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The use of videogames in the treatment of adolescents

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Abstract

This article aims to focus on how the occasional use of videogames in psychoanalytic sessions with adolescents can be useful to share the adolescent experience during sessions. The distinctive characters of the analytic relationship with adolescents are underlined, and, specifically, the need to share the analytic experience – training ground for life – with adolescents using an approach less “interpretative” and more based on curiosity and listening. The meaning of the term “experience” for an adolescent and within the analytic relationship is clarified. Videogames, which nowadays are an instrument widely used by young generations, can have a dystonic function entailing the risk of addiction and confusion, but also a syntonic one, and can even become one of the means for analytic exchange and communication.

Key words: experience, adolescence, videogame, addiction, Internet

The psychoanalysis of adolescents is based on experience.

Obviously, this utterance also applies to the treatment of children and adults, of groups and families, but I believe it acquires a particular meaning in the work with adolescents. I will borrow the term “experience” from Bion (1962). Although it is a central concept in his thought, he never fully defined it, as shown by the absence of this term or even of a simple definition of it in four of the main Kleinian and Bionian dictionaries (Hinshelwood 1989; López Corvo 2002; Sandler 2005; Bott Spillius *et al* 2011). By the term “experience” I mean that complex field of life where sensations, perceptions, emotions, feelings, thoughts, judgements and actions, both of oneself and of others (I wish to insist on “oneself” and “others”) live together and intertwine, thus creating a *unicum*, which, by definition, cannot be taken back to its basic components. Indeed, an experience is always a meeting between one’s intimate dimension and the external dimension, between sensitivity and objects of sensitivity, between the subject and the world, and it is at the crossroads of what Ferrari (1992) defined “vertical and horizontal dimensions.” The knot created by these two poles cannot be taken back to its starting point or undone because the result of these elements, like that of a chemical reaction, is irreversible. It is similar to the second law of thermodynamics, whereby the changes occurred during adolescence are irreversible (which does not mean that they cannot be subject to further changes), because they are marked, at this age more than ever, by the unidirectional arrow of time (Ferrari, 1994 and 2005). Experience is at the basis of and limits – in a Kantian sense – knowledge. In order for an experience to be such, it must be fully undergone and digested to turn into real personal heritage, which would perhaps be premature to expect in the short period going from the beginning of puberty to approximately 16-17 years of age. At this time of life, for obvious biological and psychological reasons, the amount of new experience one has of oneself and the world is so great that there is not enough time to digest it. When this overload of new experiences causes

distress, sometimes psychotherapy is the instrument enabling adolescents to dispose of their first indigestions of experience.

The analysis of adolescents is made of experience because they bring their external world experience to their sessions and turn it into experience they develop during treatment. The very word “treatment” may be inappropriate, because although formally and practically it is psychotherapy as it includes all its typical features such as perception of a need, help request, setting, times and fees, from the adolescents’ point of view, rather than treatment it is often a type of *meta-experience*. I have chosen this term to radically distinguish it from all the descriptive forms often found in the literature of psychotherapy of adolescents, which define the clinical work in terms of “thinking emotions,” or “containing impulsiveness,” “working through conflicts” or “knowing one’s own functioning system.” I believe all the aforementioned terms are inappropriate to describe what happens in an adolescent in treatment or, rather, they are all adult-centric definitions of processes that, *from the point of view of a boy or a girl*, have an utterly different form and color. Very often adolescents themselves define what they do in treatment as experience, and consider it helpful to face the external world, although they are frequently unable to say how. A boy defined his psychoanalytic sessions as “rehearsals,” a girl as the “point of view that I don’t see by myself.” Providing an adolescent with a distinction between life and reflection on life, doing and thinking, feeling and experiencing or, even worse, taking these distinctions for granted, means to pose oneself at a great distance from the question “what is it like to be an adolescent?”, to quote Thomas Nagel’s famous essay (1974), and its philosophical/psychoanalytical development by Emilio Garroni (1992), which is very different from an external and “objective” observation of adolescents. An even harder and refined task would be “what is it like to be Matteo or Francesca, Luca or Anna,” i.e. to be the boy or girl in front of us at that precise time. Hence, having an attitude closer to that of an anthropologist rather than a “technician of the psyche” is advisable to develop an approach of ignorance and attention necessary to be imbued with adolescent life experience. To use Malinowski’s words to describe a particular type of on-site observation which is *participant observation*, psychotherapists should, like anthropologists, attempt to «grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realize *his* vision of *his* world» (1922, page 19).

