

2023 Stamps Senior Thesis

Here In the Garden

Game Design Concept Video for Therapeutic Edutainment Experiences

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To view my senior thesis animation and website as a whole, please visit:

<https://sites.google.com/umich.edu/hereinthegarden-lakylathomas/creative-process?authuser=0>

• *Background* •

Much of my work utilizes interactive aspects in order to directly establish connections and opportunities for learning and reflection. I have incorporated interactive experiences through sculpture, 2d mixed media work, book making, and video game experiences. Stand alone pieces and small portfolio series are predominantly inspired by research on social issues and personal interpretations of human experiences or emotions through the use of symbolic and nostalgic imagery. Other pieces, such as game art assets and models, are made to provide a sense of aesthetic delight, whimsy, and mystery contributing to the immersive fantasy worlds they are from. While my work always incorporates an air of surrealism or fantasy, it is always curated with the audience and their experience interacting with it in mind.

Here In the Garden is a trailer piece for an interactive experience curated to provide a facilitated guide for personal health and mental well being.

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A deep reverberating sound followed by a chime would always catch my ear from anywhere in the house. It was the sound of my dad starting up his Xbox. From a young age, I would always stop playing with my toys or take a break from studying to watch him play video games. They were always grotesque with monsters and people in heavy armor. I didn't think much of the enemies he was fighting, if anything I thought their designs and animations were intriguing. Then I watched him play Batman: Arkham Asylum. At the age of 8 or 9 I knew asylums were places where people went to get help and didn't understand why those people were bad guys and now enemies...the "Lunatics"... Batman had to fight rather than protect. I asked my dad why he had to fight them... he brushed off my string of questions by saying they were just enemies, insane mobs that would hurt him if he did not defeat them first. Maybe there was something in the story I missed and can't remember, but those scenes always stuck with me.

Since then, I began to notice how frequently the crazy insane humans were used as mobs and felt unsettled and uncomfortable with mental health being villainized in video games.

The moment that truly sparked my interest in the portrayal of mental health and illness in games was when I was during a time when I was addressing my own mental health. I began playing a game called Omori, a surreal single player RPG maker game. At first it was a great game with wonderful and immersive character design, beautifully soothing yet bright color palette, and an atmosphere that felt like it was straight out of a childhood dream, and an intriguing story that I was slowly being pulled into.

I was slowly progressing through the beginning of the game when the main characters came across enemies called sprout moles. These adorable sprouts were originally causing havoc, destroying flowers and gardens. The player would kill them to stop their disruptions... which is nothing unusual for a game. But then they came across a sprout mole that was sitting alone crying, not being a disturbance like the others. I was sure the game would allow us to leave it alone or cheer it up but then one of the characters stated "it looks so pathetic, let's put it out of its misery" and the battle began. Games are interesting, due to their sense of autonomy, the story

does not progress for the player unless they actively make it so. As a result, I tend to get invested in stories and experiences of games, so at that moment I became quite upset and stopped playing for some time. After coming back to the game and picking it up again, I came to realize that this game heavily focused on creating an accurate depiction of mental health and trauma.

My experience with this game had dimmed a light in me only to ignite a passionate interest that I did not anticipate at the time. Not only that, but I found other games like *Life is Strange*, where the player had the opportunity to genuinely help a character who was suffering. *What Remains of Edith Finch* is another title for an impactful game experience. While the character could not be saved, the representation of their experience was genuine, impactful, and had no demonizing or villainizing representation like so many of their counterparts. These all became comfort games due to their positive representation and demonstration for coping and depicting interactive stories with something that could be learned from. These examples of storytelling and gameplay mechanics made me wonder, how can game design be utilized to create therapeutic gaming experiences for users' mental health and what would that look like?

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From this point, I began researching mental health and its portrayal in video games. I found that the vast majority of the games that portray some aspect of mental illness are in action and adventure genres (83%, 83/100), and (68%, 68/100) are noted to contain horror, violence, and gore (Ferrari et al., 2019). In these types of games, the player, who is almost exclusively the protagonist, becomes justified in fighting and or harming the mentally ill antagonist, whether they be the main villain of the plot or recurring mobs/enemies that appear throughout the game. This depiction of villainized people being depicted on par with monsters and mods meant to impede the protagonist in their pursuits spans across decades within video games across countless genres. In fact, a study published by JMIR Mental Health found that from a total of 789 games identified for being related to mental illness on steam. Their study focused on 100 best selling out of those nearly 800 games and they found that 96% of the video games depicted at least one character with mental illness and linked mental illness to dangerous and violent behaviors.

