

Playing with Perceptions: Reducing Mental Health Stigma through Proxy Experiences in Video Games — Insights and Recommendations from Self-Identified Gamers Using *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (2017) as a Case Study

Luke Simeon Pierce

Dublin City University (Alumnus)
lukesimeon.research@gmail.com

Abstract

This pilot study examines how self-identified gamers perceive video games as tools for reducing public stigma around mental health issues (MHIs) using a sequential, linked mixed-methods design. A closed online survey (N = 50) assessed demographics, gaming/media engagement, and attitudes toward MHI representation and served as the recruitment pool for an in-person qualitative phase, in which a subset completed individual playtests of *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (2017) followed by semi-structured interviews (n = 7).

Participants across both phases supported the use of video games for destigmatization. Playtesters emphasised that stigma-reduction impacts are more plausible when designers prioritise engaging narrative design, immersive play, and meaningful player autonomy over overt, moralizing, or didactic instruction. They linked *Hellblade's* authenticity and ethical representation to the proactive collaboration between developers, mental health professionals, and people with lived experience of MHIs. They also advocated for wider consultation with related affected groups (e.g., family members) to better reflect the cumulative and far-reaching societal impacts of mental health issues.

Three developer-oriented recommendations emerged: define target audiences beyond “gamers” alone; design research-informed games that balance compelling play with sensitive portrayal; and disseminate across several platforms concomitantly to reach active players, wider gaming-related communities, and non-gaming publics.

Author Keywords

Video Games, Mental Health, Stigma, Game Design, Media Engagement Strategy, *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*.

Introduction

Entertainment media is a dominant feature of contemporary cultural life, shaping what global audiences see and discuss, including social issues such as mental illness. Because many people

encounter media portrayals of mental illness before they have direct experience or formal knowledge, these depictions can strongly shape early assumptions about mental illness and treatment, particularly through persistent stereotypes (Stuart, 2006; Ferrari et al., 2019). Video games now occupy a substantial place within this media landscape, with influence extending beyond individual play into multiplayer and streaming cultures, online commentary, and community discussion (Şener et al., 2021; Lozic et al., 2021; Mejeur & Cote, 2021).

Questions have been raised about whether video games can go beyond entertainment to help reduce perceived public stigma toward people experiencing mental health issues (MHIs). Destigmatization games are seen as indirect, population-level interventions rather than a replacement for individual care or for delivering clinical education. They instead offer more humanized and authentic portrayals of lived experience with MHIs (Cangas et al., 2017, 2019; Ferrari et al., 2019). By leveraging their innate interactive nature, narrative-driven play, and creative audiovisual design, such games may stage encounters with distress and social exclusion via the player character by supporting perspective-taking and emotionally resonant engagement in a relatively safe context (Ferchaud et al., 2020; Galvão et al., 2025). In doing so, destigmatization games seek to prompt reflection and conversation about MHIs and contribute to shifts in public attitudes that may reduce stigma and support earlier help-seeking (Corrigan & Nieweglowski, 2019; Thornicroft et al., 2022; Tseng & Thiele, 2022).

Mental Health Stigma

Stigma is a deeply entrenched social phenomenon that fosters group exclusion, misunderstanding, and systemic inequality. It disproportionately impacts marginalised groups, including individuals experiencing MHIs (Ahad et al., 2023; Zayts-Spence et al., 2023; Voldby et al., 2022). Thornicroft et al. (2007) define MHI stigma as “the combination of a lack of knowledge (ignorance), negative attitudes (prejudice), and disadvantaged behavior (discrimination) toward those with mental health problems.” Perceived public stigma remains a major barrier to care and can discourage early help-seeking (Thornicroft et al., 2022). It reinforces stereotypes, increases social distancing, and makes open discussion of lived experience more difficult (Ferchaud et al., 2020; WHO, 2022).

Moreover, the effects of stigma can extend beyond the individual. Family members, friends, and support networks may take on emotional and practical burdens that contribute to stress and burnout (Ahad et al., 2023). At a broader level, untreated MHIs can affect workplace productivity and cohesion, while stigma-related delays in help-seeking can increase reliance on emergency and long-term care, placing avoidable strain on health systems (Ahad et al., 2023; Thornicroft et al., 2022). Reducing stigma is therefore central to supporting earlier help-seeking, improving mental health outcomes, and fostering more inclusive and sustainable social systems (Thornicroft et al., 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic heightened attention to MHIs as lockdowns and isolation increased distress and social disconnection (Kumar & Nayar, 2021; O’Sullivan et al., 2021; O’Connor et al., 2021). Over the same period, the games industry expanded in audience size and cultural influence (Şener et al., 2021; Lozic et al., 2021). Taken together, these developments suggest that

games' cultural reach can be leveraged to strengthen public understanding of MHIs and support efforts to reduce perceived stigma.

Destigmatization through Games: Three Core Considerations

To understand how video games might be used to reduce stigma, three connected issues need to be addressed.

1. Video Games as the Chosen Medium

Games are often positioned as promising vehicles for destigmatization because they can organise audience participation through player agency and avatar control, supporting sustained attention and experiential proximity to a character's situation (Waern, 2011; Ferchaud et al., 2020; Tseng & Thiele, 2022). However, claims that games are "uniquely engaging" compared to more "passive" media risk collapsing a complex media landscape into an unhelpful binary. Keogh (2015) cautions against treating video games as inherently special or automatically transformative, arguing that what matters is how specific configurations of play, attention, pacing, and context produce meaning rather than interactivity alone. Framed this way, the central question is not whether games are categorically better tools for stigma reduction than film or television, but under what conditions particular game designs and play contexts might support stigma-relevant outcomes.

At the same time, the medium's potential should not be overstated. Video games have historically contributed to stigma through portrayals that link mental illness to violence, supernatural phenomena, or comic relief (Ferrari et al., 2019; Ments and Green, 2019; Tomé et al., 2024). Yet recent research also points to a growing body of games that approach MHIs with greater nuance, suggesting a shift toward more responsible representational practices in some development contexts (Anderson et al., 2020; Ferchaud et al., 2020; Bienkowska, 2021; Schlote & Major, 2021). Evidence is also mixed regarding how strongly game portrayals map onto stigma outcomes: for example, Mittmann et al. (2025) reported no significant association between playing games identified as featuring negative depictions of mental illness and explicit stigma scores, indicating that broad exposure may not translate into straightforward effects. As the industry continues to expand and diversify its audiences (Newzoo, 2023, 2025), the cultural significance of representational shifts may increase, but any stigma-reduction potential will remain shaped by practical access constraints, including hardware and software costs, control literacy, and the time required to play.

2. Engendering Empathy for Destigmatization

A second aspect of the destigmatization-through-games model concerns claims that play can foster "empathy" and support stigma reduction. Within games-and-empathy scholarship,

however, empathy is conceptually fluid. Schrier and Farber (2021) note that research in this area draws on multiple (12) disciplines, using 13 divergent definitions with varying mechanisms and evidentiary standards. Ruberg (2020) cautions that empathy is often assumed to be inherently beneficial, without sufficient attention to whose empathy is being fostered, toward whom, and how power and positionality shape which perspectives are centred. Further work demonstrates that “empathy” is frequently used interchangeably with adjacent responses, such as pity, sympathy, and compassion, (Jerret et al., 2021). To counteract this, they propose an “empathy spectrum” to clarify what kinds of affective and moral orientations games may evoke. Distinctions between cognitive and affective empathy further complicate what is being measured and what kinds of downstream change can reasonably be expected (Edele et al., 2013; Ruberg 2020). Empirical work reflects this heterogeneity: reported empathy-related effects vary substantially depending on how empathy is defined and assessed, making straightforward causal claims difficult (Garcia et al., 2022).

