Episode 144 - Michael Langlois: Gamer-Affirmative Practice: Today's Play Therapy

[00:00:08] Welcome to in social work. The podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at www.insocialwork.org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of in social work is to engage practitioners and researchers and lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice to research. We're in social work. Hi from Buffalo. Buffalo experienced a burst of exceptional growth and prominence at the turn of the 20th century one of the continuing benefits to our town as a city full of architectural gems. Recent public events celebrating our history have included tours of exceptional residences in our historic Linwood and Parkside neighborhoods as well as the masters of American architecture tours of signature works by some of America's greatest architects. I'm Peter Sobota 97 percent of adolescence in the United States play videogames and one half of adults play them regardless of their race or income. The U.S. military has learned that video games decreased symptoms of PTSD and combat veterans. Despite these and other numbers social workers have been reluctant or unclear how or when to integrate technology let alone video games in their work. Our guest today Michael Langlois will argue that social work is well past the point where learning about technology is negotiable and that meeting our clients where they're at means understanding technology. Now to this end our guest shares his thoughts and experiences with utilizing 21st century technology. Social work practice. Specifically what he calls gamer affirmative practice. Mr. Langlois will elaborate on that idea.

[00:02:04] He sees gaymer affirmative practice as a stance of cultural competence and a response to the growing subculture of people young and old who play video games especially for children and adolescents utilizing this kind of play is reflective of how our clients spend their time learn and relieve stress. Mr. Langlois describes what social workers should know about video games and why and gives numerous examples of their utilization in practice. Michael Langlois LICSW has over 20 years of experience counseling the adults and children. His work focuses on gaining social media and the impact of social networks on relationships. He is an adjunct faculty member at the Boston College School of Social Work and here at the School of Social Work. Mr. Langlois was interviewed in April of 2014 by Tony Guzman director of online programs here at UB School of Social Work I have with me Mike Langlois and we have the opportunity to have him do this podcast interview and share a bit about his therapy sessions with his teenaged clients and families and some of the innovative ways that you've actually got about doing those sessions. So Mike thank you for joining us. Thanks for having me. So Mike actually was when we met last year that the first time I heard the idea of a game or federative therapy which is I guess a variation of play therapy. So can you tell me a little bit about that and how you use that in your sessions with teenagers.

[00:03:42] Sure I guess I would think of game or affirmative therapy more as a stance of kind of like cultural competency rather than a specific treatment mortality and I coined the term based on gay affirmative therapy which back in the 80s and 90s when it was harder to find a therapist that was affirming of the culture and competence of the culture of LGBT folks. And I've noticed that there's a similar problem finding therapists that are affirming and culturally competent when it comes to the subculture of people that play video games or now even more because it's prevalent in mainstream culture. People play videogames. Certainly I mean when you get to the point that you have the popular forms of entertainment around society focusing on videogames and all be it from TVs movies it's all around us really. So it is a cultural competency for sure. So what do you think social workers need to know about using games within their therapy sessions. Well I think one of the things that I would want to think about is first before what they should know why they should know. Because I think a lot of times the question that maybe spoken or may not be by social workers is why should I know about videogames. Why is this so important and because it's a game

it can seem less important to people but I think there are a couple reasons why I think people should be knowing more about video games. One is I think as we've alluded to it's a pretty predominant part of culture in the 21st century. But more specific to social workers that work with kids and adolescents and even adults. Video games are a form of play. Their 21st century play and people that are doing play therapy need to start integrating 21st century play.

[00:05:36] If you're going to be doing 21st century play therapy it doesn't mean we have to throw out things like Chutes and Ladders or monopoly or other games that therapists have traditionally used like the talking feeling doing game. But we need to start figuring out what ways can we integrate these newer forms of play into our treatment with our patients. And so then what types of video games or kinds of video games you end up using. Oh I use of all sorts of games and it really depends on what games the kiddo may be interested in or the adult may be interested in and I want to continue to say both kiddo and adult because a lot of videogame users in fact a large number of videogame users are statistically in their 30s and 40s. So it's not just children that are playing these games. But part of assessing whether a kid or an adult what their videogame usage is is figuring out what they like. You know some people are playing massively multiplayer online games other kids or adults like playing first person shooters. People like playing games on Facebook people like playing Minecraft that's a huge one now. So it really depends on what the kiddo or the adult is interested in. So I actually in sessions play games that range from all the ones I've discussed with the exception of multiplayer online games because that's a little hard to do while trying to keep containment and confidentiality certainly. So you mentioned first person shooters and then there will be many parents and there are people that think wow a violent video game. So what would you say in terms of using games that have been traditionally more violent in the therapies. Good bad. How do you end up applying that problem. Right.

