

National VA Mental Health Wellness & Recovery Webinar  
Series:

Video Games and Gaming Communities in Mental Health  
Recovery

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[Begin Recording]

Dr. Samantha Hack: Welcome everyone. This is the Mental Health Recovery and Wellness Webinar Series. This series is made possible by the VA Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, Psychosocial Rehabilitation and Recovery Section, and the VISN 5 Mental Illness Research, Education and Clinical Center, or MIRECC, in partnership with the Employee Education System. The planning committee's members for this Webinar series include Daniel Bradford, Valerie Fox, Spencer Glipa, Catherine Lewis, Marty Oexner, Kathryn Peacock-Dutt, Donna Russo, Tim Smith, my co-host Ralf Schneider, and myself, Samantha Hack. Today's Webinar is entitled, "Video Games and Gaming Communities in Mental Health Recovery". Our presenters for today's Webinar are Dr. Michelle Colder Carras, and Mr. Mathew Bergendahl. Dr. Colder Carras is a public mental health researcher specializing in video games and gaming communities. She works closely with gaming community stakeholders to understand the role that gaming plays in mental health. Her recent work focuses on the potential role of peer support within online gaming communities for mental health support and suicide prevention. Mr. Bergendahl is the program manager for the Stack Up Overwatch program, or StOP, which provides Veteran gamers around the clock access to a team of trained and certified crisis management volunteers. He is a licensed professional counselor and served from 1999 to 2005 in the United States Air Force. If you have any questions throughout today's presentation, please feel free to post them in the chat box, and the presenters will get to them as they pop up, or address them at the end of the presentation. At this time I am happy to turn the Webinar over to our presenters.

Marty Oexner: Michelle, are you still having problems getting in? Well, I just ask you one more time.

Dr. Michelle Colder Carras: Oh, I am, but that's okay. I have my slides ready.

Marty Oexner: Well, I'll tell you what we'll do while we're doing that, we'll bring the polling questions back up for a minute and I'll reopen these for folks who haven't answered them yet.

Dr. Michelle Colder Carras: That would be great.

Marty Oexner: And we can go ahead and do that. There are six questions up there and they're all based on video games, whether you play the games regularly, whether you have experienced problems from gaming. If you've ever used a chat, if you've ever heard of the discord program, what do you think of online communication, and the connections you can get, and then the bad question... what's your age? So...

Dr. Michelle Colder Carras: Yeah, the one everybody is frightened of. Okay, so you have the first slide up I assume?

Marty Oexner: I'm getting back over there right now, I'm going to go ahead and end the polls and if you want us to display those later we can, of if you want us to tell you what's going on with them we can do that too.

Dr. Michelle Colder Carras: That will be perfect. I think the...

Marty Oexner: Are you still not in?

Dr. Michelle Colder Carras: No, I'm still working on it. But I think the, the first thing that would be interesting is to show how many people regularly play video games. And I guess I'm gonna have to ask you or Mat to describe those results.

Marty Oexner: Sure, so that would be question 1, and Mat, I've got those up for you.

Mat Bergendahl: I appreciate it. So the question that was posed was: Do you play video games regularly? Video games on a computer, console or mobile phone? So at the top of the list at 43%, 26 folks weighing in, "I've never really played". The next one at 20% is "I used to play regularly, but I don't play now". We've got 9 folks at 15% saying "I play regularly", and at 13%, 8 people, "I love video games and I play it a

lot”, and then at 8% with 5 folks, “I’m a hardcore gamer.” So, we do have a wide range of experiences with them, kind of like we see in line when we’re doing these polls, so that was good.

Dr. Michelle Colder Carras: That is good. That’s exciting. We usually don’t find that we have people who are actually hardcore gamers, who are willing to admit that in our presentation, so that’s really cool, and we expect that those folks would have a pretty good understanding of all the things that we’re talking about, but for some of you, it’s definitely gonna to be an introduction, so, I’m glad that we are going to have the opportunity to give you some context and background. Can you advance the slide to disclosures please? Thanks. So, for me, Michelle Colder-Carras, just to let you know, that my funding sources include these different organization, including the VA. I don’t currently have any conflicts, but, both Mat and I are video game players. So, if you could advance to the next slide, we’re going to give you an intro to video games. And one more slide. And now, ideally, you should see a picture of broccoli, is that correct?

