LIFELONG PLAYING: THE GAME AS A PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPERIENCE

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Within the Person Construct Psychology theoretical framework, the person is a scientist who makes hypotheses tries to make sense of his/her life. And so is the player. From this perspective, games can be considered meaningful experiences during our whole life. Within a game, a person can test constructions that are different from the usual ones without being threatened by these attempts. After a brief excursus of the game as a powerful psychological experience, an example of a meeting point between game and psychotherapy is given.

Key words: *game, play, experience, psychotherapy, technique.*

INTRODUCTION

The game is a subject that lends itself to a complex and multifaceted reading. Many disciplines have addressed this topic and many have analyzed it through the lenses of their own epistemology and drawn conclusions that are also quite different in terms of the nature and function of the game. Even limiting the contribution to the psychological field, many different approaches emerge. Freud (1920), Mead (1934), Piaget (1945), Vygotsky (1966), Winnicott (1971), Bateson (1972), Bruner (1976), only to name a few, gave their personal contribution to the subject emphasizing the importance of the game from a psychological point of view. What is interesting to underline is that many of these authors developed their theories starting from the vision they have of the child playing. The game appears very early in the life and it is an activity in which the child devotes time and energy. The child/play binomial, almost inseparable, is very spread in our society, as if to say that the game is the prerogative of the child. If we use the most common contrast poles of "child" and "play", we get an insight of the adult as someone who is serious and works hard. This is a well-established social perspective: in adult life, generally, the game should have a very limited space and should not endanger other activities that are deemed more important because they are productive. We get an image of adult player in the negative terms of being nerds and game addicted. At the same time, however, we have witnessed in recent years an important technological development that allowed the spread of digital games that have largely involved adults. Furthermore, recent data (Lopez, 2010) suggest that there are no big differences in age of players.

Starting from these evidences, the game took the shape of an activity that accompanies the person during his/her whole life. When we grow up, we do not stop playing, but we do it in a different way, using time, spaces, relationships and purposes in a different way from the past. Usually, with increasing age, the game goes on acquiring complexity. For younger children the game is the prevailing daily activity, it is enacted with great spontaneity, few rules (if not none at all) and few tools; growing up, the game becomes more and more structured, more rules are planned, specific and essential items are needed and time is limited and organized. Simplicity/complexity, physical/virtual, cooperative/competitive, relational / lonely, static / active, high / low level of randomness are interesting dimensions that can describe a ludic activity (McGonigal, 2011). However, to consider the game from a psychological point of view, it could be more interesting focus on the Player, or better the person in the player's shoes, and on the particular relationships he/she builds during this specific activity.

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THE PLAYER

Paraphrasing the words Maturana and Varela (1999), I assume that "Everything played is played by someone" to take into account the Player point of view to look at the game as a psychological experience.

To define the Player, I rely on the structural organization of the constructs, as it can be identified on the basis of the organization corollary, the fragmentation corollary, the range corollary and the modulation corollary (Kelly, 1955). Firstly, the constructs are not isolated from each other but are arranged in a system in which the relations may be of superiority and inferiority in terms of hierarchy Secondly, a construct cannot be applied indiscriminately to all events that we face; the relevant field of a construct defines its application. The characteristic of the permeability of a construct allows us to determine the extent of the relevance of a construct field: a 'good' construct should be permeable enough to be able to incorporate new elements and to allow the system to change but at the same time should not be excessively permeable in order to be able to retain its capacity for discrimination. Thirdly, the person can use sub-systems of constructs which can also be independent of each other and can be used alternately allowing the person to maintain a certain inconsistency and construe differentiated aspects of himself/ herself.

On the basis of this structural organization, I hypothesize that the game-player can be considered a portion of the personal construct system. This portion, this sub-system, will be more detailed and structured as the Player's experiences allow him/her to enrich and consolidate it. Starting from this definition, a question arises: Why should a person be a player? My answer is that the game is a tool in the hands of the person to gain experience without risk on a personal construct system level. The Player-system allows the person to test new constructs in an ideal situation because, as pointed out by Bateson (1996), the essence of the game lies in its being meta-language, because the games are something that is not what they seem; each player must be able to say "This is a game", and there must be awareness that the action is fictitious. According to Bateson, metacommunication serves to reveal the nature of the 'as if' of the game and its crea-tion of a fantasy world in which fictitious actions simulate real actions.