[00:07:24] So people that have done play therapy since the late 19th century and through the 20th century have probably noticed that when there is any sort of play that has what we would call projective qualities to it where people can use imagination to represent what may be going on internally there's always aggression there's always violence. You give kids sticks. They make them guns. You have kids abuse building blocks. They often make them into weapons. Violence is often a theme that's inherent in play. So I don't think that's necessarily new. I think what makes videogames troubling for a lot of people is the concern about the violent imagery and the concern that it actually makes people more predisposed to violence and for better or for worse. We have a lot of research that says both pro and con and there's a lot of questions about the validity of the research that I've seen that posits that it triggers violence. And so ultimately where I sort of find myself coming down is taking the long view and the long view is that over the past since the 1980s youth violence has actually decreased in our society on the whole and that's roughly around the time video games became much more part of our culture so we know correlation isn't causation. But if there is any correlation the correlation we see is that around the same time video games showed up violence on the whole has been decreasing. So back to first person shooters in sessions. I don't think I use them for every single kid.

[00:09:04] If there are kids that are extremely dis regulated or extremely prone to get anxious or agitated when they watch these sorts of games then it's not really indicated. But for kids that have an interest in playing these games and can enjoy them. One of the things I've noticed is it has a lot of benefits to them. One of the things that may seem counter to what people think is I think video games like first person shooters help you with impulse control because in order to be really effective at a first person shooter you have to learn to not pull the trigger of the gun in the video game. The minute you see something you have to be able to refrain or set up a target or aim. And so although social workers and therapists may feel uncomfortable with the concept of guns and games social workers are less likely to be against the concept of developing more impulse control. And so if you have a game that can actually engage a child or an adolescent or an adult. And at the same

time help them with impulse control then you may want to rethink whether or not you use it. I can recall myself years ago when I used to work in Manhattan and have a rough commute back into northern New Jersey which would just be very hectic and after a long day and usually I would relax through some first person shooter and the early days myself and what would you say. There are those types of first person shooter or in general video games that are more a story based are those beneficial in these types of therapies or is it more to whatever that genre is that it get as quick to that type of play as possible. If that makes sense.

[00:10:54] I think if I understand right you're talking about games that may have lots of cut scenes or things that are sort of stories I think there's a therapeutic value to those as well. For example it may be that in a 45 minute 50 minute session it takes a little while to get from one part of active play to another but at the same time the therapist and the patient or client are sharing watching this story. And there may be things in that story that are thematic we appropriate a lot of video games that have stories that involve themes that are really important to kids and adults alike. Themes of attachment and loss. There's one game I think of in particular called Poppo Ijo which is really on one level about a kid trying to learn how to deal with this giant monster and solve all these puzzles. But at the same time interwoven with that is the back story of the adults and his past abusive history with his father and his father's drinking that turns out to be interlinked with this story. So if you think about some of the kids or adults you may be working with who have parents that abuse substances or have had a history of trauma. There can be a lot of things in these games that are very meaningful for them. At the same time that's why we need to educate ourselves before we just start playing the game with the kids because they can be extremely activating as well. And so would you say that when you're using video games in your sessions is it for the entire session or is it part of the session.

[00:12:30] That's a really good question because the old way I used to do it and again I try not to make any rigid hard and fast rules but I used to do what I think a lot of my colleagues do which is use video games as a reward that if you did some of the talking stuff that you don't want to do with me we can then play the video game and then I sort of realized that I wasn't using the game as therapeutic content I was using it almost as a behavioral reinforcer or a reward and that if I truly value the content of the videogame and the ACT the video game I needed to actually start letting the kid direct that. And so I've actually had sessions now with patients where I have to play Call of Duty for 40 minutes or 45 minutes and I have to be honest I don't always like playing call of duty just like I haven't liked playing thousands of games of Uno in my career play therapy. A lot of times it's fun but sometimes we don't like every game that the person wants to play. But what I've noticed is if I let go of this need to kind of make it seem therapy like I often get a lot of valuable therapeutic content whether it be talking with the patient or client during the play or reflecting on how they're acting as we're playing in the game. And I think the one other thing I'd say about this is I think we have more pressure now when we work in agencies or even independently to talk or have some talking part.

[00:14:04] And it's not for the kids sake it's often for the notes sake that the progress. And that I think we sometimes worry that we can't just put in the progress note played Call of Duty themes of competition emerged as patient explored X Y and Z. We seemed to need to sort of report on symptoms and sort of document that we talked about stuff and I think I would encourage people to let go of that because it not only is it not really good play therapy sometimes but it's often the note dictating that treatment rather than the note reflecting what happened. And I would suspect that you probably come across at times from parents that as they're coming to meet you and consider some sessions with their child that they might say hold our child just spend so many hours playing video games. What's your response to that when they share that with you. Well I try to front load for parents information so that their expectations are in line with how I work. I work in an area which is in an urban area in Boston where there are lots of therapists and there are a lot of good child

therapists and adolescent therapists. And I don't think everyone works the same way. I have a very pro videogame stance. So what I have is very clearly on my Web site videos.

