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## MMOs as therapy: A therapeutic tool or a barrier to psychological growth?

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### Abstract

This paper investigates the possibility of using Massively Multi-player Online Role Playing Games (MMOs) as therapy to help people dealing with depression, phobias, social anxiety, etc. It carefully examines the advantages and disadvantages of MMO therapy through gaming experience, literature reviews, and interviews with gamers. While on-line games are being used more and more in today's society, many questions still exist about their value and place in the field of therapy. Do the advantages of gaming therapy outweigh the disadvantages? If so, how could therapy be successfully integrated into the virtual world? This paper shows that despite the many advantages that could exist through gaming therapy, there are also a few drawbacks that cannot be overlooked. The immersive fantasy, flexibility, and anonymity of MMOs make them ideal for therapy; however, concerns for addiction, a lack of real life social interaction, and a loss of important visual cues hinder the success of their practical applications.

### Overview

Mental health is an extremely important aspect of a person's overall well-being. However, psychological problems are often left ignored, while people suffer greatly from their effects. Throughout the years, therapy has become increasingly important in the treatment of psychological issues such as depression, phobia, and social anxiety. The field has grown incredibly over the years and branched out greatly to include less traditional forms of therapy such as art therapy, play therapy, role-playing therapy, and adventure based counseling. Research on these emerging fields of therapy has been quite promising, revealing the therapeutic effects of such techniques on patients.

This paper investigates the ways in which virtual worlds could be effectively used as therapy to help people dealing with phobias, social anxieties, depression, etc. It examines the advantages and disadvantages of MMO therapy could as opposed to more traditional forms of therapy, while attempting to develop an understanding of the most effective way to use virtual worlds for therapy. Would it be possible to apply conventional approaches to therapy to the virtual world? If so, how could an effective form of therapy be implemented in such worlds? The use of MMOs for therapy could be the next step in this tradition of innovative therapeutic approaches that provide help and relief for people suffering from psychological disorders. Combining aspects of many different kinds of therapy, MMO therapy could prove an effective solution that provides a more immersive and socially interactive experience for the patient. Therapy in virtual

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worlds would also provide a greater degree of privacy and anonymity, which could help encourage a greater number of people to seek help for themselves. However, issues dealing with the addictive nature of such games and the lack of real life interaction challenge the possible implementation of this notion. My research weighs these issues and attempts to find an answer to these questions.

## Literature Review

### Creative approaches to therapy

Over the years, the practice of therapy has become increasingly important to the field of psychology. New research is being conducted with hopes to provide those experiencing psychological stress a better way to deal with their struggles. Many new forms of innovative therapy have been constructed for those who suffer from a wide range of physical and mental disorders.

One particularly important form of therapy that is often used with children and even adults is play therapy. Studies have shown that it can be quite a useful approach for children who "have not yet developed the abstract reasoning abilities and verbal skills needed to adequately articulate their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors" As Hall explains, "For children, toys are their words, and play is their conversation" (2002). A meta-analysis conducted in 2001 examined over 3000 subjects who were divided into 20 different types of "client groups" to determine the overall effectiveness of play therapy for a variety of psychological issues. The groups included problems such as depression, anxiety, behavioral problems, and post traumatic stress disorder. The meta-analysis showed a very large effect size ( $d=.80$ ), and highlighted the importance of play therapy in dealing with a wide range of psychological disorders in children (Ray, 2001).

Art therapy has also been proven to be quite effective for many different kinds of psychological disorders, trauma, or issues. Throughout history, art has "helped man to reconcile the eternal conflict between the individual's instinctual urges and the demands of society" (Ulman, 1992). It can be a psychologically revealing outlet for expression and sublimation. Art therapy is noted for its ability to create a reflective dialogue through the "symbolic speech" of art, while using the "healing quality inherent in the creative process" to help the patient as well (Ulman, 1992). As a student of studio art and art history, I am quite familiar with the therapeutic effects of art. Throughout my life, art has provided me with an outlet for my stress and inner turmoil, allowing me to escape from my problems and work them out through acts of creativity. The act of artistic creation itself is a very important part of this therapeutic process.

