singled out games like [*Edith Finch]* … and that's what I take away is the feelings that they gave me, good and bad.

Edith Finch thus provided Greg with an outlet to "sample" a sense of vulnerability and to have emotional experiences that he finds so important and yet struggles to create for himself due to his mental illness. By becoming characters like Edith's grandmother, simultaneously similar enough but clearly unlike him, Greg could distantly embody narratives and feelings in the relative safety of the game to begin to reclaim aspects of his self.

Another participant, Layla, grappled with managing symptoms and navigating her Major Depressive Disorder that she was diagnosed with at a young age, struggles that were

compounded by a lack of social support and a strong sense of isolation throughout much of her adult life. She described not having anyone with whom she felt comfortable talking about her mental health. With digital games, Layla found a space that she could inhabit, and embody characters whom she felt understood her. For example, Layla played *Hellblade* and came to "really just have a deep connection" with Senua, the protagonist and player-character. In Senua, Layla found someone who "feels things very differently than other people" and "experiences things very much more fully than we do." While Layla's mental health experiences had mostly been characterized by feeling isolated and ostracized, in the world of *Hellblade*, she could connect with, and *become,* Senua, someone like her and someone Layla therefore imagined would understand her.

Layla's embodiment of Senua intensified throughout the progression of the game. This climaxed during the final sequence where players face a never-ending wave of enemies to try and reach and defeat Hela, the Norse goddess of Death, in an attempt to resurrect Senua's lover, Dillion. There is technically no way to win at this moment; players must in fact accept defeat as the only way to progress. Layla, however, refused to give up—she "held on for like 30 minutes, parrying and dodging for my life"—before realizing that "there was no possible chance of defeating Hela." Once players are defeated, a cutscene shows a defeated Senua crying at the realization that she cannot bring Dillion back from the dead. Hela approaches and stabs Senua who then falls to the ground, slowly dying. As the camera pans from Senua's body back up to Hela, players see that Hela has become Senua. This moment serves to symbolically convey Senua's transformation, that she is shedding a past version of herself. As Senua stands looking over a sunlit valley, the game's narrator states that "even in darkness, the wonder and the beauty of the world never leaves." Senua turns to face the player, and with newfound confidence in her

eyes tells the player to "follow us. I have another story to tell," as she walks away, seemingly to embark on a new journey with a new understanding of her mental health.

The ending of *Hellblade* struck a deep chord with Layla, who interpreted the scene as communicating "Hela is you and Hela is me and Senua is me, we're all the same." Layla was grieving the end of a relationship and the game's own ending "made me think, I'm trying to move on from this person that I was in love with, and this friendship that I held so deeply to me because it was so different than any other ones that I had before." As Senua comes to terms with her inability to resurrect and hold onto Dillion, Layla, who refused to give up during the final battle, too was coming to terms with her own inability to resurrect and hold onto this relationship.

Yet, as Layla is careful to note, she also maintained a certain amount of distance from completely identifying as Senua, and this distance served to facilitate Layla's reflections on and interactions with her own struggles:

> Because you're not, you might have these negative feelings towards yourself that you might view as personally attacking yourself. But if you're able to put it on someone that isn't you, but is you, it makes it easy to kind of dissect what you're thinking, what you're feeling, how to kind of better yourself.

Distanced embodiment allowed Layla to engage more compassionately with and reflect on her mental health. Here, Layla can explore and discern her depression and grief as and through Senua's story and journey. This provides a means for Layla to interrogate and interpret her mental health by becoming Senua and trying on how Senua navigates similar yet distinct encounters to view and reflect on herself less antagonistically.

In this section, participants experienced what I call distanced virtual embodiment, an extension and specific form of virtual embodiment that points to the safer exploration and experimentation of mental health afforded through the sense of players as distinct from the

digital game characters. In the single-player games that participants described above, they inhabited pre-programmed characters with their own biographies. Participants encountered these narratives both as these characters and also as themselves. Distanced embodiment creates the felt sense of becoming digital actors while acknowledging the impermanence of that embodiment. Participants inhabit an other at a distance; they can fully immerse themselves in these worlds, stories, and emotions to put on and try out versions of their own experiences as and through the characters they embody.

Inhabiting digital game characters in this way enabled participants, as they put it, to explore aspects of their own mental health and emotions "steps removed from" them; they could "put it on someone" else and "sample your own feelings" in different narratives through digital bodies. Digital games become a safe space, one that facilitates the courage to try on and experiment with mental health and emotional perspectives that are similar to, but not participants' own. Through distanced virtual embodiment, participants created self-understanding and compassion by drawing from their own lived experiences in inhabiting other characters and narratives.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explore the ways in which participants' virtual embodiment of game characters and subsequent immersion into these gameworlds shape and is shaped by their mental health experiences. I argue that through virtual embodiment, participants encounter and discern their own emotions and mental health both as an other and as themselves. Embodiment meant becoming other characters with distinct biographies to intentionally feel differently—a sense of confidence, accomplishment, empowerment, and control—that momentarily redressed depressive symptoms, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Participants also experienced distanced

virtual embodiment, where they could try on similar, yet separate, narratives and perspectives more safely and explore their mental health and emotions by putting it on the characters that they inhabit and enmeshing it with characters' narratives. In all cases, virtual embodiment allowed participants to interact with their mental health through distinct digital bodies and narratives that offered an escape and means to explore and play with different feelings and ways of being.

Participants described engaging with games as a means to escape everyday stressors and the struggles of their mental health. While they felt the benefits of escapism for stress relief and mood management (Kosa and Uysal 2020; Stenseng, Falch-Madsen, and Hygen 2021), participants intentionally sought specific games, and particular elements of these games—their structured environments, set objectives, and gameplay mechanics—knowing that they could lessen mental health burden, and immerse themselves in this space to feel differently. Participants' lived experiences, then, inform the kinds of games sought and the escapism felt through their gameplay (Calleja 2010). Digital games provide narratives, interactions, and mechanics that make participants feel like they are surviving wastelands and saving galaxies; that they can be who they want to be, unconstrained by their mental illness, social isolation, or biographies. In games, participants encounter and create a space unlike their everyday lives. These worlds are fantastical and allow participants to become others, but they also contain structure and specificity, opportunities to feel competent and in control. Participants may select games to get away from their lives, but as I have argued here, not as a means to simply turn off and tune out the world around them. Rather, digital games, through their characters, structure, and gameplay, offer participants an intentional, and intentionally alternative, kind of embodiment to temporarily become someone or something different. Intentional escapism enables participants to embody and feel the way that they do in these games, as their interaction and immersion create

and bring about feelings of confidence, for instance, or delight and control that is often absent in their lives.

This chapter also revealed more explicitly the ways in which virtual embodiment provides a unique way to view and interact with the self and mental health as digital game characters. Participants encountered a duality of embodiment—one where they felt a sense of fully becoming these characters while remaining aware of characters' distinct bodies and narratives (Anderson 2016; Bayliss 2007; Crick 2011). This kind of distanced virtual embodiment, as I define it, calls attention to a more specific sense of engagement with and immersion into similar biographies while also knowing that they themselves are separate from these characters and their stories. Participants can, for example, embody Senua and experience her narrative and mental health, sustaining this embodiment to imbue, interact with, and create their own mental health narratives through Senua's particular approach to and experiences within her journey. This constitutes games as a safe space, a space where participants can see and experience themselves not as themselves but as and through in-game bodies with separate but similar enough biographies, encouraging and allowing them to try on and experiment with different emotions and approaches. Participants can tinker with and explore their mental health without directly confronting their psychological pain head-on.

Participants' distanced virtual embodiment allowed them to build compassion and understanding for themselves. Compassion resituates encountering others' realities in games as an act of sharing and 'living with' rather than being experts on other experiences (Ruberg 2020). As participants participate in the narratives of the characters that they become, able to put on and try out their mental health at a distance, they create for themselves a safer, more generous, and compassionate space to confront and reflect on their own experiences without judgment.

In the next chapter, I explore an additional way in which participants share in the journeys of the characters that they play. Drawing from social network theory, Chapter 3 surfaces digital game player-characters as distinct social actors that participants form bonds with, constituting them as experientially similar to themselves that are capable of offering social support through their challenges and struggles of mental illness. This is yet another means through which participants connected with characters in ways that deeply affected their mental health.

CHAPTER 3: EXPERIENTIALLY SIMULATED OTHERS: FINDING SOCIAL SUPPORT FOR MENTAL HEALTH

Introduction

Mental illness is a lonely experience. Due to a combination of factors such as stigma, social isolation, and adverse social experiences, people struggle to find connection and seek help for mental illness (Bharadwaj et al. 2015; Rössler 2016). It is unsurprising, then, that those experiencing mental illness face higher rates of loneliness, social isolation, and lack of social support (Alasmawi et al. 2020). Social isolation and loneliness has been linked to increased mortality and poor mental and physical health outcomes (Holt-Lunstad et al. 2015). Among those experiencing mental illness, compared to those who do not, loneliness can lead to worse prognosis and outcomes, like increased hospitalizations (Badcock et al. 2015; Fortuna et al. 2020).

Sociocultural ideologies surrounding a health condition can shape the formation and perception of lived experiences of it, and how it is represented in popular media can be particularly impactful for those living with the condition (e.g., Anderson 2003). Digital games, as one type of mediated experience, has a troubled history of using mental illness as a vehicle to build horror or to justify portraying characters as enemies (Buday et al. 2022). Yet digital games' interactivity and immersivity can convey aspects of the experience of mental health issues in nuanced and intentional ways, inviting players to step into new worlds, characters, and to experience fantastical and near limitless narrative possibilities.

For example, the game *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* tells the story of Senua's experiences with psychosis, trauma, and grief as she journeys through the Norse underworld to resurrect her deceased loved one. Senua's psychosis manifests for players in unique ways such as the use of

binaural audio (i.e., players hear voices coming from all around them). A different game, *Celeste*, follows the journey of Madeline as she attempts to climb Celeste Mountain. As she climbs, Madeline grapples with her experiences with anxiety and depression largely manifested as "Badeline", who periodically chases the player through the game's levels.

In this paper, I elucidate the mental health effects of interacting with and through characters like Senua in *Hellblade* and Madeline in *Celeste* by drawing on extensive in-depth interviews with people who play video games and struggle with mental illness. These data provide analytic insights into the social effects of digital game characters by exploring how players connect with these characters based on shared mental health experiences and how these experiences extend into everyday life. I argue that players interact with these characters as experientially similar others, and perceive different kinds of social support from these interactions.

Below, I trace the literature on social support among experientially similar others in both physical and digital spaces. I then describe previous research on the social dimensions of digital games, providing examples for how communities form and how players interact with one another in these spaces. Finally, I provide a conceptual overview of the significance and broad effects of interactions and bonds formed with digital game characters. The findings then explore the different ways in which digital game characters provide specific kinds of social support for players who encounter, interact with, and inhabit characters throughout their gaming experiences. These include validating their mental health experiences, motivating new behaviors and coping strategies, and supporting a vision of a future self toward different relationships to their mental health.

Background

The Social Significance of Similar Others

Social support can positively impact health through giving someone the sense of being loved and cared for, enhancing the belief that individuals have control over their health, and providing emotional support (Umberson and Montez 2010). Berkman and colleagues (2000) add that social support also influences health through tangible aid and assistance, appraisal or help with decision-making, and informational support through advice given to those experiencing a health issue. Social support can also influence health behaviors, whereby a person obtains guidance about behaviors from others, and help create purpose, belonging, and recognition of self-worth (Berkman et al. 2000; Kawachi and Berkman 2001).

At the onset of their illness, individuals will seek social support as they come to terms with the diagnosis (Perry and Pescosolido 2015). Individuals make conscious and subconscious decisions about who they will go to for this kind of support. They may prioritize people they are closest to or those who have had positive experiences with healthcare (Perry and Pescosolido 2015). They may also seek support from those with shared experiences of mental illness, sometimes referred to as *experientially similar others* (Perry and Pescosolido 2015; Thoits 2011).

Thoits (2011) argues that experientially similar others provide social support in three distinctive ways: First, emotional sustenance validates the experience and reduces distress stemming from similar others' in-depth understanding and empathy of the dimensions and nuances of the stressful situations. Second, similar others can share successful coping strategies tailored to the shared situation. Finally, similar others provide social influence through serving as role models for the individual experiencing mental health problems. This social influence can

emulate what it would be like to cope effectively with the stressful situation and generates hope where "the distressed individual can envision himself or herself in the future" (Thoits 2011:155).