Mat Bergendahl: That’s correct Doc.

Dr. Michelle Colder Carras: Okay, great. So, when many of you think about what we mean by video games and health, probably you think of this idea of serious games, because especially within the Veteran treatment, for example, for PTSD, we do tend to think of how we can use simulated environments to forward health. And, you know, this is not just limited to Veterans, because of obviously people are designing all kinds of games for health or social media applications that connect people to be used for health but the problem with these types of applications that are made for health purposes, is that they are not able to sustain engagement. They usually will have, if they have any kind of scientific assessment for study, then what we find is that the pilot studies often show that they work and, you know, maybe they’ll even work in a small naturalistic setting, but usually people recognize that they are not as engaging. So, they essentially are like chocolate covered broccoli – you know it’s good for you, its

got this layer of like deliciousness, but ultimately it's not really what you want. Okay, can you advance one more time. And I believe you should be seeing a picture of a crowd – is that true?

Mat Bergendahl: It is.

Dr. Michelle Colder Carras: Great. So what my research is focused on is instead of thinking about how we can design games that could be used for health purposes, how can we take advantage of the incredible popularity of games that are made for entertainment? This picture shows actually an E-Sports tournament – they have filled the arena to watch a world championship League of Legends game. Games have become the highest grossing industry, entertainment industry in the world. They gross more than Hollywood. So, that gives you some sense of the context that we're operating in when we talk about games being engaging and what we'll discuss as the communities that involve around games, also being engaging. So, next slide please. And just to confirm we're talking about evolution of video games, right?

Mat Bergendahl: Correct.

Dr. Michelle Colder Carras: Okay, great. So, we haven't answered the age question yet. So I don't know our range of ages. Why don't we go ahead and bring that up now just for fun... If you're able to do that, Marty.

Marty Oexner: It should be up now.

Dr. Michelle Colder Carras: Somebody will have to describe to me then.

Mat Bergendahl: I will do that for you. So we have nobody between the ages of 18 and 24. Between the ages of 25 to 39 we have a total of 21 people for 44%; 40 to 54 15 people, which is 31%; 55 to 64 11 folks at 23%; 65 and older 1 person at 2%.

Dr. Michelle Colder Carras: Okay, that's really cool. Um, so the majority age group has grown up with Nintendo, and the Internet, and video games being basically a daily part of life. And then, many more folks, you know, they may not have played video games growing up, but certainly should be aware of these basic ones that we see here – Super Mario Brothers, you know, those early platformers. Those came out in the 80's and the 90's even, and then in the early 2000's we have what are called massively multiplayer online games that bring together people throughout the world to play in the same game environment at the same time. These kinds of games emphasize group play, they emphasize teamwork, and sometimes they emphasize combat and competition. And then finally, in the last 2010's and more recently we have, we're combining games with real environments. So, in the lower right corner you see Pokemon GO, and if you haven't played that you should try it – it's very interesting. And then, on the bottom left corner, we have actual virtual reality, and this is an exercise game that I really love because it can put you in a virtual environment and it gives you a really good incentive to keep moving. So, let me see..., yeah, let's move on, and we should have games differ and sandbox.

Mat Bergendahl: Yes, it is.

Dr. Michelle Colder Carras: Great. So, Mat has probably played both of these games more than I have, so, I'll just describe them real quickly. On the left you see Minecraft, which probably everyone has heard of. It's a game where you can build things with blocks, so you can see some users took the time to build the United Nations. It gives the opportunity to be really creative. It's the kind of game where there are no rules, there's no specific things that you have to do to progress in the game. And, in comparison, the game on the right is also a sandbox game. You can explore with it, you decide how you want to progress. But the difference with this game is that it is a survival game. So you start out naked in the

woods and I believe you can get a rock and your goal is basically to survive, and if that involves killing other people, then that's what you do.