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and storefront. Their study focused on 100 best selling out of those nearly 800 games and they found that 96% of the video games depicted at least one character with mental illness and linked that mental illness to dangerous and violent behaviors.

The main reason why these portrayals are problematic is because they undermine the experiences and struggles that real individuals living with these conditions face on a daily basis. You would not typically see this type of depiction in what would be considered your everyday person. The predominant game interpretation of these conditions are used to add an ominous atmosphere, jump scares, villainize the mentally ill, and sensationalize the presentation of mental breakdowns and trauma.

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Realizing just how consistently prevalent negative depictions of mental health have been within games across decades resulted in my searching for ways that people are attempting to combat this standard that has come to be widely accepted as a norm within game media.



While less common than their negative counterparts, in recent years more games have been produced for the purpose of creating awareness and fostering empathy surrounding the topic of mental health. Rather than adding characters with mental illness as a source of eerie ambiance, disturbing atmosphere, or demented enemies to be fought against, main characters are carefully curated

to portray the immensely personal and often invisible symptoms of mental illnesses such as psychosis, BPD, anxiety, and depression. Game developers have begun to incorporate real and accurate research regarding the symptoms, experiences, and treatment for mental illnesses.

A study on the use of games for mental health treatment, by Sheena M. Miller, reveals how video games that incorporate aspects relating to mental illness can be developed to help spread awareness and understanding. In this study, Miller reveals how video games, that incorporate attributes that relate to mental illness, can be developed to help spread awareness and understanding for the conditions they are interpreting. The study describes this as Informative Game Playing, which essentially means that the player is being directly or indirectly informed about the real experiences, struggles, and perceptions of living with a particular condition through the experience of playing the game, developing an understanding of the character, content, and its application to the real world. Miller also creates a model for Therapeutic Game Design, which is similar to Informative Game Playing, but it predominantly becomes a form of expression for game developers to facilitate their personal healing processes. The last category Miller establishes is Therapeutic Game Playing. This type of game playing. In summary, this model describes games that are developed in order to provide actual therapeutic practices to patients as players based on research. Individually and in combination, these models create a very beneficial learning experience for a diverse range of people, those with and without the challenges being addressed in the games. After reading this paper, I began taking note of how other games I was playing were actively utilizing the methods she spoke of, whether it be directly or indirectly. This study greatly informed and inspired the direction my creative practice has taken.

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Here In the Garden is a project I developed that serves as my way of acknowledging the history of how mental health is regarded in interactive game media and actively addressing the situation in a supportive and positive manner.

This trailer video represents the single player game that will provide therapeutic gameplay practices. The purpose, theme, and plot have been developed to create a soothing relaxing experience for the player while providing support for their individual real world problems, such as anxiety and relief and help with developing healthy practices to deal with moments of distress and unpleasant situations.

Rather than being a game that focuses on character development of the in game characters or combat, the interactive experience focuses on the player themselves. It's designed to have an open ended space with objects the player can interact with. Interacting with the objects prompts empowering dialog and provides activities for the player based on research in order to give them tools that will help support them in their daily lives.



Ferrari M, McIlwaine S, Jordan G, Shah J, Lal S, Iyer S, Gaming With Stigma: Analysis of Messages About Mental Illnesses in Video Games, JMIR Ment Health 2019;6(5):e12418
Miller, S. (2015). The potential of serious games as mental health treatment.

• Contextual Information •



Celeste

Matt Makes Games, Extremely OK Games, Ltd, released January 25, 2018

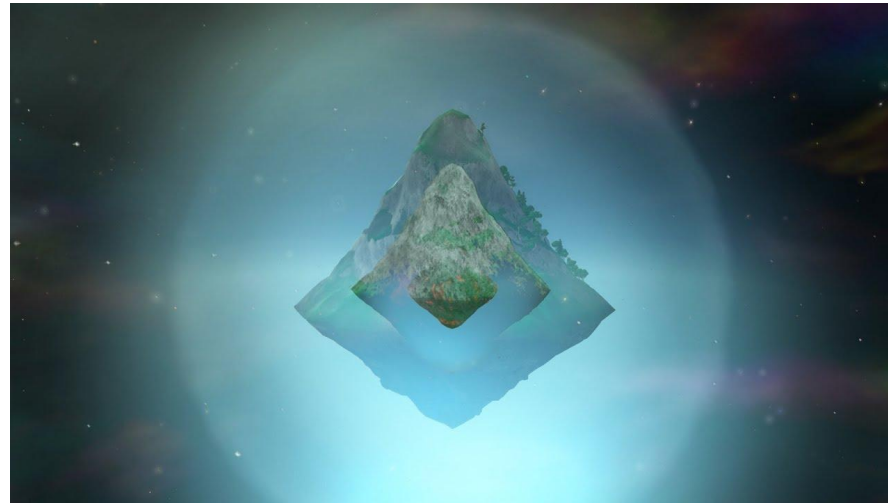
The game Celeste is a relatively new game, released in 2018. In this game, the player becomes the protagonist known as Madeline, who happens to have anxiety and depression. This attribute is not what the game revolves around and does not define the character herself, but features/mechanics related to it are seamlessly integrated into the gameplay and story.

