

Gaming and Wellness

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Video games are one of the highest grossing forms of entertainment in the world. Market research indicates that nearly 50% of American households contain a video game console, though the percentage of video game players is likely even higher than these reports. That having been said, there are relatively no services in place that have been formulated to work with this population of "gamers." I have developed a form of practice over my years as a mental health counselor that makes use of long standing therapeutic interventions but infuses themes and practices that are common to and supportive to gamers.

Recent trends within the mental health community have put a focus on promoting client strengths. As well there has been a movement away from identifying with client symptoms and diagnoses (the so called "medical model"). This shift in theory is commonly referred to as "Positive Psychology" or the "Wellness Model" of mental health. The basic premise is working with client strengths in an environment that is supportive of their cultural and developmental needs in order to foster healthy growth and positive change. In this way we move away from treatment of symptoms and instead focus on the building of existing strengths. I make use of this model from the perspective of gamer strengths, and the potential benefits found in the medium of gaming itself.

In my studies as a counselor I focused on the use of metaphors and symbolism to help teach meaning in my clients' every day struggles. My counseling orientation is a combination of three major theories of practice. First I make use of what's called Existential Phenomenology, which emphasizes finding meaning in our suffering. Secondly, I work through what's called Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, which promotes helping a person change their thoughts in order to change their behaviors. Finally, I've been trained in Structural Family Therapy which promotes shifting of patterns of interaction common in families to help create new and more helpful relationships. Through all of these methods of practice I emphasize metaphors and images common among heroic stories to help build the old notion of making honorable decisions

and living our lives well. It was in using these symbols I was able to begin incorporating my passion for video games into my therapeutic practice.

I began working with clients to incorporate the archetypal themes present in heroic stories into their daily lives. In my discussions I would use examples of heroes from literature, and film. When my clients were comfortable with video games I would begin talking about the heroes present in video games as well. It occurred to me that video games allowed the added benefit of being able to explore these themes actively. The basic benefit to video games (and this is common in games generally as well), is that they provide a unique opportunity for learning. Existing literature references components to game design that are at once attractive and beneficial to human beings. All games employ clear objectives, rules, constant feedback, and the player's willingness to participate. These structures are actually very common in learning theory, and are widely promoted by teacher education programs as optimal qualities in a classroom.

I began my experience in video game therapy by playing through portions of games with my clients as a means of "Narrative Therapy." In classical therapy models Narrative Therapy is where the imagery and behaviors found in stories can be related back to the clients experience. In this way the therapist can help the client to create their own "story," which allows them to re-write their lives at their leisure. The immersiveness of video games promoted this exploration of themes in a unique way for my clients.

I have also used video games as a means of promoting behavioral modification. Gaming is attractive to some of my clients, much more than traditional talk therapy interventions. This was true of one of my earliest clients. The major point on our therapeutic contract was to work on his verbal aggression. He played video games freely, and after many more traditional methods (all of which were unsuccessful) I eventually landed on using Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six 3 for the original XBox. This game was unique at the time because it made use of voice recognition technology to control the Non Playable Characters (NPCs) in the game. I was able to coach my client on using appropriate dialogue in the game in order to control his soldiers. After practice in game we worked on transferring those skills into his daily life. This was a very successful transference process for my client and his family.

The above mentioned ability to transfer skills is one of the major components in my use of games in therapy. I also find that my clients are able to engage in dialogue more freely if they feel comfortable with my understanding of this gamer culture. So as a gamer myself I can build

rapport in a session with my clients when they recognize me as a participant in their culture. This lends itself well to the "Wellness" model I described earlier. I am able to facilitate a safe environment in my counseling sessions because of my clients ability to relate and their comfort. I intend to use this same practice in my Gamer Wellness Program. I will be able to develop a larger scale "safe place" that promotes an openness to gamers by infusing games into the entire program. This "safe place" is often found in gaming centric conventions. The social aspect of video games (and gaming in general) has been a recognized shift in game development over the last ten years. Gaming becomes a cornerstone of establishing strong social relationships. It also provides an opportunity for safe pro social interaction.

Skills like teamwork, good winning and losing, socialization, and problem solving in a group environment are commonly development in gaming "clans." I have used these sort of activities on a smaller scale with families in my current practice. I would like to see this transitioned into the model of psychotherapy groups to benefit a more diverse client population. Games provide an opportunity for "teams" (whether among clients or within the same family) to work together toward common goals. The task oriented nature of gaming lends itself perfectly to skill groups. Clients could then transfer these newly learned practices into life skill training (for participants who may not have a specific mental health diagnosis for example).

This documented has provided some basic ideas on my use of gaming in therapy. I continue to develop new opportunities and have plans for additional group therapy, individual counseling, and educational experiences that will readily be available. Game development is ever changing. Yet, every day new "gamers" are drawn to this culture. There has never been a time where so many individuals willingly leave real world experiences to engage (often collectively) in virtual experiences. Yet, there is a significant opportunity for growth through the prime model of learning found inherently in gaming. Therapy asks that individuals try new experiences, and potentially learn through trial and error in an effort to grow. Individuals will willingly fail over and over again within a game, yet often struggle with the willingness to make life changes. These sort of opportunities are often missed, but would be capitalized on in a program as I am proposing.