

I HAVE LIVED A THOUSAND LIVES:

TEACHING MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS ABOUT THE GEEK
AND GAMING COMMUNITY

Dr. Steve Kuniak, Tiffany Sims, Brittany Riffle, Rivka Dattlo





LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Highlight the underlying concerns with mainstream mental health treatment and the needs of the geek and gaming community.
1. Identify counseling literature that supports the core theme of relationship as the central factor in the change process.
1. Recommend assessment and treatment options that center around geek culture, but are rooted in classic mental health theory.
1. Review examples of counseling interventions that leverage geek and gamer themes for delivery.



“Video games foster the mindset that
allows creativity to grow”

—NOLAN BUSHNELL,
ATARI CO-FOUNDER

Why is this important for mental health professionals?

- Your Clients
- Your Colleagues
- Your Friends
- Your Family

“People of all ages play video games. There is no longer a ‘stereotype game player,’ but instead a game player could be your grandparent, your boss, or even your professor.”

- Jason Allaire, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology at North Carolina State University and co-director of the Gains Through Gaming Lab

Geek/Gamer Culture in Mental Health: Past, Present, & Future

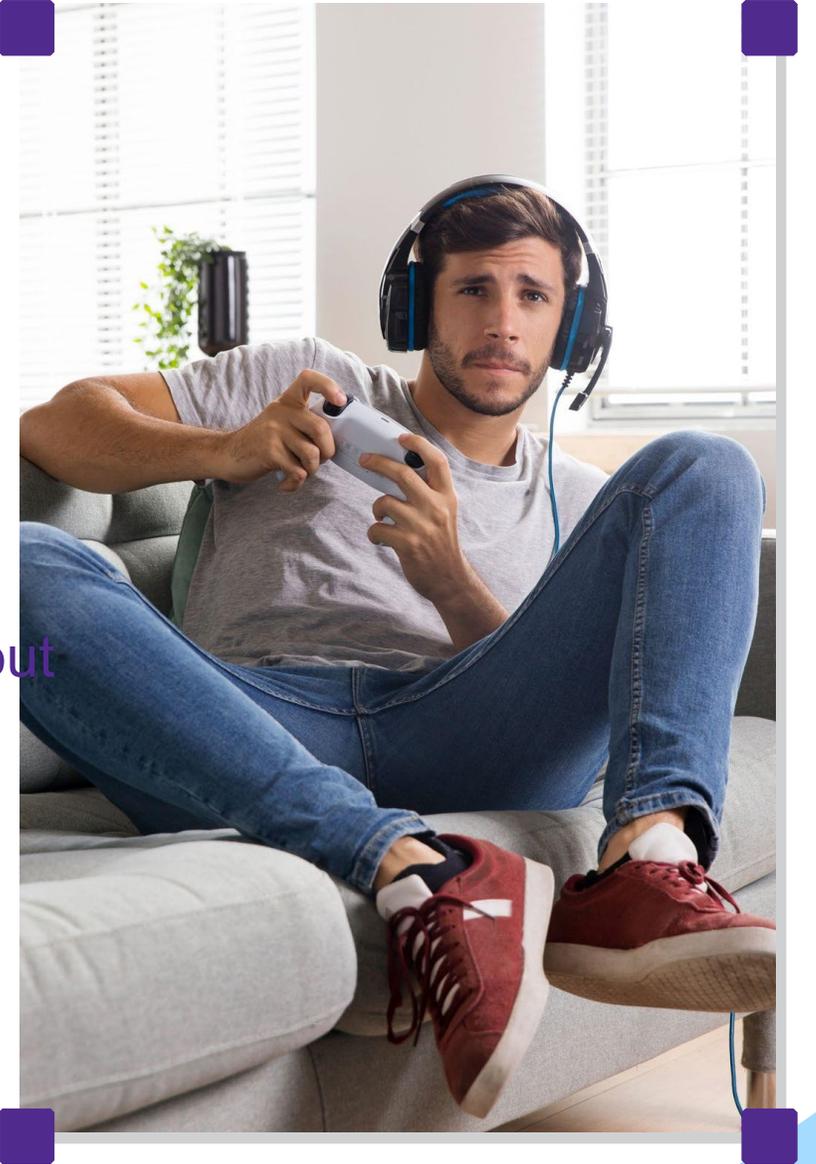


Concerns with Mainstream Mental Health Treatment and Gamer Clients

While mental health professionals have grown to have a better understanding of many aspects of clients' lives, many still lack adequate **knowledge** about gamer clients and what comes along with that identity.

Many professionals have a negative perspective on the impact of video gaming and internet culture on people's lives, likely due to a majority of research and media focusing on excessive gaming and gaming disorders (Wang et al., 2019).

There are a multitude of **negative stereotypes** that exist in regard to video gaming and gamers themselves in mainstream mental health treatment. Mental health professionals must work to increase their awareness about the realities of video gaming culture to better understand and treat this client population (LaFleur et al., 2018).



