

Hues of Health and Horror

Visualising Uncanny Adolescent Mental Health through Video Game Space Design

LEA MERLE BACHMANN / HEBAH UDDIN

This paper explores the intersection of mental health representation and spatial design in the American indie RPG game *Omori* (2020). As stigma surrounding mental illness gradually decreases in some cultural contexts, notably the United States, *Omori*'s production context, video games increasingly incorporate more nuanced depictions of mental health. *Omori* exemplifies this shift by visualising the inner psychological struggles of its adolescent protagonist Sunny through its distinctive spatial aesthetics and horror elements. The game employs a dual-world structure – Faraway Town and the dissociative dream world Headspace – alongside two liminal spaces, White Space and Black Space, to convey stages of trauma, repression, and coping. This analysis draws on van Gennep's rites of passage, Freudian uncanny theory, and Kristeva's concept of abjection to argue that *Omori* uses interactive spatial storytelling to depict the typically invisible nature of mental illness. Unlike earlier games that rely on harmful stereotypes, *Omori* invites players into an empathetic engagement with trauma and psychological fragmentation through gameplay and choice-based narrative outcomes. Ultimately, this paper suggests that *Omori* contributes to a broader discursive trend in which video games act as a medium for negotiating mental health in ways that challenge traditional narratives and encourage complex, individualised understandings of psychological suffering.

Trigger warning: *This paper discusses topics related to trauma, mental health issues, self-harm, and suicide, which may be distressing to some readers. Please engage with the content at your discretion and seek support if needed.*

The mostly invisible nature of mental health challenges contributes to the persistence of stigma and, consequently, negative media representation, which in turn continues to affect those wishing to seek support. While countries like the United States have reported gradual reductions in mental health stigma and increased acceptance of therapy, other nations – such as Germany – are witnessing these shifts at a more measured pace. The change in societal discourse and gradual destigmatisation influences not only everyday utterances but also media productions, leading to an increase of nuanced mental illness representations in popular media. Video games in particular have seen an increase of titles concerning mental illness due to the increasing reduction of stigma in game-production countries, such as the United States, and a growing demographic of young players seeking to explore the this topic through interactive media. (Szekely et al. 2024) Many earlier published video games incorporate mental health as a feature to make NPCs or locations dangerous or threatening to the player in often ableist and reductive ways.¹ A common trope is the use of the mental asylum as a backdrop,

¹ An NPC is a non-player character, and refers to any character in a video game that the player cannot control with their actions.

with patients portrayed as monstrously distorted and irredeemable adversaries, as seen in *Alice: Madness Returns* (2011), *Outlast* (2013) and *The Evil Within* (2014). While some modern video games still tend to reproduce negative stereotypes of mentally ill individuals, current video games – particularly »indie« or non-mainstream video games – demonstrate a trend towards more nuanced depictions with mentally ill individuals as protagonists, such as in *Life is Strange* (2015), *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (2017), *Disco Elysium* (2019) or in this paper's chosen game *Omori* (2020). Therefore, video games, like literature, have become a medium through which concepts of health and illness are negotiated and explored. (von Jagow / Steger 2009, p. 95)

This increasing number of games featuring depictions of mental health also influences game studies research, leading to an increase in publications. However, most publications focus on the overpowering negative portrayal of mental health (Buday et al. 2022; Kowal et al. 2021) or the game's potential for psychotherapeutic practices (Bocci et al. 2023; Granic et al. 2014), neglecting other potentials of incorporating mental health. Research about *Omori* has so far focused on the game's educational potential (Castiglione 2024), the unpredictability of the narrative structure due to trauma (Dewanto/Suprajitno 2024) – reminiscent of the concept of the unreliable narrator in literature – and the environmental design. (Younis/Fedtke 2024) As an extension of current research, this paper argues that the video game *Omori* (2020) uses spatial design and horror elements to visualise the mostly invisible mental health suffering of the adolescent Sunny, using the video game's explicit interactivity to highlight the overall spectrum and individuality of mental health experiences.

The American RPG game *Omori* follows 16-year-old Sunny as both protagonist and sole playable character, whose mental health has been declining for four years following his older sister Mari's accidental death. Attempting to reframe the accident out of fear that he might have contributed to it, 12-year-old Sunny and his friend Basil stage the event as a suicide, leading to Sunny repressing the memories due to trauma. As part of his repression, he constructs and inhabits a dissociative dreamworld² as an alter-ego called Omori. The game consists of two main game planes – the »real« Faraway Town and the »imagined« Headspace – and two opposing liminal spaces – White Space and Black Space. The four spaces symbolise not only Sunny's fractured memories but also different coping mechanisms as the following spatial and psychoanalytical analysis demonstrates. Though *Omori* is classified as an adventure game, specifically inspired by the conventions inherent in Japanese role-playing games, or JRPGs, its utilisation of dark and unsettling elements, particularly to address suicidal tendencies, and depression, make it unsurprising that the developer has deemed it a horror game.

