VIRTUAL MADNESS, CULTURAL REALITIES: A CRITICAL CROSSED EXAMINATION OF PSYCHOSIS REPRESENTATION IN *LAYERS OF FEAR* AND *HELLBLADE SENUA'S SACRIFICE* AND THEIR RECEPTION IN ONLINE COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a thorough and comparative analysis of two video games, Layers of Fear (LOF) and Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice (HSS), exploring their representations of madness. By combining an examination of relevant scientific literature with an analysis of Steam and Reddit forums, the study provides a comprehensive overview of gamer reactions and the ethical implications of developers' representation choices. While LOF takes a horror-oriented approach, eliciting mixed reactions, HSS stands out for its nuanced conceptualization resulting from collaboration with experts and individuals living with psychoses. The article underscores the importance of sensitivity, respect, and empathy toward psychosis in gaming representation, highlighting the diversity of approaches in addressing mental health through video games. Additionally, the discussion delves into fundamental questions regarding artistic versus realistic representation of madness, challenging norms and emphasizing the poetic power of video games as a medium for artistic expression and understanding of the psychotic experience.

Keywords: Psychosis; Stigma ; Fandom ; Representation of Mental Health ; Video Games ; Madness

1 INTRODUCTION

The term "psychosis" was coined by Austrian psychiatrist Ernst von Feuchtersleben in 1845 from the Greek word "psyche," meaning "mind," and the suffix "osis," indicating a process or state (Colman, 2015). The American Psychological Association's Dictionary of Psychology defines psychosis as an abnormal mental state marked by major difficulties in evaluating reality. It is characterized by profound alterations or disturbances in essential higher brain functions, such as perception, cognition, cognitive processing, as well as emotions or affect. These dysfunctions manifest through behavioral phenomena such as delusions, hallucinations, and markedly disorganized speech (American Psychological Association, 2015). Historically, the term "psychosis" has also referred to a severe mental disorder greatly impairing the ability to meet ordinary demands of life or a significant impairment in reality testing (Colman, 2015). The term psychosis is also used generically to refer to "psychotic disorder" encompassing disorders due to substance use, delusional disorder, schizoaffective disorder, or schizophrenia (American Psychological Association, 2015), and its positive symptoms such as catatonia or disorganized thinking (Colman, 2015).

Buday et al. (2022) emphasize that the representation of a psychotic illness similar to schizophrenia is the most common manifestation of mental illness in video games developed between 2002 and 2021. According to Shapiro and Rotter (2016), approximately 24% of video games feature characters with mental illnesses.

Thus, many video games use mental illness as a narrative and gameplay driver. Historically, when discussing disabilities in media, the trend has been towards physical disabilities rather than mental health issues and cognitive differences (Fraser, 2018, p.37 as cited in Austin, 2021). Within video game production, mental illness, and particularly psychosis, is associated with various negative stereotypes that serve narrative or gameplay. Ma (2017) notes that medias portray mental illnesses negatively, thus contributing to the current stigma surrounding mental illness. Indeed, media stereotypes lead to fears and stigmatization from unaffected individuals but also slow down access to care for affected individuals.

The question of the recovery of mental disorders also seems an important and interesting topic to develop. While some researchers lament the lack of representation of recovery in video games dealing with characters with mental disorders (Ferrari et al., 2019:7), others consider it a sanist trope that can be avoided.

We will focus on two games that have been widely acclaimed by critics: Layers of Fear (Bloober Team SA, 2016) and Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice (Ninja Theory, 2017). Layers of Fear (LOF received the "Best Indie Game" 2016 award from PC Guru Magazine, the "Best Art Award" 2016 from Pixel Heaven, and the "Best Art Award 2016" - Pixel Heaven. Hellblade: Seuna's Sacrifice (HSS) was praised bygamers

(Austin, 2021), it also won the awards for "Best British Game," "Best Artistic Achievement," "Best Sound Achievement," "Game Beyond Entertainment" at the BAFTA 2018 (PCGamer, 2018), as well as the awards for "Best Audio Design" and "Best Game with a Positive Message" at The Game Awards 2017 (IGN, 2017).

2 METHODS

2.1 PROBLEM STATEMENT AND OBJECTIVE

The primary objective of this article is to examine the various conceptions and receptions of psychosis in two video games involving a central character affected, namely Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice (HSS) and Layers of Fear (LOF). To achieve this, initially, we will analyze the scientific literature on these two games, before studying the reception of the representation of psychosis by gamers and fans of these games in various public digital spaces, namely Reddit and Steam. Based on the analyses conducted, we will discuss several themes related to the representation of psychosis in video games, such as the conceptualization of madness, the developers' intentions, and the effects of these latter points.

