Article

Echoes of Madness: Exploring Disability and Mental Illness in *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*

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Abstract: Video games are known for many things, but nuanced portrayals of characters with mental illness might not be one of them. This trend, however, has gradually started to shift with games like *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, which aim to convey a genuine experience of mental illness to the player. Through a close reading of different instances in the game, this paper shows how *Hellblade* complicates the usual sanist ideas seen in most other games by taking an ambiguous stance, using mental illness as a representational tool. Furthermore, it avoids some of the more sensationalist and problematic tropes often employed in such representations, like the supercrip and the Cartesian divide of the body and mind. In order to show this, we have employed Mitchel and Snyder's concept of narrative prosthesis to demonstrate how the game does not in fact rely on Senua's disability as an exotic feature of the narrative to hook players in. By combining insights from disability and mad studies, we show how this game is a step in the right direction when it comes to challenging the perceptions of mental illness prevalent in pop culture.

Keywords: game studies; disability; madness; psychosis; narrative prosthesis

1. Introduction

Video games that attempt to represent mental illness, often unsuccessfully, toe a delicate line. While games may attempt to shed light on an oft underdiscussed human experience, they often fall victim to simplistic narratives or reinforce negative stereotypes, failing to capture the intricate realities of life with a mental illness. Ninja Theory's *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* attempts to surpass these stereotypical representations, offering a novel exploration of psychosis through the eyes of Senua, a Pictish warrior battling both external threats and her own internal demons. This paper explores the game's stance on mental illness by taking a closer look at how it represents the experience of psychosis and how video games like *Hellblade* may open opportunities for a questioning of the binary opposition of in/sanity. Our close reading of the game is informed by the social model of disability, (a critique of) medical models of disability, and Mitchell and Snyder's concept of "narrative prosthesis". We argue that while *Hellblade* does occasionally invoke some problematic tropes related to mental illness, it leans more towards a nuanced representation that aligns with a social construction of disability, asking players to question biomedical conceptions of disablement. By considering these contrasting elements, this paper aims to illuminate the multifaceted portrayal of mental illness in *Hellblade*, gesturing to how it (perhaps unintentionally) evokes the potential role that video games can play in evolving our cultural imagination(s) of mental illness.

2. On the Methods

In approaching video games as narrative texts open to analysis, we turn to a repurposed practice of close reading that has been adapted to the multimedia nature of video

games. While close reading of a written text focuses on the written word and close reading of film expands to include audio–visual data, Clara Fernández-Vara explains that a close reading of a game is conducted by

> . . .selecting a specific aspect of a game and breaking it down into its basic elements. Close readings are in-depth analyses and provide us with very specific examples to sustain our argument, be it explaining a high-level theory, and interpretation, or helping to deliver our personal account and approach to the game.
>
> <div align="right">[1] (p. 233)</div>

Combining the insight gained from media thinkers, such as Marshall McLuhan, with literary theory, Jim Bizzocchi and Joshua Tanenbaum suggest a different way of understanding text as a "gestalt of medium and message" [2]. Bizzochi and Tanenbaum offer us a different way of "reading" a video game; by swapping form with medium, we can make use of all of the ways a video game conveys meaning, such as through the environment, the story, character design, the affordances provided to the player, etc. This allows for a well-rounded analysis that multiplies the possibilities of close reading. Close readings are, of course, not performed within a vacuum; rather, they are inflected by the theoretical and ideological perspectives of the researcher. In this study, we turn to the field of disability studies and its corollary, mad studies, to unpack the construction of disability and madness within *Hellblade*.

Within the field of disability studies, a discipline characterized by its inherently interdisciplinary nature and critique of biomedical imaginations of disability, the corporeality of disability is conceptualized as an embodied intersection of cultural, biological, and medical paradigms, all of which shape subjectivity. Disability studies scholars not only engage in the confluence of these diverse fields of inquiry but also actively celebrate the transgression of established epistemological boundaries. As such, this paper is informed by an eclectic mix of qualitative and cultural studies methods, which makes it harder than usual to distill them into one recognizable and unified theoretical lens. Rather than considering this complexity as a limitation, disability studies scholars encourage us to revel in the messiness of mixed methods [1]. One prominent thread that emerges from the collision of fields is the social model of disability, which critiques the construction of disability as individualized deficit that needs to be fixed. Under the social model, impairment is clearly demarcated from disability in that the former is seen as an existing medical condition, while the latter is the result of the external impediments created by a society that prioritizes normates. This exclusionary attitude is just as disabling to an individual as their impairments are [4]. Consequently, one of the long-standing objectives of disability studies is locating and exposing ableist hegemonies, which manifest as both celebrations of superior abilities and expectations for "the disabled" to overcome or resolve their bodily differences to regain some sense of "normalcy" [5–8].

