World of Motives: Seeking the "Why" in Videogame Play

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Abstract: This conceptual paper explores the underlying motivations of videogame media interactions as being either "pleasure-seeking" (hedonic concerns) or "truth-seeking" (eudaimonic concerns). Videogames are distinctively different from other medias in the amount of inputs and control from users. Contrary to hedonic labels, videogames are an expressive and persuasive medium that can be paired with eudaimonia. I argue that understanding the motives of videogame play may serve as a psychological tool in identifying the well-beings of individuals and allow for appropriate interventions where needed.

This paper explores the following research questions: Are videogame media interactions caused by "pleasure-seeking" (hedonic concerns) or "truth-seeking" (eudaimonic concerns) motivations? Why does the distinction between hedonic and eudaimonic videogame play matter? What can be gained from understanding the motives of videogame play and who can this information be beneficial to? I first position videogames in the media realm as a distinctive medium where players exert control over their interactions, followed by possible motives that drive us to play such games using the Motivational Activation Measure model (MAM), and stress the importance of evaluating videogames as an art. As videogames continue to grow more popular on the global scale, understanding the *why* behind player motives beyond triggering aggression is crucial for the future of educational game design and our evaluation of videogames in general. Videogames are an "interaction driven" media. Radio and television programs obey a set schedule or narrative, whereas "input" from the videogame player impacts the conditions within the game world and may alter the succeeding events. Videogames can be multimodal, meaning multiple interpretations can be drawn from the same source. For example, titles such as *Minecraft* allow players to interpret its content (e.g. text, sounds, music) in various ways; the game has been used to study a range of topics concerning social studies, math, science, and language arts (Ellison et al., 2016). The use of such videogames has been argued to induce flow, a state that causes the player to lose time and where goals are driven by pleasure rather than external rewards (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). The combined features of being multimodal and flow-inducing allows players to fully immerse themselves into fictional narratives. Rigby and Przybylski (2009) identified the "learner hero," where each player is cast as the role of a hero. Rigby and Przybylski argued that the hero role leads to self-determined actions that satisfy the following needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The idea of the learner hero stems from commercial virtual worlds, and it can help shape the development and research of digital learning environments. The learner hero model, as well as the flow state, assumes that the player's motivations are hedonic. How does the learner hero concept apply to more ambiguous narratives like *Grand Theft Auto*, where the line between hero and villain is blurred? The gameplay in such games can still be largely narrative despite the absence of a clearly-defined learner hero. Perhaps the role that is assigned to the player does not matter as much as the capability to satisfy autonomy, competence, and relatedness within the game. While games can be enjoyed because they address these needs, meaningful games (also known as serious games) can give rise to feelings of appreciation and address the need for "insight" that helps players negotiate and understand novel emotional experiences (Oliver et al., 2016; Przybylski et al., 2012). This suggests that the underlying motivations for playing videogames can be eudaimonic in nature. Lastly, are infamously difficult games like *I Wanna Be the Guy* or *Dark Souls* motivated by pursuits of hedonic efforts—perhaps gaining pleasure from the pain of countless failures—or are they motivated by something else entirely?

Lang and her colleagues (2007) proposed a measurement of individual differences in the activation of motives. They referred to it as the MAM: involving the rating of pictures that may evoke an emotional response. The dimensional theory of emotion suggests that our responses are an activation of "appetitive" and "aversive" motivational systems, and these two systems can be active independently, simultaneously, or reciprocally (Lang, Bradley, Sparks, & Lee, 2011). The appetitive system is more active than the aversive system, and this difference is called the "positivity offset," whereas the fast response to negative stimuli is called the "negativity bias." Ordinarily, the aversive system increases its activation when responding to increasingly-intense negative stimuli in the environment (Potter, Lee, & Rubenking, 2011). On another cognitive level, Lang (2010) proposed the limited capacity model (LC4MP) in an attempt to capture how we process mediated messages. The prediction following the model was that negative stimuli will require more resource allocations than positive stimuli (Fisher, Keene, Huskey, & Weber, 2018). The literature on videogames and appetitive and defensive constructs is sparse. Potter, Lee, and Rubenking (2011) surveyed 206 college-aged participants and found that Appetitive System Activation (ASA) and Defense System Activation (DSA) generally predicted self-reported likelihood to watch specific types of television programming, radio formats, and videogame genres. More specifically, people with

