

Save-Scumming: A Novel Exploration of Video Game Play

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ABSTRACT

The presentation of this extended abstract will cover an exploratory study that is inspired by our initial call for a psychological exploration of save-scumming behaviours (Farmer & Kelly, 2024), which is a currently under-researched phenomenon in media psychology research at present. Save-scumming behaviours present a unique and novel case study of media-specific engagement across gaming genres and cultural experiences of video gaming. The study discussed in this presentation aims to provide insights into why players are motivated to engage in save-scumming using the principles of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and will explore preliminary themes generated from UK and US data.

Keywords

Save-scumming, motivations, self-determination theory, role-playing games.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

When playing a video game, especially a role-playing game (RPG), it is possible to commit to a decision involving your playable character (PC) and a non-playable character (NPC) that one may regret. However, a practice known as 'save-scumming' may be able to reverse the consequences inspired by the player's decisions. Save-scumming refers to reloading a save state within a game from a previous checkpoint to escape the consequences of an unwanted outcome from the player's decision.

Save-scumming has become a focus of attention for players considering the recent publication of *Baldur's Gate 3* (Larian Studios, 2023) and previous RPGs, including *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2019), with some popular media articles claiming that save-scumming is a 'better' way of playing RPGs (Clark, 2023). Whether save-scumming is acceptable practice is a contentious topic for video game players; some argue that save-scumming is a protective measure against negative outcomes of play, such as the death of a PC (Schules et al., 2018), while others argue that save-scumming is a form of wish fulfilment (Handley, 2021) that detracts from the permanence of meaningful decisions or actions (Bugnar & Persson, 2021). However, there is little published academic work examining save-scumming from a media psychological perspective. Inconclusive results suggest that save-scumming is associated with alterations in player flow or immersion and has a wider perception within the gaming community as an immoral act of cheating (e.g., Bugnar & Persson, 2021; Cowley et al., 2008; Schules et al., 2018).

As an inherently enjoyable task, gaming is associated with intense intrinsic motivations to play, defined as a willingness to act because of interest or engagement with the task itself (Guay et al., 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Extrinsic motivation, in comparison, refers to engagement with the activity for an external reward or reward external to the self, and is a core principle of Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Engagement in save-scumming behaviour suggests that save manipulation provides the desired outcome for the player (such as becoming romantically involved with a specific NPC, provided they choose the appropriate dialogue option), which would be intrinsically motivated as it increases the overall enjoyment of the game (Tamborini et al., 2010). However, there may be extrinsically motivated reasons for save-scumming, such as being awarded an achievement for completing specific tasks in the game (Reiss, 2012). While some would argue that individuals engage with gaming because of their heightened intrinsic motivation to play, save-scumming demonstrates behaviours associated with extrinsic and intrinsic motivations. Save-scumming, therefore, represents a more context-specific instance of the complex dynamic between motivations and gaming that may be understood through the lens of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan et al., 2006).

There is currently limited exploration of whether save-scumming is observed in other genres of games outside of RPGs and whether save-scumming would fulfil different needs based on the type of game played. Indeed, there may be an added level of nuance about how video gamers use save-scum; it is expected that players who save-scum during a dialogue with NPCs fulfil different aims or objectives than players who save-scum in other types of video games. Despite the individualised consequences of save-scumming (in that it rarely affects the gameplay of others), there are some examples of articles that perceive this behaviour as negative (Evizaer,

2012; Lenzini, 2023). This provides an interesting avenue of enquiry on two levels. The first is to understand the motivational complexities associated with save-scumming. The second is to understand why other gamers react so poorly to players who decide to save scum: does this reflect our perceptions of player motivation, or are these perceptions indicative of a larger issue within the gaming community?

Ultimately, we would argue that saving-scumming is of academic interest as a psychological phenomenon, and we build upon our original call to action (Farmer & Kelly, 2024) to describe the preliminary results of an exploratory qualitative study to investigate save-scumming in greater depth, including motivational, emotional, and social factors associated with the behaviour. We believe that by studying save-scumming behaviours, including motivations for save-scumming as understood through the lens of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), and the effects of save-scumming on player enjoyment, we have a chance to explore a media-specific novel behaviour that is currently under-researched.

The current presentation will report on initial investigations into the motivations behind save-scumming behaviour, asking questions such as ‘Why do video game players engage in save-scumming?’, ‘Are there differences in save-scumming behaviours based on the genre of video game?’, and ‘Is there a difference in cultural understandings of save-scumming between the UK and US, particularly in gamers interested in speed-running?’. Online semi-structured interviews were carried out with gamers invested in various genres across the UK and the US ($n = 20$). Interview questions focused on the use of save scumming across gaming genres, investigating how the behaviour is used for progression, challenge and gameplay consequences. Further interest was taken in how save-scumming was perceived in more ‘specialist’ domains of video gaming, such as the speed-running community in the US, to determine whether there are variations in save-scumming perceptions. This initial exploration will open the door for future quantitative investigation, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the motivations behind save-scumming behaviour.

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