Throughout the game, there are moments when she has panic attacks. She is taught to imagine balancing a feather in order to slow her breathing and help her to calm down. This imagery becomes a mechanic where the player has to learn how to balance the feather using the game's mechanics.

In this way, the real life player, who may or may not have anxiety, is taught a productive and considerate coping mechanism. For individuals who play the game and have not experienced panic attacks, they are given imagery and visuals that would help.

This also teaches a useful strategy to help or assist someone who is having an attack in the future.

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Mountain

David O'Reilly, released Jul 1, 2014

This title refers to an example of a game that makes people question the definition of what a game is and what it can be.

Mountain is essentially an idle game/experience; one that runs and plays itself without the player's input or influence.

The description of the game and its form of play is as follows: “Experience life as a Mountain in this relaxing nature simulation game.”

At its core there is nothing other than a spinning mountain surrounded by a rainbow halo, floating in silent space. It is simple, stress relieving but is an experience the player can gain so much fun when they offer a bit of their time, something to passively experience.



Omori

Studio Omocat, released December 25, 2020

This game is heavily focused on creating an accurate depiction of mental health and trauma through a fantastical rpg (role playing game) experience. It depicts depression, anxiety, suicide, shows the various ways people deal with grief and loss as well as

interpersonal relationships from a young age and as they grow up. The game utilizes informative gameplay and therapeutic game design making it even more of a source of inspiration.

This game is of particular interest as it was the game that primarily inspired my interest in the portrayal of mental health in video games, which then led to my interest in the concept of therapeutic games.

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What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy - James Paul Gee

(Gee, J. P. (2003). What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.)

In this book, James Paul Gee notes the 36 different principles related to features and mechanics of gameful learning.

All of the principles are noteworthy and important, but I am particularly interested in the Active Critical Learning Principle, as well as the Transfer Principle.

The Transfer Principle addresses the importance of learners being able to utilize the skills and information they obtained from their gameful learning experience.

Being introduced to concepts does no good if they do not help develop the skills they are addressing, which is why this principle is so fundamental to acknowledge and keep in mind when designing interactive experiences

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EndeavorRX

Akili Interactive Labs, released June 15, 2020

(Akili. (2022, February 25). Homepage - EndeavorRx®. EndeavorRx.)

EndeavorRx is the first prescription game meant to treat ADHD, developed in order to help adolescents, ages 8-12, improve their attention span through the use of gaming software alongside their other treatments.

ADHD is not a mental illness, rather an attention disorder, but EndeavorRX's use of gameplay as a type of prescription therapeutic program, shows the potential for the use of the gameplay as a means for therapy and treatment for other disorders and mental health. There are very few negative side effects of this type of treatment as well.

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Sheena M. Miller

Video Game Art Therapy: THE POTENTIAL OF SERIOUS GAMES by Sheena M. Miller

(Miller, S. (2015). The potential of serious games as mental health treatment.)

In this study, Miller reveals how video games, that incorporate attributes that relate to mental illness, can be developed to help spread awareness and understanding for the conditions they are interpreting.

The study describes this as Informative Game Playing, which essentially means that the player is being directly or indirectly informed about the real experiences, struggles, and perceptions of living with a particular condition through the experience of playing the game, developing an understanding of the character, content, and its application to the real world.

