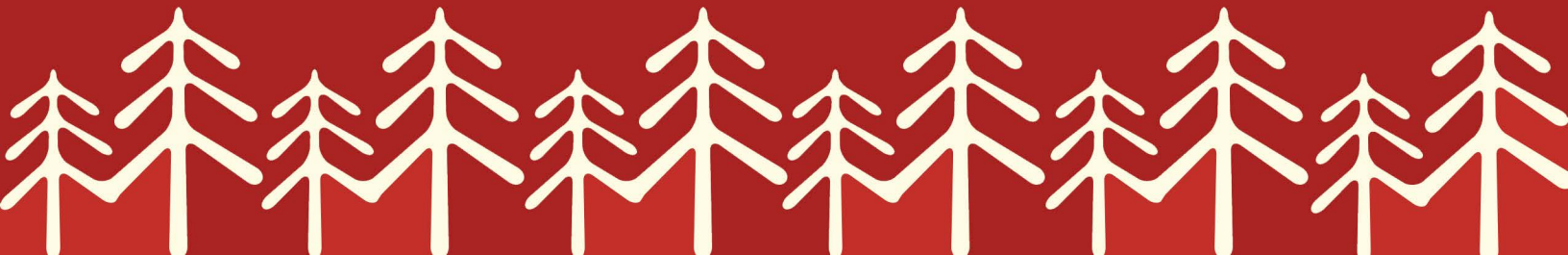




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CTIN 190
10/22/19

Using Formal Elements
to Destigmatize
Psychosis in *Hellblade*:
Senua's Sacrifice



Introduction

People often relegate the term “psychotic” to an exaggerated form of irrationality in casual conversation. Emblematic of our society’s lack of education on mental illness, this phenomenon exemplifies how we degrade and misconstrue the disorder’s true nature. In a direct effort to offer a more accurate understanding of the disease, developer Ninja Theory produced the game *Hellblade: Senua’s Sacrifice* as a learning tool for destigmatizing the disorder. Even though the core gameplay is somewhat antithetical to its socio-political message, the game achieves its overall goal by translating the experience of psychosis through a manipulative death mechanic.

Establishing Games as a Learning Tool

Before analyzing how *Hellblade* mimics the literal sensations and underlying struggles of psychosis, we must first justify its existence as a tool for such social impact. After all, video games are traditionally thought of as a mindless pastime, not a mechanism for critical learning. In the case of *Hellblade*, this assumption does not hold true because the experience itself is not designed like a traditional video game. Rather, it fits under the definition of “critical game-design” defined by Mary Flanagan in her book *Critical Play: Radical Game Design*: a game that is “critiquing the status quo” by “using play for such a phase change.” In this case, disrupting the status-quo would be getting rid of the old stigmas surrounding psychosis. The game does this via play by creating scenarios in which the player is experiencing the emotion of certain psychotic elements and/or going through a gamic simulation of them. It exists to send a serious message about psychosis in our contemporary society that is provided through interactive experiences that aren’t inherently “fun.”

Many critics may still dispute this claim under the notion that games are inherently entertainment, making them incapable of being tools for learning. The intent, they may claim, is irrelevant if the player still plays for enjoyment instead of critical enrichment. To that, I retort with a study on gamic learning, “Playing Video Games: Learning and Information Literacy,” by Sabina Gumulak and Sheila Webber. By interviewing a range of people who play games, they found that various forms of information could be learned from video games. From practical skills to complex concepts that could be applied in the real-world, they found that 89 percent of their respondents were capable of learning from a vast array of game genres. With these findings, along with establishing *Hellblade* as a critical game, it has been proven that the formal elements that this paper will analyze have a significant capacity to elicit change in the real-world by critically challenging the stigmatized notions the player has about psychosis.

Battling Our Inner-Demons

Consider the core mechanics in the context of the game's aesthetics. More specifically, the "hack and slash" fighting mechanics are so effective at demonstrating the relentless chaos of psychosis because of the enemies the player faces. While every enemy is a human, each is evocative of a demonic entity due to their animal skull masks. When put in the context of this game's socio-political messaging, their satanic style makes them representative of the mental plight that psychosis causes. It makes them quite literally the "inner-demons" that people refer to when discussing the struggles individuals have with themselves. Players battle these demons because it allows them to understand the difficulty and constant nature of the uniquely distressing issues that plague people with psychosis. Even though the experience is not literally representative of the struggles that the demons are being analogous for, it is a way for the game to at least get across the feelings of weariness and exhaustion that are byproducts of psychotic episodes. By working in tandem with the aesthetics of the enemies, the game still conveys the consistency and severity of these conflicts while also providing a way for the player to emotionally relate to them. This leads to a better understanding of psychosis that begins the process of destigmatizing it for the player.



