Chapter 8
"Piece of Mind" and "Wellbeing Town":
Engaging Service Users in the Development of a Wellbeing Game

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ABSTRACT

The long-term implications of COVID-19 for wellbeing are predicted to be both significant and enduring. Data from previous epidemics indicates long-term detrimental effects are more pronounced among particular demographics, including individuals with pre-existing mental health conditions. The Mental Health Independent Support Team (MhIST) is a charitable organisation offering a range of free-at-the-point-of-contact services via self-referral for a range of mental health and wellbeing concerns, both with and without diagnosis. Since March 2020, the organisation noted significant rises in demand for services. Serious games and their active involvement in eliciting rapid positive behavioural change is associated with their emergence as a key learning tool, with effects transferable to the real world. While a growing number of gamified interventions exist for a range of mental health diagnoses, their presence in the domain of positive psychology is more limited. The chapter reports two studies conducted to enhance the development of an educational game for adult wellbeing.

INTRODUCTION

Outline

The following chapter will comprise of a synopsis of two empirical studies conducted in conjunction with the Mental Health Independent Support Team (MhIST) in Bolton, UK, to develop a serious game for adult wellbeing. In the following chapter proposal, contextual information is provided, along with an overview of the two studies; (1) a potential end-user survey to establish interest and preferences/requirements among the demographic prior to the development of two prototype games and (2) a user-feedback study conducted on these two prototypes to establish their acceptability and to outline directions for further development.

Wellbeing During the Covid-19 Pandemic

At the end of March 2020, the United Kingdom (UK) government initiated the first of a series of 'lockdown' restrictions aimed at decelerating the spread of COVID-19. These restrictions have been associated with detrimental implications for social connectedness and with increasing feelings of social isolation (White & van der Boor, 2020), which are established factors in promoting positive wellbeing (Jetten, Haslam, Haslam, Dingle & Jones, 2014; Al Issa & Jaleel, 2021). Contrastingly, the ability to perceive kindness, feelings of connectedness with community and essential worker status have been found to be associated with better mental health and well-being outcomes during lockdown (White & van der Boor, 2020).

Beyond the immediate and short-term future, the long-term implications of COVID-19 for wellbeing are predicted to be both significant and enduring (Hotopf, Bullmore, O'Connor & Holmes, 2020). However, it is as yet unclear who will be affected, how effects will manifest, and to what extent. Extant data from previous epidemics however has indicated that specific long-term detrimental effects are more pronounced among particular demographics (Cheung, Chau & Yip, 2008; Mak, Chu, Pan, Yiu & Chan, 2009), for instance increased risk of suicide in older adults following severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) (Yip, Cheung, Chau & Law, 2010). Early data from COVID-19 investigations indicate that self-harm and thoughts of suicide and self-harm were more prevalent among women, Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups, people experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, and individuals with pre-existing mental health conditions (Lob, Steptoe & Fancourt, 2020).

The Mental Health Independent Support Team (MhIST) is a user-led charitable organisation located in Bolton, United Kingdom, offering a range of free at the point of contact groups and services via self-referral (including self-help groups, advocacy services, and talking therapies) to people with a range of mental health and wellbeing concerns, both with and without formal diagnosis. Service users present to the charity with a range of mental health needs at varying degrees of symptom severity. Of service-users providing feedback data (N=100) via an online survey in February 2020, 62.5% of service users were female, 36.4% male, and 1.1% did not state their gender. 19.3% of respondents were aged 18-29 years, 14.8% were aged 30-44, 46.6% were aged 45-59, and 19.3% were aged 60+ years. 48% reported having a long-term illness, and 29% of respondents reported themselves as having a disability.

Since the onset of the COVID restrictions at the end of March 2020, the organisation noted a rise in demand for services – increasing from approximately 1,500 referrals in the year to end of March 2020, to over 2,500 by December 2020. The severity of symptom presentation among service users was also noted to have deteriorated during this time. The organisation utilises a range of online facilities encom-

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