[00:15:21] And so if parents haven't come to me through seeing the website I really forward them to that and I say watch this yourself and then if you think you might want to try having your child or adolescent come see me watch it with them because I have a very specific pro videogame stance and if you're coming in with the hope that I'm going to take a specific side or stance about reducing time you may be disappointed. And so I find that about eight times out of 10 parents and kids still come in. The other two times parents are really committed to. We have an agenda we want this child to stop or adolescent to stop or reduce the time they're playing but then they're not a really good fit for me because my stance is I don't want to get you to a certain number of hours. I want to understand the meaning for you of what you're playing because I think ultimately when kids play videogames they're doing something that they're failing at about 80 percent of the time and they're persisting which tells us that there's something in there that makes them feel competent and challenged and that if we can somehow harness that and find ways to generalize it to other parts of their life they're ultimately going to be successful. And I'd rather approach it that way than to have them stop doing something that they feel competent and or stop doing something they persist in because it's too many hours. And if a parent was asked what type of game should I have my child play or should I allow my child to play. How do you approach that question.

[00:16:56] Well that I think parent guidance is really an important part of doing work with kids and adolescents from my point of view that there always should be at least one appointment a month where you're meeting with the parents unless the kiddo is at such an agent in such a circumstance that they want their parents completely out of therapy and that that's reasonable and safe to do so. So what I actually do is try to encourage parents to not try to park their parenting on a setting or a list whether it be the rating system or Mike's list of videogames. If your kiddo is interested in a video game go out and rent it and preview it yourself play it yourself a little bit see what you think about this videogame because everybody's family has different values. A lot of our families that overlap our values but some families value being compassionate more than being competitive other families value being respectful and helpful but not as much aggressive. Other families think aggression is healthy to a degree. So what your family values and what your family is concerned about is going to dictate this. So I guess in short I often tell parents you need to take a look at what these games are you need to preview them and actually sit with your kids when they're playing if they're not going to say get out of the room. And the last piece about this I think that makes me not give a list. Is that different videogames perform different functions with kids some kids that may be working on better hand eye coordination first person shooters or wonderful other kids that may be working on executive functioning whether it's A.D.H.D or some other reason tower defense games like Plants versus zombies are really good. So we need to get to know the child or the adolescent better to know what games we might want to encourage them towards. But then I guess I often think that we may want to lead a little here.

[00:18:56] Sure that's interesting because actually as a parent I've always taken the stance I have videogame fan from a young age myself that when my boys were of evasion of wanting to get interested and play video games that I always previewed it beforehand and played with them. I always thought that it's a family type time. And exactly as you mention the values of our family are reflected within what games we end up playing right. Emily would you say that there's any difference in terms of when you have a mobile platform you have your console's you have your PC games that can be used within your therapy. I've actually used all of them. I bring my laptop in and we'll use the PC I bring in my iPad and we'll use that I've actually played Minecraft for example in my office with kids on both my PC the Xbox and the office and the iPad. So I'm really flexible about that I try to use as much technology as possible. The part that I think I get more rigid around is locking down contact with the outside world. In my therapy office just like I don't want people

running in and out of the office when I'm doing therapy. I don't want the Xbox to have people pinging us. Can you play this game or to hear other people's conversations and like online games. So I set limits with kids around. We really need to keep this locked down to us a private match and I don't have my own minecraft server yet so it's hard to do that.

[00:20:30] I envision a time if I have enough time and resources I would love to be able to set up a secure hipper compliant minecraft server where kids could come in and maybe do some peer or group work because I think Minecraft especially would be a great tool to do some group play therapy. The technology is there. I think we have to sort of catch up to it in terms of privacy and protecting confidentiality. It's going to still be important and so we've often talked about different technology advances and what have you. So what would you say. Video games from back in the 70s. You know playing Pong to where they are today have advanced greatly. What do you think if you could see down the road five years from now ten years from now. How else might video games change that would benefit using a therapy sessions. You know that's really interesting. You know I'm thinking about some of the stuff that's being done with Oculus Rift which is a sort of a virtual reality interactive device and some other interesting work that's being done where for example there's this game called Sky RIM which you are immersed in this sort of fantasy world with dragons and swords and fighting and all sorts of stuff. But with Oculus Rift and or some other devices you can actually be walking and using gestures much like what we see with the we now. But in a much more immersive quality and that I think having those things integrated more into therapy would be really interesting because one of the things we know about steep learning is that when we get our body into certain states our mind follows and so if we have our body in more empowering stances people are going to feel more empowered.

