

Press Enter or Escape to Play

Deconstructing Escapism in Multiplayer Gaming

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ABSTRACT

The term escapism tends to be used in game research without providing any extensive definition of what it means or acknowledging its composite nature. In this paper, the authors question the possible conceptualizations of escapism and the extent to which gamers identify with them. Beginning with a theoretical deconstruction of escapism, the authors developed a framework that they applied in an empirical study with three focus groups. Respondents in these groups completed a survey and participated in a group discussion. The resulting data allowed the identification of eight different discourses of escapism in the context of playing multiplayer computer games. In addition, the study showed that citing escapism as a reason for playing games elicits debate and emotional responses. Given the existence of multiple interpretations and connotations, this paper concludes that escapism is problematic for use in surveys, interviews, and other research techniques.

Author Keywords

Critique, deconstruction, escapism, multiplayer, player motivation

INTRODUCTION

In a way, we seem to be escaping all the time, through either books, movies, and sports or simply the power of our minds. One might even argue that *escapism* is a “mantra of Western society” [10]. Escapism seems to be equally applicable in defining why some people like to play computer games.

Juul has argued that a computer game creates a “fictional world” [14], i.e. an environment that encompasses limitations and affordances which a player must adhere to and use, respectively, in order to play the game. This world is fictional, since it is a constructed world that, in many cases, is distinct from non-game environments like work or school. Given the existence of this fictional world, it is not surprising that some researchers apply the notion of escapism when examining motivations for playing various types of computer games [7, 13, 25].

There seems to be some consensus about what escapism means and its importance in life. Underlying escapism is a

distinction between the real and the virtual. The concept of escapism is based on the assumed existence of two comparable contexts for activities: “daily life,” comprising work, studies, and chores, and activities that escape it such as watching television, reading a book, or playing a computer game. Escapism can therefore be defined as simply relieving stress or breaking the mundaneness of daily life.

At the same time, there seem to be multiple connotations or interpretations of escapism that conflict with each other. Escapism is quite therapeutic when considered as a way of breaking the mundane. But the term is also used in highly negative discourse in describing situations where escapism is deemed to take on extreme forms. In the latter discourse, breaking the mundane is seen as leading to procrastination: excessive avoidance of activities that must be done [10].

Despite these multiple connotations and interpretations, researchers offer no coherent definition when using escapism to examine motivations for playing computer games. When Yee introduced escapism as a motivational factor for playing massively multiplayer games [25], it sparked a discussion about what Yee’s conclusion actually means.¹ Indeed, simply citing escapism as a motivation can fuel theories of addiction and procrastination. Research results are thus taken beyond the researcher’s meaning, especially if the researcher is unclear in communicating that meaning in the first place.

We are thus left pondering the questions: What is escapism? Is it useful for explaining why people play computer games? And, if so, how can it be researched?

The above questions formed the premise for our Derridian deconstruction of the use of escapism in playing computer games. We treat escapism as a metaphorical “nutshell,” or “a secure axiom or a pithy maxim,” with the intention “to crack it open” [6]. The first step was to further define escapism, both in general terms and in the context of

¹ Yee set out to scrutinize Bartle’s system of player types [1, 2, 3], and discussed the results on the *Terra Nova* blog, allowing Bartle to react. See http://terranova.blogs.com/terra_nova/2003/11/empirical_frame.html.

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computer gaming. These definitions are discussed in the next and third section, respectively. Second, we wanted to confront players with several possible definitions of escapism, asking them which of these apply to why they play computer games. The method and results of this empirical study are addressed in the subsequent sections. The paper ends with a discussion of the results and our conclusions about the suitability or unsuitability of applying escapism in game research.

WHAT IS ESCAPISM?

Not many authors have attempted to lay comprehensive and critical links between the highly philosophical concept of escapism and computer games. In fact, only a few authors have even discussed escapism in detail [10, 22]. Nevertheless, several researchers have identified it as a motivational factor explaining the attraction to massively multiplayer games [7, 13, 25].

Our definition of escapism is based on the conceptualization of different motivations for escapism and different forms of escapist activities. A literature review reveals that Evans offers the most useful and concrete theories for developing an escapism framework [10]. This theoretical framework sheds light on what escapism can mean in the scientific discourse about why people play computer games, consume media, or even pursue any other leisure activity. We based our framework on three questions:

1. Why would people want to “escape”?
2. How do people “escape”?
3. What are the positive and negative consequences of “escape”?

