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Beyond Play in one of Yayoi Kusama's Obliteration Room Installations.

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Special Issue

Beyond Play

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wellness services, use digital platforms to commercialise play and therapy by offering online, privatised individual and group coaching and support to adolescents while they play commercial and specially-created video games – all with the goal of improving their mental health and general wellbeing. Crucially, unlike the integration of video games as a therapeutic tool within the healthcare industry (where licensed professionals draw on well-established play-therapy techniques within safeguarded institutional environments), these services are commercially driven, available to anyone without the need of a diagnosis or prescription, do not always require licensed credentials from their therapists/coaches, and are not subject to the same safeguarding restrictions, legal requirements or policies as traditional, institutional therapy. By understanding this emergent genre of privatised digital ludic wellness services as a development in the increasing platformisation and digitalisation of mental health services, this article seeks to illuminate the evolving cultural imaginaries surrounding therapy, neurodivergence, and the role of play and video games in mental healthcare and digital wellness culture.

Starting from this premise, this article analyses the promotional materials of three digital ludic wellness services – *MindJam* (2025a), *Mightier* (2025a) and *Hero Journey Club* (2025b) – to interrogate how digital games are imagined and marketed as therapeutic tools for treating neurodiversity in teens and children. Through a critical technocultural discourse analysis of these materials (Brock 2018), we explore the ways that video games, ludic therapy, and online platforms are entangled with, and can transform, neurodiverse healthcare and wellness practices and neoliberal healthcare models. To do this, we first offer an overview of relevant literature related to the use of video games in therapy, theories of neoliberal healthcare, digital wellness culture (Baker 2022, Derkatch 2022, Illouz 2008), and neurodiversity studies (Walker 2021), as well as some notes on our method of data collection and analysis. We then turn our

analysis to the functionality of the three digital ludic wellness services. We first focus specifically on their demographics and subscription models, to demonstrate how video gameplay is being commodified as a way to financially profit from the treatability of neurodiversity. Following this, we explore how the ideology of neoliberal self-responsibilisation is discursively embedded in the foundations of the services, by analysing the discourses of self-improvement, individualisation, and hero narratives that are prevalent in the services' promotional materials.

After this first section, we move beyond the individualisation of digital ludic treatment and therapy for neurodiversity, to explore how these services present video games and play as techno-solutions for treating the traits and symptoms of neurodiversity. To do so, we offer an overview of the games that these services use for treatment purposes and demonstrate how these services employ video games that focus especially on neoliberal values of productivity. We then analyse how emotional regulation and resilience are presented by these services as fundamental concepts for neurodivergent youth to succeed within the context of neoliberal living. While we recognise that these services provide users with an opportunity to build communities and develop life skills and coping strategies for contemporary life, we argue that the strategies these services provide still perpetuate neoliberal (and neurotypical) modes of behaviour. As such, through this second part of our analysis we illuminate how, in the process of commodifying video game play as techno-solutions for neurodiverse users, these digital ludic wellness services reify the very logics of neoliberalism that perpetuate ideas of normative/neurotypical and non-normative/neurodivergent behaviours, feelings and symptoms in the first place. In doing so, this article shows how these services not only commodify video gameplay, financially profit from the precarity of neurodivergence, and market treatment for neurodivergence as an individual responsibility; they also imagine video games as digital spaces in which

neurodiverse players can develop their socio-emotional capabilities in line with neurotypical (and, by extension, neoliberal) standards. Ultimately, then, we argue that the transformative potential of these emergent digital ludic wellness services for treating neurodivergence will remain limited, as long as they continue to promote the very same Sisyphean neoliberal ideals of self-responsibilisation, productivity, self-improvement and self-regulation against which concepts of normative and disordered behaviour are measured.

