

***'Debris'*: Exploring video game messages and values through gameplay**

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INTRODUCTION

'Debris', created by Moonray Studios Inc. is a single-player/co-op adventure game, set in underwater Arctic ice caves. In the game, Alta, a mining company, is getting ready to present a new discovery in renewable energy: the debris. Dr. Sonya Rossi, Alta scientist and marine biologist and Ryan Norcott, owner of Fathom Productions, and his friend Chris are present during the inauguration of this discovery when something happens and they find themselves trapped underwater. Dr. Rossi is injured and she cannot move, the only option for her is to stay behind and guide Ryan through the dark water so that he can reach safety and send a team to rescue Sonya. Sonya will follow Ryan's moves using a squid-like Remotely Operated Vehicle (ROV), which will allow them to communicate. What the player does not know is that the accident, in connection with a very stressful and dangerous environment, will alter one of the video games character's perception as

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well as alter his/her ability to think and, broadly, make sense of the reality around him/her. The game is based on experiential learning and displays how people who live with psychosis experience the reality around them. At the same time, the game demonstrates how psychosis affects more than just the individual, but also the family members, friends, co-workers, and fellow citizens (Ferrari, Archie, Bush, & Clark, 2017).

In general, the term psychosis refers to a person's state when (usually a young person) loses contact with reality. In a psychotic episode, the individual faces trouble in distinguishing what is real and what is not. Debris describes psychosis using the three core positive symptoms - delusions, hallucinations and disorganized thinking (speech) - which serve as core game mechanisms. In Debris, one of the game's characters (Ryan) experiences the positive symptoms of psychosis, such as hallucination and alteration of his way of thinking/talking with others. Furthermore, Ryan's actions (or the player's decisions) influence these delusions. Psychosis slowly changes the way Ryan thinks, acts, feels or senses things in the game environment. The player slowly loses contact with game's reality without realizing it – as it often happens with people who experience first episode psychosis. Another character (Sonya) witnesses these changes and tries to make sense of the situation and provide support to Ryan. At the beginning of the game, player(s) in both single and multi-player versions will not know who is going to experience psychosis at different stages. Psychosis usually appears first in late teens or early twenties. It can occur both in men and women and across all cultures and socioeconomic groups. Psychotic disorders affect 1– 2% of the population (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2012; World Health Organization, 2001); this number does not include the friends, family members or colleagues, who are also impacted because of the affected person. If we include families and caregivers, mental health problems and illnesses impact a large number of people (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2010). Indeed, Debris considers psychosis as a collective experience - to survive, players need to find a way to make sense of their reality, trust each other, and mutually overcome crisis situations (Ferrari, Archie, Bush, & Clark, 2017).

Debris was designed using participatory methodology inviting five youths (2 female, 3 male; age 17-19), who were gamers with lived experience of mental illness, in helping understand the complexity of the psychosis experience and stigma associated with it (Ferrari, Archie, Bush, & Clark, 2017). Academics and clinicians were also part of the game design by providing information on the science and clinical knowledge of psychosis. Over the course of eight months, the five young gamers, Moonray Studios founder and project manager, and academic researchers met (seven meetings and two individual meetings) to discuss video game elements (game characters, story, interactivity, graphics, etc.), video game experiences, and messages around psychosis and mental illness. Each meeting was audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed resulting in a game Conceptual Model created to capture Debris' game experience, mental health messages, and values (reference removed for anonymity). The Model is composed of the following elements: Gamer values (fun, fantasy, interactivity, experiencing, control, autonomy, connectedness); and, mental health video game values (empathy, dignity, and compassion); video game learning objectives; and game mechanisms. The discussion between youth, game developers, and researchers, captured by the Model influenced and shaped video game messages and game mechanisms of Debris (Ferrari, Archie, Bush, & Clark, 2017).

METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS

Debris was released on Steam and Humble in fall 2017. Shortly after, players posted videos of their video game playing online offering a unique opportunity to explore players' experience in relationship to mental health messages as well as game ability to challenge, or not, stereotypes about mental illness. More than 40 Debris playthrough gameplays were posted on YouTube and Twitch; playthrough with commentary were identified and 10 videos were selected for final analysis (five from YouTube and five from Twitch). The playthrough with commentary gameplay videos were analyzed looking at Debris' game mechanisms: Experiential learning (experiencing reality with psychosis); game environment (reality-based "surrealistic" game); story (complex game characters and compelling story); narrative (Interactive stories and dialogue options); and symbiotic mechanism (players are intrinsically bound together in order to survive). We also explored gameplay experiences in relationship to Debris' game messages and learning objectives: (1) Promote understanding of mental illness by reducing stereotypes and fear; (2) promoting the possibility of relating to and willingness to help someone in a situation of crisis.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

Debris aims at helping players understand the experience of psychosis, and how it can impact different people in different ways. Using real gameplay experience, posted online by players, we explore the impact that the Debris' game mechanism had on players as well as the meanings and understandings around psychosis generated by players through the Debris' game experience. Currently, only a few video games attempt to represent the lived experiences of someone dealing with psychosis. For example, *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, a dark fantasy action-adventure game, shows the leading character struggling with psychosis, this game was also developed in conjunction with psychologists and neuroscientists to ensure its accurate depiction of mental illness. Debris and Hellblade are promising but also the minority in the market, as the majority of video games perpetuate "madness" stereotypes and mental illness stigma (Corrigan & Kleinlein, 2005; Ferrari, McIlwaine, Jordan, Lal, Shah, & Iyer, 2017). Players are learning to respond to people with mental illnesses in avoidant and disparaging ways. A game such as Debris promotes a different experience and learning. This analysis has implications for assessing and understanding the impact of gameplay on players when exposed to video games on the serious topic such as psychosis and mental illness.

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