

ATRIUM CLINIC'S APPROACH

Atrium Clinic set out to make gaming part of the solution. Our goal is to reconnect young people struggling in school, community, or the justice system, improve their wellbeing, and support the professionals who work with them. We developed a structured protocol for integrating gaming into therapeutic work, refining best practice through evidence-based methods.

A SYSTEMIC AND SUPPLEMENTARY APPROACH

Traditional talking therapies are not always developmentally appropriate, especially for those who struggle with emotional literacy, attention, or verbal expression. Digital game-based therapy builds on principles of person-centred and systemic therapy, meeting young people in a medium that feels familiar, safe, and motivating. Rather than replacing the therapeutic relationship, digital play becomes a shared space where connection, regulation, and meaning-making can occur — and the therapy continues outside the therapy room, strengthening family ties and family play.

Structured game-based therapy allows young people to externalise emotions, practise problem-solving, and develop social and emotional skills. Platforms such as Minecraft function like sand tray or creative therapies, offering symbolic representation, narrative construction, and co-regulation within a therapeutic frame.

THE INTERVENTION

We delivered a supervised, digital game-based therapy programme to children and young people aged 7–21 across schools and community settings. Participants often struggled to remain in the classroom, had experienced exclusions, bereavements, trauma, neurodivergence, or other difficulties unresponsive to traditional therapy. Some were involved with the criminal justice system.

Sessions were led by Atrium's trained therapists and psychologists, using the digital environment intentionally according to our clinical protocol. Therapeutic aims included emotional regulation, resilience, social understanding, and expression of internal experiences. Referral pathways were through schools and community settings; sessions were 50 minutes long, beginning with assessment to check suitability. Clients typically had 4–8 sessions.

The digital format allowed engagement at an individual pace, while therapist supervision ensured boundaries, safeguarding, and therapeutic containment. Parents, teachers, and youth workers were included to ensure continuity beyond the sessions.

WHAT WE FOUND

Participants showed meaningful improvements in emotional wellbeing, with reductions in psychological distress. Gains were especially notable among males — a group less likely to engage in traditional therapy. Parents, teachers, and youth workers reported improvements in social functioning and overall mental health, indicating that therapeutic benefits transferred beyond the sessions.

CLINICAL REFLECTIONS

Key themes emerged from our work:

- ▶ **Engagement first:** Digital play lowered barriers for anxious, avoidant, or resistant participants.
- ▶ **Safety through distance:** The digital environment allowed exploration of difficult themes indirectly.
- ▶ **Therapeutic presence matters:** Outcomes were strongest when therapists were actively attuned and purposeful.
- ▶ **Not a replacement, but a tool:** Game-based therapy works best alongside traditional therapeutic models such as CBT, relational therapy, and trauma-informed approaches.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELLORS

Digital approaches are not a panacea, nor suitable for every child or young adult. When used ethically and intentionally, however, they can expand the therapeutic toolkit — particularly for those with trauma, neurodivergence, or who face barriers in institutional and community settings. The question for counsellors is not whether to engage with digital therapy, but how to do so thoughtfully, safely, and grounded in core therapeutic principles.

LOOKING AHEAD

Atrium Clinic has been pioneering gaming-mediated therapy since 2014 — from Tetris for trauma management to Minecraft for supporting troubled young people. Our gaming-mediated therapy protocol will be published in Spring 2026, alongside a journal article with ARU. We also provide training and clinical supervision for professionals working in this emerging field.

More information: www.atriumclinic.co.uk

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