[00:22:23] Perhaps if we make ourselves smile our brain thinks hey I must be happy because the last time my muscles were like this I was happy. And so I think that the closer we get to immersive and virtual realities in the play the more powerful some parts of the play may be and I'm imagining that some people listen. This may worry about. Well you know but is that going to make it hard for kids or adolescents or even adults to distinguish between fantasy and reality. And I don't think that's true. For the most part because one of the things that's in the nature of play is people need to know it's play. It's only a game. And I think when you talk with kids or talk with adolescents they'll tell you they know it's only a game or not only a game. They know they're playing that in order for it to really work. There needs to sort of be this dual consciousness about it that we're both immersed in it but we also know it's set apart from reality. That would sound very much and I agree I think Oculus Rift is going to make some leaps in video game technology in the next couple of years and we'll probably get somewhere close. I know we're both Star Trek fans having something like a holodeck which I would expect would actually be very beneficial to the more immersive and be therapeutic in a lot of ways because now you can customize what exactly you're using within your session right. And what about the timing. We've got quite a few games that are tied to movies TV shows and whatnot.

[00:23:57] Other products do you find those to be more beneficial do they come in at all. Or they can avoid them because they are used in other words and. Does it work in the session to have a game that actually has other elements that might allow the child or the adult to be involved in. Oh gosh there's so much in that question. So on the one hand I'm very leery of branding and cross branding and marketing in games. On the other hand the Avengers are heroes of our time. They're cultural artifacts and representations of things. Grimm's fairy tales weren't marketed or had product lines back when they came out. So I know that there's that concern that a lot of people share and I share it too. On the other hand I've seen attempts at therapeutic gains and where the intentions I think are really good. There is not the financial resources to make them look as interesting or engaging. There is not the built in connection with kids worlds so they are less likely to be engaging. And I do have a bias against sort of therapeutic games that lead with the therapy that I

actually think it's more useful for therapists to survey a lot of different games and think critically about how different games might be useful for different things. For example I would hate to see the holodeck spawn a bunch of social script games where you have to kind of go in and do certain things. I would much rather see games that are currently in existence that have more perhaps media force and industry force behind them. But I have a better more engaging and more immersive.

[00:25:44] So what I think would be great is if we started having even more dialogue between mental health providers and the video game industry so that we could start cooperating more so that we could maybe integrate therapeutic themes into these games rather than try to create therapeutic games that really aren't very fun. And so that makes me think of. And you're probably aware of the term serious games and there are quite a few things I know especially with a lot of the veterans coming back from having seen warfare that have PTSD that it just does help them because through their therapy and while it's different than I think what we've been talking I think there's some similarity and benefit to it. If I could ask one more question. Do you find it's generally a myth out there and I think it's just a myth that it is more boys than girls that play video games and I believe actually not. Recall that you've had your own statistics and you've done your own research into this what you've seen in your own practice and what have you found to be the case with research you're looking into. Well so I'm trying to think some of the statistics and you know I don't have any right off the top of my head what I can tell you that we seem to know from the research is that girls may be more inclined to play social games like on Facebook like words with friends and things like that than boys. But in general there is a very narrowing gender gap girls game in much the same way boys do girls enjoy much the same video games boys do.

[00:27:24] The differences may be that girls are marketed differently than boys and I think that is also changing as gender roles are shifting in our society. Sure. But I think that the idea that if you ask most families that have kids that are girls that have video game platforms they're using them now why they're using them is very interesting. There is some evidence to suggest that girls play video games with their dads are closer to them which may be because it's an activity based on an affinity. So I'm not sure exactly if girls are playing video games for the same reasons boys are but we know that people play for many different reasons. Not the least of which is to have fun and it's pretty clear that girls and boys both have fun playing video games and with some of the technologies some of the recent game console is Altair like the Wii and exports with the Kinect and what. So having controllers and or more motion sensor based capabilities within the console is defined that also assists in the therapy sessions that you have with your clients. You know it's interesting because different kids come in and different adolescence come in with different strengths and weaknesses relative to like fine motor coordination or gross motor coordination. I don't have a we in my office and it's not set up with the Kinect so the controllers we have are used really just basic Xbox controllers or if a kiddo is using mouse for the PC or touch with the iPad I haven't noticed the preference of one over the other. Some people are much more interested in the controllers and controls.

[00:29:04] Other kids find the tactile being able to push or move. Minecraft blocks around on the iPad easier. What I think is really exciting is that there is a range and a proliferation of different kinds of consoles and devices so that more people than ever can interact with video games certainly. All right. Thank you for sitting down me and sharing from your practice and what you have found beneficial within your practice to both as you say kiddo's and adults. And thank you for joining us. You're very welcome. Thanks for having me. You've been listening to Michael Langlois discuss gamer affirmative social work practice in social work. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school our history our programs and what we do we invite you to visit our website at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu.