

Games that Play You: Outmersion, Game Bleed, and Transformative Vulnerability in Hellblade

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Keywords

Outmersion, transformative play, virtual reality, game bleed

INTRODUCTION

An ever-changing and imperfect world demands courage and strength, often derived from vulnerability – itself a fusion of uncertainty, risk, and emotion that is inherently uncomfortable (Schawbel, 2013). Games present players with a unique avenue to explore these dynamics, enabling a controlled yet profound emotional experience (Isbister, 2016). This paper explores how *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (Ninja Theory, 2017) uses outmersion—a design strategy that blends immersion with critical distance (Frasca, 2001A; Berge, 2021A)—to provoke transformative vulnerability. Outmersive design enables players to question power and agency within and beyond the game world (Berge, 2021B). Using the standard PC version as its core object, with supplementary VR version insights (Ninja Theory, 2018), this paper shows how *Hellblade* challenges agency, fosters game bleed, and redefines power through disempowerment.

ELEMENTS OF OUTMERSSION

Outmersion Analysis

While *Hellblade* is deeply immersive, its impact stems from how it unsettles that immersion. Outmersion emerges through moments of narrative rupture, mechanical futility, and emotional discomfort. It employs outmersion by positioning the player as a voice in Senua's head, challenging their sense of control while engaging them in her reality. This "critical distance" (Berge, 2021B) forces players to simultaneously inhabit and question their role in Senua's journey. Moments such as the permadeath mechanic, later revealed to be a bluff, and Senua's climactic battle with Hela blur the boundaries between agency and surrender, prompting reflection on control, power, and vulnerability.

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According to Larsen and Walther (2019), outmersion operates across three zones: mechanical (critiquing gameplay systems), fictional (narrative subversion), and meta-outmersion (real-world learning). *Hellblade* integrates all three. Mechanically, the bluff of permadeath creates anxiety about failure, only to finally reveal the player's lack of real control over Senua. Fictionally, the game's poetic and disjointed storytelling mirrors Senua's fractured psyche, blurring narrative coherence. Meta-outmersion arises as players contemplate psychosis, trauma, and stigma, extending insights beyond the game. This design not only highlights the interplay between immersion and outmersion but also reinforces the idea that "we do not simply play, but are played" (Taylor, 2009).

Transformative Play and Game Bleed

Games like *Hellblade* function as transformative sandboxes, allowing players to explore emotional and psychological challenges in a controlled environment (Bowman, 2022). Games that facilitate this kind of transformation often provoke what Bowman and Baird (2022) call "game bleed". Bleed manifests in two overarching forms: bleed-in (real-world experiences shaping gameplay) and bleed-out (gameplay influencing real-world perspectives). In *Hellblade*, bleed-out centers around memetic bleed (altered views on mental health), emotional bleed (use of binaural audio, mirroring Senua's grief), and ego bleed (rethinking identity and agency). Austin (2021) suggests that *Hellblade* dissolves the boundaries between player, character, and narrative, creating a layered metacognitive experience that enhances its transformative potential making vulnerability not just observed but inhabited. The use of such approaches in games design deserves not only more recognition, but further attention and exploration as it can create unique meaningful experiences.

Vulnerability in Design

Psychological vulnerability—often viewed as weakness—can be a site of growth (Sinclair & Wallston, 1999; Yamaguchi et al., 2022). Philosophers and psychologists alike argue that openness to uncertainty is foundational to empathy and resilience (Schawbel, 2013). Senua embodies this vulnerability, shaped by grief, isolation, and internalized stigma from her community. *Hellblade* uses outmersion to make players experience her sensory and emotional vulnerabilities, prompting questions about resilience and self-acceptance. Ortiz (2021) observes that *Hellblade's* portrayal of mental illness encourages players to confront their own emotional pain and adopt healthier coping mechanisms. Forum responses cite the game as prompting mental health conversations and encouraging some to seek help. If such approaches to vulnerability are adopted by more games, the medium could more fully realize its potential to foster empathy, introspection, and emotional literacy in players.

Narrative Resolution

The climax, where Senua surrenders rather than defeats Hela, forces players to relinquish control, aligning with what Baird and Bowman (2022) describe as "ego bleed": when players' own self-perceptions are altered by play. This forced surrender heightens emotional and ego bleed, positioning the player as both spectator and participant in her journey. The fourth wall break, Senua addressing the player directly, cements the game's meta-narrative, reinforcing its themes of resilience and transformation. The ending is a poetic culmination of vulnerability and agency, leaving players with lingering questions about their role in Senua's story.

Virtual Reality Experience

The VR version of *Hellblade* amplifies these effects. Binaural audio becomes more visceral, heightening emotional bleed. Players describe feeling as if Senua's voices are their own (Jagneaux, 2018). Reviews highlight VR's ability to deepen connection and vulnerability, with players describing the experience as profoundly unsettling yet transformative (VR Realm, 2018). VR has proven effective in therapeutic contexts, such as treating PTSD through virtual reality exposure therapy (Rothbaum & Schwartz, 2022). As Berge (2021A) suggests, VR's potential lies not just in immersion but in its ability to foster outmersion through embodied discomfort and reflective distance. By leveraging the immersive potential of VR, *Hellblade* expands the possibilities of vulnerability-centered game design, offering a compelling model for future titles that engage with mental health themes.

CONCLUSION

Video games are transformative portals, offering players unique opportunities to explore vulnerability and self-reflection. *Hellblade* exemplifies outmersive design that merges narrative fragmentation, mechanical subversion, and psychological depth. It calls players to not just act, but to feel, reflect, and grow. It demonstrates the potential of games to reach beyond the magic circle and inspire real-world change. A follow-up empirical study on *Hellblade* and *Hellblade 2* (Ninja Theory, 2018, 2024) will use player interviews and phenomenological analysis to test how these dynamics evolve. As game designers, we must continue to explore the edges of immersion, and outmersion can offer a path toward richer, more transformative play.

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