2.2 GAME CORPUS

The choice of Layers of Fear and Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice is motivated by several reasons. Firstly, psychosis is central to both video games in both narrative and gameplay, even if it is never explicitly mentioned. In Layers of Fear, the main character is plagued by hallucinations such as changes in scenery within his house. Rats, whether real or hallucinatory, also proliferate. This transforms his once reassuring space (his house) into an unstable, labyrinthine place of anxiety. The game unfolds entirely within this enclosed space. In Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice (HSS), the main character, Senua, ventures into a fantastical universe, Helheim – the realm of the dead – in Norse mythology. Her hallucinations allude to elements of this mythology, such as Garm, a terrifying boar-like monster acting as one of the guardian creatures of Helheim. Her quest culminates when she confronts Hela, a Norse goddess reigning over the realm of Helheim. Both cases are interesting to study because the main characters embody different representations of psychosis. In Layers of Fear, the character is a man, embodying the image of the tormented painter. In HSS, Senua is a woman, taking on the role of a Pictish warrior. The environments also allow for different approaches to the treatment of psychosis in video games. In LOF, the story unfolds in the late 19th or early 20th century, in a familiar setting: a house. In HSS, however, the story unfolds in a mythological and fantastical universe, intertwined with historical elements. Finally, both games offer gameplay of different genres: a chilling walking simulator and an action/adventure game. Furthermore,

HSS and LOF are the games with the highest number of overall ratings under the keyword "psychosis," with 53,103 and 11,402 respectively as of January 26, 2024, on Steam, thus attesting to their great popularity within the gaming community. These two games thus allow us to understand the production and reception of psychosis through two case studies.

2.2 ANALYSIS

To address the question of the various conceptions and receptions of psychosis in these video games, we conducted a two-step analysis.

Firstly, we examined how psychosis in these games has been analyzed through the scientific literature. For Layers of Fear, we scrutinized the findings retrieved from the Google Scholar database through three searches using the keywords "Layers of Fear" + "schizophrenia" (47 results), "Layers of Fear" + "Bloober" (94 results), and "Layers of Fear" + "psychosis" (45 results), selecting seven chapters from books and scientific articles. Concerning Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice, we analyzed the results obtained from the Google Scholar database through three searches using the keywords "Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice" + "schizophrenia" (45 results), "Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice" + "Ninja" (152 results), and "Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice" + "psychosis" (81 results), selecting 29 chapters from books, scientific articles, and academic works.

Secondly, we analyzed the reception of these representations of psychosis in the public forums Reddit and Steam, selected based on various keywords (including "psychosis", "mental health", "mental", "illness", "schizophrenia" and "stereotypes"). Our Reddit corpus (entirely in English) comprises 36 Reddit threads and 562 comments, while our Steam corpus consists of 38 threads and 849 comments.

3 ANALYSES OF THE REPRESENTATION OF MADNESS IN THE SCIENTIFIC LITERATURE RELATED TO LOF AND HSS

3.1 LAYERS OF FEAR

Ferrari et al. (2019) analyzed the game elements framework (especially characters, game environment/atmosphere, and goals) to describe and unpack messages about mental health and illness in video games. 17% of the games they analyzed presented eerie and unsettling music and emphasized the supernatural, while 11% featured paranormal activities in cursed or haunted buildings or hospitals. According to them, these frightening and horror-filled atmospheric elements are very clearly evident in LOF, where the gamer navigates through a dark and ever-evolving mansion.

Furthermore, Beyvers (2016) analyzed the narrative and representation of psychosis in the video game Layers of Fear, which portrays a painter struggling with hallucinations and mental disorders. She specifically examined the game's narrative mechanisms, highlighting the influence of the painter's perspective on the gamers' perception. Indeed, the unstable narrative and visual distortions create an immersive experience that challenges the notion of reality. Beyvers emphasizes that the game utilizes visual elements such as rat hallucinations, impossible architectural movements, and alterations of paintings to illustrate the protagonist's mental decline, and more broadly, his potential psychosis or schizophrenia. Sarah Beyvers also notes how the game interacts with the gamer's perceptions, putting them in the shoes of the main character and questioning universal normality. Finally, she raises concerns about the stereotypical and reductionist representation of mental disorders, particularly schizophrenia, by highlighting clichéd and potentially harmful elements in the game, such as a list of schizophrenia symptoms found in the main character's house.