Becoming a part of a social network online is an increasingly important space for social support from similar others. Online spaces—like in social media, on message boards, and forums—offer enhanced accessibility to these networks, convenient platforms for sharing experiences and stories, and relative anonymity. Those experiencing mental illness often turn to social media to share illness experiences and seek advice and connections from similar others due to social isolation and stigma (Naslund et al. 2016). Like social support in non-digital spaces, online communities formed around similar illness experiences minimize social isolation, provide hope, and facilitates exchange of strategies (Yan et al. 2015). Online interactions among similar others can challenge stigma through normalization and validation, increase activation towards seeking formal health care, and be a space to discuss interventions to improve mental health outcomes (Naslund et al. 2016).

Digital Games as Social Spaces

As a networked medium, digital games offer multiple possibilities to form connections and create social networks. First, developers can build social interactions into the functionality of the gameplay itself, such as allowing players to form groups to complete activities and socialize with other players, for example with guilds and multiplayer matches (e.g., Poor and Skoric 2014). Second, players may feel forced to create community when faced with exclusionary and discriminatory practices that can characterize online digital game interactions. Gray (2012) examined such practices on Xbox Live showing how female gamers of color carve out their own spaces removed from the racism and sexism they routinely face in multiplayer games. Third, emerging technologies, such as augmented reality (AR), blend the digital and non-digital,

allowing people to interact with games and others in physical spaces. *Pokémon Go*, one of the more popular AR games, builds community among players by bringing them together in physical spaces around the shared experience of the game (Vella et al. 2019).

Alongside and beyond these interactions between players, digital games also afford players the opportunity to interact with game characters, accompany and converse with them throughout their experience. I argue that these characters need to be conceptualized as more than just an amalgamation of lines of code and programming. Interactions with characters, both playable and non-playable, can foster social connection wherein players see and interact with them as 'real' social actors. To explore this, I next turn to theory that conceptualizes interactions between players and digital characters as a kind of relationship.

Social Ties of Digital Characters

Science and technology studies theorizes objects as non-human *actors*, exhibiting their own agencies, acting upon and shaping human interactions both with and beyond the objects themselves (Winner 1980; Latour 1992). We often engage with and think of non-human actors as we do human actors, such as using gendered terms or behaving towards them using existing social rules (Nass and Moon 2000). As encoded non-human actors, digital game characters are given human-like traits, personalities, and stories, can communicate and express emotions, and accompany players as they inhabit these worlds.

Conceptualizing human and non-human interactions as social allows for the study of digital game characters as social actors. Banks and Bowman (2016:1258) argue that interactions between player and character are dialectical and influence each other such that games and characters form "independent agencies and act toward players, revealing relations that in many ways mirror human-human social relationships." They devised a relational spectrum by

examining how players talk about and engage with digital characters, with ‘Avatar-as-object’ on one end and ‘Avatar-as-other’ on the other end. Players that relate to characters as ‘objects’ have no emotional attachment towards them, seeing them as solely a means to experiencing the gameplay. Players that relate to characters as ‘others’, form strong emotional attachment to characters as agential and with distinct identities. Here, players engage with characters “as autonomous social actors [that] requires players to differentiate and personify [characters] as human or human like” (Banks and Bowman 2016:1269).

Situating digital game characters as agentic and autonomous social actors alongside the social network literature allows for the exploration of the impact and meanings that these interactions may foster. This paper illustrates how players engage with digital game characters in the context of mental illness as experientially similar, as individuals that they form relationships and bonds with, who share and impart their own ‘lived’ experiences onto players that is felt through the digital games’ tactile, audiovisual, and interactive experiences, and thus emerge as what I call *experientially simulated others* that offer multiple kinds of social support for players. In the findings below, I trace these different forms of social support drawing on Thoits’ (2011) framework and extending it to describe particular effects/mechanisms of simulated others.

Methods

Forty-eight participants were recruited through a combination of Reddit (from game-specific subreddits, such as r/hellblade and r/celestegame) and my participation in local gaming groups between 2019 and 2020. All study materials and procedures were approved by the University of California, San Francisco’s Human Research Protection Program. Interviews were remotely conducted via Zoom, semi-structured, and 1-2 hours. Interviews focused on

participants' gaming life history, experiences with mental health, and their experiences playing games toward their mental health.

Participant locations varied, ranging from the United States, Europe, South Asia, and South America. After the interviews, participants completed a brief demographics survey via Qualtrics. Of the forty-eight participants, fourteen participants identified as female, twenty-nine identified as male, four identified as non-binary/third gender, and one identified as agender. Five participants identified as Hispanic or Latinx, twenty-nine as white, and four or fewer identified as Asian, Black, or Multiracial. Eleven participants identified as bisexual, six as pansexual, and twenty-five as straight. Regarding age, twenty-seven participants were between the ages of 18 and 24, while almost all others were between 25 and 44 years old. All participants either chose their own pseudonyms or were given one if they indicated no preference.

Analysis

Using constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2014), ongoing data collection and participant experiences iteratively shaped subsequent data collection and analysis, and early interviews informed the direction of future interviews. In-depth analytic memos followed each interview, and contained reflections on the overarching conversation as well as how these interviews fit with or added to emerging themes. Analysis began with line-by-line coding, focusing on participant experiences by applying action-oriented gerund codes and creating the initial codebook (Charmaz 2014). This was followed by focused coding, using and testing this initial codebook against subsequent transcripts to ascertain fit, as well as determine the generation of new and previously unforeseen codes that would then be applied to earlier transcripts. This paper focuses on data coded with two main codes—normalization and validation—with continued memoing to capture the nuance and depth of participant experiences.

Results

Participants' engagement with digital games about mental health afforded them opportunities to interact and form bonds with characters with shared mental health experiences. Participants perceived and interacted with game characters as experientially similar others, who validated and helped participants' feel less alone in their mental health experiences. Participants could compare themselves to these game characters and envision new mental health realities through witnessing and trying out how these characters navigated and coped with their struggles, and the ways that the mental health narratives played out for these characters. Following Thoits (2011), the sections below trace how players experienced these interactions and derived meanings and social support in three ways: emotional sustenance, active coping assistance, and social influence. I adapt and extend these mechanisms highlighting how games' unique technological affordances strengthen the connections felt by players.

Emotional Sustenance

Thoits (2011) describes how similar others' deep knowledge and understanding of what an individual is going through helps to validate the experience and reduce distress. Feeling less alone in the experience can be relieving for individuals experiencing mental illness. Participants described receiving emotional sustenance and subsequently feeling more validated and less alone in their mental illness. This effect arose both from the 'lived' experience of the characters themselves and how they served as a connecting thread to the imagined experience of those who make these games. In this section, I trace these two analytical threads, first describing how digital game characters stood in for game developers who participants imagined shared their own mental health experiences. I then describe how participants derived emotional sustenance from

their interactions with digital game characters themselves, acting as experientially similar others for participants.

"Feeling like somebody else gets you"

Participants described being deeply struck by portrayals of mental health in the games they played, and how the accuracy and 'realness' of these depictions created connections to those who developed these games. They recall thinking "there's got to be somebody in the background that's suffered from any of these mental health issues" and that "whoever made the game [must have] gone through something similar," because "they wouldn't be able to deal with mental health so accurately" otherwise. That is, these games' accurate portrayals of mental health drew participants to connect with the experiences and imagine how these experiences stem from other people. Roman[8], for example, was navigating a recent diagnosis of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) at the time of the interview. Roman had been experiencing stress around navigating his OCD at work, describing feeling alienated and ostracized by his coworkers who did not understand when his symptoms presented themselves while at work. This made encountering digital games that reflected his mental health experiences particularly important for his subjective and lived experience.

Specifically, Roman had an impactful experience playing *Celeste* with it's story about the protagonist, Madeline's, experiences with anxiety and depression. The gameplay engenders feelings of anxiety through its challenging platforming that causes players to fail and retry again and again, while motivating the player through immediate restarts and encouraging messages. Roman connected with *Celeste* through its accurate mental health representation and it's merging of gameplay and narrative. Even down to the game's challenging difficulty, precise movements,

[8] All participant names in this paper are pseudonyms.

and quick restarts, Roman saw how the game's developers captured the feeling of his own experiences: "if in a video game…certain systems push back against you in a way that is frustrating or irritating or feels arbitrary and meaningless, guess what? That's what anxiety is like." For Roman, the combination of relating to the overall story and specific aspects, like the game's mechanics, take on new meanings as they emulate with fidelity experiences of anxiety that help foster a sense of belonging.

As a result, through the game, Roman perceived the existence of multiple experientially similar others:

> it can be an absolutely euphoric feeling to feel like somebody else gets you, somebody else you've never met, somebody else who lives miles away from you, you would never have any occasion to meet in real life, who you've never even heard of before picking up this game...somebody out there knows how you feel and feels it too and wants other people to understand it.

Roman imagines the developers sharing in his experience, and encapsulating and encoding those experiences into the game and its main protagonist, Madeline. In his everyday life, Roman feels "how isolating it can be to be different" and "how alone you can feel when you're the only person around you who is like you." Yet, from playing Celeste, Roman feels the "incredible power of feeling less alone" and "in seeing someone who feels the same struggles you have and still manages to win."

After experiencing multiple tragic losses, that of his mother and two of his closest friends, Otto, another participant, turned to games, including *Gris*, to help process his grief. In *Gris,* players follow a nameless protagonist as she navigates a gray landscape on a quest to return color to the world. The game symbolically conveys the story of this character's loss, as each level represents one of the five stages of grief. While the levels are not explicitly named after these

stages, players can unlock achievements by completing certain actions (e.g., smashing a set of statues in the Red level grants players the "Anger" achievement).

The accuracy with which the game captures the emotional experience of these different stages fostered Otto's imagined connection to the shared experience of grief. In *Gris'* 'Depression' level, players traverse an underwater labyrinth to restore blue color to the world. Players must navigate this maze in almost complete darkness, moving from one light spot to the next. Otto recalled this moment distinctly as one in which "you can't really tell where you're going, if you're going the right way." For Otto, "the underwater level made me feel what the depression feels like…it's a great analogy for feeling just like you're drowning in depression and you can't find a way out." In the "Anger" level, players push through a desert sandstorm that not only pushes players back, but also obfuscates the landscape, making it hard to progress through the level. About halfway into this level, players gain the ability to turn into a large block to smash objects and open up new pathways. Whereas the sandstorm engenders anger through, as Otto says, "the frustration of not being able to figure out certain areas," the ability to turn into a stone block further symbolizes anger as the player destroys their surroundings to progress.

Otto described the effect of games like *Gris* for him:

> I think another one of the reasons I love the games or that they're comforting to me is it makes me feel like whoever made the game, they've gone through something similar or they understand me or I understand them. It makes you feel less alone. You're not the only one who's had these experiences.

Otto found sharedness and "healing" in how *Gris* captured similar emotions to his own grief and loss. And this shared experience helped Otto imagine others as having gone through something similar. At a time when Otto's world was in disarray from the loss of three people in his life, this experience helped him feel less alone in his loss and that he is not the only one going through this emotional experience.

All digital games are created by game studios comprised of numerous other people. Because these are products designed and built by others, players surmised that developers infused their own mental health experiences (or those of others they knew) into the games in uniquely accurate and resonant ways. As exemplified by Otto and Roman, building connections through gaming experiences allows for connecting with an imagined group of people that engenders broader feelings of validation and belonging.

"Seeing someone struggling with similar things"

While games helped participants imagine connections with developers around a shared experience, participants also felt validation and belonging from interactions with the digital game characters, themselves. Gabi had been struggling with depression and anxiety since high school and was navigating a recent diagnosis of dissociative identity disorder. Gabi never felt understood nor supported by others, particularly her father who would describe her mental illness as "laziness." She resonated with Senua, the main character in *Hellblade*, whose father, according to Gabi, also "never took [Senua] really seriously" and "tried to control her" because of his distorted and antagonistic views towards Senua's mental illness.

Experiencing Senua's struggles with, and ultimate overcoming of, this familial trauma toward mental illness helped Gabi "feel a bit stronger and more understood [by] seeing someone struggling with similar things I struggled with." Gabi reflected on the ways in which relating to Senua's familial struggles surrounding her mental illness helped her feel validated because it resonated with her own family's misunderstanding and hostile views toward her mental illness. This "was very amazing to experience" for Gabi, particularly because of the isolation she felt around her mental illness. The social effects of interacting with and experiencing Senua's story

and similarities were particularly impactful for Gabi because like Thoit's (2011) suggests, similar others offer validation and empathy when lacking support from closer connections, like family.

