

Mindful and Mindless Gaming: Two Approaches to Emotional Regulation Through Play

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INTRODUCTION

Coping with stress is one of the primary motivations for playing video games, according to recent surveys (Cahill 2021a, 2021b; Entertainment Software Association 2022). However, the precise method by which games are able to reduce stress levels and contribute to emotional regulation remains contested in the theoretical literature.

The predominant way in which entertainment media is typically assumed to aid in coping with stress is *distraction*, providing a venue for individuals to shift attention away from the circumstances causing them stress (Stevens and Dillman Carpentier 2017; Rieger et al. 2014). While this approach yields short-term improvements, it has limited long-term effects. (McRae et al. 2010).

In contrast, *reappraisal* involves the adoption of alternative cognitive frames that allow the individual to experience a stressor in a more positive or adaptive way (McRae et al. 2010). This strategy has been shown to contribute significantly to both short-term mood recovery and long-term emotional stability and resilience (Goldin et al. 2008; Roos and Bennett 2022); however, it is also thought to be more cognitively demanding, similar to what has been described as *eudaimonic* media use, which requires audiences to balance complex narratives and mixed affective experience but likewise contributes to feelings of satisfaction and self-affirmation (Rieger et al. 2014; Daneels et al. 2021).

This difference is not only theoretically relevant but also has significant practical implications in terms of the long-term emotional resilience of players (Reinecke and Rieger 2021). There are also directions implied for game designs that explicitly support emotional regulation, whether for targeted interventions or for commercial release. It is also worth noting that the objectives and motivations of players has been found to moderate emotional outcomes (Cahill 2022). With this in mind, distraction and reappraisal suggest alternative paths of mediation that may account for this relationship.

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METHODS

In contrast to the stark difference in long-term effects of distraction and reappraisal as methods of coping with stress, the salient distinction between distraction and reappraisal in the short term is primarily one of cognitive objectives, demands, and structures before, during, and after play. Thus, the first step in investigating the relative use of each approach should be through qualitative analysis of player's subjective mental states under conditions of stress.

A series of semi-structured interviews is being conducted accompanied in some cases by observed play sessions. Individuals were purposefully recruited from locations throughout the United States who play games at least once a month, and were going through or who had recently experienced demanding life events (e.g., preparing for college exams, welcoming a new child, searching for a job) to better understand how games are used during periods of heightened stress and emotional instability. 14 interviews have been conducted thus far, with additional interviews scheduled for January and February of next year and a planned total of 25-30 ¹.

Instruments

Planned questions during the interview focused on the participant's recent mood, sources of stress, coping strategies, gaming habits and preferences, identification with "gamer" culture, and thought patterns before, during, and after recent sessions of play. In some cases, the interview was preceded by an optional hour-long session in which the participant played a video game of their choice while the interviewer observed via webcam and screen recording. In these cases, the participant was encouraged to vocalize their thoughts and feelings while they played.

Analysis

Both interviews and play sessions were recorded for subsequent analysis, and the interviewer also took notes of their observations during the optional play sessions. The primary analytical strategies used in interpreting the recordings and notes were grounded theory and inductive coding (Glaser and Strauss 2017). This approach allows for reporting of preliminary results that are robust and grounded in the data.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Interviews conducted thus far reveal two very distinct modes of play, both of which involve intentional and self-conscious mood management on the part of players, but with very different immediate goals and mechanisms of action.

In one mode, players describe themselves as primarily aiming to achieve distraction from stressors. Several participants used the word "mindless" to convey the nature of this experience, and described preferring games that were accessible, easy to learn, popular among their friends and social circles, and playable on mobile devices.

In contrast, a smaller group of participants indicated that they preferred play experiences that were narratively engaging, philosophically complex, or mechanically demanding. These players expressed a desire to be fully engaged by the games they played (e.g., "to lose myself in another world"). Several players also discussed treating the games they played while stressed as a metaphor or mental model for the real-life

source of their stress (e.g., “if I do well in the game, then that means that I’ll also do well on my exam”). These players were also much more likely to describe themselves explicitly as “gamers,” to be older, and to play games on a stationary console or PC rather than a mobile device.

DISCUSSION

This preliminary observation of two distinct, yet occasionally overlapping modes of play during stressful circumstances suggests the possibility of theoretical synthesis: it appears that in contexts of stress, games are used to regulate emotion both through distraction (i.e., *mindless play*) and absorption (i.e., *mindful play*).

Examining participants’ descriptions of their personal circumstances and gaming habits in relation to their preferred modes of play, these uses appear to be functions both of personality and of context: some individuals find emotional utility only in one mode or the other, while others may find each mode more useful in different emotional contexts (e.g., “sometimes I want something to be challenged and sometimes I just want to zone out”). In these cases of mixed or hybrid modality, the distinction between when participants seek mindless versus mindful play seems to be around whether their emotional resources are presently depleted or whether future challenges are anticipated. This reflects a distinction articulated in Conservation of Resources theory between behaviors motivated by a need for rest and resource recovery and those that build long-term emotional resilience and resource reserves to cope with future demands (Hobfoll 1989, 2010). In this context, “mindless” and “mindful” play should not be taken as indicators of normative value, but rather reflect two distinct and equally valid psychological needs that may be addressed through play.

ENDNOTES

¹ This being said, interviews will continue to be conducted until conceptual saturation is reached (Thomson 2010).

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