

Clara Martin Center's

“Gamers Guild”

A Therapeutic Curriculum.

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“YOU CAN DISCOVER MORE ABOUT A PERSON IN AN HOUR OF PLAY THAN A YEAR OF CONVERSATION”

PLATO-(429-347 BC)

The idea of play as a tool of understanding and teaching has long predated modern psychotherapy and counseling. The first documented case play used in therapy was in 1909 when Freud documented his use of play with the case of “little Hans”. Since that time many counselors/therapist have refined the use of play in treatment to both understand clients and teach skills through this medium.

Now though, for many of today’s youth, play has changed. Play is no longer done on a physical realm. It is no longer playing with a toy sword, setting up plastic army or a bunch of action figures, or actually throwing a ball. For many of the youth we work with all of this play occurs in a videogame environment. For some technology has surpassed dice games, Monopoly, or playing Pictionary or Uno (which historically have been used by therapists as tools to approach a myriad of issues related to problem solving, projection, future orientation, rapport building and emotional management).

For teens these days’ technology has made the outdoor play and exploration or board games obsolete. Play is in the world of Skyrim, the battle maps of Call of Duty or Vice City (Grand Theft Auto). Play is logging on with a headset and connecting with other people “Questing” or winning a “Battle Royal”. Play has switched to a virtual realm.

If we don’t meet these young adults where they’re at we are missing an opportunity to use a medium that they connect with on a visceral level to teach insight and skills. This is also a medium that excites their emotions and that we can use to teach self-regulation and critical thinking skills **in the moment**.

With teens, I have always tried sneak skills and insights through their “back doors”. These teens have developed significant strengths in gaming and that gaming is a back door, Let’s use it!

Clinical Focus: The clinical focus of this group is to support clients to identify the various strengths and resiliency factors they use while gaming and to support them to apply these skills to obtain their personal and therapeutic goals.

Running themes of the group will be: Identification and extrapolation of strengths used in gaming to other areas,, mindfulness, distress tolerance/ emotional regulation skills,, cognitive flexibility and pro-social interactions/communication and critical thinking skills.

STRUCTURE OF GROUPS:

Guild Meetings: (Therapeutic Groups)- But we will call them “guild meetings”. This fosters a sense of belonging and allows clients distance themselves from stigma they may associate with mental health services.

Throughout this group I incorporate a lot of psycho-education regarding a variety of issues. The first one is the manipulation of the sympathetic and para-sympathetic nervous system.

First I explain (briefly- we are working with teens after all) the sympathetic vs the parasympathetic system. I lay it out like this “The **sympathetic nervous system** prepares the body for the “fight or flight” response during any potential danger. On the other hand, the **parasympathetic nervous system** inhibits the body from overworking and restores the body to a calm and composed state where control can be more easily attained. The sympathetic system is what makes you want to huck your controller across the room or scream at other players in your mike. The parasympathetic system is the one activated when you’re able to take a deep breath, stop shaking and focus on the problem at hand.

To manipulate these systems I teach “Kumbhaka”. Kumbhaka is the retention of breath in pranayama either after the inhale or after the exhale. I teach a method which has the guild members inhale for the count of 4 hold for count of 4 and exhale for the count of 8. This decreases the electrical activity in the sympathetic nervous system and increases it in the para sympathetic system.

This will be used throughout the group. Whenever the members are getting really escalated or we need to reset our focus we will count off “in 2,3,4, hold,2,3,4,, exhale 2,3,4,5,6,7,8” and repeat that several times.

I also explain the basis of learning theory “see it, do it, teach it”. Then in later groups I have each members lead 1 round for the rest of the group.

Each guild meeting starts with a mindfulness exercise. The first few I focus on Kumbhaka but after that I do a lot of guided ones off the “Calm” app (by far my favorite meditation app). This also allows for the opportunity to conduct psycho-ed around the effects of meditation and its impact on the brain.

Then we move to a brief check-in.

Check in Questions:

1. What has your gaming looked like this past week? (Games played, time invested, emotions/situations that triggered gaming, achievements-This is meant to reinforce mindfulness around clients gaming.

Question: #1: Can also serve to open up dialog to if gaming was problematic to completion of other goals/responsibilities/expectation in their lives (i.e. – school/home/work/needs).

2. Have you noticed your self-using any gaming strategies in other environments (make sure members have identified what other various environments they have (i.e.: school, home, work etc.).
3. What's your current gaming goal?

Gaming Goals:

Guild members gaming goals can be anything from "I want to beat this game" to "I want to level this character up" to "I don't want to be bored". The important part for the clinician now is to distill those goals down to the core skills needed to achieving that goal – these will almost always be skills around persistence, learning, distress tolerance, emotional management, socially connecting or having fun/passing time in a healthy way that increases mood (clinician will highlight "healthy way" as gaming - and sober gaming – can be a alternative to substance use. Many guild members will have gamed high but will also have memories of very fun/positive times of gaming not high). This can be reinforced even if during the past week the Guild member has not gamed sober. Once these goals are distilled down the therapist will support clients in identifying how the skills can be applied to attainment of their individual therapeutic goals.