Why? Motivations for escapism

Underlying any definition of escapism is a common point of reference: reality. People may want to escape from – among many other things – financial difficulties, loneliness, or fear. We call this sort of escapism “cause-based,” as it serves the purpose of negating an element in life. Interestingly, cause-based escapism can be mapped on opposing ends of the psychological spectrum. Either people want to escape due to boredom, lack of stimulus, and for variety and change, or due to stress, pain, or worries. Based on this knowledge, we can define two types of motivations.

Mundane breaking

Escapism can be characterized as a “break” from daily activities. In some cases this break is the sole purpose of the escapist. This might be when people have worked hard and just want to “take a break” or when they are tired of their day-to-day routines.

Stress relieving

When in pain, stressed, or frustrated about something, people like to vent. Escapist activities can include taking these emotions out on something (e.g. using a boxing bag) to release the stress.

Aside from escaping unsatisfying situations, people may also just want to escape because they can. Why bother being involved with something that is “real” if it is possible to enjoy an escapist activity or dream away for a while? We call this sort of escapism “effect-based,” as it allows people to transcend reality by pursuing an activity or fantasy. Here we can once again distill two types of motivations.

Pleasure seeking

Humans are pleasure-seeking creatures. Modern society especially is crammed with escapist activities, from reading books to watching movies [10, 22]. Society may have developed in this manner because people were able to fulfill their basic needs [17].

Imagination conjuring

People like to daydream and imagine other worlds. Most people also have fantasies. For some, the wish to experience an alternative reality is the dominant reason for escape. Moreover, this type of escapism can be quite productive, as imagination can lead to innovation and improvement [10].

How? Escapist activities

Escapism is oftentimes connected with media use, such as watching TV, movies, and, of course, playing computer games. Yet the range of possible escapist activities is, in fact, much larger. According to Evans, there are four types of escapist activities [10].

Evasive

Evasive activities are literally about escaping, and are by definition always based on avoiding another activity. Examples are crying to avoid or deal with a confrontation or staring out a window for no apparent reason (“zoning out”). As these examples suggest, evasive activities are always cause-based.

Passive

Unlike active pursuits (see next), passive activities require no input from the escapist. Inactivity is the entire point of escapism. Examples are watching TV or listening to music.

Active pursuits

Activities like writing, fishing, and playing computer games require actual input from the escapist. Activity in another context is the point of the escapism here.

Extreme

Extreme activities have contributed to the negative discourse surrounding escapism. Binge eating, manic house cleaning, excessive gambling, and drug use are examples of extreme activities [10].

If we link these four underlying motivations with the four types of escapist activities we get a matrix of possible escapist configurations, as shown in Table 2 (see appendix). When a person defines watching television as a passive escapist activity, this person might want to take a break, relax, be entertained, or fantasize, while zoning out might be interpreted as an evasive escapist activity to delay work or deal with work-related stress. The matrix makes it

possible to identify the type of escapism at issue in any given situation.

Consequences: healthy or unhealthy?

By now it should be clear that while escapism carries a negative connotation, it is something all of us do on a daily basis. More importantly, it can be positive. We all sometimes need to take our minds off of things or have a good laugh. Escapism may also help prevent situations from becoming worse, such as when someone is very angry.

Unhealthy escapism develops when someone stops “taking care of business” and inhabits a personal fantasy world more or less full time, turning it into “a self-deluding hell” that nevertheless exerts “an insidious appeal” [22]. Notable aspects of unhealthy escapism are procrastination, psychosis, denial, and addiction [10]:

- *Procrastination*: Although everyone “slacks off” once in a while by escaping from duties they need to take care of, excessive procrastination can have far-reaching effects on family, friends, and work.
- *Psychosis*: When people start to confuse what is real and what is not and have difficulty “returning to reality.”
- *Denial*: Building layers of illusions by isolating oneself and sustaining certain beliefs; this can be quite harmful.
- *Addiction*: Addiction is when people are unable to control their habits.

The degree to which escapism can be described as unhealthy depends on how much escapism a person indulges in and how extensive that form of flight from reality is. Additionally, it depends on whether the escapist is able to escape and return in a safe manner.