Additionally, the complex spatial design as well as its interactivity and potential for immersion (Schallegger 2017, p. 27) influence *Omori's* video game experience. Therefore, the player does not only function as a recipient of information, but also has an essential influence on the storyline progression. (Zelling 2023, p. 38) In *Omori* this is especially significant during the end of the game, when the player's choices will affect the course of the storyline, with the focus on Sunny's mental health progression, allowing for six potential endings: two good endings (Good and Secret Flower Endings), three Sunny

² The psychoanalytical concept of dreams, following Sigmund Freud, as well as the categorisation of different types of dreams would be an interesting concept to apply. For further reading please refer to Freud (1961) or Schäfer (2023).

suicide endings (Bad Ending, True Route, Hikikomori³ Route) and one with him never getting over his trauma and suffering for the rest of his life, while his friend Basil commits suicide due to guilt (Abandon Ending). (Omori Wiki 2023a) Depending on the ending, Sunny demonstrates re-traumatisation experiences or suicide, which can influence the players' experiences and possibly their mental health in general.⁴ Overall, statistics show that more than 2.3 million players purchased the game, playing for an average of 22.8 hours, and 97.3 % have left positive reviews. (Video Game Insights 2025) The sheer number of players and positive reviews indicate gamers' desires for games approaching the topic in a more nuanced way, incorporating fewer stereotypes than previously utilised for the topic.

In line with this observation, a seemingly recurrent desire for mental health depiction is that of the ›authentic depiction‹. (Anderson 2020, p.21) Such a desire goes back to stigmatising media narratives of mental health through recurring tropes and to the aspiration for more varied and less negative portrayals. (Ibid.) This is especially true because »[p]lacing players in the empathetic position of experiencing a fictional character's mental illness, eschewing adventure or excitement, can make mental illness seem more relatable.« (Ibid, p.27) However, aiming for accurate depiction implies that there is a singular experience, and different individuals experience depression or trauma in varying ways. Although *Omori* might also partly »rel[y] on old tropes of mental illness as a justification for the game's horror« (ibid., p. 29), aligning with more modern media depictions of mental illness (Schäfer 2015, p. 234), it allows the player to experience significantly individualised, differing and gradual stories of the trauma and mental illness of the adolescent Sunny, as the following analysis shows.

Spatial design and the uncanny adolescent

»Welcome to White Space. You've lived here for as long as you can remember«: This opening line introduces players to *Omori*'s world and quickly establishes colour and space as two crucial keywords in understanding the four dimensions the titular protagonist navigates. The colour functions not only as aesthetic choice but also as indicator for the protagonist's mental health state, as well as indicating switches between the game's spaces: White Space, Headspace, Black Space and Faraway Town, which will be introduced and discussed in the following as part of the mental health and psychological horror aesthetics in *Omori*.

However, before the spatial design of *Omori* is discussed in more detail, two relevant and complex concepts will be briefly introduced: adolescence and the uncanny.⁵ Although adolescence cannot be discussed in detail here, it can be defined as encompassing »im weitesten Sinne alle psychischen, physiologischen und sozialen Veränderungen« [in the broadest sense all psychological, physiological and social changes] (Weinkauff /von

³ Hikikomori is a »form of severe social withdrawal [...] frequently described in Japan and characterized by adolescents and young adults who become recluses in their parents' homes, unable to work or go to school for months or even years.« (Teo /Gaw 2016, p. 1)

⁴ This paper cannot elaborate on the reception process or the potential positive or negative impacts on the player's mental health. For a literature review and research on this topic, please consult Halb-

rook et al. (2020). Because the Werther effect is still considered controversial and influences discussions surrounding suicide depictions in media, we would also like to offer two more sources: firstly, Martus (2009) for the theory of the Werther effect, and secondly for media depiction guidelines concerning mental health depiction, the World Health Organisation (2023).

⁵ For more details, see Stemmann (2019) and Freud (2003).

Glaser 2018, p.128) in the context of contemporary societies »zwischen dem Ende der Kindheit und dem Übergang zum Erwachsenenalter« [between the end of childhood and the transition to adulthood]. (Ibid., p.127)⁶ This period of transition is especially relevant; Stemmann (2019) emphasises the impact of literary space on adolescence, a concept underlying our spatial design analysis. Just as Stemmann states in her analysis of Kevin Kuhn's *Hikkomori* (2012), *Omori* functions as does the novel's protagonist Till, who remains isolated and immovable in the »real space«. He also escapes into an alternative space inaccessible to his parents (Stemmann 2019, p.150), although Till escapes into a virtual space while Sunny escapes into an imagined world.

In this game the adolescent protagonist's depiction and his experiences in the alternative spaces include what Sigmund Freud calls the »uncanny.« Following Freud, the term uncanny refers to »the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread. It is equally beyond doubt that the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense, and so it commonly merges with what arouses fear in general« (Freud 2003, p.123) Freud's definition also rests on the understanding of this aesthetic as arising when the repressed or hidden becomes visible, particularly in family contexts and dynamics. This is applicable to *Omori* because Sunny subconsciously suffers from the repressed memories of Mari's death. It is therefore, at the same time, both familiar and strange to the perceiver, since even the player only gradually finds Sunny's memories and therefore the reason for both the appearance of Somethings⁷ and the incoherences in the storyline. The Freudian uncanny can be extended by Julia Kristeva's »abjection,« which refers to »whatever disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules; the in-between, the ambiguous [...] a composite of judgment and affect, condemnation and yearning, signs and drives.« (Kristeva 1982, p.4) In *Omori* the disturbances within White Space and Black Space, discussed in the following sections, are perfect examples of the in-between and ambiguous. In line with what Stemmann argues in the context of young adult novels, the protagonist's internal struggles are mirrored in the topographical dimension of the game's story, suggesting space and psyche are interdependent (2017, p.53), as the following analysis aims to show.