Video Games, Therapy, and Neoliberal Mental Health Care

While much research at the intersection of video games and mental health tends to critique video games for diminishing users' ability to focus and pay attention, and for exacerbating problematic feelings like loneliness, stress, anxiety, and violence (Isbister 2016), the therapeutic capabilities of video games, and their positive impacts on mental health, are also well recognised within academic literature. Active video games, for instance, have been recognised as an effective intervention for reducing dysphoria and improving mental wellbeing and health among college students (Zhao et al. 2024), while all kinds of video games (especially role-playing games [RPGs]) have been perceived to be psychologically beneficial (Hazel, Kim and Every-Palmer 2022). The potential benefits that video games can bring to one's wellbeing are also acknowledged within institutional therapy contexts, where video games have been used since the 1980s for addressing pain management (especially within physiotherapy) and used in occupational therapy and psychotherapy for cognitive rehabilitation (Ceranoglu 2010). Indeed, video games are increasingly being adopted to treat a range of mental health and neurodivergent conditions such as autism, depression, anxiety, PTSD, and ADHD within institutional therapy spaces (Fernández-Aranda et al. 2012, Gerhardt and Smith 2020, Griffiths et al. 2013), and there has been

a burgeoning development of serious games designed in collaboration between mental health professions and the gaming industry for cognitive behavioural therapy (Merry et al. 2012, Schoneveld et al. 2016). In response to this, the vast majority of research on video games as a therapeutic method tends to have a utilitarian focus on their efficacy (Meinen 2023). However, to offer a diverging perspective on the role of video games and therapy, this article seeks to move past examining the consequences and therapeutic effectiveness of playing video games, to instead explore the emergence of phenomena, practices and cultures within these therapeutic and wellness *gamevironments* (Schwarzenegger et al. 2025).

To do this, we understand the privatised digital ludic wellness services that we analyse in this article to be exemplary of the recent emergence of privatised mental health support platforms within *digital wellness culture* (e.g., the norms, practices, and values that shape how individuals and societies pursue wellbeing through digital technologies) and the recent emergence of privatised mental health support platforms (Hendry 2022). Importantly, as Davies (2024, 114) notes “wellness culture aligns with neoliberal logic” where “ideals are achieved through self-improvement and self-discipline while reinforcing patriarchal and capitalist systems.” Mental healthcare, in Western anglophone culture (particularly in the US and UK) is dramatically shaped by neoliberal healthcare structures and the market-driven pharmaceutical industry. The over-prescription and over-reliance on pharmaceutical treatment as the leading form of healthcare for neurodivergent conditions like ADHD has received significant critique (Conrad 2007), with U.S. healthcare institutions being accused of, at times, prioritising pharmaceutical profit over patient care (Sismondo 2018). This is especially acute in the U.S. healthcare context where privatised health insurance policies often dictate the level and kind of healthcare that patients can afford, leading to many neurodivergent individuals paying out of pocket if they would

prefer to receive therapeutic behavioural treatment over (or in addition to) pharmaceutical care (Leslie 2017). Similarly, in the U.K., non-medicated therapeutic interventions funded by the National Health System are increasingly difficult to access for those with autism, ADHD and other neurodevelopmental differences due to long wait times (Maciver et al. 2025). To fill this void in affordable, accessible mental healthcare during the so-called global mental health epidemic/crisis, the commercial market for alternative wellness and therapy options has grown exponentially in the anglophone Western world. Among the multiple genres and mediums of self-care and private therapy offerings, digitally-mediated self-help approaches have become especially prominent, with wellbeing apps like *Calm* (2025) and *Headspace* (2025) being particularly popular. Often seen in the form of apps, online platforms and AI chatbots, these services offer mental healthcare therapy services anywhere, and at almost any time for users whose access to traditional clinical mental healthcare may be limited by factors such as geographical location, race, gender, sexuality, availability, and affordable health insurance policies.

These technologically-mediated mental healthcare and therapy services are restructuring therapeutic labour and dramatically impacting the economic, technological and professional configurations associated with therapeutic work for therapists and healthcare providers (Garofalo 2024). Moreover, as part of the (largely unregulated) wellness industry and prevalent self-care culture (Illouz 2008), they capitalise on neoliberal logics of marketisation and individual responsibility, appealing to desires for self-optimisation and self-investment by positioning health as something to be self-managed and maintained through lifestyle choices and behaviours (Crawford 1980, Dolezal and Oikkonen 2021, 5). Indeed, digital healthcare and wellness services rely on the same self-help and self-care discourses that are central to neoliberal ideology which frames health as a personal project and