As someone with depression, Johnny also connected with Senua, noting that her experiences were "really like my inner monologue" when reflecting on Senua's inner critical and negative voices. Johnny understood that many people experience depression, but within his day-to-day experiences with depression, he felt largely alone: "even though I know I'm not alone, I still feel like I'm alone." Playing *Hellblade* helped to attenuate these isolating feelings. Reflecting on a gameplay moment where players navigate complete darkness looking for light, he said this "felt very similar to my depressive episodes because it feels like the entire world is closing in and like everything hurts." These gaming experiences were "soothing" for Johnny; through interacting with Senua, who shared in aspects of his own mental health experiences, Johnny felt "better because I know I'm not alone because millions of people have depression and millions of people are in the same situation as I am." Witnessing and experiencing Senua's journey helped Johnny better understand that there were others like him because the game engendered similar feelings of depression, demonstrating a level of understanding and accuracy that brought Johnny catharsis.

Encountering digital game characters with similar mental health experiences made players feel less alone in their own experiences. The accurate and thoughtful representations of mental health helped players form imagined connections with those who make these games. The felt sense that developers could only capture mental health experiences with such fidelity if they themselves, or someone they knew intimately, shared these experiences too, was convincing evidence for players that they are not alone. Further, the digital game characters' own experiences and journeys, narratively told and mechanically felt, helped players build bonds with

characters. Forming relationships with these characters throughout the game, spending time with them and gaining a deeper understanding of their shared mental health experiences, combined with interactivity creating feelings similar to their own mental health, resulted in players constructing the game characters themselves them as experientially similar others.

Active Coping Assistance

A second way that people perceive social support from experientially similar others stems from strategies learned through seeing, hearing, or, in the case of this paper, interacting with others and their navigation of shared mental health struggles. Thoits (2011) describes active coping assistance as individuals receiving guidance and encouragement from those knowledgeable about the illness or stressor. Participants, through playing games, learned new and different ways to navigate and reduce the burden of their own mental illness. In this section, I illustrate how players drew from connections they formed with characters to identify strategies and behaviors to aid in navigating their own mental health experiences. This occurred in two distinct but interrelated ways. First, games about mental health encoded interactive moments where participants directly experienced and effectively experimented with coping strategies. Second, through reflecting on how characters themselves navigate shared mental health experiences, participants adapted their own ways to cope.

"I started breathing in and out"

Celeste features a moment where Madeline experiences a panic attack while trapped on a gondola suspended over a deep chasm. As she struggles to breath, dark tendril-like branches emerge from the sides of the screen, enclosing and constricting around Madeline. At the same time, the controller begins to vibrate, providing a tactile response that is intended to mimic and even generate the stress that accompanies a panic attack. For Abby, a participant who

experiences panic attacks, Madeline emerged here as experientially similar. Abby described the dark tendrils and the way that the controller starts to vibrate as a "very accurate [and] very good representation of what a panic attack feels like" where "the vibrating controller gives it a whole other layer." That Abby saw Madeline as someone navigating similar mental health experiences made it easier for Abby to draw insights from how Madeline navigates out of this panic attack.

Also stuck on the gondola is Theo, a friend that Madeline meets along her journey. In an effort to help Madeline through her panic attack, Theo tells Madeline to imagine a feather floating in the air and use her breath to keep the feather afloat. At this point, players must press a button for Madeline to breathe and keep the feather rising and falling within a glowing box on-screen that moves in time. When players succeed at what is effectively a mindfulness-based minigame, the darkness subsides and the tendrils retreat, while the blue sky reemerges, and the gondola again moves toward the other side of the chasm, while Madeline begins to feel calm, her breathing slow and steady.

Abby encountered this moment, experiencing how the feather imagery helped Madeline through her panic attack, and planned "to use that next time I have a panic attack." Even during the minigame, itself, as Abby pressed and released the button as a tactile version of Madeline's breathing, she found herself mimicking the practice: "And I actually started breathing in and out in time with the game because I took it as an exercise, because sometimes you have to relax." Breathing in time with the feather solidified this moment as a strategy that Abby could try when facing another panic attack. Because it worked for Madeline, it could be efficacious for Abby, as well.

For some, however, players connected with the reality that individual coping strategies can have limits, and that they're not foolproof. This breathing technique works for Madeline

until towards the end of the game when she attempts to confront Badeline, her evil doppelgänger and inner critic, who slices the feather in half, increasing Madeline's panic. This directly resonated with Roman's own lived experience where "a very OCD thing is that you have an anxiety-taming technique that works sometimes, but not all the time." For Roman,

> *Celeste* is very real that the anxiety techniques that Madeline learns in this game don't always work sometimes and can get her out of a crisis in some situations. But there are some times when it's like no. That's not going to work this time.

As a similar other, Roman connects with Madeline's shared experiences of these coping strategies not always working. That these techniques don't always work adds realness to Madeline's experiences without minimizing the benefits that can come when they do provide reprieve from mental health stressors.

"Think about Hellblade. It'll be fine."

Alicia, a woman in her early 30s, had spent much of the previous decade of her life on a mental health diagnostic journey. During college, Alicia initially sought care for depression that cascaded into other diagnosed conditions, like childhood PTSD and dissociative identity disorder. Alicia described that all of this "culminated" in graduate school where she had a "breakdown…and ended up being admitted to a psych ward for a few days." Since this experience, Alicia has found a therapeutic relationship, family support, and a balance of medications that together help her manage her mental illness. However, Alicia did not have anyone in her life who she could connect with over shared mental health experiences. Additionally, Alicia described that working with her therapist was not always effective; while she understood the advice and insights of her therapist, it was sometimes hard to put them into practice.

This was part of the reason that *Hellblade* was so impactful for Alicia. As Alicia experienced *Hellblade*, she identified similarities between her own mental health and that of

Senua's experiences. Through a technology called binaural audio, sound is recorded using multiple microphones to create the experience of three-dimensional sound. The developers of *Hellblade*, Ninja Theory, utilized this so players would more directly experience Senua's internal monologue. Thus, as players like Alicia inhabit Senua, they are literally surrounded by her voices of self-doubt and criticism. Alicia connected with the way the game portrayed Senua's internal dialogue:

> I don't have psychosis. I do not hear literal voices. But it still felt very much analogous to the things that I had experienced … [I] definitely have the internal monologue being like, 'oh, you're going to fail at this thing.' And so it felt, again, there's a lot of metaphorical resonance.

Initially, Alicia noted that the similarities had her "cringing" describing it was "too familiar," and not being sure "if I like this." Yet, Alicia continued with the game, witnessing and experiencing how Senua "overcame all this crap"—that is, the negative self-talk and the anxiety and panic that she continuously faces on her journey. Alicia found it "amazing" and "very empowering" to accompany Senua as she navigated her struggles. Alicia began to realize "how much compassion" she felt for Senua as a character; in turn, this motivated her to reduce her own self-judgment and have more self-compassion, a "breakthrough that my therapist had been trying to make me have for years":

> I notice[d] how compassionate I felt toward her. And then I was like, 'Wait a second, if I can feel this way towards this fictional character, who's going through all this stuff…why can't I feel that toward myself?

This reflection toward how she responded to Senua became a strategy for Alicia during future moments of struggle, anxiety, and panic. Alicia would recall the compassion she felt toward Senua to be kinder to herself which in turn helped Alicia:

> Feel less shame…And I would very much just draw this comparison to myself and be like, 'yeah, if she can get up and keep going, so can you. And if you can find her to be a lovable, good protagonist that you admire, then why can't you feel the same about yourself?

Thus, Alicia identified Senua as a similar other; through reflecting on how she responded to and interpreted Senua's similar struggles, she understood how she could turn this response back towards herself. Alicia then drew from her experiences with *Hellblade* as a new tool to practice the self-compassion she developed during her time with the game. Alicia said that when she encountered future struggles, she would just tell herself to "think about Hellblade. It'll be fine. Everything's fine." The game, and the connections Alicia formed with Senua's shared experiences, became a way to cope by reflecting on Alicia's interactions with an experientially similar other.

Social Influence

Similar others can serve as reference individuals, as examples of how to successfully navigate stressors, who can be observed and then emulated (Thoits 2011). Participants in the present study perceived and interacted with experientially similar game characters who have navigated particular mental health experiences, and found hope in these characters' journeys and imagined themselves relating differently to and struggling less with mental illness like the similar others. This potential to discover alternate narratives through games was also enhanced by the storytelling arc of many digital games, that often follow a normative narrative structure with a beginning, middle, and end. Player participants reflected on the games' endings, and how they depicted the conclusions and resolutions of the characters' and players' journeys. As participants spent many hours in these worlds and with/as these characters, forming intense bonds with them, the shape of the narratives over the course of entire games and their experiences and interpretations of how these games ended made deep impacts on participants. In this final section of findings, I focus on the final moments of *Hellblade*. I do this because this

game and its narrative conclusion was a powerful reflective experience for participants to draw from when and envisioning their own future.

Hellblade ends with players facing a never-ending wave of enemies. There is no actual way to win this battle, so the only way for players to end the game is to stop fighting and accept defeat. This triggers the ending cutscene, or video sequence, where players witness Senua make one final plea to Hela, the Norse goddess of death, to resurrect her loved one, Dillion, the central focus of her quest. The scene then shows Hela appearing to kill Senua; Senua then has one final imagined interaction with Dillion, who tells her to confront loss, that doing so is the only way to emerge from her darkness. Players then see that Senua is still alive as she releases Dillion from her grasp. As Senua stands, her internal voices remain but become more positive and hopeful. Senua then looks at the camera, straight back at the player, and states, "Come with us. We have another story to tell." The camera fades to black as the game concludes.

Gabi, who saw Senua as a similar other through the sharedness of their intersecting experiences of mental illness and familial trauma, described this ending as "the most emotional part for me" because, "in the end, [Senua] has to lose against the enemy and she kind of defeats herself and emerges from the ashes and becomes a different person." This helped Gabi form a new perspective around mental illness, one that involved not running from nor necessarily seeking a cure for her mental illness:

> [Senua's] voices aren't gone in the end, which is something that makes it much more special to me because it shows that your mental illness won't, most likely, go away entirely. You can still learn how to deal with it. You can heal from your past experiences and live with it.

Senua in the end begins relating differently to her mental illness, making Gabi feel it is possible for her too. As Gabi chooses to put down the controller to stop fighting the enemies, and Senua also stops fighting in turn, Gabi interprets this moment as symbolic of ceasing to struggle against

mental illness, trauma, and grief. For Gabi, this coalesces into the beginnings of an alternate narrative and new envisioned future. She realized there are ways to accept her mental health as part of her reality, as something that might not necessarily "go away," as a way to find healing in her past experiences, and to begin to reframe her relationship with her mental health.

Joseph similarly reflected on Senua's conclusion. Stemming primarily from an abusive childhood, Joseph has a long history of mental illness that includes clinical depression and PTSD. During an early mental healthcare interaction with a therapist, one that his mother forced him to go to, Joseph learned he was neurodivergent, experiencing both autism and Asperger's syndrome. As Joseph got older, he found some support outside of his childhood home, such as friends who shared his neurodivergency and a partner whose own interest in mental health helped Joseph learn a lot about himself. Yet, these relationships never seemed to last long and much of Joseph's social life has been fraught with instability and fleeting friends and partners. At the time of the interview, Joseph was still going through a divorce while also having started a new relationship. With so much relational impermanency, digital games served as an important activity and escape for Joseph, providing a "kind of cathartic feeling" that helps Joseph "process a lot of feelings that maybe I wasn't able to express in real life" and a space to let out frustrations through "beating the tar out of monsters." Both kinds of gaming experiences provided Joseph relief from his mental health struggles.

However, interacting with experientially similar digital characters helped Joseph envision new ways to think, relate, and understand his mental health. Like Gabi, Joseph began forming connections to Senua's family trauma and subsequent mental health impacts. Joseph noted Senua's, "narcissistic abusive father" and " that had a very deep effect on me," referencing the

troubled relationship he had with his mother for most of his life. Joseph qualifies that he does not share Senua's mental health label of 'psychosis', but sees the similarities between his own experience and how Senua's mental health manifests:

> [Senua is] dealing with the guilt and the voices that get caught in her head about her father, and even though I don't have psychosis and I don't have schizophrenia, I definitely do have that voice every once in a while that's my mother.

