The End is Never The End is Never The End

A Conclusion

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ALL OF THIS HAS HAPPENED BEFORE. ALL OF THIS WILL HAPPEN AGAIN

As I start to write the conclusion of this anthology of works centered around the intersection of mental health and video games, I feel a bit overwhelmed. The two topics have had such an intertwined history that it is difficult to even call their meeting point an intersection. Instead, the image of a dual-track roller coaster comes to mind. As the authors in the anthology have shown, the intersections are varied in topic, theme, and tone. Discussions range from the effect of games on the mental health of players, the possibility of using them as tools to increase the well-being of players, or as a means of representing people's psyche and their struggles within. These multiple intersections between games and mental health have been weighed and measured psychometrically, legally, and culturally for decades.

This should come as no surprise. The object of study in the field of psychology and mental health is the behavior of individuals, their affective lives, and cognitive functions. Video games, in turn, provide a virtual space for human behavior to be enacted, for decisions to be made drawing on individual appraisals, and for cognitive capacities to be exercised. Crucially, to the untrained eye, the behavior taking place in video games is separated from the behavior of the flesh and blood individual placed in front of the screen. As arcades first became a popular pastime for the young, psychologists observed that players spent hours staring into the black mirror of the arcade screen, eyes glazed over and hands rhythmically twitching. As an ever-growing number of the youth fell into this seemingly cataleptic state, scientists became concerned. In 1983 in one of the first studies concerning

the well-being of arcade players, Gwinup et al. stated that"Video-game mania has affected millions of Americans in recent years. "[1] The tone of paternal concern includes a note of panic regarding the spread of this infectious addiction.

Though arcade games have long since lost their cultural relevance, debates surrounding video game addiction as a measurable and diagnosable mental and behavioral condition have carried on. As **Rune Nielsen** discusses in this anthology, in 2022, almost four decades after Gwinup et al.'s study, the World Health Organization (WHO) minted the gaming disorders, which are subsumed under addictive behaviors. The decision follows decades of scholarly debate on the validity of such a diagnosis, and its potential, or lack thereof, as a stand-alone affliction.[2,3] In the dual-track roller coaster of mental health and games, this is one of the shakiest sections of the track. But does the decision made by the WHO mean that this particular ride is over? This question is possibly the only one in this debate that can receive a firm answer, and that answer is no. As Nielsen states, the unknowns of game addiction as a disorder are many, arguably outweighing the knowns. The political pressures under which the WHO may find itself are also part of this complex issue. As the debate surrounding the diagnosis of game addiction will carry on, the political and economic networks within which games, mental health, and the effects that games have on mental health will necessarily play a part in the scholarly debate surrounding the topic. This is currently the case in the discussion around random reward mechanisms and has happened before, with concern to violent video games.

Game-induced violence and game addiction have traditionally been the two horsemen of the gamepocalypse. Like game addiction, game-induced violence and aggression also emerged from the arcade, where players ran over goblins at the skeleton-themed cabinets of DEATH RACE.[4] Named as the source of the first moral panic surrounding video games, DEATH RACE, released in 1976, was the first spark of the fiery debate that has since surrounded the portrayal of violence in video

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1   Gwinup, Grant/Haw, Tarek/Elias, Alan. "Cardiovascular changes in video-game players.", in *Postgraduate Medicine*, 74(6), (1983) 245-248. https://doi.org/10.1080/00325481.1983.11698546 (1983).

2   Aarseth, Espen et al.: "Scholars' Open Debate Paper on the World Health Organization ICD-11 Gaming Disorder Proposal", in *Journal of Behavioral Addictions* (2016), pp. 1-4.

3   Ferguson, Christopher, J et al.: "Policy on unreliable game addiction diagnoses puts the cart before the horse." In *Psychology of Popular Media*, 9. 4. (2020).

4   DEATH RACE (Exidy, 1976, Exidy).

games, and their potentially detrimental effects on the behavior of players.[5] In the decades following DEATH RACE, the research interest in violent games has not ceased but has arguably become more nuanced.

The theme of the preceding edition of the Young Academics Workshop anthology titled VIOLENCE | PERCEPTION | VIDEO GAMES: NEW DIRECTIONS IN GAME RESEARCH is a testament to this diversification of perspectives and growing desire to tackle the representation of violence, and the effects of violent game content in new ways, that treat both the player as a discerning actor and the game as a dynamic, culturally contextualized artifact. In the concluding thoughts of the introduction to the section on violence in games, Chris Ferguson notes that

Considering all of the above, I argue that it is time to reframe the debate away from the notion of the effects games have on people – a line of research that has seldom borne fruit. Rather, it may be helpful to understand the interactions between games and players, their motivations for playing action oriented games, and how such game play can be understood in the context of a greater milieu of a given individual's life[6]

In this volume, **Nils Bühler** takes the aforementioned different perspective on the debate, to explore not the effects of violent games on youth, but the effects of the paternalistic view on the relationship between the game and the naive player, or, as Bühler puts it, "an imagination of the youth". Such research is necessary in order to reveal the myriad social, political, and cultural networks in which games are embedded, as well as heed the call for more research that acknowledges the player in the broader context of their life beyond the game.