Guild meetings will then proceed with going through the curriculum of lessons. Each lesson does not have a prescribed time for completion. Some guild sessions will cover multiple lessons, some sessions will need more than one meeting to complete a lesson.

The lessons are designed to run concurrently (as some of the later lessons build on concepts and skills identified, taught/reinforced earlier in the curriculum).

Some lessons, such as lesson #2 on "game strategies" (identification and application of solution focused problem solving skills and strategies) will be repeated throughout the guild meetings.

After each lesson the participants will be able to cooperatively play the guilds current "designated" games for (roughly) 15 minutes. Although they are not playing the game with the clients this is when the group facilitator (Guild master) really needs to shine.

Throughout these times of gaming the therapists job is to identify and address (or note for discussion after) both adaptive and maladaptive patterns/instances of 1: problem solving strategies, 2: Coping mechanisms, 3: Communication style, 4: Skills application. This is the bridge to creating insight and awareness to the cognitive/behavioral strategies and their efficacy to the gamers reaching their goals. The point is to coach the client on noticing their automatic thinking system when it works, when it doesn't and how to mindfully apply or intervene around this system (while collecting loot, navigating puzzles and battling goblins).

Meetings will then end with a quick review of highlights of concepts skills discussed, a review of goals both initially stated goal and it's "distilled down" nature and how the skills needed to obtain those gaming goals can be applied to other environments and therapeutic goals in the guild members lives.

First Guild Meeting:

Therapeutic Objective: Explain rules, expectations of “Guild Membership” and participation. Begin rapport building. Explain philosophy behind using gaming in therapeutic setting

Guild group rules: Cover the standard rules around respect, respectful communication, confidentiality and maintaining behavioral control (not throwing controllers etc.).

Go around in circle having members introduce themselves. At that time, members will be asked questions from the “gamers prep questionnaire” (which participants should have received prior to 1st meeting). This will provide members with insight to their fellow guild members and allow an audience for members to discuss areas of safe mastery in their lives (hopefully minimizing anxiety and the initial social awkwardness of teenagers thrust together in clinical group situation).

These questions will provide the facilitator (and possibly the other guild members) significant insight into how this member chooses to present themselves when in a fantasy/virtual world and that can provide significant insight into how they operate (or wish they operated) in the “real world”.

Do they play the marauding warrior, brooding mage or back stabbing rogue? Do they carry guns or cast magic? Do these players choose a alignment that’s good or evil? Are these characters symmetrical or asymmetrical to how the client presents themselves? Is this who they feel they are internally or who they would like to be or someone they are afraid they will become?

Fantasy self can provide a wealth of information about a client’s internal motivations, problem solving strategies and self-concept.

Then explain structure of future guild meeting:

Three to ten minutes of meditative time.

Check in questions:

1. What has your gaming looked like this past week?
2. Have you noticed yourself using any gaming strategies in other environments?
3. What’s your current gaming goal?

Check in will be followed by a variety of lessons and activities around mindfulness and gaming.

After the completion of lessons guild members will get 15-20 minutes to game and work on skills taught/reinforced during the lesson portion of the group. After the 15 to 20 minutes therapists should stop the game, identify what’s

working and not with clients, then repeat the process as necessary and as time allows.

Then the Guild meeting will end with a quick review of highlights and goals.

Now is the time to discuss goal formulations. Process with participant's question #3 of checking questions; "What is your current gaming goal"?

A variety of goals will come out, at this time the facilitator needs to help "boil" or "distill" them down to the core skills and concepts.

Examples:

- "I just need to level up so I can beat this boss" can be boiled down into a goal based around persistence and distress tolerance.
- "I need to figure out how to beat this level/board". Boiled down=Information gathering, resiliency, flexible problem solving.
- "I just don't want to be bored". Build down=Healthy distraction, healthy mood elevation, harm reduction.

Once clients have identified and "boiled down" a current gaming goal the facilitator will have them identify how the strengths and skills can be applied to their therapeutic treatment plan goals.

Now it is time to introduce the game. Let clients check out characters, decide make up of the questing party and get to know controls with some playing (15-20 minutes). Then, transition back to lesson #1 of curriculum (to complete therapeutic objective of the first group lesson #1, should be done during 1st meeting).

Critical Thinking Skills Around Gaming

Lesson #1 "Problem Solving and Strengths"

Therapeutic Objective: Clients will identify different problem solving strategies utilized in gaming and internalize that altering strategies and being flexible around problem solving leads to increase in goal attainment.