Joseph interprets Senua's mental health experiences, particularly her internal dialogue, as stemming from the control and abuse of her father. This is communicated to players in the game through flashbacks showing earlier interactions between Senua and her father, but also in how her father's voice is one of many that she hears internally throughout the game. This helped Joseph see Senua as a similar other as the game's portrayal of these elements resonated with his own experiences.

Thus, in that final moment when players fight and then must choose to succumb to never-ending waves of enemies, Joseph saw this as overcoming the control that others had over Senua and himself. The "conquering of that fight" was not about the primary goal of resurrecting Dillion nor defeating her psychosis. Rather,

> It's about her controlling [her psychosis], it's about her coming to terms with it and who she is. Her coming to terms with the fact that your mental demons are always going to be a part of you, but you control them and not the parental unit, not whatever abuse caused such a schism in you.

Joseph interprets Senua's new perspective as (re)gaining control of her sense of self and her mental health, and particularly taking control back from her father. Joseph sees in Senua an imagined version of himself, reflecting and working towards this in his everyday life. Joseph described how Senua "taught me a lot" where the "game was an experience of embracing what [trauma] molded you into without crushing [you] under the monster that it created." Further,

seeing Senua's narrative conclusion in *Hellblade*, and how she finds strength and accepts herself and her mental health helped Joseph be "okay with one's self" where *Hellblade* "helped me a lot with not hating being autistic and not hating having ADHD." Because Joseph saw himself in Senua's experiences, he could also identify with her navigation and new interpretation of mental health, and in turn, Joseph could envision new understandings of and more self-compassion for his mental health.

Conclusion and Discussion

In this study, I illustrate how people who play digital games build bonds with game characters, through identifying and interacting with shared mental health experiences. These connections enable digital game characters to serve as experientially similar others, those who individuals experiencing mental illness see as like them through shared experience (Perry and Pescosolido 2015; Thoits 2011) who players perceive to be capable of providing social support to them. Players in the present study described interacting with characters as social actors, forming strong emotional attachments to these characters and perceiving them as having distinct identities (Banks and Bowman 2016). Contextualizing characters in this way demonstrates how these characters become construed as social actors that players interact and build bonds with, similar to what researchers have found in multiplayer game settings (e.g., Pearce 2011; Poor and Skoric 2014). Forming these connections and perceiving characters as autonomous social actors with their own 'lived' experiences enables the kinds of social support explored in this paper.

Social support literature explores experiential similarities in the context of how people learn from other people like them (Perry and Pescosolido 2015; Thoits 2011). In the interactive and immersive context of digital games, I argue for a new conceptualization of similar others as experientially *simulated* others. In a technologically mediated environment, these experiences

happen with, but also around and through, characters who act as simulated others. These simulated others provide social support and benefits like similar others, but also offer new and impactful ways to connect with shared experiences. Participants not only witness and observe character experiences, identifying them as similar to their own, but digital games' interactive affordances introduce other elements that contribute to and strengthen the felt connection and impacts from these experiences. That is, games not only communicate these experiences and narratives, but they simulate those very experiences through elements like three-dimensional sound design and tactile feedback from button presses and controller vibrations. *Celeste's* gameplay mechanics and difficulty mimic feelings of anxiety and *Gris'* level and sound design recreates what it feels like to be depressed.

In *Celeste*, players actively help Madeline breath and move through her panic attack, while simultaneously seeing and feeling the effects of this moment through the symbolic imagery of the tendrils disappearing and the varied controller vibrations as they see on-screen the impacts of their participation in this moment. *Hellblade* simulates the experience of self-criticism and inner doubt through both how Senua communicates these experiences and through the game's sound design where through binaural audio players are immersed into the sharedness of their experiences. In doing so, they enhance the similarities between player and character; participants inhabited characters and participated, in an embodied, immediate way, in coping strategies and tools to help mitigate their struggles and stressors with mental illness. These similarities are simulated through the way a level's challenges makes a player feel, the way a controller's haptic feedback brings players closer to the emotional experience, and through their active participation in these characters' own journeys.

Finally, players connected with the narrative conclusion of these games and interpreted the characters' journey toward a vision for themselves and their future. Because of these games' narrative focus and their storytelling arc towards a defined endpoint or resolution, participants could see clearly characters' next steps and futures. In many of these games, characters importantly do not emerge cured of their mental illness, but rather find new ways to relate to their own mental health and commitment to continued growth. As players build bonds with characters throughout the game, these concluding moments are particularly emotional and become a more impactful way to then reflect on their own lives through the connections made with the narrative and how it ends.

Commercially available digital games about mental health can serve as a viable addition to the repertoire of social support that people can engage in towards mental well-being. Games afford developers the ability to extend the connections and bonds that players form with characters further, pushing them beyond the screen. Players enter these games carrying with them their own narratives, histories, and lived experiences with mental illness. This shapes their subjective experiences of these games, melding and molding with the game's narrative and messaging. Together, players and game characters simulate sharedness—an often too-rare experience for those struggling with mental illness—as players identify and interpret nuanced moments journeying alongside others' storylines and through fantastical worlds, and in the process find validation, belonging, and new perspectives to buoy them in their own lives.

In Chapter 4, I turn my analytic lens toward the relationships between digital game aesthetics and environments and navigating grief and loss. Contextualizing participant experiences within the broader social and cultural landscape that often limits and represses fuller and richer processing of loss, this chapter surfaces digital games as inhabitable worlds that grant

players time, space, and permission to mourn. By deconstructing the specific environmental and gameplay elements of the digital game *Gris,* I illustrate the myriad ways that participants create for themselves their own worlds replete with metaphorical and symbolic resonance with the particular losses that they experienced to better process, frame, and feel their bereavement.

CHAPTER 4: "IMMERSING YOURSELF INTO PROCESSING GRIEF:" GRANTING SPACE, TIME, AND PERMISSION TO EXPERIENCE LOSS

Introduction

A female-presenting character lays in the stony hand of a large statue. She's singing a somber tune as she rises to her feet. As she sings, the stone hand beneath her begins to crack and suddenly, the woman has no voice. Clutching at her throat, she seeks safety from the crumbling stone embrace, running towards the statue's wrist. The entire hand collapses, sending her plummeting to the ground below. As she spins through the air and amongst the clouds, the opening credits roll, and I find myself feeling sad and mournful. With that, Gris *begins.*

My character sits slumped on the ground. She is now, like the world around her, void of color except for the vibrant neon blue of her bobbed hair. She continues to sit, breathing. I continue to sit, breathing. Eventually, I press the thumb stick on my controller forward to see if I am in control. The character rises; I am in control. I have stepped into her world. I instinctively move the character to the right and walk slowly until my character falls to her knees, looking up to the sky. Then I'm back in control; now I can run. But instead of progressing further to the right, I turn and retrace my steps, curious as to what might lie to the left. Eventually, I come across the crumbled remains of a statue, like the one who was just holding me in the palm of her hand. My character, again, falls to her knees. I linger, hands away from the controller. Eventually, in the corner of my screen, I see a trophy[9] appear; it is labelled "Denial."

* * *

Spanish game developer Nomada Studio released *Gris* in 2018. It was well received by critics, lauded for its beautiful art style, soundtrack, and surprising, if simple, puzzles and platforming (Hall 2018; McShea 2018). The game went on to win that year's Games for Impact award at the annual Game Awards celebration, an award given to "thought-provoking games with a pro-social meaning or message" (The Game Awards, n.d.). *Gris* is a game about loss and draws from the five stages of grief model; the developers worked with trained mental health counselors to capture each stage (Chowdhury 2022). It uses metaphorical imagery and symbolism, combining its gameplay and aesthetics to create a rich interpretive experience.

[9] Trophies or achievements are digital awards granted to players for accomplishing tasks in games. These can be granted by just making progress, like completing a level, or through finding secrets or completing difficult moves or actions.

I did not expect to hear about grief while doing interviews about video games and mental health. And yet, an unexpected number of participants organically reflected on interacting with their own loss through gameplay. Further, participants themselves were surprised while playing digital games to discover that these games resonated as they were grappling with their anguish and sorrow. This chapter explores these unexpected encounters and situates *Gris*[10] as an interpretive and interactive space that flexibly reflected and refracted participants' emotions as they processed loss. I argue that participants find within games habitable worlds that grant space to spend time with, explore, and feel their mourning (Calleja 2011). I describe how digital games become an important space—one that is all too rare in daily life—to interact with grief, a complicated emotional experience that is made more difficult by the social and cultural contexts in which it is shaped.

The sociocultural construction of loss shapes the way in which we feel and find space for bereavement. Grief is socially regulated, meaning that death is not itself sufficient to 'permit' mourning, but that loss must first be validated and legitimized by others (Fowlkes 1990). This is because grief, much like the sick role (Parsons 1951), is a "form of deviance from a state of normality" and individuals must first be excused from their daily roles and obligations to be granted time to process their loss (Fowlkes 1990:637). In our capitalist society, bereavement is a "threat to productivity," and therefore "something that must thus be resolved quickly" (Macdonald 2020:126) and dealt with individually and privately (Charmaz 1997), so individuals can return to their work and labor.[11] This social imperative to move through bereavement

[10] I focus on *Gris* because of how it consistently surfaced for participants and is an interesting analytical site to think through how games can expressively and interpretively draw from an established mental health framework.
[11] We can think about bereavement leave in this context, which is a socially and economically constructed brief removal from productivity where the employee is given 2-3 days away from work and expected to 'complete' their grieving during this time, keeping their loss out of the workplace so as not to interfere with others' productivity (Charmaz 1997).

quickly, and the accompanying disavowal of fully sitting with and feeling loss, creates what Macdonald (2020) describes as a state of grief denial, where there is refusal to acknowledge and make space for our anguish and sorrow.

This limited time to mourn often only grants the bereaved enough space for what has been described as loss-oriented coping, or "those activities that … includes crying, missing, yearning, remembering, and all activities dealing with the loss itself" (Gillies & Neimeyer 2006:36). Societally, grief is often constructed solely in terms of this emotional experience. Yet encountering death spurs profound feelings of confusion and meaninglessness and necessitates a renewed search for purpose in a post-loss reality (Gillies & Neimeyer 2006; Hibberd 2013). Gillies and Neimeyer (2006) argue that those in mourning need time and space both to experience the emotions surrounding their loss, and also to engage in broader reconstruction of meanings through which individuals can more fully fathom their grief and reconfigure their sense of self and identity after loss.

In this chapter, I assert that digital games provide such a space. They grant opportunities for players to spend time feeling and validating their emotions while also processing and comprehending their bereavement, in ways that are antithetical to the broader social repression of grief. Here, I offer an approach to thinking about digital games and grief distinct from how they are currently explored in the literature. Much of the existing scholarship is situated within massively multiplayer online games and how both developers and players use these games to commemorate the loss of dedicated fans, developers, and even celebrities (Beaunoyer and Guitton 2021; Karmali 2014; Servais 2015). For example, online multiplayer games afford developers the opportunity to create characters and questlines, that is, a series of missions stitched together into an overarching narrative, that are intended to honor the deaths of those

connected to the game (Beaunoyer and Guitton 2021). For players, these games allow them to create community where in-game worlds become a site to hold commemorative ceremonies for players that they knew, virtually and/or in-person (Servais 2015).

In contrast, this chapter focuses on and features the single-player game of *Gris*, and the social alchemy that occurs between this game and the individuals who play them while mourning different losses. Previous research does exist on single-player games and grief, broadly, but has largely employed content analysis, examining games' representational content and how players might grapple with the death of in-game characters (Harrer 2018; McGuire 2020). Studies of *Gris* specifically have similarly examined its representation of grief and mental health topics (Baker 2022) or the artistic presentation of the game, more broadly (Hernández and Lorenzo 2023). To my knowledge, only two studies have qualitatively examined how players themselves craft meanings around grief through games: First, in a small study, Eum and Yim Doh (2023) asked participants to play two pre-selected games containing themes of grief and found that participants crafted meanings and self-narratives that reflected on their loss. Second, Sandra and Mutiaz (2021) explored *Gris* for how it broadly communicates experiencing a traumatic event and depression. To do so, they interviewed a small group of teenagers who themselves encountered trauma and depressive thoughts after having them play a few hours of *Gris* and found the game facilitated connections and exposure to participants' own traumatic events through their gameplay. I move beyond these works to explore how participants unexpectedly and serendipitously encountered *Gris* as a digital game that resonated with their grief, and to understand the reflections participants came to as a result of deeply engaging with their experiences of loss through their gameplay. I argue that not only did participants find and create moments that echoed their melancholy, but that in digital games participants felt a sense of

worldness that granted them space, time, and particular interactive instances to mourn and experience emotional release.

