

COUNSELING CONNECTIONS



Western Carolina University Counseling Program

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Counselors Can 'Level Up' Clients Through Game-Based Therapies

Games have generally gotten a bad rap from media and politicians, but counselors are beginning to give games a second look based on some promising studies of how they are actually quite effective at helping clients work through [stress](#), [anxiety](#), [depression](#), and even [sexual trauma](#).

Yet, while the younger generation of clients (and counselors) have grown up within a gaming culture, it is important to recognize that gamers and the games they play have been negatively stigmatized for over 30 years prior, both in politics and in the public consciousness.

As recently as 2011, the Supreme Court heard arguments on whether or not video games should

even receive first amendment protection in *Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association*. Before that, Florida Attorney Jack Thompson lead a [well-documented](#) crusade against violent video games during the 2000s, and President Clinton even placed partial [responsibility](#) for the Columbine school shooting on several video games in 1999.

Democratic Senator Joe Lieberman held public hearings that vilified video games in 1993, which lead to the formation of the ESRB, or Electronic Software Rating Board, and before the digital age, the pen and paper role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* was associated with [devil worship](#), [murder](#) and

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The Power of Play: A Conversation with Dr. Heather Thompson

Counseling Connections recently sat down with WCU graduate professor Dr. Heather Thompson to ask some questions about *COUN 693: Play Therapy*, the value of play, and also what options are available for students who wish to pursue this path.

Counseling Connections: What could be the value for counselors-in-training in taking Play Therapy if they do not plan on working directly with children?

Heather: This is a great question. Funny thing is, there are people who take the play

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Roleplaying Games Help Clients on the Autism Spectrum Build Social Skills

In 2013, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) [defined Autism Spectrum Disorder \(ASD\)](#) by a client's "impaired social communication and/or interaction" and/or his or her "restricted or repetitive behaviors." Asperger's Syndrome now also falls under this diagnosis, according to the DSM-5.

The helping profession's understanding of how to effectively work with clients who have ASD is also in a state of flux, but what follows will be two stories that suggest that for



Retrieved from *Wizards of the Coast*

higher functioning males, at least, gaming may hold a key to unlocking previously-closed emotional doors.

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Counseling Looks to 'Level Up' (cont.)

[suicide](#) in the 1980s by movies, TV, and several religious institutions.

New studies show the benefits of game therapy to be numerous, but one particularly [interesting study](#) conducted by researchers from Radboud University in the Netherlands may help to illustrate WHY games can be a powerful tool for the counselor, as well.

Clients, as critics have thought, may not be "distracting" themselves from stress by gaming. The Radboud study monitored *Starcraft 2* gamer's heart rates, facial expressions, and then issued pre and post questions about their perceived stress levels during the game, and it

turned out that the gamers were typically very stressed while playing, though not all volunteers were as aware of how stressed they actually were.

The results showed that how a person's body reacted to stress in the game correlated with how they reacted outside of the game, in life.

Game stress, in other words, was felt, experienced, and dealt with just like life stress. Counselors, moving forward, can make and use games as a training ground for their clients to face their fears, to grow more resilient, or perhaps even to practice some solution-focused problem solving techniques ... all of it in a safe, low-risk environment.

This issue of *Counseling Connections* is dedicated to the power of gaming and play in therapy. A few well-designed games or CBT modules will not replace a counselor's good techniques or basic skills, but if used with intention and creativity, the helping community can certainly utilize them as culturally relevant and powerful tools.

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Break by the Lake Pictures

**150+ Attendees,
14 Presenters,
10 Trainings, and
1 Great Experience**



Roleplaying Games Develop Social Skills in Clients with ASD

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A Mother and Son

Delani Bartlette is a professional writer who is also the full-time mother of a son with Pervasive Developmental Delay, a spectrum disorder which she notes is similar to Asperger's. In 2014, Bartlette shared her story of how the role-playing game *Dungeons and Dragons* (D&D) "saved" her son's social skills – first with [The Good Men Project](#) and later with [Salon.com](#).

