Playing to Find Out: Adapting Story Games for Group Therapy with Teens

Adam McConnaughey, St. Catherine University

Date of Paper
5-2015

Type of Paper
Clinical research paper

Degree Name
Master of Social Work (M.S.W.)

Department
Social Work

First Advisor
Jessica Toft, Ph.D., LISW

Department/School
Social Work

Abstract
Millions of adolescents in the United States face childhood trauma and its sequelae, and group therapy is a common treatment. The purpose of this project was to examine the field of role-playing game design with an eye toward developing future group therapy methods for adolescents with trauma histories. Using a qualitative textual analysis research design that was a mix of grounded theory and content analysis, two contemporary role-playing game texts, Apocalypse World and Monsterhearts, were analyzed. The text was coded, and themes were generated to organize the findings. Findings indicated that RPGs and group therapy share a great deal structurally. In addition, RPGs provide a way to approach triggering material in a safe way, through a fictional avatar. Findings also suggested that these RPG texts teach users how to play the game in a clear manner that could be helpful for future writers of group therapy manuals to emulate. These findings indicate that RPGs are a potentially fruitful field in which to develop new group therapy methods, and that these games would provide excellent starting points for such therapies.

Recommended Citation

Since 2011 we've been running therapeutic groups using Dungeons and Dragons and other games to help teens and adolescents build confidence, relieve anxiety, and develop social skills. Many of our participants struggle with autism-related challenges, and we've found that games of all kinds, but especially Dungeons and Dragons, can help them build much-needed skills. We just launched the non-profit Game to Grow along with a crowdfunder in order to expand our work and spread it around the world. Donations to our Generosity campaign go directly to helping us launch more groups to serve even more kids and teens with lagging social skill development! A game in every home! Ask us anything! Psychodrama, group therapy, and play therapy are all established fields of therapy recommended for use with people. Playing to find out. With trauma histories, and each shares a key element with role-playing games: Group therapy shares structure, psychodrama shares role-playing, and play therapy shares games and stories. Virginia Satir, in the discipline of family therapy, has written entire therapeutic techniques that are, ultimately, indistinguishable from some types of RPG. Simply being interested in and playing video games (as most children and teen do) does not appear to negatively affect school performance. Most kids can play video games without becoming addicted and their academic grades do not suffer as a result of occasional play. Teenagers and children addicted to video games may undergo a noticeable change in personality. Teens and young adults may drop out of school, experience breakups due to excessive gaming, experience work-related problems, etc. For more information, see Video Game Addiction Symptoms and Signs. How important is it that parents are "on the same page" when helping a child who is addicted to video games?