Games offer an optimal situation to test actions that if performed within the personal construct system could lead to anxiety or threat hard to tolerate. If the Player-system enjoys 'proper permeability', the game may have the great advantage of being a safe experimental environment, a situation in which the Player can enter and leave voluntarily, without impact on the daily life. In this case, permeability can be considered 'proper' to the extent that it allows a suspension of the usual dimensions of meaning used by the person.

So, new constructs can be safely tested and possibly, if the results of the experiments conducted by the Player-system are useful, they can develop in the broader personal construct system. As an example, you can think about a person who uses the dimension sincere/liar as a regnant construct; he would find it very hard to play a bluff game, but in doing this he could make a new experience; he can define the event "bluffing" as connected to a dimension that is not sincere/liar but perhaps strategist/naïve. If he considers this new construct useful in the game context he can decide to test it also in his daily life, enriching his personal construct system. In other words, I am assuming that the game can be very elaborative, in terms of the experience corollary and the choice corollary.

THE PLAYER'S RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships are essentials in many aspects of our lives and game is not an exception. Not only 'social games', by their definition, put ourselves in relationship with others. Videogames, thanks to the enormous development of the Internet and technology, have become multi-player online games, generating a complex social phenomenon of exchange and collaboration between players, both 'inside' and 'outside' the screen. Not least, the player of individual games (single-players), usually are grouped in communities, sharing their experiences and strategies through forums, chat and other communication tools. It seems therefore to support the hypothesis that the game is something to do together.

Whereas at personal system level, role constructs are hardly put into discussion, because

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they are "a part one plays as if one's life depended upon it" (Kelly, 1955, p.371), at a player-system level, roles can be acted with greater flexibility since they are not necessarily linked to core dimensions. This means that we could afford to play with other players different roles from the usual ones and at the same time allow others to play different roles with us, without feeling threatened by this.

To give an example, think of the animal world: many puppies playing vigorously, making ambushes, rolling, giving mighty paws to their "opponents". Their teeth and their claws, although not so strong as those of an adult, can still be lethal. Nonetheless, when playing, the puppies show their belly, a very vulnerable part of their body, because they live the context as safe: the behaviors that might indicate an attack, are not construed as harmful because they are contextualized as a game, a safe activity.

Something similar happens to human beings in some games and contact sports: we let others attack us and beat us and we do the same with them, because it is part of the game. This kind of behavior is expressed not only on a body level but it is also verbal, as indicated by the common practice of social interaction of 'trash-talking' and 'pwning' (sic). Trash-talking refers to the practice of teasing your opponent, more or less good-naturedly; it can go from playful teasing to heavy teasing to unnerve the opponent and/or strengthen the competitive spirit. The pwning (which is derived from a spelling mistake in writing 'own') refers to getting a victory so overwhelming that the winner can only gloat and taunt his/her opponents.

Keltner (2009) conducted research on the psychological benefits of mockery and argues that this has a valuable role in helping to build positive relationships: the mockery is like a social vaccine. It would enable us to mutually provoke slightly negative emotions to stimulate a small amount of irritation, pain, embarrassment, etc. This process would have two effects: on the one hand, it confirms the trust in the relationship: the person who teases demonstrates the ability to hurt, but at the same time, shows that it is not his/her intention; on the other hand, when we allow someone to make fun of us, we con-

firm our willingness to put ourselves in a position of vulnerability and actively demonstrate our confidence in the consideration that the other person has of our emotional well-being.

This kind of interaction is not only tolerated, but is also often actively sought because it is located on a level of interaction between the players, specifically between a player-system and another player-system.

Stressing the importance of interaction at this level, we can also infer that the game 'ends' when the person moves away from this level of interaction. In other words, it is necessary that the player construes the other people as players too. Only in this case you will be "fair play", the ethical game. About ethics, Giliberto (2012) introduces the Person Criterion stating that it is the awareness that we are one person only among other people, in a relationship of mutual validation of identity. As long as we are in the context of the game, the relationship between people should not be questioned. As an example, if I'm playing a game against a friend and during his turn I ask him (even on a non-verbal level) not to attack me, I'm coming out of the game context: I'm using my personal relationship with him asymmetrically, from player-system to personal system.

Clearly, the line between the personal system and the player-system only exists in the eyes of those who play, it cannot be measured or established a priori from an external point of view, to respect the rules is not enough to guarantee a fair play.

