

# Confronting the Abyss

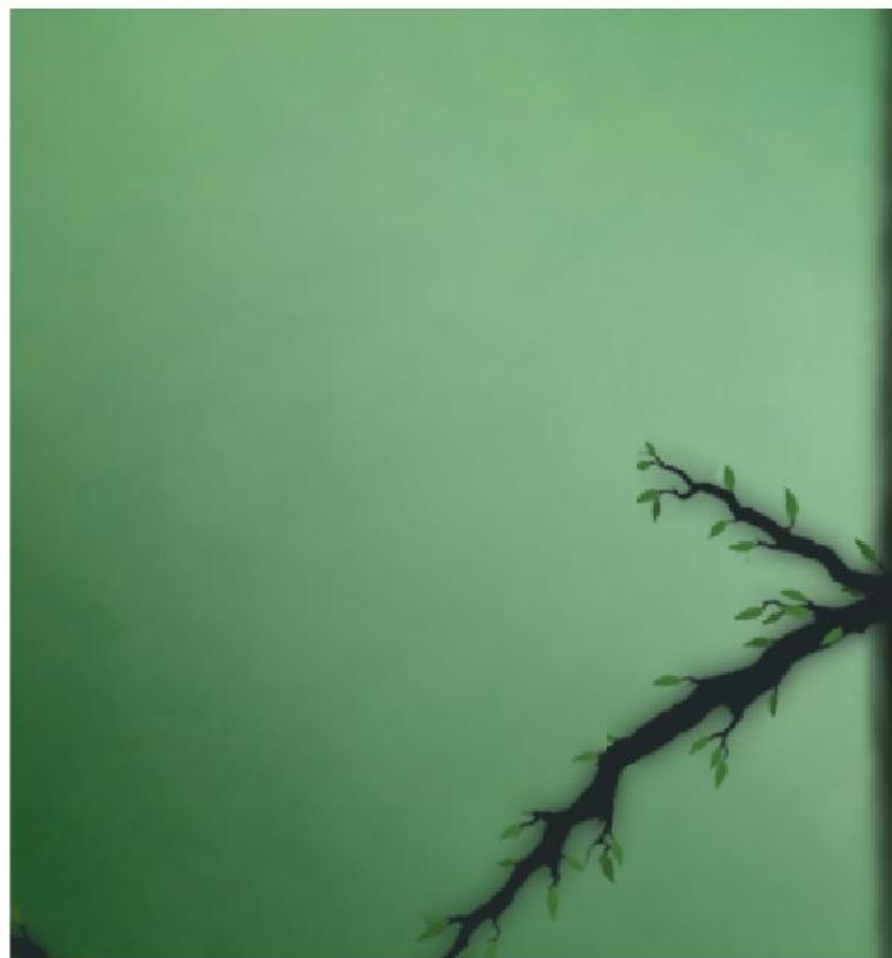
## TACKLING DEPRESSION WITH GAMES

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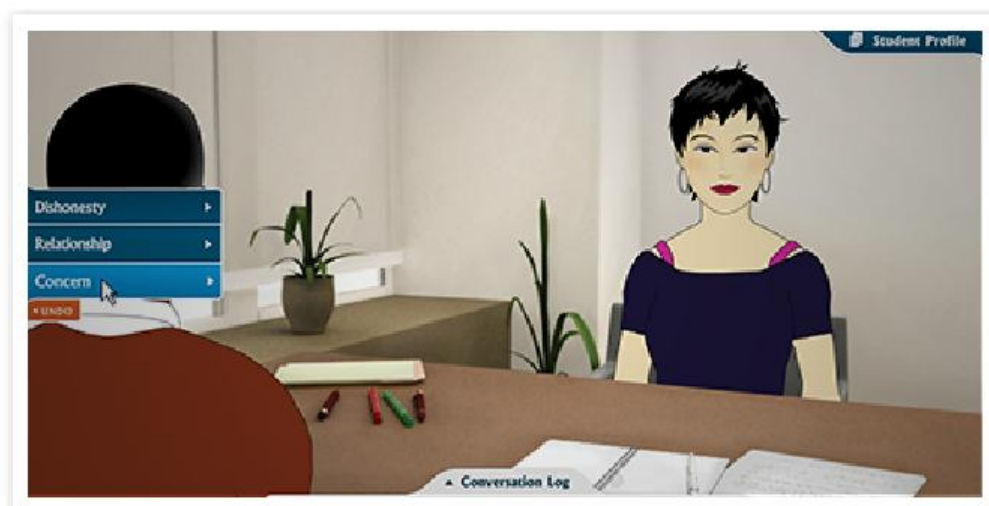
Despite the high number of people currently experiencing depression, lack of understanding and awareness still remains to be a massive issue, hindering those struggling from proper treatment and support. The amount of stigma and misunderstanding surrounding mental health, particularly something as common as depression, is enormous. Unfortunately, depression is a little more complex than just having a crappy day, or forgetting to 'think positive'. But if we can just make a collective effort to break down the social taboos surrounding it, then it really doesn't need to seem so perplexing.