White Space

As indicated by its name, White Space is monochrome, reminiscent of the consolidated motif of the white space between life and death often found in films or series.⁸ It also creates a sense of liminality. But not only the space is monochrome: Sunny, and hence also *Omori*, becomes monochrome following Mari's death– a detail that remains unchanged even when he leaves White Space for his utopic dream world Headspace, where his friends and other characters exist in vivid colour. The sparse White Space functions as a »hollow, risk-free form of escapism [...] in an environment free of triggers and memories related to his trauma.« (Younis / Fedtke 2024, p.311)

The depicted space in Figure 1 only contains, for *Omori*'s use, a laptop, sketchbook, tissue box, light bulb, door and the cat Mewo. The latter, when clicked, poses a question

⁶ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the authors.

⁷ The Somethings are antagonistic beings based on *Omori*'s perception of Mari's dead body, who pursue *Omori* whenever he encounters them, and force him to flee before they overtake him.

⁸ It should also be noted, when considering the significance of whiteness for this space, that white is also traditionally a colour of mourning in Japan, worn by funeral attendees, while the dead are also clothed in a white *kyokatabira*. For further reading, see Davisson (2012).

that encapsulates the inert nature of Omori's existence in this room: »Waiting for something to happen?« The emptiness conveyed through the sparse selection of objects mirrors the overall emotional numbness portrayed by the character Omori, shown in the bottom left corner. The minimalist interior décor of White Space highlights the feeling of Omori's isolation and loneliness. At the same time, White Space functions as a safe space to which Sunny repeatedly escapes in moments of being emotionally overwhelmed. This duality can

be read as a parallel to the motif of a padded cell in a mental hospital – supposedly for safety but uncanny at the same time.

This dichotomy between safety and unease is also evident in Omori's character depiction. Although Omori is shown as »feeling well« with full health points (designated by hearts) and magic points (delineated in the game as »juice,« and allowing him in the usual fashion of JRPGs to wield special skills beyond the rote attack mechanism), his facial expression as well as the potential selection of »stab« simultaneously highlight his mental struggles. The red hand icon, along with the vibrant indicators for level, health and magic, disrupts the otherwise black-and-white aesthetic, with the colour red functioning as ominous foreshadowing – hinting at themes of self-harm or suicide. In contrast to typical game conventions, where the »stab« option directs the character to attack an enemy, in *Omori*, choosing this action leads to Omori stabbing himself.

Stabbing the alter-ego Omori in the alternative spaces functions as a foreshadowing of the fight between Sunny and his alter-ego, as an embodiment of Sunny's trial, in order to break with his escapist coping mechanism. The action being placed in the hand of the player is a provocative and deliberate choice that evokes ludonarrative dissonance. A concept coined in 2007 by video game designer and director Clint Hocking, ludonarrative describes an opposition between the ludic structure, or gameplay, and the narrative structure, or the story. This disconnect is often utilised to unsettle the player and force them to confront and justify their actions rather than mechanically following the game's directives. (Hocking 2007) Having to take the knife in hand for the game to proceed directly conflicts with the childlike innocence expressed by the narrative to that point and makes the player directly complicit in aiding Omori's self-harm. Hence, the unsettling aspect of potentially deciding for the adolescent character to suicide themselves⁹ goes hand in hand with the concept of the uncanny.

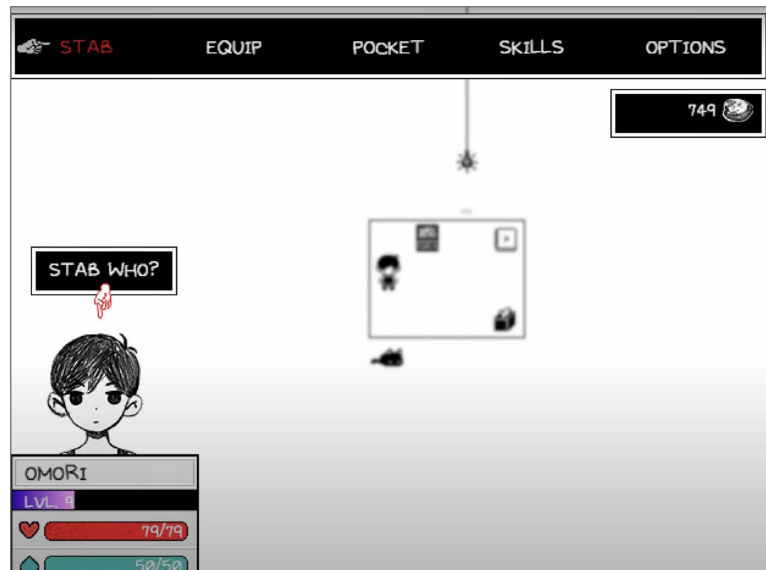


Fig.1
Screenshot of
White Space in
Omori.