The analysis of adolescents is made of experience because adolescent life is dominated by experience. Adolescents in treatment do not repeat *tout court* what they face in their daily life, but they perform a type of training through a particular form of experience consisting in sharing their life and their *Weltanschauung* with a person willing to listen and to participate in a relationship that *creates* immediately a different and shared experience level. Training is not playing a game; revising a lesson is not taking a test, confiding one’s hatred for a parent to a friend is not tackling a conflict with one’s father. However, they are experiences linked to other experiences, which are regarded as more complex and complicated. The treatment of adolescents is, in my opinion, this training ground.

Given that it is a training ground, the therapist’s task is to ensure, through his role and prompts, that the training takes place in the best possible condition. He has to have an idea of the adolescent’s environment, modes and forms, but he should by no means

expect to impose the content of the training, which should be left in the hands of the adolescent. In other words, the therapist, like a training session, has a loading or a downloading role depending on the moment and on the emotional intensity experienced by the adolescent. Since adolescents bring their experience, it is necessary to begin from this experience, which requires two fundamental attitudes: *curiosity* and *listening*.

These two attitudes enable the therapist to enter into the adolescent's world and to begin to know its functioning system, its (unwritten) rules, its ways to interrelate, its culture (intended in its broadest sense), its language and communication codes, etc. These details seem to be alien to the main object of psychotherapy, but they are useful tools to know the cultural *humus* where the boy or the girl lives. A trivial example, from my perspective, which is that of a no-longer young analyst, was my astonishment when I found out that the same sentence written with Whatsapp has radically different meanings if it ends with an exclamation mark, with suspension dots or with a period. What I believed to be a mere variation in stress, as was the case for the old hand-written letters sent by post, nowadays is a deep change in meaning which goes from light joke to offense, expression of hostility, or peremptory statement.

One of the elements of major cultural otherness between adults and adolescents – though surely not the only one – is new technologies (which are no longer that new) which adolescents have dealt with since they were children. Since one of the fundamental results of these technologies has been a substantial change in the communication channels, – consisting in great accelerations, time reductions, rapid and essential dialogues – today the entire adult world is having a hard time to understand, to keep up with or even to accept these innovations. Having performed many analyses of adolescents over the last years, I have been able to notice a series of changes, facilitated by new technologies, which have significantly modified the interaction modes between adolescents. Recently, this type of communication has received (as often happens, unfortunately) a name and a set of initials: TMC (Technology Mediated Communication). An example I have noticed is a frequent split in communication, which was previously inconceivable. Specifically, a boy and a girl (but also two adolescents of the same sex) can reach a high level of emotional intimacy when they write to each other through the private channels of *social networks*; they can exchange existential thoughts and reflections, and voice their emotional fragility. By contrast, in the presence of each other, they may keep an apparently incomprehensible distance and coldness, as if the two communication channels were separate and the two relationships were independent. I have witnessed this description too often to think that it is only a kind of pathological mode. Indeed, I believe it is a new model of relationship, allowed by the new tools available and previously unknown. The expression of intimate and secret emotional states is entrusted to the virtual channel, whereas the external relationship remains carefree and superficial. Of course, the foregoing cannot be uninfluential with respect to one's own emotions and to the possibility to share them in real life experiences, but it is not up to me to say whether it carries only negative consequences and, in any case, it is probably too early to say.