Marak (2017) argues that the video game LOF provides an immersive experience. Although she does not specifically address the concepts of "psychosis" and "schizophrenia," she more or less touches upon them through themes of haunting past, loss, and madness. According to her, the protagonist's obsession with the past, the traumatic memories of the family depicted in the game, and the gameplay mechanisms express the character's complex relationship with his own inner demons. Similarly, Pimentel and Melo (2018) mention that the first-person immersion and the importance of memories in LOF contribute to the understanding of psychosis. They note that LOF can be interpreted as an endless loop, symbolizing the artist's incessant pursuit of perfection and his detachment from reality. According to them, all these elements - including a complex storyline and carefully crafted game design - offer a nuanced representation of psychosis and schizophrenia through a complex storyline and carefully crafted game design.

Some researchers have delved into the artistic influences in LOF. Schweigert (2018) observes that the game is heavily inspired by Oscar Wilde's novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and presents elements of Victorian Gothic, creating a frightening atmosphere. She compares the game to Gothic literature and underscores the importance of gamer involvement in constructing the story. Schweigert (2018) highlights that LOF uses the protagonist's schizophrenia as a means to create impossible and horrifying events in a familiar environment. Thus, the main character's mental illness serves as a backdoor to making normally impossible things plausible. Moreover, schizophrenia is exploited as a design element, altering the gamer's visual perception with psychotic episodes that render the environment unstable and frightening. These moments include visual changes such as distorted colors, blurry vision, and strange noises, contributing to the game's eerie atmosphere. Finally, she points out that the narrative explores

themes of the painter's unhealthy obsession with his model, highlighting the distinction between art and reality, as well as how the protagonist's schizophrenia influences the gamer's perception and the course of the game. Moreover, Vinzenz (2018) focused on pictorial influences. According to her, the game uses canonical artistic references, such as the works of Friedrich and Goya, to create a frightening atmosphere and immerse gamers in a horrific experience. She also emphasizes that immersion creates a particular emotional environment for the gamer. Regarding the representation of psychosis and schizophrenia in the game, Vinzenz suggests that the protagonist, a painter plagued by madness, visually represents these mental disorders. According to her, the dynamic changes in the game's artworks, alterations of reality, and disturbing visual elements can be interpreted as manifestations of the main character's mental decline. The developers have used madness-related stereotypes and exploited conventional visual codes to evoke specific emotions and immerse gamers in the protagonist's psychological experience. Thus, the game leverages artistic elements, stereotypes, and visual strategies to create an immersive experience focused on psychosis and schizophrenia even though the medium of video games has limitations. Additionally, Runzheimer (2020) analyzed the increasing playful integration of mental illnesses in video games by focusing on display techniques and the pros and cons of first-person versus third-person perspectives. According to him, rather than stigmatizing mental disorders as malevolent elements, the use of virtual reality headsets could simulate the perception of those affected, thereby creating a form of self-awareness from the gamer's point of view. Runzheimer (2020) explores the representation of mental disorders, especially psychosis and schizophrenia, in the context of the horror video game genre and more specifically LOF and HSS. According to him, in LOF, the developers, through the use of the first-person perspective and specific narrative devices, have managed to generate an immersive experience similar to an altered perception of reality, a characteristic of psychosis. He introduces the concept of "Blind Space," describing elements of the game that induce disorientation, paranoia, and loss of control. Furthermore, virtual reality devices, according to him, have the potential to intensify subjective immersion in mental disorders. Rather than an excessive focus on the technological aspects of virtual reality, Runzheimer (2020) emphasizes the importance of maintaining an empathetic and thoughtful approach in representing mental disorders and highlights the diversity of narrative and visual approaches adopted in this type of game.

3.2 HELLBLADE: SENUA'S SACRIFICE

One of the key highlights of Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice is the collaboration between mental health professionals, individuals who experience psychosis, and developers. This aspect has been recurrent in scientific literature. According to Fordham and Ball (2019), this collaboration facilitated the creation of a

precise and empathetic portrayal of mental disorders, particularly psychosis and schizophrenia, which are notably characterized by visual hallucinations and sensory distortions. The representation appears more realistic, and according to Harju (2019), this departure from traditional stereotypes has contributed to the game's success. Thus, Senua emerges as realistic and human, struggling against her own inner demons. Anderson (2020) observes that the visual and auditory symptoms are presented in a way that elicits empathy towards individuals suffering from psychosis. He notes that Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice innovates by presenting symptoms in a complex and contradictory manner.