The emergence of digital ludic wellness services that specifically target neurodivergent users is situated within the broader context of the medicalisation of non-normative behaviour. In recent years, neurodivergence has gained significant traction as an umbrella category for encapsulating a multitude of mental health and neurological conditions requiring therapeutic intervention – most notably (the now

critical neurodiversity studies to understand neurodiversity as a discursive and embodied socio-cultural phenomenon that describes conditions experienced through dysfunctions of the brain, but that is also heightened by societal demands and norms. To that end, neurodivergence is not a deviation from any *objective* state of normalcy, but rather, “from whatever constructed image and performance of normality the prevailing culture currently seeks to impose” (Walker 2021, 59). In other words, neurodivergence essentially refers to deviations from neurotypicality or neuronormativity – a descriptor of “the normal human being” (Garland-Thomson 1997) as someone who lives, acts, and experiences the world in accordance with how the prevailing culture imagines a person with a normal mind would (Walker 2021, 51). This critical approach towards neurodivergence acknowledges that there are “many forms of innate but value-free neurological differences within normal human variation” (Meinen 2023, 3), and that these variations are moulded by multiple factors such as

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“genetics, the influence of developmental environments on genetic expression, and the infinite variety of ways in which each individual mind is shaped by culture, activity, environment, and experience.” (Walker 2021, 38)

In line with this thinking, we also understand that neoliberalism, as a pervasive cultural ideology, thus shapes the very environment that impacts neurodevelopment, while also playing a significant role in determining what behaviours are deemed normative or disordered within society (Chapman 2023) – in particular through the way in which neoliberalism “champions pace and productivity” (McGee 2012, Lloyd and Norris 1999). As such, this article understands that, while users may find these services beneficial, the emergence of digital ludic wellness services for neurodivergence is a socio-cultural phenomenon that is deeply imbricated in the broader digitisation of mental health and wellness culture, the increasing

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humanistic process prioritised reflexive, theory-informed interpretation (as opposed to employing formal coding schemes or inter-coder reliability procedures typical of positivist qualitative designs). By utilising CTDA as a technique to analyse digital ludic therapy services, this article incorporates critical theories of neurodiversity studies and neoliberalism to discuss the extent to which both video games, and digital therapy services, are entangled with neurodiverse healthcare practices and neoliberal healthcare models. Because CTDA emphasises the interpretive role of theory in unpacking the cultural and political discourses embedded in technological artefacts, critiques of neoliberalism and critical neurodiversity studies function here as analytical lenses that illuminate how these services frame neurodivergence, responsibility, and therapeutic self-management. By using this technique, we hope to contribute to scholarship on the evolving cultural imaginaries surrounding therapy, neurodivergence, and the role of play and video games in mental healthcare and digital wellness culture.

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Accordingly, our analysis focuses on two areas: first, the extent to which neoliberal ideologies are embedded in the digital ludic wellness services themselves, and second, the way that video games are imagined as techno-solutions for treating neurodivergence. In this first section, we provide a detailed description of the three digital ludic wellness services, focusing specifically on their target demographics and subscription model, to show the commodification and marketisation of video gameplay and neurodivergence. We also focus on how neoliberal ideologies of self-responsibilisation are reified (and normalised) through the services' marketing materials – especially in their use of hero narratives. The marketing materials provide a particularly valuable source of analysis. Firstly, they indicate the markets that these services are appealing to (e.g., neurodiverse youth who most likely play video games, and their parents). Secondly, their discursive self-presentation reveals the aims of

