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COMMENTARY

Research Directions in the Study of Gaming-Related Escapism: a Commentary to Melodia, Canale, and Griffiths (2020)

Alessandro Giardina[1] · Vladan Starcevic[2] · Daniel L. King[3] · Adriano Schimmenti[4] · Maria Di Blasi[5] · Joël Billieux[1]

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Abstract
Escapism motivations and related processes (e.g., avoidance, dissociation, relaxation, and emotion dysregulation) have been identified as risk factors for problematic gaming. However, the escapism construct has often been poorly conceptualized and operationalized in assessment instruments. In their systematic review, Melodia et al. (2020) proposed that conceptualizing escapism as an avoidant coping strategy could provide a sound basis for further study of problematic gaming. In this commentary, we critically examine some terminological and conceptual issues in relation to escapism to guide future research.

Keywords Escapism · Escape · Problematic gaming · Gaming disorder · Virtuality

✉ Alessandro Giardina
alessandro.giardina@unil.ch

Vladan Starcevic
Vladan.starcevic@sydney.edu.au

Daniel L. King
daniel.king@flinders.edu.au

Adriano Schimmenti
Adriano.schimmenti@unikore.it

Maria Di Blasi
maria.diblasi@unipa.it

Joël Billieux
Joel.billieux@unil.ch

[1] Institute of Psychology, University of Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland

[2] Faculty of Medicine and Health, Sydney Medical School, Nepean Clinical School, Brain and Mind Centre, University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia

[3] College of Education, Psychology, & Social Work, Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia

[4] Faculty of Human and Social Sciences, UKE – Kore University of Enna, Enna, Italy

[5] Department of Psychology, Educational Sciences and Human Movement, University of Palermo, Palermo, Italy

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Escapism and Escape: a Terminological Conundrum

Melodia et al.'s (2020) systematic review aimed to examine the relationship between "escapism" and "avoidant coping," which are often referred to interchangeably in the literature. To this aim, the authors presented the framework of gaming motives proposed by Demetrovics et al. (2011), which distinguishes the motivations of "escape" (defined as *gaming to avoid life difficulties*) and "coping" (defined as *gaming for mood boosting or channeling of emotions*). Relying on this model, Melodia et al. (2020) defined *escapism* as the process of leaving reality and *avoidant coping* as the game's capability to help the person deal with "real" problems by favoring management of unpleasant emotional states. Subsequently, Melodia et al. (2020) proposed that "*clarifying the nature of escapism as an avoidant coping strategy should be seen as the basis for further research on this topic*" (p. 5). Although Melodia et al. (2020) recognized that the interchangeable use of the terms "escapism" and "avoidant coping" had complicated the interpretation of the findings of several past studies, the authors provided a general definition of coping to address avoidant coping and used the terms "escapism" and "escape" interchangeably as if they effectively referred to the same phenomenon. In accordance with Demetrovics et al.'s (2011) distinction between escape and coping, we contend that escape rather than escapism may be more appropriately considered an avoidant strategy (Table 1; Hayes et al., 1996). Our view is that terminological rigor is necessary to prevent perpetuation of past inconsistencies.

A Differential Approach

The constructs of escapism and escape are not mutually exclusive. From a dimensional perspective, escape could be viewed as a more severe form of escapism. However, it is noteworthy that a significant increase in the severity of this process would also, at a certain level, determine its qualitative change (escapism ⇒ escape). Furthermore, differences other than the severity levels exist between the two constructs. For this reason, we posit that the qualitative distinction between escapism and escape is important for the field and that these constructs should not be used interchangeably. In previous research, the term "escapism" was usually referred to an active and at least partly adaptive process entailing a positive emotional payback, while the term "escape" was related to dysfunctional and avoidant coping strategies (Kuo et al., 2016; Demetrovics et al., 2011; Stenseng et al., 2021). Relatedly, Calleja (2010) suggested that a feature shared by escapism and escape is that they can both be conceptualized as *psychological movements* from one environment (e.g., the physical world) to another, perceived as more favorable (e.g., the virtual world of gaming). However, Calleja (2010) describes escapism as a bidirectional and temporary movement, with an expectancy to return to the place where the movement originated (i.e., the physical world), while escape would rather correspond to a unidirectional and possibly permanent transition into a game environment, with no expectancy of return. In other words, the escapist (the one who resorts to escapism) strives to improve the original situation (i.e., his or her life outside gaming) by spending some time in the gaming environment, while the escaper (the one who escapes) expects a change by a more stable transition from the rejected original situation to the gaming environment. This critical distinction between escapism and escape is depicted in Fig. 1. It is important to note that escapism and escape principally differ in the patterns of feelings and motivations associated with the