Game mechanics also seem to serve as a driver for raising awareness about the experience of psychosis. According to Evans (2019), Senua, who suffers from severe psychosis (experiencing internal voices and anxiety-inducing visions), leads gamers to feel the emotions associated with this condition through specially designed game mechanics such as permadeath and visual landscape puzzles. Moreover, the game mechanics, focused on anxiety and repetition, attempt to make gamers feel Senua's emotions while representing her symptoms in an almost literal manner. Furthermore, it raises the question of whether it is preferable to directly materialize symptoms or to opt for a metaphorical representation of mental states.

Audiovisual analysis is also a relevant approach to raise awareness about hallucinations induced by psychosis. Lucas (2019) notes that the game utilizes elements such as 3D audio narration, reducing gamer agency, and virtual reality perspective to immerse the gamer in Senua's experience and enhance feelings of fear and anxiety. Several studies demonstrate that audiovisual elements allow for better immersion and empathy towards the character. Gamers undergo an experience similar to Senua's, feeling closer to her (Crawford, 2020; Cunoti et al., 2022; Elford, 2022; Grosser, 2020; Ferchaud et al., 2020; Jesus, 2019; Pellencau, 2019; Saravia et al., 2020; Spies, 2022; Torrisi & Williams, 2023). According to Ferrari et al. (2019) and Paredes Otero (2020), Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice offers an educational and engaging experience for gamers and a nuanced, immersive, and realistic portrayal of psychosis by thoroughly addressing the protagonist's subjective experiences. Beal (2022) points out that the choice of a female protagonist enhances the emotional impact of the game and has helped reshape the perception of the mental illness by questioning behaviors traditionally associated with depression, often perceived as feminine and weak. Therefore, Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice creates a conducive space for discussing mental health and can be perceived as a means of raising awareness and understanding of mental disorders.

Spies (2022) adds that the combat and gameplay mechanics reflect Senua's struggle against her inner demons, and the representation of battles and defeats contributes to the narrative of trauma and reconstruction. The author concludes that the game does not portray Senua as a set of negative

characteristics but rather as a person facing difficult situations who does not rid herself of her psychosis but finds a new self-acceptance by integrating her dark experiences into her own story. Mason and Westhead (2023) evaluated Senua's voices compared to clinical and non-clinical samples of voice-hearers and reported that they are perceived similarly to clinical voices, especially in terms of malevolence, omnipotence, and resistance.

The game offers gamers the opportunity to embody Senua from her point of view. In this regard, Igarzabal et al. (2022) emphasize how games (role-playing, video games, virtual reality, etc.) can not only depict mental disorders, such as psychosis, but also contribute to understanding and awareness by portraying characters who live it.

As highlighted by Stang (2018), Austin (2023) advocates for an ethical approach to representing mental illnesses in video games and avoiding presenting mental illness as a mere "narrative prop" in order to raise awareness of neurodiversity issues. Thus, in Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice, the simulation of disordered thoughts, psychosis, and hallucinations should prompt critical frameworks to prevent the reduction of complex characters to stereotypes. He also notes the debates surrounding the dramatization and romanticization of mental health issues in art, highlighting the risks of simplifying the portrayal of complex mental disorders and criticizing the idea that Senua's psychosis would be a gift.

However, Anderson (2020) observes that visual and auditory symptoms are presented in a way that elicits empathy towards people suffering from psychosis. According to him, Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice innovates by presenting symptoms in a complex and contradictory manner. Indeed, experiences lived through the main character, Senua, offer both terrifying and beautiful aspects of psychosis, highlighting the duality of mental illness. The game questions the stigma associated with mental illness, showing that psychosis can have positive aspects such as resilience, creativity, and problem-solving.

Torrisi & Williams (2023) highlighted that Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice has a transformative impact on gamers' perception of mental health, especially through the phenomena of "memetic bleed-out" and "procedural bleed-out" from the game's characters. They also note the importance of accurate representation of mental health in games to counteract the inadvertent reinforcement of stereotypes linking psychosis and schizophrenia to dangerousness.

