Chapter 4

Dangers of Playing with the Virtual Other in Mind:
A Psychoanalytical View on Digital Role-Playing Games and the Edge between Facilitating Personality Development and Endangering the Player's Psyche

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ABSTRACT

This chapter contributes to the discussion on worth and dangers of digital role-playing games. With a psychoanalytical approach it focuses on the psyche's abilities provided by entering a game space. Building on the basic axioms of psychoanalysis a set of hypotheses concerning a psychoanalytic view on the act of playing is developed, which is systematically processed in the following. The aim of these deliberations is to outline that playing always means to deal with certain chaos in the sense of an unknown and unfamiliar structure in which the player immerses. The narrow edge between facilitating personality development on the one side and overwhelming - the player's psyche endangering - chaos on the other is worked out. The chapter is a revised part of an upcoming transdisciplinary PhD-thesis in the field of educational science and game studies.

INTRODUCTION

At the outset a couple of psychoanalytic basic assumptions, which are a precondition for understanding this article's approach, are described. Out of that a set of hypotheses on the psychotherapeutical impact of digital role-playing and its limitations where danger might be coming up are developed. In a next step a bridge is built to a couple of relevant characteristics of digital role-playing games in order to show how an individual's psyche is able to put the act of role-playing into service of his/her developmental progress. In this context it is described in which way the interaction with game-characters challenges

the player. And which mental faculties she/he has to have readily available to turn these challenges into developmental advantage. The other side of the coin is the danger that the player's psyche is not well enough equipped for the involvement with immersive personally meaningful scenes. Again, turning back to the hypotheses, the point where the benefit of role-playing is transmuted into danger is concluded.

This article's focus lies on a psychoanalytical view on the dangers of digital gaming and especially on the aspect of overwhelming and therefore potentially endangering psychic chaos. It fits into the context of this book because it is dealing with a problematic aspect of game play. The purpose is to open up a new sight on the dangers and challenges of gaming, aside from the addiction paradigm. A recent longitudinal study in Germany suggests that gaming addiction is not that prevalent phenomenon – only 1% of the probands showed a problematic use of computer games. (Scharkow, Festl, Quandt, 2014) Griffiths stresses that "there is still a need for epidemiological research to determine the incidence and prevalence of clinically significant problems associated with video game play". (2014, p. 129) The psychoanalytic view might fruitfully contribute to this discourse.

AXIOMS OF PSYCHOANALYSIS

To track this perspective on the act of playing, the axioms of psychoanalytic theory have to be clarified. Besides a dynamic unconscious as part of the human psyche, we are working with the assumption that individuals internalize in the course of a lifetime – but prevalently in their early years - representations of meaningful interactions. These representations do have a scenic character as they are formed in scenic interactions. In the course of transference, which means externalizing once internalized representations anew, an actual interaction partner takes the counterpart within the *old* scene. We have a certain readiness doing that, because the "… infant is born with a virtual other in mind that invites replacement by some actual other in felt immediacy." (Braten, 1993) This kind of role-playing opens up the chance to get in touch with the old internalizations in order to – eventually - modify them. The possibility space for that is given by the immersive character of co-constructed intermediate areas (Winnicott, 1971/2005; K. Stephenson, 2007, 2009, 2010; Stephenson-Mittlböck, 2012; Mittlböck, 2012).

"The third part of the life of human being, a part we cannot ignore, is an intermediate area of *experiencing*, to which inner reality and external life both contribute", says Winnicott (1971, p. 3). The internal psychic act of constructing such an intermediate area is - as mentioned above – drafted scenic or dialogic because the "… immediate form of understanding and feeling is assumed to have the primary form of the dialogical …" (Braten, 1993) This interaction – "in the mind (in dialogue with the virtual other), or between minds (in dialogue with an actual other)" (Braten, 1993) – is a developmental necessity in order to build up stable object representations. The affective-interactive qualities within the early relationships form the internalized representations of the self and the world. (cf. Mittlböck, 2013, p. 271) Therefore subjectivity is a result of inter-subjectivity. (cf. Dornes, 2004, p. 178) In a first conclusion we can say, that – seen from this angle - the internalizations are scenes between the *virtual other* and the old *me*. Therefore that contains also the little child we used to be. The externalizing transference of an actual scene between the actual *me* and an actual relational person always means confrontation with the infantile, weak, often fearful, sad and hurt *me* in need of protection. Depending on the resurrected scenes, the old and familiar relational experiences will be repeated or new experiences will be made.

That means human beings need three repositories - with their several inhabitants - for their mental and psychic development. "1. They need constantly available, self-resilient interaction-partners on the

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