ESCAPISM IN GAMES

Based on Table 2, we can see that playing a computer game can be a way to unwind after a long day at work, feel better, have fun, or experience an alternate reality. It only becomes problematic if gamers continuously avoid the mundaneness, deny problems of daily life, cannot control their game playing activity, or confuse daily life with the games. Though gaming can be positive, the negative associations are what tend to be stressed by media and experts. For example, psychotherapist Berne has called games an “unconstructive use of time” [4]. Figure 1 shows an advertisement that goes even further, warning that playing games is a health risk.

Especially striking is that many game researchers define escapism in negative terms, such as “how much a user is using the virtual world to temporarily avoid, forget about and escape from real-life stress and problems” [25] or even as a “cause to leave reality, in which the users live, cognitively and emotionally, in unsatisfying life circumstances” [18]. Based on our theoretical framework, we think these definitions provide a rather one-sided

portrayal of escapism. More importantly, we would argue that certain developments in games make a strict application of the concept of escapism to games particularly difficult.



Figure 1:
Change4Life
campaign in the UK.

One important concept in game studies that has received a great deal of attention [5, 8, 12, 15, 20] is the *magic circle*. In essence, this concept emphasizes the idea of “being somewhere else.” The magic circle takes players away from life as they know it and into a new reality. Players are shielded off and engaged for hours in a different world, separate from the “real” world. The magic circle, therefore, supports the interpretation of gaming as an escapist activity.

However, the gaming landscape has changed. While in the early (classic) games, players stepped into well-defined fictional worlds in which they enjoyed the game and then stepped out of the game to return to the real world, this is not true of the more modern variety of games, and particularly of massively multiplayer online games. With the advent of the Internet, modding, and other user-created content options [19], it has become difficult to draw a “circle” defining where play starts and ends. Playing games has become a pervasive activity. This development has led some researchers to conclude that analysis of these types of games should look “beyond the magic circle” [8].

The foregoing demonstrates that escapism is an ambiguous concept when applied to game-playing, and that its use in media and research is rather one-sided. We would argue that researchers must take greater care in using the concept of escapism, given the question of which conceptualization of escapism individual gamers actually identify with. Care is particularly necessary when using surveys for research, since this method does not allow the researcher to “see

into” the respondent’s thought process. Our empirical study was designed to test this overall hypothesis.

METHOD

Our first step was to deconstruct the theoretical concept of escapism. We then approached three groups of eight respondents who had agreed to engage in a critical discussion of the relevance of escapism in computer game-playing. This approach stems from the “focus group” [16] methodology, which emphasizes the value of participatory research. Here, participatory research entails discussion within a small group of participants who are able to voice and discuss their opinions on a specific topic freely and openly thanks to certain commonalities [16]. We chose this method because it would allow us to get a deeper understanding of the concept of escapism from the player perspective.

Participants

We chose to discuss escapism with respondents who are active multiplayer game players. This decision was based on two considerations. Firstly, we expected that *active* players would have an extensive rationalization for their game-play and the role it has in their lives, thus making them the most knowledgeable candidates to discuss this topic with. We defined *active* gamers as people who play computer games for at least 14 hours a week.

Table 1: Key statistics for each panel.

	Value
Focus group A (n = 8)*:	
- Age ¹	34.6 ± 6.8
- Worker/student ratio	87.5%/12.5%
- Years playing ²	23.8 ± 5.0
- Hours playing/week ³	21.3 ± 7.9
- Hours working/week ⁴	50.0 ± 9.6
Focus group B (n = 8):	
- Age	22.1 ± 4.8
- Worker/student ratio	37.5%/62.5%
- Years playing	12.1 ± 3.4
- Hours playing/week	13.8 ± 6.9
- Hours working/week	28.5 ± 15.3
Focus group C (n = 8)*:	
- Age (mean ± SD)	28.4 ± 6.6
- Worker/student ratio	75%/12.5%
- Years playing	15.6 ± 6.1
- Hours playing/week	25.8 ± 6.1
- Hours working/week	41.3 ± 7.4

* Panel participated in focus group discussion

¹ Value: mean ± SD

² “How many years have you been playing computer games?” Value: mean ± SD

³ “How many hours a week do you spend playing computer games, on average?” Value: mean ± SD

⁴ “How many hours a week do you spend on your occupation (job or education, if applicable), on average?” Value: mean ± SD

Secondly, we decided to focus on *multiplayer* gamers because people seem to play these games for a variety of reasons [25]. Heterogeneity in participants’ motivations was important in order to yield a wide spectrum of beliefs about escapism. Additionally, multiplayer games are inherently social and quite pervasive. As mentioned above, this aspect of games controverts the validity of escapism as it challenges the concept of the magic circle.

