Becoming, Not Being: Rethinking Mental Illness at the Crossroads of Videogame Representation

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Traditional frameworks for analyzing mental illness in media frequently rely on fixed representations that treat complex conditions as metaphorical devices, narrative problems to be solved, or stable markers of difference. When applied uncritically to video games, these paradigms risk flattening the medium's distinctive procedural and interactive capacities. Instead of recognizing that games can model mental illness as a lived, relational, and evolving phenomenon, conventional approaches tend to frame it as a static trope—an obstacle to overcome or a puzzle to resolve before the story's conclusion. Such readings neglect the unique affordances that video games offer, particularly their ability to engage players directly in dynamic experiences that resist easy categorization. This paper argues that Gilles Deleuze's concepts of "becoming" and "assemblage" provide a more productive framework for depicting mental illness in video games. By drawing on a non-representational approach, we can move beyond the limitations of symbolic depictions and toward an appreciation of mental illness as an emergent, affective multiplicity that unfolds through the interplay of the videogame, player, and sensory design.

Deleuze's notion of becoming challenges static conceptions of identity and meaning by emphasizing continuous transformation and relationality. Rather than viewing entities as fixed and self-contained, becoming insists that they are always in flux, defined through processes of interaction and change (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). His theory of assemblage complements this perspective by highlighting how complex arrangements of heterogeneous elements—human and nonhuman, material and affective—coalesce to produce meaning and affect (Cremin, 2015). Together, becoming and assemblage encourage a shift away from reductive binaries such as sane/insane or healthy/pathological. Instead of affirming stable categories that can be neatly represented, these concepts push us to consider mental illness as a procedural event shaped by multiple forces. In games, these forces include elements such as narrative, mechanics, audiovisual design, player input, and cultural contexts. Such a non-representational lens resonates with emerging insights in disability and mad studies, which question dominant cultural narratives that stigmatize and

pathologize mental illness by treating it as a stable category ripe for metaphorical appropriation and narrative resolution.

Historically, media representations of mental illness have leaned on binary constructions that separate so-called normality from aberration. Scholars like Mitchell and Snyder have illustrated how disability in traditional narratives often functions as a "narrative prosthesis"—a device mobilized to signify lack or deviance, only to be fixed or eliminated by a story's end (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000). This pattern denies the complexity and fluidity of lived experience, presenting mental illness as a static problem rather than an ongoing relational condition. Deleuze's critique of representational logic aligns with this challenge, exposing how binary thinking forecloses multiplicity. By acknowledging the complexity inherent in human difference, Deleuzian non-representational theory, when combined with insights gained from disability and mad studies, creates a conceptual space for more nuanced portrayals that neither romanticize nor demonize mental illness, but understand it as part of a broader ecology of human variation.

Video games, with their interactive and procedural elements, could provide fertile ground for these more nuanced portrayals. Instead of simply showing mental illness as a fixed trait—often reduced to villainous madness or pitiable weakness—games have the capacity to simulate processes, model systems, and engage players in relational experiences that shift over time. Despite the potential of the medium, many titles default to the same reductive tropes found in other media. Complex conditions are frequently harnessed as cheap narrative devices or stable character traits that signal antagonism or victimhood, rarely treated as evolving, intimately felt, and context-dependent conditions that affect and are affected by their environment. The challenge, then, is to identify examples where the medium's unique strengths are harnessed to model mental illness more dynamically, and to analyze how a Deleuzian framework can sharpen our understanding of these achievements.

Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice (Ninja Theory 2017) offers a compelling case study. Rather than relying solely on cinematic tropes to represent psychosis as a stable marker of difference, the game employs procedural and sensory strategies that immerse players in the lived dimensions of Senua's condition. Mechanically, the use of binaural audio simulates auditory hallucinations that shift in response to player action and environmental context. Instead of providing a detached depiction of Senua's mental state, this approach entangles the player in her experience. The player does not simply observe Senua's psychosis from the outside but participates in a relational process that emerges through gameplay. Environmental storytelling reinforces this dynamic: visual and spatial elements within the game world mutate and align with Senua's evolving perceptions, challenging the notion that mental illness is a fixed narrative device. *Hellblade* models psychosis as a becoming rather than a trait, mirroring Deleuze's emphasis on processual transformation rather than static identity.

Deleuze's theory of assemblage further illuminates how *Hellblade* orchestrates this non-representational portrayal. The game's meaning does not reside in one fixed element—a single plot point or symbolic image—but emerges through the interplay of multiple forces. Mechanics, narrative cues, audio design, visual elements, and player interaction form a shifting assemblage that resists a definitive reading of psychosis as a closed category. Instead, psychosis becomes an event that unfolds dynamically, continuously reconfigured by the player's agency and the game's procedural logic. This assemblage perspective reveals how games can produce affect

and understanding outside the confines of stable representation, enabling a more faithful engagement with the fluidity and multiplicity of mental illness as experienced in lived reality.

To be sure, *Hellblade* does not entirely escape traditional representational forms. The presence of certain cinematic sequences and symbolic markers occasionally reassert the familiar logic of representation, threatening to pin mental illness back into static meaning. Yet even these moments highlight the tension between non-representational potentials and the commercial, narrative-driven conventions of mainstream game production. Rather than dismissing such tensions, acknowledging them helps us understand the complexities of implementing a Deleuzian, process-oriented framework in practice. The game's achievements nonetheless mark a significant step forward by demonstrating how interactive media can move beyond simplistic portrayals and toward a richer engagement with difference.

By situating *Hellblade* within a Deleuzian framework, this paper aims to contribute to interdisciplinary dialogues in game studies, disability studies, and mad studies. Deleuze's philosophy enables us to articulate why static representations are insufficient for capturing the relational, ongoing nature of mental illness and how video games might better express these complexities through their procedural form. Ultimately, this approach does more than critique existing stereotypes: it points to a reimagining of cultural narratives that validates the fluidity of embodied experience and resists binary logics. In an era in which interactive media occupy a central place in cultural production, embracing Deleuzian ideas can encourage designers, scholars, and players to see mental illness as neither a metaphor to be resolved nor a token of otherness, but as a constellation of processes unfolding in a dynamic, relational field. By doing so, we open the door to more inclusive, ethically responsive representations that better reflect the lived experiences of individuals navigating mental illness—not as a fixed identity, but as an evolving event always in the process of becoming.

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