What are we talking about when we talk about escapism?

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Escapism is often used interchangeably with related concepts such as avoidance, coping, and dissociation. These terms generally have negative connotations and have been correlated with problematic gaming tendencies, but it has generally been accepted that 'active', 'healthy', or 'self-expansive' escapism is a separate phenomenon not associated with maladaptive tendencies. However, definitions of positive types of escapism conceptually conflict, and as of yet, it is not clear what personal or game contexts presuppose 'healthy' escapism. This workshop submission attempts to disentangle the underlying concepts of positive escapism and pose questions regarding how we should treat escapism as a potentially positive experience.

1 Introduction

In the last few decades of gaming and online behavioral research, escapism has been defined and operationalized in a number of different ways [15]. Generally, definitions of escapism include using the game to escape from real life and/or real life problems [4, 6], but escapism is often used interchangeably with avoidant coping [18]. Operationalizations are variable; Melodia et al. [18]'s recent systematic review identified six different psychometric measures used to assess escapist motivations, including but not limited to: the Motives for Online Gaming Questionnaire [6], the Motivations to Play in Online Games Questionnaire [26], and the Video Game Uses and Gratification Instrument [22]. Given this evidence, it is not a stretch to say that escapism is somewhat poorly conceptualized in the literature [8].

Indeed, recent work has further elaborated on dualistic models of escapism in which both positive and negative outcomes are possible. Several versions of this dichotomy have been proposed by a number of researchers. These are outlined in the following subsections.

1.1 Self-suppressive vs. self-expansive

This dichotomy is drawn from Regulatory Focus Theory [11], which suggests that human behavior is motivated by two fundamentally different self-regulatory view points: a *promotion focus*, which leads people towards acquiring superior standards and ideals in order to effect positive personal outcomes, and a *prevention focus*, which leads people to protect themselves from threats to their own stability through inhibiting negative outcomes. In parallel, *self-expansive escapism* stems from promotion motives and is taken as an opportunity for self-development and self-improvement, while *self-suppressive escapism* is based in a prevention focus and is intended to temporarily direct one's attention away from

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current stressors or future obstacles. Cole and Gillies [5] make a comparison between this dichotomy and Hartmann [10]'s motives for media consumption (recreation vs. psychological growth), namely in that self-suppression parallels recreation ("the harmonizing of imbalanced physiological states (homeostatic regulation) and the replenishment of exhausted physiological resources, with both processes linked to pleasurable responses" [10]) while self-expansion parallels psychological growth ("achieved via the master of challenges. . . the term 'challenge'. . . refers to a variety of cognitive, affective, visceral and behavioural tasks imposed by the media environment" [10]).

Stenseng et al. [25] (and others) also use the terms *adaptive vs. maladaptive* interchangeably with self-expansive vs. self-suppressive. This dichotomy originates from adaptive and maladaptive coping styles discussed in psychology [27].

1.2 Healthy vs. subversive

Kosa and Uysal [15] demarcate between escaping real life to reduce daily stress (healthy) or using games as an escape device to avoid real life problems (subversive). Their four pillars of healthy escapism include: *emotional regulation* (the attempt to modify the trajectory of emotions, consisting of: situation selection and modification, attention deplyoment, cognitive change, and response modulation); *mood management* (maintaining positive moods or trying to end negative affect states); *coping* (efforts spent for minimizing problems and stress, characterized by three main strategies: problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidance-focused), and *recovery* (recuperation from cognitive and emotional exhaustion characterized by psychological detachment, relaxation, mastery, and control).

1.3 Active vs. passive

Kuo et al. [17]'s framework differentiates between stress relief via narrative transportation and a refocus of attention (passive) and stress relief via confronting the specific nature of an external stressor through gaining affirmation and empowerment from the game environment. Active escapism is seen as a form of projective fantasy or mediated reality, while passive escapism is seen as a form of transportation or immersion. This aligns strongly with the TEBOTS (temporary expanding the boundaries of the self) model [13], which posits that when self-control resources are depleted are more motivated to temporarily escape the self through absorption in narratives.

2 Conflicting Definitions and Open Questions

Despite varying in theoretical foundations, there are certainly conceptual overlaps between these models. Generally, it seems that positively-valenced escapism refers to "an active and at least partly adaptive process entailing a positive emotional playback" [8], while negatively-valenced escapism suggests dysfunctional and avoidant coping strategies.

However, as a student studying transformative gaming experiences, I have encountered several conceptual conflicts and overlaps that create confusion as to how I should treat escapism as a phenomenon. In my most recent paper about the effects of eudaimonic gaming experiences [7], I was unclear about how to treat escapism as part of their potential formation. In the following sections, I outline three primary points of my own confusion.

2.1 Escapism vs. escape? Escape vs coping?

Some scholars have made an attempt to differentiate between positive and negative valenced escapism using terminological differences. For example, Demetrovics et al. [6] found that in their development of a questionnaire for gaming motivations, escape and coping registered as two separate factors, despite initially being grouped. *Coping* was aligned with positively-valenced escapism, reflecting the "role of gaming in channeling and coping with distress and aggression and improving mood", while *escape* was aligned with negatively-valenced escapism, referring to "escaping

from reality, especially problems of the real world". Relatedly, Melodia et al. [18]'s systematic review pointed out the often interchangeable use of 'escapism' and 'avoidant coping', and their findings suggested that "escape from real-life problems or dysphoric mood is associated with several negative psychosocial and physical outcomes". They subsequently proposed that "clarifying the nature of escapism as an avoidant coping strategy should be seen as the basis for further research on this topic". However, in Giardina et al. [8]'s response to Melodia et al. [18], they criticize Melodia et al. [18]'s interchangeable use of the terms 'escapism' and 'escape' and contend that (in line with Demetrovics et al. [6]) they should be treated as separate phenomena, with escape rather than escapism being considered the avoidant phenomena. Drawing from Calleja [3], Giardina et al. [8] suggest that escapism should refer to a bidirectional and temporary movement to the game world through which the player will ameliorate their emotions and then return to the physical world, while escape should refer to the desire for unidirectional movement into the game world that rejects the physical world. They conclude that escapism and escape are not necessarily positive or negative, but rather, more or less adaptive.