Recent qualitative research treats empathic engagement less as a single outcome than as a set of interrelated player responses. Glaser et al. (2024) show that the game *Spiritfarer* prompted varied emotional, reflective, and relational experiences shaped by players’ interpretations, personal histories, and specific design elements rather than a uniform endpoint, supporting the view that empathy in games is multifaceted rather than monolithic. Instead of treating this multidimensionality solely as a limitation, Galvão et al. (2025) reframe it as a design opportunity. They propose breaking empathic response into more traceable subcomponents and mapping these onto concrete game elements across development cycles. In this framing, empathy shifts from a single outcome to be asserted and to a set of design targets that can be specified, implemented, and evaluated. This approach aligns with broader calls for conceptual precision and methodological transparency when linking player experience to stigma-relevant outcomes (Ruberg, 2020; Corrigan & Nieweglowski, 2019; Thornicroft et al., 2022).

For the purposes of this study, empathy is treated as a multi-component form of player engagement that may inform stigma-relevant interpretation. Accordingly, the focus is on how players describe and evaluate their own responses and how they translate these into judgements about a game’s destigmatization potential rather than claiming a single, measurable “empathy effect.”

3. Gamers as Expert Witnesses

A third consideration is the target audience for destigmatization games and the contexts in which they are encountered. Self-identified gamers were recruited because they are a central audience for games: their familiarity with conventions, mechanics, and genre expectations constitutes a form of experiential expertise that shapes how MHI portrayals could be interpreted and evaluated (Muriel & Crawford, 2018; Jimenez et al., 2019). These interpretations are further influenced by encounter contexts beyond play, as games circulate through streaming cultures, online commentary, and community discussions (Şener et al., 2021; Lozic et al., 2021). Accordingly, this study treats self-identified gamers as an analytically useful “first line” audience and uses their accounts to examine how stigma-reduction claims are received in practice and which design

and dissemination choices may increase approachability for gamers—and potentially wider publics beyond gaming. Recruitment and sampling decisions are detailed in the Methodology section.

However, gamer identity is neither neutral nor consistent. Shaw (2012) shows that “gamer” is a contested and sometimes stigmatized label, and willingness to claim it is shaped by context and implicit standards of legitimacy and investment; people may play games while resisting “gamer” identification, particularly marginalized groups. Shaw also cautions that diversity advocacy can inadvertently reproduce market logics when it relies on proving marginalized groups are “gamers” to justify industry attention rather than treating representational diversity as a baseline expectation of games as everyday media (Shaw, 2013). Work on gamer identity formation similarly emphasizes that “gamer” is socially produced, negotiated, and shaped by community norms and dominant stereotypes that influence who feels authorized to belong (Grooten & Kowert, 2015).

Case Study Example: *Hellblade*

Hellblade: Senua’s Sacrifice (Ninja Theory, 2017) is a widely cited example of MHI-related representation in a commercial game and provides a useful case for examining how destigmatization claims are made and received. The protagonist, Senua, experiences psychosis-related symptoms framed in-game as “The Darkness.” Ninja Theory’s development process is frequently highlighted as a key feature of the game’s credibility, involving consultation with neuroscientists, mental health professionals, and individuals with lived experience of psychosis (Ninja Theory, 2018; Fordham & Ball, 2019). The game integrates symptom-related representation into audiovisual and mechanical design, including binaural 3D audio intended to simulate auditory hallucinations (Ninja Theory, 2018; Fordham & Ball, 2019). Framed as a title balancing commercial visibility with distinctive creative ambitions (Antoniades, 2014), *Hellblade* has been discussed as contributing to wider conversations about mental health representation in games (McAloon, 2018; Wellcome Trust, 2023). Scholarly and critical commentary has further emphasized its psychological realism and its portrayal of Senua as a complex, resilient protagonist rather than a purely sensationalized figure, positioning the game as a counterpoint to more stigmatizing representational traditions (Ings, 2017; Anderson, 2020; Austin, 2021).

Empirical research on how games relate to stigma-relevant outcomes remains limited, and the pattern of findings is not yet straightforward. In an exploratory survey, Mittmann et al. (2025) reported no significant association between playing games identified as featuring negative depictions of MHIs and explicit stigma scores, and no differences between gamers and non-gamers. This suggests that broad exposure measures may be too coarse, and that any effects of portrayals, negative or positive, are likely contingent on how specific games represent MHIs and how players engage with them. Adding such specificity, Ferchaud et al. (2020) compared active play versus passive viewing of *Hellblade* gameplay and found that active play was associated with higher narrative immersion and emotional identification with Senua. Active gameplay also reduced desire for social distancing, a key component of stigma, although it did not significantly change stereotypical beliefs about MHIs (Ferchaud et al., 2020). Beyond short-term studies, calls

have been made for more longitudinal perspectives on how games leave lasting emotional traces and shape subsequent reflection (Ferchaud et al., 2020; Bienkowska, 2021). For example, Tomé et al. (2024) examine reflective accounts of prior play experiences and argue that emotionally driven games may contribute to enduring empathy-related effects through the combined impact of narrative and gameplay design, although the relationship between affect, interpretation, and attitude change remains complex.

Study Aim

Using *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (Ninja Theory, 2017) as a case study, this two-phase mixed-methods study examines how self-identified gamers evaluate the potential of a video game to contribute to mental health issue (MHI) destigmatization.

Research Question

How do self-identified gamers, following the structured play of the opening of *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, evaluate the game's portrayal of mental health experiences and its perceived potential to support MHI destigmatization? This includes the design and dissemination conditions they identify as enabling or constraining that potential.

Methodology

Phase One: Online Survey

Self-identified gamers, aged 18yrs +, were recruited through snowball sampling (Naderifar et al., 2017). Invitations were distributed to official groups that were likely to include the target demographic: university societies related to gaming and national gaming organizations. These invitations were disseminated via each group's Discord servers, directing participants to an anonymous online survey hosted on SurveyMonkey.

The survey comprises 40 items, including multiple-choice, Likert-scale, and open-ended questions, covering three areas:

- Demographics, Gamer Identity & Habits;
- Media and Gaming Preferences;
- Perceptions of Mental Health and Stigma in Games.

Upon completion, respondents could opt into Phase Two by submitting contact details via a secure email link.

Phase Two: In-Person Playtest and Semi-Structured Interviews

This phase comprised two parts. First, a 45–60-minute playtest of the opening of *Hellblade*, adapted from Ferchaud et al. (2020), followed by a 60–90-minute semi-structured interview. There were three reasons for using the first hour of gameplay: it could easily be standardized and reset between playtests, it reflected how players would typically begin the game outside the study, and it provided sufficient exposure to core gameplay and narrative elements (e.g., atmosphere, combat, puzzles, and an introduction to Senua/the “darkness”).

A PlayStation 5 console was used for ease of controls. Noise-cancelling headphones were provided to maximize audio immersion. To maintain authentic and comparable experiences between playtesters, no gameplay instructions were provided beyond assistance with initiating the game.

Each playtest was followed by a semi-structured interview covering two areas:

- Experiences of playing *Hellblade* and reflections on the protagonist, Senua;
- Perceptions of *Hellblade*'s potential efficacy in reducing MHI stigma and any recommendations for future destigmatization games.

Sessions were conducted at two locations, following Bearman's (2019) guidance on promoting participant comfort and accessibility in qualitative research. Both sites used an identical setup: a dedicated playtesting station (console, monitor, controller, and headset) and a separate interview area (SubZero SZ-AI2 audio interface and XLR microphones).

Data Analysis

Survey data were exported to Microsoft Excel (macOS). Quantitative items were analysed descriptively (e.g., frequencies and proportions) to summarize participant demographics, gaming habits, and attitudes toward MHI representation. Open-ended survey responses were reviewed using keyword filtering and thematic grouping to identify recurring language and concepts.

Interview recordings were edited in GarageBand and manually transcribed in Microsoft Word (macOS). Guided by the interview's three focus areas, transcripts were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021). Coding was conducted inductively through repeated, immersive reading, with themes developed and refined through iterative comparison within and across interviews. Where relevant, themes were triangulated with thematically aligned open-ended survey responses.

Analytic decisions were documented throughout to support coherence and transparency. Interviewee phrasing was retained where possible to preserve meaning and context, and the mixed-methods design was used to enable survey and interview findings to complement,

complicate, or reinforce one another.