This bifurcating nature of ableism can be seen in many representations of disability, which may lead viewers to internalize common stereotypes and ableist fantasies about disabled people. As Jeff Preston has previously explained, "representations both isolate and separate the disabled from the normates, allowing the normate to peer into the world of the Other from the safety of the screen while simultaneously being assured that their lives, and more specifically the normate body, are not this" [9]. Following in the same line, Davis argues that "most constructions of disability assume that the person with disabilities is in some sense damaged while the observer is undamaged. Furthermore, there is an assumption that society at large is intact, normal, setting a norm, undamaged" [10] (p. 14). Despite its particular strengths, however, the social model is not the best fit when it comes to thinking about mental illness and how it is experienced [11]. To fill this gap, we call upon insights gained from the field of mad studies, which has become a force for change by offering an alternative perspective and a discursive set of beliefs, thoughts, and actions that directly confront sanism [12]. Like ableism, sanism is "the systematic subjugation of people

who have received 'mental health' diagnosis or treatment" [13]. Mad studies, in other words, aims to debunk the sanist way of thinking while also shifting the focus to people who have experienced mental illness, giving them space to voice their own experience rather than being treated as invalids who need fixing. Concisely:

Mad studies is steadfastly arrayed against biomedical psychiatry; at the same time, it validates and celebrates survivors' experiences and culture. Mad studies aims to engage with and transform oppressive languages, practices, ideas, laws, and systems, along with their human practitioners, in the realm of mental "health" and the psy sciences, as well as in wider culture [14]. Taking the lead from this school of thought, we are interested in unravelling the binaries that "disability" constructs [3], such as the invalidating alterity of sanity as good and insanity as abnormal deviance. It is important to note that throughout this paper, we use the term "madness" in a critically reflective manner, drawing from mad studies to challenge conventional and often derogatory uses of the term. This approach aims to reclaim and validate the experiences of those labeled "mad", aligning with the discursive goals of mad studies. Furthermore, when referring to characters like Galena in *Hellblade*, we are mindful of the distinction between self-identification and external labeling. We analyze how characters are labeled or stigmatized as mad by others, rather than asserting that these characters self-identify with the term.

Finally, we turn to the influential text *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependency of Discourse* by David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder. Their concept of "narrative prosthesis" is used to explore how disability is often used to drive the story forward, propping it up like a prosthetic device. They write

The narration of the disabled body allows a textual body to *mean* through its long-standing historical representation as an overdetermined symbolic surface; the disabled body also offers narrative the illusion of grounding abstract knowledge within a bodily materiality. *If the body is the Other of text, then textual representation seeks access to that which it is least able to grasp.* If the nondysfunctional body proves too uninteresting to narrate, the disabled body becomes a paramount device of characterization.

[15] (p. 64)

In considering the body as a legible surface, the disabled body is reconceived as a text that is already written through and continues to be constructed by a repertoire of historical and symbolic representations. The way disability is understood is informed, in part, by how it has been used as a metaphor to convey experiences of loss and deviance or, in this case, certain psycho-emotional responses marked as aberrant. Disability, framed as a rupture in the surface of normalcy, draws out the character in a story

...as a case of special interest who retains originality to the detriment of all other characteristics. Disability cannot be accommodated within the ranks of the norm(als), and, thus, the options for dealing with the difference that drives the story's plot is twofold: a disability is either left behind or punished for its lack of conformity.

[15] (pp. 55–56)

This kind of appropriation, though, rarely entails a critical engagement with disability itself since the disability is either fixed, destroyed, or entirely forgotten by the end of the story. Rather than engaging with the complexities of disability, these texts merely assert disability's negative status and advocate for its destruction. A similar schema appears in *Hellblade's* representations of Senua's psychosis, though the game deviates from Mitchell and Snyder's predicted conclusion. As we will explore further, the treatment of Senua's experience both relies upon and, at the same time, extends Mitchell and Snyder's narrative prosthesis, making mental illness more than just a means to an end.

