

Mental Jam: Co-Creating Video Games with Participants About Their Lived Experiences of Depression and Anxiety

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INTRODUCTION

Mental Jam is a series of game jam workshops that I developed to co-create with young people video games about their lived experiences of depression and/or anxiety using different game design approaches, namely narrative, metaphorical (Rusch 2017) and gameful design (McGonigal 2015).

Mental health is a vital part of our health and wellbeing. Mental health is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a state of wellbeing where a person can recognise their abilities, handle normal life stress, work productively and contribute to their community (WHO 2004). One of the goals of the WHO's Mental Health Action Plan is to decrease stigma and discrimination by educating the public through mental health awareness campaigns (WHO 2013). One of the ways to promote mental health is through the knowledge translation of lived experiences via different artistic mediums, such as video games. Video games can be a powerful medium for telling people's stories as they are interactive and immersive. Empathy games can inspire players to gain more insightful understanding of the experiences of others (Caballero 2014).

Accordingly, my practice-based research is motivated by the following question: "How can participants with lived experiences of depression and/or anxiety co-create video games as a form of self-expression?" I have addressed this question using the participatory action research (PAR) methodology to engage my participants at different stages of the video game development process, including lived experience interviews, game jam workshops, post-game jam interviews and player group interviews. Rather than portraying representations of depression and anxiety as defined by mental health professionals, use of PAR ensured that my participants' voices were heard and their contributions were valued throughout the study, following the WHO recommendation to engage and empower people with lived experiences by collaborating with them in mental health advocacy projects.

I conducted a pilot study and three game jam workshop iterations that were refined based on the feedback from the participants and players, and which resulted in the development of the Mental Jam Process Framework (MJPF). The framework outlines

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a process for co-creating video games with people in relation to their lived experiences of depression and/or anxiety.

The MJPF is composed of five stages: 1) Participant Recruitment; 2) Subject Matter Interviews; 3) Ideation; 4) Game Development; and 5) Reflection (see Figure 6.1). Each stage has one or more goodness criteria and outcomes that need to be accomplished before moving on to the next stage. The MJPF comprises two main activities – interviews and game jam workshops. The MJPF stages and activities are aligned with the three phases of game jams: 1) the pre-jam phase; 2) the game jam phase; and 3) the post-jam phase (Faas et al. 2019).

The pre-jam phase includes recruiting participants with lived experiences, game developers and players. For game jams conducted online, researchers should consider time zones and availability (Faas et al. 2019). This phase emphasises team formation with a balanced skill set, which may involve engaging with game developers to fill skill gaps. Moving to the subject matter interviews, researchers conduct semi-structured interviews with participants with lived experiences, transcribe these and apply thematic analysis. The interview findings inform the subsequent ideation stage.

The game phase begins with the ideation stage, where researchers present interview findings, introduce game development and collaboration tools, and facilitate brainstorming guided by IDEO's principles (IDEO 2015). Participants finalise the game design and create game development tasks for the following stage, which consists of game development sessions and asynchronous game development. Game development sessions enable participants to work together, share progress and receive feedback. Asynchronous development allows participants to work individually during the week between group sessions. Playtesting aimed at quality assurance and game refinement also occurs during the game development phase.

Finally, in the post-jam phase the video game is released with the consent of the participants and the reflection stage commences. Participants are interviewed about their workshop experiences, while players provide feedback on the final game through group interviews. These insights inform future game jam iterations and game development. Feedback from participants and players is integral to enhancing the game jam workshop process and the quality of the created games.

The MJPF offers researchers a model for co-creation with participants about their lived experiences, ensuring their experiential knowledge is valued and shared with the general public. Currently, the MJPF has not been tested and evaluated by other researchers or game jam facilitators. Further work could invite them to apply the MJPF in their research to co-create video games about different lived experiences. While the MJPF is focused on experiences of depression and anxiety, it may also be applied to other subject matter to follow other research directions in future. Other researchers could evaluate and critique the framework based on the participant engagement and game jam workshop outcomes, including authentic portrayals of lived experiences using various video game design approaches.

BIO

Hsiao-Wei Chen is a creative practice-based PhD Candidate at RMIT, where she co-creates video games with people about their lived experiences of depression and anxiety. She is also a game developer with more than 10 years of experience in programming, design and production, and was named as GameIndustry.biz 100 Future Talent. The video games co-created through Mental Jam workshops are available on: <https://mentaljam.itch.io/>

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