Mat, anything to add from those, from that idea of sandbox and Rust versus Minecraft?

Mat Bergendahl: Certainly, both games definitely have a very elevated sense of freedom as far as what you do, what you build. Games like Minecraft is also been considered to be kind of a great way to just relax in the environment and just build things. You're right Doc, I'm definitely a big fan of survival games. I enjoy that balance between maintaining your own wellness versus, you know, continually, continuing your own goals within the game. To me it's a very relaxing environment to be in. People will say, "Well why would you want to do that? You're constantly worrying about your health and your stats and stuff like that", but it's just kinda like, you know, well, once you get into it, get used to it, it's very fun, very freeing.

Dr. Michelle Colder Carras: Yeah, exactly. So like we've talked about, games can be very engaging, and we have many different genres of games. There's many more other than sandbox games, but we won't really go into them in depth here. The Strong Children's Museum in Rochester has a good online exhibition of video game timeline, if you ever want to take a look at that. So, that's something that I could recommend. But let's move on to what we can see when people become too engaged with games. So, we'll talk about the negative before we talk about the positive. If you could move on to the next slide. And hopefully you see Tokemon there.

Mat Bergendahl: Yes, you do.

Dr. Michelle Colder Carras: Okay, great. So, from a health perspective, for a decade, the main perception of video games has focused on a couple of negative areas, focused on whether video games contribute to violence and whether playing games excessively can be a form of addiction, and we now have some kind of codified disorders. The first disorder is called Internet Gaming Disorder, which appeared as a condition for further

study in the DSM in 2013. And you can see here that the symptoms of this disorder really closely resemble those of pathological gambling, which really closely resemble substance addiction. And the motivation for creating a disorder is that for some people gaming takes over their lives, to the point where they're unable to function, and there is evidence that playing games excessively, people can develop similar brain responses to what is seen in addiction. So, for that reason, the working group, when this first became discussed in like 2011 or 2012, there was a question of whether playing too much or using the Internet too much could be considered a compulsion or an addiction, and after a lot of discussion it was decided to put it into the addiction category because of the neuroscience behind looking at people who played a lot and people who actually experienced this impairment that seemed more addiction like. So, that, however, that wasn't the first official disorder. The first official disorder was designated in 2018 in the ICD-11 by the World Health Organization. And the definition that you see on the right side for that is I think more straightforward and it gives you a sense of real impairment being a necessity. So, in this case you have impaired control over gaming. Priority given to gaming over other activities, to the extent that gaming becomes most important thing, and that this behavior pattern continues or gets worse, despite consequences, and that it causes significant impairment, and is evident for 12 months, unless the impairment is really threatening many, many areas of life in a very severe way. So, I'd like to say that this is really finalized, and that experts around the world all agree that this is a serious problem, but there is still some disagreement, and the disagreement is not that some people don't experience serious addiction like problems, but that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between transitory engagement in games, such as that that might happen when a person is undergoing a difficult period in their life, or they have some other thing going on that they're using games to deal with, and that this may temporarily be a problem, but it might resolve, or, (17:17 dog barking - Sorry, my dog watcher had not removed the dog from the room, I apologize. One more second, we're gonna make sure she gets out of the room). Okay, my apologies. The difficulties of conducting these things from home. So, right



and the other way we can think of engagement. Let's move on to the next slide. You can also have engagement as a way to connect to others and find yourself in an enjoyable setting where you're playing a lot, but you're not interfering with life. And that's when one of the concerns comes in, because many people who are working on the working groups to try to figure out how to identify and distinguish between addiction like problems and engagement. They don't seem to understand very well, this idea of extreme engagement. So, I don't know, many of you are probably clinicians, many, if not most, and you may have had patients who prefer to play games several hours a day. For many people, this may seem like a lot, but it may just be a preferred past time for them. Just the way you might play soccer for hours a day as preferred pastime. But, because it's not well understood outside of gaming circles quite yet, it seems like there's not a good way to really cover how to distinguish between that and addiction. So, hopefully though, one thing that has happened as a result of the pandemic, is that we understand better that games can offer a huge advantage for allowing people a space to enjoy their lives in settings where they are otherwise not able to enjoy them. And I'll talk about that a little bit more when I describe my early research with Veterans. So, what I have been trying to discuss in my research is the ideal that we need a paradigm shift – previously from public health and health research, we've thoughts of games as negative. There are more and more studies coming out that show that traditional games for entertainment have possible uses for mental health. So, one of my papers that I have in the bibliography provides more information about these, and I do cite these papers specifically as well in the bibliography for this presentation, but just to quickly summarize, there have been RCTs, randomized controlled studies, that show that playing Tetris after a traumatic experience reduces the number of intrusive thoughts in the following weeks, and that of course may be protective against PTSD. The one in the middle here, I'm sorry, do we, we moved to paradigm shift right? I may have forgotten to say next slide.

