**ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

# Playing with the Narrative of Mental Illness: Communication Beyond Serious Empathy Games

*Jugar amb la narrativa de la malaltia mental: la comunicació més enllá dels jocs seriosos d'empatia*

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## Abstract

This essay focuses on the implicit narrative of mental illness communicated through the cultural rhetoric of serious games and empathy games. Games about mental illness are seen to promote a change in behavior and foster greater understanding by breaking down the boundary between the neuro-non-normative avatar and players. However, rather than cultivating empathy, these games reinforce notions of mental illness as the unknowable Other. Using Infinite Fall's *Night in the Woods* (2017), this essay demonstrates how the use of non-serious elements, changes to the narrative premise, and limited insight into the avatar's mind create a new communicative situation. Oscillating between sameness and difference, the game shows mental illness as a normal part of life, of growing up and getting to know yourself and the people around you.

## Keywords

## Resum

Aquest assaig se centra en la narrativa implícita de la malaltia mental comunicada a través de la retòrica cultural dels jocs seriosos i els jocs d'empatia. Es considera que els jocs sobre la malaltia mental promouen un canvi de comportament i fomenten una major comprensió trencant la barrera entre l'avatar neuro-no-normatiu i els jugadors. No obstant això, més que cultivar l'empatia, aquests jocs reforcen les nocions de la malaltia mental com l'Altre desconegut. Utilitzant *Night in the Woods* (2017), d'Infinite Fall, aquest assaig demostra com l'ús d'elements no seriosos, canvis en la premissa narrativa i una visió limitada de la ment de l'avatar creen una nova situació comunicativa. Oscil·lant entre la similitud i la diferència, el joc mostra la malaltia mental com una part normal de la vida, de créixer i conèixer-se a un mateix i a les persones que t'envolten.

## Paraules clau

# 1. Introduction

Mental illness is both over- and underrepresented in videogames. Players are intimately familiar with the asylum or psychiatric ward as game world (e.g., *Silent Hill* (2001), *Amnesia* (2010), *Outlast* (2013), *The Evil Within* (2014)) and the "mental patient as the principal villain" (Yarwood, 2015; e.g., *Until Dawn* (2015), *Dishonored 2* (2016), *Far Cry 5* (2018), *Days Gone* (2019)). The use of mental illness as a narrative device to induce fear or suspense can be found in all media, with videogames being no exception to the stigmatizing rule. In a quantitative review study, Jozef Buday and colleagues evaluated 456 games released between 2002 and 2021 for their representation of mental illness, finding that "54 games included a representation of mental illness... 43 instances were negative (75%), 13 were neutral and only 1 instance was clearly depicted as positive" (2022). These numbers are indicative of mental illness still being treated as "a sign of barely subdued violence and of the threat of the unknown depths of the mind" (Cooke 2017, 2).

As a counterbalance to AAA-titles, which are videogames developed and distributed by high-budget, big-name publishers with large international fan and player bases, indie games strike a different tone in their representation of mental illness. Typically developed by a single person or small team, many indie developers see their games as a means to communicate subjective experiences of living with mental illness and allow players to experience this perspective through gameplay. Such representations are becoming increasingly common in the indie industry, with titles such as Zoë Quinn's *Depression Quest* (2013), WZO Games Inc.'s *Actual Sunlight* (2014), Killmonday Games AB's *Fran Bow* (2015), Ninja Theory's *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (2017), Levall Games's *Please Knock on My Door* (2017), Maddy Makes Games Inc.'s *Celeste* (2018), Charlie Francis Cassidy's *In My Mind* (2018), and OMOCAT, LLC's *OMORI* (2020). These games are usually seen as being more 'accurate', 'sensitive', and 'empathic' to the lived experiences of mental illness and the people who live with them.