3. Disability in Video Game Scholarship

While there have been over fifty years of academic interest in representations of disability, it is only recently that this critical lens has been extended to considering mental illness as a trope in video games. One key scholar, Dianne Carr, has undertaken extensive research on disability representation in games, showing how a close reading of such depictions illuminates the complex and multifaceted social and ethical implications of human augmentation and disability [16–19]. In a much-needed work on disability representations, Fraser points to the fact that disability representation scholarship regularly focuses on physical disability to the disadvantage of cognitive disability since the latter is often easier to ignore due to its invisibility [20]. In terms of mental health, Kelly Hoffman studied players' cognitive reactions to two games that specifically deal with themes of depression, both to identify the specific feelings that these games induced in their audiences and to determine whether the games succeeded in sparking new insights amongst the players [21]. She argues that factors such as player agency, realism, player character, and game complexity all play a major role in how a game is received by players, impacting whether the game will be successful in conveying its message. Ferrari et al. turn their analytic eye toward stigmas of mental illness in video games and acknowledge the important role of this new media in educating the public [22]. While much attention has been given to depictions of sexism, violence, and racism in games, there has been relatively little work regarding how mental disability is codified in commercially successful video games, especially considering the recent practice of using video games as a new therapy for individuals with mental health issues [23–29].

Taking *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* as one of the more prominent games that has attempted a realistic depiction of psychosis, Fordham and Ball [30] argue that this game can act as a model for other game designers in its researched and respectable approach towards the issue of mental illness and the ensuing stereotypes that can come along with it. Aiming to shed light on the unique challenges that are endemic to fictional representations of disability, Austin also analyzes *Hellblade* but through a disability studies lens. She concludes that continued interdisciplinary collaboration between the humanities and medical sciences could prove useful in disarming negative stereotypical representations of mental disability [31]. Revolving around the same issue, Beal argues that the choice of a female avatar as the main character in *Hellblade* has relatively neutralized the uneasiness surrounding the subject of mental illness since the existing stigma is greater for male mental health [32].

Changing the scope, Rodéhn takes an important step towards introducing the emerging field of mad studies and the practice of mad reading into the study of games dealing with madness and mental health, arguing for the necessity of stepping away from psy science-influenced methods in favour of more theory-driven endeavours [33]. She argues that mad reading of games enables researchers to focus on the situational nature of madness and where and how it appears in a game, thus reducing the restrictive and oppressive branding practice of the psy sciences and producing new knowledge. Following in the same vein, Meinen decries the focus on the instrumental application of video games for education or therapeutic purposes and instead opts for ethical questions surrounding embodied representations of neurodiversity in games, introducing the concept of "attunement" as a suitable alternative [34]. Taking inspiration from feminist phenomenology, she defines attunement as an "embodied way of sensing difference without directly trying to understand it" that can foster connections and interpersonal relations between individuals. Such an approach, according to Meinen, will encourage reflection and thinking, disrupt hierarchies of difference, and put neurodiverse individuals on the same playing field as neurotypical ones, while also fostering bilateral engagement between the player and the game, with both cooperating in making meaning. Additionally, Grimwood's work on monsters and madness is pertinent, particularly his identification of the "monstrous double" as a recurring trope in video games, which can be analyzed to understand the rhetorical construction of mental disability in gaming narratives [35]. Furthermore, Gibbons provides a critical examination of the motives behind creating games that portray disabilities and

their impact on the disability community with a specific focus on autism [36]. This paper builds upon the existing scholarship by focusing specifically on *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* and its nuanced depiction of psychosis. By employing a mad studies lens, this study not only challenges the conventional representations of mental illness in video games but also advocates for a more inclusive and critically reflective approach to understanding neurodiversity in gaming narratives.

4. The Madness Unveiled: The Creeping Rot

Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice begins with an extended introductory scene. We find Senua paddling her way on a log into a misty world with only her sword and a bloody sack that seems to hold a human head. Just as the player is trying to grasp what is happening, voices take over the scene. Some are talking to, admonishing, or encouraging Senua, while another particularly calm and melancholic voice specifically addresses the player and acts as the narrator. Relying upon the common representation of schizophrenia as hearing voices, gamers do not need to be psychiatrists to surmise that things are not "normal". The game is very careful with the details, and the plot is woven very gradually from the scattered pieces of monologue and Senua's memories. We soon learn that Senua has begun her quest to Helheim, "the land of mist and fog", to bargain with Hella, the Norsemen's goddess of the underworld, for the soul of her lover, Dillion. Helheim is depicted as a desolate and eerily empty world full of burned-down houses, sunken ships, and corpses staked or otherwise scattered around. After a few minutes of playing the game, we learn that Senua is afflicted with a curse, which the player is seemingly meant to interpret as psychosis. This curse, initially a discursive form, quickly shifts into a physical marker in the game.