In art therapy, symbolic elements and developments within the art are analyzed, revealed, and discussed by the therapist to help the client to deal with internal issues and develop a better self concept. A study conducted in 1975 examines the effects of combining two or more expressive creative modalities such as art and drama in the therapy of a group of young boys. In the study, art and drama were successfully combined to create a uniquely interactive therapeutic experience. An art therapist and a drama therapist led the boys in "symbolic and fantasy play" which helped them learn to socialize, explore, and build a better self-concept. The researchers concluded that "in

making available a variety of expressive art forms, the therapeutic possibilities are enlarged and enhanced" (Irwin, 1975).

Some other emerging forms of therapy are Adventure-Based Counseling (ABC) and low-element challenge courses (LECC), which have been shown to be highly effective in "improving individuals' self-concept through elements of trust building, goal setting, and problem solving" (Glass, 2001). By using the Adlerian approach, which "defines social interest as the fundamental human motivation," these methods give each patient an important role in the group decision making process. The participants learn to work together to solve problems and overcome challenges, while learning how to apply the lessons they learn through the exercises to real life situations. By acting as a team with a group goal in mind, they become better equipped to handle real life conflicts and social interactions, while building a better self concept. (Glass & Myers, 2001).

### The value of role-playing in therapy

Many studies have noted the importance of role-playing and fantasy as aids to therapy. The therapeutic value of role-playing has often been cited for its ability to separate its subjects from reality, allowing them to explore different situations and perspectives than their own, while helping them learn important lessons that can be applied to real life circumstances. In 1976, Lewis Yablonsky published an informative book on the positive effects of psychodrama through the use of role-playing. It is a survey of the theories and techniques associated with psychodramatic role-playing which clearly attests to the success of these therapeutic techniques. It includes very interesting transcripts of actual clinical role-playing sessions and praises the incredible healing and learning powers that role-playing can provide for patients (Yablonsky, 1992). Carrington (2005) also addresses the topic of role-playing as an important tool in therapy. She addresses the positive aspects of role-playing and notes its ability to empower and assure the individual. Carrington discusses her experience with an office secretary who, through role-playing the position of her boss, is able to find a way to adjust and take control of her working situation in a much more effective manner. The subject was able to gain confidence, while being allowed to view her situation from another perspective and learning the complex social dynamics of her workplace (Carrington, 2005).

As John Hughes (1988) shows in his case study with 'Malori,' role-playing can be an extremely effective form of therapy. In this study, a girl uses her hobby of role-playing to help overcome the obstacles she faces from a severe form of depression and numerous struggles with gender identity. Through role-playing, she is able to step outside of her own world and her own problems to look at life through a new perspective. By doing this she engages her imagination and brings forth the fantasies and issues she faces within. Eventually, she is able to reach a point where she is happy when role-playing and can transfer these positive feelings to her real life. W.D. Blackmon's 1994 case study also highlights the positive effects that role playing can have on patients. His study describes the use of the role-playing game "Dungeons and Dragons" in the psychotherapeutic treatment of a young man. He describes it as "a form of group-related, organized, controlled waking fantasy" which, when paired with therapy, was effectively used help the young man to allow his "underlying unconscious thoughts to come to awareness and be worked through" (Blackmon, 1994). He notes

that young adults are able to develop a better self-concept if their fantasies are “tolerated, encouraged, and guided” through some kind of creative outlet. Games such as “Dungeons and Dragons” seem to allow just that, as well as providing a positive source of social interaction. As Blackmon concludes in his case study, “the use of this game as an adjunct to therapy can allow patients an opportunity to explore their mental dungeons and slay their psychic dragons.” This creative use of role-playing in therapy seems to be quite promising in its practical applications and future possibilities.