While it is important to point out, my intention in this essay is not to dwell on the ways in which videogames (mis)represent mental illness or uncritically reproduce the binary between AAA and indie titles. Instead, this essay engages with the ways we —as players, (amateur) critics, and scholars— think and talk about these games. In this sense, the aim of this essay is twofold. First, I disentangle the implicit narrative of the genres to which most videogames about mental illness are ascribed, namely serious games and empathy games. I take cue from Bo Ruberg's critique of the "rhetoric of empathy" (2020) and Ruberg and Rainforest Scully-Blaker "cultural rhetorics" (2021) of care in videogames. Expanding on these studies, I argue that the quasi-genre of serious empathy games reinforces the idea of mental illness as the unknowable Other rather than promoting greater understanding. Second, I focus on the implicit narrative of mental illness that choices in a game's narrative, design, and mechanics communicate. I show how this implicit narrative often thwarts the overt aim of making lived experiences of neuro-non-normativity more accessible by reducing avatars to their mental states and using them for plot progression.

To illustrate the influence of generic ascriptions and choices in game design to ease and limit the communication of mental illness in and through videogames, this essay is divided into two parts. First, the essay contextualizes the criticism of serious games and empathy games that has been growing over the past decade. Using *Depression Quest* and *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, two of the most discussed serious empathy games, I juxtapose the genres' pro-social rhetoric with these games' functionalization of mental illness as a storytelling device. The second part of this essay discusses Infinite Fall's *Night in the Woods* (2017), a non-serious serious game that both discusses and does not discuss mental illness. I argue that this oscillation forges empathic bonds while complicating players' empathy, balancing sameness and difference between playable character and player, and thereby allowing them to see mental illness as the familiar Other.

## 2. Serious Empathy Games: Generic Ascriptions and the Implicit Narrative of Mental Illness

Videogames provide a dual route of communication about mental illness, helping those experiencing symptoms to express their lived realities while allowing others to participate in and learn about them (Diver 2016, 66–72). Today, videogames are being used in psychotherapy (Jung &Gillet 2021), and studies show that playing them promotes mental health literacy (Ito-Jaeger *et al.* 2022) and reduces stigma (Cangas *et al.* 2017). Paramount to the success of games in communicating about mental illness is the medium's feature of interactivity, which allows players to control digital avatars and playable characters and experience the game world through them. Games' simulation environment, coupled with players' agency, results in an embodied experience that parallels real-world experiences (Bogost 2007, 34; Gee 2014). This fundamental feature of videogames takes on added significance in representations of mental illness because "[f]inding ways to allow players to experience perspectives other than their own is particularly difficult when the perspective you are trying to show involves an entirely different way of thinking to what they're used to" (Cole & Zammit 2020, 27). For players to experience this other —and Othered— perspective, Ferrari and colleagues identify five salient features that videogames should include, relating it to psychosis: "Promoting awareness about the problem; Educating people on psychosis causes; Recognizing psychosis as a collective experience; Promoting listening and talking about the problem; and promoting bystander 'Empathy'" (Ferrari *et al.* 2016, 2). These features point to two overarching aims, namely to educate players and promote greater understanding. These aims come together in two genres, serious games and empathy games.

"Serious games are both games — and not games" (Michael & Chen 2006, 43), as their main premise is to educate rather than entertain players (Ratan & Ritterfeld 2009, 11). Serious games can be found in "government, educational, corporate, [and] healthcare" areas (Susi et al. 2007) to help players understand complex and abstract processes through digital game-based learning. To illustrate the difference between 'serious' and 'non-serious' games, consider the first game attributed to the genre, *America's Army* (2002). The game was praised for its realistic rendition of military combat, from the handling of weapons to the need for medical training to heal teammates. The difference between *America's Army* and other first-person shooters, such as the *Battlefield* or *Call of Duty* series, lies in the purpose of the game. Not simply another offshoot of a AAA studio, *America's Army* was released free-to-play by the U.S. military to recruit skilled

players. As such, the main aim of the game was not to entertain but to inform them about a prospective career in the U.S. army and test players' skills in one go.