For an accurate experience of psychosis, the documentation work of the developers, including interviews with healthcare professionals and individuals with psychosis, has been emphasized as positive steps towards representation. In this sense, Ortiz (2023) emphasizes that the collaboration between developers, Paul Fletcher, professor of health neuroscience, and individuals affected by psychosis offers an immersive experience and allows gamers to understand and accept experiences related to psychosis. Buday et al. (2022) note an authentic representation of psychosis in Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice, which,

unlike most other games on the topic, offers a more balanced and positive perspective. They thus demonstrate that mental health issues can be addressed constructively and that solutions are possible, contributing to reducing the stigma associated with these disorders.

Contrary to the "accurate" portrayal of psychosis as a documentary representation, Noury (2023) demonstrates that psychosis can also be developed from a poetic and aesthetic perspective: through myth. She observes that the developers have opted not to explicitly designate the protagonist Senua's psychosis as a psychotic disorder, preferring to use the generic term "darkness." This approach allows gamers not to be confined to a single interpretation, leaving room for different readings and interpretations of the character. Noury (2023) also notes that the game does not simply present psychosis as an obstacle to overcome but rather explores the coexistence of myth and psychosis, highlighting the poetic relevance of using myth as a means of representing psychosis in a manner other than documentary. She highlights how the character of Senua continues to express herself through the language of myth even after the conclusion of the initial narrative, thus demonstrating the mobility of myth and its capacity to resonate with reality.

Continuing from a poetic perspective, Meakin et al. (2021) explore the application of poetic principles, including Aristotelian catharsis, in Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice. They note the use of narrative elements to create an immersive and emotional experience. According to them, poetic elements such as peripeteia (a reversal of circumstances) and anagnorisis (discovery or change in cognition) can lead Senua towards a better understanding of reality. Senua's process of anagnorisis is described as dispelling illusions and seeing the world as it truly is, marking a cognitive transformation. Thus, for them, game mechanics and poetic elements immersively represent the inner struggle of a psychotic character while offering a cathartic experience to the gamer.

Fordham and Ball (2018) highlight how design choices (narrative techniques, gameplay, and aesthetics) and frameworks have been used to create an immersive experience while avoiding trivializing the serious subject matter. They also remind that psychosis in the game is presented through a historical framework based on Norse mythology, where mental illness is perceived as a curse rather than a disease. Thus, mythological elements serve as artistic metaphors for Senua's struggle with her psychological symptoms.

Fusdahl (2019) suggests that game mechanics integrate symptoms of psychosis, such as hallucinations, into puzzles and combat. The puzzles require a distorted perception of reality, offering a unique perspective on how mental illness influences daily life. Throughout the game, Senua transitions from confusion and fear regarding her hallucinations to an awareness of their internal origin. She recognizes that her visions are creations of her mind rather than external elements. Thus, the game

presents an unusual challenge at the end, where progression depends on accepting defeat rather than victory, highlighting the theme of struggling with mental illness. Senua thus reaches a positive conclusion by accepting her mental condition, abandoning her obsessive quest, and embracing self-acceptance.

Genovesi (2020) indicates that the gamer immerses into Senua's intense emotional experience through specific ludonarrative mechanisms. Indeed, developers seek to establish a continuous sensory and emotional fusion between the gamer and Senua through binaural audio systems. Also, the game demands that the gamer emotionally distance themselves from Senua towards the end, simulating an endless battle where the gamer's voluntary defeat leads to a significant revelation. Indeed, by allowing themselves to be ludically defeated, the gamer enables Senua to accept her inner voices and find inner peace.

Finally, Kuusela (2021) observes that the game avoids clearly defining psychosis-related objectives in gameplay, but narrative and cinematic elements gradually reveal aspects of Senua's story and the traumas that led to her mental condition. He suggests that game objectives, such as "Confront Hela" or "Defeat the Northmen," can be interpreted differently by gamers based on their own understanding of the narrative elements related to psychosis. Indeed, negative inner voices in the game are presented as obstacles, but the final resolution encourages gamers to question these objectives, thus illustrating ludonarrative dissonance to create a narrative impact. Thus, the article highlights the complexity of representing psychosis and schizophrenia in a video game, emphasizing that individual interpretations of narrative objectives may vary depending on gamers' experiences and perceptions.