Mat Bergendahl: We're there.

Dr. Michelle Colder Carras: Okay. Sorry about that. So, Second Life, the middle picture there, Second Life, is a, is a, not really a video game, but a virtual world where anyone can gather and socialize. And in this specific picture you see my avatar on the end presenting with two of my colleagues from around the world and we're talking about the uses of video games for mental health, specifically in the disability setting. I think that presentation might even be recorded, so I'll try to find it if anyone is interested. The game Solitaire has been used to monitor cognitive decline in people at risk. The game Bejeweled has been shown to reduce clinical depression, to the point where people are out of the range of depression. Things like Game Boy, consoles, platforms – what am I trying to say... consoles I guess, they have been used by people with autism, for example, to empower them to interact with other folks and games like Pokemon GO can be used to promote physical activity. Next slide please. And just really quickly, another of the papers that is in the bibliography, we discussed how video games can be used for therapeutic purposes by thinking about the fact that individuals chose games based on their life experiences, what's going on in their lives, and then within the game they have some way to engage purposely and meaningfully. It can be immersive, and they have the opportunity for social interactions and teamwork. Now how we can use those, from a clinical perspective, the games generate data, where we can capture that data, analyze it on the fly and then use that to deliver intervention. So, sorry for glossing over that, but I have, we have much more good stuff to give to you. So, next slide. And Mat, I think that you can take over for a couple of minutes.

Mat Bergendahl: Yep, I'm here, and thank you Doc. So, we're gonna talk a little bit more about Veterans and video games. That's kinda where I come in when talking about Stack Up Overwatch program as well. Let's go to the next slide. Thank you. So let's talk a little bit about Twitch. We have a couple of pictures here that I'd kinda like to talk to you about. In that first one, the picture in the top left-hand corner, you got a (inaudible 24:02) here I'm sitting there with my glasses on, the gentleman at the bottom, he's our communications director at Stack Up. We're

using the Twitch platform as a way to engage our Veteran population, as well as active duty and civilians, to talk a little bit about what's going on with COVID. When COVID first hit, you know, the biggest, there were a lot of questions out there, and there were a lot of concerns. A lot of worries as far as what can we do protect ourselves. We were also, you know, trying to do our part as far as combating this misinformation, which, you know, at that time there was quite a bit of it, a lot of speculation as far as how to prevent, you know, spreading it or how to prevent getting it in the first place. So we would Twitch. Twitch is a streaming platform, for those of you who don't know more often than not is being used to stream, live stream video games where the streamer can engage directly with their audience and that's one very essential tool about this platform, is that there is that high level of engagement that is going on. So going back to the streams, the COVID streams that Doc and I were doing you will see in that top right-hand corner, you can see a screen shot of what it looks like, you know, when we were talking about various, the mental health impacts and the impacts to your health about COVID, the viewers will sit there and watch and then ask questions directly, very much like you're doing right now. And that's what made Twitch such a powerful tool. It's not just for gaming – you can use it for mental health, you can use it for artwork or music, there's several different ways to use it. So, Twitch in itself is definitely a powerhouse when it comes to the gaming community so as such, for Veterans and active duty people it is a tool for them as well when it comes to engagement. Next slide please. So here's the other part about Stack Up, is the discord platform. As you had seen on the polls, if you had a chance to weigh in on them, it's, it's a very intuitive program. It has different ways of reaching out and engaging with the community. The Stack Up program organization, which we will go into a little bit more in depth later, it does most of its engagement online. And that's what makes it have that's what gives it the capability of having such a larger reach, as opposed to more localized organization. We can be reached throughout the entire world. In fact, we've got members from New Zealand, Australia, United Kingdom, all over the world. This is the platform that we use to engage the rest of the community,