### Therapy in virtual worlds/MMOs

Recently, the therapeutic nature of online games has become the subject of much research. Many have acknowledged the importance of fantasy and role-playing online games in psychological self-analysis and development. One case study investigated the aid of MMOs in the therapy of a young man referred to as Mr. A. This study provided an interesting look at the positive and negative aspects of MMOs as used in therapy. In the on-line gaming world, Mr. A could be anything he wanted, which helped him build the self esteem he so desperately lacked in real life. “Online role-playing also allowed Mr. A the opportunity to explore real and threatening aspects of himself but in an environment where consequences were not real” (Allison, 2006). He was able to learn and grow greatly through the pairing of his on-line gaming experiences with therapy. However, Mr. A’s use of MMOs tended to be quite excessive, and prevented him from forming meaningful real world relationships. As stated in the study, the

“increased substitution of cyberspace-based personas and relationships at the expense of face-to-face interaction may create a developmental double-edged sword. The Internet may provide a socially anxious youth the opportunity for modified peer group interactions, yet it does little to foster the development of genuine intimacy” (Allison, 2006).

Although the therapeutic possibilities of on-line games are quite promising, we must not overlook the problems that could arise with such therapy. However, more research is being done and more developments are being made to explore the possibilities of this type of therapy.

Specific games, organizations, and virtual spaces are now being designed specifically for the purpose of therapy and support. One British organization called ARCI is even using the virtual world of Second Life to help abused children learn important life skills. They enter the virtual world to learn to socialize, work as a team, and learn essential computer skills (Terdiman, 2005). This virtual environment lends itself very well to developmental learning and counseling such as this. Brain Talk Industries is another organization that is paving the way in this field by creating a variety of on-line communities and forums which provide support and information for specific groups suffering from physical and mental disabilities. John Lester, the president of BrainTalk, is even working on ways for these communities to be carried over and enhanced through the virtual worlds of MMOs (Lester, 2005). The private island Brigadoon in the online game Second Life is his innovative attempt to enhance the lives of people dealing with a form of autism called Asperger’s Syndrome. This island is reserved specifically for people diagnosed with this disorder. Because the disorder can make normal social

interaction very difficult in real life, these people are often unable to feel a sense of belonging in the real world. However, this virtual world provides an ideal place for them to communicate and interact with other people dealing with the same problems. Brigadoon allows people with Asperger's to form very important social bonds in the virtual world, while learning and growing through the support and experiences of others (Lester, 2005).

Live2Give is another one of BrainTalk's projects within Second Life. It provides an on-line world for people dealing with cerebral palsy and other physical disabilities. It was created by John Lester and June-Marie Mahay to give these people opportunities in a virtual world that they do not have in the real world. Mahay states that these people "felt stigmatized by their disabilities, (which) kept them from the normal social integration we take for granted. Second Life removes both of these things" (Terdiman, 2005). Like Brigadoon, this virtual world brings people together who can relate and help each other in their similar struggles. According to Mahay, this seems to be a quite empowering experience, and has "revolutionized how they feel about themselves, and their part to play in the world" (Lester, 2005).

### Study Design

In order to research and evaluate the possibility of using MMOs as therapy to help people dealing with psychological problems or disorders, I began by first gaining experience in the gaming world of MMOs by playing Everquest II for at least five hours per week over a period of about four months. This was quite a time commitment, considering my full schedule of classes, work-study job, and participation as a member of the university's softball team. However, this allowed me to view the on-line gaming phenomenon from an insider's perspective, helping me to understand the overall purpose and underlying motivations that make such games so compelling. When I first began to play the game, I felt like a complete outsider, but I quickly learned the ropes and began to feel more like a part of the gaming community. In addition to my in-game research, I have also consulted a wide range of literature addressing the fields of conventional and alternative therapy, as well as emerging research on the therapeutic effects of gaming. Finally, I recruited a group of interview participants to share their experiences, thoughts, and opinions about the use of MMOs for therapy.

In recruiting interview participants, I hoped to target individuals who have experience with both online gaming and psychological disorders. I posted a recruitment message (see Appendix 1) to several forums dealing with gaming, as well as a few that were focused on the field of psychology/therapy:

- RPG Consortium: A forum with a discussion board for a wide variety of role-playing games.
- Women Gamers: A discussion board devoted to female gamers
- Everquest II: An official Everquest II forum devoted to non-gameplay topics
- Therapy: A discussion board which addresses many issues regarding therapy and psychology
- Living with mental illness: A forum which gives online support and information to people dealing with psychological disorders and therapy

- Brigadoon: Online support group with a discussion board devoted to gamers with Asperger's Syndrome

Most of my responses came from posts I made on the gaming forums. I was quite pleased with the interest that was shown for my research through these responses. However, I had a more difficult time trying to recruit people from the psychology/therapy forums. To conduct my interviews, I first created a survey (see Appendix 2) on SurveyMonkey.com and sent a link to all of the people who replied to my posts. This survey consisted of a list of basic questions dealing with the person's experience with MMOs as well as therapy, finally asking for their thoughts and opinions on the use of such games as therapy. From these initial responses, I replied to the individuals through e-mail or instant messaging to ask them more specific questions about their opinions and experiences.