⁹ Due to the space constraints of this paper the motif of suicide and its associated discourses cannot be discussed in detail. This paper follows the dominant Western, Christian discourse that suicide is a sin and hence something negative to be prevented. Considering Omori's development in and marketing

toward an American audience, it may be helpful to refer to the US Congress H.R. 5514, the Suicide Prevention Act, in considering this perspective and associated reception. For opposing positions, please refer to the philosophers Schopenhauer, Nietzsche or Améry.

However, unlike the potential of choices to influence the game's progression, in one instance the player does not have any options if they want to continue the game. For the game to progress the player (or the alternative persona Omori) must leave White Space, whether through the open doorway in the game's first few minutes, or by stabbing himself later on. The leaving of White Space following the escape from the ›realk world – Faraway Town – functions as a secondary *rite de séparation* and is crucial to start van Gennepe's three-part *rite de passage*. It consists of ›rites de séparation« (separation), ›rites de marge« (transition) and ›rites d'agrégation« (reincorporation) (van Gennepe 2005, p. 21), which Stemmann uses for the analysis of the interconnection of adolescence and space. (Stemmann 2019, p. 3) Also relevant is that Sunny is 16 years old at the start of the game, which coincides with van Gennepe's statement that male adolescence, and hence the *rite de passage*, starts at age 16 (2005, p. 65); however, due to the game's interactivity, the player is also given a choice never to leave White Space (Zelling 2023, p. 39) – effectively refusing to begin the rite of passage and hence failing the developmental tasks of adolescents. (Schäfer 2015, p. 14; Stemmann 2019, p. 169) If the player chooses not to leave White Space, there is only one possible outcome: suicide. This establishes White Space as both a refuge and a trap, mirroring the potentially deadly consequences of escapism in the face of trauma.

Headspace

During the tutorial stage of *Omori*, the character discovers a door that leads from the confines of White Space into Headspace. Omori and the player are both instantly immersed in a colourful environment; however, on closer inspection, the palette is still limited to nocturnal, twilight hues of purple, and there is a sense of frailty to his interactions with its inhabitants, which focus less on deep conversation and more on superficial childish play.

Unlike the liminal White Space as in-between, safe and entrapping space, Headspace, a near-utopia, represents childhood as happy and innocent, as perpetuated in dominant societal discourse. Headspace is therefore a realm of nostalgia filled with idealised memories of Sunny's childhood where Omori symbolically reverts to childhood.

This reversal is reinforced through environmental design, including ›toys littered throughout the room, such as in the baseball bat on the ground, the snake toy on the stairs, and the doll on the counter.« (Younis/Fedtke 2024, p. 318) The overall aesthetic thus imbues the space with, according to theorist Svetlana Boym, ›a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed [...] a sentiment of loss and displacement, but also a romance with one's own fantasy« (quoted in Heithausen 2022, p. 82).

This near-utopia is frequently disrupted by horrific entities that slip through the cracks, since Headspace also ›occupies the realm of the uncanny« (Spittle 2011, p. 315), feeling ››not quite right«; familiar but unfamiliar.« (Ibid., p. 314) Even as Headspace is filled with toys, pastel colours and childlike symbolism, these elements of childhood are often



Fig. 2
Screenshot of
Headspace in
Omori.

tainted with horrific imagery due to the encroaching Black Space and Sunny's unresolved emotions – for example, visible tentacles creeping out of an otherwise idyllic lake. The recurring duality as essential for the uncanny not only reflects in the game's spatial design but also in the construction of other elements: An example of this disruption of childhood innocence occurs early in the game when Omori's friend Basil vanishes after a panic attack, leaving no clues except a small hole in the floor where he stood. Other unsettling elements in Headspace include battles with creatures that appear outwardly cute but can inflict harm on Omori and his friends. Over time, Basil's home – the Old Shoe depicted in Figure 2 – begins to rot under the influence of the encroaching Black Space, which harbours Omori's most repressed memories and fears. This gradual breakdown suggests that even the most seemingly idyllic escapist spaces cannot remain untouched by underlying trauma, and that escapism is not a long-term solution.

Black Space

Unlike White Space and Headspace, Black Space only emerges later in the game, though hints of its existence flicker in and out of previous encounters Omori has with his unconsciously embedded trauma: Basil's drawn and shocked face against a black backdrop during his panic attack, for example, and two brief, disturbing black-and-white introductory sequences when first entering White Space in the initial moments of the game, and at the start of its second phase when introducing the player to Sunny as Omori's alter-ego. The inclusion of and emphasis on Omori as Sunny's

alter-ego recalls Lacan – specifically, the function of the mirror stage as the establishment of the relationship between »dem Organismus und seiner Realität – oder [...] zwischen der *Innenwelt* und der *Umwelt*« [the organism and its reality – or [...] between the *inner world* and the *environment*]. (Lacan 1973, p. 66)

The mirroring space is designed as the antithesis of White Space, not only in colour but also in function. Rather than a risk-free environment, it is filled with triggers and suppressed memories. This space symbolises the player's confrontation with Sunny's mental demons. It therefore visualises subconscious struggles, allowing the player to interact with otherwise invisible triggers. The colour choice of black reflects both the negative experiences stored here and the act of repression itself – blank, dark and inaccessible memories.