To generalize our deconstruction of escapism [16] we decided to set up three focus groups of eight participants each to discuss the applicability of escapism in playing computer games. Unfortunately, one of these three groups (Group B) was not motivated enough to finish the discussion. We included this group in the survey results and excluded it from the focus group discussion results.

Group participants were of differing ages (see Table 1). All participants were male. The three groups consisted mostly (67%) of professionals. Of these, five out of 13 worked in the IT industry, while the other eight had a wide variety of professions. The remaining participants were secondary, college, or university students (29%), or unemployed (4%). The participants were from various countries, namely, Great Britain, Finland, the Netherlands, and the USA.

Task

The focus groups were given two different tasks. First we asked each individual participant to fill out a survey. This survey introduced the respondents to our theoretical framework of escapism through a series of statements, on which they were asked to rate their level of agreement on a Likert scale (from 1 to 5). We presented four statements for each escapist motivation. In each case the first statement denoted a healthy form of escapism (i.e. “I play games to have fun.”), with the following three becoming gradually more negative (e.g. “Playing games has severely affected my ability to deal with real-life problems”). Aside from collecting demographic (gender, age, occupation) and game-playing (number of hours per week) data, the survey also included Yee’s [25] main statement for measuring escapism as a motivation for playing online games (“I like the escapism aspect of games”).

By sending the survey to participants prior to the group discussion, they were introduced to our initial conceptualization of escapism beforehand. This allowed participants to reflect on what escapism could mean, while allowing us to keep our group discussion introduction short and to the point [16]. The survey also enabled us to get necessary personal information outside the group discussion. Finally, sharing the results of the survey allowed us to kick-start an active discussion.

The second task consisted of a group discussion. Due to the physical distances and possible time differences between participants and researchers we had to rely on an online tool for the group discussion. Since we still wanted to keep the discussion confidential and personal we chose to use e-mail,

since the respondents had access to it, knew how to use it, and were able to respond when it was most convenient.

We initiated the discussion with a simple question (“What games are you currently playing?”) in order to stimulate the participants to respond [16], followed by more in-depth questions. The in-depth questions were designed to elicit the participants’ personal beliefs.

After a number of days we initiated a second round of discussion. The questions posed sought to clarify the positions and implications of the responses provided in the first round. We asked the groups to think about whether the vast majority of people can be considered escapists. Furthermore, we wanted them to reflect on the question of whether escapism can explain why some people play games, or whether playing games has become so accepted that we cannot call it escapism anymore. This approach was intended to make participants further delineate their positions.

Procedure

We recruited participants who actively play multiplayer games by contacting clans and guilds. In essence, clans and guilds are communities who play games together. These communities can be international or local. In the case of international clans or guilds, the members may never meet each other in person, but only online – both in-game and out-of-game.

Our reason for approaching clans and guilds is that we knew they could provide a true focus group. By assembling a group of eight people from a specific clan or guild we would instantly have a group with a common denominator. Thus, true to the focus group premise, we would have a number of people that could discuss escapism freely and openly.

We contacted clan and guild members through personal and work acquaintances; these gatekeepers were our primary contacts. We asked them to assemble eight people (themselves included) to form a focus group, taking account of three specific rules: i) participants needed to be part of the same community, ii) participants could not be too close to each other (closeness could trigger social desirability in responding to each other), and iii) participants needed to be willing to actively discuss the topic.

To start each group off we had the gatekeeper ask participants to fill out the survey. After receiving the completed surveys, we initiated the discussion by outlining the rules, providing the survey results, and posing three questions. The rules emphasized the informal, open, critical, and respectful nature of the discussion. Moreover, they emphasized that it was important for every respondent to reply to each of our questions at least once and to refer to the others’ responses as much as possible. To get the group discussions started we briefly presented the survey results; in two of the focus groups these results did indeed spark productive discussion.