However, it must be noted that it is difficult to treat escapism as a construct with any sort of positive valence when much of the past literature attaches dissociative or avoidant connotations to the term. Hussain et al. [12]'s meta-analysis showed that while there are both positive and negative outcomes of escapism, the negative outcomes still outweigh the positive ones. Hagström and Kaldo [9] make the strong claim that "positive aspects of escapism are theoretically and empirically unstable and that escapism is best clarified as purely negative".

Open question: It is clear that terminological rigor is necessary to distinguish between the intentionality and adaptivity of a phenomenon that could be defined as escapism. Should the field continue to use the term 'escapism' at all?

2.2 Context-aware escapism?

Stenseng et al. [24]'s model of escapism (self-suppressive vs. self-expansive) is perhaps the clearest in demarcating differences between adaptivity levels. Indeed, Stenseng et al. [23] found that self-suppression negatively correlated to trait self-control and an addiction prone personality, while self-expansion was correlated to positive psychological outcomes. The work further points out that players engaging in self-suppressive escapism felt significant levels of autonomy, despite the engagement itself having pathological overtones.

However, the contexts in which escapist tendencies develop pathological overtones are somewhat unclear. For example, although avoidance-based tendencies would likely fall under negatively-valenced escapism (e.g. self-suppressive, subversive), Pearce et al. [20] include escapism-avoidance as an emotion-focused coping strategy in the context of the pandemic [1]. Indeed, while such tendencies might be pathologized under more normal conditions, the unusually stressful and uncontrollable circumstances of a global pandemic make it difficult to label avoidance as strictly negative. Similarly, while self-suppressive escapism is broadly defined as engaging in an activity to remove negative affect [24], a player's inherent levels of emotional disregulation may define whether such engagement qualifies as mood management (generally agreed to be healthy) or problematic usage [2].

Conversely, while self-expansion is motivated by self-development and personal growth, achievement-based motives can become problematic in some cases. For example, in Billieux et al. [1], they identified a player type motivated by high achievement and possessing high self-esteem, but also reported high levels of escapism, an association that the authors deemed "unexpected". For these players, their "virtual sel[ves] overwhelmed the real self, implying a potential denial of

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[1]Although joint escapism was not mentioned, there is some discussion on how parents and children used Animal Crossing as a joint coping mechanism within this paper, which may merit further exploration.

real life and an overinvolvement in virtual life". This aligns with Stenseng et al. [23]'s finding that self-expansion is positively associated with autonomy, competence, and relatedness. However, context matters; players experiencing these tenets of self-determination in the virtual world may not transfer productively back to 'real life'.

Open question: Several authors have suggested that we must determine exclusion criteria for excessive behaviors that should not be considered pathological (e.g. [14, 17]). While several player related factors (such as emotional disregulation [2] and low trait self-control [23]), there are likely factors about player's personal and environmental contexts as well as the game context that also affect whether an instance of engagement should be considered problematic. How do we go about identifying these factors?

2.3 Eudaimonic escapism?

The CHI PLAY community has recently seen increased interest in eudaimonic gaming experiences, which entail gaining insight and appreciation for the personal search for meaning in life through play [19]. These experiences normally have a *motivation* (game and player characteristics), a *game use* (interaction between player and the game), the *experience* (affective elements of the game use), and the *effects* (outcomes of the experience). Escapism is normally treated as a cognitive *motivation* [21] and not as an experience; however, it is notable that this normally refers to negatively-valenced escapism. For example, Kreling and Reinecke [16] showed that escapist media use was negatively correlated to meaning making and meaning-focused coping, but they distinguished escapism with self-distraction, which was considered to be more adaptive and positively associated with meaning making. Self-distraction could possibly qualify as an emotion regulation or mood management strategy. In my paper, I also posit that self-expansive escapism could be treated as an *experience* rather than as a *motivation*. Elements of the game use have the potential to transform maladaptive tendencies to more adaptive ones, and for many participants, the escapism was, in itself, the meaningful experience.

Open question: Could exploring how more positive forms of escapism factor into eudaimonic or meaning-making experiences could help us better demarcate between more and less adaptive behaviors?

3 Conclusion

There are several areas in which the construct of escapism needs further elaboration, and many potential avenues to explore. Terminological rigor and a clear understanding of in what contexts escapism may or may not be healthy - or perhaps, even meaningful to players - is crucial to not unjustly pathologizing gaming behaviors. I am excited about the opportunity to discuss further with the other workshop participants at CHI PLAY.

4 Author Bio

Nisha Devasia is a PhD student in Human Centered Design & Engineering at the University of Washington. She received her bachelor's degree from MIT in Computer Science and Comparative Media Studies, and researched social robot companions and AI education at the MIT Media Lab. Prior to rejoining academia, she gained game industry experience from software engineering positions at PlayStation and Twitch. Inspired by how games have changed her own life, she now researches eudaimonic gaming experiences and builds tools to promote transformative reflection in games.

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