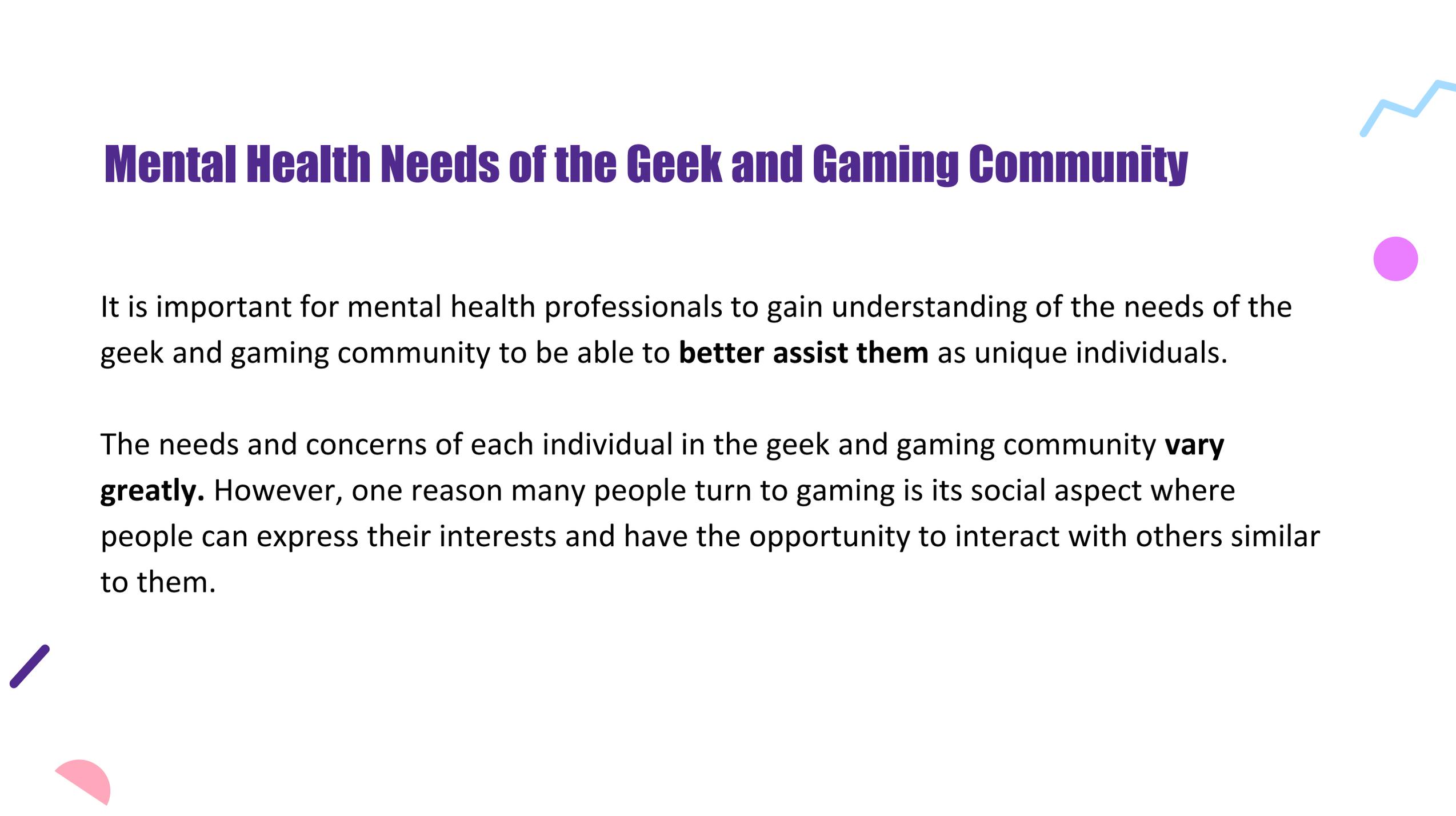
Mental Health Needs of the Geek and Gaming Community

While the viewpoint on gaming culture is diverse in mainstream mental health treatment, there are many potential therapeutic benefits to video gaming that are being increasingly studied. This includes the use of video games as a **therapeutic modality** for both children and adults, such as with the use of gaming as a type of play therapy (LaFleur et al., 2017).

Many individuals use video gaming as an outlet to express creativity, engage in self-exploration, communicate with others, and feel a sense of belonging that they might not have in real life (LaFleur et al., 2017).



Mental Health Needs of the Geek and Gaming Community



It is important for mental health professionals to gain understanding of the needs of the geek and gaming community to be able to **better assist them** as unique individuals.

The needs and concerns of each individual in the geek and gaming community **vary greatly**. However, one reason many people turn to gaming is its social aspect where people can express their interests and have the opportunity to interact with others similar to them.

Ethical Obligations

Just as other aspects of culture such as race, gender, age, and more are important to understand and be respectful of, video gaming and internet culture can be critical part of some people's lives.

There are ethical obligations around meeting our clients where they are...



ACA CODE OF ETHICS



A.1.a. Primary Responsibility

The primary responsibility of counselors is to respect the **dignity** and promote the **welfare** of clients.

To promote the welfare of clients in the most effective way possible, we need to understand and respect them as a unique individual and what is important to them in their life such as gaming.