It should also be noted that in this case, as in similar ones, the real border between a physiological and a pathological use of these tools consists in whether they are being used or abused. Any excess, in any domain, may be considered the limit beyond which a certain activity becomes risky. It applies to alcohol, sport, study, caffeine, etc. By the same token, an excessive or a balanced use of the internet and its derivatives makes all the difference.

For many reasons a boy or a girl who, nowadays, wishes to maintain social relations with their peers cannot do without the main communication channels such as the social networks mainly used by their group. In the past, it would have been tantamount to not having a telephone or means of transport to meet with one's social group. However, we are progressively realizing that a certain level of *addiction* to the internet may be an obstacle for a harmonic development of adolescents. For example, what is known as *multitasking*, that is the ability to perform more than one activity at the same time (studying, following Facebook or Whatsapp messages or the evolution of a videogame) seems to cause more problems than one could ever imagine, such as a reduced ability to concentrate, memory loss, increase in cognitive deficits, increase in the production of adrenaline and dopamine, and increase in cortisol and stress, the last two being factors that generate an addiction (Levitin 2014). All of the foregoing also occurs because, as the brain cannot really perform two conscious activities at the same time, it is forced to carry out a continuous shift of attention. Earl Miller, a neuroscientist at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, writes that: "When people think they're multitasking, they're actually just switching from one task to another very rapidly. [...] And every time they do, there's a cognitive cost in doing so [...] People can't do [multitasking] very well, and when they say they can, they're deluding themselves." Levitin concludes by saying: "And it turns out the brain is very good at this deluding business" (Levitin 2014. pages 96 and 98). Today it is known that continuous *multitasking* may cause a reduction of up to 10 points in IQ (up to 15 points in males, according to a study conducted by the University of London), which is higher than that produced by the abuse of marijuana. The sooner will these effects become socially known, the sooner we will be able to reduce their damage. Decades of tobacco tolerance have led to a great increase in tumors and cardiovascular pathologies; hopefully, this negligence will not be repeated.

However, abuse is different to use, and criminalizing or turning into pathologies systems that are now part of adolescents' daily lives would be pointless, and the use of TMC applies to adolescents undoubtedly more than to any other section of the population. According to a multipurpose survey by the Italian Statistics Institute for 2009, 68.1% of families including at least one minor have access to the internet against a national average of 47.3%, and 99.8% of them own a cellular phone, as opposed to a national average of 90.7%. The age range with the largest use of the internet is 15-19 years old. Since then, seven years have gone by and, as everything seems to suggest that these data are on the increase, we must come to terms with these new tools. One of them in particular, videogames, has begun to impose its presence in treatment rooms too.

Like any other tool, videogames can play syntonic or dystonic functions according to the way they are used. Today addiction to videogames is becoming increasingly

concerning and carefully studied, as shown by its first appearance in the latest edition of DSM, the fifth, under the name of Internet Gaming Disorder, the only non-substance-related addiction disorder taken into consideration after the gambling disorder. It is included in the DSM 5 section of the disorders requiring further studies (2013, pages 921-924, Italian edition). Over the next years, this pathology will probably be studied thoroughly like many other forms of addiction, but for now, it should be approached not only as pathology, but also as a form of exchange and communication shared by young generations. I used the word “exchange” because in addition to *fashions*, which cause some games to become more popular than others, many videogames are played on line with rivals who are sometimes strangers; other times friends or direct acquaintances who agree to play at a distance.