In making these arguments, I leverage the literature on digital game worldness to understand how a player's emplacement in games produce opportunities to create meanings surrounding lived experience with loss. Digital games are inhabitable gameworlds, ones that build a sense of a realized and imagined environment and the feeling of meaningful impact and consequence through player involvement (Calleja 2011; Klastrup 2008). These environments act as spaces for players to navigate and create for themselves a sense of an imagined world; the particular areas that a player explores, in their minds, become connected and vast. This gives players "the sense that they are inhabiting a place, rather than merely perceiving a representation of space" (Calleja 2011:43). As players enter and become familiar with a game's world, they *feel* themselves within these worlds, environments that they perceive as navigable and fully realized places.

As detailed in Chapter 1, a player's ability to navigate a space is but one aspect of the meaningful forms of expression afforded to them in digital games. Through characters, players can jump, swim, open doors, and attack enemies where each action involves the game in turn responding and reacting to the player. A player feels more emplaced in digital worlds because they can act upon them, and those actions come to feel meaningful; they have impact and agency in these worlds (Calleja 2011; Klastrup 2008). The subsequent sense of immediacy and presence, that players themselves inhabit and interact with these worlds—rather than this experience being mediated through a controller or gamepad—builds a sense of worldness. These digital game environments become spaces to spend time in, and through that time come opportunities for the identification of and interactions with meaningful symbols, objects, and narratives.

As this chapter explores, this can also include engaging with and reflecting on sorrow and anguish. While such themes may themselves be present and programmed into the game, their significance for participants are ultimately the product of their navigation and interactions within the gameworld. That is, I argue that participants find in the digital environment of *Gris* abstract and flexible narrative spaces to map on, explore, and interact with their loss. In the sections that follow, I illustrate the open-ended and metaphorical nature of *Gris*, combined with its immersive worldness, that grant participants the sense of time and permission to be with, feel, and work out their grief. First, I explore how participants identified rich metaphors that circulated in *Gris* and interpreted them in ways that refracted the meanings of their losses, such as the felt sense of mourning as a journey or feeling that, like the character in *Gris,* they too exist in a world void of color. Then, I examine specific gameplay moments—actions like moving their character or pressing a button—that participants discerned and then connected to struggles they were grappling with in the aftermath of loss. Finally, *Gris* granted participants a deep sense of validation for the complex and visceral emotions that constituted their experience of bereavement. Specific environments and gameplay in *Gris'* levels resonated with participants' intense feelings of anger and sadness, feelings that are often disallowed in daily life. Ultimately, I suggest that for participants navigating different forms of death, whether of a person, pet, relationship, or parts of their own identity, *Gris* offered metaphorical experiences that helped them to process and understand more of their mourning, and to release some of the emotional weight of their loss.

“To go from this gray world and bit by bit, add color to it”: The Interactive Narrative of Grief as a Journey

Participants reflected on *Gris*, overall, as a “perfect metaphor” of their grief. Through the game’s genre, gameplay, and progression from a colorless and voiceless world to one rich in various hues and song, participants came to understand their own grief as a journey. Participants saw in *Gris* a world that resembled their own after loss, where “all of the colors [are] zapped out,” “the world can kind of lose color,” and one can “lose your own voice in a traumatic experience.” Participants’ interactions throughout the game in pursuit of restoring color and for the protagonist to regain her voice held metaphorical resonance for them as they moved from “being in this gray bit of world [to then] have the first pop of color come in,” eventually to “when [all] the color returns back to the world” and the main character is able to sing. Creating and interpreting these metaphors provided participants with focus on structured imagery (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Schwartz-Borden 1992) to make sense of their grieving and help reconstruct their own identities and biographies disrupted after losses. I suggest that entering a vividly abstract and flexible gameworld like *Gris* and finding symbolic connections to their bereavement helped participants create “a new relationship … [and] new meanings” with experiences with loss (Guité-Verret et al. 2021:2).

One participant, Alex, conceptualized mental health as a journey:

> Especially with mental health, it’s like the phrase you’re starting at rock bottom … [it] is a journey navigating different obstacles.

He likened and melded this broader perspective to *Gris’* genre where, as a platformer,

> usually you’re trying to get higher. That’s typically the way that it goes or you’re going from beginning to end … [thinking] critically of how you’re going to get out of [different obstacles] physically and emotionally … depending on the level and which stage of grief you’re in.

Alex interacted with *Gris*, and after interpreting the game as one about loss, made sense of the overarching narrative in relation to how he broadly understood mental health as a journey and a climb from "rock bottom." Because *Gris'* narrative "was vague enough that almost anybody could relate to it," Alex could draw from his interactions with the story and his own framing of mental health to better understand, through the player-character, his mother's grief after losing his great-grandmother:

> So, I was able to almost picture my mom in the character's shoes. And seeing the character go through the stages of grief, because it's a side of people's emotions that you don't actually get to see, it's really internal.

The unspecified and flexible gameworld of *Gris* did not depict "a very specific situation that only some people could relate to" but had "enough detail" to connect Alex's gameplay with the imagined internalized anguish of his mother.

As he jumped and navigated from "point A to B" sometimes needing to backtrack and start certain sections from the beginning in this digital game about loss, Alex could conceive of his mother's healing as "not linear, surviving and recovering is not linear … there are going to be mistakes." Further, Alex felt that "the mechanics of the game were very much set up to really put you in the situation of being in those emotions" associated with each level. Taken together, while Alex did not explicitly describe how his gameplay translated to direct interactions with his mother's mourning, he nonetheless learned various lessons about grief generally through *Gris.* Then, connecting his gameplay to the loss that his family was navigating, he could imagine and possibly better accompany his mother despite not sharing in the grief that she was experiencing.

Another participant, Gordon, described exploring through *Gris* "his bigger traumas" of "grieving previous relationships [and] grieving previous losses of my own self, like wishing I was the more optimistic person that I was in my twenties." The main objective of the game, to

return color to the world and to restore the main character's voice, "resonated best" with Gordon because it is a

> perfect metaphor for what dealing with grief, dealing with trauma is about, [because] you can sort of lose your own voice in a traumatic experience metaphorically, and sort of the world can kind of lose color in a way. And trying to bring that back is a very apt metaphor.

The symbolic ways in which *Gris* evokes themes and feelings of bereavement better allowed Gordon to understand and articulate his particular losses, ones not of a person but of aspects of his social self and identity. Gordon described how *Gris* served as a space where he could "explore grief in a way where it's not about a specific event [which] allowed me to put in [and] … think of my own situation." This framing of grief as a journey to restore both color and voice to the world thus allowed Gordon the interpretive flexibility to insert and reflect on his own losses and traumas, through the capacious lens offered by the game.

The final level of *Gris* served as a poignant metaphorical culmination to Gordon's journey and became a space to take time and reflect retrospectively on his newfound understandings about loss formed throughout the game. In this final level, players find themselves back in the main temple that serves as the game's hub. At this point in the game, with the four in-game colors returned, each relating to a stage of grief—red for anger, green for bargaining, blue for depression, and yellow for acceptance—and equipped with new abilities, players must climb to the top of the temple and form a constellation with stars they have gathered throughout the game.[12] This constellation serves as one conclusive set of steps that allows players to climb into the bright light of the sky to reach the final cutscene of the game. The final moments of *Gris* are comprised by a challenging series of puzzles that require players

[12] Throughout the game, players gather stars in the previous level, which they use to build constellations that act as a bridge to unlock passage to the next level.

to use all their abilities and accumulated skills to jump, swim, and smash their way through the level. For Gordon, the difficulty of this final stage served as a perfect conclusion to his overall symbolic journey through *Gris*:

> That [level] always seems to take several tries to get to … It is I think the highest jump that you have to make in that game. And it's kind of like … as you progress more in moving on from grief, the steps become bigger and bigger that you have to make … you have to get better and better to get there.

Gordon describes *Gris* as a space where his continual movement through and navigation of the game's levels mirror the challenges he faces to understand and cope with his sense of loss. The game's difficulty requires Gordon to practice persistence and to keep going, that resonates with his resolute commitment to keep moving through his bereavement. Just as each stage of the game takes Gordon multiple tries and extended time to complete, so too does mourning require his engagement and confrontation. Here, the time it takes to progress in each level of *Gris* literally and figuratively grants Gordon space and permission to create explorations of his grief, and to move him closer to the end of the game and its final stage of acceptance.

Abby vividly remembered the time when, at 11 years old, her mother told her that her father had died:

> It felt like the color had been sucked out and everything was gray, and everything was white. And everything was silent. I remember being in my kitchen and sitting and my mom telling me, and we started crying immediately, but I could also hear nothing. It was silence, complete silence where at the same time we were wailing.

While traumatic on its own, Abby described how it was not until 10 years later that she learned the truth of her father's passing, that he had actually died by suicide. This, for Abby, "opened up all these new feelings of grief that I had to work through." When Abby played through *Gris,* which was about a year or so after learning about the nature of her father's death and the re-experiencing of her grief, she interpreted and connected deeply with the game's metaphorical journey of restoring colors to the world. Likening her own experience of loss to being plunged

into a world devoid of color, *Gris* granted Abby time and a semi-framed illustrative space to process the new knowledge surrounding this loss more deeply. Abby's progression through the game, to go from a gray world to one rich in color, was "very personal" to her:

> Go[ing] from this gray world and bit by bit, adding color to it was kind of cathartic because I played it at just the right time in my life where I was really dealing with the emotions of losing my father, and it helped me … And then as I traversed and … started to explore more of my feelings and my grief and how I felt about it, I felt some of the colors that were stripped away from that day slowly returning.

This sense of movement through *Gris'* world mirrored for Abby her own exploration of her feelings and experience of the slow, "bit by bit" work of processing the loss of her father. Abby found that this progression through the stages of grief and restoration of color gave her a "cathartic" relief from the press of her loss.

Other metaphors in *Gris* validated for Abby the process of being transformed by bereavement and healing. For example, Abby noticed how, with each stage, the main character changed: "her dress…shaped and moved with her, transformed with her through the stages." For example, acquiring the "Heavy" ability in the red level sees the character and her dress "literally becom[ing] a cube to get grounded" but also to smash and break open new pathways. In the blue level, as players navigate and swim through an underwater maze, the dress becomes "a triangle shape" to help propel players through the water. For Abby, these provided an

> interactive outlet to visualize more the way I was changing or the way I have changed already, because sometimes the changes happen on the inside. You feel different [after loss], see the world differently, but don't really exteriorize those changes. I like that *Gris* exteriorized them … I like the concept of changing and I like to see it represented in such an original way.

For Abby, seeing the character go through her own transformations in this way,

> stayed with me …When you lose someone, you have to transform, adapt into another human being that has to live with the fact that you won't be able to see that person ever again. And I think *Gris,* it taught me that lesson. I think it made me think about that.

At the same time, Abby understood that “the death of someone isn’t something that only affects me” but impacts her entire family, as well. Abby reflected that

> maybe … I can change the persons around me and help them … Because I see it as *Gris* returns the colors to her world … I can try to help my sister for example, with her grief in a way that returns her colors to her.

Abby drew from the metaphorical narratives that she herself created in *Gris* from experiencing both the world and the character changing, understood them to mean that she too needed to transform both herself and her world, and also that she could play a role in doing the same for those around her who also shared in the grief of losing her father.

Alex, Gordon, and Abby all encountered *Gris* as a flexible gameworld full of interpretive possibilities. They became immersed in a fictional environment that allowed them to fashion and reflect on their own narratives of their losses. Through the game’s progression and gameplay, they all introspected on their grief overall as a journey but in nuanced, unique ways, each an amalgam of their own personal circumstances and distinctive modes of mourning and coping. As they jumped from platform to platform and experimented with the interactive affordances of the game, participants internalized and interpreted their gameplay to carve a path through the effortful progress and transformative experiences of their own bereavement. Importantly, the game’s open-ended storyline and abstract, symbolic representations better allowed participants to infuse their own and varied experiences of loss. Navigating and meaningfully interacting with this metaphorical imagery ultimately helped participants create resonance, expanded views on and fresh articulations of their experiences with different forms of death.