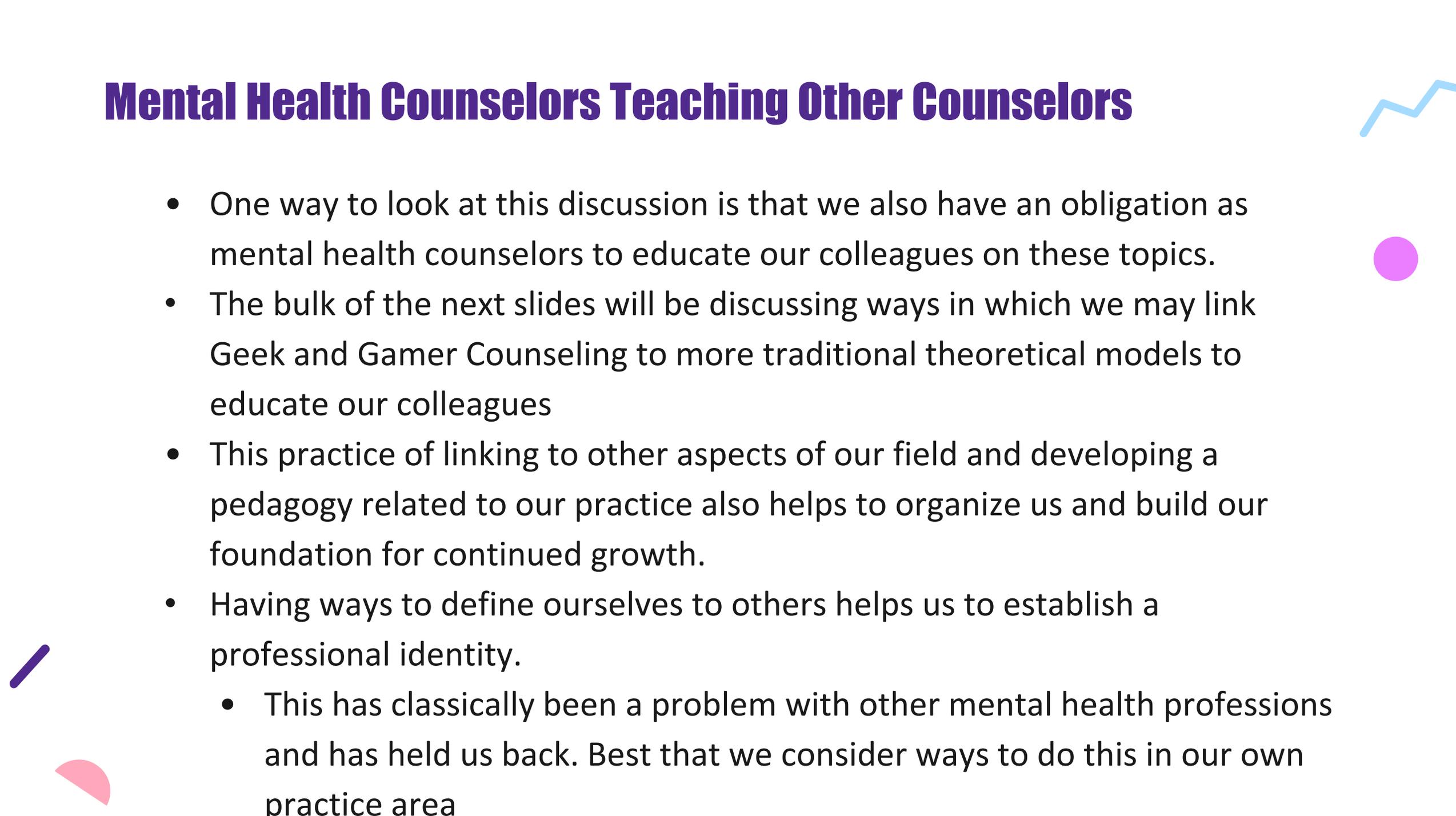
E.5.b. Cultural Sensitivity

Counselors recognize that culture affects the manner in which clients' problems are **defined** and **experienced**.

Video gaming and internet culture can have a strong impact on how an individual perceives and experiences problems. Something that others may view as unimportant such as a stressful tournament or getting a higher ranking may be highly valued by a client.

(American Counseling Association, 2014).

Mental Health Counselors Teaching Other Counselors



- One way to look at this discussion is that we also have an obligation as mental health counselors to educate our colleagues on these topics.
- The bulk of the next slides will be discussing ways in which we may link Geek and Gamer Counseling to more traditional theoretical models to educate our colleagues
- This practice of linking to other aspects of our field and developing a pedagogy related to our practice also helps to organize us and build our foundation for continued growth.
- Having ways to define ourselves to others helps us to establish a professional identity.
 - This has classically been a problem with other mental health professions and has held us back. Best that we consider ways to do this in our own practice area

Definition of Professional Counseling



Counseling is a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals.



American Counseling Association (2010) - The 20/20 Consensus Definition of Professional Counseling

ACA Conference 2010 in Pittsburgh, PA



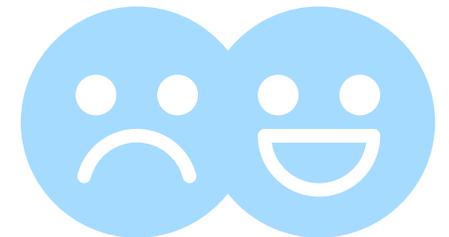
The Counseling Relationship Impact

- The Counseling Relationship is a central component of the change process.
 - Most common predictor of change (Sexton & Whiston, 1994)
- Mattering to Others (Rayle, 2006)
 - May Strengthen the Counseling Relationship
- Trust is the Cornerstone of the Counseling Relationship (Barnett & Johnson, 2008)
 - The formal processes we put in place keep this relationship and its importance in mind.
- With so much focus on the importance of our relationship, would not respect of this particular culture go a significant way towards relationship building?

