

# Prisoners' Media Use as a Coping Style: Game Play as an Atypical Mode of Escapism



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# Context: Pains of Imprisonment

- Deprivation of liberty
  - Moral rejection by the community
- Deprivation of ((hetero)sexual) relationships
- Deprivation of goods and services
- Deprivation of security
- Deprivation of autonomy
- Doing time
  - Monotone environment
    - Mental deterioration
  - Unwanted self-reflection

# Context: Acute stress

Stressful life events (family problems, death, parole, ...)

→ needs are created and solutions frustrated



# Media as a coping mechanism

- Abundant research on media use as a coping mechanism to deal with extreme emotions
  - Loneliness *Perse & Rubin, 1990*
  - Low self-esteem *Ehrenberg, Juckes, White, & Walsh, 2008*
  - Depression *Miranda & Claes, 2009*
  - Identity crisis *Donoso & Ribbens, 2010*
  - Trauma Recovery *Minnebo, 2006*
  - ...



# Games as a coping mechanism

Research on games and extreme emotions.

- Gratifications *Sherry, Lucas, Greenberg, Lachlan, 2006*
- Mood management *Grodal, 2000*
- Identity *Jansz, 2006*
- SDT *Przybylski, Rigby, & Ryan, 2010*

→ How does a context in which needs are created and solutions frustrated relates to the motives to play games?

# Research

- Retrospective think aloud protocol + semi-structured Interview
- 17 respondents
  - Where?
    - 5 respondents in the prison of Bruges
    - 12 respondents in the prison of Leuven
  - Closed vs open regime!
  - Who?
    - Long term (> 5 years) sentenced criminals (Murder, armed robbery, assault, rape, ...)
    - Experienced players

# Motives for digital game play linked to prison context

## Perceived problems related to the prison context

Time management

Reduced problem solving abilities

Deprivation of regular social contacts

Deprivation of freedom

External locus of control

## Motives for digital game play associated with perceived problems

Diversion

Challenge - Competition

Social Interaction

Fantasy

Diversion - Control

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Fantasy / escapism

Diversion - Control

Escapism

# Escapism as a determinant of Media Use

Use of 'light media contents' as escape from poor  
life satisfaction *Katz & Foulkes, 1962; McQuail, Blumler & Brown, 1972*

Media use studied on level of social subgroups, and associated with  
negative circumstances and negative outcomes

Cinema and the transcendental relationship  
between spectator and symbolic reality *Baudry, 1970;*  
*Metz, 1975*

Film enjoyment studied on individual level, and associated with  
regular patterns of consumption

# Escapism as a determinant of Media Use

**Escapism and media enjoyment** *Vorderer, Klimmt & Ritterfeld, 2004; Henning & Vorderer, 2001; Hartmann, Klimmt & Vorderer, 2010*

Mapping of consumption patterns and social/individual needs and circumstances

Escapism as part of comprehensive theoretical frameworks, and related to:

- Transportation theory *Brock, Green & Kaufmann, 2004*
- Mood Management *Kubeya & Csikszentmihalyi, 1990*
- Parasocial Interactions *Greenwood, 2007*
- coping *Knobloch-Westerwick, Hastall & Rossmann, 2009*

# Escapism as a determinant of Media Use

## Digital games and escapism *Calleja, 2010*

Games are considered inherently escapist because they are *virtual* (magic circle) ●

Games are considered inherently escapist because they are *procedural* (flow theory, engagement theory) ●●

Games are inherently escapist because they offer a variety of designed experiences ●●●

# Escapism as a determinant of Media Use

Escapism as a process of leaving one's situation or state behind and moving into a more desirable state or situation

Escapism conceptualized on 3 levels:

- Intention of the media user
- Relationship between reality and fiction
- Mapping between context and preference for specific media contents