RESULTS

Survey

Most respondents reported enjoying the escapism aspect of games (3.71 ± 0.995). We also found a positive correlation (.772) between Yee’s statement “I like the escapism aspect of games” and the statement “To me escapism is something positive.” Specifically, 54% agreed or strongly agreed that they liked the escapist aspect of computer games and felt it was something positive. Only 12.5% disagreed or strongly disagreed about liking the escapist aspect of computer games, and felt it was not positive. Another 21% agreed that they liked the escapist aspect of computer games, but were neutral about whether this was something positive.

Of the four meanings of escapism, pleasure-seeking scored the highest means (4.54 ± 0.721). Overall, 50% of the respondents deemed pleasure-seeking the most important reason why people escape through computer games. Imagination-conjuring scored the lowest means (2.71 ± 1.042). We also asked respondents to rank the importance of the four conceptualizations of escapism in relation to why *people in general* like to play computer games. Here again we found that each focus group collectively deemed pleasure-seeking the most important reason and imagination-conjuring the least important for why people escape by playing computer games.

Interestingly, we found that of the 16 statements about the four escapist motivations for playing computer games only one correlated with Yee’s statement that “I like the escapism aspect of games,” namely, “I play games to fantasize or imagine different worlds” (.523). Thus, many of the respondents who liked to play computer games to fantasize or imagine different worlds also liked the escapism aspect of games. Yet since imagination-conjuring scored lowest overall, it seems that many respondents differed in their specific reasons for escaping through computer games, even though they collectively liked the escapism aspect. This supports the conclusion that individual respondents each had their own idea of what escapism means, though as a group they felt imagination-conjuring to be the most applicable meaning of escapism.

Almost all respondents disagreed with the more negative statements concerning different forms of escapism. The means for each of the four most negative statements about gaming as a way to break the mundane, relieve stress, seek pleasure or conjure imagination were very low: 1.83, 1.46, 1.83, and 1.13 respectively. Thus all respondents reported that playing games did not inhibit their own functioning in everyday activities (occupation and chores), did not affect their ability to deal with problems, did not render them unable to control the time they spent playing games, and did not lead to confusion between game worlds and physical reality.

Focus Group Discussion

Given our premise of deconstruction, we performed a discourse analysis after each group discussion had come to

an end. We started this analysis by individually “coding” [11] each respondent’s response during the discussion, and then comparing our results afterwards. These codes served to identify categories of definitions and opinions concerning escapism as a reason for playing computer games. We then constructed discourses about escapism along the lines of these categories by quoting and interpreting responses that seemed to fit each category. After this analysis we shared our constructed discourses with the respondents, offering them an opportunity to react one last time.

In total we constructed eight discourses. These discourses do not necessarily belong to one person; indeed, it is common for one person to adopt multiple discourses. One might even go so far as to say that all participants have every discourse, while the ones they reveal are those they feel more strongly associated with. Below, we discuss each of the discourses and provide a typical response on which it is based.

1. Escapism is therapeutic

“If I wasn’t able to ‘escape’ into my computer games, I’d go nuts. I’ll not go as far as saying I’m addicted to them, but it really means a lot for me in order to relieve stress and ‘shake off the day’.” [respondent C1]

This discourse states that escapism is needed to de-stress or canalize behavior. People experience things that they want to find relief for. Games provide an excellent means to escape according to this discourse, because they enable players to do anything they want in a safe environment.

2. Escapism is a label

“‘Escapism’ to me as an avid gamer is such a negative connotation. It implies several labels and stereotypes portrayed by the media and general public. In this day an age [sic], the media has certainly concentrated their negative views towards gamers and gaming industry which I base on news reports all around the world. Just a few years ago gaming was not the main focus but instead music was the culprit. Of course a few years before that we had the evil television and it’s [sic] MTV. If history continues in this fashion, ‘escapism’ of tomorrow will be refocused elsewhere. Perhaps then the negative scope of ‘escapism’ for an avid gamer will be much different.” [respondent A4]

According to this discourse, escapism is used as a label, especially by the popular media, and has a negative connotation. It is used by the media to denote activities that seem a “waste of time” or trivial. In fact, this discourse also relates to the popular media or general public’s lack of understanding of what the activity is about. In time, when the activity becomes more accepted and widespread, the label disappears. This discourse is highly associated with games as these in particular are receiving this label at the moment.