Ethics and Data Protection

This study was conducted in partial fulfilment of a taught MSc degree and received University Research Ethics Committee approval. Procedures followed the University's research ethics guidelines, and all participants provided written informed consent. Survey responses were anonymous, with settings preventing collection of personally identifiable data and reducing duplicate submissions. In-person playtesters were pseudonymized. All datasheets, audio recordings, and transcripts were stored on encrypted, password-protected devices and used only for research purposes.

Results

1) Online Survey

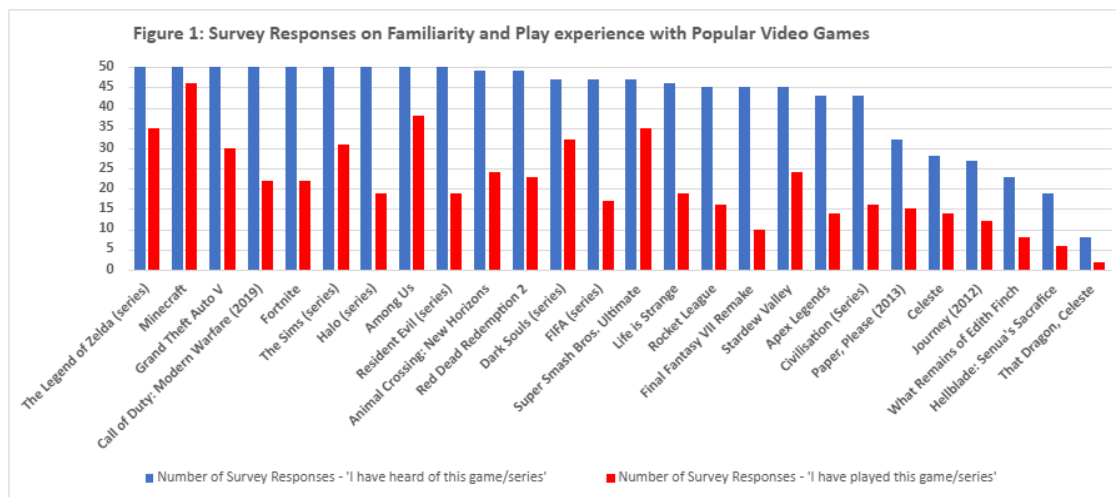
1.1 Demographics, Gamer Identity & Habits

78 responses were received; after manual verification, 50 complete responses (64.1%) were retained for analysis. 31 (62%) identified as male, 14 (28%) female, and 5 (10%) non-binary. Most respondents were aged 18–24yrs (24, 48%) or 25–34yrs (23, 46%), with a small minority aged +35yrs (3, 6%).

Elaborating on their self-identification, most respondents described their identity in terms of regular current engagement with games (34, 68%). Many also referenced long-term involvements in gaming and/or gaming communities (20, 40%), while smaller proportions linked gamer identity to related media use (e.g., gaming videos/streams; 10, 20%) or professional involvement (e.g., development, content creation; 5, 10%).

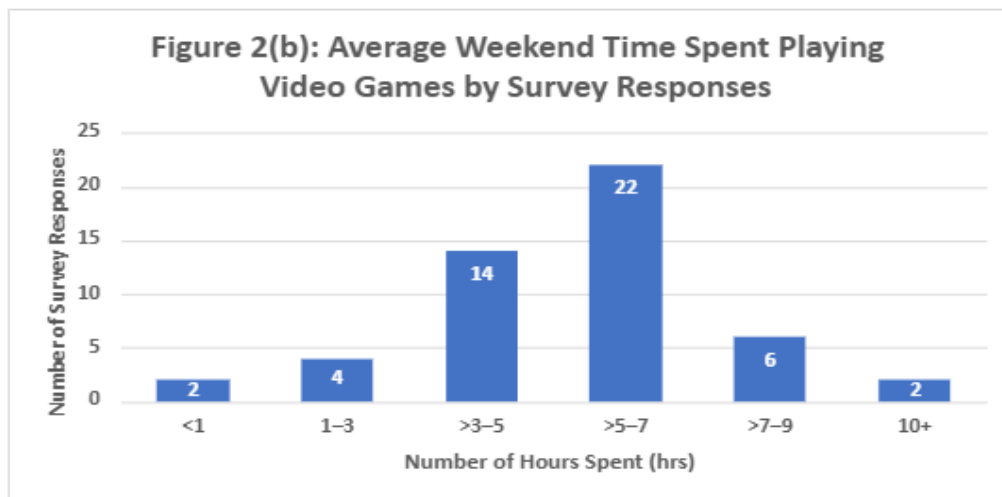
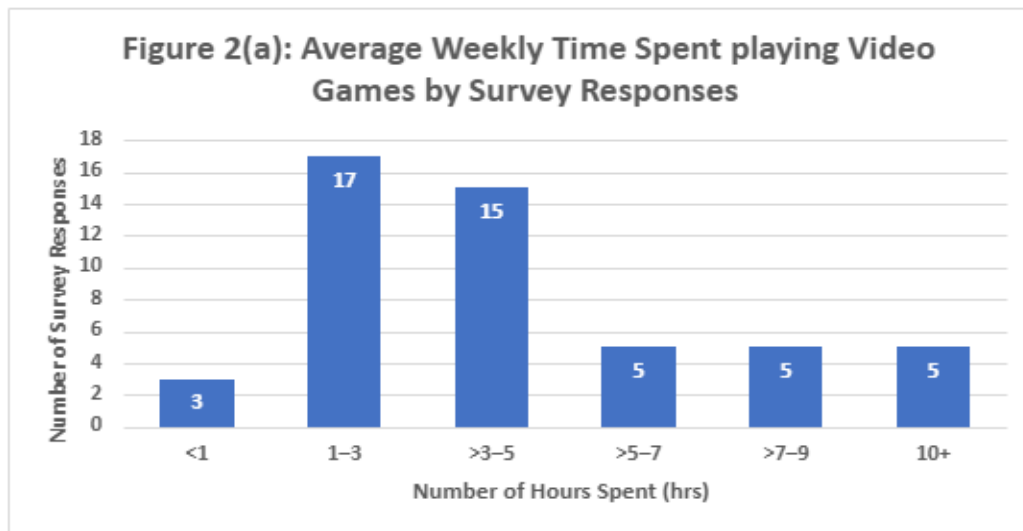
Respondents were more likely to have heard of a game rather than have played the same game. They reported substantially higher familiarity and play experience with well-known AAA franchises than with independent developers or more niche titles (Fig. 1). Despite its critical acclaim, *Hellblade* showed relatively low baseline familiarity. Only 19 participants (38%) had heard of the game and 6 (12%) reported any prior experience playing it.

