

# Learning about “Self” – Game + Design + Therapy

Heidi McDonald, Centerstone Research  
Leslie Kirby, Vanderbilt University  
Sabine Harrer, Vienna University  
Doris C. Rusch, DePaul University  
Susan Imus, Columbia College  
Adam Mayes, Uppsala University  
Martine Pederson, Indspark

**Abstract:** This panel brings together game designers and therapists in order to explore the potential of playing as well as designing games for self-inquiry, reflection and therapeutic purposes. Games enable embodied experiences and have thus gained a reputation as powerful learning tools. They can teach us something about ourselves as well as what it's like to walk in somebody else's shoes, thus increasing empathy, understanding, and personal growth. Playful engagement with personal conflicts through games and their design can lead to new insights, opening up new perspectives, point towards opportunities for change, increase psychological agency and have transformational power. This panel explores different purposes of and approaches to games and game design from therapeutic perspectives, including an inquiry of game design as a new modality within creative arts therapies.

## Games and Positive Psychology

Heidi McDonald, game designer and creative director of iThrive, and Leslie Kirby, psychologist at Vanderbilt University and consultant to iThrive, are going to discuss the iThrive's goal of infusing entertainment games with positive psychology values. iThrive brings psychologists, researchers, youth coordinators and game designers together to conceptualize and implement ways of enriching the gaming landscape with products that promote empathy, resilience and emotional well-being. The talk discusses the theoretical frameworks on which iThrive's design challenges rest, investigations of positive psychology game examples so far, experiences applying the framework to the creation of games and the perspective of youth in all that. The overarching question Heidi and Leslie aim to raise with fellow panelists and the audience is: how can we make games that youth love to play (as much as the readily available and highly appealing AAA games), that rest on sound positive psychology principles and that have a measurable positive impact on their players?

## Game Design as Personal Dialogue

Sabine Harrer investigates games about loss and mourning and the power of the design process as a personal, transformative dialogue with the bereaved. Her research pursues both the question of representation - how can games portray experiences of loss and grief? - and the idea that games can be outlets for grief and technologies for commemoration. The talk will share some insights from her participatory design work with four bereaved mothers recruited via the Regenbogen self help group in Vienna, Austria. It will briefly describe the creative journey towards making the game *Jocoi*, and touch on the importance of symbolic modeling as mediator between experience experts and design team. Comparing initial ambitions with results and outcomes, the talk aims to work out a response to the question what we can expect from designing for grief, and why it might not only benefit those who go through it but those who creatively engage with it.

## Game Design as Creative Arts Therapy

This contribution by Doris C. Rusch (game designer) and Susan Imus (creative arts therapist) ties up to Sabine Harrer's work and argues that game design is a powerful means of self-inquiry and artistic expression that deserves a place in the canon of creative arts therapies. Starting with a brief, introductory overview of the basic concepts, criteria and fundamental mechanisms of creative arts therapies, the panelists share the results of an experimental “game design as therapy” session conducted at Columbia College with a volunteer client and in the presence of five faculty members / creative arts therapists. The design therapy session revolved around the question of “social value”, the desire of having meaningful encounters with people in social spaces and the fear of being perceived as “not worth talking to”. The talk explains how the tools of game design – identifying the

goal, conflict, rules and mechanics – were applied systematically, creatively and imaginatively to the personal issue and led to the discovery of multiple win scenarios rather than one, opening up new opportunities for action and social engagement and increased the client's sense of agency. The discussion of the experiment includes an analysis of the game design process as it corresponds to or deviates from the creative arts therapies' principles and mechanisms laid out before, and ends with an experience report of the client and what she took away from her "game design as therapy session". This contribution aims to open new avenues of exploration towards establishing game design as part of creative arts therapies and initiate thoughts about suitable educational and professional opportunities for game designers interested in applying their skills to personal and social change in the context of therapy.

## **Games, Design and Social Work**

Coming at this from the ground is the work of Martine Pedersen, a social worker and therapist and her husband, Adam Mayes, game designer and now lecturer. Over the past ten years they have shared their work process with each other, initially through conversation but now in a more focused manner. These insights have informed, and inspired, each other's work.

Martine works, primarily, with at-risk youth. She uses the games her clients are already playing as a part of their therapy. Rather than look at their games as a "waste of life," as many of the adults around them do, Martine was curious to see – and to try to understand – what they gained from playing. Was there a positive narrative that the kids created about themselves in-game, and, if so, what did that mean in their real lives? Through therapeutic sessions Martine creates the space for her clients to explore and discover their agency and in-game narrative, and helps them transfer these positive narratives and competences into their real life.

For Adam, social work was an entirely new window onto his skill set, as well as a new way of thinking. When Martine would talk about three types of therapy, he heard three levels of Critical Thinking, but applied to a social/personal problem. When they discussed addiction, he came to see problematic behavior as a symptom of a larger problem. They discussed Cognitive Behavioral Therapy as a form of game design with, to paraphrase Jane McGonigal, "A goal, a constraint, feedback and voluntary acceptance of goal, constraint and feedback." With that as a base, they have started to see if the engagement, personal investment and, to some extent, in-game narratives, that games create could be used to aid therapy.

Together they are testing the waters of game based initiatives within local councils in Denmark, as well researching this in an academic context.

## **References**

McGonigal, J. (2011). *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*. NY: The Penguin Press.