meetings, as well as the StOP program, the Stack Up Overwatch program. So we kind of talk a little bit about here. You can see here with a chat, you know, it's just, it's very, it's about as close and personal as you can get. You also have the capability of doing voice chats or video chats, sharing your screen, or even if we want to streaming your own desktops. For example, for our community nights they will have movie night, so would all sit there and watch a movie together and chat about it in the discord channel and here with the StOP program it's within the Stack Up community. It gives immediate access for those who are looking for mental health assistance or if they're in like some kind of a crisis we can help them get set up with resources as well. Next slide please. So, we definitely want to talk a little bit about the Veteran gamer when it comes to just, like what I would call like, you know, the influences. I don't want to read this slide off to you completely, but it's important to take note and take a look to see just how these online communities, like Stack Up, can have an influence on an individual person. And here we'll see on the micro-system peer support, the VA itself uses peer support specialists throughout the country and, at least from my feedback that I've been given, both as a Veteran and as a mental health professional, it has a tremendous success. And that's exactly one of the reasons why it's the, the program within Stack Up is so, a very successful one because of the way the peer support specialist have that capability to reach out to the member when they are in need of help. And then the actual system, we had the Stack Up community as a whole. It's very similar to, you know, the VA system, and of course other mental health resources when we are trying to help out that Veteran, or that active duty personnel who are experiencing some issues. And then of course we have, you know, the macro system as a whole. The military culture and the gaming culture, there is definitely some overlap there. And we see that influenced throughout the entire system, you know, straight down to the individual user when it comes to overseeing in the Stack Up community. We have Veterans who served and have done several deployments, and then we have Veterans who were serving during times and they were never deployed. But they all have gaming culture in relation. So, it makes the common ground, that common

knowledge, you know, it makes it a little bit easier for the peer support folks to reach out to them. And then of course you see, on the very last here, is COVID-19. And that impacts all of them. And that's exactly what gets seen inside Stack Up when it first started to hit, folks coming in that are talking about family members who ended up getting COVID, some of them who had passed away. We have a lot of first responders here too who are also Veterans talking about their experiences of dealing with COVID-19 as a first responder. So, it certainly has had a huge impact on every single one of these systems and how the Stack Up community was doing business. Next slide please. Well let's talk a little bit more about Stack Up. At Stack Up, we have four pillars of our program. The first one is the Stack Up overwatch program, which we talked about it is definitely the most direct mental health benefit that we have within the online community. Then we have stacks, which is more of the boots on the ground group, where each stack is localized between, in a city, or a couple of cities, depending on where they're at. It gives the opportunity to come together and do community services, sometimes doing just fun events, interacting, social gathering, which is, you know, the basics of Stack Up is all about community and social connectivity. Then we have Air Assaults. If you take a look at the picture on the top right-hand corner, you see a lot of folks wearing the red shirts, the Stack Up red shirts the famous brand of what we wear when we're going out to groups. The Air Assaults we, we have a group of what we consider Veterans who are, you know, a lot of them are disabled, some of them have wounds from their deployment, and we get them all together, and we take them out to places like Comic Con, or PAGES for those who know about it. Just kind of a way to get Veterans who are often isolated and disconnected, into a group of other Veterans where they can sit there and engage in a platform that they enjoy, be in an area that they, you know, again, most gamers know of PAGES and they definitely just want to just check it out. And then we kind of give them the VIP treatment. And then again, the idea is to get them all together, and very organically you will see them sitting there talking and swapping stories about their time of being in the military. Very, very interesting ways of engagement, and again, we spend them, an

all expense paid trip, including the lodging and of course getting them there to the PAGS, food as well. The only thing that we do is just try to be there for them and talk to them about what they're experiences are like. The very last thing that we have is a Supply Crate. The Supply Crates are seen at the bottom left-hand corner there. We send them out to Veterans from active duty members – a lot of the active duty members who are deployed, you know, um, video games once again serves as a way to unwind and de-stress when it comes to being out there in a war zone.

