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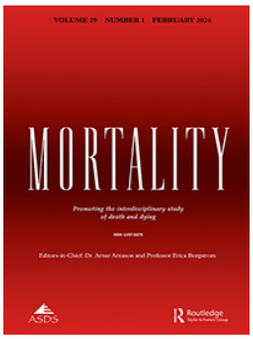

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'I wasn't me, grieving in my room. I was spiderman': gaming, loss and self-care following COVID-19

Matthew Spokes, Jack Denham, Matt Coward-Gibbs and Caitlin Veal

Social Sciences, York St. John University, York, UK

ABSTRACT

Building on M. S. Stroebe and Schut's (1999) 'dual process model' (DPM), this paper draws on data from a survey of young people who identify as regular gamers ($n = 450$) and semi-structured follow-up interviews ($n = 20$) to understand video games as a form of self-care, and the positive and problematic encounters gamers experience in relation to immersion and escapism. The work is situated in relation to game/leisure studies, and extant research on different types of loss (bereavement; social opportunities; employment). We argue that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, self-reported responses to play function as a form of oscillation between 'loss' and 'restoration' in the DPM, and that the act of play and its post-hoc rationalisation is a crucial form of coping for young people, and an opportunity for meaning-making whilst grieving. Our contribution is to demonstrate how video games can and should be considered as a catalyst for grief management.

KEYWORDS

Video games; dual process model; self-care; loss; young people

Introduction

In March of 2021 the Daily Telegraph reported on the Sapien Labs survey of 49,000 English-speaking 18–24-year-olds, which found young people were experiencing a clinical-level risk of depression, anxiety and other mental health problems exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Rigby, 2021). This was followed in May of the same year by a report by the OECD (2021) which found those aged 15–24 were between 30% and 80% more likely to report symptoms of depression, loneliness and anxiety than other adults during the pandemic: the relative absence of protective factors offered by the closing of educational institutions, alongside the challenges of maintaining a job, were identified as substantive contributory issues and that 'adequate support and timely intervention' were needed to aid in recovery following the pandemic.

This paper explores the experiences of young gamers in relation to different types of loss exacerbated by the pandemic, and how the leisure activity of playing video games offers insights into the therapeutic value of gaming as a form of self-care. In terms of loss, we are deliberately expansive in our definition, ensuring the types of loss identified by the likes of the OECD – educational opportunity, employment – are included alongside the

CONTACT Matthew Spokes m.spokes@yorksj.ac.uk York Business School, York St. John University, York YO31 7EX, UK

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impact of more traditional notions of bereavement. In this context it is important to understand that young people who have not directly experienced the loss of a loved one in relation to COVID have still experienced loss, albeit of a less immediately identifiable kind. Those who experienced loss of a direct kind might be considered akin to Goldsworthy (2005) notion of 'physical loss', but psychosocial loss – that which is less tangible to codify at present, including the wider symbolic societal loss associated with the pandemic and its after-effects – is also significant, and responds to recent work on young adults experiences of widespread grief (R. Weaver et al., 2022; R. H. Weaver et al., 2022).

To do this work we draw on a mixed-methods approach, which included a survey of 450 18–25-year-olds in the United Kingdom and the United States, followed by 20 qualitative interviews with young people in the UK. The results from our data allow us to identify how gamers contextualised the different outcomes they experienced through playing video games, how these experiences were understood, and what this tells us about young people, loss and gaming as a form of self-care: our focus in this paper is not about promoting specific interventions, but rather developing a stronger understanding of what young people are already doing to support themselves through video games as a therapeutic tool. Alongside being deliberately broad in our definition of 'loss', we allowed gamers to self-select the games they discussed, the results of which demonstrate how games are often used in ways that offer a point of departure from their original or intended design.

The paper starts by exploring research on gaming and therapeutic value, including an examination of existing work on gaming in the context of coping-mechanisms, before unpacking types of loss and the dual process model (M. S. Stroebe & Schut, 1999; M. Stroebe & Schut, 2021; henceforth DPM) as a possible approach for understanding our data. The DPM emerged as a useful model during initial data analysis where overlaps between participant responses and features of the model where identified, and the opportunity to further stress-test the model's applicability follows earlier precedent setting in relation to gaming (see Eum et al., 2021); here we draw on more extensive data sets in considering gamers experiences and reflections in relation to loss-oriented and restoration-oriented practices (M. S. Stroebe & Schut, 1999). We argue that self-reported play, and responses to play, function as a form of oscillation between 'loss' and 'restoration' approaches in the DPM, and that both the act of play and gamer's reflections are a crucial form of coping for young people, and an opportunity for meaning-making during times of grief. Our contribution is to demonstrate how video games can and should be considered as a catalyst for, and facilitator of, grief management.

Literature review

A normative reading of video gaming is that it has negative impacts on gamers – there is substantive literature arguing this case (Brunborg et al., 2014; Shi et al., 2019) – and whilst our data includes gamers' reflections on the negative consequences of prolonged play in some contexts, this paper seeks to understand how gamers use their play agentically as a form of self-care. This is also mirrored in extant literature that considers, to some extent, gaming habits and behaviours during COVID-19. Balhara et al. (2020) work, for example, found increased engagement with gaming during the

pandemic, with participants identifying gaming as a way of reducing stress compared to individuals who did not increase their time spent gaming. Similarly, King et al. (2020) found a 75% increase in gaming reported in the US during the pandemic, with reported increased use of games in coping with stress: we also see this perspective echoed in journalistic accounts in the popular press (Flint, 2023). This paper builds on this foundation of gaming as a form of stress relief by seeking to understand which games gamers have used to cope with loss and why.