### Results and discussion

The results from my research provide a range of players' perspectives on the topic of using MMOs as therapy. My participants represent a variety of backgrounds, experiences, and opinions on this subject. The names of the participants have been randomly chosen to protect their identities. The world of MMOs is becoming increasingly popular, and has often been recognized for its therapeutic qualities and ability to provide an intriguing alternative to reality. What is it that draws people to these on-line games and keeps them coming back for more?

The factor of escapism is often cited as a very popular motivation for playing MMOs. Such games allow the players to become immersed within the game and create an alternate reality of their own. They are taken away from all of their real-world worries and transported to a place where they can be or do anything they please.

What makes them therapeutic is the environment itself. It's new, different, exciting. -Lane

It's very relaxing and it allows one to escape the problems of daily living and real life. It encourages interaction and social grouping, and it forces players to find ways to make associations between their characters and others. -Lisa

Lisa touches upon the central aspect of socialization in on-line gaming. With the importance of forming guilds in games such as Everquest II and World of Warcraft, these games are comprised of a great deal of social interaction. This can provide a very important source of social exchange for people who are very shy or have other issues which prevent or hinder their social interaction in real life.

There's a fairly open social structure where people can play as casually or hardcore as they wish. And depending on that level of interest, guilds (and subsequent communication) provide a home for like players. -Brian

Although these games can provide positive outlets for socialization, some players take this too far and allow MMOs to become their only source of social interaction, hindering their growth and personal interaction in real life. This is one thing that would have to be

strictly prevented in the implementation of MMO therapy. However, some believe that people game to make up for something that they are missing in their real life. MMOs provide an opportunity for ego building empowerment by allowing the player to be and do whatever he or she pleases within the game. They are allowed to explore different personas through role-playing

Please keep in mind that EVERYONE who plays an MMO has certain problems in their lives. Due to the time and effort involved, nobody with a perfect life would sit at a computer for up to ten hours a day. –John

People often feel weak in their real lives, in MMOs it's a level playing field. Everyone starts out the same, and how far you go is limited only by yourself...In the game, I felt powerful. I was somebody. –Tyler

All of these positive aspects lend to the therapeutic quality of the MMO experience. Would it be possible to use such games for therapy to help people dealing with psychological issues or disorders? What aspects of these games make them ideal for therapy? One very popular advantage of using MMOs for therapy is the concept of anonymity. It allows players to be much more comfortable in social interaction and allows them to open up on situations and issues that they would normally be very uncomfortable discussing.

The best aspect for therapy in the game is anonymity. Nobody truly knows who each person is, so people can feel much more natural talking about themselves. It also provides an easy way to chat with people that are in similar situations. -Randy

This concept of anonymity is very important to people dealing with anxiety disorders and social phobias. Many people who struggle with problems such as these have a serious lack of real-world social interaction. MMOs provide a more secure outlet which these people are allowed to socialize and learn important skills that can eventually transfer to real life interaction.

I have mild to moderate social anxiety, and I'm much more comfortable dealing with people through an avatar. –Rachel

In a group situation, the anxiety of meeting other people face to face would be removed...Removing the burden of reality may allow patients to express themselves more openly. –Brian

The anonymity of MMOs is also very important because it provides a more discreet opportunity for people to seek help through therapy. So many people suffering from psychological disorders are left untreated because they are simply too ashamed to seek professional help. MMO therapy could allow many of these people an alternative to the stigma associated with traditional kinds of therapy.