Since 2002, the label 'serious game' has been applied to a variety of titles that are not issued or published by official institutions and is often mentioned in connection with representations of marginalized groups. The purpose of today's serious games is to change players' behavior in the sense of fostering a deeper understanding of these groups of people (Prensky 2001). In this respect, the genre of 'serious game' merges with that of the 'empathy game', that is, a type of game that harnesses empathy not just as a feeling but "as [the] principle of game design" (Ruberg 2020, 56). Because players act as the avatar or playable character and digitally walk in their shoes (Bogost 2011, 18), some scholars see videogames as "empathy machines" (Bowman 2021). This feature becomes essential when turning to games whose characters belong to marginalized groups, as is the case in games about mental illness. Proponents of empathy games see them to "creat[e] experiences that make people uncomfortable, allowing them to empathize with situations they otherwise couldn't understand" (Velho 2016, 1). The "creation" of these experiences follows the idea of "emotioneering", that is, constructing a game and its world in a way that "immers[es] a player in a role" and makes them experience certain emotions at a certain time (Freeman, 2004, 4). By destabilizing the boundary between fictional characters and player (Neitzel 2013, 15), empathy games about mental illness aim to make neuro-non-normative realities accessible to a wider audience that would otherwise not be able to share in these experiences.

The premise of serious and empathy games is largely congruent, which is why I will refer to them as serious empathy games. This choice of terminology is also intended to point out the lack of conceptual clarity that has found its way into scholarship and discussions of the titles generously grouped in one of the two genres. This is also evident in uncritical readings of games that are praised for their serious subject matter or said to foster empathy, even while purporting a simplistic understanding of both mental illness and empathy. To better illustrate this point and the potential pitfalls of serious empathy games, the remainder of this section looks at two of the most discussed videogames about mental illness, the text-based *Depression Quest* (2013), developed by Zoë Quinn, and the self-declared independent AAA title *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (2017) by Ninja Theory.

If not starting the trend of serious empathy games about mental illness, *Depression Quest* is certainly one of the earliest examples that is still widely acclaimed in both scholarship and games journalism. The game is a hypertext fiction, consisting of written text that players can navigate by clicking embedded links. These provide additional information or allow players to choose between several options to continue the story. The text is written in the second person, addressing players as "you". As "you" make your way through a seemingly normal day, some of the options presented for continuing the narrative are crossed out. These options include, for instance, "Order some food, grab a drink, and hunker down for a night of work" or "Shake off your funk and go have a good time with your girlfriend". Banners below the players' possible responses remind them that "You are depressed. Interaction is exhausting, and you are becoming more and more withdrawn", "You are not currently seeing a therapist", and "You are not currently taking medication". As the story progresses, these reminders will change based on players' choices, providing insight into whether "you" are on the road to recovery.

The game has three principal ways it can end: either "you" start taking medication and see a therapist, "you" go to therapy, or "you" do neither.

Reviewers have praised *Depression Quest* as "an adventure in empathy" (Campbell, 2013) or "a text-based empathy role-playing game" or "empathy RPG" (Jerreat-Poole 2016). Developer Quinn sees the game's strict rule-based system as a fruitful metaphor for lived experiences of depression, as it "ask[s] people to take some time out to see what 'rules' other people have to live with" (Parkin 2014). While a powerful communicative tool, the game's narrative and game mechanics also pose potential pitfalls. Players have voiced their frustration in how the game is "deterministic in how it maps out your future: if you end the game in a bad place things *will* get worse, and if you end in a good place things *will* get better" (Keever 2016). In this sense, each choice players make throughout the game is evaluated to be either "good" or "bad", determining in which place "you" end up Kris Ligman points in a similar direction, stating:

By claiming depression has a clear system, and designing a system around it in which players are encouraged to make the "correct" choices [...] *Depression Quest* treats the experience of depression as "something to be moved through as quickly as possible" and successfully defines the experience as something without value to the person experiencing it. [...] this is what the language of illness does, and this is the language they [the developers] employ. (Ligman 2013).

This critique connects to David R. Michael and Sande Chen's concept of "simulation shortcuts" (Michael & Chen 2006, 36). This concept describes how videogames necessarily reduce the complexity of some topics to make them fit the format of a game. However, in the case of mental illness representations, this reduction of complexity means that videogames will always remain "close enough" to actual experiences (2006, 97). For players who engage uncritically with these games, these simulation shortcuts will translate into experiential shortcuts, leading them to assume that they know what it feels like to live with depression after having played *Depression Quest*.