1. Brainstorm (and make a list- which will be referred to in the future) with the clients about the various strengths and strategies that they use to obtain goals in gaming.

Examples may include; Brainstorming, Persistence/Resiliency, Gathering Information Knowing Your Strengths and Weaknesses, Using Past Experience, Being Open to Change in Tactics (Being Flexible), Managing Emotions, Prioritizing Pre-Planning/Preparing, Being Positive/using humor, Honing skills/Practicing.

2. Discuss how they use these strategies in "real" life (include home, school, relationships etc)..

Now allow gamers 15 to 20 minutes to game. The facilitator needs to be very aware and present during this time. The facilitator's role will be that of a "mindfulness coach". He/she should spend the time mindfully pointing out what is going on in the game and within the group dynamic (mirroring a major piece of traditional play therapy). The facilitator will discuss (and/or note for later) all problem solving, strategies, communication, use of humor and any other adaptive skills displayed by clients.

After the allotted time expires the game will be paused/saved and they will discuss what they noted in the exercise. Review strengths, areas of growth and anything else that arose that would be of clinical significance.

Lesson #2 "Strength and Judgments"

Therapeutic Objective: Support client in objectively identifying strengths that gamers exhibit and weaknesses/concerns that are salient for themselves and others as to what "too much" gaming is. Facilitate insight into what would be concrete signs in their world that they were involved in "too much" gaming.

1. Set up and have clients complete a payoff matrix around the strengths of gamers and weakness (judgements of others) around gaming.
2. Discuss how they can use the personal strengths exhibited in gaming in other environments where they struggle.
3. Discuss judgements and validity of judgments around gamers.
4. Discuss what "too much" gaming would look like in clients' individual lives.
5. Process how clients would regulate themselves if they noticed these factors arising in their lives (discuss behavioral plans, supports, cognitive interventions, prioritizing needs etc). Identify that abstinence is probably not a realistic option (this can lead into a discussion regarding harm reduction tactics which should then be discussed as an intervention around substance abuse)

Lesson #3 "Internal Self Talk".

Therapeutic Objective: Clients will identify internal self talk, process what self talk is helpful and what self talk is detrimental to goal attainment. Clients will develop skills to mindfully change internal self talk to support healthy emotional regulation and application of adaptive skills.

1. Discuss the concept of internal self talk with clients. Process how people are always engaging in some level of self talk and how much of the time people are unaware of it.
2. Process with clients how they use self talk in gaming and other areas of life. Discuss what self talk is helpful to goal attainment and what self creates obstacles to goal attainment (and effective way that I have found to relate this concept is to use the idea popularized in cartoons and movies of the "devil" on one shoulder whispering

things to the client and an “angel” on the other giving advice to counteract the “devil”. This is useful narrative tool in that the “devil” can be used to symbolize salient symptoms the client struggles with such as anxiety, depression, anger, procrastination etc).

3. Process impact of self talk on emotional state and have clients roleplay how they would coach their “angel” to respond to various negative narratives (examples of negative narratives include statements such as “I’m worthless”, “nobody likes me”, “I can’t handle this”, “I just need to get high” etc, etc).
4. Discuss what are areas of negative self talk that clients experience in their lives and facilitate planning around how they can change that dialog.

Lesson #4 “Effective Communication”.

Therapeutic objective: Clients will identify what effective communication looks like, why it is necessary to much of life’s goal attainment and how they can utilize effective communication to communicate their individual and emotional needs.

1. Start by having the group brainstorm why effective communication is necessary to communal gaming and goal attainment. Discuss why it is necessary to individual goal attainment outside of gaming environments.
2. Discuss effective and ineffective ways of communicating in gaming and life and have clients come up with examples of each that they experienced in their lives (ways that they have communicated effectively and ineffectively and ways others have communicated effectively and ineffectively). Cover tone, vocabulary used, non verbal communication etc.
3. Discuss situations in which they need to communicate effectively to obtain their goals, obstacles to effective communication, and problem solving around those issues.
 4. Process how clients communicate their emotions, difficulty around communicating emotions and how clear communication can benefit clients.

Lesson #5 “Gaining Experience and Leveling Up”.

Therapeutic objective: Clients will identify how the concept of “leveling up” that they apply to their avatars/characters can be applied to their “real world” selves. The focus is on skill building towards mastery/goal attainment in areas outside of gaming.

1. Have participants explain the concept of leveling up . Discuss: When they first noticed it in games, their favorite leveling up system, favorite bonuses gained by experience and what the purpose of leveling up/gaining experience is during game play.
2. Discuss how clients see this in “real” life (examples include: graduating, getting employed, learning skills, going to college, buying own home etc).

3. Discuss and identify how they have “leveled up” in their own lives and what they are currently working on in their lives around “leveling” up.
4. Discuss strategies around leveling up in gaming and how those can be applied to “real” life.