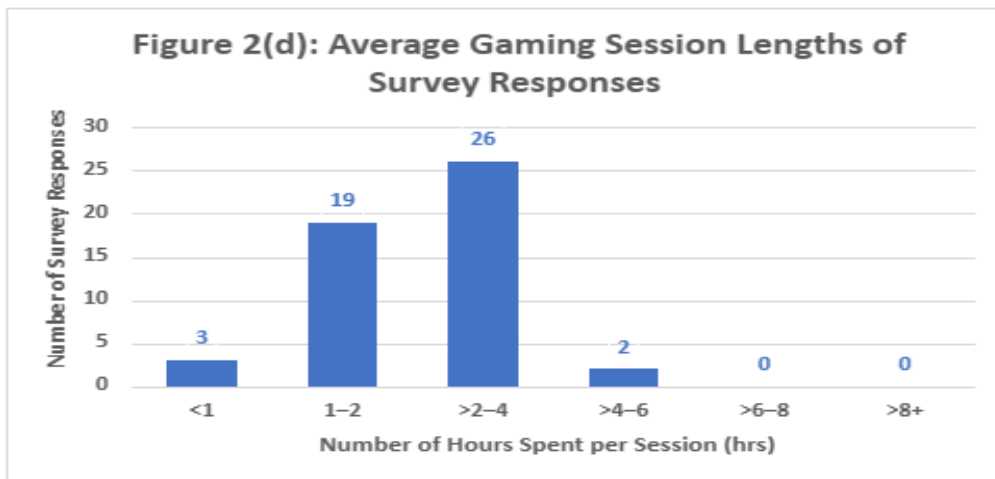
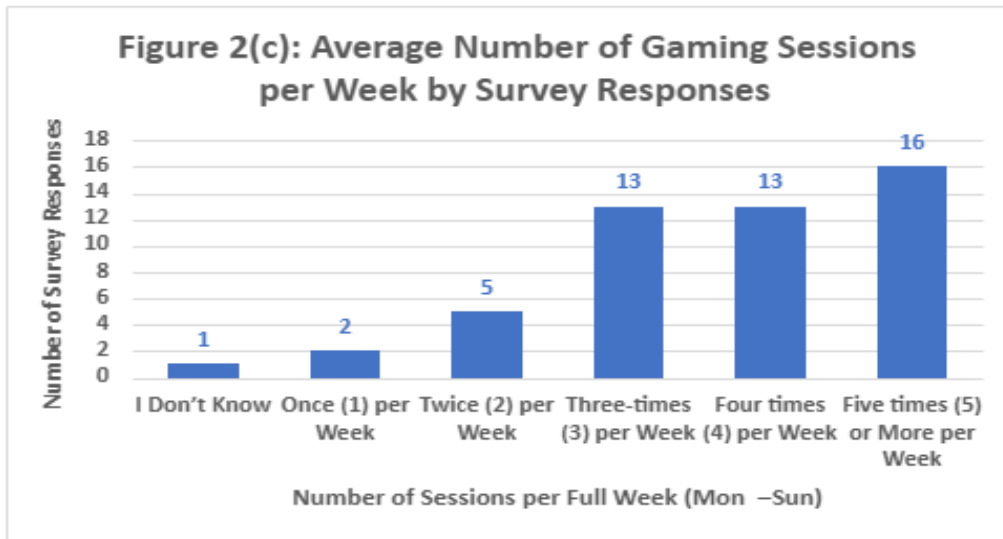
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Respondents also provided insight into their typical weekly gaming habits. This included the time they spend gaming, session frequency, and average session length of play (Figs. 2a–2d).

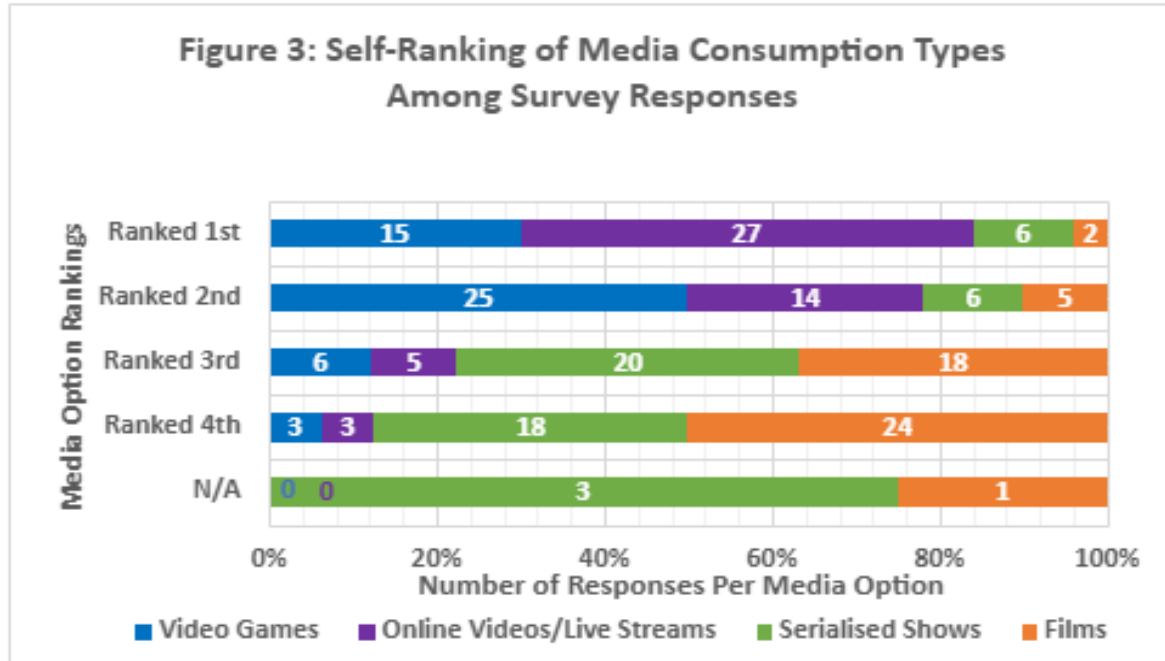
Weekday play clustered between 1–5 hours (32/50, 64%), and almost all reported playing at least ≥ 1 hour during the working week (47/50, 94%; Fig. 2a). Weekend play shifted upward, with 72% (36/50) reporting 3–7 hours and 60% (30/50) reporting ≥ 5 hours, indicating higher average play time than on weekdays (Fig. 2b). Participants also reported frequent engagement across the full week: 84% (42/50) indicating playing three or more times per week, most commonly five or more sessions (16/50, 32%; Fig. 2c). Typical individual session duration was also substantial, with 90% (45/50) reporting sessions lasting 1–4 hours, and sessions < 1 hour being rare (3/50, 6%; Fig. 2d).



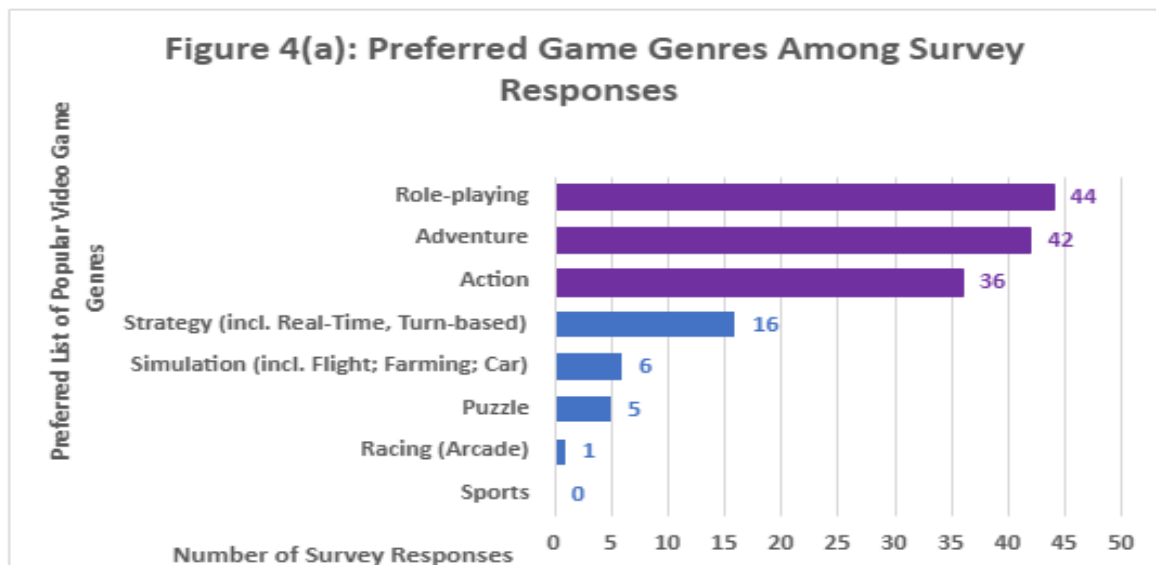


1.2 Media and Gaming Preferences

In media preference rankings, online videos/live streams were most frequently ranked as the first choice of responses (27), followed by video games (15); video games were primarily ranked as their second choice (25). In contrast, TV/streamed shows and films were typically ranked lower overall (Fig. 3).



