

I went into Hellblade: (HUURH) Senua's Sacrifice with full knowledge of the game's central theming. I did not know the particulars of the plot, but I did know that the game concerned itself, both in thematic and mechanical representation, with psychosis.

To be blunt, I was skeptical. In my experience, games whose stated purpose is dealing with the depressed elephant in the room, mental illness, often either lean too far into melodrama or rely too much on a central, unsubtle metaphor (*Gris*, I loved your art, but tuff). I expected that the game would ply its hallucinatory voices and illusions and delusions. I kept notes as I played.

I tracked small moments, plot happenings, mechanical frustrations. I was ready. Yet for all of that meticulous note-taking, the moment that left the most lasting impact on me from this game snuck up on me out of nowhere, and, after the fact, I realized that it had already happened several times before then. This moment brought about a scary, almost overwhelming moment of empathetic realization that I have yet to experience in any other game.

My understanding of psychosis borders on nonexistent. I have experience, both in my own life and through friends and loved ones, with other mental illnesses, but no one in my circles, at least as far as I know, suffers from psychosis. What I did know was that the symptoms of psychosis often, but not always, include hearing disembodied voices, seeing illusions, or concocting delusions of grandeur or paranoia. For the most part, those three symptoms make up the majority of Hellblade's portrayal of psychosis. However, a small yet ultimately perspective-shifting detail regarding the voices shook me.

The voices follow Senua throughout the entire game, save for a small reprieve closer to the end of the game. From puzzle solving to traveling to combat, Senua is always accompanied. Clever technological use of binaural audio gives a physical sense of location to these voices, as if they are not just in Senua's head but inhabit the world.

For the most part, the voices that Senua hears whisper terrible things to her. They whisper that she cannot accomplish her task. They whisper that danger lurks around the next corner. They whisper that she ought to turn back and give up on her harrowing task. All of these things were what I expected. I expected the voices to be hostile or to encourage self-defeating behavior, as is the common cultural conception of the phenomenon.

When these voices were spouting warnings or insults, I found them easy enough to ignore, even though I was trying my best to give the experience an honest try. When you first approach a corner, and the voice says "No, turn back! It's dangerous," I felt engaged. After a couple hours of gameplay, that same warning lost some of its edge. The same principle applied to the voice's doubting words. What brought the impact roaring back, however, was the voice's utilization in combat.

While in combat, the voices continue their prattle. They urge Senua to get up when she is knocked down or to push the advantage when the enemy nears death's door. They decry her ability to finish the battle if she sustains multiple hits in a row. The dynamic, contextual aspect grants the voices even more presence. The voices even call out when an enemy out of camera view winds up for an attack. That the voices could actually provide beneficial information (though, of course, the enemies were of Senua's own conjuring anyways) surprised me. I had thought the voices provided vitriol and nothing more.

After several hours of gameplay, one particular instance of the voices' warning made me pause the game. I realized that, not only did these voices give beneficial information, but I had

come to rely upon them and their forewarning of unseen attacks. I was relying on the disembodied voices resulting from psychosis, and I had no idea how long exactly I had been relying on them. This realization made me rethink my entire understanding of the disease, and I immediately took to the internet and Youtube to see what other people had to think about this same phenomenon.

The YouTube rabbit hole led me down a path that ended up at this [video](#), courtesy of the channel Leonardi da Sidci. The man himself experiences psychosis, and he provides a fascinating take on the game. His entire analysis is superb, but one particular thought stood out to me. Sid wonders whether, without the voices that he experiences on a daily basis, if he would still be himself, or if he would still possess his creative, technical, or professional skills. Would he still be him?

Admittedly, it might have been a good idea to conduct a little more research into the condition before sitting down to this game. At the same time, I wonder if I would have had the same experience had I known that the voices sometimes provided beneficial “advice”? Do people who experience psychosis have much experience before it changes their lives? I don’t think so. It sneaks up on you.