



GAME NARRATIVE
SUMMIT

How to Represent Mental Illness in Games

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GDC

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE

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CheckPoint

Content Warning

- Suicide
- Mental illness
- Swearing

Disclaimers

- Please don't sue me, I do not represent any character or franchise, whatsoever
- Mental illness is also a legal term, but we are using the colloquialism
- This talk is symptom based as opposed to diagnosis based
- This is not medical advice

Spoilers

- Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice
- Celeste
- The Last of Us
- Life is Strange
- Stardew Valley (Shane)
- Max Payne 3
- God of War (2018)

Why is this important?

- **Highly Prevalent**

25-50% people have a mental health issue

Why is this important?

- **Highly Stigmatized**

25% people feel "*uneasy/fearful*" around a mentally ill person

46% people believe a diagnosis of mental illness is an "*excuse for poor behaviour*"

People with mental illness are *10x more likely* to be a victim of violent crime

Why is this important?

- **Highly Undertreated**

2/3 people with mental illness *never get professional help*

Why is this important?

- Improving attitudes
- Promoting help-seeking
- Protecting the vulnerable
- **Saving human lives**

GUIDELINES: LAPSES

- **Language**
- **Accuracy**
- **Purpose**
- **Stereotypes**
- **Empathy**
- **Support**

Specific Conditions and Symptoms

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Psychosis
- Trauma and PTSD
- Borderline Personality Disorder
- Substance Abuse and Addiction
- Others

Myth

Just sadness

Antidepressants make
you feel “numb”

A sign of weakness

Requires meds

Depression

Reality

Apathy, ↓ enjoyment, ↓ concentration, ↓
motivation, physical symptoms

All meds have side-effects, many people
get none

Can effect anybody at any time, many
people hide it

Psychotherapy/lifestyle treatment options

Myth

Just panic attacks

It's emotional
sensitivity

Shy people, stuttering,
etc

Meds are sedatives

Reality

A range of disorders e.g. GAD, social phobia etc.

A physiological response to perceived threat

Many people with anxiety disorders are very outgoing and can be irritable

Medication of choice is antidepressants

Anxiety

Myth

Evil, psychopaths

They see things

Split personality

All in “asylums”

Psychosis

Reality

Vulnerable, detached from reality.
Psychopathy is a totally unrelated thing

Key symptoms are hallucinations,
delusions, thought disorder, lack of insight

A myth from the etymology of “schiz”

Most people recover and live independently

Trauma and PTSD

Myth

Only soldiers

Must be the victim

Lack of resilience

Violent/unpredictable/
psychotic

Reality

Anyone impacted by any threat to life or safety

Vicarious trauma also can cause PTSD

Many contributing factors

Can present with hypervigilance, flashbacks, nightmares, irritability, emotional detachment

God of War
Santa Monica Studios, 2018

The Last of Us
Naughty Dog, 2013

Borderline Personality Disorder

Myth Rare

Split personality

Attention seeking

Untreatable

Reality

Incredibly common, often misdiagnosed as bipolar disorder, anxiety and depression

Key symptoms are emotional instability, black and white thinking, fear of abandonment, +/- deliberate self harm

Help seeking

There are many evidence based therapies

Others

- Bipolar Affective Disorder
- Dissociative Identity Disorder
- Antisocial Personality Disorder (and psychopathy)

Jen's Specific Gripes



1. Why so many wheelchairs why
2. “Asylums” are not scary, and psychiatrists are not all evil (or British)
3. Get the meds right please
4. Yes we still use ECT, it's very effective

Other Considerations

- Support the team (and yourself)
- Don't be scared to ask
- Verify with professionals

Thank you

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