The quest for regaining his lost memories leads Omori to the Lost Library, which is part of the Black Space but accessible through Headspace. Like Omori's repressed memories, this is a sunken, subconscious location: »it used to be above the ground in Pyre Forest, evidenced by some picnic dialog where Mari talks about a library that sank into the ground.« (Omori wiki 2023b) The solitary facing of Omori's Lost Library evokes the

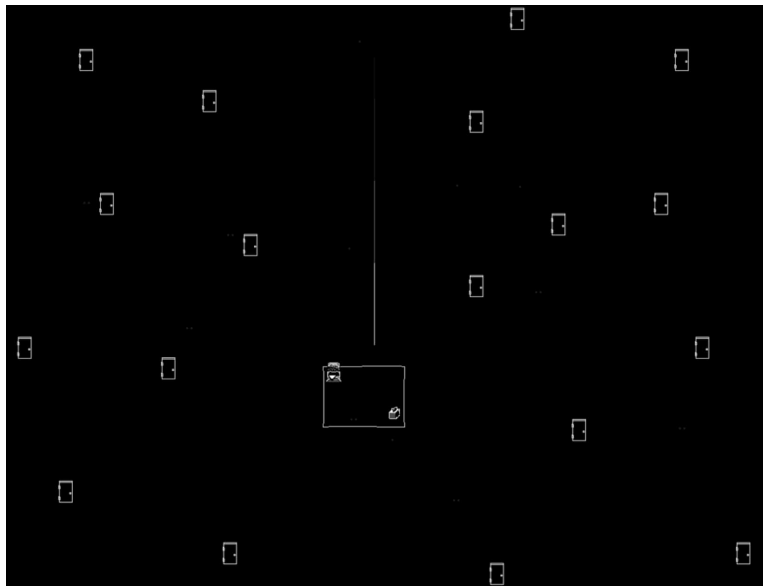


Fig. 3
Screenshot of
Black Space in
Omori.

Jungian concept of the Shadow as »that hidden, repressed, for the most part inferior and guilt-laden personality.« (Jung 1968, p. 266) If there had been any of Headspace's childish, cheery décor here, it has now dwindled away and become dark, with the notable features of the place including cobwebs, broken trees, and dusty bookshelves. This space externalises Omori's trauma, whereas White Space reflected his coping mechanisms in hiding it.

As mentioned previously, Omori and the player must visit this space alone and face this guilt for the initial visit, though Omori's friends (as a party able to support him in any battles he may face with antagonistic forces, according to the media-specific characteristics of RPG) are able to join him later. This marks a turning point at which Omori must engage with his forgotten past and must take on the responsibility to start on his own, »individuation [...], by which man is made one.« (Ibid., p. 170)

The Shadow can also be found in the aesthetics of this space—deserted, dark and infested with Somethings, »visually reminiscent of Mari's corpse.« (Younis / Fedtke 2024, p. 320) This design choice ties Omori's trauma directly to the visual representation of his most significant source of fear and guilt. The game designers reinforce this connection by offering an achievement called »Repressed« if the player avoids regaining these painful but necessary memories. (Ibid. p. 324)

The interplay between trauma and visual representation aligns with Kristeva's abjection as particularly visible in the precarious in-between stage of adolescence, due to the body and identity being in transition, and thus the boundaries between human and monster are blurred. (Kristeva 1982, p. 129) The latter construct can be applied to Sunny / Omori's sister Mari and her appearances in the story, which are both innocuous (in her original human form in Headspace) and demonic (as a deformed depiction of her death in Black Space and a few times in Headspace as the story progresses). It can, however, also be applied to Sunny himself and his vacillation between his true self and his repressive Omori side, who – if given complete control of their state and body – will choose suicide over reunification.

Sunny's split self, and the existence of Omori, is a demonstration of the identity conflict as defined by Erikson, particularly within the adolescent stage of identity formation, the »negative identity [that] is the sum of all those identifications and identity fragments which the individual had to submerge in himself as undesirable or irreconcilable or by which atypical individuals and marked minorities are made to feel ›different‹.« (Erikson 1970, p. 733) The clash between identity and negative identity, demonstrated in Sunny's and Omori's concluding fight, is also mentioned as »a specific rage aroused wherever identity development loses the promise of a traditionally assured wholeness« (ibid.); this may conclude negatively if the negative identity becomes the dominant one, but can alternatively conclude in the triumph of the original identity and the reunification of the self.