I wish to present a few-month clinical case to show how the virtual world can enter into the treatment of adolescents. Marco is a 15-year old who is in treatment due to a violent conflict with his parents, which is particularly serious with regards to school. Marco wants to leave school. Last year his attendance was poor and he ran the risk of failing all his courses. He had to retake three exams in September but did not prepare for them and expected to repeat the entire year. For reasons he finds inexplicable, he passed the three exams, although he is sure his performance was bad. He then changed schools and chose an easier one, but he still wants to leave it because it is utterly uninteresting to him and he cannot understand why he has to go to school even though he does not feel like it. If he has to go to school because his parents force him to, he does no work, gets distracted, plays with his cell phone, and thinks about other things. He describes the hours he spends in his class as real agony, he tells me about his desire to escape, to move, to run away. He is especially intolerant to the physical constraint compounded by the size of his chair and desk, which are too little for his height and especially for his long legs. In his scheme of things, the problem and its solution are very clear and he does not see why he should delve into it so much: “I don’t like to go to school, so I don’t go.” It is not difficult to develop an idea of the theory underlying his thoughts: “If something generates problems and confronts me with difficulties or frustrations, I will avoid it so that I don’t have to deal with them. Also, if I manage to eliminate it from my life with a violent action against my family, I will not even feel a sense of failure, but I will perceive it as my choice and self-assertion.” What Marco is currently unable to see is that he is not making a choice, but he is following the only road that his anguish enables him to see. If Marco were ten years older, it would not be too difficult to focus first on this theory and then to assess what function such a theory can have for him. But Marco is 15 and his theory is very strong. An attempt to focus directly on its dysfunctional aspects could harden his theory and strengthen its paradoxically protective function. The mechanism building his theory is visceral. It is not by showing him its illogicality that I could help him change it. Therefore, I quickly decide to abandon this path and accept his apodictic statements in silence to attempt a different approach.

I ask him what he would like to do instead of going to school. "Play with my computer!" he replies with determination. Thus, I find out that he spends many hours every day playing with his computer, by himself or on line with his friends, and he looks at me skeptically when I begin to ask him some details. He observes me as if I were a *voyeur*, someone who wants to poke his nose into questions he cannot understand and that cannot concern him, an alien who is curious about terrestrial life. His attitude is that of someone who knows I could never understand; he places me immediately and rightly among the adults, who are too far from his individual and generational experience to be able to communicate on this level. However, I manage to startle him by taking advantage of the few but precise pieces of information I have on the games he begins to discuss with me. The first one is *Minecraft*, of which I find out that Marco has become a skilled player. My starting ignorance is so vast that I need Marco's slow and patient explanation of the various details of the game and the infinite development possibilities it entails.

However, videogames cannot be discussed for too long (especially with an adolescent) without falling into excessively academic or abstract reflections. Therefore, I suggest that he download it on my cell phone, so that we can play together. In the little time we share, my apprenticeship begins. I am fascinated by the building possibilities of this game where few bricks, shown as rough pixels, constitute the basic elements for the construction of a universe. I am also surprised that such a graphically poor game with no allure has conquered an entire generation of young people. I share my thoughts with him and we begin to build a shared communication code so that the game is not really played (I would not be able to), but it becomes a means to exchange ideas on the game itself. I express my fascination with a world which is all *in power*, where all kinds of constructions are possible within a precise initial scheme. At this moment, Marco creates the first connection between the game and himself: "Well, that's exactly how I feel! I could become anyone, but I don't know who yet." As time goes by, I am able to show him that the above statement runs counter to his apodictic sentences regarding studying and the way he handles it, and he informs me that actually his attitude to studying is changing. He tells me about some oral and written tests that went well, and some others that are still difficult for him and he does not want to prepare for.

This communication channel becomes increasingly fruitful. Marco comes back with another videogame, which is a type of journey in stages; at every stage, a mystery or a problem must be resolved to reach the subsequent stage. I am surprised by Marco's mental readiness in finding complex and creative solutions, and I do not refrain from congratulating him and underlining that if he used one tenth of his intelligence at school, he could handle it very easily. In the meantime, his school results and his acceptance of the school itself improve, and he expresses his appreciation for a couple of teachers who seem willing to understand his difficulties.