Mightier operates a similar subscription model to the other two services: for \$40/month, players aged 6-14 years receive a heart sensor that pairs with an app, a supplemental handbook and “conversation card deck” that allow them to practice social skills with their family, as well as access to over twenty-five specially-created arcade games designed to help children explore a new emotion every month (Mightier 2025b). They adopt inclusive game design for users with different cognitive or motor challenges, setting a “goal of having a game for every child and every type of game player” within their Game Library (ibid.). As such, these games tend to be simple and quick to play, ranging from puzzles to “quick-swipe” mechanics that are easy for children with motor challenges to access. Each game is purpose-built to enhance different skills, from “Whip Swing”, which is a “great option for players who

struggle with time pressure", to "Crossy Ninja" which has a set game length that "helps players of all abilities feel successful" (Mightier 2025e). In this sense, *Mightier's* model differs from the likes of *Hero Journey Club* and *MindJam*, in that U.S. subscribers do not play commercially-available video games online, but rather receive physical and digital resources that are specially-designed by *Mightier*. This signals towards an oft-neglected integration of the *physical* and *mental* as two interwoven components of *health*. *Mightier* also includes the option of the Mightier Parent App which allows parents to "follow [their] child's progress with real-time data, resources and support" (Mightier 2025c). This Parent App is remarkably similar to the use of quantifiable SMART goals within clinical therapy and exemplifies a desire to quantify progress and self-improvement in an easily accessible and digital format (see Parker forthc. or Lupton 2016 for more on the quantification of health) – at the touch of a button one can monitor their child's emotional wellbeing and access the necessary support to help them keep on track with their emotional regulation (Mightier 2025c).

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However, rather than focusing on the act of play itself, *Mightier* gamifies emotional development. They assert that "calming down is a game and learning how to regulate emotions is the goal" (Mightier 2025b). This marketing thus demonstrates how *Mightier* design their own arcade games solely for therapeutic purposes rather than *play*. The focus of the service is therefore on the skills they are imparting to their subscribers (and their parents), rather than the games they are playing. Moreover, the other services are similarly focused on the wellness benefits of gameplay, and while *Hero Journey Club* and *MindJam* identify the games they use, they currently make little reference to the act of playing itself. *Hero Journey Club's* website, for instance, frequently refers to worksheets, handbooks and support apps, but does not offer much description of what the act of *play* through the platform actually looks like (Hero Journey Club 2024a). Like *Mightier's* app, user handbook and conversation

neurodivergence is understood as an emergent revenue stream within the broader subscription-based wellness economy, from which companies can profit without addressing underlying social issues.

Neoliberal Self-Responsibilisation within Digital Ludic Wellness Services

In addition to commodifying video games, leisure time and profiting from neurodivergence, what is particularly salient about *Mightier*, *MindJam* and the *Hero Journey Club*, is the way that they reify neoliberal ideals of self-responsibilisation and self-improvement. The social and economic configurations that prevail within neoliberal society position individuals as responsible for their own success. As Verhaeghe (2014, 177) argues, this cultural need to present oneself as “successful” is articulated through constant work evaluations, social media, and the expectation to build wide numbers of (so-called) social connections. However, the increasing pressures to succeed often lead to a growing sense of inadequacy as people fail to approximate these neoliberal expectations. Indeed, “in a society which constantly proclaims that anyone can make it if they just try hard enough, an increasing number of people feel humiliated, guilty and ashamed” when they consider themselves unsuccessful (Verhaeghe 2014, 176); “after all,” Verhaeghe writes, neoliberalism tells people that “they only have themselves to blame for their failure” and thus, “to fail is to be guilty” (ibid.). This perpetual sense of failure drives a focus on self-improvement through seeking self-help. Rimke’s work on the self-help industry under neoliberalism refers to this onus on improving the self to meet expectations of success as “responsibilisation” (Rimke 2020). Rimke (2020, 47) argues that

“the role of the self-help movement should not be overlooked in the study of contemporary societies as it forms an integral cultural field, shaping the political, economic, and social rationalities of neoliberalism.”

Indeed, she posits that

“the exaggerated focus placed on individual responsibility accompanied by the dismantling of public healthcare and social services, forces individuals to absorb structural deterioration contributing to a growing self-help movement.” (ibid.)

This is evidenced by the continued expansion of the self-help industry in the last two decades where “human troubles are treated as mainly individual problems” (Rimke 2020, 37). According to Rimke (2020, 47),

“the mass marketing and widespread operations of the medical industrial complex have secured its domination on the global therapeutic stage where self-help activities have become an integral aspect of modern life.”

