

Publication

Playing with mental issues: Entertaining video games as a means for mental health education?

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Author(s) Schlote, Elke; Major, Andrin

Author(s) at UniBasel [Schlote, Elke](#) ; [Major, Andrin](#) ;

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Keywords video games, mental health education, game studies, production analysis, product analysis
Our qualitative analysis focuses on prosocial depictions of mental health issues in entertaining video games, with the theoretical lens of Critical Disability Studies. The inquiry of four video games in our sample focuses on a. how the depictions of the mental health issues were constructed in the games' production process and b. how these issues are represented in the products' structures. The method of document analysis allowed us to reconstruct how and to which end game designers and mental health experts collaborated during the production process towards implementing the mental health issues. Employing methods of game studies, we analyzed the depiction of the main playable character, the interaction design and the gameplay. In conclusion, the four indie video games can be played with or without a deeper insight into the mental health issue. The way the mental health issues are constructed in the video games shows that they are mainly illustrative for an individualized, medical model of mental health. Gameplay was mostly linear, and there was little room for interactivity in terms of choices or self-guided exploration. This can be traced back to the production process, as the game designers mainly relied on the advice of medical professionals and/or the introspection of individuals with a lived experience of the mental health issue. Although the analyzed video games are commendable for their efforts to engage with mental health issues in a prosocial and playful way, their usefulness for fostering a comprehensive mental health education is limited.

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