To Hell and Back: *Hellblade's* Depiction of Mental Illness and Its Impact

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Keywords

Hellblade, Mental Health, Controversy

INTRODUCTION

Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice is a digital game developed and independently published by Ninja Theory. In *Hellblade*, players take on the role of Senua, a female Pict warrior on a quest that quite literally tests her sanity. *Hellblade's* presentation of Senua's psychosis provides interesting insights into how games can depict challenging, controversial topics (Mortensen, Linderoth & Brown, 2015; Shapiro & Rotter, 2016) and the effect that these sorts of serious portrayals can have on those who play (Papoutsi & Drigas, 2016). As a result, *Hellblade* is a game that could contribute to numerous conversations across various fields in game studies.

This paper approaches the topic of *Hellblade* in two ways. First, it serves as an exploration of the game's potentially-controversial depiction of psychosis. Specifically, we examine how various frames and design choices were used to create a compelling experience related to mental illness while alleviating concerns of trivializing such a serious topic. Secondly, this paper also investigates the various reactions to *Hellblade's* depiction of mental illness. Particularly, we analyze reviews and popular press coverage of the game as well as conversational threads within a *Hellblade* subReddit that acts as a place for players to share information and experiences related to mental illness. Our hope is that this paper will act as a stepping stone for further research in two ways. First, by illustrating the value of an in-depth analysis of a single game case study: from design to reception. Second, to inform future research possibilities related to games dealing with serious topics such as *Hellblade*.

FRAMING PSYCHOSIS

The story of *Hellblade* centers on Senua's journey through settings grounded in Norse mythology in an attempt to rescue her fallen love. *Hellblade's* setting, though quite fantastical, is historically rooted in a time before mental illness was understood. Historical elements help frame mental illness in a social context in which it is seen as a curse rather than an ailment. In fact, much of the tension in Senua's life arises from the stigma attached to her "curse" rather than the curse itself (Goffman, 1963). In the end, these mythological elements serve as artistic metaphors for Senua's struggle with her mounting psychological symptoms.

Gaming depictions of more serious or controversial topics are typically met with a great deal of skepticism. The notion of "playing" these types of games typically brings with it accusations of trivializing or exploiting topics that are perceived to require a more reverent approach. To better understand *Hellblade*'s depiction of psychosis, this paper analyzes elements of the game through frame analysis (Goffman, 1974; Deterding, 2009) combined with content analysis of various developer diaries created and shared by Ninja Theory employees throughout the design process. As Chapman and Linderoth (2015) argue, concerns over the depiction of controversial topics in games can sometimes be alleviated by developers positioning their work within frames of artistic expression, education, or a documentary-like devotion to accuracy. Ninja Theory's attempt to replicate psychosis follows many of these same techniques to provide a respectful depiction of mental health issues.

For instance, numerous design decisions educate players as to the experience of mental illness. Through various narrative twists (calling reality into question), gameplay (puzzle solving, the threat of permadeath), and aesthetics (binaural hearing, hallucinogenic visuals) the game creates composite of psychotic symptoms. As a result, *Hellblade* pushes the player towards a better understanding of severe mental illness without trivializing the seriousness of the subject matter. To maintain a respectful and accurate depiction of psychosis, Ninja Theory included multiple mental health professionals as consultants and mental illness sufferers as advisors throughout the development process. By providing developmental diaries, a mini-documentary packaged within the game, and numerous resources for those with interest or concerns about mental health, the game provides a great deal of information for players to learn and further educate themselves on psychosis and other mental disorders. Ultimately, the inclusions of these contextual elements change the frame of the gameplay experience towards one that is serious, respectful, and educational.

REACTION AND INFLUENCE

In Ninja Theory's final developmental diary, the creators of *Hellblade* admitted to a growing sense of fear as they approached the game's release. Tameem Antoinades and Melina Juergens, the lead developer and actress for Senua, both openly admit dreading the idea that the game may, in some way, offend those dealing with psychosis or other forms of mental illness (Ninja Theory, 2017b). While many reviews noted that the game's core gameplay was not overly "fun", they also noted the emotional impact of Senua's story and the need for others to experience it (Oh, 2017; Tyrrel, 2017). Some commentators posited that *Hellblade* may have overstepped by gamifying aspects of psychosis (Lacina, 2017) and even possibly reinforces myths about mental illness (Scaife,

2017). Yet, there were many who reported its depiction as eye-opening, cathartic, and even helpful (Ninja Theory, 2017a).

One of the more interesting resources for reactions to *Hellblade* is the Reddit community dedicated to the game. Like most other game-inspired Reddit communities, a number of posts are dedicated to conversations regarding interpretations of different scenes within the game. Interestingly, the community also serves as a place for people to openly discuss their own mental illness. These posts often take one of two forms. Those who have completed the game and attempt to relate the game to their own individual experiences (u/Merixa, 2017) and those who have become interested in the game but are hesitant to play for fear of the game triggering aspects of their own mental illness (u/Swiftzor, 2017). Posts such as these have numerous responses from positive reinforcement, to further discussions about the game and suggestions for coping with symptoms related to the gameplay.

CONCLUSION
Hellblade provides numerous avenues for interesting research questions. This paper is an exploration into two important directions for further research related to *Hellblade*. First, this paper argues that the framing and design decisions in *Hellblade* allow it to successfully tackle the potentially troubling topic of mental illness in a video game. Second, this paper proposes the importance of extending the study of serious or controversial games such as *Hellblade* to the actual experience of its players and the culture/community that from around them. For us to adequately explore the capabilities of commercial games which deal with controversial topics, we must always remember to contextualize them within the communities that play them.

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