Lesson #6 “ Bosses”

Therapeutic Objective: Clients will identify people of authority in their lives and will plan around what different skills need to be used to be successful in interactions with said “bosses”.

1. Discuss bosses in video games. Process favorite (or least favorite) bosses, how they were beaten and what role bosses play in gaming.
2. Discuss bosses in real life (examples include; parents, teachers, coaches, employers, probation officers etc).
3. Discuss what being successful in interactions with these bosses looks like and what skills clients need to exhibit in order to “beat” them in a pro-social way.
4. Process internal self talk around bosses in life making clients do things they do not agree with and typical automatic response around this (anger, opposition) and whether that response is helpful to clients broader goal attainment.

Lesson #7 “Leadership”

Therapeutic Objective: Clients will identify traits indicative of a “good” leader. Why good leadership is conducive to goal attainment and what characteristics in team members support a leader's efficacy.

1. Discuss what it means to be a good leader (traits, skills, styles). Process past experience with leaders and what worked for clients and what did not.
2. Process what kind of leaders clients would be if in a leadership position.
3. Process what it is to be a good team member and struggles around being a good team member. This is an opportunity for clients to focus on internal self talk and how clients can manipulate this self talk to tolerate distress around leaders taking action in ways clients do not agree with.
4. Process what “teams” clients are members of (family, school class, friends, gaming etc) and what skills they bring to those teams.

Lesson #8 “Racism, Sexism, Classism and Bullying”

Therapeutic Objective. Clients will obtain skills to identify racism, sexism, and bullying in online/gaming communities and in “real” life communities. Clients will acquire strategies to address racism/sexism/bullying issues in “real” life and online (as both a witness and a victim).

1. Support clients in identifying what is racist/sexist/homophobic language online and in gaming.
2. Discuss why racism/sexism/bullying is bad. Of note clients will be able to identify the hurtful nature of this but the key here is to teach how the underlying narrative of racism /sexism/classism affects people. Teach the principle that if the narrative of society keeps whispering to people that others are inferior this affects the global functioning of the people being targeted, how society subconsciously perceives them and how they think of themselves.
3. Discuss what society/their environments “whisper” to clients (about being a gamer, being male/female, being in high school, being of low SES etc)
4. Discuss how to challenge someone online around being racist/sexist/bullying (as both victim and witness).
5. Process where clients see racism/sexism/bullying not online and what they can do to address it in those environments.

Lesson #9 “Navigating Environments”

Therapeutic Objective: Clients will identify differing environments in their world, boundaries associated with those environments and what skills and presentation will facilitate their success in those areas.

1. Process various gaming environments and what leads to success in those environments (differing strategies, skills used, equipment etc).
2. Discuss the various different environments that clients have to negotiate in their lives (and in the future). Examples include school, employment, community events, areas prevalent in substance abuse etc).
3. Process how clients will need to change their presentation in these environments (not cursing, dressing differently, not being high etc) to achieve goals. A huge piece of this is facilitating insight with clients around how this is not being “fake” or “two faced” or “telling it like it is”. This type of adaptation is just bringing forward pieces of their personalities that already exist. They are just “playing” them more intensely in that scenario.
4. Process ways clients already do this and ways they can apply this concept/strategy in the future.

Lesson #10 “Gaming as Coping Strategy”

Therapeutic Objective:

Clients will identify internal and external triggers that instigate gaming as a coping strategy. Clients will recognize that while gaming can be effective they need alternate coping strategies when

gaming is not available. Clients will then identify alternate coping strategies and plan on how they will implement them when gaming is not an option.

1. Discuss how some people utilize gaming as a coping strategy and brainstorm when clients use gaming to cope with problematic emotions or situations in their lives.
2. Discuss what need that meets (need for stability in environment, venting, distraction etc.).
3. Process alternates that clients have and/or could use to meet these emotional needs.
4. Support clients in planning how they can implement these alternate coping strategies and how these alternate strategies can support therapeutic goal attainment.

CLARA MARTIN CENTERS “GAMERS GUILD” PREP

QUESTIONNAIRE.

#1) What kind of games do you prefer to play (first person shooters, racing games, board games, tabletop strategy games MMORPGs, fantasy based quests)?

#2) Why do you think you like that particular style of game?

#3) When you pick an avatar/character, what kind of characters do you usually like to pick?

#4) Why do you like that style of avatar/character?

#5) What would your ideal avatar/character look like and what would he/she be armed with?

#6) In thinking of your gaming history what 3 games were your favorites of all time?

#7) When you game do you prefer to game alone, on a team, or head to head against other players.

#8) Why do you prefer that style of play?

#9) What has been your greatest gaming accomplishment?

#10) What are you looking forward to about games/gaming in the future?