To clarify whether a player is playing ethically, we should wonder "Who is the move for, the player or the person?" In this regard, a concept used in sports is interesting: gamesmanship. Gamesmanship indicates the use of the dubious methods (though not technically illegal) to win a game. I suggest a relational version of gamesmanship: the use of this breaks the boundaries of the player-player interaction and leads to the loss of the experiential power of the game context, exposing participants to a potentially threatening situation because it pertains to the personal system. The relations between personal systems, player-systems and gamesmanship is represented in *Figure 1*.
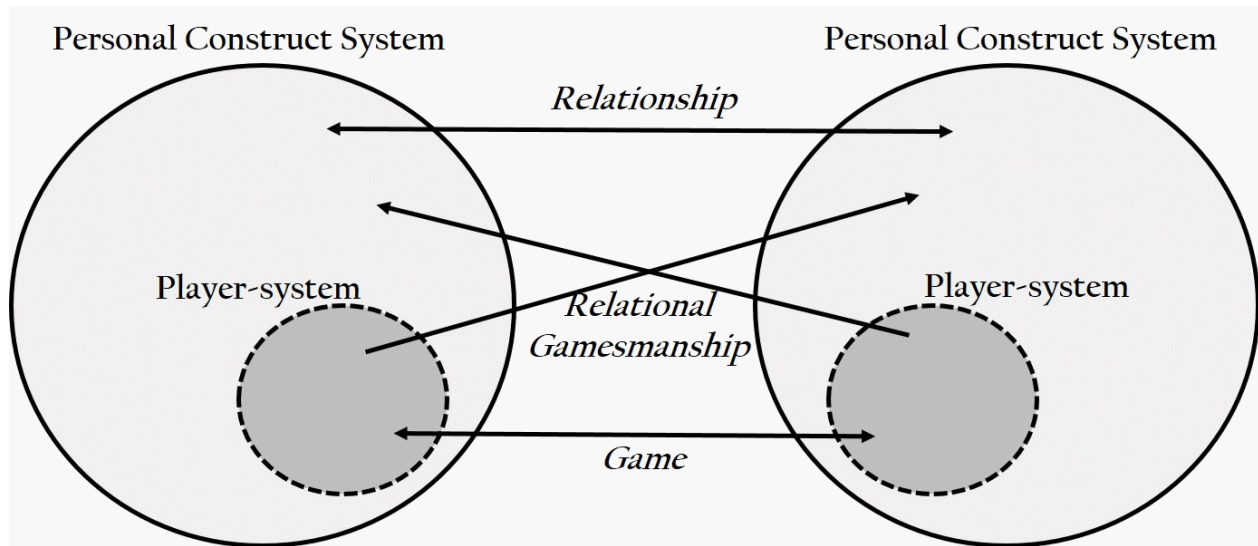
Figure 1: *The relations between personal systems, player-systems and gamesmanship*

A STEP INTO PRACTICE

The power of game involvement has been studied for a long time: few other activities make people feel so involved, active and productive. Gamification and serious games are good examples of how games and ludic approach have been used effectively as a driver for change in social, educational, commercial, learning contexts and in health promotion and wellness (Bellotti, Kapralos, Lee, Moreno-Ger, and Berta, 2013; Petruzzi, 2015).

And what about in psychotherapeutic practice? Can clinicians usefully use games with their clients?

In the attempt to answer these questions, my first thought goes to Fixed Role Therapy (FRT) and the large overlap I see between this technique and the Role Playing Games (RPG).

The FRT is a technique meant to encourage the client to take on a different identity for a short period to have an alternative experience of the world. It starts with the writing of a sketch, based on self-characterization. The person portrayed in the sketch should not be an improvement for the client, should not become the embodiment of the ideal self and should be create keeping orthogonality in mind.

The therapist asks the client to follow this sketch for of two weeks, during which, the client is invited to play the new identity in all daily facets inferring the behaviors from the description of the character. The sketch should concern many aspects of everyday life and should include some of the constructs that the client usually uses, in order to preserve his/her identity. The sketch is played also in the therapy room, where the client and the therapist interpret it alternately and comment on the simulation, exploring the feelings, the undertaken and the avoided choices.

RPGs are games where participants play the role of a character and through the conversation and the dialogical exchange, they create an imaginary space. The rules indicate how, when and to what extent, each player can influence the imaginary space. In many RPGs, there is a Master, the one who takes care of the 'direction' of the game, who acts as a referee and storyteller. Each player creates a character who will play in the game and gives it a history, a disposition and defines relationships and eventually equipment. A game can last a single session completed in a few hours or a series of repeated game sessions with a cast of characters and players that evolves over time.