Talking a little bit about myself I was in Iraq during the start of the war back in, well, 2003, and you know, and being in security forces it was a very demanding job it was very sketchy at times, to say the least, and so after a long day of work I would go back to our tent and fire up the TV on my day off and play a game on my Play Station 2. It was just my way to take a break from everything that was going on. So, this is basically the same thing. Deployed members can send out requests for Supply Crates, we'll fill up a tote full of X-Boxes, Video games, t-shirts, a bunch of other swag that will help them, hopefully help them during their time out there in the desert or in the Middle East, or wherever they are. We've sent these out to the entire world as far as our reach goes. It just really depending if the service members are there, we can definitely try to get them a Supply Crate. Next slide please.

Dr. Michelle Colder Carras: Back to me... I'm gonna try to skip ahead a little bit. Hi everyone, I'm officially in here now and my dog is actually behind the door somewhere. So, hopefully we'll have a more smooth presentation now. Um, I'm actually going to skip ahead, because we'll talk about Veteran's use of video games. This was a project that ran from 2016 to 2017 and in cooperation with the VA. We asked Veteran gamers who gamed regularly for like 7 hours a week. We asked them about the role that games played in their lives, and in their mental health recovery, and we found that for these gamers, the few gamers that we interviewed in this qualitative research study, that games helped relieve some symptoms that were otherwise very difficult to relieve. It gave them a way to cope when the tools that they were learning did not really make it.

And let me just show you a few of the quotes, and again, again you'll be able to see these in the downloadable slides. For example, in terms of connecting with other people, they were happy to be able to connect with other Veterans out there. Again, it goes back to the culture that Mat was talking about. We all know the lingo that, that part of the culture helps maintain good relationships with family. Again, I apologize for skipping through, but you will have access to these slides. The thing that really struck me as a mental health researcher, and a person with lived experience, is that games could be used for distraction when nothing else worked. If you need to be sober and you're playing a video game for 8 hours a day, then you're not using heroin for 8 hours a day. To me, that was a very powerful finding. Now, let's move on to the project that we are working on now. This is the evaluating the Stack Up Overwatch program. And Mat, I'm trying to remember is this one of the slides that you were doing or I was doing?

Mat Bergendahl: Um, I think this is the one that I'm going to go ahead and do. So let's talk a little bit about the general chat. Again folks, this is in reference to the discord channel, you know with this evaluation, there is a couple of things that we need to take a look at as far as the depth of what you can do within discord. So as you see here, we have the general chat. We talked about, you know, around 2000 users online, but it's, realistically, as far as active users, it's a little bit, well, it's a lot smaller than that, like around 200 folks. The general chat itself is used just for casual discussion. Often people are talking about current events, a lot of gifts are being shared back and forth. We use that for our meetings. The Wednesday night meetings that we have are reengaged directly with the community and getting feedback and discussing things that are coming up. Again, it's just for overall general use. Now, within that program, or within that server, we have the Overwatch program. That is much more specific in scope as far as what it's being used for. The Overwatch program is where users will come when they are in need of assistance. You know, folks will come and some of them will be a little bit more guarded and say, 'Hey, I need some help', and one of the, the support folks will

come and reach out to them. Sometimes people will be very blunt and open and they'll completely discuss what's going on. We wanna offer them, we do offer them private chats. We, within the Overwatch program, we can do one-on-one voice chats with them to give them a little bit more sense of protection as far as having everybody seeing what's going on. And so, while some folks are very open about it, some folks want to have an opportunity to go into 101 and so that's why we have the private voice or the text chat channel. Within that is where we are starting to do the assessment of that person. Each person that comes into our chat channel, for their suicidal or homicidal ideations, we try to find some sort of support system for them. It's very, it's very solution focused, orientated as far as getting them services that they need as well, of course, as doing the followup with them. We want to make sure that when they come in there, even if they are there just to vent, and believe me, we definitely get them quite often, we want to make sure that they walk away with some sort of solution oriented goals for them, and that's kind of two-fold – one, it puts the responsibility back on the user as far as, you know, working through their own challenges, as we always say “You are your own best advocate”, and at the same time, it gives them that empowerment that they are taking advances towards changing their issue that's going on.

