

Mental Health

Play, Games, Mental Health

An Introduction

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Before introducing the workshops and contributions that made this volume possible, the editors would like to address the ways in which world events shaped—and continue to shape—the questions, the concerns, and the ideas explored in the pages to follow. Though the 2019 Young Academics Workshop preceded the initial outbreak of the pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns of spring 2020, the following contributions were composed, compiled, and edited in a world that was continually adapting to the dangers and demands of the deadly global virus. Regardless of whether the following contributions directly thematize COVID-19—and some do—, it goes without saying that the publishing process that produced this volume was not only influenced by the immediate health threats and logistical complications of the pandemic, but it was also burdened with the emotional and intellectual gravity of grappling with a research topic that had taken on—and remains—a crucial, central role of our global discourse: mental health. In this light, the editors were continually heartened and inspired by the resiliency of this volume’s contributors, who worked collectively and individually, in person and online, and who did not give up on this project in the face of truly unprecedented challenges and constraints. While this volume does not purport to have all the answers to the ever-increasing multitude of mental health queries and questions, this volume serves as a testament to the strength of community and the necessity of collaboration that has always been and will continue to be at the heart of scientific inquiry and academic research.

THE 2019 WORKSHOP

In 2019, the Young Academics Workshop (YAW) at the Clash of Realities conference explored the connection between mental health and play. While video games are at the center of the Clash of Realities—and, accordingly, the workshop—mental health is a matter that concerns play in general, so we chose to frame the issue broadly.

Nowadays, video game addiction is perhaps the first thing that comes to most people's minds when it comes to the relation between play and mental health. In the same year this workshop took place, the WHO made gaming disorder an official medical condition; a decision that was met both with approval and strong criticism (especially in the scientific community), showing that this is still a polarizing issue that needs to be discussed further.

But games have also been credited for bringing about cognitive and emotional improvements in players. In 2014, Isabela Granic, Adam Lobel, and Rutger Engels published the influential paper *THE BENEFITS OF PLAYING VIDEO GAMES*.¹ This publication contributed significantly to broadening the focus of the discussion, which gravitated primarily around the possible detrimental aspects of video games, to include the medium's cognitive, emotional, motivational, and social benefits.

Beyond the benefits of those video games created primarily for entertainment purposes, games can also be designed with the specific intent to diagnose and treat mental illness. Granic and her lab at Radboud University are once again spearheading this movement. Psychologist Daniel Freeman and colleagues see the potential of VR as especially promising, and believe that the technology will usher in “[a] technological revolution in mental health care.”² Recent projects like VIRTUALTIMES are attempting to develop VR tools to diagnose and treat psychopathologies like depression and schizophrenia.³ And in a landmark achievement,

1 Granic, Isabela/Lobel, Adam/ Engels, Rutger, C. M. E.“The Benefits of Playing Video Games,” in *American Psychologist* 69(1), 66-78 (2014). <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0034857>.

2 Freeman, Jeffrey, D./Reeve, Sarah/, Robinson, Amy/Ehlers, Anke/Clark, David, M./Spanlang, Bernhard/Slater, Mel “Virtual Reality In The Assessment, Understanding, and Treatment of Mental Health Disorders,” in *Psychological Medicine* 47(14) (2017), 2393-2400. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S003329171700040X>

3 <https://virtualtimes-h2020.eu/> from 18.07.2022.

the mobile game ENDEAVORRX obtained approval from the United States' Food and Drug Administration (FDA) as a treatment for anxiety.^{4,5}

Video games can also enhance our popular understanding of mental illness by including characters who suffer from them and devising novel forms of representing their symptoms. HELLBLADE: SENUA'S SACRIFICE is a recent popular example of a game whose main character suffers from psychosis.⁶ Games like Hellblade can also make those suffering from these pathologies feel like they are not alone in their struggle.

But video games are one of myriad ways in which we play. We play sports, we play fight, we play tabletop games, and we play pretend—to name a few examples. Play is a central aspect of human experience and, as scholars like Peter Gray have stressed, a fundamental component of a child's development.⁷ Nowadays, with the rise of helicopter parenting, children are at risk of missing the important life lessons that free, unsupervised play provides.⁸ All work and no play makes Jack not only a dull boy, but also a depressed and anxious adult.

The intersection between play, games, and mental health is as timely a topic now as it was in 2019. All of the above claims are still being openly debated, which is why they were the focus of YAW's 2019 edition and of this anthology. The articles that make up this part of the volume tackle the issues of representation of psychopathology in games, the design of games for mental health, and different perspectives on the effects of play and games on our mental wellbeing, all from the point of view of game design and a variety of academic disciplines.