*Hellblade: Sanua's Sacrifice* takes a different approach to representing the lived experiences of playable character Senua. Overtly, Senua is on a quest through Helheim, the underworld of Norse mythology, to save the soul of her deceased partner. Metaphorically, she is battling the symptoms of psychosis, which manifest as intrusive thoughts and monstrous adversaries to defeat. Unlike *Depression Quest*, *Hellblade* prioritizes "keeping the player actively engaged" through more conventional game design choices, such as a third-person perspective and a beautifully designed game world (Fordham & Ball, 2019). These two aspects "allow [...] the developers to bring more serious, empathetic moments" to players by translating Senua's lived reality into gameplay (2019). Players experience Senua's intrusive thoughts as multiple, overlapping voices speaking to them insistently. Her alternative view of the world is incorporated in the central mechanic of finding patterns in the environment to progress. There are also voices Senua hears and things she sees that are not relevant for progression —the voices not only provide combat advice but also encourage her to harm herself; the environment does not only shift to reveal patterns but also spawns eyes that follow her every move. By making Senua's hallucinations central to progression, players cannot simply discard them as pathological.

These choices in game design and mechanics allow players to experience the world through Senua's eyes and mind, which is why it has been described as "a potent exercise

in empathy" (Chiodini 2017) and "a powerful and significant experiment in virtual empathy" (Lane 2017). And the game does not stop there. To make sure players are aware of their role in the narrative, they are addressed *as players*. One of the voices Senua hears acts as a narrator throughout the game, and early on involves players in the journey by saying "Why don't you join us? Maybe you too have a part to play in this story". These direct addresses are paired with frequent breaks of the fourth wall, where Senua appears to be looking directly at players. Additionally, the game attempts to put players in a similar emotional position as Senua through a metaphorical game mechanic, a dark rot spreading across her arm. As a text overlay explains, the rot spreads each time the player dies; when it reaches Senua's head, they must restart the entire game. What players will not know when they first start playing is that this is not true but a measure by the developers to instill a sense of urgency that parallels Senua's. While potentially strengthening the empathic bond between players and character, the dark rot also "risks shuffling the game back into the lineup of historical depictions of madness that rely on similar tropes" (Austin 2021). The heavy-handed metaphor of mental illness as a growing darkness contradicts the game's intention to convey Senua's experiences of psychosis. By implicating players and attempting to make her subjective journey as accessible as possible, "the narrative fell short of focusing on the topic. Instead, it [mental illness] becomes a plot device to propel Senua through Helheim. If you took away the conceit that Senua lives with psychosis and replaced it with real demons..., how different would the game be?" (Faulkner 2017).

I do not wish to diminish the importance of games such as *Depression Quest* and *Hellblade* in promoting greater visibility of neuro-non-normative conditions in videogames. However, a critical analysis of the implicit narrative of mental illness in these games reveals several shortcomings. First, "you" and Senua are reduced to their mental states, with their neuro-non-normativity as their sole and defining characteristic. While both games offer a nuanced discussion of the trials that each character has to go through, the games necessarily "minimize [...] the lives and identities of those who are seen as 'different' or 'other'" (Ruberg 2020, 60) by casting them in the roles of victim and heroic overcomer in their respective (illness) narratives.

Second, while choices in game design and mechanics break down the boundary between character and player, erasing this line "promot[es] an overly simplistic model of empathy that seeks to draw out similarities rather than differences" (Tynan 2020, 363). Referring to the effect as "toxic embodiment" (2020, 51), Lisa Nakamura highlights how such digital texts "invite the user to confuse immersive viewing [or playing] with access to the actual experiences of an-other, to perform co-presence within virtual spaces that can be navigated at will" (2020, 54). In other words, serious empathy games aim at making lived experience of an-Other intimately understandable but do so by purporting an idea of sameness between neuro-non-normative playable character and neuro-normative player.