Her son, whom she calls "Storm" in the article for his protection, said that he was diagnosed with ASD in 7th grade, and that before then, despite his best attempts to make friends, he was often ostracized or bullied. He did not understand non-verbal communication, and his awkward repetitions of certain words or phrases left others confused by his presence.

He felt isolated, and so one day, his mother noticed that he was sword-fighting outside, and she said it was an "aha!" moment. She invited her son and any classmates that may have wished to play with him over for a game.

That game was *Dungeons and Dragons*. It involves dice, miniature figures, maps, quests, but also lots of team work and social interaction skills, albeit under the guise of pretending to be "characters" in a fantasy world that the Dungeon Master (the mother in this case) creates.

At first, Storm was fidgety, "he spoke out of turn," he ignored other players, and he often lead his character into certain doom by acting impulsively and without the rest of his "team." The other players would give him a "verbal smackdown" for moments like these, Bartlette said, but everyone continued to play, and to her surprise, Storm started to wait his turn.

"Unlike in real life, when he messed up, he could simply create another character and try again," said Bartlette. "His classmates

Shane and Benjamin, became friends, and they would come over each week. Storm began to recognize social patterns, the rules of those interactions and effectively become a better player in life."

Clients with ASD need a safe environment to practice interacting, and repetition is key. D&D offered just that. The bonus, she noted, was that Storm took those skills outside of the game. He has since moved away to college and he continues to play D&D on his own.

He credits the game with his real-world success: "All the variables in the game are still human. You begin to learn and anticipate what other people will do. It helped me to make friends and socialize."

ASD Gaming Therapy

[Wheelhouse Workshop](#) is a new type of organization that hosts therapeutic game nights for children and teenagers with ASD. Their work was recently featured in a [panel discussion](#) at the famous gamer convention, PAX Prime, in Seattle, WA on Sept. 2015 as well as on the [April 5, 2013 podcast episode](#) of "Psychology in Seattle."

Wheelhouse Workshop was founded by two friends and gamers who met while earning their respec-

**"All the variables are still human. You begin to learn and anticipate what other people will do. It helped me to make friends."
- "Storm"**

tive Masters degrees - Adam Davis in Drama Therapy and Adam Johns in Couples and Family Counseling, respectively.

The Workshop builds D&D team scenarios that challenge the participant's perspective taking, conflict resolution skills, and their social interactions with others, some also with ASD and some without. The weekly game nights, according to several parents, leave their children better able to monitor their own behaviors and interact with family outside of the game.

Research supporting the use of roleplaying games with clients with ASD can be found [here](#).



Retrieved from Wheelhouse Workshop, LLC

A Conversation with Dr. Thompson: Play Therapy (cont.)

therapy elective who are not committed to the idea of working with young children in a therapeutic capacity.

Some of those folks change their mind and some of them are better prepared because of their experience in class to work with parents and guardians. I'd also add that play therapy is really a way of being with others that is easily translated to clinical work with adolescents and adults. It's a skills-based course and the clinical practice will help you be a better counselor regardless of the age of your client.

CC: What is your personal experience and interest in play therapy?

Heather: I have an interesting relationship with play therapy. When I first began using it with young children who were survivors of intimate partner violence, sexual trauma, child abuse, or community violence, I was torn. I could see how it was a powerful intervention with young children, but I could not thoroughly articulate the reasons. I was insecure about selling this work to parents, guardians, and probation officers who seemed doubtful, and probably for good reason, that this young girl (me) with a pony tail and big toothy smile could use *play* to help kids.

Fortunately, I had an amazing play therapy supervisor, Mary Jane Thompson, who for two years helped me craft an understanding of the work, hone my skills, and deepen my presence with young trauma survivors. I'm so glad you asked me this question because it reminds me that I need to touch base with her and re-express my gratitude! After my experience with Mary Jane, I worked under the supervision of a child psychologist and there I began to craft a more fully integrated approach to working with young trauma survivors that entails the interweaving of play therapy, psychoeducation, teaching and practicing skills, bibliotherapy, and creative arts.

CC: In the Western North Carolina area, where are the current opportunities for counselors to practice this technique properly?

Heather: You can integrate play therapy into your work in most any setting and it can be part of a brief or long-term intervention. I know recent graduates from our program who use play therapy at [Access Family Services](#), [RHA](#), and local elementary schools.