The complexity of incorporating the mental health issue, or in this case Omori as representation to fight against and as protector at the same time, breaks the stigmas of mental illness, as the differentiation between associated coping mechanisms like Sunny's escapism does not solely have adverse effects but also functions as a protection mechanism. Consequently, in *Omori*, the sheer complexity of possibilities afforded by the medium's interactivity and diverse game-design elements allows for a more layered depiction of mental health and thus a potential for critical, individualised and destigmatised representation. Therefore, the game opens the door for the discussion of the spectres not only of mental health but also for the very binary of illness and health

itself, extending to the classification of time-limited and life-long conditions. This representation aligns with Bettina von Jagow and Florian Steger's statement that health is not merely »die Absenz von Krankheit« [the absence of sickness] (2009, p. 62) because health itself is a spectrum and cultural construct with different in-between stages. However, the introduced spaces and their different environmental designs not only represent elements of this specific visualisation of aspects of Sunny's mental health—e.g. Headspace as wishful returning to idealised version of Sunny's childhood before Mari's death, White Space as escapism and forgetting, Black Space as trauma space and space of sealed memories, and Faraway Town as trigger and home simultaneously – but they also play an essential part in the previously mentioned rite of passage associated with adolescence.

Faraway Town

Of the four potential spaces – White Space, Headspace, Black Space and Faraway Town – the player can explore alongside Omori once the decision to leave White Space is made, Faraway Town represents the in-game reality. This is where Omori's true identity Sunny resides, or more precisely where he is initially shut off from Faraway Town, in his childhood bedroom (Zelling 2023, p. 44) until he leaves his hikikomori life behind and leaves the house. Interestingly, many publications analysing the game's environmental design overlook Faraway Town and only focus on the other three imaginary spaces (Younis / Fedtke 2024), although Faraway Town is essential for Sunny's depiction of adolescence in the video game.

Faraway Town, the supposed reality, represents the physical world in which Sunny exists. However, this space is no less haunted – Omori's house, particularly in its darkest form, mirrors the unsettling atmosphere, horror elements and near impenetrable darkness of Black Space, further reinforcing the idea that reality and the mind's constructed spaces are not so easily separated. Objects, such as Omori's sketchbook, found here – as well as in White Space – also appear in distorted forms in Black Space and Headspace. Even in the light of day, the subspaces available for the player's exploration alongside Sunny are forlorn and desolate. Sunny's house is filled with moving boxes while his mother, who remains physically absent throughout the whole game¹⁰ and only leaves messages for Sunny, prepares to move away from the site of the family's personal tragedy and his own lingering trauma.



Fig. 4
Screenshot of
Faraway Town in
Omori.

¹⁰ The absence of parents in *Omori* is another interesting element we cannot focus on in this paper. However, the family dynamic also in the context of

depicting adolescence is another interesting research aspect (see Stemmann 2019).

Faraway Town, therefore, ultimately serves not only as the setting for the initial separation but also the reincorporation of the rite of passage (van Gennep 2005, p. 21) that Sunny must undergo. The journey through White Space and Headspace allows him to regress into childhood as a form of escapism, but he must overcome this. The darkness and monsters, both literal and metaphorical, act as trials in the individuation which are part of the second phase in the rite of passage – the transition. (Ibid.) In the game's good ending, Omori regains colour, symbolising his maturation and reintegration with his true self and therefore his successful finishing of the last step of the rite of passage. (Ibid.) However, during the final confrontation, Sunny loses his right eye – serving as a lasting physical reminder of the otherwise invisible toll that mental health struggles can take on individuals. While van Gennep introduces *rites de passage* primarily as socially embedded process (ibid., pp. 14–16), Omori can be classified as a modern, psychologically individual, variant. However, during the journey through the different imagined spaces, Sunny still imagines a social group, reminiscent of his existing friend group in Faraway Town, to help him navigate the different challenges and to fight the battles together, creating a pseudo-societal context. In the end, the potentially successful passing of adolescence by reintegration leads to Sunny's return to the real world, to the replacement of the pseudo-society by real society, and with that to a change in Sunny's societal role.

The game's conclusion

After finding the missing Basil, as an essential part of the game, and once Sunny regains his suppressed memories, the journey and hence the game concludes with a battle between Sunny, the original adolescent identity from Faraway Town, and Omori, his imagined persona inhabiting White Space, Black Space, and Headspace.

As Figure 5 shows, the visual is set against a grotesque red-black background of distorted limbs and indistinct organic forms, while the dialogue box reads, »You killed MARI. She loved you and you killed her.« – a

line that functions as both accusation and self-revelation. The recurring dichotomies once again find their way into the game's visuals since the character of Omori, rendered in stark monochrome with saturated red staining his limbs and torso, appears visually distinct from the neutral, unaffected portrait of Sunny. This juxtaposition underscores the psychological fragmentation within the protagonist, separating the constructed emotional detachment of the everyday self from the unbearable trauma carried by his repressed shadow. The red surroundings, composed of what appear to be Mari's dismembered limbs, foregrounds the collapse of bodily integrity, evoking disgust, fear and attraction in the player. The red-black palette and the blood-like smears covering Omori's limbs suggest violence against the reimagined Mari, or the Somethings, but also self-infliction, underscoring the interpretation that this confrontation is as much about the

