

Making Sense of Lived Experiences with Opioid Addiction through Autobiographical Game Design and Game Jamming Practices

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Communities across the province of Ontario are experiencing an opioid addiction crisis, a long-standing public health problem across Canada. The COVID-19 pandemic and public health restrictions have exacerbated this crisis, creating access barriers to social services for people using drugs (Gomes et al. 2021, 3). Drug-related deaths between March and May 2020 increased by 25% in Ontario compared to 2019 (ODPRN et al. 2020, 3). The community of Brantford, Ontario is known for the second highest rate of opioid poisoning in Canada (Canadian Institute for Health Information 2018, 22), which is the number one cause of death for people under 30 (Ball 2021).

Focusing on the community of Brantford, our project harnesses autobiographical digital game design and game jamming to understand the opioid crisis from the perspectives of young adults living with opioid addiction. Digital game design enables world-building and new forms of self- and collective-actualization (Danilovic 2018), which have the potential to benefit young adults facing social isolation, poverty, stigma, and a history of trauma—all underlying causes of opioid addiction (Dasgupta et al. 2018; Ireland 2020). A game jam is a creative workshop where participants prototype games over a period of 24 to 72 hours. In our project, young adults will be invited to a game jam to make sense of, or render intelligible, their lived experiences with opioid addiction through the creative processes of digital game design—i.e., ideation, prototyping, narrative design, interaction design, and audiovisual design. We take Weick et al.'s (2005) definition of sense-making—a process of interpretation,

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articulation, and action—and apply it to the material production of an autobiographical digital game.

This study reframes digital game design as a sense-making tool—a tool of thought—for imagining new worlds, redefining selfhood, and challenging prevailing attitudes and beliefs about addiction. Our research team will explore the following research questions: 1. How do participants make sense of their lived experiences with opioid addiction through autobiographical game design and game jamming practices? 2. How can autobiographical games be used to build community health?

This interdisciplinary research draws on arts-based, participatory, and action approaches, applied phenomenology, and life storytelling to understand how young adults living with opioid addiction harness digital game design to foster community, develop resilience, engender self-insight, and develop new forms of knowledge. Action research can galvanize positive change in marginalized communities (Reason and Bradbury 2007, 1), which aligns with our objective to create an improvisational space—a game jam—for open-ended, playful exploration. Participatory research departs from traditional research to meaningfully engage community stakeholders in the research process (Vaughn and Jacquez 2020).

To conduct this qualitative research, we will invite 20 young adults (18-30) living with opioid addiction in Brantford to participate in two weekend-long game jams. Dating to 2002, game jams have reinvented game making as a social experience (Reng et al. 2013). Adopting the model of the inclusive game jam for marginalized makers (see Dames Making Games, GAMERella), our game jams will invite participants to explore their lived experiences in a non-clinical, oppression-free space, without pressures of competition or medicalization. Recruited participants will be trained in three software tools—*Twine*, *Makey Makey*, and *GameMaker Studio 2*. As part of data collection, we will collect participants' drawings, sketches, and other visualizations while they implement ideas, prototype, iterate, and playtest. We will conduct in-depth phenomenological interviews defined as encounters between researcher and participant who generate knowledge of an experience together (Hoffding and Martiny 2016). Data analysis will harness a phenomenological lens towards “generating rich descriptions” of experiences (Ravn 2019) across participant narratives. Importantly, our university's research ethics board has given us full approval to conduct this study during summer 2022. As experienced researchers who regularly work with vulnerable populations, and following *Researching the Vulnerable* (Liamputtong 2007), we are taking steps to ensure the highest ethical standards are achieved. For example, we are collaborating with a local community health center that has trained staff for supporting our participants.

The cultural impact of autobiographical games such as *Dys4ia* (Anthropy 2012), *Depression Quest* (Quinn 2013) and *That Dragon, Cancer* (Green and Larson 2016) underscore the potential of digital game design as a transformative social and personal tool. As Poremba (2007, 706) notes, games are not expected to “reflect back on our real lives”. In the popular imaginary, they are considered too frivolous for grappling with existential themes of illness, adversity, and death. Consequently, this project is grounded in life storytelling and the illness and disability narrative (Couser 1997) as potential analytic frameworks for theorization. Life storytelling is used in anthropology, medicine, law, psychology, and sociology as a narrative-based inquiry (Burke 2011; Gough 2008). The illness narrative supports the notion that storytelling can recover meaning lost through illness (Frank 1995) and organize experience through the power of language (Hawkins 1999).

Researchers have examined illness narratives in literature and graphic novels (El Refaie 2018; Hawkins 1999); and autobiographical games from the designer's perspective (Danilovic 2018; Anthropy 2012; Harrer 2018; Stone 2018). Addiction researchers have explored storytelling (Oliver et al. 2012) and drawing (Shinebourne and Smith 2011) as modalities for representing addiction narratives. There is a lack of research however, on how autobiographical game design and game jams can become expressive tools of action and self-reinvention for people living with addiction.

Consequently, our project will advance understanding in the fields of serious games, addiction research, and more broadly, the health humanities. We add to debates in serious games by focusing on the psychosocial benefits of marginalized creators designing art and narrative-rich games to promote community health. The conventional research approach is to design serious games geared to a "vulnerable population" instead of inviting participants to take creative control of the design process. Instead, we underscore our action-oriented approach to facilitate the creator's agency and self-determination.

This project will contribute new knowledge by examining how autobiographical game design and game jamming are dynamic practices for expressing lived experiences of addiction; disrupting stigma about substance use; raising public awareness of the worsening opioid crisis in Canada; and introducing novel approaches to community health in a post-pandemic world.

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