Fig 1. Senua fighting one of the demonic enemies
(Gameplay, 2017)

However, despite the intended perceptions that the developers developed around, the inherent design of the game allows for players to see certain elements in their own view. Since everything is seen through the perspective of Senua's psychotic mind, it's implied that the enemies are diegetic hallucinations that she experiences, especially since they spawn in to start a fight instead of being found in the world. Framing the enemies in this way causes them to lose their symbolic meaning. Instead, the player only sees them as a manifestation of psychotic hallucination, making the fighting system a literal simulation of psychosis rather than a representation of its underlying mental degradation. Considering the fighting in this way destroys the emotional relatability that the player should feel because it implies that Senua's mind has become violent due to psychosis. In turn, this reinforces the societal assumption that mental illness is something to be feared, presumably because it can ramp up violence in a person. In "Understanding the Impact of Stigma on People with Mental Illness," a research paper by Patrick Corrigan and Amy Watson, a survey of over 2,000 English and American respondents found that people in these countries thought that "persons with severe mental illness should be feared," causing them to be excluded from society. The paper also found that mental illness was stereotypically linked to criminality, something that typically includes violence. When players see the fighting as a gamified representation of physical psychotic outbursts, given the pre-existing stereotypes about mental illness and violence, it causes the player to reinforce their stigmatization of the disorder with an unintended interpretation. Although the battling can have a powerful message that falls in line with the philosophy of the game, the rest of the game's mechanics work with it in a way that leaves it too open-ended. As a result, fighting is a risky mechanic that either promotes or destroys the message of the game depending on the viewpoint of individual players.

Death Defying

While the battling mechanic may not always have its intended effect on the player, there are other formal elements that are constrained in such a way that their meaning is more clear. Take the death mechanic for example. Referred to as "the rot," a black substance slowly consumes Senua's arm each time she dies in combat. One of the only times the game directly tells the player information is at the beginning when it warns them that their save will be deleted if "the rot" consumes too much of Senua's arm. In other words, the game employs a perma-death mechanic. Or so it says. "The rot" does grow each time the player dies, but only to a point. The game never actually deletes the save. This is done to mimic the anxiety that psychotic people constantly feel, as players will constantly be stressed about dying too many times and having to start

the game over. Working in tandem with the frequency and difficulty of enemy encounters, this mechanic is effective at evoking anxiety.

The visual “rot,” however, is an aesthetic element that is open to a bit more interpretation. In a mechanical sense, it is simply a meter for judging how close the player is to having their save deleted. But, in reality, it is a visual metaphor for how psychosis slowly creeps up on those affected. Even though it starts at just the hand, most players will find that it has grown by a significant margin by the end of the game. Given that it growing means that they are closer to utter defeat due to their own mistakes (dying to enemies), it is a perfect metaphor for how people with psychosis slowly succumb to the disease via their psychosis-driven behaviors that increase in destructiveness. With the presence of this visual, it allows the player to both experience the anxiety that comes with the psychosis slowly taking over (“the rot” slowly growing) and allows them to understand how people become psychotic. It isn’t a snap change. Rather, it is something that people develop overtime, a consideration most non-psychotic people don’t make when stigmatizing the disorder. It serves as a reminder that the disease takes over the person, as opposed to the stereotypical view that the person has always had this disease and grew around it. Not only does this further the player’s understanding of the disease, but it helps to promote the socio-political message of destigmatization in a more clear-cut way than the fighting mechanic.



Fig 2. An example of how “the rot” grows after Senua dies in a battle
(ComiConverse, 2017)

Conclusion

Although there are other ways in which *Hellblade* uses its formal elements to propagate its socio-political idea of destigmatizing psychosis, I believe the two laid out here are the main mechanics behind its critical gameplay. Moreover, this paper has also provided a convincing argument for the game's place as a catalyst for reform on the topic. Not only does this game succeed in its reformist goals, but it serves as an example of how games can be designed in a way that appeals to a large audience while expressing a very specific message.

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