This is where the immersive nature of video games steps in to lend a helping hand. After all, why tell someone when you can show them?

Accepting the reality of having depression is a difficult thing not only for those afflicted, but the people around them- the ones who are in a position to be offering support rather than judgement. Anyone who has dealt with depression whilst studying has likely been through the unpleasant experience of having to explain yourself to your school or university's staff. These environments are stressful enough, and can often trigger depressive episodes both new and recurring. At-Risk puts the player in the role of a university faculty member in charge with approaching students who appear to be displaying signs of potential mental illness, including anxiety and depression. The game displays the students not just as numbers in the system, but as real individuals with complex emotions and intelligence. The aim of the game is to correctly assess and



**"THE TRUTH IS THAT YOU HAVE ALL THE POWER TO GET BETTER WITHIN YOU ALREADY"**



**Role-play conversations with virtual students**

**Above:** At-Risk deals with the stigma surrounding mental illness and support services at university.



Below: Zoe Quinn, Depression Quest developer.



direct the students towards appropriate counselling services without unnecessary fear or misunderstanding. Designed with actual university staff in mind, it's a great way to examine the real impact and process of reducing the amount of students who are often overlooked when in a personal crisis.

Depression doesn't just mean a prolonged period of sadness. It's a confusing and ever-changing thing, sometimes with just as many ups as there are downs. This rise and fall of mood is explored metaphorically in *Elude*, a game involving navigating a gloomy forest by floating from branch to branch. The threat of being dragged down in to hopelessness is very real, holding the player back from where their true passions lie in the treetops. Each passion is represented by colourful birds dotted around the forest. Reaching a state of happiness presents a vastly unique gameplay experience to that of hopelessness, a diverse mechanic

that illustrates the literal ups and downs of life with depression.

The critically acclaimed *Depression Quest* takes a more literal approach to life with depression. This Twine game takes you through every day life as someone in the early stages of depression. The narrative is driven by decisions made by the player, although there are many choices which are shown but made unavailable. Tasks like going to work despite your average mood, or involving yourself in social activities are shown to be impossible when weighed down by the monotony of depression. The experience is truly personal and deeply moving, and does an excellent job of illustrating that you don't need a 'reason' to be depressed- this is an illness that can affect anyone.

The path to recovery when faced with depression can seem daunting and even impossible. Depression is an all-consuming state of being that makes it hard to imagine any other

Above: Jane McGonigal invented *SuperBetter* to empower those struggling with illnesses like depression.

reality. But the truth is that you have all the power to get better within you already. *SuperBetter* helps those on the path to recovery to feel empowered and capable on the road to recovery. It is fully customisable and, in the words of developer Jane McGonigal herself, focuses on 'provoking positive emotion, strengthening social connections [and] building up players' abilities to tackle tougher and tougher challenges without giving up.'

And not giving up is exactly what these games encourage us to do. Battling depression isn't easy, but it isn't impossible either. By raising awareness and offering support through games like these, the entire gaming community can show their solidarity for those facing tough times ahead.