Without acknowledging the Otherness of lived experiences of mental illness, these games fail to engage with culturally mediated images and ideas of neuro-non-normativity that players bring to them. This can be seen in an empirical study of *Hellblade*'s effect on players, which found that "[i]dentifying with Senua was not associated with changes in held stereotypes about mental illness. [...] even though participants can take on Senua's thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors as though they were the players', they may still stereotype their own self-concept" (Ferchaud *et al.* 2020). While *Hellblade*

succeeds in providing players' insight into Senua's experiences of psychosis, it does not encourage reflection on culturally mediated beliefs, lead to a change in behavior, or result in a more inclusive and pro-social attitude toward people living with symptoms and conditions. Rather than approximating Senua's experiences of psychosis, players appropriate them by failing to acknowledge their Otherness.

This brings the discussion back to the quasi-genre of serious empathy games, specifically the cultural rhetoric about mental illness implied in the respective labels. On the one hand, games fall into either "good" or "bad" representations of mental illness, either perpetuating stigmatizing notions about neuro-non-normativity or promoting empathy. On the other hand, any game that is considered a 'good' representation of mental illness automatically becomes a "serious game" simply by virtue of its subject matter. Analogously, Ruberg points out how "'empathy game' [has become] a blithely repeated catch-all term for any video game that tackles difficult subjects ... or includes representations of diversity" (2020, 58). Despite the experiential and simulation shortcuts involved, "the outcome of playing these games is [seen to be] always advantageous for the player: first by facilitating learning experiences, and second by not having any negative or harmful impacts" (Ratan, 2009, 11; Whitehead 2017, 7).

In the following, I turn to a game not usually discussed as either a serious or empathy game, nor is it mentioned in scholarship debates about the representation of mental illness in videogames. Infinite Fall's *Night in the Woods* (2017), hereafter shortened to *NITW*, is a prime example of a non-serious serious game that invites empathy without appropriating the Other(ed) experience. The analysis focuses on features that align *NITW* with serious empathy games to then illustrate how the game breaks with the implicit pro-social claims that the quasi-genre imposes. Drastically limiting players' engagement with the playable character's inner world, and thereby also limiting their empathic involvement, *NITW* presents an alternative way of communicating lived experiences of neuro-non-normativity in videogames.

## 3. *Night in the Woods*: Mediated Empathy in a Non-serious Serious Game

*NITW* tells the story of Mae Borowski, an anthropomorphic cat who returns to her sleepy hometown of Possum Springs after dropping out of college. Moving back in with her parents, her life lacks direction and she spends days just wandering around, (re)discovering childhood memories hidden away in the town's nooks and crannies. Every day, she meets up with her friends Gregg, an overexcited fox, his partner Angus, a down-to-earth bear, and Bea, a no-nonsense crocodile. Next to rekindling old friendships, *NITW* is about "walking, running, jumping, exploring, puzzle-solving, talking, doing activities with characters, playing bass and sometimes smashing things" (Infinite Fall), according to the developers Alec Holowka, Scott Benson, and Bethany Hockenberry.

What remains unmentioned in this cozy overview is the seriousness of the game's topics, which include questions about the purpose of life, the meaning of death, belief and religion, living as a queer couple in a conservative rural town, the economic trials of lower and middle classes, and the psychological effects of feeling disconnected and lonely. The common thread that ties these diverse themes together is mental illness. While players are initially left in the dark about Mae's reasons for dropping out of college, the narrative provides nuggets of information to help them piece together the

story. While in school, Mae experienced an episode of derealization. When she came to herself again, she realized that she had beaten up a schoolmate. Anger issues, dissociation, and depression followed her to college, where the people and things around here were "just shapes… just lines someone wrote like nothing in there".