4 DESIGN AND RECEPTION OF MADNESS REPRESENTATION IN LOF AND HSS GAMER FORUMS ON STEAM

4.1 STEAM

There are four threads on STEAM related to Layers of Fear (LOF) discussing mental health, symbolism, and game analysis with a total of 224 comments have been selected. In the first thread discussing the painter's schizophrenia, 10 comments explore the potential schizophrenia of the painter and/or his wife. Additionally, three comments from individuals with schizophrenia discuss their potential condition. The second thread critiques the portrayal of mental illness in the game. Among the comments, two agree with the critique, while 18 strongly disagree, including two from individuals dealing with psychosis and depression. The third thread is a discussion of existing game analyses, with no negative criticism of the game, and only one comment mentioning the potential presence of the painter's schizophrenia. Lastly,

the final thread discusses the demonization of mental health in video games and was authored by an individual claiming to be affected by delusions and other unspecified issues, criticizing the developers' approach (which they label as ableist). Among several dozen comments, only two agree with the author's viewpoint: one from an individual identifying as autistic with other "mental illness" issues, and another seemingly offering compassionate validation to the original poster's sentiment. However, 32 comments strongly disagree with the original poster, including five from individuals claiming to be affected by the topic (one with "Asperger's" (*sic*), four with unspecified mental illnesses), with many others labeling the author as a troll or social justice warrior, telling them to grow up, asserting that it's a common trope in such games, and indicating they believe the developers did an excellent job of representation.

There are 34 threads on STEAM related to Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice (HSS) discussing mental health, schizophrenia and its prevalence, obsessive-compulsive disorder, psychosis, apophenia, voices (and the desire to stop them in the game as they are too invasive), paranoia, delusions, mental illness (and its artistic representation, public ignorance, awareness, and empathy elicited by the game), depression, spirituality, healers, mythologies, and others analyzing and discussing the game, with a total of 625 comments have been selected. Among these comments, 83 validate the representation in the game (38 from the general populace, 13 from individuals with psychosis, 16 from individuals with schizophrenia or schizoid personalities, four from individuals with relatives affected by psychosis, six from bipolar individuals, five from individuals with mental health issues such as depression and social anxiety, and 1 from a psychiatrist). Additionally, 1 thread criticized the stereotypical representation, and six comments criticize or express disappointment (with arguments explaining that it misrepresents reality, that it's commendable they attempted it even if it's a failure, that it's embarrassing to see what they've experienced presented playfully, that it's not just about having a consultant but using their advice and that it's not just about communication from Ninja Studio, that it doesn't delve deep enough into mythology and only represents mental health issues in the modern world). Ultimately, there seem to be many positive opinions under the guise of authority arguments (related to the inclusion of an external expert consultant in the game's development) and a sort of susceptibility to the studio's communication, and the trailer including comments from affected individuals (with a narrative like "if the expert or certain affected individuals say it, then it must be true"). However, many affected individuals validate the representation in the game. The negative opinions, although fewer and minority, nevertheless seem to express well-constructed and relevant criticisms.

4.2 REDDIT

Four threads on Reddit discussing mental health, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and depression in games in general, with a total of 158 comments have been selected. Among these comments, three mention LOF as a faithful representation of these themes, with 14, nine, and two Likes respectively. Regarding HSS, 14 comments describe a faithful representation of these themes, with Likes totaling 141, 16, 21, 11, 16, 7, 5, 3, 3, 2, 2, 2, 2, 1, and 1. Other comments from individuals experiencing psychosis also describe the same with 3 and 3 Likes, and one critical comment regarding the representation in the game with one like.

Two threads on Reddit discussing LOF, specifically its use of VR and possible reasons for the symptoms experienced by the painter, with a total of 55 comments were analyzed. Among these comments, only one mentions representations, acknowledging the accurate representation in HSS (with one like).

On Reddit, we find 30 threads discussing HSS, its representation of mental health, game analysis, gameplay experiences, and the effects of the game on mental health, many from individuals experiencing psychosis, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, depression, and other mental health issues, sharing their life experiences, with a total of 349 comments has been analyzed. Among comments on representations, 25 from various users validate them, with Likes buttons totaling 27, 13, 6, 1, 12, 3, 6, 27, 6, 2, 1, 1, 42, 9, 8, 6, 6, 10, 2, 5, 1, 14, 4, 6, and 8. Additionally, 17 comments from individuals affected by schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, psychosis, depression, OCD, anxiety, and/or unspecified issues express satisfaction with the representation in HSS, with Likes totaling 3, 8, 8, 3, 6, 1, 3, 3, 3, 2, 5, 1, 1, 2, 2, 3, and 4. Finally, 10 threads, many from individuals affected by psychosis, where the original poster's (OP) message directly expresses satisfaction with the representation in HSS, with Likes totaling 8, 3, 12, 6, 72, 33, 6, 64, 26, and 37.