One evening he sends me a message saying that he has an urgent need to talk to me about a new wonderful videogame that is fascinating and anguishing him,

but that he is going to bed now and will tell me about it tomorrow in the session. I realize that he wants me to know that something is changing, but has no urgency to tell me what. The following day, at the session, he is enthusiastic and cannot wait to tell me that he has discovered a new game called *This war of mine*. He has downloaded the free version, but believes the paid one to be even better. He tells me he wanted to call me because he was stuck and did not know how to proceed with the game. He explains to me how it works. He must choose a group of three people (three civilians) who live in a war-torn place where they must attempt to survive (by browsing the internet – indeed! – I find out that the setting of the game – plot and characters – is conspicuously inspired by the siege of Sarajevo). Life is divided into day and night. During the day the characters must satisfy their primary needs (sleeping, eating, healing, drinking, etc.), but also build a kitchen, a bed, repair cracks in the walls, protect their house from possible attacks, etc., but they cannot leave their home because the city is full of snipers ready to shoot. At night, under cover of darkness, they can go out to search for food, water, weapons, medicines, etc. The three characters chosen can act independently, and if one of them dies, the other two can continue to play and possibly accept another character who knocks on their door and asks to join them. While Marco explains the game to me, he opens the application in his phone and I am briefly able to read the sentence quoted at the opening of the game: “In modern war... you will die like a dog for no good reason”, Ernest Hemingway. This sentence strikes me and I begin to listen to him with increasing interest. He explains to me that each character has his own background of abilities and limits, skills and difficulties, possible addictions to substances, weaknesses or proneness to depression, etc. They should be used for different missions in accordance with their abilities. He had contacted me the day before because he was in a predicament and did not know how to proceed. On the game map, he had identified an area full of foodstuffs, where he could send one of the three members, the most skillful and fast in external missions for food searches. In addition, the girl of the group, whom he had left at home for surveillance, was in a serious state of malnutrition, and if he had not brought her food, she would have probably died. Hence, he had reached the house where the food and water were, but there he had found two elderly people with their little grandchild. They had prayed he not take the food away, or the child and themselves would have died. He was in great difficulty and did not know what to do. He looks at me with a very upset expression, and when I ask him what his final decision was, he tells me that he had gone to look for food elsewhere. But the night was almost over and he had to go back home where he found the girl in agony and could do nothing but wait until she died. Soon afterwards, the other two characters had died too and he had lost. At my request, he explains that he is unable to assess how long he should survive to win, although he knows that at some point the war will end. So far, he has managed to survive for three days, but he does not know in advance how long he should remain alive to survive the war.

After a couple of sessions during which he continues to inform me about the evolutions of the game, we decide to download the paid version on my cellphone. He tells me it offers many possibilities, which the *beta* version does not. Since then we spend the time of several sessions to proceed with the adventures of the game. Marco chooses his three characters: Pavle, able to run fast. Roman, provided with the skill “Trained in combat,” enabling him to be good at fighting also when he is depressed; with the characteristics “Smoker,, – he will smoke one cigarette a day, if he finds it in his supplies, to increase his level of happiness – ; and “Moral improvement,” enabling him to play his guitar to help the others struggle against depression. Finally, Marco chooses Cveta, whose characteristic is to improve her mood or happiness when she interacts with children.

During the game, various conflicting levels emerge.

First, at each step, an assessment is called for to decide whether to prioritize the need for food, sleep, health or good mood, in accordance with the circumstances or preferences.

Second, the cooperation among the three characters and the attempt to keep them all alive, although they may renounce or lose some individual advantages;

Third, the assessment of risks/advantages. Every action entails risks which must be proportional to their potential advantages; going to the “sniper junction” to find medicines is worth it only if one of the three members of the group is wounded or ill and in urgent need of medicines, because the risk of being shot, also at night, is very high;

Fourth, the bereavement when one of the members dies and the choice of a new candidate, which should not lead the others to “regret the dead;”

Fifth, upgrading the house, which should not be exaggerated given the precariousness of the situation. All the operations should always be prioritized;

Sixth, the continuous moral conflicts mainly based on the pair altruism/selfishness, which often appear as *mors tua vita mea*.

