

Brief Summary of Some Basic Considerations for Role-playing Games with At-risk Populations

by W.A. Hawkes-Robinson at RPG Research, December 23rd, 2018

This is a very brief list of some basic considerations that we frequently come across that can help make role-playing gaming "safer" for at-risk populations, that will hopefully help others when considering this modality with these populations.

The following may be very obvious to some, but for many others these may be new concepts, so just in case it is helpful, regarding using RPGs to help with substance abuse recovery, here is a brief summary of considerations.

In the rehab and rehab transition programs we have helped with using RPGs, we found that using metaphorical approaches took them out of the game less, and reduced resistance to participation, better than more overt approaches in-game.

Then in pre-and-post game processing sessions discussing how those metaphors were analogous to their own challenges. Spelling this out may not be necessary for those clients that have learned introspective and analytical skills, but walking through the potential lessons (and skills) learned from the session is especially useful for those that might be younger or have cognitive impairments (or those that haven't had as much introspective analytical experience) that might not have picked up on the direct relationships in the RPG session stories to their own personal challenges.

Also critical for the transition programs was setting up supervised day passes to a weekly/regular game to prepare them to have a new (gaming) peer group they were already comfortable with as long before discharge as possible. This potentially reduces the risk of going back to the same drug/gang/maladaptive peer group they were associating with before. You can't just tell them "stay away from your old friends they're bad for you", without offering something to replace that void.

One easy but useful example is that some game settings already provide equivalents to using over-using/abusing magic, and the risk of it becoming addictive and other dangerous consequences (corruption, SAN, detection by "the enemy", etc.) as part of the rules.

Especially for juveniles, we find that resistance is higher (less likely to engage in suspension of disbelief to enjoy and immerse in the game to maximize potential flow state learning) if the message was too "in their face" about the game being therapy. We've seen this across the board with a whole range of at-risk youth programs.

We've also found RPGs that have built-in behavior modification make it much easier to address in-game-session social conflict between players, than exerting our own rules to curb them (though we always include codes of conduct, especially if using games that don't spell it out in the game well).

Games such as The One Ring RPG (TOR) & Adventures in Middle-earth (AiMe) Shadow Points, or TOR's Fellowship Focus (which we port over to AiMe (pdf on the RPG Research website freely available), or Doctor Who's rules relating to taking the least violent approach impacting initiative & story points, etc.

If the rules are built into the game they are more willing to go along with those published rules modifying their behavior.

We hope others find these basic considerations helpful for any others planning to provide RPGs in their programs with at-risk and substance abuse recovery programs.

You can find a link to read a much more in-depth article on this topic here:

<https://www.rpgresearch.com/news/at-risk-considerations-12-2018>