4.3 SUMMARY

In total, across 38 Steam threads and 849 comments, 133 validate the representations in HSS and LOF, compared to only 11 critiques of these representations. Across 36 Reddit threads and 562 comments, 3 comments on LOF praise the accurate representation of mental illness with 25 Likes. Regarding HSS on Reddit, there are 40 positive comments about the representation from general users, totaling 460 Likes, 20 positive comments from individuals more directly affected by the subject, totaling 61 Likes, and only 1 critique of the representation in HSS with 1 like. Additionally, 10 threads discussing opinions on the accurate representation of mental illness in HSS garnered 267 Likes.

On Reddit, many threads were created by affected individuals, but they mainly recount their experiences with mental health, and comment responses mostly consist of questions on the subject. Discussions extend beyond the game and the issue of representation within it, leaning more towards empathizing, understanding, and respect. Moreover, threads and comments on Reddit tend to steer away from personal attacks when there is disagreement, unlike what was observed in Steam forums. It is worth noting that for many original posters or commentators, mental health is seen as a homogeneous entity; they express concern because they experience anxiety or depressive traits, which are not directly related to psychosis. However, threads on Steam and Reddit specifically discuss these questions.

Ultimately, the spaces for exchange between individuals around the subject, akin to a paratext, become spaces for peer support (peer support here could be understood as support around mental health issues beyond psychosis). Thus, forums and comment sections also become arenas for debates on what constitutes "good representation" (documentary or liberating), "bad representation" (stigmatizing), the means of representation, and debating the original intentions of developers. They also become spaces for conflicting views to coexist (original gameplay versus horrifying and stigmatizing psychosis).

5 DISCUSSION

Scientific and academic analyses of representations of psychosis and schizophrenia in LOF and HSS, as well as the reception of these representations within gaming communities, lead us to discuss several elements: the conceptualization of madness through the intentions of developers and the effects of these video game representations.

The game LOF adopts a horrific approach to representing mental illness. Indeed, "madness" is often perceived through the lens of psychological horror, using visual and narrative elements to evoke feelings of terror in gamers. The potential use of virtual reality intensifies this experience and can be interpreted as an attempt to experiment with psychosis, plunging gamers into a world distorted by mental illness and allowing them to intensely and immersively experience the terrifying aspects of mental illness. Thus, the conceptualization of "madness" in LOF appears to be centered on horrific and sensational elements, favoring a visceral approach rather than a nuanced representation of mental disorders that could contribute to reinforcing stereotypes and stigmatizing psychosis. Furthermore, the game elicits contrasting reactions on Steam forums. Some gamers express concerns about the representation of mental health, highlighting negative criticisms of stigmatization. Thus, the diversity of opinions suggests that the game's effect on awareness and empathy may vary among individuals. However, this representation seems in line with the conceptualization of the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders

(DSM-5) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) under the label "Schizophrenia Spectrum and Other Psychotic Disorders," including schizophrenia, psychotic disorders, and schizotypal disorders defined by anomalies in one or more of the following five domains: delusions, hallucinations, disorganized thinking (speech), grossly disorganized or abnormal motor behavior (including catatonia), and negative symptoms.