All these conflicts carry difficult choices, which Marco and I compare regularly to those of real life, discussing how the choices made in the videogame can teach us something about our behavior in life. Sometimes they show Marco mistakes he made (for example with a friend or a teacher), other times they are modified in the videogame based on how he would behave in a similar situation in real life.

While many choices tend to be technical, the moral conflicts are the most demanding ones. After a while, I realize that Marco is able to make decisions to protect his group to the detriment of other civilians only to save one of the trio, but not the one he embodies at that moment and whom he identifies the most with. If he can save a friend, he decides to damage someone else, but if he can save himself, he renounces, which often results in losing the game. This criterion does not apply when the survival of a child is at stake, which ends up being the crucial element in his choices. When I point it out to him, he tells me he feels “too guilty,” and that the same happens in his life. If he thinks his choices (with his friends, parents, school) can only damage himself, he does not

care about what others think, but if he realizes his choices upset others, he is at a loss to make them. In other words, the objective is to reach the end of the game without turning into a monster. We agree that, after all, “dying” is better than not being able to look at oneself in the mirror.

The game continues during various sessions where we share every choice: children who come ask for food or medicines, people who want to exchange their products with ours, where to go at night to get what we need. Every time we suffer from the cruelty of the game and the difficulty of making increasingly difficult moral choices. The representation of the death of our characters is very realistic, and Marco often underlines how guilty he feels for the choices made. Finally, we reach the 45th day. We are exhausted but realize that, surprisingly, the war has ended and the three characters are finally safe.

I used the example above to highlight how sharing an experience (a game or a videogame, in this case) during treatment can bring about significant changes also in the absence of “interpretations” or supposed “translations” of the adolescent’s language register into other languages. A clarification is called for in this respect. According to Ferrari’s clinical framework, the analyst’s main duty – and even more so in the case of the analyst of adolescents – is to learn how to speak the language register of his patients without expecting to decode it into another language (mainly psychologizing and therefore adult-centric). If the analyst succeeds in speaking an adolescent language register, he is free to make his own proposals or to introduce his propositions using a code that is easier for the patient to listen to and, therefore, to understand. An example taken from the game is the following; when Pavle must decide whether to steal foodstuffs from a family with a little child who needs food, rather than underlining Marco’s doubts regarding the urgency of his needs, his aggressiveness and cruelty and his concern for the possible consequences, I decide to give voice to his partner, who is at home and hungry, thus voicing one aspect of his doubt, i.e. is it worth acting in this way or are there possible alternatives? Here Marco/Pavle reflects on the fact that some actions are unjustifiable even in the worst-case scenario, which does not necessarily entail neglecting one’s own needs. A compromise is necessary. In Pavle’s shoes, Marco can tackle the theme of his responsibility for his choices, which I believe he would not be able to do personally and on issues too charged with his anguish. This technical framework requires the analyst to take into account the adolescent’s ability to “translate” this experience into his other fields of existence, and to understand what *use* the adolescent is able or not able to make of his experience in treatment.

Indeed, during the months in which Marco was in treatment, important changes occurred in his family, school and social life, ranging from a significant reduction of his conflicts at home to an increased commitment to school time and homework, and a different attitude towards his friends, with whom he no longer feels forced to appear as the wittiest and most insolent.

Due to the work technique I used, although I believe said changes are in no way casual, they cannot be attributed to Marco’s specific understanding of one of his difficulties or functioning modes. As I wrote in the beginning of this article,

experience, just like a chemical reaction, is a complex, rich and unrepeatable phenomenon and cannot be decomposed into its basic elements. By drinking a glass of water, we quench our thirst, although we cannot perceive the introduction of atoms of hydrogen and oxygen into our mouths. It is simply the encounter and mutual understanding experienced in an analytic relationship that leads to global changes whose details inevitably escape one's attention. In this regard, I believe that a "purely cognitive" approach (which regards not only cognitive psychology but also "hyper-interpretative" psychoanalysis), pressing for a "rational" understanding of one's difficulties, could – especially with adolescents – lead patients to understand many things about themselves, but not to make use of them because their sensorial, emotional and social elements are not *experienced* but *explained*. Only two aspects deserve to be analyzed: one concerns the content, and the other the method.

