

Comments by Clinical Editor

The author encourages readers to think about how social networking can enhance the practice and process of play therapy.

Live in Your World, Play in Ours:

Social Networking in Play Therapy and Counseling

By Lawrence C. Rubín PhD, LMHC, RPT-S

In 2000, Sony Computer Entertainment America released its revolutionary PS2 (Play Station 2) followed soon after by a brilliant marketing campaign headed by the slogan “Live in Your World, Play in Ours.” Likely cognizant of the power of their product to absorb and ensnare its users, Sony’s prophetic catchphrase *caught on* and has provided parents and clinicians a useful axiom for the potential benefits and abuses of video games, online gaming and by association, Social Networking (SN).

Social networking is the use of Internet and digital technology to connect and interact with others. It may take the form of texting or talking in chat rooms, by email or through Twitter; blogging (Blurty), writing and displaying electronic postcards (Post Secret), participating in ‘multi-player online role-playing games; (MMORPG) such as World of Warcraft, Dungeons and Dragons or City of Heroes, traversing virtual landscapes such as Second Life, Meez and Pixie Hollow), producing and critiquing home-made videos on YouTube or creating online profiles/identities on MySpace, Facebook as well as through web page construction. In short, there is no short supply of ways in which children, teens and young adults can reach out, touch, or be touched by someone. These are today’s *virtual* and digitally mediated gathering places ... and people are gathering by the millions. In a review of the ongoing Pew Internet and American Life Project (<http://www.pewinternet.org>), Williams noted that “fifty-five percent of teens online use and create social networking profiles (2008; p. 254). In his study of the potential self-therapeutic elements of online involvement, Tan noted that “My Space is currently the world’s most populous social network or online community with a population in excess of 200 million” (2008; p. 145). Estimates of the number of children,



teens and young adults who make use of the numerous other above-mentioned facets of SN are likely equally, if not more impressive.

More than ever before, play therapy practitioners have been challenged to become more technologically sophisticated as well as to invite technology into their play spaces. Questions that we may ask include, "Should I communicate with my client through MySpace or Facebook?", "What is appropriate for inclusion in a professional blog and should I encourage my client to create a blog on Xanga?", "Are online interactive video games dangerous for my client and dare I use them therapeutically-and if so, how?", "Might I be reinforcing social disconnection by using Second Life as a therapeutic tool?", and "Is it unhealthy for my client to Twitter, text, and chat as much as they do?" Answers to these questions are far from simple and the controversy over the inherent value and potential abuses of electronic media, including social networking rages. Proponents, such as Steven Johnson, argue that the electronic media of all sorts, including video games and gaming can contribute to cognitive growth and neurological enhancement (2005), while others contend that certain clients who are predisposed to antisocial behavior and social disconnection may be harmed by immersion in video games, gaming and electronic media (Singer & Singer, 2005).

Clearly, there is no, and likely will never be consensus in this area; however, it has been cogently argued that SN may serve a variety of therapeutic functions, both inside and outside of the playroom. Children, teens, and young adults seek similar ends through these technologies as they do in our sandtrays, doll houses, family sculpting, storytelling, and game play. According to several researchers in the field of technology and counseling, chatting online with peers, shape shifting through an avatar (digital self-representation), journaling through blogging, catharting through online postcards, battling and cooperating through online gaming, webpage creation, and re-inventing oneself on social networking sites provides benefits similar to those offered in play therapy. These include appreciating others' perspectives, expressing deeply private thoughts and feelings, commiserating, validating and being validated by others, practicing social skills, working through painful and even traumatic events and experimenting with new identities (Allison, et al., 2006; Riviere, 2008; Tan, 2008; Williams & Martan, 2008).

I am not advocating the replacement of play therapy with electronic media nor the (play) therapeutic relationship with a virtual substitute. However, there are many potentially useful aspects of social networking that may enhance our play therapy efforts. Both the playroom and online communities such as Meez, Pixie Hollow, and Second Life offer clients a meeting place where interactions and relationships can be supportive, and identities can be both forged and explored. Blogging can provide for a powerful form of self-expression akin to journaling and storytelling. Creating a character that goes off on an adventure in an interactive online game such as Star Wars Galaxie or Voyage Century can provide the opportunity to build knowledge, practice new skill sets, and experiment with new styles of interaction.