Following Mitchell and Snyder's schema, any disability story must denote to the audience the characters that deviate from normalcy. Two important "signs" of disability and madness are presented to players at the beginning of the game. The first, the auditory hallucinations that surround the player, deploy a symptom of psychosis as a game mechanic. The voices that surround Senua/the player appear initially as both a disturbance and an annoyance, but as the player moves further into the story, this symptom becomes an important tool, offering guidance or cues to improve their performance. For instance, the "focus" ability reveals hidden runes and paths, tying Senua's mental focus to the player's actions, reinforcing the embodiment of her experiences. Unlike film or television, where the audience remains a passive observer, *Hellblade's* interactive nature requires the player to actively engage with Senua's mental and physical challenges: we too are affected by her hallucinations. This engagement blurs the lines between Senua's perceptions and the player's, as the player navigates puzzles and combat scenarios that are directly influenced by Senua's psychological state. It is important to highlight the novel use of a symptom of psychosis as a beneficial tool because while it may wander into the territory of the supercrip, it also asks users to contemplate whether this is something they should inherently desire to rid themselves of, as the game would be harder *without* the hallucinations. Rather than *dis*abling Senua/us, the hallucinations actually *enable* play.

Senua's cognitive difference also manifests upon her body itself, providing a visual indication that all is not well. Early in the game, we enter a cutscene when trying to open a door, with Senua seeming to be sensing that someone else is watching her. When she extends her hand towards this presence, she recoils in pain while holding her arm, which is now black and shrivelled. From this point onward, she will carry the mark with her until the end of her journey. The mark darkens every time the player fails in the journey, visually representing Senua's worsening psychotic state. If the creeping rot reaches her head, "the seat of her soul", her quest will end in failure, and the player will need to restart the game. Senua's body is quite literally marked as disabled, the creeping rot the embodiment of an individual increasingly corrupted by madness. This creeping rot also represents the player's disablement, visually representing their inability to play the game successfully.

A recurring critique within disability studies, as exemplified by the work of Paul K. Longmore, highlights the association between outward physical differences and neuro-

divergence, particularly in the context of villainous characters, whose deformed bodies stand as a sign of a corrupted soul [37]. Writing on the monstrosity of disabled characters, like Shakespeare's Richard III, Longmore explains how outward deformities embody a corrupted and evil mind:

> The physical disabilities typically involve disfigurement of the face and head and gross deformity of the body. As with the criminal characterization, these visible traits express disfigurement of personality and deformity of soul. Once again, disability may be represented as the cause of evildoing, punishment for it, or both.
>
> [37]

At first glance, *Hellblade* would seem to be similarly binding bodily difference as a metaphor for cognitive deviance. The player's failure to live up to the expectations of the game, to "perform" the game correctly, becomes a literal mark of shame written upon Senua's body. At the same time, the rot on Senua's arm is a creative game mechanic that draws into question Cartesian dualism, where the body and mind/soul are seen as separate entities.

The notion of dualism is nothing new and can be traced back to Plato's theory of Forms, but its more modern conception, better known as Cartesian dualism, was introduced by the 17th century French philosopher Rene Descartes. Crudely explained, Descartes argued that the mind is an immaterial, non-physical substance distinct from the physical body; the mind is the realm of thoughts, feelings, and sensations, while the body is a machine governed by physical laws [38]. Such a divide proved revolutionary for the medical sciences, which at the time were held back by religious prohibitions on dissecting the human body given the common Christian belief that humans were one in body and soul and any tampering with the body would prevent the soul from ascending to heaven in its perfect form [39]. The demarcation of the body and mind/soul was an important stepping stone in the making of the biomedical model, which views humans as biological organisms that can be studied through different branches of science. Therefore, when viewing physical disability through a Cartesian lens, "the self is left 'intact' or whole, since the mind is purportedly unaffected by physical disability...a self is encased, housed, or trapped within a body" [40] (p. 49). In other words, this demarcation sets the body on a lower level than the mind/self, thus objectifying it as a complex entity that is not constitutive of the self.

Hellblade challenges the Cartesian mind–body split through its nuanced portrayal of Senua's experiences, adopting a "bodymind" approach to depicting mental disability in an innovative fashion. [41]. Emerging from feminist disability studies, the concept of the bodymind offers a critique of Cartesian dualism by emphasizing the inextricable interconnection of mind and body, where experiences—both physical and mental—shape and are shaped by each other, forming a unified whole [42,43]. Thus, whereas dualism separates mind and body, this game emphasizes the interdependence of mind and body. The rot on Senua's arm, a potential physical manifestation of her mental state, visually represents the mind–body connection. Furthermore, the third-person camera perspective allows the player to empathize with Senua's experiences while also maintaining a degree of separation. This dual perspective complicates traditional mind–body dualism by immersing the player in Senua's world and mental state. The camera often positions itself close to Senua, heightening the sense of intimacy and immediacy and making her hallucinations and auditory distortions a shared experience between her and the player. For instance, the constant whispers and disembodied voices that Senua hears are experienced by the player through binaural audio, creating an unsettling yet immersive environment that mirrors Senua's psychosis. Here, we have an important dissonance: the spreading rot on Senua's arm reminds us of the interplay between her psychological trauma and physical condition, visually representing success/failure, while the auditory hallucinations serve as both disruption and an information source. Through these interactive elements, *Hellblade* provides a profound and embodied exploration of mental disability, setting it apart from other media that depict psychosis from a purely observational standpoint.

5. An Origin Story: Senua's Madness

In most texts adhering to Mitchell and Snyder's narrative prosthesis formula, the next step after distinguishing the disabled character involves providing a root cause for their difference. Very often, deviance is linked to what happened to the characters in the past, such as childhood trauma, violence, death, or any other "events" that have transformed their otherwise "normal" and sane minds into twisted personifications of malice [44]. *Hellblade*, however, subverts this expectation by focusing on Senua's lived experiences and her journey rather than a singular explanatory cause. We learn that Senua does have a deeply traumatic past, but the game is often reticent to reveal everything, relaying bits and pieces of scattered monologue, brief nightmarish flashbacks, or dialogues with a hooded figure [2] to gesture toward without fully disclosing. By the end of the game, however, the player is offered a relatively detailed picture of Senua's past that they must piece together themselves. We learn while playing the game that Senua is the daughter of a clan chieftain and druid called Zynbel and that her mother, Galena, was also mad. The game hints that Senua started seeing visions like her mother's from a very early age. While her mother tried to comfort her and help her deal with this new experience, her father saw this as a curse and sacrificed Galena to appease the vengeful gods. Senua, a child of five, witnessed her mother burning alive at the stake.

The idea that disability results from a heavenly curse is not new; many religious schools of thought have "constructed disabilities to be a curse, one often associated with the attribution of shame onto an individual or family" [45] (p. 106). As a druid, Senua's father Zynbel is seen as a legal authority, a religious figure, and healer simultaneously. The game suggests that Zynbel's status is why the village folk, including Senua, take the pronouncement that Galena's behaviour can only be explained as a curse and that she is possessed by darkness seriously. Unable to find a cure, Zynbel declares that the only way to appease the gods and stop the curse from afflicting the entire village is to purge it with fire. However, when he sees that Senua is showing the same symptoms as her mother, Zynbel relegates his daughter to a life of isolation and abuse, believing that he can "defeat the darkness" within her through physical and emotional torment. In this moment, the player is clearly intended to see Zynbel as an ignorant monster, a truer threat to the villagers than Galena or Senua. While the game does point to the historic instinct to incarcerate mad people, the emotional tenor of the narrative conveys that this action is not only repugnant but that it may, in fact, be the cause of Senua's disability. Put another way, perhaps rather than "fixing" mad people, we must prevent madness from being exacerbated by exclusionary sanism.

Here, we find an important divergence in how the game frames the origins of Senua's madness. On the one hand, there is an implication that her madness was merely passed on genetically—psychosis runs in the family. On the other hand, there is a suggestion that the real root cause of Senua's madness is her traumatic upbringing, which aligns with the common belief that adult mental illness results from traumatic childhood events, such as physical abuse, the death of a parent, etc. [46]. The game does not shy away from establishing such a connection. Senua's traumatic past experiences play a significant role in shaping her mental struggles. The loss of her mother at a young age, compounded by her abusive relationship with her father, contributes to Senua's feelings of isolation, guilt, and vulnerability. Interestingly, however, the game resists pointing out a definitive cause of her madness, instead oscillating between curse, childhood trauma, and heredity as being a possible "cause" of her disablement, with Zynbel playing a central role in all three possible explanations.

Senua's only escapes from her suffocating living conditions are her rare foraging trips, on which she is allowed to see the outside world. On one such outing, she witnesses Dillion, a tribe warrior, practicing his swordsmanship. Inspired, Senua begins mimicking his movements, eventually mustering the courage to approach him. Dillion, impressed by her skills, befriends her and encourages her to compete in the warrior trials. Their bond deepens into love, offering Senua solace in a world that continues to shun her, and they

decide to leave together and start a new life. Here, Senua is offered a new narrative frame to be seen through—not as a dangerously cursed or impotent victim but as a valuable member of society. When placed in a different context, Senua has the opportunity to thrive.

