From the Eudaimonic to the Demonic in Gameplay Narratives

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INTRODUCTION

Recent research in the fields of social psychology and human-computer interaction has turned to the concept of *eudaimonia* to affirm videogames' potential to elicit 'experiences that are profound, personally meaningful, and transformative' (Väkevä et al. 2024, 2). Often rooted in first-person accounts of play, from autoethnographic diaries to survey and interview responses, such research is part of a wider effort to challenge the suspicion and stigma that still attach to games as a medium. This paper reads the concept of eudaimonic play in relation to two texts in which gameplay is cast in *demonic* terms: novelist, memoirist and literature professor Michael W. Clune's *Gamelife* (2015), and psychotherapist Alexander Kriss' *The Gaming Mind* (2019), an account of gaming's power rooted in Kriss' own experiences and those of his patients. Rather than dismissing this tendency to frame digital gameplay as demonic or eudaimonic as an etymological coincidence, this paper uses close reading to unpack the implications of these discourses. In so doing, it aims both to elucidate the allure of digital games, and to contribute to recent efforts within game studies to determine whether videogames are finally winning 'recogni[tion] as legitimate and culturally valuable' and how such processes of legitimation operate (e.g. Gislam et al, 2025; Gallagher, 2025).

DEMONIC ETYMOLOGIES

Historically the term 'demon' has described spirits or supernatural beings who may or may not be malign, and who are frequently understood to occupy an ontological plane somewhere between the divine and merely human. Demons have sometimes seen as dictating the fates of individuals, families or communities, and sometimes as incarnating something innate or essential about a particular group or person. More recently, the figure of the demon has offered a way of discussing individuals' struggles with addictive substances or poor mental health (*OED*, n.d.). Without wishing to elide

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important distinctions in how demons have been conceptualized across eras and cultures, it is possible to say that demons often figure fears of being manipulated or led astray, whether by malign exogenous forces, or by one's own appetites - a distinction that can be difficult to draw.

Etymologically, the term *eudaemonic* - in the sense of promoting or pertaining to happiness, and wellbeing – implies that to be truly happy is to live in harmony with one's spirit. In the field of media psychology, the term is applied to 'meaning-seeking' engagements with media, and the willingness of some audiences to undergo emotional, ethical or intellectual challenges in pursuit of experiences that transcend mere 'hedonic' gratifications such as such as pleasure or relaxation (Cole and Gillies 2022, 2). While the concept remains somewhat slippery (Daneels et al. 2021, 178-80), much eudaimonic gameplay research makes a case for gaming's social and cultural value in humanistic terms, affirming the medium's capacity to enrich our understanding of '[our]selves, others and aspects of the real world' (Cole and Gillies 2022, 7) and to furnish players with 'insight into the human condition' (Daneels et al. 2021, 183).

THE GAMING MIND

Kriss' project in *The Gaming Mind* aligns with that of eudaimonic gameplay researchers. Countering assumptions that games are 'at best' a way to 'frivolously distract, at worst to corrupt and disfigure', he seeks to demonstrate that games can 'offer more than immediate gratification… explor[ing] complex aspects of the human experience' via accounts of his own and his patients' play which foreground gaming's therapeutic potential (2019, 31 81). For Kriss, accounts of games as dangerously addictive are not just inaccurate, but pernicious. Treating a patient who has bought into what Kriss describes as 'the hysterical dogma that games had the power to make him do things he didn't want to do', Kriss strives to convince him that he is misrecognizing 'a compulsion that arose from within' as 'a malevolent force that seized him from without' (2019, 129). Yet toward the end of the book Kriss finds himself slogging through *Demon's Souls* (FromSoftware, 2009), a game that he portrays as being akin to 'Sisyphean labor... Repeating itself endlessly with nothing learned, nothing gained, nothing to show for it' (2019, 230). As his language becomes saturated with the kinds of gothic motifs found in the game, he is forced to consider why he is continuing with an experience that feels more demonic than eudaimonic. In this way, Kriss suggests how what Daniel Vella (2016) theorizes as the dynamics of 'ludic subjectivity' – whereby the player occupies a role within the world even as she also maintains the position of onlooker external to that world – can offer new and sometimes discomfiting insights into the nature of subjectivity in general.

GAMELIFE

Michael Clune's 2015 memoir *Gamelife* has attracted conflicting interpretations. Francis Butterworth-Parr's (2024) reading echoes accounts of gaming's eudaimonic functions, arguing that the young Clune derives lessons from games help him make sense of adult life. By contrast, Ian Bogost (2015) holds that it is ultimately 'a book about the *incompatibility*, rather than the affinity, of game life and human life'. Clune

too turns to demonic rhetoric to describe experiences of gameplay, particularly in the chapter recounting his devout mother's refusal to let him play games featuring occult motifs. Clune notes that even at the height of the "Satanic panic", 'People… made fun of the evangelical Christian groups who tried to ban' games (2015, 30-31). Ultimately, however, he implies that his mother is correct in intuiting that there is something 'evil' about digital games in their mathematical 'inhumanity', using the figure of the demon to figure this troubling otherness (2015, 43, 45).

CONCLUSION

Eudaimonic gameplay research has largely cast its claims for gaming's value in humanistic terms. In Kriss' and Clune's books the topos of demonic temptation or possession offers a means of acknowledging pleasures that are hard to reconcile with this framing – fulfilling, by so doing, a function akin to that which posthumanist theory serve in some recent theorizations of games (e.g. Keogh, 2017; Fizek, 2018). Given the continuing centrality of humanist ideas to canons of cultural value, help us not just to understand the allure of digital play, but the ongoing demonization of digital games.

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