Rune Nielsen discusses the complications the WHO's decision to include 'Gaming Disorder' into the ICD-11 catalogue faced and still faces. He raises and reiterates concerns regarding the effect it has on psychological diagnoses, as well as a lack of scientific evidence for and transparency during the decision-making process.

- 4 U.S. Food & Drug Administration: "FDA Permits Marketing of First Game-Based Digital Therapeutic to Improve Attention Function in Children with ADHD," June 15, 2020. <https://www.fda.gov/news-events/press-announcements/fda-permits-marketing-first-game-based-digital-therapeutic-improve-attention-function-children-adhd>.
- 5 ENDEAVORRX (Akili Interactive Lab, 2021: Akili Interactive Lab).
- 6 HELLBLADE: SENUA'S SACRIFICE (Ninja Theory, 2017: Ninja Theory).
- 7 Gray, Peter: *Free to Learn: Why Unleashing the Instinct to Play Will Make Our Children Happier, More Self-Reliant, and Better Students for Life*, New York, NY: Basic Books 2013.
- 8 Skenazy, Lenore: *Free-Range Kids, Giving Our Children the Freedom We Had Without Going Nuts with Worry*, Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons 2009.

Nils Bühler deals with the censorship of video games by youth protection law in Germany. For this purpose, he analyzes the indexing documents for video games by the Federal Review Board for Publications Harmful to Young Persons (BPjS) and contextualizes their central arguments in discourses of media effects research and social ethics. The paper conducts a Foucauldian critical genealogy of game indexing in the 1980s.

Anh-Thu Nguyen explores the importance of space in nonverbal storytelling, focusing on spaces that express a character's cognitive process—mindspaces or mindscapes. In doing so, she takes a closer look at the representation of spaces and mental health in popular culture and games in particular, through an analysis of the Japanese role-playing game PERSONA 5.⁹

Miruna Vozaru seeks to move away from anthropocentric views of agency in games and analyzes self harm and the representation of recovery in THE MISSING: J.J. MACFIELD AND THE ISLAND OF MEMORIES through changes in its agential network.¹⁰ To achieve this, she applies Actor-Network Theory and related game analysis methods to map out and examine changes in the game's mechanical layer.

Natali Panic-Cidic introduces the benefits and possibilities of using digital fiction for narrative-driven games and deals with issues of body image and the resulting psychological problems faced by young women and female-read individuals. As a case study, she refers to the WRITING NEW BODIES (WNB) a narrative-based, interactive story game application that can be used as an intervention method in therapy for body image issues.

Rogerio Augusto Bordini and **Oliver Korn** examine the potential of mental health apps and offers valuable insights into their design by walking the reader through the development of NONELESS, his app to combat loneliness in university campuses.

Kelli Dunlap inspects the role of Twitch streamers during the COVID pandemic in providing mental health support to their communities, and their struggle in maintaining their own mental health in this trying context. She discusses the

9 PERSONA 5 (P-Studio, 2016: Atlus).

10 THE MISSING: J.J. MACFIELD AND THE ISLAND OF MEMORIES (White Owls Inc., 2018, Arc System Works).

findings of a specific survey and, on the basis of these results, identifies ways in which streamers can improve their mental health.

We thank all workshop participants and contributors to this volume for their efforts and insightful contributions. We are honored to have their work in this volume's pages. We also want to thank Isabela Granic for her generous engagement. We had the privilege to welcome her to the workshop as our guest speaker and, while her work is not included in these pages, her invaluable input is reflected in the final result.

We are deeply grateful to the entire network of people who made this publication and the 2019 workshop possible. First and foremost, we would like to thank the team at the Cologne Game Lab for all of their help. We are especially grateful for the ongoing support we have received from Gundolf S. Freyermuth and Björn Bartholdy, co-directors of CGL and board members of Clash of Realities. We would also like to thank the Clash of Realities' board, as well as the conference organizing team and the CGL "Events" Student Work Group. We are grateful for the support from the Center for Computer Games Research of The IT University of Copenhagen and for the support from the sponsors of the Clash of Realities conference, in particular the TH Köln-University of Applied Sciences (Cologne, Germany).

Last but not least, we would like to thank the lively audience that enriched the workshop with their thought-provoking questions and comments. And we thank you, the reader, for engaging with this volume and hope that you find the texts that constitute it as thought provoking and inspiring as we did while editing them.

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