Mental Health Needs of the Geek and Gaming Community

Individuals who struggle to regulate their emotions in real-life may feel the need to turn to gaming during leisure time to elicit positive emotions, but video games can also help them learn **emotion regulation skills** as well (Granic et al., 2014).

Gaming can elicit both positive and negative emotions, which is a potential benefit that can help individuals learn **adaptive regulation strategies** and gain practice in controlling their emotions (Granic et al., 2014). These improvements made while playing video games may influence how they regulate their emotions in real-life situations when they are trying to accomplish goals (Granic et al., 2014).



Gaming & Counseling Theory



Existential Counseling Theory & Gaming

Fundamentals of Theory

- Individuals are accountable for actively seeking and establishing meaning in their lives (Gehart, 2016)
 - Video games frequently revolve around self-directed character development, plot, and action (LaFleur et al., 2018)
- Human suffering is inevitable; what matters is how we perceive and react to this suffering (Gehart, 2016)
 - In gaming, we encounter new challenges, meet new adversaries and learn to adapt/acclimate to new situations/environments (LaFleur et al., 2018)

Existential Counseling Theory & Gaming (cont.)



Therapeutic Environment

- A place where client and counselor can be wholly present, genuine and engage their intuition (Wadlington, 2017)
 - While gaming, client and counselor can enter a limitless dimension where they rely on their senses and immediate instincts to interact with each other and their environment (LaFleur et al., 2018)
- 

Dual Role of Counselor

- Ally: Source of empathy and encouragement to client (Wadlington, 2017)
 - Observer: Witness to client's experience in the moment (Wadlington, 2017)
 - By engaging with our clients in the 'digital sandbox', counselors serve as both ally and witness as clients encounter complex adversaries and new challenges (LaFleur et al., 2018 & Wadlington, 2017)
- 
- 

Existential Counseling Theory & Gaming (cont.)

Relationship as Conduit for Change

- Relationship is supportive, ever-present, and boundless where clients can expose their vulnerabilities and healing can occur (Gehart, 2016)
 - Video games allow a safe space where it is acceptable to try out real-time, new roles and strategies (LaFleur et al., 2018)
 - It is through this here-and-now interactive engagement that character growth and development occur (LaFleur et al., 2018 & Wadlington, 2017)

Narrative Counseling Theory & Gaming

Fundamentals of Theory

- We each have narratives or stories that we create about ourselves (Gehart, 2016)
- Problems are considered independent of people; they can, therefore, be extracted and examined in an effort to re-write our stories (Dinc, 2019)
- Our narratives must be considered within their sociocultural context (Murdock et al., 2012)
- Emphasis on client strengths to uproot and expose problems in an effort to generate and cultivate new stories (Gehart, 2016)
 - Gaming can serve as a mechanism to objectify problems as extraneous to the client while exploring new storylines and outcomes (Franco et al., 2016)

Narrative Counseling Theory & Gaming (cont.)

Therapeutic Environment

- A safe space where client and counselor join together on equal footing to establish a new narrative (Dinc, 2019)
 - Gaming provides a culturally-relevant and rich environment to the geek/gamer client (Jung & Gilet, 2021)
 - Gaming offers a safe setting where a counselor can enter the world of the client, and where together, they can co-create and co-explore alternate storylines (Franco, 2016)

Narrative Counseling Theory & Gaming (cont.)

Role of Counselor

- Counselor is partner in reframing the story (Dinc, 2019)
- By exploring the existing storyline and extricating the problem, counselor helps client to create a new, more favorable outcome (Dinc, 2019)
 - Counselor can encourage client use of role-playing games so client can 'try on' various roles and experiment with different outcomes (Franco, 2016)
 - Outcomes of these new roles/stories can be discussed and evaluated during session (Franco, 2016)

Narrative Counseling Theory & Gaming (cont.)

Relationship as Collaborative Venture

- Respectful alliance between co-writers equally motivated to author a storyline that supports and reflects the client's perspective, culture, and needs
 - While gaming, counselor steps into client's narrative and together they navigate various roles/stories to assess 'best fit' (Dinc, 2019; Franco, 2016)
 - By engaging in geek/gamer culture, client/counselor engagement, trust, and rapport are strengthened (Dinc, 2019)

Narrative Counseling Theory & Gaming (cont.)

