

# Exploring Future Directions for Healthy Escapism and Self-Regulation in Games

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## Abstract

People play games with a variety of motivations. One among them is escapism, which is related to playing games to get away from other activities, stressors or problems. This behavior can become detrimental if it is purely pursued for avoidance, however depending on the situation and when utilized mindfully, it can also provide regeneration, recess or a breathing space. It is important for individuals to be aware of their intentions and experiences to be able to better understand how their gaming behaviors may affect them. This workshop is about exploring healthy escapism and self-regulated gaming. It aims to connect researchers interested in similar topics, and create a roadmap for future research in the field.

## CCS Concepts

• **Applied computing** → **Computer games**; • **Human-centered computing** → **Collaborative and social computing**; **Human computer interaction (HCI)**.

## Keywords

escapism, self-regulation, emotion regulation, coping, mood management, stress recovery

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## 1 Introduction

Gaming ideally involves engagement that is self-determined, healthy, and aligned with other commitments in life. Therefore, gaming behavior needs to be self-regulated, meaning players should be able to decide when to start and when to stop gaming for themselves.

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There are many variables that can be obstacles to healthy or adaptive self-regulation, such as system design, individual predispositions, or underlying mental health problems. When players turn to games with high escapist motivations, i.e., to take their mind off of something, self-regulation capabilities gain further importance in determining whether the outcomes of gaming will be beneficial or not. This workshop is designed to bring perspectives together for discussion in relation to self-regulation and escapism in games.

Healthy escapism is a framework developed by Kosa and Uysal (2020) that focuses on motivation for and engagement in games for their potential positive outcomes by examining escapism in relation to emotion regulation (ER), mood management, coping, and stress recovery [15]. The framework investigates whether and how engaging in gaming might be beneficial when players are faced with certain challenges in daily life. The conceptualization of escapism solely as an avoidant coping strategy that only results in harmful outcomes was also challenged by others (e.g., [10]). There has been empirical support for the potential healthy aspects of escapism in games. Depending on their design and themes, commercial games are found to be therapeutic (see [4, 22]). For instance, certain games were found to help individuals and families cope with pandemic-related stress through distraction [21, 27]. Specifically, challenges in games and overcoming them were found to help facilitate adaptive coping mechanisms including ones that may arise from escapist motivations [20]. Additionally, games were found to provide stress recovery through several pathways including mental disengagement [2]. Moreover, it was posited that gaming motivation and behavior might form adaptive forms of escapism when the gaming activity satisfies basic psychological needs and/or serves as an integrative emotion regulation tool [8]. For instance, self-regulated curation and optimization of immersive experiences for positive outcomes may be examples of healthy forms of escapism [19]. Self-regulation is associated with positive aspects within the gaming domain such as having harmonious passion for gaming and having higher overall wellbeing [17]. Self-regulated gaming and healthy escapism have strong connections since healthy escapist motivation inherently involves regulated gaming behavior emphasized in the motivation to engage in games, which differentiates from subversive escapism, which is more focused on maladaptive avoidance that likely results in negative outcomes. The multi-dimensionality of escapism has been receiving support in a variety of contexts, including games [25]. Importantly, socially demanding gameplay can

interfere with self-regulation (e.g., a game has to be played because of friends or job requirements [5]), however it is also possible to design for helping players regulate their behavior via self-determined exit intentions from gaming [1, 6].

Moving beyond gaming, studies in the broader domain of self-regulation and emotion regulation likewise hint at the idea of potential benefits of mental disengagement from stressors (e.g., [24]). It is important to understand when engaging in a situation is unhelpful and withdrawing becomes a better strategy. This is related to emotion regulation flexibility, which is about applying regulation strategies based on the situation. Not knowing or not being able to flexibly decide when to apply which strategy (e.g., engaging in some form or disengaging) is a sign of unhealthy functioning of individuals [7, 24]. Even if an individual is healthy and generally capable of effectively deploying ER strategies, external circumstances can affect regulation as well. For instance, when interacting with digital systems, the design of a system can interfere with the effective application of emotion regulation strategies. One example is that additional video content automatically playing after the planned viewing duration reduces the likelihood of self-regulation [11]. Moreover, depending on the density of information that needs to be processed, the amount of cognitive resources the situation demands and whether one wants to find a longer-term solution to a situation might determine whether one should utilize mental disengagement in the face of challenges [24]. Taken together, there are several factors at play in determining what the best strategy is for effective self-regulation in a given circumstance, and individual differences may also matter. It is important to delineate these factors and examine how they relate to problematic gaming or healthy and adaptive forms of gaming.

In addition to better understanding self-regulation and healthy escapism in games, it is important to draw connections to mainstream concepts that are frequently studied in the field [8]. These include but are not limited to need satisfaction and need frustration, which are regarded as essential components in gaming motivations (e.g., [3, 16, 23]), passion, which is the strong desire to engage with games and can be harmonious or obsessive resulting in positive and negative outcomes respectively (e.g., [12, 18]), toxicity, which is related to negative and harmful behaviours, including abusive communications or disruptive gameplay (e.g., [9]), or problematic gaming, which covers gamers at risk of being diagnosed with gaming disorder (e.g., [13]). When one decides to engage in gaming, more cognitive involvement and more immersion might be helpful for stress reduction, especially after need frustrating events [14, 19, 26]. However, how much the nature of escapist motivations and self-regulation capabilities relate to adaptive aspects of gaming and under what conditions they might not work as intended is not well known yet.