Unfortunately, Senua's father cannot let go of the belief that Senua must be contained, refusing her request to leave, which leads to a confrontation where Senua, emboldened by Dillion, defends herself and eventually escapes her father's grasp. Zynbel's ominous prophecy about "blood on her hands" lingers as Senua embarks on a new life as a warrior alongside Dillion. Tragedy strikes again as a plague sweeps through their village, claiming Dillion's father. This event, and the continuing voices plaguing Senua, makes Senua believe that Zynbel's warnings are accurate—that she is, in fact, cursed. With the creeping rot on her arm, we are asked to confront the potential reality that Senua *is* a danger lurking among the villagers. Determined to protect Dillion and her village, Senua exiles herself to the wilds. In exile, she befriends Druth, a scarred scholar escaping his enslavement by Norsemen. As Druth succumbs to his injuries, he pledges to aid Senua both in life and beyond for listening to his stories. Returning home, Senua is met with a horrifying sight—a Viking raid had devastated her village, leaving Dillion brutally sacrificed to their gods, which leaves her broken with grief. This is the event that initiates her quest to the underworld.

Such a painful character history is ripe for fomenting a villain, explaining why they are out for blood; many mad villains in pop culture have justified their "psychopathic" turn with much less than what Senua experiences [47]. This trend has a long heritage in video games as well, with games like the *Batman: Arkham* series (2009, 2015), the *Silent Hill* series (1999, 2001, 2003), and *Far Cry 3* (2012) pointing to a villain's past to justify not only their clear signs of mental disorder but also their malintent. Senua, however, breaks from this tradition to offer an alternative perspective—mental illness does not inevitably result in villainy. As Antoniades notes in his commentary on the production of *Hellblade*, Ninja Theory intentionally attempts to confront and debunk the common association between psychosis and other diagnoses, such as psychopathy [48]. While Senua has a troubled past, the game makes clear why Senua is fighting: she is driven by a deep affection to save the soul of the only person who loved her. The way the game develops Senua's character makes the player see her first as a person capable of compassion and love and later as a skilled warrior who is adept at martial arts. Through Druth's recollections, Senua is presented not only as capable of empathy and compassion but also as a selfless hero who will risk harm to herself to the benefit of those around her. Throughout *Hellblade*, there are no signs of the maliciousness or the joy in carnage we see in psychopathic killers like Joker in the *Batman* series [3] or Vaas Montenegro in *Far Cry 3*. Instead, *Hellblade* tells a story in which the victim of trauma has agency, the ability to choose a different path forward. This narrative choice better reflects the reality that mad people are far more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators of it [49].

6. Madness Resolved?

While scholars like Mitchell and Snyder and Longmore note that disability texts often conclude with the resolution of disablement, either through cure or death, *Hellblade* resists this trope by presenting Senua's psychosis as an ongoing struggle, something that is an important part of her identity and not something that must be fixed [15]. In fact, the game openly poses the question, what happens when there *is* no cure? In Senua's case, we see that her father did everything he could to cure her of her psychosis but, in failing that, only alienated and traumatized his daughter, leading to her eventual elopement and escape. According to Longmore, if the cure fails, then the disabled character must die [37]. *Hellblade*, however, troubles such conclusions. In the game's climax, when Senua finally descends to the depths of the underworld to find Hella, the player must fight their way through hordes of Vikings and monsters in a desperate attempt to gain an audience with the goddess. Upon reaching the conclusion of the game, however, Hella stabs Senua with her own sword and throws Dillion's head, which has been carried in a sack secured to Senua's waist since the

beginning, into the abyss. The game does not end here though, and we soon see Senua standing where Hella stood as the camera zooms back in. There are generally two ways to interpret this ending: either she dies, rejoining Dillion in the underworld, or her madness is cured, metaphorically. Either way, Senua's madness appears to be resolved.

If there were no indication of a sequel, then one could validly interpret the ending as Senua being "cured" of her psychosis. However, the creation of a sequel suggests that the game did not, in fact, culminate in a traditional "cure" for Senua. Playing the second installment, aptly titled *Hellblade 2: Senua's Saga*, confirms that the first game's ending is intended to challenge the classic resolution of disability. Despite facing her trauma and experiencing a potential symbolic victory over her inner darkness at the end of the first game, Senua continues to exhibit signs of psychosis in the sequel. The voices are not gone. The "Shadow" is not gone.

By rejecting the overused trope of the mentally ill character being "fixed" or their illness disappearing entirely, *Hellblade* paints a more nuanced picture: Senua's journey might be about resisting the expectations and barriers invoked by a medical model of disability, where the disabled individual is the problem that must be fixed. While Senua grapples with her mental state throughout the narrative, the player's objective is not to miraculously "free" her from the voices; the elimination of her "condition" is not framed as the eventual happy ending. As noted earlier, without Senua's psychosis, the player could not successfully complete the game. Instead, the conclusion of the game suggests that the "point" was never to overcome her disability but to fight back against the cultural and religious systems that have oppressed Senua throughout her life. Here, psychosis is positioned as a valid form of subjectivity, inextricably bound up in Senua's identity, which offers both benefits and limitations depending on context. The lack of a definitive cure, alongside this framing of madness as an important and valid part of Senua's character, can be seen as a clear counterpoint to the typical invalidating representation of madness in popular culture.

