

Commercial video games could help treat mental illness

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Popular video games have the potential to provide low-cost, easy access, effective and stigma-free support for some mental health issues, researchers at Lero, the Science Foundation Ireland Research Centre for Software, have found.

The team at Lero said video games could be used where conventional therapies are not available because of cost or location, or as an addition to traditional therapeutic treatments for depression or anxiety.

Lero researcher Dr. Mark Campbell said there is mounting scientific evidence supporting the efficacy of commercial video games to improve [mental health outcomes](#) after the team reviewed existing academic research on the impact of video games on [mental health issues](#), particularly depression and anxiety.

"It is worth considering commercial video games as a potential alternative option for the improvement of various aspects of mental health globally," he added.

Dr. Campbell led a team attached to University of Limerick's Health Research Institute and Physical Education & Sport Sciences department to publish their latest research paper *Gaming your mental health: A narrative review on mitigating depression and anxiety symptoms via commercial video games* in academic journal *JMIR Serious Games*.

Dr. Campbell said commercial video games are freely available or available for a one-time relative low cost and there are an estimated 2.7 billion video gamers worldwide.

"The overall accessibility and pervasiveness of commercial video games within modern society positions them as an invaluable means of reaching individuals with mental health disorders, irrespective of age and sex, and with limited access to [mental health care](#), particularly relevant during the current COVID-19 pandemic," he said.

Lead author on the paper Magdalena Kowal of Lero and UL said their research was in the context of the financial and healthcare service burden of mental illness, affecting more than 14% of the world's population, with a significant proportion of people with [mental health problems](#) not receiving treatment.

"There is a heightened demand for accessible and cost-effective methods that prevent and facilitate coping with mental health illness. This demand has become exacerbated following the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent increase in mental [health](#) disorders, depression and anxiety in particular," she said.

Magdalena Kowal said commercially available Virtual Reality (VR) [video](#) games have great potential in treating [mental health](#) issues also.

"These are well-suited for the implementation of cognitive behavioural techniques for the treatment of depression and anxiety disorders in the future.

Given the immersive nature of VR technology and the controllability of the virtual environment, it could be particularly well-suited for use in exposure therapy," she added.

More information: Magdalena Kowal et al, Gaming Your Mental Health: A Narrative Review on Mitigating Symptoms of Depression and Anxiety Using Commercial Video Games, *JMIR Serious Games* (2021). [DOI: 10.2196/26575](https://doi.org/10.2196/26575)

Provided by Lero, the Science Foundation Ireland Research Centre for Software

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