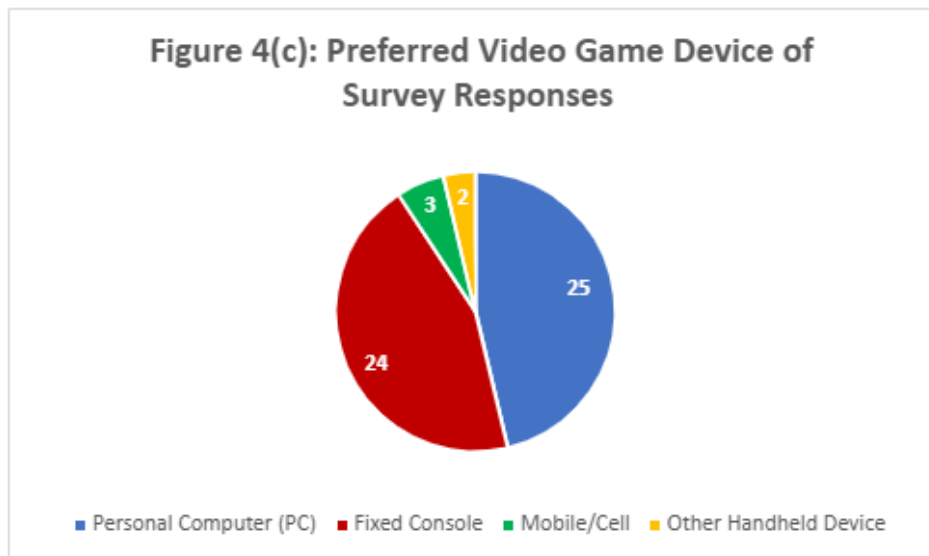
Regarding gaming preferences (Fig. 4a-4c), the more popular genres reported by responses were role-playing (44, 88%), adventure (42, 82%), and action games (36, 72%) (Fig. 4a).



When ranking game components by their importance in contributing to enjoyment (1 = least important; 9 = most important), respondents rated narrative/story (M = 7.36) and gameplay mechanics/controls (M = 6.90) highest, followed by graphics/visual design (M = 5.86) and exploration/discovery (M = 5.84) (Fig. 4b).

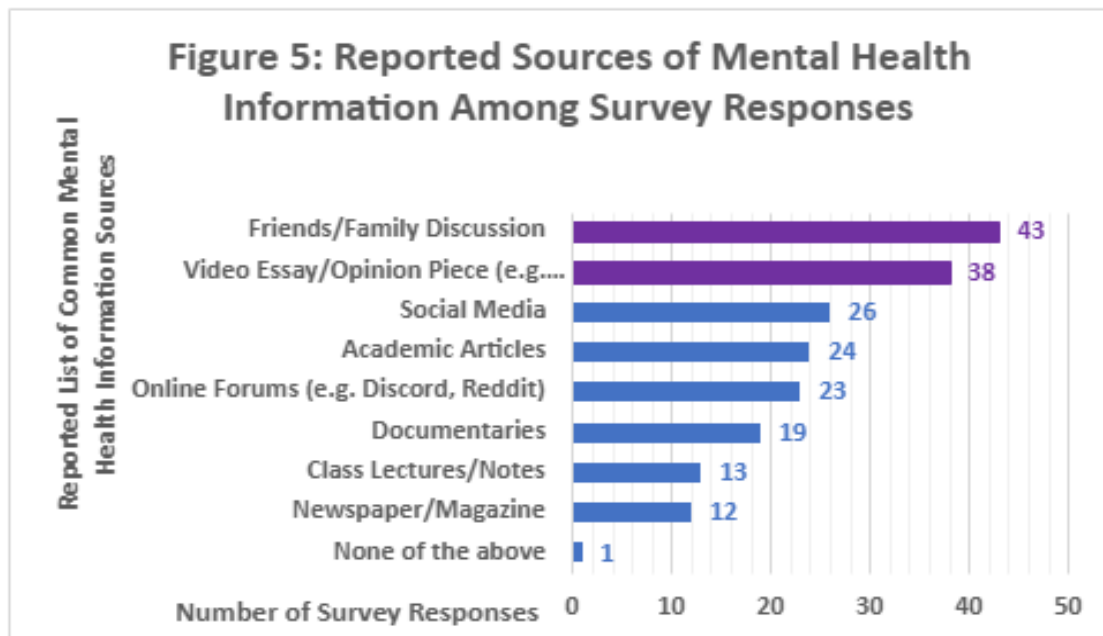


For preferred platforms, respondents primarily reported playing on PC (25, 50%) or fixed consoles (20, 40%), with few selecting mobile (3, 6%) or other handheld devices (2, 4%) (Fig. 4c). The most cited reasons were game availability (56%) and ease of use (36%) followed by value retention (30%) and device multifunctionality (16%).



1.3 Perceptions of Mental Health and Stigma in Games

Respondents reported multiple sources for mental health information (Fig. 5). The most frequently cited sources were discussions with friends and family (43, 86%) and online video essays/opinion pieces (38, 76%). Social media (26, 52%), academic articles (24, 48%), and online forums/communities (22, 46%) were also commonly reported.



Survey participants were lastly asked a series of four Likert scale questions. In response to the statement, “Entertainment media can serve as an effective means of raising awareness about mental health issues,” respondents expressed near-unanimous agreement (98%, 49), with 54% (27) selecting “strongly agree” and 44% (22) selecting “agree.” In open-ended comments, respondents most frequently attributed this potential to entertainment media’s ability to engage audiences (41, 82%) and its broad reach (25, 50%). A smaller subset emphasised that impact depends on ethical, responsible delivery to ensure accurate and respectful portrayals of MHIs (14, 28%).

In response to the statement, “Video games have the potential to influence and challenge societal norms within player groups,” 96% (48) expressed some level of agreement (“strongly agree” 14, 28%; “agree” 50%; “somewhat agree” 9, 18%). Open-ended rationales most often cited games’ immersive qualities (29, 58%), followed by role-playing mechanics (17, 34%) and shared familiarity within gaming cultures and communities (13, 26%). Nonetheless, some respondents raised concerns that stigma-related content may be undermined when games lack research-informed development (10, 20%) or are perceived by players as “agenda-driven” (9, 18%).

Responses to the statement: “Video games tend to depict individuals experiencing mental health issues accurately” were more divided. While 48% (24) expressed some level of agreement (predominantly “somewhat agree,” 18), 42% (21) disagreed. Among those expressing agreement, respondents commonly noted inconsistency across titles but perceived gradual improvement in some portrayals (14, 58.3%), with several pointing to greater nuance in recent examples (9, 37.5%). Among those who disagreed, the most frequent critiques were that portrayals are sensationalised (11, 42.3%), stereotyped (9, 34.6%), or framed for comedic effect (8, 34.6%). A further concern was the treatment of mental illness in horror games (10, 20%).

Lastly, in regard to supporting the use of video games to raise awareness of MHIs, respondents were unanimously supportive. Most indicated conditional support dependent on the inclusion of appropriate tools and resources (30, 60%), while 40% (20) reported being very supportive without qualification; no neutral or negative responses were recorded.

2) In-Person Sessions

2.1 Demographics

Seven survey participants completed the in-person sessions: five males, one female, and one non-binary participant. Six were aged 25–34yrs, with one playtester <24yrs. Playtesters’ prior exposure to *Hellblade* was recorded to contextualize responses. Overall familiarity was limited: most had heard of the game but not played it, one had not heard of it, and the few with prior play reported only brief or poorly recalled experience (e.g., under 30 minutes).

2.2 Playtester Feedback on *Hellblade* Gameplay and Senua

Regarding the beginning of the game, playtesters described the absence of typical gameplay elements, such as a heads-up display (HUD), minimap, and obvious tutorial, as an intentional design choice for immediate, greater immersion and player-player character connection rather than a design oversight by the developers. However, prior gaming experience was felt to be necessary for playtesters to adapt to these aspects of *Hellblade*. This included understanding button layouts and joystick controls for movement/combat, as players are not given obvious direction or control layouts in-game (these features are only accessible in the game settings menu). This reliance on prior knowledge was especially noted by playtesters in the absence of a tutorial, which several flagged as a potential barrier for less experienced players.

