

While attending university, I worked part-time as a substitute teacher for Clark County School District. I worked with children of all ages, but primarily elementary-aged children. I enjoyed seeing how happy and excited they always seemed to be about learning and interacting with their peers. When the 2020 Covid pandemic shut down schools, the world saw an alarming increase in anxiety, depression, and suicide rates among children including children in elementary school. In Clark County specifically, the suicide rate doubled between 2019 and 2021. The number of children needing help did not match the amount of counselors and therapists available to assist.

This crisis inspired me to create a therapeutic tool to teach children early on in their lives how to understand their emotions and teach them relaxation techniques to help manage their anxiety with the goal of early intervention fostering emotional health and future resilience. For my project, I decided to narrow my focus and create a digital bibliotherapy resource centered on social anxiety. I chose the format of a visual novel, which is essentially a narrative text-based video game where the player assumes the role of the protagonist and engages in a story with multiple chapters and decisions that guide the outcome.

To create this tool, I focused on a few key components. First, I had to understand what qualifies as bibliotherapy and the distinctions between developmental and clinical bibliotherapy. Second, I needed to learn about the defining characteristics of social anxiety as well as treatment options used to address this condition. Third, I had to research which mediums created

engagement and accessibility for children. Finally, I had to learn about what type of stories and characters children were likely to connect with.

For my research, I relied heavily on UNLV's online library database. The peer-reviewed search parameters helped me locate a smattering of case studies and journal submissions explaining the steps of bibliotherapy, which separate it from the experience of reading for pleasure. These steps include *involvement*, *identification*, *catharsis*, *insight*, and *universalism*. To put it simply, the readers should be able to see themselves in the characters, identify and experience the conflict like their own, think critically and thoughtfully about what they have learned and how it applies to their situation, and discover they are not alone in their experience.

A key element of my visual novel and visual novel in general is the decision-making prompts that determine what will happen next in the story. Visual novels are a relatively new concept so I could not find any visual novels focused on bibliotherapy or specifically on anxiety. This posed some difficulty when constructing my visual novel as I was trying to determine how to emphasize the importance of decision-making without punishing the player/reader for making what is considered the "wrong" choice (e.g. choosing not to learn an anxiety-reducing technique when prompted). Since I could not find research specifically on educational or therapeutic visual novels, I decided to broaden my search in the library database to include peer-reviewed case studies focused on using video games to help treat mental and emotional health as well as behavioral disorders. This led me to a research project in Europe known as PlayMancer that focused on these exact issues. In a PlayMancer game, the player's good or bad decisions will impact their gameplay. I was influenced by the way PlayMancer handled this element by automatically forcing the player into a timeout if the biometrics picked up signs of a negative

emotional response. This research prompted me to change the “wrong” decision element of the visual novel to what I call a “redirection” answer. Meaning, the player can select the answer, but instead of bypassing it, a character in the visual novel will encourage them to reconsider and explain the importance of trying to learn new skills. Bypassing the learning strategy altogether would negate the purpose of the visual novel.

Creating this digital bibliotherapy visual novel has been an extraordinary experience with unfathomable outcomes. I flourished in a highly creative space that allowed me to combine my love of literature with my love of video games. Academically, it pushed me to be a savvier researcher, taught me to be adaptable, and encouraged me to be open to hitting roadblocks. This project began as a storyboard for my senior capstone, it later became a proof of concept for a tangible resource. As of this year, I have been working with a local school to prepare for beta testing of my visual novel.