Table 1 Definitions of the constructs of relevance for understanding gaming

Construct	Definition	References
Escapism	Bidirectional and temporary movement from the physical to the more favorably perceived gaming environment, with an expectation to return to the physical environment after experiencing emotional benefits in the gaming environment	Adapted from Kuo et al. (2016), Calleja (2010), and Kosa and Uysal (2020)
Escape	Unidirectional and potentially permanent movement from the physical to the more favorably perceived gaming environment, with an expectation to remain in the gaming environment because the physical environment is "irreparable" and has been rejected	Adapted from Demetrovics et al. (2011) and Calleja (2010)
Experiential avoidance/avoidant coping	Efforts to decrease the frequency and dampen the quality of contact with private experiences (emotions, body sensations, thoughts, memories) and with the context that generates them	Adapted from Hayes et al. (1996)
Virtual	Virtuality is a non-physical constituent of the reality that allows experiential expansion. The virtual and physical environments do not necessarily differ with respect to how real they are, and the boundary between them is permeable and changeable	Adapted from Calleja (2010), Chirico and Gaggioli (2019), and EU Kids Online (2020)

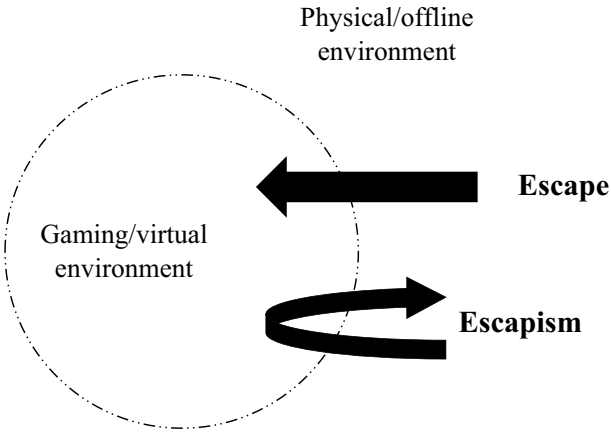

Fig. 1 The distinction between escapism and escape

initial expectancy or intent, whereby the outcome of the movement can change depending on what actually happens in the game and other "pull or push" individual factors (Shi et al., 2019). Whereas a switch from escapism to escape and vice versa is plausible, at this stage of investigation we see these patterns as relatively stable characteristics of the relationships that individuals have with videogames, rather than a motivational push that changes episodically (e.g., at each gaming session).

Escapism Is Potentially More Adaptive Than Escape

Based on the above-discussed distinction between escapism and escape, we posit that these processes may differ qualitatively. In other words, we propose that escapists, compared to escapers, are characterized by (1) more "side" benefits from gaming even when negative outcomes are present and (2) greater responsivity to treatment, due to the inclination to transfer benefits experienced through gaming to their physical life. Indeed, the escapist does not reject the physical reality outside the game but rather tries to ameliorate it *through* the game. For example, Kosa and Uysal (2020) proposed that escapism provided individuals with four "pillars" of psychological well-being: (1) greater ability to manage negative emotions and enhance the positive ones (*emotion regulation*), (2) mood repair through the satisfaction of basic needs (*mood management*), (3) effective management of internal and external stressors (*coping*), and (4) restoration following cognitive and emotional exhaustion (*recovery*). In contrast, escape occurs because of the rejection of the physical reality and a need to run away from it as far as possible and usually regardless of where one ends up. In the long run, this avoidant strategy could get the person "stuck in between" the two environments, with a potentially increased risk of presenting clinically relevant problematic gaming patterns and greater resistance to treatment. Accordingly, the impairing nature of escape has been highlighted since early studies of problematic gaming, with the "retreat" into virtual worlds considered as a likely manifestation of a severe clinical condition (Di Blasi et al., 2019; Schimmenti & Caretti, 2010; Stip et al., 2016). However, as already noted, the outcome of the two movements is not necessarily in accordance with these premises. Hence, we do not consider escapism and escape to be "positive" and "negative" in an absolute sense but rather to be more or less adaptive. Indeed, even the