A large amount of people with psychological problems are embarrassed to step forward and let their immediate surroundings know that they suffer from depressions or other forms of mental ailments. An MMO could effectively grant them "immunity" as they wouldn't have to be physically

present in front of a psychotherapist or a group of people with problems. The "shield" against prying eyes would be an immense motivational factor, in my opinion. –Sam

Although this factor of anonymity might help the patient feel more comfortable in participating in socialization, this alone should not act as a replacement for real life social interaction. Communication through an avatar simply cannot perform all that is necessary for psychological growth. In-game therapy would not be able to completely fill in the role of the therapist. The game takes away many factors of real life therapy that make it very effective. It would be extremely difficult to extract many very important cues and details from the patient in MMO therapy.

My therapist learns a great deal by watching body language - she can tell when I'm uncomfortable about a question she's asked, how much eye contact I make or don't make, and whether my body language is closed or open. She would lose a lot of nonverbal cues in an online office visit... MMOs provide ways to HIDE, not REVEAL... therapy is all about digging out and looking at stuff you have trapped inside you. –Rachel

Another factor involving the use of MMOs for therapy is the question of real life application. How much of what is learned in the virtual world can be carried over to the player's real life? Although there is much support for the healing nature of playing on-line games, even some of the people who praise the therapeutic powers of on-line gaming find that the lessons they learn and relief they get in-game do not always transfer to real life situations. Is it more of a distraction from reality than a way to deal with problems and learn?

Lots of people use MMOs as an escape from reality, and a way to act how they are unable to act in real life situations. While this may help them enjoy those experiences, I don't think it provides any help once they get out of the game. -Randy

Although EQ2 doesn't do much to help me improve RL social anxiety, it is helpful in some ways for depression, because it provides a very structured environment with achievable goals. -Rachel

MMO therapy has no value as a replacement for therapy, merely as a distraction from the problems of mental illness. –Lisa

Some people worry that these games might actually take away from real life success and growth if used excessively. When real life social interaction is replaced by in-game socialization, serious problems could arise. Gaming addiction is a very important issue to consider when contemplating the possibility of using MMOs for therapy. People have been known to take games such as this way too far, even to the point of obsession and addiction. Many of my interview participants voiced this as a concern. When it reaches this point, gaming even has the ability to act as a barrier to real life social interaction and psychological growth. When taken to such extremes, people use gaming to escape from their problems and simply ignore them in real life instead of facing them.

It does help while I'm in the game, but while outside of it the problems are still there and the more you avoid them, the worse they can become.  
-Jessica

Another aspect of the virtual world that could negatively affect the therapeutic effect of on-line gaming therapy involves the openness of the server and the sometimes offensive and thoughtless behavior of other players within the game. Some people take advantage of the games' anonymity by acting in ways that are rude, immature, and inconsiderate. Contact with such people in-game could discourage therapy participants from entering the virtual world and could even increase their fear and anxiety in social situations.

Very young player populations (WOW springs to mind, heh) would be a serious deterrent as patients cope extremely poorly with derogatory remarks and general immaturity. –Sam

Having other people as part of the game environment is a wild card...You would have to have a very controlled environment so that the individuals would know that it's safe. - Lee

How could conventional therapeutic techniques and practices be translated into the virtual world to create an effective form of therapy? My research shows very creative and thoughtful ideas and possibilities which could provide a model to create a successful therapeutic experience through an MMO. However, it seems clear that MMO therapy should not be intended as a replacement for the traditional therapist, but used instead as a tool by the therapist. It can be used in this manner to point the patient in the right direction and assist them in developing a sense of understanding of themselves and the social world around them. The virtual world is also suggested as a "practice environment" which can be used to try out new ideas and challenges assigned by the therapist.

I actually talked to my therapist about using the game as a sort of practice environment for social interaction, since I'm rather shy. She thought that it could be a positive way to practice this, since the consequences for rejection/failure were low. –Lee

This seems to be a very promising idea which could be a great help in boosting confidence and helping the patient to apply what they have learned in the virtual world to their everyday lives. Other suggestions for successful applications of therapy in the virtual world include the use of group therapy through therapist led activities and possible "player" and "mentor" learning explorations.