HEY YOU, WOULD YOU HELP ME TO CARRY THE STONE?

While on one hand, the World Health Organization was preparing to warn people about the pandemic of video game addiction, on the other hand, it was advising people to stay inside and play video games to try and guard themselves against an

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5   Kocurek, Carly A. "The Agony and the Exidy: A History of Video Game Violence and the Legacy of Death Race.", in *Game Studies*., 12. 1 (2012).

6   Ferguson, Christopher. "Real violence versus imaginary guns. Why reframing the debate on video game violence is necessary", in F. Alvarez , C. Maughan, M. S. Debus (eds.) *Violence | Perception | Video Games: New Directions in Game Research*. (2019), p. 25.

actual pandemic.[7,8] During the long period of lock-down, unable to socialize as usual with friends and family members, people turned to video games as a source of comfort in uncertainty and socialization without the risk of infection. Games like ANIMAL CROSSING: NEW HORIZONS enabled people who did not belong to the same isolation bubble to share an island where the only uncertainty was the price of turnips.[9,10] While mental health issues were dreadfully exacerbated by the isolation and threat of the pandemic, games provided players with a brief reprieve. This need for an outlet, a community-based support network also influenced the dynamics of, as **Kelli Dunlap** presents, video-game adjacent platforms, such as Twitch. Her discussion of the untrained, ad-hoc mental health carer position in which Twitch streamers found themselves during the uncertain and stressful times of the pandemic illustrates the diverse social networks that games and game platforms form around themselves and the varied roles they play in the lives of players.[11] Throughout the pandemic, the roles of games in the lives of players became more pronounced, as they provided a safe space to congregate and socialize, and sometimes even mourn and hold virtual funerals when they couldn't be near the absent loved one in the real world. However, this shared space and experience of living with and through challenges to mental health and well-being created a unique set of challenges for those who found themselves as the unifying factor in the online community. Dunlap's thoughtful exploration of the lived experience of streamers gives us not only an in-depth look at the roles of community leaders but

7   Canales, Katie: "The WHO is recommending video games as an effective way to stop the spread of COVID-19, one year after adding 'gaming disorder' to its list of addictive behaviors" in The Business Insider, Apr 2, 2020, https://www.businessinsider.com/who-video-games-coronavirus-pandemic-mental-health-disorder-2020-4?r=US&IR=T.

8   World Health Organization: "Online games encourage players to stay mentally and physically healthy at home in World Health Organization Departmental News", November, 2021, https://www.who.int/news/item/16-11-2021-online-games-encourage-players-to-stay-mentally-and-physically-healthy-at-home.

9   ANIMAL CROSSING: NEW HORIZONS (Nintendo EPD, 2020, Nintendo).

10 Zhu, Lin: "The psychology behind video games during COVID-19 pandemic: A case study of Animal Crossing: New Horizons." in *Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies* (2021).

11 Barr, Matthew/Copeland-Stewart, Alicia: "Playing Video Games During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Effects on Players' Well-Being." in *Games and Culture*, 17(1), 122-139. https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120211017036 (2022).

also an idea of the heterogeneity of game communities and their changing forms depending on the actors involved in them.

While the pandemic has likely increased the volume of day-to-day conversations surrounding the mental health benefits of playing video games, the topic of games and mental health has been going on for decades in academic and industry circles. Amidst these conversations, the genre of serious games has emerged as a lightning rod for both attention and criticism. Part of the criticism surrounding the benefits of games for mental health and well-being revolves around the relatively small amount of time a game requires when compared to other activities in our lives.[12,13] While the easy access to mental health and well-being apps and games promotes awareness and acceptance, it might also dilute the quality of mental health care by lowering the barrier to entry. However, the actor-network dynamic of these apps also appears to be changing. No longer an individual effort of self-development, games like the ones designed and presented by **Rogerio Bordini** and **Oliver Korn** emphasize community, shared experiences, and a space for people to find, if they so wish, a safe environment where their struggles can be recognized by like-minded individuals who can then create a network of support. Clearly, games can function in an online format and can host online communities– this has been the case since the first Multi-User Dungeon. The differentiating aspect however is the focus on the mental well-being of the players.

This approach to game design moves the game into a different position in the relationship between the game, the player and the community. The game is not the central element of the community being formed, but a means through which it forms, and offers the possibility to be an intentional actor in the quest for the betterment of the player's well-being. This approach can also be seen in other well-being-centered games, such as Lumi Interactive's A KINDER WORLD.[14] While most mobile apps apply various strategies to secure user retention, A KINDER WORLD takes the opposite approach, making the player fully aware that they can leave and come back at any time. In the game world, players can send messages of encouragement or advice to one another, or simply describe their day, emphasizing the notion that the journey to mental well-being is not necessarily a solitary

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12 Johannes, Niklas/Dienlin, Tobias/Bakhshi, Hasan/Przybylski, Andrew, K.: "No effect of different types of media on well-being." in Scientific Reports 12, 61. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-03218-7 (2022).