high ASA have a greater need for simulation, novelty, and arousal, and react more positively to unpleasant pictures than people with high DSA, who prefer pleasant pictures. Their results suggested that initial media-selection behaviors may be predicted by abstracting genres based on their appeal from motivationally-based features. It was posed in a dissertation that those who used drugs and engaged in other risky behaviors enjoyed playing videogames, especially when the content was negative in nature (Park, 2010). Similarly, Krcmar and his colleagues (2015) used the LC4MP and MAM models to examine the relationship between arousal, aggression, and attraction to media violence. They found that participants who were categorized as "risk takers" from scores on the MAM showed a stronger preference for violent games and that participants who were identified as "risk avoidant" were significantly less aggressive than the other arousal groups. They also found that arousal resulting from videogames containing violence can be experienced as being pleasant or aversive depending on the individual. For example, those who secured higher positions on a scoreboard could gain pleasure from knowing there were others below them in points (Velez, Ewoldsen, Hanus, Song, & Villarreal, 2018). Other notable examples of downward social comparisons, I would argue, are trolls (Neto, Yokoyama, & Becker, 2017) and/or cyberbullies (Ballard & Welch, 2017), both of which are a form of aggressive, disruptive, and intentional behavior from an instigator.

What is the underlying motivation for interacting with videogames: Is it for nothing more than pleasure? Doing for the sake of doing is associated with "intrinsic motivation" whereas "extrinsic motivation" is driven by external goals, a "means-to-the-end" approach (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Literature indicates that most people categorize videogames as hedonic systems (Lowry et al., 2012), but the effects of achievements in games have recently been found to have no strong correlation with intrinsic motivation (Lewis, Zulkifly, & Salas, 2015). Whether we play videogames for pleasure or seek further truth in our lives has multiple implications for the applicability of videogames in everyday life. Can we learn and reflect—individually and in groups—on our morality through the manipulation of lives in *The Sims*? Research suggests that hedonia (seeking pleasure and comfort) and eudaimonia (seeking to develop the best in one's self) simultaneously play a role in one's well-being. Huta and Ryan (2010) examined the dynamic relationship between hedonic/eudaimonic motives and well-being and found that examining eudaimonia between persons related to elevating experience (awe, inspiration, a sense of connection with a greater whole) while hedonia related more negatively to negative effects. Both pursuits were connected with life satisfaction, with hedonia's links being more frequent. Those who were high in both eudaimonia and hedonia had higher degrees of well-being variables than people whose lives were low in both pursuits; they had higher positive effects and carefreeness than primarily eudaimonic individuals and higher meaning: elevating experience and vitality rather than primarily hedonic individuals. They suggested that a combination of hedonia and eudaimonia may be related to the greatest well-being.

Oliver and Raney (2011) claimed that people consume media entertainment not only for pleasure but also as part of the search for life's meanings, truths, and purposes, which I argue applies to videogames. Videogames, like any media, have the potential to exacerbate existing conditions. For example, although the link between clinical depression and Facebook use still needs to be further examined, researchers can agree that Facebook features and the number of quantifiable "likes" on content may evoke envy and other negative effects (Appel, Gerlach, & Crusius, 2016; Blease, 2015). One hypothesis could be that users are more susceptible to be depressed—take, for instance, those who derive pleasure from downward social comparisons—could experience more negative effects from Facebook than individuals who are less susceptible to feeling depressed. Another hypothesis is that the continuous use of Facebook for an individual who is already depressed intensifies the feelings associated with depression, such as anxiety and worthlessness (exacerbated by constantly comparing oneself to others). Understanding the underlying motives of videogame play may reveal behaviors and attitudes that affect an individual's well-being and allow for interventions where appropriate. An individual who plays one hour of videogames a day to help them relieve stress from work presents a completely different scenario than an individual who plays for long extended periods of isolation who may already be depressed or is emotionally/mentally unstable. Meaningful, on-task interactions with peers (e.g. conversations) help facilitate learning better than passive (e.g. reading), constructive (e.g. diagrams), and active learning (Chi, 2009). The release of endogenous dopamine is activated during goal-directed videogame play (Koepp et al., 1998), which could have potential as a supplemental treatment option for depression. In addition, an online environment involving social interactions (e.g., MMO games) could also aid in this endeavor when paired with professional counseling. Findings from Park (2010) and Krcmar and his colleagues (2015) suggested that preferring violence in a game's content may also serve as an evaluation of an individual's appetitive and aversive levels. The possibility exists for videogames to function as interventions for measuring personality characteristics and mental health. Videogames are popular cultural symbols that can serve as a powerful tool for researchers and practitioners, particularly when it comes to capturing the attentions of the youth or adults who are avid gamers. Huta and Ryan (2010) conducted an intervention study that suggests a blend of both hedonia and eudaimonia