In contrast, the game HSS stands out with a more nuanced conceptualization of "madness." Indeed, developers collaborated with experts and people living with psychosis to create an artistic and immersive representation, and they intended to offer a game with "clinical accuracy" (Austin, 2021) and to provide an experience that would enable gamers to better understand and even sympathize with the experience of psychosis (Austin, 2021). However, Austin notes that claiming to offer "compassion" and "awareness" could also be a marketing argument. Ferrari et al. (2019) also claim that video games like HSS can use features, mechanisms, characters, and scenarios that can disrupt stereotypes about mental illness and potentially contribute to a new meaningful understanding of the illness experience. Thus, game mechanisms integrating symptoms of psychosis, such as hallucinations, offer gamers a unique perspective on how mental illness influences daily life but reduce it to a mere gameplay and aesthetic experience. The creator of the game Hellblade, Antoniades, emphasizes that psychosis has rarely been adequately addressed in film and other media, as also mentioned by Austin in 2021. This subject is often overlooked or even ignored, even in the new medium of video games. When it is represented, there is often confusion between psychosis and psychopathy, the latter being associated with a lack of empathy. Indeed, it is undeniable that the production of video games dealing with madness less stereotypically is limited. As Adichie pointed out in 2009 (as cited in Ferrari et al., 2019:8), a single story creates stereotypes and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are false, but that they are incomplete. They reduce a story to the only possible story. However, Austin notes that HSS does not fall into a gendered stereotype of "madness." Senua is compared to Harley Quinn, who became "mad" because of the Joker but turns out to be sexualized and dependent on the Joker. Similarly, it is interesting to note that her madness has no cause. Austin compares Senua to Ellie from *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013). Both female characters are hardly or not sexualized. However, Ellie's motivation to fight is driven by a desire for revenge. In contrast, Senua fights because she is a warrior. Similarly, her "madness" precedes the game and continues after the game. The game does not fall into the trope of "healing." Mental illness is also integrated into the narrative through Norse mythological elements, offering a perspective that goes beyond the simple psychiatric representation of the DSM-5. In HSS, schizophrenia, and psychosis are presented more as internal struggles, using poetic elements to describe Senua's cognitive transformation.

However, the game does not explicitly mention psychosis as such, as psychosis is a term rooted in Western psychology and psychiatry and also situated in contemporary times. Nevertheless, developers

sought Celtic terms that reflect Senua's behavior: *Gelt* and *Druth*, with the former signifying "a person who, having succumbed to madness due to a curse, grief, or trauma, is forced to exile oneself from one's own people" and the latter connoting madness dating back to a time when those who spoke on behalf of the gods were considered mad, or had made a pact with the devil (Noury, 2023). This approach indicates that attempts at anthropological research were made to try to place Senua in her time, even though a specialist in psychiatry was interviewed and involved.

The conceptualization seems aimed at educating gamers about the complex aspects of mental disorders while fostering understanding and empathy. Indeed, Steam and Reddit forums reveal a largely positive reception of the representation in HSS, with many comments validating the accuracy and quality of the representation of mental health. Gamers seem to appreciate how the game encourages empathy towards people living with psychosis and schizophrenia by blending psychiatric psychotic design from the DSM-5 with artistic and mythological elements. This also seems in line with Simond's (2023) constructivist interpretation of madness. According to him, instead of drawing parallels between video game characters and diagnostic manuals, or evaluating therapeutic methods based on their real-world applications, video games should be appreciated for their essence: creative expressions designed to inspire and entertain. In this context, madness in video games is not considered a reflection of real mental illnesses but rather as a unique construction in itself (Simond, 2023).

Criticisms have been raised that Senua, being placed in a mythological universe, does not reflect the reality of situations experienced by people with psychosis in the 21st century (Lacina, 2017). However, these criticisms seem to overlook the "poetic power" (Noury, 2023) that video games can use. If we consider that video games, like other media, are also part of an artistic process, artistic prescription is hardly applicable, and poetry allows for this aesthetic freedom that sometimes enables multi-level readings. Thus, the poetic power of HSS lies in not representing psychosis as it is because it is inherently protean. The poetic power would therefore offer a possibility of interpretation and may make it attain a certain degree of temporary universality or at least "rationalization." In doing so, the myth does not propose itself as a tool opposed to reason but rather as "a form of rationalization" in its own right (Di Filippo, 2016: 129 as cited in Noury, 2023). Noury (2023) also emphasizes that the gamer's position as an entity capable of producing and receiving meaning is central when analyzing a video game because the gamer is both actor and spectator, thus experiencing psychosis but without living it.

While Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice and Layers of Fear were praised for being good games (awarded, good narrative and gameplay, well sold, highly rated on Steam, etc.), they both present different conceptions of "madness". The difference in the conceptualization of "madness" between LOF and HSS underscores the importance of developers' approaches and intentions in representing mental disorders

and otherness. While LOF leans towards a sensational and horrific representation that may reinforce stereotypes or preconceptions and elicits more mixed reactions regarding its contribution to awareness and empathy towards psychosis, HSS strives to present a richer and more nuanced image, successfully balancing gameplay experience with ethical sensitivity towards mental health issues, encouraging understanding and empathy towards those experiencing psychotic experiences. This divergence highlights the ethical choices developers can make when addressing such sensitive themes.

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