13 Fanfarelli, Joseph: "Games and Dementia: Evidence Needed." In C. Ferguson, Video Game Influences on Aggression, Cognition, and Attention (1st ed., pp. 163-171). Springer. (2018).

14 A KINDER WORLD (Lumi Interactive, 2022, Lumi Studios).

one. Both A KINDER WORLD and the NONELINESS app that Bordini and Korn discuss in this anthology deemphasize the relationship between the player and path-enlightening technology. Rather, these innovative games make room for human interconnectivity and enable players to help each other.

Much like the debate surrounding the malicious effects of video games, the discussions surrounding their potential benefits will go on, as it should, because science is iterative, and looking for the last word on the effects of such a complex artifact is bound to produce an incomplete perspective. This section of our anthology is not meant to fall on one side or the other of the debate. What is worth showcasing here, rather, is the ever-evolving role that games have in our lives. They can, and arguably should, be more than self-improvement devices. Instead, they can be a place to congregate, a means to form networks of support. Rather than searching for the ghost in the machine, we instead find other, like-minded individuals both within and beyond the gamewold, just using it to reach out and connect.

GO ASK ALICE, I THINK SHE'LL KNOW

As discussed in the previous section, creative works often reflect back at us an unexpected version of our own mental state filtered through the constraints and the possibilities of technology. Perhaps the most exemplary and holistic version of this process can be found in the representation of mental spaces, as discussed by **Ahn-Thu Nguyen**. It's difficult to address the work on the representation of mind spaces without paralleling the previously discussed chapter concerning the therapeutic use of game development. Both concern the visible, creative representation of mental processes that are are, by their very nature, obscured, private and unseen. And both concern the communication of this mental process in an audio-visual interactive medium. But the role of the human in this process differs. While in one, the developer takes on a creatively introspective role, with the aim of outward communication, in the other, the player is an explorer of a stranger's representation of their most intimate thoughts and dreams. The voyeuristic role afforded to the player is hard to decouple from the experience, particularly in an interactive space, where the individual's psyche hosts their actions. This discordance is exacerbated by what Ngyuen notes as frequent themes of mindspaces, namely trauma, emotions, and dreams. There is an undeniable sense of wonder in mindspaces, of a fantasy within a fantasy, but when we are not the authors there is a nagging question that can persist—is it our white rabbit to follow?

The question, of course, can branch into further discussions of ownership of the actions and narratives that are performed and created within a game. The thesis

Miruna Vozaru puts forward in the chapter concerning the agency of playable figures is that a feeling of shared agency demonstrated by the mechanics afforded to the player in the game can act as a bridge towards a more open and inclusive outlook on experiences that are acknowledged as being one of another. As Nguyen points out in her discussion of mindspaces, aside from the audiovisual representation of the person's psyche, games also provide mechanical changes and representations which reflect the mental states intended to be shown. There is thus, a link, an invitation extended to the player to exert effort to understand this matter. But representation is not necessarily enough. It is perhaps a looming necessity that developers should contextualize well/designed and descriptive mechanics into the roles attributed to each actor taking part in the interaction. This is likely a very difficult task that I, in the comfort afforded by this conclusion, can push on game developers without practicing the preaching and without awareness of my own role in the conversation. It is a task that requires introspection, the evaluation of our roles in relation to one another, and further, in relation to a virtual other. It is a task that cannot be done from a position of comfort, but only by reaching out and collectively deciding to make better representations of a concept as elusive and as important as the human psyche and mental health. But efforts are already being made to include both mental health professionals and people who live with mental health issues in the development of games that touch on this theme. While perfection may not be achieved, it can be strived for. In the meanwhile, we should keep in mind that we are entering a mind palace, and we should probably take our boots off.

CONCLUSION

Though I started this chapter by discussing the various debates that have accompanied mental health and video games over the years, I do not wish to leave the reader with the impression that such a history should be seen in a negative light. On the contrary, it is certainly a positive sign for a field of research that boasts dedicated academics who are willing to argue for and debate the merits and foundations of their work, and their implications in our day to day lives. The president of the American Psychological Association ended his 2003 speech with the hope that the introduction of digital games research into the field of psychology will be an innovative and productive endeavor, and above all else, academic. The debates surrounding the field—featured in this volume—are proof that his wishes were not unrealistic. Moreover, the contributions in this anthology demonstrate the possibility for ever more perspectives and innovative approaches to tackle the topic

of mental health in video games. The end is never the end, but who would ever want it to be?

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