"The flowers bloomed but nothing changed in the game": Producing Meanings from Small Gameplay Moments

The above set of findings captured the interpretive space that participants constructed through the entirety of their playthrough of *Gris.* I now turn to the small, almost intimate moments of gameplay and seemingly minor interactions that participants connected to their experiences of grief and invested with sometimes profound meanings. I argue here that specific gameplay become a means for participants to externalize, explore, and deeply connect with aspects of their mourning (Goldberg and Stephenson 2016; Neimeyer et al. 2010; Schwartz-Borden 1992) by more directly producing these moments through their interactions. This sense of agency, that participants themselves create specific moments of meanings and symbolism, better allowed them to interpret, connect, and feel their gameplay as mirroring and resonating with their losses.

Gordon, for example, discovered in the final "Acceptance" level after the main character regains her voice, that by having her sing, he could make the flowers in the temple bloom. While he simply "liked that flowers bloomed there," the greater significance of this small moment for Gordon was that he inferred a lesson about coming to terms with his own loss through this interaction. He noted that making the flowers blossom was not "something that you had to do to finish the game," that "nothing materially changed about the game," and he likened this to

> Accepting that something traumatic has happened … It doesn't fix the thing that happened—accepting that a relationship has ended does not bring that relationship back. All it does is make the present situation a little more beautiful, which is exactly what that [moment] did. It made the cave a little bit more flowery.

Obtaining the ability to sing, and experimenting with it to discover that it would make the flowers bloom served for Gordon as a metaphorical reflection on what it means to deeply accept a loss, the impossibility of going backwards, and a reminder that he continues to possess the

capacity to make his world “a little more beautiful.” In *Gris,* where the character recovers her voice only after players have moved through all the preceding stages of grief, the ability to sing and bring life back to the flowers does not gain any advantage nor advance progress in the game. For Gordon, this “made sense because you don’t accept the past to achieve something.” Gordon himself invested this singular moment with this specific significance, and in doing so, he built for himself a narrative about his grief and his own healing, and in so doing, became the architect of his own meaning-making.

Misty has played *Gris* multiple times, describing it as “such a good little place to go back to.” When speaking with Misty, she had not experienced the loss of a person, but *Gris* presented a flexible narrative space that allowed Misty to identify and interact with different types of losses, what she called “tiny griefs,” such as having to give up on ideas, abandon plans, or end relationships. She described,

> I’m feeling like I’m grieving … This is on a smaller scale, but sometimes when you build up an idea in your head and then you have to let go of it for various reasons…or just an idea of a person that you thought you had and they let you down.

After her first playthrough, *Gris’* gameworld became for Misty an environment to return to and navigate through as a means to reflect on the normalcy of loss, “to remind myself that it’s okay” and, like the journey through *Gris,* that Misty herself will make it through whatever loss it is that she is experiencing.

While *Gris,* overall, helped Misty remind herself that loss is a normal part of life, specific gameplay moments allowed her to identify, interact, and form different understandings around her bereavement. This created in *Gris* a rich space to produce meanings and interpret different losses. For example, even Misty’s first moment of control in *Gris* became a poignant space to quite literally sit with a sense-making opportunity connected to her mourning. At the start of the game, when the player-character lands after their fall from the statue’s hands, they sit slumped on

the ground and without any tutorializing, the player has to push a button or move the thumb stick; the character then gets up and the game begins. This simple action of movement, the “smallest of detail” for Misty, reinforced the idea that “for you as the player, it’s choosing to play the game … it’s you letting them get back up.” This overt and chosen act of forward movement for “a person dealing with mental health” is

> realizing that there’s something to address and deciding to take steps to address it … just sort of a really good reminder … to keep pushing forward, that it’s okay to go through all of this, and that loss is loss [and] you get up again and that you keep going through that journey.

What would normally be taken for granted in nearly every other game, the interactivity of moving a character forward, becomes yet another deeply metaphorical site for Misty to interpret and reflect on her own movement and navigation through loss. As a platformer, movement is one of the main gameplay mechanics, a mechanic that for Misty becomes “this gentle, encouraging push to keep going through it.” Misty’s time spent inhabiting, navigating, and moving through *Gris’* world becomes a reminder to “be gentle with yourself in the same way that the game is with you and work through it at your own pace and as you’re able.” Misty discerned that, unlike other domains of social life, *Gris* does not give the player a timetable, but rather through the art, sound design, and mechanics, creates a world where players like Misty can dwell and interact with whatever it is that they are mourning.

Misty and Gordon demonstrate that within a game that players’ identify as related to loss, they take even the smallest moments as opportunities to reflect on and learn about their grief. Otherwise simple gameplay mechanics—pressing a button or thumb stick—carries for participants distinct meanings; they thus find and build within the world of *Gris* an environment in which they can discover and interact with their sorrow and anguish in unexpected ways. As they navigate this gameworld, they explore and engage with an aesthetic environment replete

with opportunities for metaphorical interpretation. This narrative flexibility enables a social alchemy for players to create and infuse their losses, through distinct and specific gameplay interactions, with rich and detailed metaphorical framings to better understand and articulate their grief. Each moment, whether big or small, holds the potential for the kinds of creative production of meanings that arises when a flower blooms or a character rises after a fall.

"Rather than be thrown into this puddle of messy emotions and pain": Creating Release and Validation

Gris' gameworld evoked complex and visceral emotions that granted participants a space to find a deep sense of validation surrounding the feelings associated with their bereavement. Participants encountered the levels in *Gris* and found within them space and permission to feel and release the intense feelings that come with grief; emotions that are often dismissed and repressed in other social domains of life. In this section, I use the red level that represents anger and blue level that represent depression as evidence for and explorations of this sense of validation and release. In the environments and gameplay of these levels, participants created for themselves room to emote and validate their feelings arising from their grief.

Otto played through *Gris* shortly after he sadly lost his mother due to COVID-19. Otto and his mother had had a difficult relationship for most of his life, but shortly before she passed, they had reconnected and Otto said, "it was the best our relationship had ever been in my entire life." Otto described the aftermath of her death as "being thrown" into a depression, but that playing *Gris* "resonated because … the game is kind of playing through stages of grief." For Otto, the links between the game and his own experience felt quite literal: "At the end, you find out a lot of [the game] has to do with [the character's] own mom." However, there are no apparent moments in *Gris* that confirm that the statue, whom the character appears to mourn, personifies

her mother. Rather, I understand Otto's connection and interpretation of the game as further evidence of the social alchemy of his gameplay, that he made sense of the game's narrative because of the specific loss that he was navigating at the time.

Unfortunately, Otto experienced further losses: two of his closest friends had recently died; he had also been unable to work, and was on disability from his job, and thus was grieving a loss of his sense of self too. All of this "plunged" him "into one of the darkest pits." Otto thus connected particularly with *Gris'* blue level symbolizing depression. In this level, players must navigate a part of the temple submerged and almost completely enshrouded in darkness. In this underwater environment, players swim through a twisting labyrinth of tight corridors and passageways. The only clue to where players must go is indicated by small pockets of light that punctuate the labyrinth. Otto thought this was "such a great analogy" for his own experiences with depression:

> She's lost in the dark underwater. You're kind of making your way from one little area with light to the next, and you can't really tell where you're going, if you're going the right way, and you just feel like you're never going to get out of there, and you feel like there's no way I'm going the right way…like you're drowning in depression and you can't find a way out.

The gameplay loop of moving and navigating this space evoked and helped Otto articulate and validate his own mounting sadness and despair from the depression brought on by his encounters with multiple traumatic losses where "you're just every day, trying to hop from one little thing to another, one little speck of light to another, trying to get to the surface, but it just feels too hard." Otto directly related these elements of the game to his own grief; working through these feelings while playing the game, level by level, became a "pretty cathartic" experience for him.

Otto also spoke extensively about the red level of *Gris* that represents the stage of grief of anger. Players encounter a harsh and arid desert bathed in large watercolor splotches of different hues of red. As players navigate through the desert, they are enveloped in a violent sandstorm

and must find hiding spots to avoid the winds that push them back and impede their progress. Eventually, however, they acquire the "Heavy" ability where with the press of a button the character's dress transforms into a large stone block that can push through the strong winds and smash obstacles to open new paths. For Otto, this level literally "made me angry" with the "frustration of not being able to figure out certain areas." At the same time, expressing and acting on anger in the game proved to be useful and assuaging:

> I'm turning into this heavy weighted brick and I'm slamming down on things. It's a very angry kind of motion you're doing…it was like, you have that satisfying weight brick move thing you do.

In *Gris*, Otto both produced the feeling of anger through the frustration of being pushed back by the wind, while simultaneously and symbolically validating his emoting and expression of anger. With his transformation into the stone block, Otto used his weight to slam through obstacles and demolish a path forward as a means to progress through this level of the game.

For another participant, Syd, *Gris* was initially intriguing because of its music and art style: "On my first playthrough I was just like, this looks nice. This is artistic. I guess this was a good struggle versus adversity, but it wasn't super deep to me." But then his experience of the game shifted dramatically when he returned to the game following the passing of his dog: "And then when I came back to it [after my dog died] it was like the most impactful thing in the world." In particular, much of the significance of Syd's second playthrough arose from the gameplay, where Syd felt

> from an interactive standpoint, the game makes you go through these different obstacles that symbolize something that is related to grief [and] everything you do is symbolic and the interactivity adds another layer to it.

For Syd, it was a combination of this interactivity within each environment that provided a means through which to explore and reflect on his own emotions surrounding his loss. Syd, for example, described the symbolism he identified in the red level's environment:

> I guess [anger] would feel like a desert, right? It makes sense. It's anger, heat, some bitterness, a hot desert with no moisture. No place to relax. It's just sunny and red and hot with rocks everywhere.

It was one thing for Syd to be in and experience this desert, but the interactivity during this level enhanced his interpretation:

> One particularly powerful moment in the red stage, where you are using your [stone block] ability through a storm the first time. Like a very specific audio plays … This music sounds like you are fighting the hardest battle you're going to fight. And then you just walk forward, you march through that storm. And that is itself a strong combination of the visuals, the audio and the player interaction, because you're just holding down a button. Anybody could hold down a joystick, but experiencing that music, visual, and interactivity, it delivers a message.

Syd's experience with the gameplay, audio design, and environment combined to produce a feeling of pushing through and overcoming. With the press of a button and the tilt of a joystick, enveloped in a game about anguish and sorrow, Syd literally felt and sensed the emotional content of his actions of fighting, battling, marching through the storm, pushing forward, and trying to move through grief.

In *Gris*, Syd found a space to frame and make sense of his emotional experience after the passing of his dog; it "really help[ed] me to understand what I was feeling and validate it rather than just be thrown into this puddle of messy emotions and pain." Identifying the game as related to loss, the representational and interactive emotional experiences gave Syd "more space" to feel and normalize his own emotions, helping him "feel less in shock and more willing to accept" the emotional aspects of his mourning.

Gris' gameworld provided participants with an emotional and emotive space. The audiovisual aesthetics of the game's environments evoked anger and sadness through the symbolic natural elements of a dry desert and deep, dark water. As participants could navigate and move around these environments, they also engaged in gameplay that engendered frustration, confusion, and symbolic drowning, mirroring the emotions they felt after living

through loss. Playing the game thus granted them a period of time where they could viscerally surface and relive these emotions, in ways that proved cathartic and enlightening. Gameworlds emplaced participants in worlds and environments with symbolic and interpretive flexibility so that players could invest them with personally significant meanings. At the same time, *Gris'* gameworld granted participants a capaciousness to navigate, in their own ways and on their own timetables, the emotional messiness and uncertainties of their unique losses.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I argue that participants encounter flexible gameworlds that allow them to create space and time to sit with, distinguish aspects of, and more fully process their grief. I do this by exploring interactions with the game *Gris,* where participants found themselves unexpectedly relating to the game as a lens through which to reflect on and think differently about multiple kinds of losses that they were mourning. Participants found in a digital game like *Gris* permission to feel their loss, and its gameworld becomes an important space amidst a capitalist and emotion-adverse landscape that disallows time for and attempts to sweep under the rug feelings of grief and mourning (Charmaz 1997; MacDonald 2020). Participants found in *Gris* a world that does not ask them to mourn quickly or to definitively resolve their grief, once and for all, but rather provides a rich and expansive place to create understandable and relatable narratives that connect them closer to their loss.