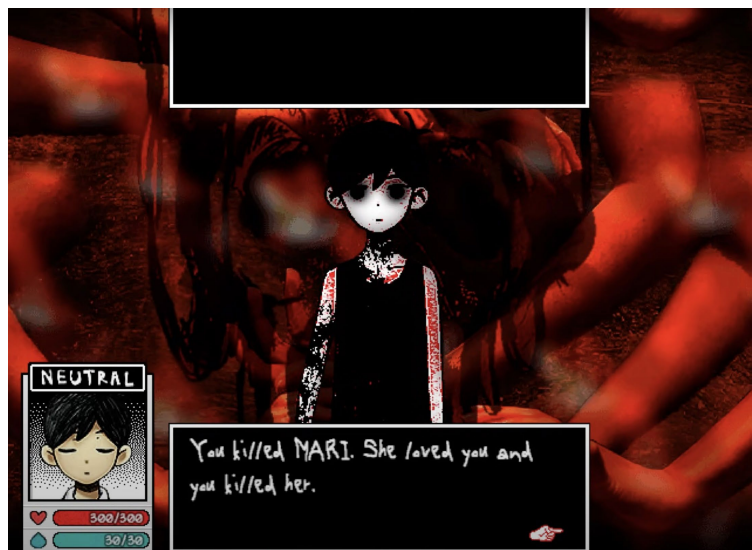


Fig. 5
Screenshot of the
battle between
Omori and Sunny.

threat of suicide as it is about repressed memories. As mentioned previously, depending on the player's choices, the second phase accordingly either ends with the reintegration of Omori into Sunny or with the failure to do so and therefore with the failed process of adolescence and potentially the protagonist's suicide. (Stemmann 2017, p. 26)

To summarise, *Omori* employs space and interactivity to visualise the psychological struggles of its protagonist, providing an example of how contemporary video games can articulate individual experiences of mental illness. By positioning the player as an active participant in Sunny's journey through spaces like White Space, Headspace, and Black Space, the game blurs the boundaries between narrative and gameplay, evoking the Freudian uncanny and Kristeva's abjection to reflect internal conflict. Unlike earlier horror games that reduced mental illness to a trope, *Omori* invites players to navigate the fragmented psyche of an adolescent in crisis, thereby fostering an empathetic understanding of trauma and repression. Thus, the game not only expands the narrative potential of video games as a medium but also contributes to an ongoing cultural re-evaluation of how mental health can and should be represented in popular media.

Primary Literature

Omocat (2020): *Omori*. Los Angeles

Secondary Literature

Anderson, Sky LaRell (2020): Portraying Mental Illness in Video Games. Exploratory Case Studies for Improving Interactive Depictions. In: Loading. The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association, Vol. 13, No. 21, pp. 20–33

Bocci, Francesco et al. (2023): Putting the Gaming Experience at the Center of the Therapy – The Video Game Therapy® Approach. Healthcare, Vol. 11, No. 12, p. 1767. <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare11121767> [Accessed 01.03.2025]

Buday, Jozef et al. (2022): Depiction of Mental Illness and Psychiatry in Popular Video Games over the Last 20 Years. In: Frontiers in Psychiatry, Vol. 13. DOI 10.3389/fpsyt.2022.967992 [Accessed 08.04.2025]

Castiglione, Alessio (2024): *Omori*, Playing With Trauma. A Case Study. In: Journal of Inclusive Methodology and Technology in Learning and Teaching, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 1–13

Dewanto, Deanya P.N./Suprajitno, Setefanus (2024): Exploring Narrative Structure and Immersion in the Game OMORI: Unpredictability and Trauma as Guiding Principles. In: KataKita. Journal of Language, Literature, and Teaching, Vol. 12, No. 3, pp. 291–298

Erikson, Erik H. (1970): Autobiographic Notes on the Identity Crisis. In: Daedalus, Vol. 99, No. 4, pp. 730–759

Freud, Sigmund (1961): *Gesammelte Werke II/III*. Dritte Aufl. Frankfurt/M.

Freud, Sigmund (2003): *The Uncanny*. Trans. David McLintock. London.

Gennep, Arnold van (2005): *Übergangsriten*. Trans. Klaus Schomburg und Sylvia M. Schomburg-Scherff. Frankfurt/M. [3rd expanded ed. Originally published in French in 1909]

Granic, Isabela et al. (2014): The Benefits of Playing Video Games. In: *American Psychologist*, Vol. 69, No. 1, pp. 66–78.