From this brief overview, an overlap between FRT and RPG is obvious:

1. the client and the player are invited to describe a character and play it;

2. the psychotherapist and the Master can facilitate this rendering, monitoring and encouraging adherence with the description;
3. they have a limited duration;
4. they configure as experiments, as alternatives experiences to what the person construes as daily experience.

Starting from these similarities, I designed a technique that could keep the theoretical assumptions and the clinical purpose of FRT, emphasizing the overlap between the two activities and implementing them with the "experimental benefits" of the game. The technique I created is called Fixed Role Playing Game Therapy (FRPGT) to emphasize the hybrid nature and the derivation from existing activities.

In FRPGT, the therapist and the client together define the features of the character that the client will play. The indications are similar to those for the sketch of fixed role. But unlike the sketch for FRT, this character can have magical and fantastic features (for example not human, or master of magic). The therapy room is the place where to play FRPGT. In fact, the client is not asked to act the character in 'his own world'. The therapist has a role similar to the Master, as he has the task of choosing the suitable context for the character, to tell the story, to introduce supporting characters and define challenges.

The Technique is designed to cover a limited period, 4-5 sessions, and is performed in the first half of a therapy session, to give space to comment and reflect on the experience. This extra-game dialogue is meant to allow the client recover his/her personal lenses and look at the experience he/she enacted. It could be interesting to observe the choices he/she made in the game in terms of the experience cycle, considering the assumptions of the character, the validation and invalidation that he/she met and how he/she faced them. Then, therapist and client can analyze the client's experience playing in the character's shoes, always using the experience cycle, highlighting the main transitions, trying to locate any contact points between the perspective of the client and the character and prepare the ground for the development of a superordinate understanding.

More even than in individual therapy, this technique could prove useful in working with couples or small groups, for example families. In these cases, even more similar to what happens in RPG, the participants will be invited to interact as outlined for their characters. Their interaction could lead to different scenarios and allow for spotlighting of the interactions that could be alternative to the usual ones.

It is important to emphasize that the choice of a particular technique in therapy is always guided by the treatment plan, so a technique should be seen as a tool to operationalise the goals of the therapy. On this basis, FRPGT should not be used with any client or any time during therapy. It could be useful when the therapist wishes to promote a creativity cycle. In fact, starting from the creation of the character, the FRPGT tends to promote loosening that allows a general movement of the system; it may also encourage dilation, so that the client may be able to take into consideration a wider variety of material (also deliberately "unreal"). During the technique, the client is invited to follow several CPC (circumspection-preemption-control) cycles. Loosening and dilation can be common in the circumspection. The following phases of pre-emption and control will go toward a tightening, together with the post-game interview so that the patient can get a more definite experience of what he/she has done in the character's shoes. The multiple sessions of FRPGT allow them to return to a phase of loosening that favours the resumption of the creativity cycle.

As in FRT, in this technique, the therapy room becomes a sheltered workshop where the client can safely try out new and perhaps unexpected points of view. It may be that the extent of change for the person is more limited than in FRT, particularly because it focuses on action that is deliberately fictitious.

At the same time, this highlights the strengths of this technique: on the one hand it features the strength of the 'as if communication' of having a different perspective that can be tested in the narrated actions; on the other hand, the markedly fictional context, will not be threatening and therefore more easily acceptable.

Finally, the therapist should be warned about crucial aspects. Creativity is necessary to draw a scenario that helps the client develop new constructs and to imagine how he or she can implement a creative process for problem solution. Audacity will allow the therapist to get in touch with issues that she could not directly address

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but allowing her to continue along this path with the client, so that both reach a constructive perspective. In addition, she is asked to develop "the talent of the story-teller" not only to enter the other world but also to create an alternative one and assume an invitational mood.

CONCLUSIONS

The attention given to the theme of games in psychology gives us a measure of how much it can be considered interesting from a psychological point of view.

The Personal Construct Psychology theoretical framework allows us to look at this activity in a broad way, without necessarily bringing the client him back to a specific stage of life, but considering games lifelong experiences.

In psychotherapy, games can trigger interesting change processes while maintaining a low level of threat. Nevertheless, clinicians should be creative and rigorous in creating a suitable game context for the client and sensitive to the client's response to the activity.

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