Relationship as Collaborative Venture

- Respectful alliance between co-writers equally motivated to author a storyline that supports and reflects the client's perspective, culture, and needs
 - While gaming, counselor steps into client's narrative and together they navigate various roles/stories to assess 'best fit' (Dinc, 2019; Franco, 2016)
 - By engaging in geek/gamer culture, client/counselor engagement, trust, and rapport are strengthened (Dinc, 2019)

Geek Culture: Assessment & Treatment Options

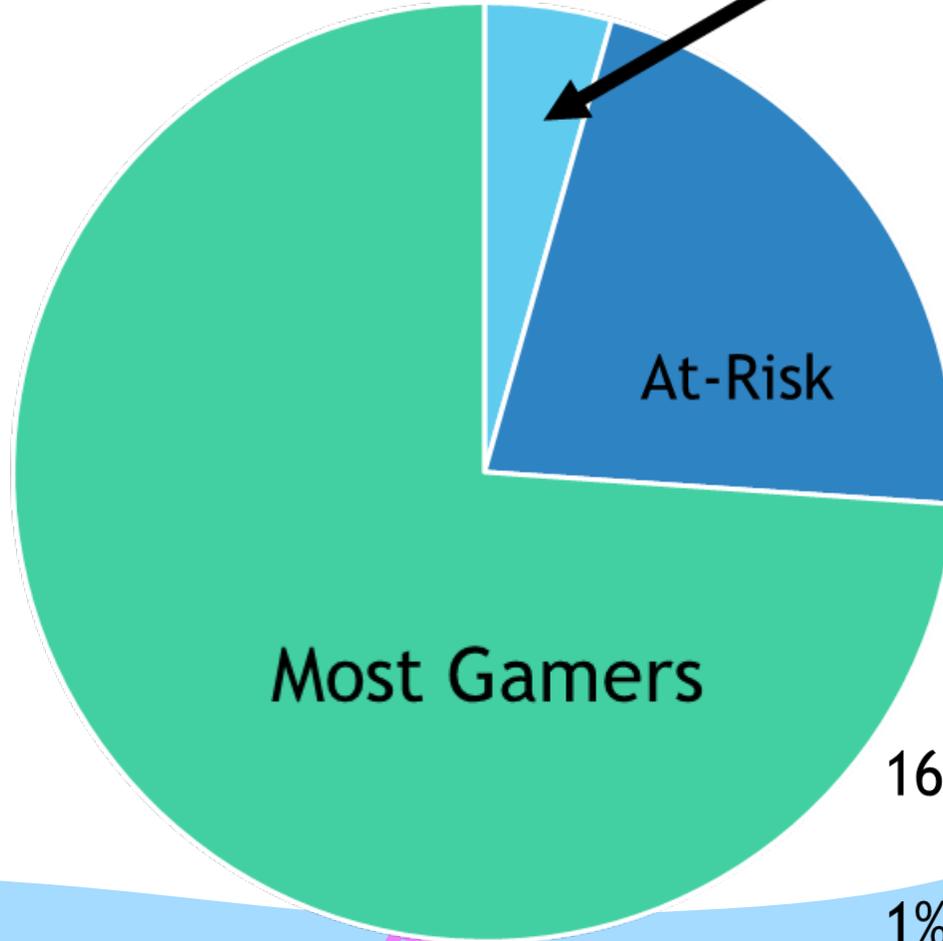


Assessment

- If you are unaware of a problem (pre-contemplative) you have no opportunity to decide if you want to make a change.
- Assessment can include a person's motivation to make a change
- Assessment can monitor if change is occurring and helping an individual
- Assessment can help monitor maintenance and prevent relapses
- Assessment simply provides feedback that people can use or not



Assessment Targets



Problematic Users

At-Risk

Most Gamers

164 Million Gamers in the U.S.

1% = 1.64 Million

Gamer Assessment Tool

- Draft Available on Experience Points: Resources tab
- As we see in the Indivisible Self model of Wellness, people are multifaceted (Myers & Sweeney, 2004)
- This assessment draws inspiration from the Indivisible Self Model and proposes several domains for counselors to explore with their Gamer clients.
- These domains are identified as Visions, Refresh, Connections, Identity, and Health
- The first page of the Gamer Assessment is a data gathering tool which focuses on factual data relating to aspects of play
- Types of consoles played and frequency and duration of game play are explored
- Also, included a counselor resource tool
 - For those less familiar with gaming and geek culture

Clinical Applications of Therapeutic Gaming

- **SPARX**
 - Intervention for Depression in adolescents
- **Spiritfarer**
 - Grief/Loss intervention
- **Tetris**
 - Decrease intrusive thoughts following a traumatic event
- **Minecraft**
 - Social skills building
- **Call of Duty**
 - PTSD intervention



SPARX: Treatment for adolescents experiencing depression

- SPARX
 - CBT based computer modules intended to decrease negative impacts of depression symptoms in adolescents
 - Acronym stands for **S**mart, **P**ositive, **A**ctive, **R**ealistic, **X**-factor thoughts
 - Offers vast appeal and likely to be enjoyed by adolescent clients which increased treatment adherence
- Basis of game
 - First person, fantasy-based computer game
 - Client selects their avatar and plays to restore harmony in the game world
 - Quest completed by destroying GNATs (**G**loomy **N**egative **A**utomatic **T**houghts) that overtook the world
 - Seven modules
 - At both the beginning and end of the modules, a “guide” offers age/developmentally-appropriate psychoeducation and provides real-world challenges (homework) for the player/client
 - Paper notebook also supplements the computer game for players/clients to journal feedback about their playing experience

(Merry et al., 2012)

SPARX: Results of vanquishing “GNATs”

- How it stacks up to treatment as usual (TAU)
 - 44% of participants playing SPARX experienced a decrease in symptoms vs. 26% in the TAU group
 - Experience with game play provided larger improvement for clients than stand alone psychotherapy