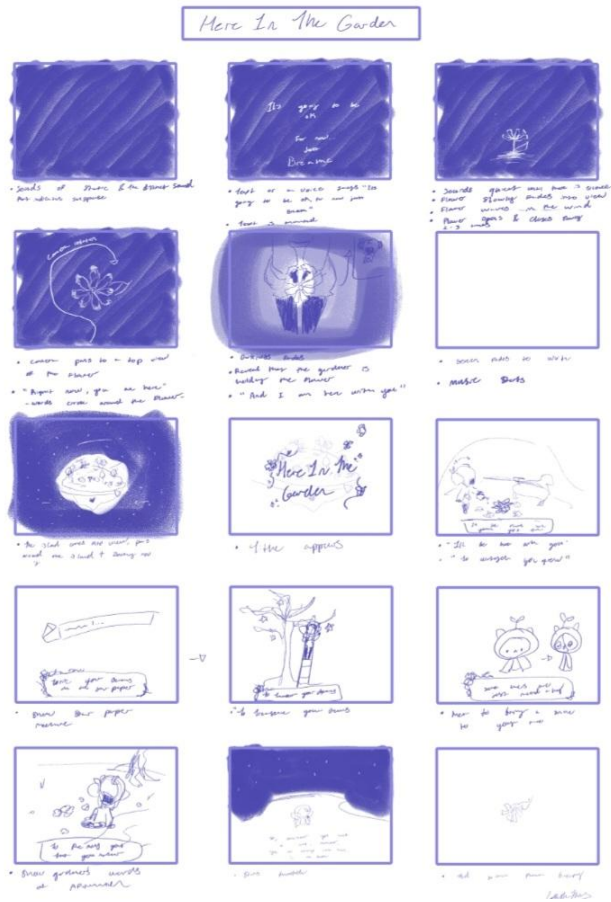
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• Process Highlights.

This animation was made using Blender, Adobe After Effects, and Photoshop. While I have used these programs before, I found this project became an incredible learning experience. I came to learn and develop new skills and found a unique workflow that suited my style of creating.



This was the storyboard I developed and used to showcase features that would be included in the game experience.

My intention was to utilize this opportunity to depict the atmosphere of what the experience would be like as well as showcase some of the features that will be included once the game is complete.

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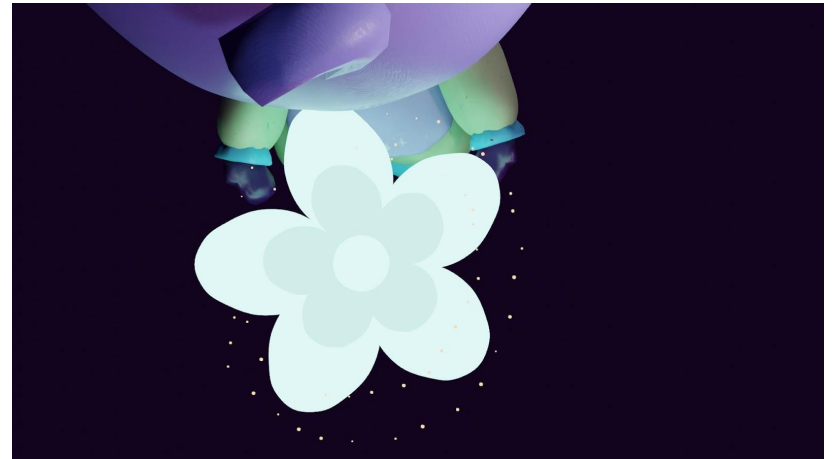
The Gardener, named Petal, is a non player character and serves as the main interaction point - They take care of the garden / idly walk around & talk when the player interacts with them or occasionally to provide words of affirmation when suitable.



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The deep breathing exercise is reflected by the movement of the flower, opening and closing as the audience exhales and inhales.

Like many people I was skeptical about how effective this practice could actually be to settle nerves. But I practiced it through my daily life. The visual of the flower was something I connected to personally and I found myself visualizing it as I focused on my breathing during times of distress.



• *Closing Notes* •

The process of creating this project has been a long yet rewarding one. I discovered a lot about myself and what I value. All while acquiring and developing skills in mediums I wished to improve in. This piece has been a passion project as it was able to incorporate my love of learning, with my desire to teach and connect with others in a medium that truly inspires me and has for the longest time.

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In my sophomore year my professor, Endi E. Poskovic described my creative direction as being on par with the feeling of having a treasured teddy bear keychain that reminds the viewer of a pleasant kindness and comfort. He said that one day my work would grow to be like that of a massive teddy bear, one that evokes the same feelings but stronger and allowing those who encounter it to lay on it, to feel enveloped and embraced. I found the analogy hard to understand at the time, but I appreciated it. I feel like this project helped me to understand what he meant and is a step closer to reaching that sensation.

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By the end of this stage of the project, I realized that I want the people who interact with my work to have something that allows them to feel loved and supported, regardless of where they are in life and where they came from, to have the tools to get them through difficult situations and ultimately to feel embraced and appreciated.