Playtesters described *Hellblade*’s gameplay as intuitive, especially the puzzle elements, and drew comparisons to *Dark Souls*, *God of War*, and *Skyrim* in terms of visual style, combat, and thematic presentation.

All seven reported enjoying the playtest. Several expressed interest in continuing *Hellblade* and acquiring their own copy. While some noted that the combat loop felt repetitive, it didn’t impact their overall enjoyment of *Hellblade*.

The in-game portrayal of experiencing psychosis related symptoms, particularly the use of visual and auditory hallucinations (e.g., multiple internal voices) was frequently identified by playtesters as a distinctive and engaging feature. Several noted that the voices functioned as an unreliable guide for Senua and the player, offering both accurate and misleading directions. They described this as a creative and unsettling sub-mechanic that could effectively represent Senua's disconnection from reality, mirroring the lived experiences of psychosis related symptoms.

Playtesters described Senua using terms related to MHIs including "troubled," "hearing voices," and "physically tired and stressed", but used terms like psychosis and schizophrenia interchangeably. Several highlighted Senua's determination and her ability to persevere despite fear and internal conflict. One playtester remarked:

"It seems like they (the voices) are afraid of the world around them, yet she (Senua) seems very determined yet scared, but willing to push through...I noticed she talks back to the voices. It looks like she's about to go back into the canoe at the very start, but then she stares at the camera and then it shows her kicking the canoe off and then all the voices kind of panic a little. It is like they represent a part of her that she has to fight which sounds very tiring to do."

- Playtester 6

However, another playtester commented on the potential complexity of players interpreting Senua's situation:

"I find the character to be incredibly driven and accustomed to fear... However, I can't say how I would react if I met someone like her in real life... it's difficult to gauge."

- Playtester 4

Emotional responses to the Senua varied:

"... I can't directly relate to Senua, as I've never gone through what she goes through in-game, but I think playing the game has given me a deeper understanding of her experience, not 100%, but I do feel empathy for her in this situation."

- Playtester 3

Playtesters generally expressed positive views on recommending *Hell*

blade to others with critical caveats. Age was one consideration. Playtesters suggest that such games may be more appropriate for older players due to emotional and thematic complexity. Several felt younger audiences might not fully grasp the underlying and nuanced messages or could find the content too intense. Experience with video games also influenced their recommendation. Playtesters noted that individuals unfamiliar with typical game controls, or those who had not previously played narrative-focused games, may struggle to navigate the mechanics and progress through the story effectively. One explanation proffered:

“It’s fairly “user friendly” ... but my mother, who’s never played a game in her life—I don’t think she’d be able to figure it out.”
- Playtester 7

In addition to age and gaming proficiency, playtesters highlighted individual sensitivity to mental health themes. While the portrayal of experiencing psychosis related symptoms was well received, they expressed caution in recommending it to individuals who might find the content distressing. Playtesters would only suggest the game to friends or peers with an existing interest in gaming:

“I would recommend the game to people but specifically to my friends or my roommates who are into gaming. I wouldn’t recommend it universally to everybody, and certainly not to my mother or anyone who might be sensitive to the topics it explores.”
- Playtester 5

“Highly recommend it, but not for those with limited experience with games like my sister or mom... However, if I were there to guide them through it, that might be a different story.”
- Playtester 6

2.3 *Hellblade* as a Destigmatization Game & Future Recommendations

When discussing the development process behind *Hellblade*, having just played the game, playtesters unanimously agreed that it is a potentially effective destigmatization game. Specific praise was given to Ninja Theory’s reported consultation with mental health professionals and individuals with lived experience. One playtester highlighted the importance of such collaboration for both authenticity and ethical responsibility:

“...it’s obvious they took a lot of their work into account, asking people about their own experience of psychosis and having a mental health advisor on a game that deals with mental health issues. I feel like there should be sort of a legal requirement at this point. Both to make sure you’re not talking nonsense, and also for just the mental well-being of those involved in creating such a game, that’s going to be tough for some people.”
- Playtester 7

Playtesters consistently emphasised that the success of a destigmatization game relies firstly on the quality of its gameplay and storytelling. Narrative design, visual immersion, and emotional impact were cited as critical factors in sustaining player engagement and presenting the game’s themes effectively. Playtesters stressed that authentic MHI representations should be woven into a compelling game experience, rather than presented as the game’s overt purpose. Striking this balance was seen as essential to avoid the game being perceived as agenda-driven, overly didactic, or simply targeting players for education rather than entertainment:

“Don’t phrase it as an education game. I think, for gamers, if you just put a game in front of them and say, “Here’s a cool concept, try it out,” they’re more likely to try it out.”
- Playtester 3

“... pretty much any art, including video games, has always been formed to transmit a message, or at least create interest, which probably is the best thing to do to raise awareness of things, but it must just be awareness, and not transmitting the artist’s morals... I didn’t feel any kind of morals or things like that in this game, but if the morals are related to the plot of the game, i.e., game first, I think that will be okay.”

- Playtester 1

Playtesters cautioned that placing too much emphasis on entertainment risks over-dramatizing and sensationalizing MHIs, potentially undermining the intended message. This tension between delivering a fun, engaging game and destigmatization was viewed as a critical design challenge:

"Imagine a game as a table, and you then put the theme of mental health on top of the table. If the table is not well-built, then placing any “heavy” theme would cause the whole thing to fall too.”

- Playtester 5

“If you’re playing video games, you wouldn’t start with something like this... they need to make a game first, so they need to keep video gamers in mind primarily.”

- Playtester 2

Several noted that factors, e.g. cognitive maturity and life experience, may influence a player’s ability to process complex themes. They suggested that games like *Hellblade* may not be equally accessible or impactful for younger or less experienced players:

“Younger audiences are generally more open to mental health themes, but the game’s complexity could be a challenge for those who aren’t accustomed to gaming, regardless of age.”

- Playtester 1

“I think such games would be a slightly harder sell to the public... it’s quite heavy. It’s not what your immediate thought is when you think of video games.”

- Playtester 4

Practical barriers to wider dissemination included the high cost of hardware, game complexity, and the general unfamiliarity with games among non-gamers. Playtesters described *Hellblade* as a title most likely to be accessed and shared within gaming communities and their extended social networks rather than reaching general audiences:

“... [such games] would be kept [within] gamers plus whatever non-gaming people that portion of those gamers would talk to and discuss games with.”

- Playtester 5

“Video games are generally a little bit harder to get into... they’re more expensive than other forms of entertainment, especially if played on a console.”

- Playtester 1

Playtesters supported the idea of making games more accessible through design rather than simplifying content. They suggested that developers could consider subtle onboarding strategies in their games to help unfamiliar players engage with complex material:

“Early-stage tweaks will be needed to ensure its accessible yet still challenging, like a tutorial that is informative but not patronising. Additionally, in the vein of *Dark Souls*, incorporating cues or markers on the ground that provide brief hints could be helpful while not breaking the game environment.”

-

Playtester

7

Some playtesters suggested that offering players additional control beyond those provided in *Hellblade*, such as greater movement choice or branching dialogue paths, could increase immersion without compromising the integrity of the game's message:

“5/5 for the message, 4/5 for the gameplay – you just need a little bit of extra choice on what the player can do. I agree with there being no HUD, since health is not something you need to care about apart from combat, but even just giving a “jump-button” would be something that would enhance the game... I understand, obviously, the game layout would need to be edited to include the ability to jump and such, but the message would literally be fine. Though, if you add any more mechanics than that, you’re then draining from the message a little bit, but you do then risk draining the gamer’s attention and engagement towards the message because they’re focusing on the other things, not the game, since the gameplay is not as exciting as usual...”

