The virtual reality of young adults

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ABSTRACT. – This contribution stems from an interest in and curiosity about understanding how adolescents and young adults navigate the reality commonly defined as 'virtual', with a particular focus on video games. The purpose is to ask ourselves, not only on a clinical level but also in a general and cultural sense, what this *reality* means for them, what it means in their lives, and to avoid attributing our own meanings or interpreting it through our own language. What is the meaning of this 'gaming world', considered as a world experienced symmetrically to the 'real world'? What use is made of it? What role does it play within the relational space, where the relation is both with the self and the other? Creative, exciting, and stimulating, or isolating and defensive? Or both? How can we read the enjoyment of 'virtual reality'? Is it a functional existential element, consistent with the adolescent movement, or is it something that fuels a defensive immobilization? Through some clinical insights, the aim is to explore some of these points, starting from the images and experiences that adolescents and young adults brought us, to identify in these images and experiences a creative potential, like a 'set in motion', but without excluding the possibility of a deep halting, a blocker towards the external world.

Key words: adolescence, young adult, virtual reality, gaming, psychoanalytic psychotherapy.

My reflection originates from clinical practice, from observing and listening to myself as I engage with the adolescents and young adults I meet. I work in a public mental health service. I see young people from 16 to 30 years old who bring different kinds and forms of difficulties, and not always of significant gravity. Hence my interest in the worlds of adolescents and young adults and virtual reality.

What I am doing now is questioning myself together with you. I ask myself questions, and I imagine answers that I often feel I have to reformulate, so everything is in motion.

When I work in therapy with adolescents and young adults, I feel that something is missing, as if there is something that is not yet specifically

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theorized and that we do not know well yet. Referring to the literature, not only psychoanalytic but also recent transdisciplinary, we know how strong the adolescent movement is today, which, in addition to preserving the characteristics we are familiar with, brings with it profound cultural and generational changes. What I'm thinking about is how hard it is for us to enter their worlds and read what they tell us, paying attention to what they say and not to what we have in mind, while at the same time maintaining our own vision (as we do in therapy, after all). We hear of isolation, a lack of relationships, and alternative lives (think of the hikikomori), which are widespread phenomena today, posing a very important social emergency where gaming is often an actor and sometimes a protagonist. I wonder, in a provocative way, how 'wrong' it is to feel comfortable (as the youngsters say) in an experience of isolation from others and reduced relationality. How should we consider this lack of social interaction? On this, Diego says, "I know I should go out, drink, and go dancing". As Diego speaks and I listen to him, I ask myself, "Why?". Although I know it is what we all expect. I wonder if proposing our model of interaction can force the guy to be in it, and when he feels he is unable to do so or 'not compatible' with that model, he feels this as a defect, an inability. We clinicians are often led to consider the virtual world, in part, as a manifestation of isolation.

Since I cannot address the world of adolescents here, I would like to focus on a part of this world that is so familiar to adolescents and young adults: virtual reality, specifically the world of gaming. Exchanging thoughts with colleagues who work in addiction and mental health services, I continually notice how hard they try to get away from the preconceived notion (real and present, as mentioned earlier) of the use of the Internet and gaming, emphasizing how much we do not want to demonize it, but it becomes clear how often they fall into thinking of it as something approaching the pathological or dysfunctional. A typical response to this could be, "It depends on the use you made of it". I would agree from a quantitative perspective, but this approach would involve everything that can be consumed, including drugs or sugar, throughout the day. So, I asked myself what it means for kids to spend part of their days playing in front of a PC or a console, and so I asked them.

First of all, I think it is important to place gaming in the personal functioning of the individual subject. If we want to find a common link in its use, I would start from the fact that for young people, gaming is a 'game', similar to reality, in which they often totally immerse themselves. They say that it can be a useful tool, that the amount of time spent is related to the sense given, and they almost all agree that it could be dangerous if used wrongly; they find it hard to understand how much the adults struggle to understand it, and are worried about it.

I am concerned because there is a fine line between pathologizing its use

and using it to understand the other and possibly thinking of it as a tool, but it is good to keep in mind that it is a tool that can potentially lead to entrapment, dissociation, and collusion. Regarding this, I began to think about what I believe is a fundamental theme: the relationality expressed in these games. This appears as a different way of relating to the other, a way that allows them to be themselves without the pressure of having to define themselves at all costs, a demand that the outside world seems to pressure for (think of school, parents, society, the theory of rampant singularity, being unique). When stimulated by the analyst's questions, the young people report that in gaming they find affinity and sharing, listening and mirroring in the interaction with the other, with associated feelings of disappointment and discomfort, difficulties of trust, and competition. Could this use of gaming lead to isolation and so exclude any form of real interaction except in a form that is not 'natural' but 'constructed'? I would argue that perhaps the desire/need for isolation, when we encounter it, was already there before, and that perhaps these worlds can be helpful in tolerating what we struggle to do outside, but yes, as we said, it can contribute. We often talk about a non-real emotionality, an alexithymic expression of the emotional sphere. I'm not sure if it is reasonable to describe it this way, but what I see is that there is a lot of emotionality, even though it is difficult to communicate it. The enthusiasm they feel in creating the avatar and the feeling that they can manage what they experience, I think, is still a way of trying to be in what they feel. And the emotion persists even when the game is not there, or in the stories of those who have stopped playing for a while. They tell me about this difficulty in dealing with what they feel, and it seems that through their experiences with gaming, they are able to tell me something about themselves, as if what they feel becomes narratable, and in my method of treatment, I guess this is fundamental (as happens in the game winnings?!). I would perhaps dare to think that the game becomes a way of experimenting, of experiencing self-realization, which is so difficult to achieve in both the family and social context, which are so demanding, where it is not 'allowed' to make mistakes, where what is given is never enough. So, the children try to express, through play, what they would like to be, and they also do so with the friends they meet in the same context. They often say, "It allows me to get away from where I don't want to be" or "I feel less powerless even though there is some frustration in the game" or "It makes me do what I would like to do, and in the end, in a different form, I do it". Here is when I wonder if it is a false self-image or an experiment with their own resources, despite the discomfort they may face. Is it covering up or hiding what they really feel, experiencing emotions that are not real because they are not experienced in this world in our way? Or is it expressing and experiencing something of oneself by feeling understood?