Okay, so next slide please.

Dr. Michelle Colder Carras: Okay, I think we're back to me, and what I'm going to do since we only have a couple of minutes, is I'm going to skip through some of this very quickly and make sure we get to some of the questions from chat, and I think it was not Steven Bundy, but Steven Richardson, “Please make sure that...” there it is..., “the age limitations to prevent addiction in young and cognitively developing children.” I'm afraid, you can, if you'd like, you can E-mail me and I'm happy to have that discussion with you, but it's not something that's really relevant for our presentation right now, so I do have those other questions about discord and Twitch and we will answer those for sure. So, I'm gonna skip forward a bit, just really quickly. This is how we combine the data sources for our current evaluation study. These are the questions for our study.



“Basically, what is StOP, is it being delivered the way we expect it, and is it fulfilling its mission?” So, just to, quickly, we conducted a mixed method study with four data sources including chat analysis, a survey and analysis of intake forms and interviews with the providers. So, these are our mixed methods integration findings. StOP is designed to be an online chat room based crisis intervention program. Users have tried other approaches to address their mental health issues and we understand this in the Veteran world that there are many reasons why Veterans want to seek help and don’t, or they have tried to seek help and haven’t been satisfied or haven’t been able to get the help that they need. And, users appreciate the different formats that they can use to get help. Is it being delivered as expected? Staff team members follow the rubric for working with people who seek help. There are a few technical problems, but every once in a while something will come up that the team will have to develop a work around for. At the point that we collect the data, screening for suicide risk was inconsistent, but because this is a grass roots program, it evolves very quickly, and even since that time there have been additional policies to improve the screening for suicide risk. So, we know from, even from suicide hotlines, that screening is not always 100%, so the goal is to bring it up to the standards for suicide hotline. And, is it fulfilling its mission? It is providing connection. The peer support format is a bit contributor to that. It provides users with suggestions for getting professional counseling, for hooking up to the VA program and other types of resources that they might struggle to find otherwise. And the military and Veterans who use StOP, they really appreciate the fact that the StOP peer supporters understand military and Veterans. Now we also have a section of the grant on the COVID-19 pandemic, and like Mat said, many, many people have been severely impacted, but there is some tension in our funding because we also found that some people were, they felt like, the meme was, “I’ve been training for this my whole life”, you know, having to stay home and connect with people through the Internet. For those people who hadn’t yet been effected seriously, that was one thing that came out of our findings as well. So, there are many challenges and lessons learned from this study. And, I think the best place to learn

more about them is going to be our paper, because even just to begin with, let me address those questions real quick. Unsavory discord servers. So going back to the idea of a gaming culture, some things about the gaming culture can be unsavory for sure. Toxicity can be a problem in the gaming culture, and even just people being kind of lighthearted and using locker room talk and insults, you know, those are gaming and military things. So, it is easy to see where things can go on that aren't supportive of mental health. So, that's at, that's a cultural thing that has to be attended to. In Internet spaces, including discord and Twitch and other places that gamers hang out, they seem to be anonymous, but at the same time it's not difficult to identify people. So when you're doing research you have to be very, very careful in how you proceed, and we did this by having me, as the lead researcher, be a part of the Stack Up community for a couple of years, and then work with them very carefully to describe and decide how we were going to deal with the need for privacy and anonymity. And I think the only other thing that I want to mention right now, two other things, when we think about the target population for an online study, it's really important to consider what it means to be a member of a server or a community, and what it means to be an active member, because that will really effect how we interpret our results. Also, how we define peer support, it's defined very specifically within the VA context and within Stack Up. One of the things that it was originally designed to be was not peer support the way that we think of it, but more like citizen support or community member support, but through out interviews and our other qualitative data, and even some of our quantitative data, we found that the lived experience of being a Veteran and / or struggling with a mental health challenge, that was a very important part of the delivery of the support, as well as the meaning and the growth of the peer support, we don't want to say providers, but the people who are providing the peer support. So, that wraps it up. My apologies for dog barking and other tech problems and running a bit long. Um, I can look at the chat now, or if somebody wants to tell me what the unanswered questions are, Mat and I can definitely answer those questions now.