Halbrook, Yemaya J. et al. (2019): When and How Video Games Can Be Good: A Review of the Positive Effects of Video Games on Well-Being. In: *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, Vol. 14, No. 6, pp. 1096–1104

- Heithausen, Cordula (2023): Being a Child Again Through Gameplay. Glückstadt
- Jagow, Bettina von / Steger, Florian (2009): Was treibt die Literatur zur Medizin? Ein kulturwissenschaftlicher Dialog. Göttingen
- Jung, Carl G. (1968): The Collected Works of C. G. Jung. Vol. 9: Part II. In: Aion. Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self. Transl. R. F. C. Hull. New York [2nd ed.]
- Kowal, Magdalena et al. (2021): Gaming Your Mental Health: A Narrative Review on Mitigating Symptoms of Depression and Anxiety Using Commercial Video Games. In: JMIR Serious Games, Vol. 9, No. 2, pp. 1–13. DOI: 10.2196/26575 [Accessed 08.04.2025]
- Kristeva, Julia (1982): Approaching Abjection. In: Oxford Literary Review, Vol. 5, No. 1/2, pp. 125–149
- Lacan, Jacques (1973): Das Spiegelstadium als Bildner der Ichfunktion, wie sie uns in der psychoanalytischen Erfahrung erscheint. In: Haas, Norbert (ed.): Jacques Lacan: Schriften I. Olten, pp. 61–70
- Martus, Steffen (2009): Johann Wolfgang Goethes *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* als Medienskandal. In: Friedrich, Hans-Edwin (ed.): Literaturskandale. Frankfurt/M., pp. 29–43
- Schäfer, Iris (2015): Von der Hysterie zur Magersucht. Adoleszenz und Krankheit in Romanen und Erzählungen der Jahrhundert- und der Jahrtausendwende. Frankfurt/M. [Kinder- und Jugendkultur, -literatur und -medien. Theorie – Geschichte – Didaktik; 101]
- Schäfer, Iris (ed.) (2023): Traum und Träumen in Kinder- und Jugendmedien. Intermediale und transdisziplinäre Analysen. Paderborn [Traum – Wissen – Erzählen; 15]
- Schallegger, René (2017): WTH Are Games? Towards a Triad of Triads. In: Helbig, Jörg / Schallegger, René (eds.): Digitale Spiele. Köln, pp. 14–49 [Klagenfurter Beiträge zur Visuellen Kultur; 5]
- Spittle, Steve (2011): »Did This Game Scare You? Because it Sure as Hell Scared Me!« F. E. A. R., the Object and the Uncanny. In: Games and Culture, Vol. 6, No. 4, pp. 312–326
- Stemmann, Anna (2017): Wenn das Ich ein anderer ist. Psychische Dispositionen in der aktuellen Jugendliteratur. In: JuLit, No. 3, pp. 25–31
- Stemmann, Anna (2019): Räume der Adoleszenz. Deutschsprachige Jugendliteratur der Gegenwart in topographischer Perspektive. Stuttgart [Studien zu Kinder- und Jugendliteratur und -medien; 4]
- Weinkauff, Gina / von Glasenapp, Gabriele (2018): Kinder- und Jugendliteratur. Paderborn [3rd, updated and expanded ed.]
- Younis, Aya / Fedtke, Jana (2024): »You’ve Been Living Here For as Long as You Can Remember«: Trauma in OMORI’s Environmental Design. In: Games and Culture, Vol. 19, No. 3, pp. 309–336
- Zelling, Wendy (2023): Coming-of-Age in Videospielen. Überlegungen zum Genre der Adolescent Games. In: Jahrbuch der Gesellschaft für Kinder- und Jugendliteraturforschung, Vol. 7, pp. 35–49

Websites

- Davisson, Zack (2012): What is the White Kimono Japanese Ghosts Wear? Hyakumonogatari Kaidankai: Translated Japanese Ghost Stories and Tales of the Weird and the Strange. <https://hyakumonogatari.com/2012/04/04/what-is-the-white-kimono-japanese-ghosts-wear/> [Accessed 08.04.2025]

- Hocking, Clint (2007): Ludonarrative Dissonance in BioShock. Click Nothing: Design from a Long Time Ago. https://clicknothing.typepad.com/click_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html [Accessed 01.03.2025]
- Omori Wiki (2023a): Endings. <https://omori.wiki/Endings> [Accessed 01.03.2025]
- Omori Wiki (2023b): Lost Library. https://omori.fandom.com/wiki/LOST_LIBRARY [Accessed 08.04.2025]
- Szekely, Raul et al. (2024): Mental Illness Portrayals in Video Games. Psychology Today. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/surrey-minds/202412/mental-illness-portrayals-in-video-games-can-they-do-good#:~:text=Many%20video%20games%20reinforce%20harmful,empathically%2C%20drawing%20from%20lived%20experiences> [Accessed 08.04.2025]
- Teo, Alan Robert/Gaw, Albert C. (2016): »Hikikomori, A Japanese Culture-Bound Syndrome of Social Withdrawal? A Proposal for DSM-V.« <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4912003/> [Accessed 08.04.2025]
- Video Game Insights (2025): OMORI Steam Stats. <https://vginsights.com/game/omori> [Accessed 01.03.2025]
- World Health Organization (2023): Preventing Suicide: A Resource for Media Professionals. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240076846> [Accessed 01.03.2025]

Kurzvita

- Lea Merle Bachmann, M. Ed., is a dual-degree PhD candidate at the Universities of Cologne and Arizona. Her research interests include narratives of illness, inclusion, politics and ethics in contemporary children's and young adult literature/media.
- Hebah Uddin, MFA, is a PhD candidate in Children's Literature at the University of Pittsburgh. Her research interests include horror and gothic fiction, particularly in Black children's and young adult horror, Black feminist studies and video game studies.