With approximately ten hours of gameplay, players will have the opportunity to learn not only about Mae's mental state, but also the psychological struggles of other characters. Gregg tells Mae that he has "really up up days and really down down days and I don't know which it is until it's over sometimes", which Bea sees symptomatic of bipolar personality disorder; Angus was abused as a child, starved by his parents in an unloving home; and after the passing of Bea's mother due to cancer, her father turned to alcohol, which had her abandon her dreams of college and take over the family hardware store. These plunges into other characters' psyches are not reserved for Mae's close friends: Players learn about her parents' financial troubles, neighbor Selmers's struggles with opioid addiction, and the death-fascinated teen Lori who sleeps between railroad tracks. Every character in *NITW* is going through something that has them stuck, unable to go anywhere else or act any differently.

As this brief overview illustrates, *NITW* prioritizes narrative and embraces "exploration and finding, collecting, and piecing together fragments of information to create a story" (Stang *et al.* 2019, i). Much of players' time in Possum Springs can be described as a side-scrolling walking simulator and thereby centers around "slowness, discovery, and the mundane" (Krampe 2023). This design choice also serves as a metaphor for Mae's (re)construction of her life, subtly hinted at by genre-unconventionally moving to the left. In this setup, players are given agency in how they go about this endeavor. The game plays out over several days, each of which starts and ends in the same way — Mae wakes up, talks to her mother, and watches a late-night show with her father. In between, players are free to explore the town and talk to its inhabitants who wait in the same spot each day. Whether or not players choose to talk to these characters, whether they do so repeatedly, and whether they engage with their offers of interaction is not essential to progressing through the game, only to its narrative exploration.

This high degree of player agency is counterbalanced by the game's central game mechanic, which severely limits this agency. When in conversation, either with other characters or with Mae's thoughts, players can toggle between two options for responding. This steers the emergent narrative slightly in one direction or the other, without giving players the ability to completely change what is to come. This mechanic is similar to *Depression Quest*'s limited player agency, which symbolically represents the playable character's mental gridlock. Here, too, limiting agency puts players in the same mental space as Mae.

*NITW* establishes a direct empathic connection between players and Mae through metareference and subjectivization. When opening the game's settings menu, the user interface is embedded in Mae's journal, which she began after her episode of derealization at school. The journal has an in-game function, as Mae fills it with notes and doodles each day, keeping track of the emergent narrative. At the back of the book is a note from her psychologist, Dr. Hank, which reads "When you feel out of control remember you always have… options". These options include counting to ten or practicing positive self-talk, that is, coping mechanisms for countering an anxiety attack. At the same time, these options also refer to the settings menu, where players can adjust the sound, visuals, and mechanics of the game. The conflation of Mae's coping strategies with the

game's settings frames *NITW* as Mae's subjective experience that players can regulate, navigate, and explore. The use of direct player address and having the game world be metonymic with Mae's subjectivity reminds of *Hellblade* and its means for visualizing Senua's altered engagement with the world. Breaking down the virtual boundary between player and character, *NITW* encourages feeling with Mae by implicating them in her inner life.

After this brief analysis, it may come as a surprise that *NITW* is considered neither a serious nor an empathy game. While a handful of blog posts and video essays address the game's discussion of mental illness, it seems largely irrelevant to the academic conversation. In saying this, I do not intend to point out an oversight in scholarship. In fact, I agree that *NITW* does not fit neatly into the category of serious empathy games. Paradoxically, this is why I consider the game to give new impetus to the discussion of serious empathy games about mental illness. As the remainder of this section argues, *NITW* breaks with the implicit assumptions of the cultural rhetoric of serious empathy games and achieves what other representatives of the quasi-genre have struggled to do: playing with the narrative of mental illness rather than using non-normative conditions as a narrative device.

"Serious games are not all serious" writes Timothy C. Clapper (2018), implicitly addressing *NITW*'s decidedly non-serious framing of Mae's lived experiences. Next to the cartoonish aesthetics and zoomorphic inhabitants, the game impresses with great comedic appeal stemming from its narrative premise. Mae's exploration of Possum Springs begins with the discovery of a severed arm outside a cafe in broad daylight, which she and her friends react to by poking at it with a stick. What follows is a ghost story, complete with attempts to hunt down supernatural entities in a cemetery and spooky shadows following Mae around town. The game's discussion of serious themes is further sidelined by various mini-games, such as tossing dumplings into Gregg's open mouth, playing bass in a rhythm game, or booting up Demontower on Mae's laptop, a complete roguelike game within the game. Echoing the title of Cuihua Shen, Hua Wang, and Ute Ritterfeld's article "Serious games and seriously fun games" (2009), *NITW* is full of purely entertaining ways to spend the time in Possum Springs.