Ralf Schneider: Okay, there was a general question earlier, this is Ralf, from Sarah Fisher, about wondering if there was any evidence she can look into about or regarding the benefits of gaming across age ranges and she was thinking about those who start gaming early may be developing some skills at an early age that would benefit. Any thoughts on that?

Dr. Michelle Colder Carras: Okay, that's a really good question. It actually ties in a little bit to the question from Steven Richardson, that I said that I didn't want to answer. So now I can answer it in the context. There are definitely advantages to playing when you're young. These advantages in learning skills like turn taking, communicating, and when we think of communicating, okay, I'm 55, when I think of the importance of learning how to communicate as a child, my mind inherently goes to face-to-face communication because I think, well, that's the human thing, that's what humans need. But, in reality, children are growing up in a global society, where learning how to communicate online is going to be equally important to learning how to communicate face-to-face. So, that's one of the skills that children can learn as they are growing. But, like Steven was implying, there's also, because children lack the self-regulatory skills, there is the chance that their interest in gaming can be, it can more easily get out of hand. So I'm, I think that setting limits, you know, the research shows that putting age limits on games is not as effective as we would hope, but of making people more aware of the content and how this specific content can lead to different kinds of problems, like some things might be more addictive, or might make people more likely to rampantly spend money or likely gambling, like those kinds of things are good to be, to include in labels for games. So, I don't think I answered the HIPAA issue questions very well. My understanding of HIPAA is that it has to do with healthcare institutions, so I'm not sure. There are one or two actual, actually there are one or two Twitch streamers who are providing, they say they're not really providing healthcare services, but they're talking with people about their addictions and about their mental health problems. So in that sense, possibly, you know, there could be this idea that healthcare services are being provided in these communities,

and then HIPAA would become a problem. But otherwise, it's more of a, more of a general privacy issue. So, for example, my gamer handle is MichelleDocColderCarras and so I'm open because I want people to be able to contact me and learn about my research, but most people have gamer handles like Frag-O..., Mat, that, you know, aren't easily linked with their real identity. Nonetheless it's not difficult to track someone down. So I'm scrolling up really quickly through the chat. I'm so glad that we have people involved in the chat. That's really great.

Ralf Schneider: There was another one near the end um, about how to get, for peers, how to get their Veterans involved in Stack Up or StOP or even a local gaming group. And I know we...

Dr. Michelle Colder Carras: Those are all great. Yeah, Mat, take it away.

Mat Bergendahl: Sure, so there's a couple of ways that this can be done. I think one way would be, it really depends on if that Veteran is interested in utilizing the services or maybe providing services, if they want to join the community. It's really, I would say that, you know, we can always just, you know send that peer support specialist information about Stack Up, maybe talk with them. Our managers that we have for the stack program could certainly help facilitate that as well. One of the, Chris, he's an Army Veteran, just about ready to retire, he's always been interested in bringing more folks into the program. And again, they can obviously pick and choose as far as their engagement goes they can, you know, we are always looking for more community members and if somebody feels interested they are inclined to actually maybe work one of the programs, like the stacks program or the StOP program, we will help them out with that as well of course. So, let me, I'll put my E-mail address in the chat if you wish to reach out and I can help facilitate that.

Ralf Schneider: Great. This is Ralf, I see we're running out of time, but I thank everybody for all the comments, and Dr. Colder Carras and Mr. Bergendahl, really appreciate this. This is exciting stuff (cuts out 53:00) and again thanks so much to everybody.

Dr. Michelle Colder Carras: Thank you everyone.

Mat Bergendahl: Thank you everybody.