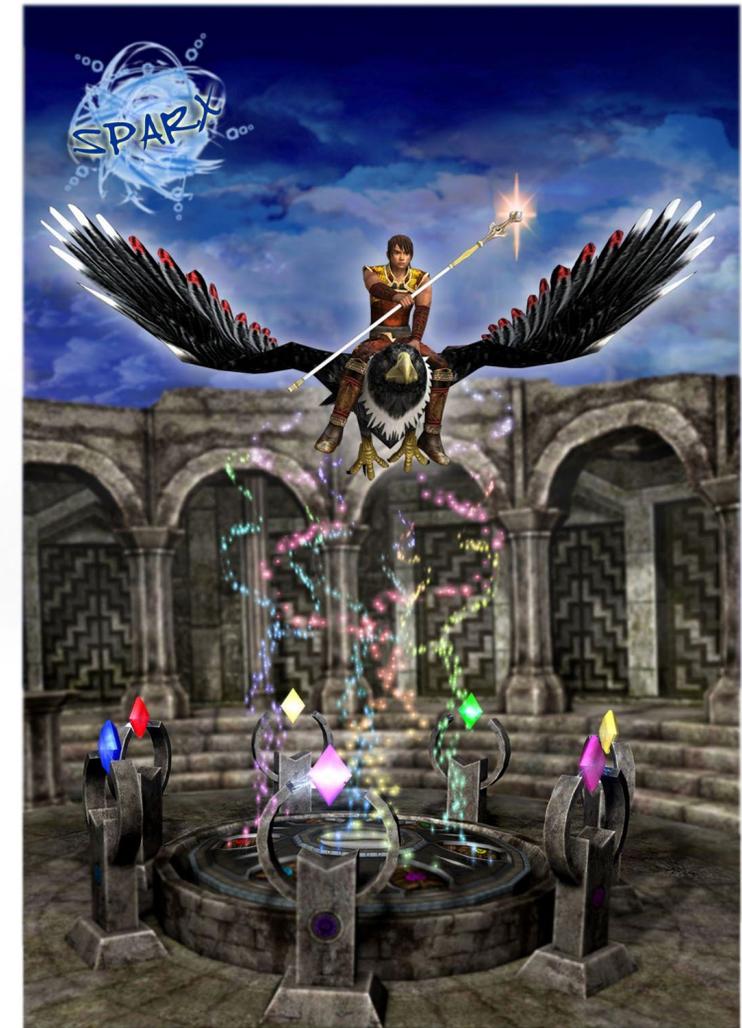


Figure 1. Gameplay image from SPARX video game. Adapted from SPARX, a videogame for depression, by Burt & Cohen, 2013, https://d112y698adiu2z.cloudfront.net/photos/production/solution_photos/000/063/633/datas/original.jpg

(Merry et al., 2012)

Spiritfarer

- Spiritfarer is a game that revolves around letting go of loved ones who have passed
 - Stella (the protagonist) must guide her friends' souls to the Everdoor, one by one
 - When these souls are aboard the ship (the vehicle Stella operates to ferry her loved ones), they build houses full of their possessions
 - Once a soul disembarks the ship at the Everdoor, their “house” on the ship becomes overgrown and covered in flowers that are unique to that soul
 - Over time, if Stella (the player) does not remove the houses, the ship becomes crowded and does not have additional room
 - This is symbolic of “holding on” and not “letting go” when it comes to grief
 - Much like Stella’s ship, the rough waters of life may be difficult to navigate carrying around the weight of grief
- Spiritfarer was created specifically with the concept of assisting players with moving through the stages of grief and portraying death more openly (Sivins, 2022)
 - Achieved through the soundtrack of the game and the in-game dialogue between Stella and her friends (Sivins, 2022)

Spiritfarer: Experiencing Grief through Gaming

- During their time on Stella's ship, passengers share their life stories, knowledge, jokes, and experiences which adds interest to the gameplay
 - Ultimate goal however is to guide them to the Everdoor
 - Souls express gratitude and messages of peace to Stella
- Every soul that the player assists in passing through the Everdoor provides a "Spirit Flower"
 - Collecting these acts as currency to upgrade the ship to a larger vessel and create a more interesting landscape/unlock game areas for the player (Wright, 2022)
 - Symbolic for creating a larger life through acceptance of grief/loss rather than minimizing into grief experiences
 - Spirit Flowers are unique to the soul and harvested from their structure they lived in on Stella's ship during the journey (much like a loved one's home)
 - Picking these flowers causes the vines to die on the structure, so there is a give and take with this resource
 - Leaving the homes takes up room available for useful resources on the ship (crop space, etc.)
 - Sends the message that it is okay to leave relics (no damage done to the ship if left) but a price is paid if this "takes up too much room"