It is easy to follow Rimke's line of thought when analysing *Mightier*, *MindJam* and *Hero Journey Club*; all three of these digital ludic wellness services position neurodivergence as an individual problem in need of self-help, and video games as the means through which self-improvement can occur. Although video games as a medium do typically centre the individual player by emphasising individual agency, immersion, and player-centred interactivity, these inherent features of gameplay are discursively mobilised by the three digital ludic wellness services, who reframe these affordances along the lines of users' personal responsibility and capacity for self-improvement. Both *MindJam* and *Hero Journey Club*, for instance, adopt language that emphasises self-responsibilisation and individual self-help treatment strategies. *MindJam* tells their mentees that the role of the mentors is purely a facilitative one, helping to "support your journey, help you feel empowered, and explore new skills, all while having fun" (MindJam 2025c). The principles of mentoring naturally lend themselves to personal and autonomous development, and we see this through the implication that individuals are both alone in the pursuit of bettering themselves, and

entirely “in control” (MindJam 2025b) of the outcomes of mentoring and the subsequent (presupposed) success they experience from subscribing to these services. Similar language of self-responsibilisation and self-empowerment is used to advertise the company’s Counselling platform, informing potential subscribers that their counselling “is more like traditional therapy but still keeps you in the driver’s seat” (MindJam 2025c). In supporting users to “help you understand yourself better” (MindJam 2025c), they place the responsibility for mental wellness on the user, rather than the counsellor. This is especially important for the services’ main demographic – from an early age, services such as these are conditioning neurodivergent youths to understand their neurodiversity as a behavioural and characteristic trait in need to self-help and correction, while encouraging them to take responsibility for their own self-improvement in order to become successful members of society.

Similarly, *Hero Journey Club* explicitly refers to the self-responsibilisation of individual users’ treatment. For instance, although *Hero Journey Club* works on a group-based model that centres around “connection, belonging, and growth,” the promotional materials nonetheless frame therapeutic progress as something that ultimately rests with the individual user. *Hero Journey Club*’s language repeatedly emphasises that “anyone” can “become the hero in their own healing journey” (Hero Journey Club 2024b). Indeed, from their founding in 2022, the language of their original manifesto draws on the discourse of self-help and individualism, claiming that “everyone is on their own journey” and proposes to players they should “walk [their] own healing journeys – together” (Hero Journey Club 2024b); what is particularly noticeable about this phrase is the tension between “own” and “together” (Hero Journey Club 2024b), which subtly prioritises individual responsibility even within a collective setting. In this sense, while *Hero Journey Club* is marketing itself as a group therapy platform with inherent social interaction, these framing positions the players as leading the sessions

and taking primary responsibility for their individual wellbeing. As we can see from looking at *MindJam* and *Hero Journey Club*, then, this model of digital ludic wellness/therapy uses gameplay to combat neurodivergence, loneliness, depression and other mental health ailments while simultaneously asking players to sit in the isolation of their own home. Importantly, they do so while encouraging users to take ownership of their personal therapeutic *journey*, even when that journey unfolds in a social or group-based environment.

Moreover, the overt references to heroes/heroism throughout *Hero Journey Club's* promotional materials (even down to the name of the service itself) exemplifies the service's self-empowerment and individualisation discourses. Hero narratives are abundant in twenty-first century pop culture discourse (Hassler-Forest 2012), and so by integrating these narratives into their marketing materials, *Hero Journey Club* thus resonates both with the enduring popularity of Superhero films (indeed, Marvel's superhero crossover *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) stands as the second-highest grossing film of all time) as well as with the discourse surrounding neurodivergence being a superpower (Chatterjee 2024, Peaty 2025). *Hero Journey Club* users are told that they are tasked with being "the hero that you needed when you were younger and be the hero who you can look up to now" (Hero Journey Club 2024b). Through doing so, the *Club* claims one can "build the courage to endure the pain and let the grief open you up to immense love" (Hero Journey Club 2024c).

As part of this hero discourse, *Hero Journey Club* utilises imagery of the video game avatar as a symbolic visual representation of both heroism and self-improvement. Their promotional materials (especially on their social media advertisements) frequently picture anime-style avatars who are designed to be interpreted as flame-, water- or air-wielding superheroes (Herojourney_club 2025). The use of avatars here

journey towards learning how to live better within the expected parameters of behaviours in neoliberal society. We now pivot our analysis away from the infrastructures and self-responsibilisation narratives of the services, to instead examine exactly how the video games themselves are marketed and imagined as techno-solutionist treatment options for neurodivergence.

