

GAMING AS A THERAPEUTIC TOOL IN ADOLESCENCE Experience of Institutional Therapy of CThA, UCL, Brussels, Belgium

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SUMMARY

Background: This work presents the experience of an Emancipatory action research led at the Therapeutic Center for Adolescents (CThA) at Saint Luc's Clinics (UCL).

Subject and methods: This research focuses on the practice effects of "Pixels" and "Passerelle" workshops at CThA. It is about the use of video games as a therapeutic tool, mobilizing of the symptomatology of the teenager.

Results: "Pixels" workshops use playing according to three specific forms: the paper role-play game, the video game, and the cards playing game. Their specificity is that the participative adult shows a regressive ability strong enough to play with teenagers and is very careful to not interpret what takes place within.

Conclusions: "Passerelle" workshops demonstrate the link between the teenager's mind and the use of his own virtual avatar. It allows to evolve from a "play together" to a "talk together", a moment of symbolization and of being able to stand back in regards to his or her own recreational activities. As a discussion, this clinical illustration of Karl recovering from depression and dependency. This setting for speech allowed him to evolve into an impulse mood and to reconnect emotionally.

Key words: gaming – therapeutic – Pixels – Passerelle – CThA – workshop - institution

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INTRODUCTION

CTHA's Specificities

The history of the Pixels Workshops finds its origin in the welcoming of an 18-year-old hallucinated teenager. He will be called Corentin. He asked his Psychiatrist to be admitted to hospital, in order to feel protected because he was so afraid of trying to murder his parents in their sleep.

One day he asked the person in charge of the Center for "a week off" because he needed to go to California where he was a guest of honour at the official release ceremony of *World of Warcraft's* latest expansion. It appeared he was a "world champion in arena combat". Guillaume Descamps, member of the staff, realized that he regularly faced Corentin by interposed avatars outside his working hours.

Usual points of reference were affected: the limit between professional life and privacy among the staff, the real contrast between a helpless immature teen and the formidable opponent in the game, the transferences and counter-transferences of Corentin and the staff were changed completely. A reflection was needed and the offense required to act in response. The online game was making an important entrance into the CThA.

Presently, at the CThA, It was surprising to find about ten teenagers sitting in the forum. Everyone was playing on their mobile phone. Some of them were playing together the same game, others were playing alone with earphones on. Some were comparing the scores they had at the «Clash Royal» game (produced by Supercell). They were exchanging their mobile phones, learning each other's favorite games. It was a real meeting moment for them.

This first spontaneous step of socialization through playing online is welcomed by adults and put in synergy with the therapeutic project thanks to the fact that adults are interested by, understand, explore with the teen, discover, and invest the world which became a symptom rather than criticize it.

Traditionally, the therapeutic mediation is brought, suggested, and sometimes imposed by the adult. The benefit of virtual lies in the fact that it, not only is brought by the teen but that it is his or her own symptom that changes status. The teenager's compliance to work from what has been for him a form of shelter, avoidance, and counter-anxiety, is not very surprising.

SUBJECTS AND METHODS

Presentation of the «Pixels» and «Passerelle» Workshops as Therapeutic Tools

Within the CThA's framework and that of the animation workshops, the focus was set on the Impact of video games on teenagers and on the role that this spreading symptom could reveal us. This technology was used to create a new media as a therapeutic goal. The video games form an array of game-oriented tools and create a transitional space during the workshop. A safe and secure space that enables teenagers to express themselves through a media they know well.

Pixels workshops

The first category of workshop focuses on the aspect of "playing together". It represents an attempt at creating an environment to meet and exchange. The specificity of these workshops is that the participative adult plays to the same extent as the teenager. The adult

plays the game and places the framework according to his status. Various media will be used, such as Paper Role Game, Video Game and Role Playing Card Game.

The Paper Role Game

The Paper Role Game is articulated around a central quest where teenagers play with a character they invented. This type of workshop fosters the player's imaginative and social skills. They start off with an oral description of the scenes and settings. The fantasy universe of this workshop can sometimes allow for a larger freedom of action that can, in turn, reveal the player's favorite interactions in terms of contact establishment, risk assessment and felt threats. As a conclusion, the fantasy role playing game can give an indication of the inner security level of the player.