## 2 Main Objectives of the Workshop

We have four main goals with this workshop:

- (1) **Community:** Building a community interested in researching self-regulation in the contexts of escapism and disengagement.
- (2) **Knowledge Exchange:** Supporting knowledge exchange between researchers for intermingling of ideas, methods and

approaches and to support the Research Agenda and Path Forward activities below.

- (3) **Research Agenda:** Creating a research agenda for the field.
- (4) **Path Forward:** Connecting researchers with similar interests to further the agenda after the workshop.

## 3 Activities

We plan the workshop as a synchronous, hybrid, and full-day workshop. At least one organizer will be on-site to facilitate the in-person discussions, and at least one organizer will moderate the virtual conversations. Depending on the attendee time zones and the level of virtual attendance, we might also add an asynchronous component where participants can share and work with documents in their own times. Workshop materials will be shared through Google Drive or a dedicated website for all participants to access. The morning session will involve Introductions, Paper Presentations, and Speed-Chats, whereas the afternoon will comprise Breakout Groups and Final Reflections:

- **Introductions:** We will outline the schedule and intended outcomes for the workshop, including the working definitions of escapism, self-regulation, and related topics. Then participants will introduce themselves and get to know each other. This will be facilitated by a shared slide deck distributed before the workshop, where each participant will have their answers prepared to the same set of questions on one slide.
- **Participant Presentations:** The authors of the accepted papers will provide 5-minute presentations of their submissions. We will also plan for a short discussion and Q&A for each presentation. The duration of the presentation will be revised based on the final participant count.
- **Speed-Chats:** After the presentations, participants will meet with each other one-on-one and talk about their presented research and their connection points. Organizers will determine the pairs and facilitate the logistics for all pairs including in-person pairs, hybrid pairs and pairs that include in-person and hybrid participants. Pairs will be determined randomly to increase cross-pollination of ideas. During each speed-chat, participants will take note of their main connection points and identified future directions / research questions to be further discussed in the final reflections section of the workshop. We will revise the duration of these chats based on the total number of participants.
- **Final Reflections:** Each participant will present a summary of their conversations and motivate their research questions in the form of a round table discussion. Organizers will take notes together with participants and create a mind map of the discussions and a list of the questions to be shared post-workshop.

## 4 Organizers

Our team of organizers consists of experts in the area of games and particularly areas related to the topic of the workshop.

**Mehmet Kosa** is an Assistant Professor in Computer Science at Marshall University, USA. His work focuses on understanding what lies at the core of human behavior and how technology such

Time	Activity
9:00 - 9:30	Outline + Introductions
9:30 - 10:30	Participant Presentations
10:30 - 10:45	Coffee Break
10:45 - 11:45	Speed-Chats
11:45 - 12:30	Final Reflections

**Table 1: Workshop Schedule**

as games and extended realities can contribute to optimal human functioning and growth.

**Julian Frommel** is an Assistant Professor in Interaction & Multimedia at Utrecht University, the Netherlands. His work focuses on the design and implementation of interactive digital systems that provide enjoyable, meaningful, safe, and healthy experiences for users, including research on benefits and harms of video games, such as the effects of toxicity and harassment in online games.

**Kathrin Gerling** is a Professor of Human-Computer Interaction and Accessibility at Karlsruhe Institute of Technology, Germany. Her research explores equitable access to games and gaming technology, for example, through the lens of disengagement as a regular part of play, and with focus on different audiences who appreciate and benefit from games, e.g., neurodivergent people.

**Daniel Johnson** is a Professor of Computer Science at Queensland University of Technology, Australia. His work focuses on how videogames influence wellbeing, often through the lenses of Self-Determination Theory and the Dualistic Model of Passion. His current focus includes better understanding and minimising toxic and disruptive behaviour in online settings, including with children.

**Regan Mandryk** is a Professor of Computer Science at the University of Victoria, Canada. Her work aims to design, develop, and evaluate novel games and immersive technologies that benefit the social, emotional, and cognitive wellbeing of people. She also innovates solutions to address the factors that undermine gaming's benefits, such as toxicity, poor emotion regulation, and obsessive play.

## 5 Participation

To be inclusive of different perspectives, we will accept submissions from all areas of CHI PLAY that discuss escapism and self-regulation in games (e.g., games research addressing children, game accessibility research, work exploring games for well-being, or broader research addressing games for health). We will advertise a call for participation and a submission form where participants will submit short papers (2-4 pages ACM single-column format without references including a brief bio).

### 5.1 Call for Participation

Players should be able to self-regulate their gaming activities for healthy outcomes. This is especially important when they decide to play games to disengage from external stressors of daily life. There is increasing attention towards understanding how escapist motivations towards gaming are formed, how they affect player experience and well-being, the interaction of these motivations

with game design, and their effects on exit intentions. This workshop intends to discuss the interactions between healthy escapism and subversive escapism, self-regulated gaming, emotion regulation, stress recovery, the role of passion, self-determined decisions related to engaging and disengaging from games, and similar topics.

We invite researchers and practitioners to submit a short manuscript (2-4 pages in ACM single-column format without references including a brief bio) via the workshop website, which will be created if the workshop is accepted. The manuscripts can be in the forms of position papers, reviews, works in progress, empirical papers or other. If the authors did not do any work in the area yet, but are interested in participating in the workshop, they can instead submit a position statement outlining their interests with references. Topics of interest the workshop will focus on include:

- Healthy escapism vs subversive escapism
- Self-regulated gaming
- Emotion regulation
- Stress recovery
- Coping
- Mood management
- Self-determined starting and exiting
- Disengagement from stressors via gaming

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