7. Stigma, Loss, and the Struggle for "Real" Representation

One thing that is often missing from previous scholarship on *Hellblade* is an analysis of the game world's emptiness. Even games that are known for their bizarre settings, such as the *Dark Souls* series, feature non-player characters (NPCs) who interact with the player, sharing bits of story and lore or initiating quests. In fact, the presence of NPCs is usually taken for granted, so much so that players may not know what to do in their absence. It would not be too extreme, we suggest, to think of NPCs as the people that form the virtual societies within which gamers are expected to operate. But in *Hellblade*, the near-complete emptiness of the world makes an important statement about Senua: it is her versus everything else but also her versus her solitude. Apart from Druth, the voices, and Dillion's voice, Senua's journey is a solitary one devoted to accomplishing tasks, finding her way through mazes, and battling enemies alone. The player receives no outside help or guidance beyond Senua's voices. Moreover, the game's user interface also lacks objective markers, maps, or guidelines of any sort. We argue that this dearth of interaction plays a vague but important role in the game. In one sense, it may reinforce the problematic supercrip trope, which results from attempts to (re)define disability as a vigorous fight for independence or a process of overcoming obstacles [50]. In her engagement with the term, Sami Schalk writes

> Generally, the supercrip is recognized as a stereotypical representation of disability that appears in contemporary journalism, television, film, and fiction...these representations rely on concepts of overcoming, heroism, inspiration, and the extraordinary. Additionally, most scholarship also mentions how these representations focus on individual attitude, work, and perseverance rather than on social barriers, making it seem as if all effects of disability can be erased if one merely works hard enough.

[51]

As with many supercrips, Senua faces extraordinary challenges throughout her journey, defying seemingly insurmountable odds. She confronts hordes of Viking warriors, who tower over and outnumber her in almost all encounters. If that were not enough, Senua must also defeat two powerful mythological entities—the fire giant, Surt, and the god of illusions, Valravan—and confront the personification of death, the goddess Hella. Such extraordinary feats could make her a prime example of the "supercrip" archetype, achieving extraordinary feats despite her profound disablement. As a mad woman with few allies, her overemphasized ability and independence might downplay her need for support, making it seem as though it is an individual's responsibility to overcome the disabling aspects of psychosis.

Simply concluding that these design choices perpetuate a problematic trope, however, misses a nuanced reading that is more in line with the complexities of mental illness and especially the issue of internalized stigma. By removing external characters, the game forces us to experience Senua's world through her singular viewpoint. We confront her anxieties and self-doubt firsthand, not through conversations with supportive companions but through environmental storytelling and a constant barrage of disembodied voices. These voices often mock and belittle Senua, mirroring the self-criticism and social isolation that mad people can experience. As Beal adds, "Senua is not fighting her mental illness, but instead learning to break free from the stigma" [32]. In the game, this stigma is presented in the shape of the domineering father, the chieftain, the enforcer, who passes the verdict that Senua is "cursed". As Senua ventures deeper into her journey, the whispers and taunts from the voices intensify. They question her sanity and purpose, reflecting the internalized stigma that can make someone doubt their own perceptions and abilities. This isolation is further emphasized by the lack of reactions from the environment to Senua's spoken anxieties. No villager gasps at her visions, no warrior challenges her seemingly nonsensical pronouncements; adversaries are reticent, and when they do speak, they do so in unrecognizable tongues. The indifference of the game world mirrors the potential social disconnect that many individuals with similar experiences navigate. The game does not shy away from the harsh realities of such a solitary fight either: while Senua displays remarkable resilience in combat and puzzle-solving, there are moments of vulnerability. She cries out in frustration at the voices, and her physical form seems to weaken as the journey progresses. Without external support, Senua embodies the immense strength required to face mental illness alone and also the potential toll it can take. At the same time, the emptiness and indifference of *Hellblade's* world demand that we confront the roles we play in mad people's isolation, the ways in which we overtly segregate them (as through incarceration) and subtly marginalize them (as through social exclusion). By removing NPCs, *Hellblade* compels us to confront the damaging impact of isolation: how a lack of societal support can exacerbate the challenge of madness.