3. Escapism is entertainment

“Escapism to me is just another form of entertainment, to relax, interact with others that enjoy the same aspects of gaming that I

do. Much like TV being able to interact in a story that you can take part in is a lot of fun for me.” [respondent A5]

In this discourse, escapism has no purpose. It is just a way for human beings to be involved in activities that are fun; to break the mundane. Fantasizing, like being a hero for a day, is something people like to do now and then. Of course, being too involved in an activity is harmful. In that case, however, it is not escapism, but addiction. Escapism in itself is not harmful. It is just a way for people to entertain themselves. Games are just another form of entertainment.

4. Escapism is breaking with reality

“...gaming escapism (as I see it, the escape into a sanitized version of life rules) reinforces what I think is ‘good’ behavior. ‘Effort brings rewards.’ ‘Cooperation is more effective (and fun) than playing alone.’ ‘Be patient.’ ‘Make intelligent decisions (i.e. do the math).’ In the games I enjoy, these rules work more often than not (and certainly more often than in real life).” [respondent C4]

People escape because they are not entirely satisfied with real life. They want to be someone else or try to avoid negative aspects of reality, such as unfairness or confrontations. Escapism relates only to these types of evasive motivations. It is not so much about the activity; it is about the intentions behind the activity. In this case, the intentions are negatively associated with aspects of reality. Due to the flexibility, high realism, and immersive powers of computer game technology, games provide good ways for people to break with reality.

5. Escapism is an enabler

“It [escapism] means that I can become someone else for a time, for example if in life your [sic] shy and keep your head down you can escape in to a game and become a leader of men and women, command great fleets of ships to conquer the universe.” [respondent C2]

The real world has its disadvantages. Stereotyping, which is something humans do on a daily basis and serves a purpose, can be unpleasant. Additionally, the real world has a fixed time-space dimension. It is not easy to meet someone who lives thousands of miles away. Escapism makes it possible to overcome these real-world obstacles, and a game is a particularly good medium for this. It enables people to be anonymous, which creates a level playing field, and also makes it possible to interact with people across enormous distances.

6. Escapism is everywhere

“Bejeweled is just as ‘escapist’ as World of Warcraft. It may not be as immersive...but that is not the definition of escapist that I am reading here, I do not think. I find it interesting that some folks do not seem to view casual games as just as escapist as traditionally hardcore games. If you are waiting for a bus, playing bejeweled on your phone, why is that less escapist than playing WoW after dinner?” [respondent A8]

Drinking a cup of coffee, playing solitaire at work, and other seemingly minor “departures” from our daily routines are all escapism. In this discourse everybody is therefore an escapist, although some may escape more than others. This begs the question of whether escapism is really that much different from simply living life. “You work to live, not live to work” is a saying compatible with this discourse.

7. *Escapism is hardcore immersion*

“When I think of escapism it does mean ‘hardcore immersion.’ It conjures imagery of people that have a difficult time separating the game from reality. [...] The game becomes more important than everything else. In my mind, escapism is strongly tied with the addictive and obsessive behaviors that can occur in people. Which is why, for me, it has a negative connotation.” [respondent A1]

This discourse states that it is only possible to speak of escapism when people are completely absorbed and immersed in their activity. It is about how people engage in an activity. If that engagement is excessive and entails complete devotion, then we call it escapism. This means that playing solitaire, or playing other types of casual games, should not be considered escapist. Playing World of Warcraft more than 25 hours a week, however, is.

8. *Escapism is solitary*

“I personally do not play multiplayer games to escape, I play them to interact with my friends. I have made many friends through the game, and also use multiplayer games (especially Xbox live) to talk with a few of my friends who moved across the entire country. [...] I do not feel the escapism aspect of these games is what some people have a negative aspect on [sic]. I know for at least my parents, they view it as a waste of time, rather than problematic because I am too absorbed in another world.” [respondent A2]

According to this discourse, escapism is not practiced in a social environment. The social environment is part of the reality we live in. It involves friends and family. Those people are very real and their presence, whether in a game or another activity, establishes that we are not escaping from anything. Rather, escapism is when we engage in the activity alone. This discourse begs the question of why massively multiplayer online games are seen as such escapist worlds, when in fact these are also the most social.