# Escapism and game play in a prison context

## Conceptualising escapism and game play

Intention

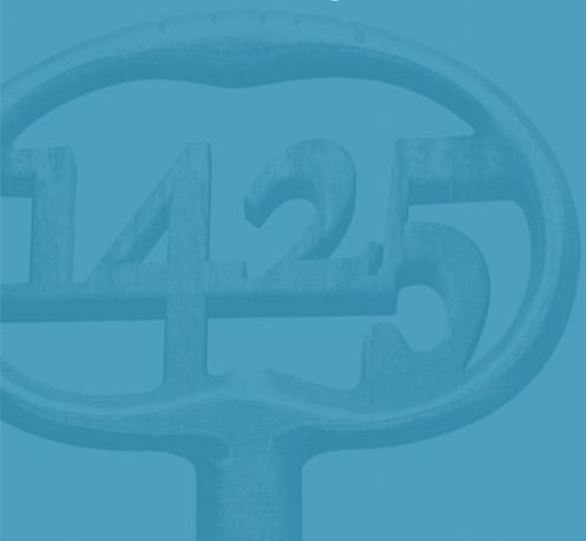
Both unintentional (distraction) and intentional (escaping from problems)

Relationship reality / virtuality

escaping into illusion of reality  
vs  
escaping into fictional journey

Mapping context / contents

Procedural logic and puzzle solving as a mechanism to solve tension between reality / virtuality



# Escapism and game play in a prison context

## Conceptualising escapism and game play

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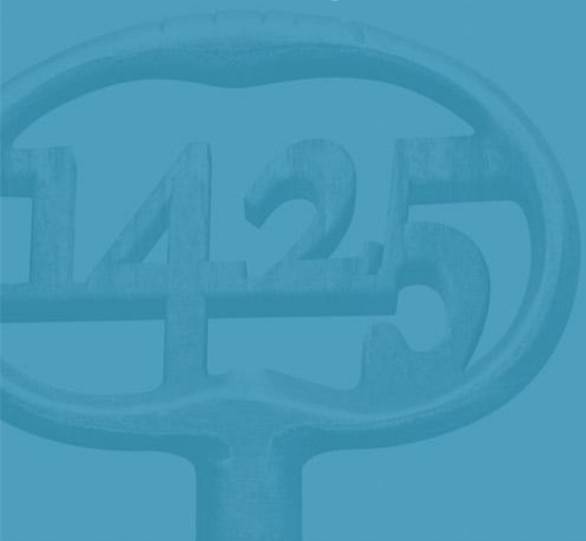
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# Escapism and game play in a prison context

Unintentional escapist style: game play as distraction:

*“You play to kill time. You are doing something and you forget the time. Either you sit around for an hour, or you are concentrated while playing a game. That makes a huge difference.” (Martijn, 33)*



# Escapism and game play in a prison context

Intentional escapist style: game play as a means to shortly forget about one's problems.

*“A game creates a seperate world. You have the world here (prison) and the world outside which you try not to think about, so you go to the game world. And the character you play with always wins. That’s always fun.”*

(Pieter-Jan, 26)



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# Escapism and game play in a prison context

## Escaping into illusion of reality

*“Gaming is probably a little replacement for the life you do not have. Unfortunately, they are still in the beginning of the development of games. If there were a game in which you could replay daily life, having the feeling of being in a relationship, going to the in-laws with my girlfriend. The game of life. Play life! (...).”*

*Q: “And is this true for other or also for you?”*

*A: “I think that applies to me as well. Yes, it’s a replacement. That does play a role. Of course, it is not really real. Well it might be someone’s reality but it is not my dream to become a soldier in Iraq for instance. My dream is more about being settled (huisje, tuintje, boompje), what normal people might find boring. They should develop such a game.”*

(Faris, 32)

# Escapism and game play in a prison context

## Escaping into illusion of reality

*“(...) games allow me to experience a sense of freedom I cannot obtain at this moment, a virtual sense of freedom. ... I turn on the PS2 with Gran Turismo 4 and drive some laps on the Nurnburg-ring with whatever car I want to drive, although I do not even own a pair of rollerblades (laughs). I do not have these things in real life, but I have them in the virtual world. ...”*

*Q: “Can you elaborate on this? Is it some kind of replace...?”*

*A: “Yes, yes, absolutely! It is a surrogate. Because that is something I really miss here, just to be able to get in the car and drive around, without a goal. And Gran Turismo allows me to do just that.”*

(Danny, 33)