The Video Game

The Video Game, as a media, constitutes an entrance into their virtual world. The workshop time is spent to playing a video game together. The grown-up gets invited in the teen's virtual world, a chance to share his use of the online game, to compare the participants' conditions in the contest, to ask questions, to admit the place the game takes in the teen's everyday life. The group effect materializes, takes the drama out and allows us to be aware of the game practice.

Themes like stress, frustration, self-esteem, discouragement by the difficulty of the game are themes that frequently come up. It is a moment of group discussion where everyone has the opportunity to bring his experienced in regards to video games.

Role Playing Card Game

The workshop is based on the use of the card game "Magic the Gathering" invented by Richard Garfield and produced by Wizards of the Coast.

This role playing card game is governed by strict rules. The player operates in a fantasy world where there are men, dragons, angels, demons, and fantasy animals. Each teen receives a set of 60 cards assembled strategically in order to win. This set is called a "Deck". Decks (12) have been made for the workshop are equivalent in strength. The condition to win is all about analyzing the game and enabling strategies.

It appeared that the choice of the Deck, the use of playing allows an unusual, particular meeting with the teenager. This encounter relates to the other player, the rules of the game, it relates also to the symbols used in this game that are all gateways to the relational modes of the teen.

Integrative possibility that this game can have is significant. It's also a game that can allow a meeting outside the workshop. Some young people gather around a table and participate partially during their free time. This allows an opening to the group, the youngsters who are more withdrawn integrate more easily with this medium because it only requires an adult to start the game and to invite him to play. Later

on as they need players, they will look for other youngsters.

Furthermore, the complexity of this game attracts teenagers with high intellectual abilities. These teens who are outside the social bond, feel offset from human contact. With this possibility of meeting, they use their intelligence, this gift, to increase their social bond, to promote their social cohesion.

« Passerelle » Workshops as a Link

The second workshop category is called « Passerelle » workshops. It demonstrates the link between « Pixels » and classic therapeutic mediations. It allows to create a secure space without intrusion into the space of the play. The theme is self-representation.

It is made out of an individual workshop "Avatar Story" and a group workshop "Golem" around a clay creation.

Avatar Story

After having opened the discussion about games, proposition is made to some teens to speak about themselves through their avatar. The purpose is to try to trace the teen's digital history back to when they first "met with" a screen. Only then do we come back to moments when games have started taking up more time in their lives, even sometimes to the point of becoming invasive. These moments are often linked with stressful events in the teen's real life.

When a teen gets addicted to a particular game, it is often useful to look into the teen-avatar relationship mode, the way the teen uses the avatar in the virtual world. Using his avatar to express himself is close to a projective test. This exercise can be an indicator of the teen's "Ideal Self", of his level of interior security and of his favorite mode of relationship.

« Golem » workshop

Golem is a mythic representation of the Jewish cabbala.

Through the Golem workshop, the teens create an imaginary being and bring it to life. In the instructions, this mythic creature could have a special role for them. It could be difficult to control, it could protect them, get angry or realize their wishes. It is in some way a mirror of their own need for destruction.

Before starting creation, the teens realise a brainstorming about the word *Golem*. Various words were writing on the blackboard. They can sculpt a piece of clay following their imagination. The workshop consists of two sessions of two hours. The first part is dedicated to creating the Golem. The second part is dedicated to the Golem decoration (sanding, painting, assembling the various pieces) and to the writing of the Golem story. Teens must briefly describe their Golem to the other participants. With their agreement, their creation is put on exhibition in a glass cabinet at the CThA.

DISCUSSION

Therapeutic Impact

For most teens, the game is cathartic. Depressivity, lethargy they complain about is fulfilled by narcissistic satisfactions the game gives them through the gamer's skill increased prestige. Feelings and affects are denied and buried deep within their own selves. The game acts as an anxiolytic and allows them not to think and therefore not to act. The game sometimes allows them to virtually break human laws instead of committing delinquent acts.

Illustration by the therapeutic story of Karl

Shield of Rationality

Karl represents an interesting experience to the usefulness of the explained setting.

He is 20 years old, well mannered, clever and a perfectionist, unbeatable when playing Trivial Pursuit. He has a cheerful temper and gives the impression of being in full control.