A 'player mentor' and a 'player patient'. The mentor supervises the patient as he/she explores the virtual world and in certain critical moments such as meeting new people online or perhaps joining a guild the mentor is there to guide and help the 'patient player'. I can also easily imagine groups of players meeting and going on hunts, meeting to craft items or whatever the particular game world has to offer, a sort of group therapy. -Sam

This seems to be an interesting approach that sticks more closely to therapist/client relations. This is important to think about as long as we take into consideration the limitations of the medium in which it is presented.

### Conclusion

Throughout my exploration of this question, my research has revealed many positive as well as negative points of view on the possibility of using games for therapy to help people dealing with psychological issues or disorders. Through playing the game Everquest II, consulting much of the leading literature on this topic, and interviewing gamers, I was able to obtain quite a unique perspective on this issue.

Although my literature review and interviews provided an overall positive view on this issue, they also noted some very important negative aspects of this idea. My sources praised MMOs for their therapeutic effects, but also warned against the possibility of addiction and further social isolation in real life interaction. On-line games were noted for their ability to provide anonymity to their players, thus offering a less intimidating opportunity for social interaction and psychological reflection. They note that the important factor of anonymity within this kind of therapy would allow more people to discreetly seek help on their own. Although the anonymity that exists within such games provides a sense of freedom that could allow patients to open up, explore, and grow, it also allows other people in the game to create an equally negative experience for the patient. To prevent this, a private server could be made into a controlled environment specifically designed and dedicated to therapy.

Care should also be taken to assure that game addiction is not an issue. The patients should learn their limits in the game and be encouraged to participate in real life social interaction as much as possible. However, this kind of therapy should not exist on its own, but should be a tool that is used by therapists to help the patient learn and develop through their experiences. Project Brigadoon and Live2Give provide very interesting models for effective ways which MMOs can be used for some types of therapy. Their open ended approach allows people dealing with similar issues to interact and work together to provide a life-enhancing experience. The possibilities of MMOs as used for therapy are quite promising as long as its limitations and dangers should be taken into consideration as well. Further research should examine better ways to create a form of therapy in MMOs.

## Appendix 1. Recruitment message

Hello,

My name is Amy and I am an undergraduate enrolled in a course on virtual worlds at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. Our class has been playing Everquest II for the past four months, with characters ranging in level from 10 to 27. Our primary characters are members of the guild The Vindicators on the Antonia Bayle server.

As part of an ongoing research project, I would like to speak with people over the age of 18 about their thoughts on the possibility of using MMOs as therapy to help people dealing with depression, anxiety, social phobias, etc. If you have any experience or opinions on this topic, I would greatly appreciate your input.

These interviews could take place via e-mail, in-game, or over an anonymous instant messaging connection. I will preserve the anonymity and confidentiality of all participants.

If you are willing to be interviewed about your thoughts on this topic, please contact me at:

[gaming884@hotmail.com](mailto:gaming884@hotmail.com)

I understand that the gaming community is bombarded with survey requests that never lead anywhere. This request is different. Our class is committed to sharing its research findings. At the end of the semester, all student papers and presentations will be linked to the course web site and made available to anyone with an Internet connection.

For more details about our course and the research project, visit:

<http://www.trinity.edu/adelwich/worlds/faq.html>

Thanks in advance for your time.

Amy

## Appendix 2. Interview questions

- Do you have experience playing MMOs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games) or other kinds of online games?
- If so, what specific games have you played?
- What was your motivation behind playing MMOs and what did you gain from your gaming experience?
- From your experience, do you think online gaming could be used as therapy to help people dealing with depression, anxiety, social phobias, etc.? Please explain.
- Do you have experience with any other form of traditional/conventional therapy? (psychotherapy, art therapy, play therapy, etc.) If so, please explain your thoughts and opinions on your experience.
- How could the conventional forms of therapy be transferred into a virtual world?
- In your opinion, what traits would make a virtual environment more or less suitable for use as therapy? (What are the specific aspects of the virtual environments/MMOs that make them therapeutic?)
- What are some possible advantages or disadvantages of MMO therapy as opposed to more conventional types of therapy?
- Please feel free to add any additional thoughts about your experiences or opinions on this topic.

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