This decidedly non-serious narrative premise serves two important functions. First, *NITW* ends with resolving the ghost story plot but not the plot revolving around Mae's mental state. In this, the game presents mental illness as an open-ended journey, as Mae will likely continue to experience episodes of dissociation, depression, and anxiety. Deciding not to reduce Mae's journey to either a 'good' or 'bad' ending, as was the case in *Depression Quest*, brings me to my second point. Unlike the previous examples, Mae's mental state is not her defining feature and thereby not repurposed as a storytelling device. Although players are granted access to her inner life, this access —like players' agency— remains limited. Narratively, players are left in the dark about Mae's reasons for dropping out of college for the longest time. While she explains the episodes of dissociation, depression, and anxiety toward the end, players spend most of the game wondering about Mae's past and her motivations. By withholding this information from players, access to her inner life is always mediated, never immediate.

This mediation is also reflected in the game's mechanics. As noted above, limiting players' agency is a means of transferring Mae's (and other characters') mental gridlock to gameplay. However, rather than forging an empathic bond, these options hamper them. Consider YouTube content creator PushingUpRoses's comment about her gameplay

experience when navigating a conversation between Mae and Bea: "This is where it becomes very frustrating. As the player, I want nothing more than to say the right things and encourage my friend, but it's just not an option. You can choose to be an asshole or a little bit less than an asshole" (2017). The frustration described here differs from possible frustration players experience in *Depression Quest*. In the text-based adventure, limited options for responding to other characters are understood as symptomatic of depression. The entire game becomes a literalization of a pathology. In *NITW*, however, the frustration does not arise due to limitations imposed by a non-normative mental state but Mae and her personality. And this personality is surprisingly unlikeable, sassy, and pert at times. Unlike *Depression Quest*'s victimized "you" and *Hellblade*'s heroic Senua, Mae is first and foremost a moody teenager and many of her thoughts and actions, though controlled by players, remain independent from outside influences.

*NITW* breaks with the rhetoric, and implicit assumptions of serious empathy games. In doing so, the game is both serious and "seriously fun", entangling players in empathic ties without having them assume to know exactly what Mae is going through. Through its play with narrative, design, and mechanics, *NITW* reinstates lines of difference while still allowing players to engage with the playable character's inner life. Oscillating between difference and sameness, the game validates the Otherness of Mae's lived experiences and "value[s] those we do not understand" (Ruberg 2020, 68). This is only possible by not relegating Mae to the role of the victim or hero of an illness narrative. Her life in Possum Springs is neither an object lesson nor a cautionary example —it is just her life. Despite her struggles with dissociation, depression, and anxiety, she can still find joy in playing bass or spending time with her friends. In short, she is more than her non-normative mental state. Nor are these struggles something she deals with alone, as all in-game characters have their own (mental) crosses to bear. In *NITW*, mental illness is shown to be a normal part of life, of growing up and getting to know yourself and the people around you.

## 4. Conclusion

My aim in this essay was to illustrate the implicit narrative of mental illness communicated in and through videogames and the cultural rhetoric of genre ascriptions. It was not to devalue games with an educational mandate, nor to argue that games need to be 'fun' in the sense of purely entertaining. As games about mental illness proliferate, it is necessary to go beyond valuing titles for the seriousness of their topic and seeing empathy as an end in itself. This essay has attempted to do this by considering how playing with a game's narrative premise, design, and mechanics can lead players to reflect on serious topics and engage them in empathic bonds in a decidedly non-serious setting that hampers empathic capacities. This oscillation between sameness and difference is what I see as videogames' most powerful tool for communicating lived experiences of mental illness as the familiar Other.

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