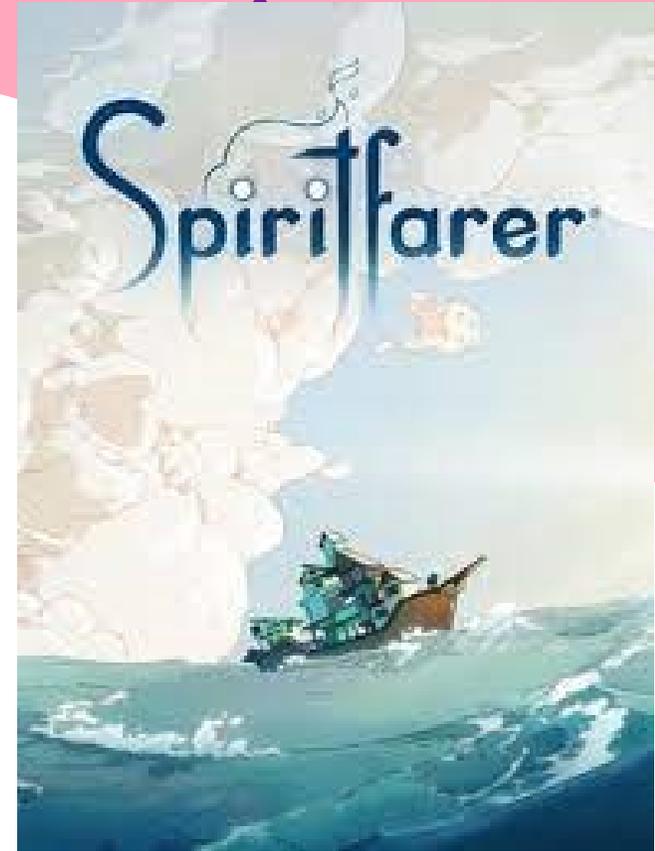


Figure 2. Image of Spiritfarer game. Adopted from Spiritfarer developed by Thunder Lotus Games. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spiritfarer>

Tetris

- Tetris is a single player, puzzle-style game
 - A player is required to strategically place various blocks of different colors/shapes into patterns that complete “rows” across the playing field
 - Blocks are called “tetriminos”
 - Once a line is filled across with tetriminos, the row is cleared away, providing the player with more space to play
 - Tetriminos continually fall at increasingly faster speeds
 - Player must focus on the falling blocks to strategically rotate and place them quickly in an attempt to clear the board before they run out of playing space
 - Tetris has broken the barriers of language and culture for over 40 years (created in 1984)
 - This allows for applicability to the field of mental health, as it already has a large place in various cultural backgrounds (Tetris, 2023)



Tetris: Retro Solution for Modern Day Trauma

- Utilized as treatment for intrusive thoughts related to psychological trauma
- Easy for clients to play/learn and does not cause distress during game play
- Intrusive thoughts/memories occur following traumatic experiences that can persist into acute stress disorder or posttraumatic stress disorder
 - Also associated with depression and complicated grief
 - Intrusive thoughts often negatively impact areas of functioning for clients
- Time window of several hours post-traumatic experience exists during which trauma memory is able to be interrupted
 - Fear memory stabilization is able to be disrupted during this limited time
 - Tasks that require high visuospatial demands can disrupt the development of intrusive thoughts by disrupting the sensory aspects of memory



Figure 3. Image of Tetris game. Image of App available on Amazon for download. <https://www.amazon.com/Tetris-Online-Inc/dp/B00HAOGSYG>

(Iyadurai et al., 2018)

Minecraft

- Players create a world/landscape from various blocks
 - No objective, no goal - just creativity
 - Three dimensional world in a “Lego-like” fashion
 - Similar to virtual sandtray activity
 - Game itself is called a “sandbox game”
 - First person perspective game
- Popular worldwide
 - Played in every country in the world
 - Downloaded over 100 million times
- Main purpose of the game is to create collaborative play within the player community
 - Highly social



Figure 4. Image of Minecraft cover art for Nintendo game. Image adapted from Minecraft by Mojang Studios. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minecraft>

(Riordan & Spark, 2017)

Minecraft: Building Connection One Block at a Time



- Minecraft has been used to spark socialization and building of social skills offline
 - Clients who may be limited to their home can obtain social interaction in a more accessible way and build a community
 - Clients experiencing Autism Spectrum Disorder can build social skills in the virtual world that they can utilize in the “real world”, gaining positive perspectives on the benefits of socialization
 - An entire online community for players experiencing Autism Spectrum Disorder exists called Autcraft
 - Minecraft also supports the building of problem solving skills, creativity, and the formation of persistence as the game design requires players to constantly engage in unfamiliar territory
 - Requires players to plan ahead and play in a calculated way
 - These skills can be useful to future success
- 
- 

(Riordan & Scarf, 2017)

Call of Duty

- Virtual Reality (VR) has been used for prolonged exposure (PE) interventions for combat related PTSD symptomology (Elliot et al., 2015)
- First-person shooter (FPS) game play provides many benefits
 - Spatial cognition learning, working memory, social communication (Elliot et al., 2015)
- Recent alterations in game development have lead to formation of “clans” (cooperative game play in teams) that encourage camaraderie
 - Provides formation of identity and social interaction for player (Elliot et al., 2015)

Call of Duty: PTSD Intervention

- Best utilized with others (trusted individuals, therapists, etc.)
- Veterans face social withdrawal due to experiencing PTSD symptoms
 - FPS gameplay stimulates social interaction
- Combat veteran participants stated they gained sharpened skill sets and pleasure from experiencing simulated combat after returning home
- Many felt lost and disconnected from their previous military lifestyle and FPS games like *Call of Duty* provided safe, controlled experiences of combat for them



Figure 5, image from Call of Duty. Adapted from Call of Duty.
<https://wallpapersafari.com/cool-call-of-duty-wallpapers/>

(Elliot et al., 2015)

Clients Teaching Counselors

It's also possible that we as consumers of mental health services can teach our counselors about our own culture.