- Playtester 5

Another concept raised was that those who may identify as gamers don’t always play games, and that this is a crucial point for developers of destigmatization games. Several disclosed that they themselves consume online content related to gaming more so than playing games themselves, largely due to time availability and the need to complete other tasks. Exploring options of disseminating the idea of destigmatization, similar to the video development diaries for *Hellblade* (Ninja Theory, 2018), through these related media channels was suggested as a potential avenue for getting more people to discuss the game’s message:

“I believe it's best to engage (audiences) through different mediums like informative posts, influencer endorsements, TV shows, online video essays, and the like.”

- Playtester 6

Playtesters offered recommendations for future destigmatization game development informed by their play experience with *Hellblade* and their broader familiarity with video games. These spanned both game design and dissemination strategies and reflected a consistent emphasis on respectful, engaging, and accessible representations of MHIs.

Playtesters strongly emphasized that fun gameplay should remain central to the experience of destigmatization games. Narrative elements, particularly those related to MHIs, should be integrated organically into game mechanics rather than delivered as explicit instruction or moral commentary. Several warned against didactic approaches, noting that overt messaging may reduce engagement. Instead, developers are recommended to focus on building compelling, high-quality games where thematic content emerges naturally through play.

Preserving a consistent narrative structure between players was viewed as crucial to ensuring that each player engages with a shared, standardized experience of MHI representation in-game. However, playtesters suggested that modest increases in player agency, such as optional dialogue choices, or expanded movement beyond those offered in *Hellblade*, could deepen player engagement. These features could strengthen player identification with their character, enhancing the game experience without compromising message clarity or integrity.

Future games were suggested to expand on the developers' collaboration efforts by incorporating viewpoints beyond experts and those with lived experiences. This included individuals indirectly affected by MHIs, such as family members or carers, to inform supporting character development and relational dynamics between player characters and non-player characters (NPCs). Another proposal was to incorporate the perspective of individuals who previously held stigmatizing beliefs but no longer do, to better understand the potential origins and challenges of such attitudes. This was suggested to help inform game narratives that meaningfully engage with the difficulty of confronting prejudice and fostering change.

Lastly, playtesters suggested that to engage with a broader audience, developers could proactively seek complementary media channels to communicate the game's message beyond solely gaming audiences. These included video essays, influencer-led commentary, social media content, and television appearances, all of which were considered more accessible for non-gamers and casual media consumers.

Discussion

This study adds to the literature by examining how self-identified gamers, as an underexamined expert audience cohort within gaming culture, perceive the potential of video games to support MHI destigmatization. Rather than treating "gamer" as a straightforward demographic label, the project approached gamers as a culturally situated group with tacit knowledge of gameplay conventions, genre expectations, and the informal norms through which games are evaluated and circulated. The in-person playtest interviews therefore form the primary evidential base for the discussion that follows. Survey findings were drawn in selectively to clarify the recruitment pool and to indicate when patterns observed in interviews plausibly reflect broader cohort tendencies.

Playtesters did not evaluate *Hellblade*'s destigmatizing potential as a simple function of "having a mental health message." Instead, they repeatedly framed stigma reduction as conditional, shaped by how the game organizes attention and meaning through design choices, and by how players encounter the game within wider media and social contexts. In that sense, they point

away from binary assumptions that games are automatically “more engaging” than other media, or that an “empathy goal” straightforwardly produces attitude changes. What emerged instead were a set of audience-facing constraints and opportunities related to destigmatization games, synthesizing into 3 key recommendations from the gaming cohort.

1. Understanding the Audience:

The in-person sample ($n = 7$) necessarily limits interpretive scope. It does not support subgroup comparisons (e.g., gender, age) and should not be treated as representative of “gamers” overall. However, the playtest group broadly mirrors the survey cohort, which was predominantly young and male-identifying. This may reflect recruitment via snowball sampling, the 18+ requirement, and the decision to run an in-person playtest. While this differs from industry reports emphasizing increasing audience diversity (Newzoo, 2023, 2025), it aligns with scholarship documenting barriers to participation and comfort in gaming spaces for women and non-binary people (Paaßen et al., 2017; Gisbert-Pérez et al., 2024). The key implication is not simply that the sample is “skewed” but that the study’s expert-audience insights are drawn from a specific segment of gaming culture; future work should test whether the design and dissemination principles identified here generalize beyond that segment.

Within those bounds, both the interviews and the survey point to a second, more conceptual issue: self-identified gamers are not a monolithic audience. Gamer identity appeared to function less as a direct proxy for continuous play and more as an umbrella label that both groups used in different ways. Survey respondents variously grounded self-identification in current play, long-standing personal histories, community involvement, related media consumption (streams and gaming video content), and even professional ties to games. The interviews echoed this flexibility. Participants described maintaining “gamer” identity despite reduced playtime in adulthood, suggesting that identity can persist through shifting responsibilities and changing patterns of engagement. The point for destigmatization research is that recruiting “gamers” does not guarantee uniform exposure to games, uniform play intensity, or uniform routes through which game meanings circulate.

Relatedly, the findings suggest destigmatization-through-games should be situated within a media ecology rather than confined to play. Across both phases, game-adjacent media were highly salient. Survey respondents often ranked online videos and live streams above video games as preferred formats (Fig. 3) and reported video essays and opinion content as common sources of mental health information (Fig. 5). Interviewees likewise described engaging with gaming culture through creators, industry discourse, and multitasked viewing. This matters because destigmatization games may be encountered not only as playable products but as cultural objects interpreted through online discourse. From a design and dissemination standpoint, this expands the pathways through which stigma-relevant ideas may be reinforced or contested.

Time-use patterns further contextualize engagement. Playtesters described fitting gaming around adult responsibilities, implying fragmented schedules rather than long “marathons.” Survey data support this: play clustered on weekends, with multiple sessions typically within a 1–4-hour weekly range (Fig. 2a–d). Notably, most participants reported no single session as being shorter

than ~60 minutes, implying a potential “golden hour” in which a game must establish tone, narrative stakes, and representational nuance before attention drops. This suggests a practical design constraint: games that require long, uninterrupted engagement to make their intended meaning legible may lose players early. It also implies a dissemination constraint: when play is intermittent, interpretation may increasingly develop between sessions via online discussions and game-adjacent media.

2. Destigmatization Game Design: Conditions of Credibility, Engagement, and Interpretation

Playtesters generally treated *Hellblade* as a credible and promising example of a destigmatization-oriented commercial game, but the reasoning they offered is important. Their assessments indicate that stigma reduction was not understood as a “message delivery” problem. It was understood as a game design problem under conditions of audience skepticism. Participants repeatedly warned that overtly didactic framing risks being read as “agenda-driven,” and that such framing can undermine uptake among gamers even when the underlying intent is aligned with stigma reduction. In this respect, destigmatization was framed as something that must be integrated into a compelling game experience rather than appended to it. Survey responses reinforce the general shape of this reception logic. While support for using games to raise awareness was unanimous, participants also flagged concerns that stigma-related content can be undermined when games are not research-informed or when they read as “agenda-driven.”

This reception dynamic places “engagement” at the centre of the model, but not in a simplistic “games are uniquely engaging” sense. Instead, the interviews suggest that engagement is earned through the interaction of mechanics, pacing, narrative coherence, and aesthetic design, and that stigma-relevant outcomes are likely contingent on those configurations. This aligns with the broader caution in the literature against assuming interactivity automatically produces deeper impact, and it is also consistent with the empirical pattern cited elsewhere: in *Hellblade* research, active play has been associated with greater immersion and identification than passive viewing alongside reduced desire for social distance (Ferchaud et al., 2020). Active play does not “prove” stigma reduction, as playtesters here emphasize design conditions that plausibly support the kinds of immersion and identification that are often theorized as stigma relevant.

Playtesters also identified design choices that support engagement for experienced players while creating barriers for others. *Hellblade*'s lack of a HUD and tutorial was read as deliberate immersion, but it assumes prior gaming literacy and may deter less experienced players. The recurring “mother/sister” framing further suggests that even sympathetic audiences may see destigmatization games as primarily for gamer networks unless onboarding and accessibility improve. This complicates population-level intervention claims. If destigmatization depends on play, but play assumes expertise, dissemination remains structurally constrained to those who already play games.