escapists may find themselves "stuck" in an attempt to ameliorate their personal situation through the virtual world of the game, whereas the escapers may discover that they are able and willing to return to the physical environment, distressed by tiring and unfruitful attempts to avoid it. Notably, future research should explore empirically the qualitative difference between the two scenarios and investigate whether tailored therapeutic approaches are called for. For example, predominantly escapist patients could benefit from treatments focused on the content of their play besides their way of playing in order to (1) strengthen diagnostic/therapeutic alliance and (2) identify areas of competences/needs addressed through the game that can be gradually transposed into the life outside the game. On the other hand, in the intervention with escaping patients, it may be more relevant to focus on what the gamers are trying to protect themselves from (e.g., aversive emotions, psychological trauma, anxiety) and on what maintains the avoidant behavior, thus buffering the risk of perpetuating the avoidance of the clinical setting itself and allowing the development of a sound therapeutic rapport.

Videogames Are Real as much as the "Real World"

Melodia et al. (2020) noted an association between escaping/avoidant processes and gamers' beliefs that the virtual world is as real as the "real world." We recognize that in a minority of gamers, such beliefs might reflect dissociative mechanisms or even delusionality, but we contend that they do not necessarily denote psychological abnormality. Indeed, a continuum between reality and virtuality has been proposed long ago, with augmented and mixed realities, such as some online games, situated somewhere in the middle (Milgram et al., 1995). However, videogames have crucially become a *non-physical* constituent of the reality that is *collectively shared* (EU Kids Online, 2020). Instead of the "real versus virtual" dichotomy, we thus suggest a conditional dichotomy/continuum between physical and virtual environments (Table 1, Chirico & Gaggioli, 2019), eschewing the notion that the latter is less real than the former by the virtue of its non-physicality. Within this framework, experiencing the gaming/virtual environment as real as the physical one does not necessarily indicate a detachment from the reality or psychopathology. As already noted, the dichotomy between virtual and physical environments is a conditional one, and the boundary between the two environments is not impenetrable (as shown in Fig. 1). For example, emotional reactions to gaming activities are experienced *physically* and not virtually, while the subsequent gaming activities in response to these physical reactions take place in the *virtual* environment. Importantly, a priori perspectives connected to "binary illusions" (e.g., virtual vs. real; game vs. work; Calleja, 2010) can be gradually identified and tackled to advance in this field.

Conclusion and Future Directions

We commend Melodia et al.'s (2020) systematic review yet propose to refine the conceptualization of escapism and related processes. We support the distinction between escapism and escape (as a form of avoidant coping) and their different implications for the conceptualization and treatment of problematic gaming. Specifically, we propose a qualitative difference between escapism and escape in gaming contexts, based on the directionality of the psychological movement from the physical to the virtual environment (bidirectional vs.

unidirectional), duration of the psychological "stay" in the virtual environment (short-lived or temporary vs. enduring) and perception of the situation in the physical environment from which the movement originated (amendable vs. intolerable and rejected). Finally, we propose a dichotomy between the physical/offline and the virtual/gaming environments instead of the overemphasized dichotomy between the real and virtual worlds. We believe that such epistemological perspective will improve our understanding of the relationship between individuals and videogames, especially in the context of problematic gaming. According to our proposal, an initial yet mandatory step to pave the way for future research is the psychometric and clinical validation of a fine-grained measure to assess escape and escapism as interdependent but separate constructs and to distinguish them from related phenomena such as relaxation or dissociation. Once validated, this measure should be employed to clarify whether escapism is effectively more adaptive than escape, establish whether these processes can be considered stable tendencies over time (e.g., with longitudinal studies), and explore to what extent Gaming Disorder symptoms (ICD-11; World Health Organization, 2019) are associated with each process.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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