CC: Are there options for former students or current counselors to train and become proficient in Play Therapy outside of the university setting?

Heather: The University of North Carolina in Charlotte (UNCC) offers a play therapy conference every year in June. The University of North Texas, home of Garry Landreth, offers comprehensive summer training opportunities to students and professionals.

CC: Have you heard of any schools in the area that are utilizing play therapy and have an appropriate space for the practice?

Heather: Absolutely! I've had the good fortune of working with students who offered play therapy interventions at Candler Elementary, Claxton Elementary, Evergreen Charter School, Hominy Valley Elementary, Mills River Elementary, Pisgah Elementary, Sand Hill-Venable Elementary, and that's just to name a few off the top of my head.

CC: What might be a WCU counselor-in-training's biggest hurdle towards becoming a Play Therapist?

Heather: The requirements for becoming a Registered Play Therapist (RPT) are extensive. Check out <http://www.a4pt.org/> for more information on the process. The real challenge might be finding a Registered Play Therapy Supervisor (RPT-S) in this area. However, I would not let that hold you back from learning more about this form of therapy.

CC: For first year students, do you have advice for how they might "dip their toe" in the Play Therapy

waters before having to choose their electives?

Heather: If you think you're interested, come talk to me!! I love to talk about play. Another great way to get a sense of the class is to ask students who have taken it before. There are several folks in our program right now who could probably give you a good sense of their play therapy experience.

Also check out Russ' online Counseling Academy on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ckZQbQwM3oU>). I have a few play therapy videos there!

CC: Thanks Heather!

A Great Game for Students w/ ASD

Click picture for review

MIDDLE & HIGH SCHOOL EDITION

Perfect therapy tool for:

- SLPs
- Special & regular education teachers
- Behavior therapists
- Psychologists, counselors, MFT's
- Adaptable for use by parents

Letter from the Editor: Stigma Begone

Games have always been important to me. I used to send detailed, hand drawn, 15-page game design submissions to companies like Sega and Nintendo as a kid. I learned words via Scrabble and Balderdash. And nowadays, well, I have game nights with friends that have helped me stave off graduate school-induced lunacy.

Officially speaking, [the verdict is in](#). We would be wise to instill a love of gaming in children and/or clients, if possible. Be they card, board, roleplaying or video, games are all gateways to higher order thinking and social understanding. The real trick is that we need to be there when the gates are opened.

Simply giving a kid a game

won't do. We need to model all of the lessons that take place above the board, first: what good sportsmanship looks like, how to abide by the rules, and most importantly, how to let loose and create a fun experience with others.

Once we teach these "how to play" moments, that's when the mental magic happens.

Have you ever considered that in chess - easy to learn, but impossible to master - that a 10-year-old player is teaching themselves how to see from their opponent's perspective, to visualize complex future problems, and also then constructing meaningful solutions?

That's some stellar learning that a kid is loading into his or her own

brain, and they're doing it *for fun*? With friends? Alone? Wowza.

Let's take poker next: bluffing, pattern recognition, and mathematical probability. Those skills are incredibly powerful for a person of any age, and yet, that's what a \$1 game teaches. Good games have great value, and as counselors, we really cannot afford to ignore their true worth.

Thankfully ... unlike when I was growing up, our culture embraces these "nerdy" pursuits a bit more, and I'm happy to report that the future is bright, shining, and maybe even [icosahedron-shaped](#).

- Shawn Hudson

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Counseling Calendar: Oct. & Nov. 2015

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
Oct. 25 European Summer ends	26 <i>European Fall begins?</i>	27 Advising Day & Creating Safe Spaces: Working w/ LGBTQ	28 Priority Reg. Begins	29	30	31 Halloween & El Dia de los Muertos begins
Nov. 1 Daylight Savings ends - Fall Back	2 El Dia de los Muertos ends	3 Election Day	4	5	6	7 Fall 2015 Comprehensive
8	9	10	11 Veteran's Day	12	13	14
15	16	17 Biltmore Park Open House for Students	18	19	20	21 One Good Beat Retreat Leicester, NC
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
						