motivations may relate to the greatest well-being. In addition, Huta and his colleagues (2012) measured individuals' eudaimonic and hedonic motivations using self-reports and found that eudaimonia, not hedonia, related positively to the well-being of close others and that eudaimonia had a positive impact on other people. Does this mean that those who play videogames with eudaimonic pursuits are self-reportedly happier than those who play with hedonic pursuits in the long run? Should we be taking an approach to play videogames with both motives, and if so, how would that sort of play take shape? "Truth seeking" behaviors in an individual seems to lead to more fulfilling social relationships. If the positive effects of eudaimonic motives translate into the realm of videogame play, then this would contribute toward shattering the stereotype of the anti-social gamer. Further research is needed to understand whether these motivations transfer across different aspects of life, including in-game behaviors and play.

Videogames are an expressive medium that carry cultural meaning with persuasive ability to confirm existing social and cultural positions or disrupt traditional attitudes and beliefs about the world (Wright & Bogost, 2007). Sad and somber movies can activate cognitions about central issues in one's own life as well as in the lives of depicted characters, and this leads to positive evaluations of those issues (Wirth, Hofer, & Schramm, 2012). The stories within videogames help involve players in the gameplay, increase feelings of immersion in the virtual environment, and maintain arousal (Schneider et al., 2004). Popular videogame titles containing violence often do not encourage senseless killing. There is usually a built-in motive for the learner hero (of sorts) to kill for a specific purpose: that can take the form of eliminating enemies for survival or those that threaten the safety of humanity, competing on the scoreboard, or a combination of hedonic and eudaimonic means. The gradual increasing demand for more game titles also increases the bar on quality. Many gamers may be interested in experiencing the same emotions as derived from Hollywood tearjerkers or other entertainment media (Oliver et al., 2016). Similar to how people may be attracted to tragedies in media (Oliver & Raney, 2011), the beginnings of games often start as tragedies. It is common for players to start out in a dilemma, be impoverished, or be placed in a confusing situation; usually there is a narrative puzzle for players to solve that unlocks as the player progresses in the game. This showing of negative stimuli in the very beginning of games flowers logically within the LC4MP model and the desire of game developers to quickly capture the player's attention and interest. In other words, there would not be much of a game to play through if there was no challenge, often taking form of negative stimuli. It is important to note that while these stimuli are "negative," they are postulated in a safe environment, and a typical player can distinguish what is virtual from real-life.

Existing studies using MAM as their primary measurement have largely focused on the effects of videogames containing violence. Researchers have observed that chronic violent media exposure can cause desensitization to violence (Barholow, Bushman, & Sestir, 2006), and they have linked violence desensitization with increased aggression (Engelhardt et al., 2011). However, videogames should also be treated as an artistic medium as well as an enabling one; videogames are a technology capable of inducing more than aggression in its players. Future research could explore the relationship between MAM and hedonic/eudaimonic motivations. Are appetitive and aversive motivational systems correlated with hedonic and eudaimonic motivations, respectively? If so, videogame play behaviors could be categorized into these different motivations and be further analyzed; MAM itself could serve as an additional evaluation of an individual's "wellness" profile in addition to videogame play.

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