First, Gris offers a flexible and open-ended narrative arc that provides metaphorical resonance for participants. As they played through *Gris,* participants encountered a symbolic gameworld in which they could discern and invest their grief with metaphorical significance that helped them frame and approach their bereavement. Through their gameplay, participants could graft their emotional struggles from the aftermath of their various losses and begin to think about

and conceptualize their own bereavement in terms of the game's content. Abby internalized the central objective of restoring color to the world to articulate and make sense of journeying through her own colorless world following the death of her father. Alex and Gordon encountered and experienced *Gris* as effortful progress through different stages of grief building for themselves a space to navigate and more directly engage with their own and others' losses. *Gris* acted as a flexible framework that participants infused with their lived experiences to create a gameworld that helped them make sense of the movement through grief.

Second, what would otherwise be mundane and taken-for-granted interactions became reflective spaces where, as participants infused them with their lived experience, they crafted specific meanings in service of interpreting their losses. As they entered *Gris'* gameworld of grief, each action, no matter how small, became meaningful. Gordon found beauty in accepting loss by pressing a button to sing and bring to life to nearby flowers. This seemingly simple moment led to a profound introspection on the idea that acceptance does not bring back what was lost but provides a bit of peace and calm, and that life could contain beauty again. As Misty pressed the thumb stick forward, taking control of and deciding to move her character, and herself, forward, she reflected on the importance of engaging with and continuing to move through her grief; that acceptance cannot occur without meaningfully spending time with and more fully processing loss.

Finally, *Gris* offered a gameworld that allowed participants to confront and release the complex and visceral emotions associated with their loss. As the environments and gameplay evoked particular feelings of anger and sadness, and enabled participants to express themselves through interacting with those representations, they found a deep sense of validation in the emotional navigation of their mourning. As Otto navigated the complex and difficult emotions

surrounding the traumatic loss of his mother, two friends, and his ability to work, *Gris* became a world in and through which to explore his anger and depression. Syd felt what it might feel like to move through grief, understanding that he, like others, are resilient and that he will process his grief and deserves to still feel happy despite the sorrow he felt from his dog's passing. Interacting with and progressing through these metaphorically rich emotive experiences helped frame the transformative potential of pushing through the resistance, finding your way in the dark, and returning color to the world.

In sum, participants' broad and specific discernment of *Gris'* metaphors constructed the game as a means to externalize their mourning (Goldberg and Stephenson 2016). *Gris'* gameworld offered participants a navigable and interactive environment that in many ways provided participants with a semi-bounded space to engage specifically with their sorrow and anguish, by offering structured imagery (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) that captured and symbolized different aspects and feelings of loss. Through its levels, platforming challenges, and interactive affordances, *Gris* asks of participants to sit with their bereavement and granted them opportunities to ultimately create their own meanings, sense making, and emotional experiences through the game but always reflecting their mourning. Further, this arises particularly from participants' sense of worldness (Calleja 2011; Klastrup 2008) in *Gris*. Exploration, navigation, and expressive interactions in the aesthetic and symbolically rich environment served as a means to create and grant space and time to meaningfully process and deeply feel the visceral pain of grief and loss. *Gris* provides players with the opportunity, and permission, to not only sit, but also interact, with metaphors that shape their understanding, articulation, and navigation of their mourning.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Before I played *Celeste,* I had never explicitly thought about nor confronted my mental health. When I started to feel the symptoms of my OCD permeate my everyday life, I was overwhelmed. With no one who shared in my experience and no frame of reference for how to navigate the burgeoning stress and worry, I felt alone and ashamed. I therefore never expected something like a digital game like *Celeste* would help shape my understanding of and relationship to my mental health. Throughout much of my life, I kept my hobby of playing games a secret, attempting to hide it from my family and using code words at school to talk about it with friends. Like the mental illness I did not want anybody to know about, my love of digital games was also a stigma that I perceived stained my sense of self and identity long into my adulthood. But neither could I ignore how important *Celeste* was to me, and how it made me feel at that time in my life. In the safety of my living room, where nobody could look upon nor judge the manifestations of my OCD and my time with games, I could immerse myself in the world of *Celeste*. I could participate and experience Madeline's journey trying to rid herself of her mental illness and relate to her feelings of worry and low confidence, and then eventually also to her transformed relationship to her anxiety and depression. This confluence of two deeply stigmatized experiences—mental illness and digital games—ironically produced such immense normalizing and cathartic feelings.

Amidst a landscape of mental health stigma and inaccessible formal treatment and care, my vision is that digital games are recognized as one of a cadre of valuable everyday, informal, and widely available spaces, where people can learn to interact with and relate to their mental health in ways that are normalizing and healing. This dissertation is a contribution to move closer to realizing this vision. My analysis reveals how the social alchemy between lived experiences and

game narratives and content yields deep and often profound ways that people encounter and create moments of mental health reflection and introspection from their gameplay. In this conclusion, I summarize the empirical chapters of my dissertation, present theoretical contributions and practical implications of my work, point to future directions for research, and offer closing remarks.

Summary of Findings

I began by examining the specific interactions and subjectivity of virtual embodiment that influence and play a role in emotional experiences and reflections on mental health. I expand on the more general definition of virtual embodiment, as the feeling of becoming different characters, to describe how this becomes an opportunity to engage with mental health. Here, character narratives take on new meanings as they symbolize and allow players to participate in different versions of similar experiences. I argue that through embodiment, participants create for themselves a safe space to express and feel their emotions and explore different relationships to their mental health in a judgment-free environment.

Specifically, I interrogate digital game discourse that connects virtual embodiment to escapism and empathy. In line with other work on escapism, my participants play games to escape from daily stress and the weight of everyday life. At the same time, however, I argue that participants practice what I call *intentional escapism* as they sought certain digital games and game features to elicit and create specific feelings that redressed their day-to-day anxiety, depression, and disempowerment. I also expand on conventional discussions of virtual embodiment to articulate a particular distanced dimension of this experience. I demonstrate how participants allow themselves to fully become digital game characters while at the same time remaining rooted in themselves. This form of *distanced virtual embodiment* enables participants

to graft their own mental health struggles onto digital game characters' narratives, and thus to interact and engage with their mental health in a less confrontational setting—that of a distinct digital other. Ultimately, I argue that distanced embodiment elicits for participants something akin to empathy but toward themselves. Participants find self-compassion as they try on versions of their selves through digital game characters to better explore and understand aspects of their mental health.

Chapter 3 explores a different set of relationships that participants fashion with digital game characters. I analyze the bonds that participants form with player-characters as separate social actors and find that participants construe the characters they play as experientially similar. Because participants perceive these characters to be like them, they perceive and receive social support through their gameplay. Specifically, participant connections with digital game characters help them feel less alone and to normalize their conditions, learn possible effective coping strategies, and envision an alternative future for themselves and how they relate to their mental health. I thus offer the concept of *experientially simulated others* to capture the specific nuances of how participants articulate and feel the effects of this social support. Digital games provide a space for people to encounter others like them. That these others are simulated, programmed characters does not diminish their effect on players feeling less alone; in fact, participants are cognizant of this simulation and come to feel digital characters and their journeys, fictions, and stories as mirrors of others in the world who too must possess these experiences. Their encounters with experientially simulated others give participants the hope that if they can form these connections in-game, it is also possible with real-life others.

I also argue that experientially simulated others intensify and layer the impacts of the social support felt by participants. Digital games not only offer players the opportunity to witness

and follow along the journeys of others but allow them to directly participate in these narratives. As participants bond with the different player-characters in these games, they *feel* the similarities through their actions and the haptic and tactile feedback in their controllers. As Madeline in *Celeste* navigates her panic attack, players participate in helping her out of it, pressing a button in time with her breaths and feeling her breaths through the vibrations in the controller. As Senua battles a never-ending wave of enemies in a symbolic refusal to accept her grief and trauma, players feel the weight of this physical and emotional struggle as the controller haptically responds to the swing of her sword and the parry of enemy attacks. Ultimately, I argue that experientially simulated others provide the benefits of similar others in the form of validation, coping, and envisioning alternative narratives but in a more personal and intimate way; players actively create and feel these bonds play out through their interpretive agency.

In Chapter 4, I situate participant experiences with loss within the digital gameworld of *Gris* while contextualizing this in a broader social and cultural repression and denial of the complicated emotional experience of grief. This chapter explores one of the more surprising set of findings to emerge from my data. As much as I did not expect participants to share experiences of loss in the context of interviews about mental health and digital games, the participants themselves did not expect to learn about their grief while playing them. In this chapter, I explore participants' gaming interactions with their loss by examining their sense of worldness and the meanings they create from acting on and through the game's environment.

Specifically, I find that the flexible and open-ended narrative presentation of *Gris* allow participants to graft their bereavement more directly onto what happens in the game. In this way, participants find in *Gris* a world of their own making, identifying and interpreting the symbolic and metaphorically rich elements of the gameworld's environment in ways that resonate directly

with their experiences of loss. This occurs at the level of the overall game as a whole where participants, prompted by the game's overarching narrative, come to conceptualize their mourning as a journey. Participants also create profound moments of reflection through seemingly simple and minute moments and scenes of gameplay. Couched in a flexible gameworld of grief, actions like moving and pressing a button at specific moments take on personal significance for participants who analogize those actions to giving themselves encouragement, for example, or allowing themselves to see beauty amidst their loss. Finally, playing *Gris* creates moments of emotional catharsis and validation because it gives permission to players to engage in gameplay and navigate environments that echoed their sorrow, anger, and anguish. In sum, this chapter argues that players become the architects of the gameworlds that they inhabit. That is, through players' interactions, navigations, and expressions, a digital game like *Gris* becomes a world and an unfolding experience of their own making, as their perceptions and interpretations of their gameplay shape and are shaped by the agony of their loss and their own navigation toward healing and peace.

Theoretical Contributions

This dissertation contributes to the theoretical literature on symbolic interaction and the social self, science and technology studies, and digital game studies. First, all the participants in my study experienced what Mead (1970) would refer to as a solitary yet social self, as they encounter and interact with digital games ostensibly on their own. In this work, I situate single-player digital games as a distinct arena for the formation of the social self. That said, many who take up the Meadian notion of the solitary, but social self often attend to how that self is shaped *by* society. My findings demonstrate the multi-directional nature of this interaction. Participants' sense of self are indeed shaped by broader social contexts and discourses about both mental

health and games. However, by paying attention to how they interact with games, invest them with meanings, exercise their agency in a game's fictional possibilities, and infer new lessons about themselves in the process, I also show that participants take active part in the shaping of their own self. I suggest from this work that through digital games people can tinker with, explore, and transform their sense of self in connection to their mental health.

By entering digital games that themselves are also socially shaped (Howcroft, Mitev and Wilson 2004; Latour 1992; MacKenzie and Wajcman 1999; Williams and Edge 1996; Winner 1980), players encounter a rich possibility space (Bogost 2007) for meaning making and expression. Participants step into these worlds and construe characters as both representational and as social actors. Through different kinds of interaction, participants find in characters social actors who are like them but also distinct. Players form bonds with these characters, engaging them socially and receiving forms of social support from them. Through distanced virtual embodiment, participants become and feel themselves as these characters who possess similar stories but represent distinct and separate individuals, providing a means to learn from a version of their own experience but then step outside of it. Characters are given life through participants' understanding and interpretations of them; they become much more than a confluence of code. And because these interactions with characters and the meanings players give to and infer from them occur in the flow of gameplay, there is an immediacy to the connections formed and to the sense of reprieve, validation, and sense of belonging that these games produce.

The result of this social alchemy is a transformation of the gameplay, itself, but also of the player. Here, I purport digital games as an arena for the active creation of experience that extends beyond the screen. I argue that within digital games exists a convergence of social, cultural, and individual influence. Individuals, who themselves are social actors who come to

games from particular biographies and positions, are afforded the opportunity to immerse themselves in and interact with alternative worlds. In doing so, they not only modify and manipulate the gameworlds in which they inhabit, but also carry and embed their lived realities creating the possibilities for interactions with versions of their selves.