- Many of the above practices can be ways to make those connections as well. Just considering this all from a different perspective.
- This can be uncomfortable for some. But is an important test of the professional counseling relationship.

Questions? Comments?





THANKS!

Dr. Steve Kuniak -

email: stephen.kuniak@gmail.com

Twitter: @Stevagorn

experiencepts.org

Rivka S. Dattlo, MS

email: rivka8154@gmail.com

Tiffany Sims, BA

email: tiffany.sims686@gmail.com

Brittany Riffle, BA

email: bmr7190@lockhaven.edu



CREDITS: This presentation template was created by **Slidesgo** including icons by **Flaticon**, infographics and images by **Freepik**



**EXPERIENCE
POINTS**



References

- Barnett, J. E., & Johnson, W. B. (2008). *Ethics desk reference for psychologists*. American Psychological Association.
- Dinc, M. (2019). Living like playing: Working with online gamers from a narrative therapy perspective. *The International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (2), 49-57.
- Elliot, L., Golub, A., Price, M., Bennett, A. (2015). More than just a game? Combat-themed gaming among recent veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder. *Games for Health Journal*, 4(4) 271-277. <https://doi.org/10.1089/g4h.2014.0104>
- Firmin, M. W., DeWitt, K., Shell, A. L., Smith, L. A., & Zurlinden, T. E. (2019). Technology and culture: Differences between the APA and ACA ethical codes. *Current Psychology*, 38(6), 1410-1416.
- Franco, G. E. (2016). Videogames as a therapeutic tool in the context of narrative therapy. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01657>
- Gehart, D. (2016). *Theory and treatment planning in counseling and psychotherapy*. (2nd ed.) Mason, OH: Cengage Learning
- Granic, I., Lobel, A., & Engels, R. C. (2014). The benefits of playing video games. *American Psychologist*, 69(1), 66–78. <https://doi-org.proxy-commonwealthu.klnpa.org/10.1037/a0034857>
- Jung, J., & Gillet, G. (2021). Psychotherapy mediated by videogames. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 102(2), 281–296. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00207578.2020.1847601>

References

- Myers, J. E., & Sweeney, T. J. (2004). The indivisible self: An evidence-based model of wellness. *Journal of Individual Psychology, 60*, 234-244.
- Kazakova, G. M., Andreev, E. A., & Tuzovskiy, I. D. (2018). Geek culture as a new 'image' of contemporary culture. *KnE Engineering, 169-175*.
- LaFleur, L. B., Hebert, Z. J., & Dupuy, A. S. (2017). Leveling up your game: The use of video games as a therapeutic modality. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health, 13*(1), 58–67. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15401383.2017.1328293>
- Iyadurai, L., Blackwell, S. E., Meiser-Stedman, R., Watson, P. C., Bonsall, M. B., Geddes, J. R., Nobre, A. C., & Holmes, E. A. (2018). Preventing intrusive memories after trauma via a brief intervention involving tetris computer game play in the emergency department: A proof-of-concept randomized controlled trial. *Molecular Psychiatry, 23*, 674-682. <https://doi.org/10.1038/mp.2017.23>
- Merry, S. N., Stasiak, K., Shepherd, M., Frampton, C., Fleming, T., & Lucassen, M. (2012). The effectiveness of SPARX, a computerised self help intervention of adolescents seeking help for depression: Randomised controlled non-inferiority trial. *BMJ, 344*, <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.e2598>
- Murdock, N. L., Duan, C., & Nilsson, J. E. (2012). Emerging approaches to counseling intervention. *The Counseling Psychologist, 40*(7), 966–975. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000012460663>

References

Potard, C., Henry, A., Boudoukha, A. H., Courtois, R., Laurent, A., & Lignier, B. (2020). Video game players' personality traits: An exploratory cluster approach to identifying gaming preferences. *Psychology of Popular Media*, 9(4), 499.

Rayle, A. D. (2006). Mattering to others: Implications for the counseling relationship. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 84(4), 483-487.

Riordan, B. C. & Scarf, D. (2017). Crafting minds and communities with minecraft.[version 2; peer review: 2 approved]. *F1000Research*, (5)2339. <https://doi.org/10.12688/f1000research.9625.2>

Sexton, T. L., & Whiston, S. C. (1994). The status of the counseling relationship: An empirical review, theoretical implications, and research directions. *The counseling psychologist*, 22(1), 6-78.

Sivins, E. (2022, December 20). *Spiritfarer and Grief Gaming: Soundtracks to Soothe Grieving Souls*. TheGamer. <https://www.thegamer.com/spiritfarer-grief-soundtracks-music/>

Tetris (2023). *About Tetris*. Tetris. <https://tetris.com/about-us>

Wadlington, W. (2017). Review of pragmatic existential counseling and psychotherapy: Intimacy, intuition, and the search for meaning. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 45(2), 183–185. <https://doi.org/10.1037/hum0000051>

Wang, Q., Ren, H., Long, J., Liu, Y., & Liu, T. (2019). Research progress and debates on gaming disorder. *General psychiatry*, 32(3).

Wright, K. (2022, April 11). *Spiritfarer and the Gamification of Grief*. Fandom. <https://www.fandom.com/articles/spiritfarer-and-the-gamification-of-grief>