# Escapism and game play in a prison context

## Escaping into illusion of reality

*“When you watch television you can recognize names, for instance when a bicycle race is on – I normally like watching that. I have seen the race in the town of X, that is where the finish is. And the family of my father lives there, so I really know the area very well. After so many years, that gets to you. Or if you watch the Tour of Flanders – I am not saying I know the track by heart – but you see them pass by these areas and you think: ‘Look where they are now’. I did not have this in the beginning but after so long it gets to you.”*

*Q: “But do you find it pleasant to recognize these things?”*

*A: “On the one hand, it is interesting to see how it all changed but, on the other hand, well, it really gets to you because you miss it so much.”*

(Julien, 28)

# Escapism and game play in a prison context

## Escapism into fictional journey

*“Gaming is a good diversion, it changes your ... environment. You forget about the environment you are in. It is an adventure. It is like travelling. Travelling also takes you out of your environment, out of the daily hustle.”*

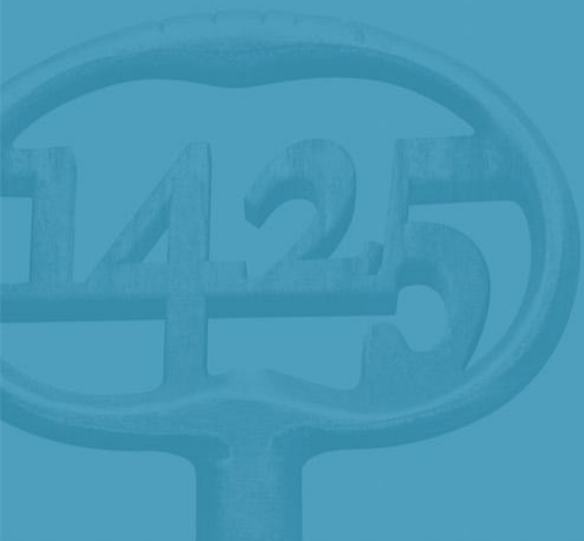
(Philippe, 56)



# Escapism and game play in a prison context

## Escapism into fictional journey

*“In a way you are doing something useful because I believe games help in keeping peoples’ brains alert. There are people here that do nothing the whole day or watch TV or whatever and that does not keep your mind sharp. While if you are playing games, then at least you are thinking or practising your reactions. I also play chess, I love that a lot and also tabletop games because they also make you think and make your brain work.” (Pieter-Jan, 26, Louvain)*



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# Escapism and game play in a prison context

Preferred contents: games are considered suitable for escapism because they are not *factual*

*“Games do not make me think about life outside, television does. That is the reason I watch so little television.”*

(Pieter-Jan, 26)

*“While watching television, sometimes, it reminds you of certain problems or memories or other bad things. You know... And games don't.”*

Q: *“So games aren't very realistic?”*

A: *“No, they aren't, at least in my opinion”*

(Julien, 28)

# Escapism and game play in a prison context

Preferred contents: games are considered suitable for escapism because they are *procedural*

*“You can only partially relax while watching television, not completely. It is difficult to explain. Games can make you completely relaxed. You forget for a moment that you are in prison, while with television, well you do not have to concentrate that much while watching. And that is different compared to games.”*

(Olivier, 30)

“While watching television, you’re sitting still and your mind can wander off. While playing a game, there’s not a single moment your mind can wander off. When you’re driving a car or something like that, you just can’t think of other things, you understand?”

(Maarten, 28)

# Conclusions

Escapism strongly related to extreme circumstance of detention

Escapism as a very important aspect in the complex individual coping process



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Escapism strongly related to extreme circumstance of detention

Escapism as very important aspect in complex individual coping process

Escapism because games are *virtual* ●

Escapism because games are *procedural* ●●●

Escapism because games are *designed experience* ●



# Conclusions

Escapism strongly related to extreme circumstance of detention

Escapism as very important aspect in complex individual coping process

Escapism because games are *virtual* ●

Escapism because games are *procedural* ●●●

Escapism because games are *designed experience* ●

Escapism into 'real' world outside prison?

OR

Escapism into fantasy world outside prison?