While the game manages to keep a reasonable distance from common problematic tropes, *Hellblade* still has faults, which have been voiced by individuals with lived experience of psychosis. One such individual, Dia Lacina, argues that *Hellblade* is a bad representation of her illness because it fails to take into account the nuance and complexity of psychosis, instead recycling the familiar symptoms that pop culture already associates with psychosis. She writes

> It felt like my own mental illness was being explained to me by an outsider...I stopped and wondered about how many times in my own life my mental illness has aided me. No intrusive thought has ever saved me from harm or given me direction. Visual hallucinations have only been horrifying or mundane. Flashbacks have never offered profound insight. Perhaps my hyper-vigilance has kept me from danger; it's also made me lash out at perceived but unrealized threats...I'm certain my mental illness has never benefitted me or society (a claim Ninja Theory co-founder Tameem Antoniades muses on at the end of a documentary feature included in *Hellblade*). I'm not some mystical aberration helping the world progress; I'm just a girl trying to live as best I can.
>
> [52]

In effect, Lacina is criticizing the core question upon which this game is built: is psychosis (or any other mental illness) a curse or a gift, an ailment or an attribute? How should disability be characterized and viewed? This is a central question in many discussions of disability. The game does indeed try to affirm Senua's experience at every possible turn, often through the understanding voice of Dillion, who asks a desperate and broken Senua "Would you give up the beautiful world that you and only you can see just to be rid of your nightmares?". Senua is also encouraged by her mother, who urges her to view the voices as useful, even necessary tools that can guide and help her in her journey. It is valid to question the motives for and consequences of framing disability in this perhaps overly positive way. However, there is another way to see things as well. When we think of the general stance of the gaming industry towards issues of mental disability, which can only be described as vilifying, villainizing, or altogether insensitive, *Hellblade* is clearly a leap in a more progressive direction [4]. While it would be wrong to declare that it is an "authentic" representation of psychosis, it would be doubly wrong to shelve it entirely as another insensitive attempt that uses mental illness as a money-grabbing gimmick, at worst, or a lazy characterization tool, at best.

8. Concluding Thoughts

In discussing the making of the game *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, game designer Tameem Antoniades has expressed a clear desire to tell a different story of mental illness—one that resists typical stereotypes and turns feared symptoms into a productive game mechanic [48]. While the result is not revolutionary, *Hellblade* is a text that should at least be considered evolutionary. In this article, we conducted a close reading of the game that was informed by disability studies and mad studies to explore how the game represents, and thereby naturalizes, the experiences of an individual with mental illness. We began by considering how the game intentionally relies on traditional stereotypical tropes, such as how the body can be an indicator of a disabled individual's state of mind, which are often used to vilify individuals with mental illness, only to flout them and show how baseless they are. Aligning with current psy-industry constructions of psychosis, *Hellblade* suggests that madness is best understood as a consequence of childhood trauma, a justified effect derived from a horrible cause. But rather than using this backstory as a justification for villainy and violence, as other popular representations of madness do, *Hellblade* offers Senua—and, by extension, the player—agency in the face of guilt and pain, framing mental illness and its associated challenges as a series of opportunities as opposed to a straightforward deficit. Senua's "disability" is left unresolved by the end of the story. The game is ultimately not a narrative about overcoming disability but a narrative about the painful journey of Senua grappling with the stigma of her madness all her life. In this way, Senua is not exclusively disabled by bio-psychical factors; she is also disabled by the cultural milieu she/we inhabit(s). Based on these considerations, we argue that *Hellblade* presents a powerful critique of prevalent sanist beliefs and representations of mental illness in video games, pushing back against common (mis)representations of mental illness.

While *Hellblade* is a significant step forward, the gaming industry has a long way to go in its representation of mental illness. There is growing awareness within gaming communities of the need for more nuanced portrayals of it. However, due to the sensitive nature of the topic, larger studios often shy away, leaving the field open for developers like Ninja Theory to take the lead. While accurate representation is crucial, a deeper understanding of how medical and social structures inform our understanding of disability is even more important. By fostering critical reflection and challenging sanist stereotypes, games like *Hellblade* can pave the way for a more inclusive and empathetic gaming landscape.

Notes

1 　Refer to Dan Goodley's 2014 book Dis/ability Studies: Theorising disablism and ableism and reference entry [3] for a more thorough discussion on the necessity of "messy" methods.

2 　While we (and others) assume that this is Senua's father, the game does not definitively identify who this figure is. It merely implies that the figure inhabited an important, potentially parental, role in Senua's childhood.

3 　See Robinson's reference entry [38] for an in-depth analysis of representations of the Joker and madness in film.

4 　While this statement primarily addresses the portrayal of mental disability in blockbuster games, it is important to acknowledge the contributions of independent game developers. Many indie games, such as Celeste (2018) and Gris (2018), have been praised for their sensitive and nuanced exploration of mental health issues. These works demonstrate that not all segments of the gaming industry share the same stance, highlighting the diversity within the industry when it comes to the representation of mental disabilities.

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