However he has been at a standstill for many years, at school and in the other aspects of his life. He has become unable to make choices. He finds it really hard to feel any emotions. He rationalizes and trivializes the events that he has to face. He can't take any stand and hence blocks any possible development. His stay in the CThA was interspersed with many comings and goings between his mother, who suffered a MDD (Major Depressive Order) and a AUD (Alcohol Use Disorder) and who used Karl as a psychological crutch, and the CThA, in which he recursively had troubles getting up in the morning or staying in the center for an entire week.

His Bond With the Game

Teens come back to the center on Sundays. Instead of returning to the center where he was expected, he used to spend the whole night playing *GuildWars 2* with his guild with the aim of being graded among the best French-speaking guilds (PVP 3vs3). He played a sorcerer: "Mesmer, the master of mirage". As it was saying above, when a teen frequently plays a game, it's interesting to focus on the use of his avatar.

For Karl the choice of this kind of character was no accident: before he decided to embody it, he experienced all possibilities one by one. He chose the sorcerer because he thought it was the most complex character to play. This argument met the perfectionist in him in the sense that he had high expectations by choosing a hard-to-manage kind. It also met his need to feel powerful by taking up the challenge of participating to the advent of his guild to the highest French-speaking European level.

Here is the description of that kind of player:

- «Mesmers are magical duelists who wield deception as a weapon. Using powerful illusions, clones, and phantasmal magic to confuse and distract their foes, Mesmers make sure every fight is balanced in their favor and their opponents can't believe their eyes.»
- The link between the choice of his character and the way he uses it makes me inevitably think about his relational model during his stay among the community of the center. He kept his distance from the other teens, wore an "everything's fine" face and avoided every direct conflict. The staff sometimes felt his presence though he wasn't there (in the chats between teens and adults when he wasn't at the center) and he also could be there without being present (resting in his room while everybody was downstairs). The Mesmer of CThA, the master of mirage.

Karl's Development

Karl took part in the role play workshop, the video-game workshop and the "*Avatar's story*" workshop. The latter was an individual workshop and it allowed him to approach and identify his emotional states, through his game practice.

The development of his therapeutic stay became possible when he managed to drop his locked theory based on a scientific look. He used to believe that emotions and affects were polluting and useless, he settled in a purely rational and impersonal world with the ideal of a relational autarky, free of "eros" and compensated in virtual reality. He would later open the door to his emotions thanks to different discussions around video games.

In everyday life Karl used humor to keep a superficial speech. Strangely, when *GuildWars* topic was brought up and the workshop animator tried to go further into his use of his sorcerer, he talked more freely. He mixed his feeling in the game with some of the events of his life. His strongest related feeling was the sense of wellbeing that followed his team's many victories. Together they managed to become the first French-speaking guild on their server, an important recognition among the *GuildWars* players, which occurred after a huge commitment to playtime (he counts more than 4000 hours of gameplay, which means more or less 5 months in front of the screen!). That narcissistic increased prestige in connection with his game skills gave him a momentary and intense wellbeing. But he would be quickly overtaken by his difficulties in adjusting to everyday life and thus by denied depressive feelings because according to his theory, affects weren't real.

In the case of this teen our interest in his virtual world allowed him, through transference, to access his emotions and to verbalize them. Some events in his life have been unlocked and so has been his singular use of the game. That "brainstorming" allowed him to get in

motion and deep in thought. The sorcerer dropped his weapons for a while...

CONCLUSION

When teenagers arrive at the CThA, they often use the virtual as a way to avoid being confronted to reality and to its implications (conflicts within their families, depressive affects, impression of emptiness, dissociation).

Throughout their stay at the Center, the staff is going to use what is virtual to create bonds through virtual and media meetings. These practices allow to create reflection on what is at stake in their use of virtual and therefore to support their efforts to socialize. It is a way to put into perspective the « admitted symptom » in the way the teenager is being supported, a way to accept their own way of being alive and how our relationships are fortified.

In addition to the fact that it provides us the possibility to penetrate their universe, to connect, to understand them, and to have fun with them, the hope is that, in socializing what was a factor of withdrawal, they can put themselves in motion and transform a no-life into a go-life on the long run.

Acknowledgements: None.

Conflict of interest: None to declare.

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