The plot and the challenges the game poses to the player captured Marco's attention, so much so that he used it as the central theme of his sessions. The scheme of the videogame focuses on typical adolescence themes, which are worth listing in a summary manner:

1. Prioritizing;
2. The problem of the relationship between cooperation and competition;
3. The difficulty in making choices;
4. The comparison between the countless possibilities of the universe and the limitations of life;
5. Responsibility for one's actions;
6. Guilt;
7. The courage necessary for every challenge;
8. The risk necessary for growing and the perception of excessive risks.

The above and other themes belong to the experience of adolescence and in particular to Marco's, who, having been confronted with the first significant school frustrations, decided to give up rather than to endanger an almighty idea of himself. Reducing impulsiveness and facing challenges in a more cautious way also emerged significantly during the game.

With reference to method, moving from a communication level between a responsible adult and an impulsive and restless adolescent to a level where an adolescent experience was shared on common grounds enabled me to work in a neutral environment, devoid of conflicts, anguish and stiffness. To this purpose, I also decided to play the videogame with Marco rather than to settle for his description or for my comments on its possible metaphoric or hidden meanings. In other words, the videogame was not litmus paper for his difficulties or a tool to read his unconscious functioning, but the opportunity to share an experience with him. During the game, we always acted side by side and, in the majority of cases, our decisions were the result of our cooperation or, sometimes – in case of disagreement – of a compromise. It was evident to me, also by looking at Marco's emotional reactions, that sharing that experience with me was an important incentive to get to know himself, although most of the times that was not the topic of our conversations. The real "transformative" part of the sessions was sharing the difficulties and the obligatory choices entailed in the game, not the interpretation of the game. It was the game per se and not its

metaphoric value. Of course, the metaphors played a role too, but it was a secondary one compared to the shared emotional *pathos*, determined by the difficulties encountered at every stage of the game. The main role was played by the shared experience, which, as such, is a form of training for life.

Marco's psychological process was so rich and complex that it is very difficult to establish how the sessions enabled him to change his attitude to school, to reduce the conflicts with his family, and to take greater responsibility for his life. Understanding these steps is not clinically possible because they took place in the intimacy of his life and only he (perhaps not even he) might be able to say something about them. Like digestion, which we only perceive when it functions improperly, or it proceeds silently, – we digest and that suffices – also harmonic psychological changes do not produce significant signals. What I know, though, and which is the basis for my work with adolescents, is that if we find common grounds to share an experience, something, sooner or later, will change.

Notes

- (1) By “theory” I mean, like Ferrari, a perseverance in adolescence and in adulthood of child theories (described by Freud), which as a person grows, turn into rigid schemes unable to evolve into more flexible hypothetical systems, necessary in adolescent or adult life.
- (2) An anecdote can metaphorically clarify how large the gap is between the adolescent world and culture and a psychoanalyst over the age of fifty: before working with Marco, I believed this game was called “*Mind Craft*”, because I had interpreted it as referring to mental activity or thought, which the game obviously does not. This misunderstanding shows, in a comic way, the need, when meeting an adolescent, to abandon one's prejudice and values scale as quickly as possible, because they would probably lead one to overload with meanings any experience in progress, thus endangering change rather than favoring it.
- (3) Out of curiosity, that evening I looked for the complete quote: “They wrote in the old days that it is sweet and fitting to die for one's country. But in modern war there is nothing sweet nor fitting in your dying. You will die like a dog for no good reason.” (Hemingway, 1935).
- (4) For reasons of space, I shall not delve into this point; for further details, I wish to refer to one of my articles on clinical dialogue with children (Carignani 2006).

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