Recommendations for future design also point to a nuanced, non-triumphalist view of “agency.” Several playtesters argued that modest increases in agency could deepen engagement and identification, but they also recognized that excessive freedom risks fragmenting the interpretive

experience or diluting the narrative conditions that carry the stigma-relevant meaning. In other words, they imply a design principle of bounded agency. Choice was valued when it supports involvement without undermining the stability of the representational arc. This is a useful corrective to the common tendency to treat “more choice” as inherently better, and it is particularly relevant for destigmatization games that rely on coherent narrative framing to avoid trivialization or comedic misuse.

Finally, playtesters’ emphasis on Ninja Theory’s consultation practices highlights another condition for destigmatization: credibility is not only textual but also procedural and social. Collaboration with lived-experience consultants and experts was treated as an ethical benchmark central to authenticity and responsibility. Survey responses similarly stressed responsible, research-informed development, aligning with frameworks for empathetic game development (Galvão et al., 2025). Credibility-building was positioned as part of the design process rather than an afterthought, shifting attention from “accurate portrayal” as an endpoint toward consultation as a mechanism that makes portrayals trustworthy and interpretable, thereby shaping message reception. This frames destigmatization game development as knowledge work in which representational legitimacy is produced through transparent processes.

3. Dissemination: Transmedia Circulation and the Visibility Problem

Interviewees repeatedly framed *Hellblade*’s reach as likely to remain within gaming circles and their immediate spillover networks. They identified structural barriers to broader uptake: hardware costs, gameplay learning curves, and the perceived “heaviness” of the topic relative to mainstream expectations of games. This is a significant constraint because it suggests that even if a game meets key design conditions, it may still fail to reach non-gaming publics. Survey data sharpens this point: baseline familiarity with *Hellblade* was relatively low compared to major franchises despite critical acclaim (Fig. 1). For developers and researchers, this supports a visibility argument: destigmatization games face not only a design problem but also an attention and discovery problem even among likely audiences.

Within that constraint, a particularly generative insight is that dissemination should not be treated as “marketing” alone but as part of the destigmatization mechanism. Interviewees and survey respondents described frequent engagement with streams, video essays, and online commentary (Figs. 3, 5), and suggested developers could leverage these channels, including creator commentary and influencer outreach, to extend stigma-relevant discussions beyond those who will play directly. This does not require the assumption that passive viewing is equivalent to play; rather, it positions transmedia circulation as a supplementary pathway that may broaden exposure and provoke reflection, especially among lapsed gamers and non-gamers. Prior work on Let’s Plays and creator-audience dynamics helps to explain why this matters: these formats combine gameplay footage with interpretation, social interaction, and community discussion (Burwell & Miller, 2016; Kreissl et al., 2021; Pingel, 2021). In this framing, destigmatization shifts from a single-product outcome to an ecosystem challenge spanning design, credibility, circulation, and interpretive contexts.

Limitations

This pilot study is exploratory in scope and should be treated as such. The in-person playtest/interview sample was small ($n = 7$), which limits generalizability and prevents meaningful between-group or demographic subgroup analysis (e.g., by gender, age, or prior familiarity). The sample also skewed toward young, male-identifying participants, further constraining representativeness and the transferability of findings to women and non-binary gamers.

The study intentionally focused on self-identified gamers to elicit feedback from an audience with gaming literacy and established interpretive norms. While appropriate for a pilot, this focus is a limitation: findings cannot be assumed to extend to non-gamers or general-public audiences who may face different barriers (e.g., access, motivation, or control familiarity) and may interpret mental-health narratives differently.

The evidence base is also bound by case and context. Using a single case-study title, *Hellblade*, supports depth but limits inference across genres and themes. Standardizing exposure to the opening sequence enhances comparability but may not capture how interpretation develops over longer play, later narrative revelations, or cumulative emotional intensity. Interview accounts may also have been shaped by study framing which raises the possibility of priming and socially desirable responding. Finally, this study was situated within one national context, limiting transferability to settings where stigma norms, help-seeking cultures, and gaming discourse may differ (Sunita & Sharma, 2021).

Conclusion

This study contributes an audience-centred perspective on mental health destigmatization through games by examining how self-identified gamers interpret *Hellblade* as a destigmatization play experience. Playtesters understood its potential as conditional rather than automatic and did not treat stigma reduction as a simple outcome of including mental health themes. Instead, they emphasized credibility signals (notably research-informed development and responsible consultation), resistance to didactic or “agenda-driven” framing, and the need for a compelling game experience in which representational meaning is embedded in both narrative and mechanics. They also highlighted practical constraints which shaped uptake and interpretation, including reliance on prior gaming literacy, the value of bounded agency to support involvement without fragmenting narrative coherence, and dissemination limits produced by platform access and contemporary attention economies. Survey findings provide cohort-level context for these patterns, particularly around media habits and concerns about responsible development.

These findings caution against blanket claims that games are inherently superior stigma-reduction tools or that empathy reliably produces behaviour change. Instead, they suggest stigma-relevant outcomes are more plausible under specific design configurations and encounter contexts, and that reach is shaped as much by circulation as by content. Even when a title aligns

with player preferences and is perceived as credible, it may remain unknown to many potential players and circulate mainly within gaming networks. Recommendations therefore position destigmatization as an ecosystem challenge spanning gameplay, credibility, visibility, and transmedia discussion across game-adjacent media.

Three practical implications for developers can be synthesized from this gamer cohort:

- (1) Know the target audience by recognizing the diversity of gamer and non-gamer identities, habits, and preferences that shape engagement with both games and online MHI content;
- (2) Design a compelling, research-grounded game that balances immersive play with authentic, sensitive portrayal of MHI experiences; and
- (3) Deliver the game's message through a multi-platform engagement strategy that reaches not only core gamers but also lapsed players and broader non-gaming audiences.

Future Research

Future work should scale the qualitative component with larger, more demographically diverse samples to enable subgroup analysis and to test whether the design and dissemination conditions identified here replicate beyond a young, male-leaning gamer cohort. Sampling should also extend beyond self-identified gamers to include non-gamers and lapsed gamers, directly examining how gaming literacy, onboarding needs, and access constraints shape reception and stigma-relevant interpretation.

Comparative designs are a clear next step. Playtesting multiple titles across genres and platforms would help separate generalizable principles from case-specific effects and assess whether particular gameplay styles are better suited to specific mental health themes (or other forms of stigma). Longer or staged exposure, including follow-up interviews, would clarify how interpretations evolve over time and whether early impressions persist, intensify, or reverse as narrative and mechanics unfold. Building on comparative approaches (e.g., Anderson, 2020) and established playtest methods (Ferchaud et al., 2020), future studies could examine a wider selection of games across genres, platforms, and societal issues. Working within a framework such as Galvão et al. (2025) would further support systematic design-to-outcome analysis by standardizing how "empathetic game" features are defined and compared across titles.

Methodologically, future studies should reduce framing effects by varying the timing and amount of background information provided about a game's development and consultation practices. In addition, reflexive interviewing procedures should be strengthened. Cross-cultural or multi-site designs would also help to test how destigmatization-through-games operates across different social and media environments.

Several participant-led avenues warrant targeted investigation. One is role position: shifting from embodying a protagonist with a mental health issue to playing as a supporter, carer, or ally in order to test how role framing shapes empathy, reflection, and stigma-relevant judgement. Another is dissemination beyond play: comparing direct play with streaming, commentary, and game-adjacent media as encounter modes, and evaluating how these channels shape interpretation and reach.

Finally, an unexpected trend warrants a focused follow-up: playtesters' recurring hesitancy to recommend *Hellblade*-like games to female-identifying family members. They mainly cited concerns about emotional sensitivity or gaming proficiency, with no comparable caveats for male relatives. Although based on a small sample, this asymmetry may reflect gendered assumptions about gaming and mental health content. Future work could test whether these perceptions reflect unconscious bias, cultural norms, or gatekeeping within gaming communities, as these could constitute overlooked barriers to dissemination and impact.

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