The use of these various social networking venues as a *therapeutic platform* are in many ways consistent with the therapeutic elements and goals that Donald Winnicott (1954)

discussed when he described therapy as a transitional space between the inner and outer world as well as between people in which relationships, creativity and growth occur. The stories, adventures, and narratives that flow from virtual and social networking experiences may confer an important self-reflective value also found in the creative unfolding within the playroom. In discussing the importance of story-making and, in particular, the written tradition, narrative therapist Michael White noted, "In order to perceive change in one's life-to experience one's life as progressing – and in order to perceives one's life changing, a person requires mechanisms that assist her to plot the events in her life within the context of coherent sequences across time,

“Ernesto took on Internet excursions to the world of Spore where he built a fascinating array of creatures that interacted with each other.”



through the past, present, and future (1990; p. 35). Social networking experiences such as gaming, blogging, Twittering, and traveling through virtual worlds with others may provide clients with the opportunity to witness the personal transformations to which White alludes. Similarly, sociologist Keith McIntosh offered the notion of 'themeing', or the (re) creation of self in a virtual world that is rich in shared symbolism, and opportunities for social identity formation and group-building (2008). For these clinicians and researchers, the virtual worlds and venues in which Social Networking occur have the potential of augmenting the liminal and shared space that a physical playroom provides.

Cases and Caveats

Ned, a recent high school graduate and oldest of four boys in an intact nuclear family, had butted heads with his loving yet domineering father since entry into adolescence. Differences of opinion in important life areas including religion, education, career and independence had thwarted a close relationship between father and son, both of whom were strong-willed and opinionated. I worked both alternately with the family and Ned over a period of two years, mostly to address their ongoing conflicts. In the family sessions, Ned was typically silenced and frustrated by his father's attempts to *steer him along the right path to adulthood*. In my individual sessions with Ned, much time was spent complaining about his father's treatment of him, and little on his feelings about either himself or the relationship. I was pleasantly surprised when Ned found me on Facebook, and shared some thoughts and feelings that were otherwise unavailable in our face-to-face sessions. He was also using the medium, including blogging to express himself to others as well as bear witness to their challenges.

Ernesto, a highly intelligent and creative middle schooler, was fascinated by all things scientific and science-fiction, particularly exotic creatures, aliens, dinosaurs, and bugs. Some thought him preoccupied with the world of the exotic; however, both his mother and I considered Ernesto's natural fascination to simply reflect certain important aspects of himself and his perception of the world that he was not able to do with words. Ernesto's mother, however, was concerned about his difficulty in social interactions as well as verbalizing his feelings. On numerous occasions, Ernesto took on Internet excursions to the world of Spore where he built a fascinating array of creatures that interacted with each other. It is my hope as of this writing to work together with Ernesto to help him bring his creations to life through social networking and creation of a Spore club at school.

It is virtually impossible to escape news headlines that describe the potential dangers of the Internet including cyber-bullies, cyber-predators, and cyber-addiction. In no way does this brief article suggest that clinicians must add SN to their clinical tool box in order to be contemporary or cool, or to ever consider replacing face-to-face play encounters with digitally mediated ones. Certainly, it is incumbent on the practitioner who would like to learn more about these newest possible additions to their clinical work to explore and experiment with them, review safety issues, and to consider any possible ethical dilemmas that might arise (I have listed a few sources for security information at the end of the article). For those who are already using social networking and other digital venues adjunctively in their play therapy, it would be helpful to share such information with peers and colleagues through

presentations at the local, state or national level as well as through professional research and publication, preferably within the *International Journal of Play Therapy*. And last, I would like to learn more about how play therapists are utilizing SN in their practices.

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- MMORPG Master Site: www.mmorpg.com/gamelist.cfm
- Second Life: www.secondlife.com
- Meez: www.meez.com
- Pixie Hollow: www.pixiehollow.com
- My Space: www.myspace.com
- Facebook: www.facebook.com
- Blurty: www.blurty.com
- GoDaddy (webpage creation): www.godaddy.com
- Xanga (blogging community): www.xanga.com
- Post Secret (personal postcards/blog): www.postsecret.blogspot.com
- Spore: www.spore.com

Cyber Security Informational Sources

- www.mysecurecyberspace.com/secure/bloggging-homepages-and-social-networking-si
- www.small-business-software.net/staying-safe-online.htmtes.html
- www.wiredsafety.org/internet101/blogs.html



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