In these ways, I also expand on and extend game studies scholarship that advocates for situating digital gameplay within and as a part of everyday life (Calleja 2012; Consalvo 2009; Malaby 2007) and those that center the player in actively constructing their own interpretations and narratives through digital games (Calleja 2011; Coles and Gillies 2021; Robson and Meskin 2016). By using mental health as a site of inquiry, this work not only demonstrates that is it critical to consider player lived experiences in their interactions with digital games, but also illustrates the value in examining the granular aspects of a game's worldness (Klastrup 2008) that elicit introspections about the self. My data show the entwinement of the narratives and character of participants' mental health experiences with those of the stories and actors they encounter in game spaces. The tacking back and forth between participants' broader social and cultural experiences of mental health and the minutiae of their in-game interactions—moving their character, parrying an enemy, and seeing the end credits roll—produce profound moments of catharsis and understanding. I show how this active creation of belief and narrative in gameworlds (Murray 1997/2017) acutely affects and relates to how participants make sense of their overall worlds in reflections on their mental health. I demonstrate how deep considerations for lived experience surfaces gameplay moments that create healing, reconfiguration, and meanings; and how players themselves identify and create these moments in their overarching encounters, and the more particular areas of immersion and interactivity, both big and small.

Implications

As my dissertation demonstrates, digital games offer important counterpoints to many of the prevailing issues plaguing mental health in contemporary society. Not only is the mental health landscape dominated by stigma and fragmented care, but the discourse connecting digital games and mental health tends to reflect an either/or approach—either focusing on their wholly harmful effects (Griffiths and Meredith 2009; Molde et al. 2018; World Health Organization 2020) or suggesting that games need to be specifically designed as therapeutic (Fleming et al. 2017; Lau et al. 2017). A more capacious understanding of the relationship between mental health and digital games, one that accounts for what I found in the course of this dissertation research, requires breaking free of dichotomous approaches and more closely examining the actual experiences and relationships that players forge with their mental health through gameplay. Given the persistent harmful rhetoric and devaluing of both mental illness and commercialized digital games, I offer insights from my dissertation for reshaping the broader discourse around mental health and digital games and thinking through the potential implications for therapeutic practice and game design.

Mental Health and Digital Game Discourse

A common thread throughout the previous chapters is how participants encountered and created in digital games moments of meaning and catharsis frequently missing in their everyday experiences. Participants felt alone, isolated, and stigmatized. In digital games, they found and produced connections with characters like them, allowing them to feel less alone and imagine that their mental illness could be normalized and more fully accepted. Participants described a strong sense of discomfort and uncertainty with how to navigate aspects of their mental health. Digital games afforded them a space to experiment, play with, and create meanings in relation to

mental illness. This work points to the need to create more opportunities for people to encounter validation, guidance, and healing in everyday life, and that digital games constitute one such informal space to counter experiences of stigma and discrimination, and perhaps to combat them as well.

I do not mean to suggest that digital games can be therapeutic for all mental health troubles or to recommend that everybody should play digital games. Participants in this study already played and enjoyed digital games irrespective of any effects they had on their mental health; perhaps this is in fact why playing games for these individuals could generate profound reflections about and reconfigure their relationships to mental illness. From this work, I do suggest that the value in looking at digital gameworlds and the feelings that players and games co-produce is that it surfaces and makes more legible aspects of normalization, belonging, and community that currently does not exist or is made challenging in non-gaming worlds and lives.

Like mental health, digital games are stigmatized; they are often construed as a frivolous and unproductive waste of time, objects solely for entertainment and distraction that separate us from the world and people around us. My findings clearly demonstrate the opposite. Players deeply engage with their own lived experiences around mental health through their gameplay and actively produce and create worlds of their own making. Importantly, they are the agents of the transformations to their relationships with mental health. While digital games and their narratives, characters, and messages carry the intentions of the developers, players are always already shaping their experiences of those games and crafting their own sense of reprieve, catharsis, and healing. Thus, from this work I urge for an expanded and more holistic account of digital games' role in society and culture, one that accounts for and centers games as a site and arena for important meaning-making.

Implications for Therapeutic Practice and Game Design

As I set out to write this conclusion and think through possible practical implications, I am left with a sense of tension and ambivalence. One could take my dissertation's findings and easily imagine that an emerging recommendation would be to see the potential of digital games as a powerful therapeutic tool or as a new part of the arsenal of formal mental healthcare. However, I fear this runs the risk of reinforcing the impoverished way our society thinks about and approaches mental health (and health more generally), through reductionist interventions, magic bullets, and easy fixes. The recommendation to design therapeutic games, or play games that already have mental health content, would be yet another easy fix. In this dissertation, participants' encounters with their mental health in games are spontaneous and interactive, where the effects that they felt depended on who they are and the lived experiences that they bring to their gameplay; this is not something that can be scripted. In my own experiences, I was surprised to find myself connecting with *Celeste* and resonating with Madeline's depression and anxiety. Juxtapose this to my encounters with the game *Neverending Nightmares*, a digital game that depicts the game designers' own experiences with OCD. I played this game to intentionally try and find connection with my own OCD experiences, but to no avail. I find that games' value stems from the spontaneous connections that are made possible from unexpected encounters with mental health in games. Said another way, any mental health effects seem to come from the social alchemy of the player—their particular biographies, where they are in grappling with their mental health and illness, the unfolding conditions of their lives—and the games themselves—their affordances, stories, symbolic and metaphorical possibilities, and aesthetics. Thus, as much as I would like to be able to recommend commercially available games be integrated into formalized healthcare, I find more value in situating these findings within the broader landscape

of mental health where there is a dearth of social arenas for people to feel validated, a sense of belonging, and a compassionate understanding in their mental health.

Similarly, I am also hesitant to make game design recommendations from this work. I do not believe that mental health influences from digital games can be boiled down to a set of specific practices or guidelines or scenarios that can elicit these feelings. As demonstrated by this work, participants find and create emotional experiences and mental health connections out of a variety specific scenes, actions, and stories within the games. To be sure, this meaning making is facilitated by a game's existing content, but ultimately *become* meaningful because of what participants bring to their gameplay. I also feel ambivalence because this project only captured the experiences of players. In many cases, participants could imagine the developers' intentions or speculated that they shared lived experiences of mental illness, but without data on game designers I cannot infer such insights. In the next section, I describe this among the future directions that I hope to take this work toward.

Future Directions for Research

I have a few directions in which I would like to expand this work and explore new sites of inquiry. First, I would like to pursue qualitative research that explores the development process of commercially-available digital games about mental health. I originally intended to conduct interviews with game developers as part of this dissertation, however, I was unable to connect with any studios or staff. I envision an ethnographic project that combines observation and interviews to focus on the experiences of developers, with more time and space to build relationships and rapport. I remain interested in observing the game design process and talking with developers about their perspectives on game design as a form of expression and what the design process means in the context of their own lived experiences with mental health. This

research can explore such questions as, how do broader biomedical mental health frameworks weave their way into game design processes and mesh with the often fantastical and imaginative worlds and gameplay that designers create? This project could also pursue questions that address the ways in which developers' own lived experiences, game design philosophies, and positionalities within the wider games industry are drawn from and influence game design. Further, by speaking with staff across a range of positions, this research could explore the ways in which the game design process, itself, might influence and relate to developers' own relationships to their mental health.

I also seek to further refine and explore the methodological and empirical potential of the docent gaming interviews that I attempted to conduct in the current dissertation. I envision explorations of this method through in-person research and ethnography. This project could explore the intersections of digital and non-digital spaces examining and meeting players both in-game and in physical spaces where they play games by themselves and with others. I could draw on more the docent method and have players walk me through different physical spaces of play while also tour different games alongside them, whether through my observations or direct participation in multiplayer settings. As this dissertation set out to intentionally and deeply consider everyday experiences as related to digital games, integrating in-person ethnographic methods to explore how digital gameplay and gameworlds weave within and through offline spaces would allow for further expansion and illustrations of digital game relationships to mental health.

Finally, I also plan to pursue research in other areas of mental health and digital games. Late in the process of writing this dissertation, I learned of a relatively new form of formal therapy that combines focus group-like treatment in commercially available digital games. This

involves players joining other players and a licensed mental health counselor online in private multiplayer and creation-focused digital game servers, such as in *Minecraft*. These private servers ensure that the gameplay only involves those who have signed up to participate thus creating a space to come together, talk about and confront their mental health through gameplay, and find support in a relatively anonymous and comfortable setting. To me, this is a fascinating area of possible inquiry to explore and understand the integration of formal mental health therapy and commercially available games. In the future, I plan to ethnographically explore this integration and engage in further methodological expansion of docent gaming interviews and digital qualitative research in the process.

Closing Reflections

Destigmatizing mental illness and building better access to compassionate and caring spaces for mental health healing are complicated endeavors. Because everyone experiences mental health in largely hidden and isolating ways, it makes sense to raise concerns over the limited domains in which we can come together and support one another. Given this, I cannot help but reflect on how players' gaming experiences—even as they created spaces of care and reprieve that are deeply social in nature—are ultimately individual endeavors. On the one hand, participants felt bonded to the characters they play, imagined that they are not alone in their struggles, and could envision a broader community within which they might be able to belong. On the other hand, it is still the player's sole role in their gameplay that produces these kinds of reflections, and is unclear from my findings whether and how participants actually found or built these communities. That is, at the end of the day, there still seems to be an onus on individuals to find their own solutions and climb their way out of problems, reflecting broader neoliberal

ideologies of individualism, ableism, and responsibility that undergird so many of our ideas about health and care.

On May 21, 2024, Ninja Theory will release their sequel to *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, titled *Senua's Saga: Hellblade 2*. While the first game focused on Senua's isolation as she journeyed through her own world full of grief and mourning, the sequel intends to emplace Senua in a world and story where she connects with others as she journeys to a photorealistic version of Iceland. It is as yet unclear whether and how the game will integrate Senua's mental illness into the storyline or how it will shape her interactions with others. However, I find this game to be a poignant sequel of sorts to my dissertation. In digital games, my participants came into contact with others, and through this came out of their own isolated world into environments where they felt accepted and safe. My hope is that digital games will continue to tell thoughtful and capacious stories of mental health that are rooted in and reflect people's lived experiences, but that they will more explicitly create alternative worlds of deeper community and belonging. Isolation and loneliness are powerful driving forces that contribute to and stem from mental illness. I wonder about the potential for digital games to actively counter that isolation and stigma by more overtly centering and signaling the importance of building community explicitly around mental health.

As Senua steps foot onto the icy shores of Iceland and interacts with people in the second *Hellblade* game, my hope is that she will encounter others who stand by her side and see her strengths.

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Appendix A. Semi-Structured Interview Guide

VIDEO GAME HISTORY NARRATIVE

[First, I was hoping to learn more about your general experiences with video games, and how you first start playing and interacting with video games.]

Can you walk me through your experience with video games from when you first started playing video games?

When did you start playing games?

First game you remember playing?

Why are video games important to you?

Thinking about the last 2 or 3 video games you played, can you describe what it felt like to play those games?

How did you connect with/relate to the characters you played as?

How do you feel when inside different game worlds?

How do character identities play a role in how you experience different video games?

EXPERIENCES WITH MENTAL HEALTH

[Thank you for talking with me about your experiences with video games. I'd now like to transition away from games briefly and talk more about your own experiences with mental health.]

First, what does mental health mean to you?

Can you walk me through your experiences with mental health?

Have you ever received a mental health diagnosis? Can you tell me about that?

How do you understand your own mental and emotional health?

Have you had interactions with mental healthcare? Can you describe what these experiences were like?

How did you learn about your mental health and well-being?

VIDEO GAMES AND MENTAL HEALTH

[I now wanted to ask you a little bit about how you think video games and mental health.]

Can you describe how you feel that games speak to and convey mental health?

Sometimes when I'm playing a game, I kind of imagine that the developer had some experience or is trying to communicate something to me because of the way they made the game. Do you ever feel this way? Can you tell me more about this?

Do you think there's a relationship between video games and your own mental health? What is that relationship like?

Has there been any game that's changed the way you view your own relationship to mental health? Can you tell me about that?

[Now I'd like to move on and talk more specifically about your experiences with a particular game that connected with you regarding mental health. Before we met for this interview, you had indicated that you have played and would like to talk more about [specific game]. Is this still the case?]

First, in your own words can you describe what this game is about?

Can you tell me why you chose this game to talk about with me?

Can you describe what it felt like to play through this video game?

Did any particular emotions come up?

Were there particular moments in the game that you really connected with?

Can you describe a particular character, environment, or gameplay moment that resonated with you and your experiences with mental health?

For this next question, I'm interested in how a few different aspects of the game played a role in how you understood and connected with the mental health story of the game.

First, how did the character's identity play a role?

The game's environment and world?

The game's mechanics?

How does this game speak to and specifically connect with your own experiences with mental health?

CONCLUDING QUESTIONS

Where do you hope to see video games go in the future?

And about their role in mental health?

Is there anything else that you would like to share with me today?

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