The discourses described above may clash with each other in some cases, yet no one discourse is more “right” than any other. A few can be reconciled, others cannot. This irreconcilability became clear at the end of each discussion, when we asked respondents delineate their understanding of escapism – in other words, to “draw the line” somewhere. As one of our respondents put it:

“Is there a line? If there is a line then how do you define it. I still think that the term ‘escapism’ is valid in all aspects of life and should be relabeled as R&R [rest and relaxation]. People find escape routes from reality in all kinds of activities.” [respondent A7]

We can trace some of these problems of demarcation back to certain dimensions of escapist activities:

- Is the escapist activity marginal (playing a game for five minutes) or excessive (hardcore immersion)?
- Does the escapist activity involve something general – applicable to all computer game genres – or is it specific (e.g. role-playing games)?
- Is the escapist activity negative, neutral, or positive?
- Is the escapist activity social or not?

The positions that people take on these dimensions depend on which discourses dominate. In other words, their perceptions and beliefs determine how they define escapism. As these dimensions show, escapism is anything but clear-cut.

DISCUSSION

Prior to starting this research, we expected to reach “theoretical saturation” [11] after three focus group discussions, such that additional data would not support a further deconstruction of escapism. We feel that our deconstruction of escapism is quite extensive, despite the fact that we had only two focus group discussions to draw on. However, we also feel that, to reach true theoretical saturation, these groups would have to be demographically distinct. As the descriptive statistics already denote (see “Method”-“Participants”), our focus groups were not very demographically distinct. Our aim therefore is to continue the current approach, taking these aspects into account, in order to further extend and validate our deconstruction of escapism in the context of computer gaming.

Arguably, massively multiplayer online games are already just as socially complex as the “real world.” Their pervasiveness is already quite remarkable [24]. Moreover, games of this type have become a profitable industry not only for developers, but for players as well [9]. If current trends continue, it would be missing the point to see them simply as escapist environments. Indeed, acknowledging the place that these types of games occupy in our society and global economy renders the distinction between “real” and “virtual” that underlies escapism moot. Of course, games can still be played for escapist reasons, but it would be more appropriate to see these games as simply another infrastructure on which society thrives [23].

CONCLUSION

Our research, as set out in this paper, aimed to gain a better understanding of the concept of escapism and its applicability to games and game research. Specifically, we aimed to investigate the multiple conceptualizations of escapism that have developed and debates about the application of escapism in research. Beginning with a deconstruction of the theoretical concept of escapism, we were able to develop a framework in which motivations for

escaping are linked with a number of escapist activities. Using this framework, we were able to identify circumstances in which escapism takes places and when it becomes problematic.

We subsequently applied this theoretical framework in an empirical study with three focus groups. The results of this study indicate that escapism is interpreted quite differently by different players. In fact, we identified a total of eight discourses that respondents apply in varying degrees and combinations. In addition, the study showed that citing escapism as a reason for gaming elicits debate and emotional responses.

The co-existence of multiple interpretations and connotations of escapism renders it impracticable for use in surveys, interviews, and other research techniques. We furthermore believe that attempts at an overall redefinition of the concept are pointless. Players position escapism in various discourses, which in many cases are incongruent with each other. Any kind of generalization about the meaning and applicability of escapism in computer gaming is therefore impossible.

Nevertheless, our deconstruction of escapism offers ample opportunity for researchers to employ escapism as a theory or construct in certain cases. Escapism could thus provide a useful concept in game research, provided researchers take a more critical stance.

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APPENDIX

Table 1: Theoretical framework of escapism.

	How:	Evasive Avoiding form	Passive Non-participative form	Active pursuits Participative form	Extreme Problematic form
	Why:				
Cause-based Escapism	Mundane breaking Negating the boring	<i>Delay</i> Staring inexplicably	<i>Take a break</i> Sitting down to have a coffee	<i>Unwind</i> Playing casual games	<i>Procrastination</i> Gaming as over-avoidance
	Stress relief Negating a negative	<i>Distance</i> Walking out of an argument	<i>Relax</i> Listening to soothing music	<i>Feel Better</i> Playing first-person shooters	<i>Denial</i> Gaming without solving problems
Effect-based Escapism	Pleasure seeking Attracting a positive	X	<i>Be Entertained</i> Watching your favorite movie	<i>Have Fun</i> Playing social games	<i>Addiction</i> Gaming becomes uncontrollable
	Imagination conjuring Visualizing	X	<i>Fantasize</i> Reading <i>Lord of the Rings</i>	<i>Immerse</i> Tabletop role-playing	<i>Psychosis</i> Gaming disturbs view on reality