

# Navigating the Virtual Playground: How Do Players Choose What, When, and How to Play?

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## INTRODUCTION

Scholars have offered various theoretical accounts to explain the use of video games as a form of stress relief. This has been extensively documented and observed on a variety of occasions (Cahill 2021; Kosa and Uysal 2020; Pallavicini et al. 2021; Pearce et al. 2022a; 2022b; Pine et al. 2020; Porter and Goolkasian 2019; Reinecke 2009; Russoniello et al. 2009).

## Coping Through Entertainment Media

These theories have typically shared a foundation in the influential coping-as-process concept advanced by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), which posits stress as a regulatory system that motivates the organism to address imbalances between resource demand and availability, as perceived through a two-step appraisal process. *Coping*, within this framework, can either be problem-focused or emotion-focused<sup>1</sup>.

The latter form of coping has connections to Mood Management Theory (MMT), which suggests that individuals select media experiences in part to alleviate "noxious mood states" rather than in pursuit of purely hedonic pleasure (Bryant and Zillmann 1984; Zillmann 2000). Like coping, selective exposure is thus accounted for in MMT through a regulatory framework (Knobloch-Westerwick 2006; Oliver 2003). A complementary approach can be found in the Recovery and Resilience in Entertaining Media Use Model (R<sup>2</sup>EM), which accounts not only for short-term recovery through the provision of experiences of psychological detachment, relaxation, mastery, and control, but also for the long-term development of psychological resilience through exposure to media content (Reinecke and Rieger 2021).

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## Seeking Experiences in the Virtual Playground

While each of these theoretical approaches yields some insight into the emotional effects of play, this is only half of the process involved when individuals use games to cope with stressful life circumstances. With the exception of some small-scale mental health interventions, players are typically not directed toward gaming experiences that will fulfill particular emotional needs. Instead, they are faced with a dizzying array of options, with tens of thousands of titles on distribution platforms such as Steam, PlayStation Network, and Xbox Live. Let loose in a near-infinite virtual playground, players locate, select, and acquire game content based on their understanding of their needs, preferences, and resources. Unfortunately, these processes—selective exposure and emotional self-regulation—have rarely been studied together in the context of games, nor from an emic perspective that prioritizes players' internal narratives and modes of understanding over the imposition of predefined academic taxonomies.

Following MMT, selective exposure to game content in times of stress or negative mood is presumed to be a motivated process (Cahill 2022). Part of this process necessarily involves the self-appraisal of the individual, both in terms of their situation and emotional state. Moreover, this process involves an appraisal of media content preceding any exposure. This element of the coping process also ties into the motivational orientation of players, given that individuals are thought to make informed predictions about particular affordances of a piece of game content when they choose to play it.

An example of this thought process might be as follows: A college student is experiencing stress around an upcoming exam. They know that the exam will be challenging (i.e., primary appraisal) and do not feel sufficiently prepared (i.e., secondary appraisal). In addition to the physiological components of stress, they experience ego depletion, perceiving themselves as incompetent and not in control of their circumstances. Consciously or subconsciously recognizing this deficiency, the student seeks a gaming experience that will give them a sense of mastery. Drawing on past experiences, they assess that they are most likely to achieve this by playing a game with exploration, puzzle solving, platforming, and challenging combat elements. Correlating these requirements with expectations formed through exposure to paratext (e.g., marketing materials, game reviews, social media posts), they decide to purchase and play *Hollow Knight* (Team Cherry 2017) in search of a play experience that will support their emotional needs in this situational context.

## METHODS

Therefore, a series of interviews has been undertaken to explore the emic perception of game-based coping as a motivated process.

### Sample

These interviews are being conducted with a purposive sample of individuals who play video games regularly—but who may or may not self-identify as "gamers" (see Shaw 2011)—and who are experiencing, or have recently experienced, stressful life circumstances<sup>2</sup>. While the study is not yet complete, the target sample size is between 20 and 30 interviewees, based on established trends and best practices in qualitative methodology for grounded theory studies in cognate fields such as health (Morse

2000; 2015; Starks and Brown Trinidad 2007), public policy (Thomson 2010), and information systems research (Marshall et al. 2013).

## Procedure

The semi-structured interviews focus on respondents' emotional state before and after play sessions, their motivational orientation towards gameplay experiences, their emotional needs, and their perception and appraisal of game content. Sample questions and probes from the interview protocol are given below.

Topic	Questions
Emotional State	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How were you feeling today when you came in?</li> <li>• Is there anything on your mind?</li> <li>• Is there anything going on in your life at the moment that you are stressed or worried about?</li> </ul>
Gaming Habits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What sorts of games do you usually play?</li> <li>• When do you typically play those games?</li> </ul>
Emotional Experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thinking back to the most recent time you played [game], how do you remember feeling afterwards?</li> <li>• Were you thinking about [stressor] while playing [game]?</li> </ul>
Play Expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When you play video games, what sort of experiences are you looking for?</li> <li>• Why do you like [genre] more than other types of games?</li> </ul>
Gamer Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you think of yourself as a "gamer"?</li> <li>• Do you interact with others who would call themselves "gamers"?</li> <li>• What do you think that word entails?</li> </ul>
Emotional Expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you expect to feel after playing?</li> <li>• Do you usually find that you feel that way after play?</li> </ul>
Information Sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When you're choosing a new game to try that you haven't played before, how do you make that decision?</li> <li>• What factors do you take into account when deciding what to play next?</li> <li>• Do you read reviews of games online?</li> <li>• Do you watch Let's Play videos of games you are considering playing?</li> <li>• Do you ever talk with friends or ask their opinions about what to play next?</li> </ul>

**Table 1:** Questions and probes from semi-structured interview protocol.

Interviews typically last between 30 and 60 minutes and are recorded—either with a voice recorder when conducted in person or using the record functionality of the videoconference software used to conduct the interview remotely—and subsequently transcribed. Transcripts are subsequently analyzed through thematic coding, taking a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 2017), and coding responses inductively based on emergent categories.

## DISCUSSION

This ongoing research program of targeted user interviews offers a window into the cognitive processes that underlie player behavior when evaluating and engaging with game content under conditions of stress—a critical component to understanding how video games are used in practice to support coping, emotional regulation, recovery, and psychological resilience. In addition to guiding the refinement of the R<sup>2</sup>EM theoretical model, which is still in development, the results of this study will have more general implications for media psychologists, games scholars, and industry professionals interested in promoting players' emotional well-being.

## ENDNOTES

1 Problem-focused coping—sometimes also referred to as active coping—generally refers to strategies that address the external source of stress, and which endeavor to alleviate stress by resolving the underlying resource imbalance. Emotion-focused coping, on the other hand, refers to strategies that address the internal cognitive processes that give rise to stress, so as to limit the subjective emotional experience, and includes measures such as distraction and escapism.

2 Some examples of stressful life circumstances would be preparing for an important test, relocating to a new community, applying for jobs or grad schools, caring for or grieving the death of a family member, or dealing with the loss of a significant relationship.

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