JEREMY'S CAMPAIGN

Video games healed my inner child

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Everyone has a heart, but I was born with half of one.

I was born with a condition called Hypoplastic Right Heart Syndrome, meaning the right side of my heart was underdeveloped at birth.

I've been fighting complications of the disease my entire life.

I was a blue baby. I couldn't breathe on my own.

Blue is my favorite color, which is ironic since I turned blue immediately after I was born and separated from my mother after birth.

Medical professionals placed me on life support. Immediately after I was born, I was rushed from Kaiser in Hayward to Lucile Packard Children's Hospital Stanford in Palo Alto.

I had four surgeries to repair my heart, one of which was an emergency surgery.

Roughly a baseball-sized aneurysm developed within my heart and several medical professionals called a code blue on me as a toddler.

I was also born without a spleen.

Because I was born without a spleen, my immune system is very weak and I'm prone to getting sick easily.

With a weaker immune system, I was more isolated than other children and had to limit my activity.

It always made me feel sad and left out to see all the other kids run around playing and knowing that I could never match their same energy.

I always got tired faster than other children and could go from one extreme to the other in no time, when it came to getting sick.

I can feel absolutely fine in the morning, but develop a fever and have the chills by the evening.

My heart disease is just one of many types of heart defects. Congenital heart disease, or CHD, is the world's number one birth defect, according to the CDC.

One out of every 100 babies are born with a congenital heart defect, according to the Boston Children's Hospital CHD webpage.

Frequent illness, countless hospital visits and the possibility of further surgeries have become

normal for me.

The constant hospital visits especially affected my mental health. I don't like being in the hospital, no one really does.

Certain things I remember seeing and feeling in the hospital have affected my mental health in a negative way.

I've developed a series of ticks and triggers from being in there.

Thick white fabric sheets remind me too much of a hospital bed and make me feel uncomfortable.

I feel sensitive toward anything having to do with Disney.

Every pediatric hospital room I have ever been in had Disney characters and decals on the walls.

The Disney brand just reminds me too much about my time in the hospital.

Oftentimes, I choose to focus on other things to make myself feel better and try to forget about the unbearable feelings of being stuck there.

It's ironic that a place that's supposed to make people feel better made me feel so uneasy.

I turned to video games for comfort and a chance to escape the white walls of the hospital.

We all have hobbies we enjoy doing and things that make us relax. Video games became mine.

I feel so thankful that I had something keeping me distracted and taking my mind off of my condition.

A recent pediatric study reviewed the medical records of 118,785 children between the ages of 4 to 17 from Texas Children's Hospital, 1,164 of them had congenital heart disease.

The study reported that 18.2% of individuals with CHD have been diagnosed or have medication for either depression or anxiety, according to Everyday Health, a health news site.

I also suffer from anxiety. The unknown scares me.

Anytime they do tests on me in the hospital or take my blood, I have to watch. I will look straight at a butterfly needle as it digs further and further into my vein.

It scares me to not know or see what they're doing to me.

The minute I hit that power button on a console, I forget about everything else.

Video games have helped me immensely.

The fact that I can turn on Pokémon Stadium or a game like Halo, forgetting all about my condition or even just the feeling of being stuck in the hospital is amazing.

Video games serve as a great escape and a chance to just forget the world exists for a while.

I'm not alone either.

Psychological trauma and pain in the brain can be remedied by the simple act of playing games, this is just one of many mental health benefits to playing video games, according to an Oct. 25, 2021 WebMD article.

Video games can also improve mental health within people who experience both depression and anxiety, according to the same website.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CHRISTIE AND RANDALL MARTIN

Today, my heart has continued to remain stable, under the supervision of specialty doctors that will follow me for the rest of my life.

I'm about to graduate college with a bachelor's degree in journalism, despite the fact that the doctors said I wouldn't live past the age of 10.

I am now 25 years old.

Another thing that affected my mental health was thinking that I was alone.

One thing that helped me with this was Camp Taylor, a free medically supervised camp for kids with CHD.

According to its website, Camp Taylor's mission is "to help pediatric heart patients overcome the emotional and developmental challenges that accompany the disease through medically supervised camp programs."

I had the privilege of not only being a camper there, but also becoming a mentor and then a counselor.

I was able to meet a large group of friends that were just like me, eliminating the excruciating thought that I would always be seen as the odd one out. The thought that I was different.

That was when my physical health started to affect my mental health in a more positive way.

Because the camp introduced me to so many people just like me, it allowed me to have more confidence in myself despite my condition.

I wouldn't be misunderstood for getting tired or needing to rest. I felt at ease.

It also helped that my pediatric cardiologist is the camp's medical director.

I even met a lot of friends who share the same love for gaming as I do.

The camp had even acquired a few PlayStation 3 kiosks for children there to play, while they were in the game room.

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While video games served as a great escape for me personally, I can clearly see firsthand that I'm not the only CHD patient who has turned to games as a type of therapy.

As I said before, video games are a great escape, but it's more than just that.

Video games can do wonders to ease the trauma and mental strain on those who have things like CHD.

It also serves as a fun recreational activity, perfect for children and other people with CHD.

It's not super physical, so it won't tire them out and gives them an option to do something fun when they may be too sick or worn out to actually go outside and do something more active.

They also do a great job of teaching a valuable lesson that was definitely burned in my brain to this very day.

Video games teach everyone that no matter who you are, anyone can be a hero.