Video Games as Techno-Solutions for Neurodivergence

The neoliberal values of self-improvement and self-responsibilisation that we see reoccur throughout the promotional materials of the digital ludic wellness services are also evident in the video games that these services utilise in their treatment of neurodivergence. Video games have long been critiqued as sources of anxiety, violence, stress, and loneliness – especially fast-paced, shooter-style games (Isbister 2016). Similarly, neurodiversity is often framed within the mainstream game industry “as a vulnerability” (Meinen 2023, 5) that leads to problematic gaming habits.

However, these digital ludic wellness services flip these narratives by promoting video game play as the medium for therapeutic discussion, and skill building as a way to treat neurodiversity; these services build on the growing popularity of slower-paced, sandbox and role play games (RPGs) such as *Stardew Valley*, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, and *Minecraft*, integrating the relaxing, therapeutic and escapist quality of these games into their mental healthcare and therapy services. Yet, despite their reputation as so-called cosy games, and their widely-acknowledged potential to help users escape the stresses of modern life (Walsdorff et al. 2022, Krzywinska et al. 2025), these games are not value-free; indeed, as Paret (forthc.) argues,

“video games that involve contemporary socio-political settings while being both narrative-focused and action-orientated are optimal for illustrating how these affects infiltrate the digital sphere and permeate our real-world environment.”

The premise of *Minecraft*, for example, rests on exploration and world building. First launched in 2009, the game is labour-centric; players spawn on a randomly generated virtual world which unfolds in real-time as they explore. They can then choose to play in creative or survival modes, which see the players mediate the level of risk and reward (the more that is at stake, the more loot you can acquire). In short, the game encourages players to mine for materials and offers almost infinite possibilities for world-building, allowing players to learn how to navigate virtual risk and adventure without the risk of real-world consequences. Indeed, as Fanning and Mir (2014, 50) argue, where playing on a playground allows children to learn and mature, “*Minecraft* provides this without the risk of concussions or broken bones.” In this sense, Sandbox games like *Minecraft* create environments of mediated risk, that condition players towards certain behaviours and ideals (hard work, resilience, patience, and exploration) while limiting the potential damage or impact to the player. Indeed, this digital safety is one of the key reasons *MindJam* feature this game on their service, noting its particular effectiveness at creating a safe digital space for emotional exploration for neurodivergent youth (MindJam 2025c).

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Likewise, games like *Stardew Valley* and *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* encourage players to follow home improvement narratives in the pursuit of improving their house and community. For *Stardew Valley*, this comes in the form of improving your farmstead, getting married and restoring the community centre. In *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, players must upgrade resident services, convert their campsite into a building, and build relationships through inviting a pre-requisite number of campers to the island to attract a local musician, K. K. Slider, to play his concert to the player’s new neighbours and friends. Like *Stardew Valley*, players must craft, collect tools, fish and give gifts to non-playable characters (NPCs) to progress in the game. In this sense, the relaxed pace of games like *Stardew Valley*, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*

and *Minecraft*, and their focus on relationship-building and social-improvement narratives “reproduce the neoliberal ideals of productivity, success, autonomy, and the commodification of play”, while also epitomising the perceived achievability of the community-driven, two children white picket fence ethos of the American Dream (Parker and Holroyd 2024, 97). In doing so, players are required to

"align their subjectivities with the market requirements [of a neoliberal society] to become entrepreneurs of the self in the 'phygital' world... engaging in multitasking, adopting versatile roles, evaluating risks, assessing costs and benefits, responding to feedback, innovating in problem-solving, and making prompt decisions." (Paret forthc.)

