

Debris: Exploring the video game values that can help reduce mental illness stigma

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INTRODUCTION

Youth between the ages of 14 and 24 are most at risk, compared to other age groups, of developing psychosis for the first time. Psychotic disorders (e.g., schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and depression with psychotic features) have a profound impact on the lives of young people and their families. The potential to significantly reduce the severity and impact of serious mental illnesses and addictions exist, if mental health programs can intervene early. However, most youth receive late interventions. The Duration of Untreated Psychosis (DUP), the time between the onset of psychotic symptoms and initiation treatment, is an important marker of treatment delay. For youth living in Ontario Canada it was 22 weeks (median), a long time to be struggling with these symptoms. Help seeking was initiated by family/friends (53%), police (15%), or self (33%) (Archie et al. 2010). Factors that influence help-seeking delays are: lack of personal awareness of symptoms or the mental health system, as well as family members' lack of knowledge about the same. Stigma also plays a key role in the pathways to care. Often, young people felt that they had done something wrong (in having a mental illness), and they felt a sense of failure for not being able to “snap out of it” (Ferrari et al. 2015). Even if they were able to recognize the signs and symptoms, navigating the pathways to care for mental health and addiction problems can be very challenging (Ferrari et al. 2015).

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APPROACH & METHODOLOGY

Debris (copyright Moonray Studios Inc.) is a commercial video game aimed at helping youth recognize symptoms associated with psychosis and overcome mental health stigma. By translating years of empirical research about first episode psychosis, Debris hopes to show players how people who live with psychosis experience the world by using gaming technology in an engaging and compelling manner. Debris is a first-person 3D game set in underwater Arctic ice caves that use multi-media sensory experiences as metaphors for emotions and psychosis. The release is set for 2017.

A Youth Advisory Working Group: five youth with lived experiences associated with risk of mental illness and/or substance use provided feedback on the game values and design. First, author facilitated meetings so that youth could share experiential knowledge about mental health and addiction experience, for the purposes of creating a realistic and non-stigmatizing game. Debris weaves psychosis symptoms directly into the video game mechanics. Youth were involved in different activities, such as: Video game character creation and video game scenario brainstorming (E.g., explore who the character reacts to different situations: negotiation; collaboration; conflict resolution).

Analysis

Feedback about gaming experiences were gathered on the process with participant consent. Youth Advisory Working Group (YAWG) meetings were audio recorded, and notes taken. Thematic analysis was used to identify and analyze patterns or themes within data.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

This paper explores the core values that identified to be important in overcoming mental health stigma using video game technology. The identified values were: Promoting awareness about the problem; Educating people on psychosis causes; Recognizing psychosis as collective experience; Promoting listening and talking about the problem; and promoting bystander “Empathy.” Debris aims to promote empathy in players and enable them to respond to a mental health crisis. Currently, video games do not truly represent the lived experiences of someone dealing with psychosis and, unfortunately, some video games perpetuate “madness” stereotypes. In creating Debris, game developers, researchers, mental health community organizations, and, most importantly, youth think that Debris should help portray psychosis with compassion and dignity.

Keywords: Psychosis, mental health, access to care, video games, digital interactive learning

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