We often talk about relationality in relative isolation from our real world.

They have friends with whom they exchange ideas and advice outside of gaming; they collaborate in gaming by making strategies; they arrange to see each other and hear each other on video calls regardless of playing; sometimes, intimately, they tell each other stories, but they see each other rarely and sometimes never. They leave the game because they get bored, they change companions because they are found to be incompatible or insincere, and they wait for the next version of the game for years, experiencing a sense of waiting and curiosity for what will come out. One day, in one of our sessions, Antonio tells me, "I know how to play, I am good at it, I do something I like, I feel free to experience joys and sorrows, and I feel I am an active part of a group. These are the places where I find people like me who live the same things… of course, you find every kind of person (he smiles). I am not disinterested in the outside world, but outside I have the feeling that they expect things from me that I cannot give them, in times that aren't mine". Antonio doesn't know what he really wants to do when he 'grows up', even though he does what society expects from him, he feels lonely and little understood even though he has people he loves and with whom he has relationships. He says, "I don't know why others succeed, or maybe they don't either. Many of us are like that, maybe they have adhered to what the world wants from us". To me, it seems that Antonio feels he cannot take his own time; he feels out of time, a time that, in gaming, he shares and is contained. And he suffers a lot for this. I wonder to what extent this use of gaming and living in this world can also be thought of as a resource to be used also by us clinicians and in the treatment, integrating it with the rest of the world they live in. When he tells me what he lives in gaming, he already makes an integration with the real. The problem is the gaming itself or the individuality and the moving structure of a twenty-four-year-old boy who uses gaming? Diego tells me:

> "In the game, the sense of impotence and incapacity that I feel, especially at home, diminishes. In the game, I have the enthusiasm to experiment and to carry out a project, even a common one, which gives me pleasure and satisfaction. Outside, this does not happen anymore. I used to write poems, and I loved it. When my father read them and told me I could write more and publish them, my pleasure disappeared, nothing interests me anymore."

As I listen to him, I reflect on the expectation and decline of desire in an 18-year-old boy who finds it hard to express, when asked, what he feels, but manages to do so when he talks about the game. How can we read the suffering? Thinking of gaming as the cause of his isolation? Or by interpreting gaming in a family and individual context of a person with so many resources who struggles to express himself. Surely, young people struggle to express themselves in a reality that is taking on different meanings, and that we should monitor. Perhaps we should pay attention to

this changing society and, with it, to the generational communication, which is so significant in adolescent growth.

In gaming, they create and imagine. Why shouldn't this creativity be real? Why don't we, during therapy, attempt to interpret the 'avatar' they have created, emphasizing their own traits, as well as a personality structure that is still under construction, as a dreamlike and symbolic tale that conveys something of itself? These young people know that the avatar is not them. What they bring is shareable and communicable, so why define it as 'psychotic-like'? It can be so in a situation where the risk was already there, and so the game becomes the only alternative and no longer a possibility, a sublimation, or, as we mentioned, self-narration and/or experimentation.

Emilia says:

> "The game allows me to be free. I chose a character that I realized shared aspects of myself that I hadn't expressed. You have the freedom… in creating it and in doing it, I have regained a fantasy and ability to play that I had lost. In this period I have the feeling that outside I survive because I am afraid of tomorrow and of the reactions to my actions, while in the games this does not happen: you say things without the fear of saying unintelligent things, you make mistakes but it does not matter, you are sorry because there are consequences, but everything seems remediable. In real life it doesn't."

Emilia is controlling and emotionally restrained; she often expresses a strong passive aggressiveness as well as a sense of judgment, and she suffers a lot. Here, too, time and expectations play an important role. I wonder, in such a fragile personality of a 26-year-old girl, what role gaming can play? Can it also serve as an organizing function for emotions? Is it also a resource to work with, as well as a way for her to feel?

I conclude by leaving food for thought that I hope will remain constantly open to possibilities. I believe we have a need and perhaps even a duty to look at the world we live in, at the generations that struggle to communicate with each other, at the expectations we have of others by delegating to the outside, and at frightening ourselves into looking at ourselves, because it is difficult to stay in suffering. To look at the meaning of being unique and single in this society, where individualism disappears and fragmentation spreads into a collective that no longer exists.

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