Like the achievable SMART goals that have become almost synonymous with neoliberal healthcare models (ibid.), the decision to include and promote this particular genre of cosy-RPGs as a therapeutic activity immediately aligns *Hero Journey Club's* and *MindJam's* values with the neoliberal ideals of constant self-improvement, hard work, success narratives and productivity that are inherent to both the video games' logic, and the services' marketing materials. This is important, because as Paret (forthc.) asserts,

"digital games operate as sites of emotional conditioning, wherein players recreate the psychological atmosphere of the ruling order, thereby revealing the intimate connection that exists between gameplay systems and the inner life of neoliberal subjects."

By playing games like *Stardew Valley*, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, and *Minecraft* while participating in therapy, counselling or mentoring, users are thus conditioned to strive to attain and enact these neoliberal values; the games themselves become the way in which players can learn the importance of resilience, relationship-building and hard work (Parker 2024, Holroyd and Parker 2025), while the games' narrative

In a similar way, *Mightier* also claims that “learning how to regulate emotions is the goal” (Mightier 2025b) and aims its services at users with a “variety of diagnoses” who “struggle with frustration, anxiety, anger, or other strong emotions” (Mightier 2025b). For *Mightier* to help neurodiverse users achieve that goal, parents of potential first-time users are presented with an online questionnaire when making inquiries into the service that asks: “how does your child express their big emotions?” (Mightier 2025a). Possible answers include “anger and frustration,” “outbursts,” “meltdowns,” “anxiety and worry” and “feeling overwhelmed” (Mightier 2025a). Just like the other two services, the implication here is that these emotional experiences are non-normative, and that by “us[ing] the power of play to help children build emotional strength” (Mightier 2025a), the gaming services that *Mightier* provide become a way for neurodiverse youth to learn how to deal with negative emotions. To do so, users are provided with a deck of conversation cards, that let “the whole family explore emotions in an experiential, playful way” by “answering questions, completing challenges and discovering new coping skills” (Mightier 2025f). Players are also required to wear a heart sensor that pairs with the service’s app and responds to the players physio-emotional responses: “as their heart rate rises during play, the games get harder” and in order to combat this, the “kids use calming exercises to lower their heart rate and keep playing” (Mightier 2025b). Through this form of Pavlov’s behavioural reinforcement (Madden et al. 2023), the service has the potential to help users better understand and regulate their emotions, by imparting the skills needed for children to respond calmly to stressful and upsetting situations with a pre-determined range of culturally-acceptable, socially compliant, able-bodied, emotional norms. Indeed, although this focus on emotional dysregulation somewhat aligns with popular discourses and medical diagnostic criteria associated with conditions like ASD (American Psychiatric Association 2022), by encouraging emotional responses that are congruent with prevalent social norms, these services nevertheless formalise

techno-solution and coping mechanism for these contingencies, where resilience and emotional regulation can be learnt and practiced.

Resilience is not just the capacity to withstand and bounce back from difficulties and disturbances, but to also learn and adapt from these changing conditions and thrive in the face of a challenge (Joseph 2013). Resilience is thus derived from the neoliberal social ontology that promotes a focus on one's own subjectivity, knowledge acquisition, adaptability, responsible decision-making (Joseph 2013) and individual agency. These resilience narratives are embedded within the marketing materials of *Hero Journey Club*, *Mightier*, and *MindJam*; the services thus presuppose that users are victim to a complex and contingent environment made up of a network of actors (each with their own individual priorities and goals) in which individuals must show initiative "as active and reflexive agents capable of adaptive behaviour" in order to thrive within the uncertainties of these complex systems (Joseph 2013, 39). By being framed in opposition to resilience, neurodivergence is consequently implied as incompatible with the neoliberal ideals of self-autonomy and flexible self-development that these services promote. Within this framing, neurodivergent users are understood as incapable of adapting and making decisions that are deemed responsible and suitable for continued personal development. This aligns with popular discourses surrounding neurodiversity which often positions ADHD as the inability to be productive and prioritise and self-regulate one's tasks and activities, and autism as a condition characterised by the inability to be flexible and adaptable to changes in external environments. By reifying these stereotypes, the services subscribe to the medical model of disability, which understands neurodivergence as "individual deficit[s] that call for treatment and compensation" (Meinen 2023, 5, see also Goodley 2016). As such, these services fail to acknowledge how these deficits are only issues in a socio-political neoliberal environment that privileges resilience,

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