Broadly speaking, gamers may actively choose to play games as a method of self-care. Identifying games as a 'purposeful activity', Shi et al. (2019) found that gaming helped promote relaxation and distracted players from stress and that some players also noted feeling validated by achievements when playing games. Iacovides and Mekler (2019) note how people engage with games to deal with life transitions and personal loss, and suggest that games also worked as a distraction from suicidal thoughts or other self-destructive behaviours. Themes of self-care identified within the research include respite from stress, dealing with feelings, offering connections, and giving opportunities for personal growth (Iacovides & Mekler, 2019; Pallavicini & Bouchard, 2020); Balhara et al. (2020) have also reported increased acceptance of gaming as an acceptable coping mechanism.

Numerous studies have identified the importance of moderation in terms of positive effects. Przybylski (2014) notes that the most positive effects of game play on mental health occurred when games were only played for less than a third of daily life. These positive effects included increased life satisfaction and decreased hyperactivity, social problems or emotional problems. Przybylski's research also demonstrated how those who played games for over half their day showed evidence of internalising and externalising problems as well as decreased life satisfaction. Similarly, King et al. (2020) concluded that use of games to deal with stress was only good in moderation and suggest that to offset negative impacts of increased gaming, games that promote physical movement or social connections should be encouraged. These concerns are mirrored by Amin et al. (2020) who also warn against individuals becoming over-dependant on games as a coping mechanism or form of escape.

Current research has identified the role of escapism, emotional discipline, and community as contributory factors. In relation to the former, whilst Calleja (2010, p. 342) has previously suggested that 'it is hardly possible for the game space to block out the complexity of social and personal relation', and that 'the lived experience of the players invariably informs, to different degrees depending on circumstance, the experience of the game'. He also highlights how games are inherently escapist due to the 'unreality' and artificiality that defines them. Building on this, Kosa and Uysal (2020) note that games can be used as a healthy means of escapism through different forms of coping and recovery. They draw attention to the need for games to draw on 'engaged' coping strategies (e.g. facing stressful situations) as opposed to 'disengaged' (avoiding stressful situations), as engaged strategies resulted in more healthy gaming behaviours (ibid). In contrast, Kaczmarek and Drążkowski (2014, p. 1) state that 'escapism is the most robust single predictor of decreased well-being'. Their work, focusing on MMORPGs, identified how individuals seeking online support through online social structures having less offline social support, and because they would often avoid resolution of their real-world problems (Kaczmarek & Drążkowski, 2014): the idea that escapism through games prevents

individuals from dealing with real-world problems is similarly echoed by Deleuze et al. (2019).

Part of the challenge in understanding gamers' use(s) of games is the interplay between the emotional engagement of the individual gamer (or group of gamers), and their experience of the structure and mechanics of the games themselves. Emotional engagement might be informed by the narrative aspects of the game for instance – research by Schneider et al. (2004), and more recently by Pallavicini et al. (2020) suggest that story-centred games allow players to immerse themselves with storylines and characters able to stimulate empathetic responses such as perspective-taking and reflexive thinking – or through specific structures designed to aid the development of emotional discipline in the face of failure. For example, Shinkle (2008) argues that games essentially reward emotional discipline because losing patience with games may lead to a lower standard of playing and thus less chance at success. Pallavicini et al. (2018, p. 1) support this, noting that 'various studies have demonstrated that video games offer a variety of positive emotion triggering situations, that may be of benefit during training of emotional skills, including self-regulation habits'.

The psychological benefits of gaming are also communal in nature, with the social aspect of gaming as a positive experience highlighted in a variety of literature and during COVID-19, where sociality in an offline environment was curtailed, these experiences may have had increased resonance for participants: for example, the benefits of social play can be seen in as beneficial for those with 'remote locations, psychological difficulties or other factors that can inhibit in-person interaction' (Halbrook et al., 2019, p. 8). Osmanovic and Pecchioni (2016) note that the community aspect of games was often of great value to older gamers, who also often preferred playing co-operatively, particularly with their gaming partner physically present. Colder Carras et al. (2018) highlight how the benefits of online gaming communities can also extend further than the context of games, with communities that 'provide social and psychological support, including peer support' and 'unite around real-world problems in a therapeutic and philanthropic way' (Colder Carras et al., 2018). However, there are limitations to the perceived communal benefits of games. Kaczmarek and Drążkowski (2014) argues that online support does not compensate for offline social interaction and support in real life, and that those that rely on online relationships often did so at the expense of offline relationships, and Kwak et al. (2015, p. 3741) found evidence of 'in group favouritism and outgroup hostility' within online communities. The context of these studies and their differing findings offers several perspectives to stress-test through our data, towards a greater understanding of the therapeutic value of gaming from the gamers' point of view.

Firstly, it is important to situate our present investigation in relation to the experiences of young people during the pandemic, and what 'loss' might mean in context. The long tail of COVID-19 complicates loss, which has been noted in Scheinfeld's et al. (2021, p. 8) finding that 'people are [. . .] experiencing a myriad of losses, many atypical or ambiguous in nature, but they are occurring all at once', and this may impact participants' ability to recognise their experiences in relation to specific forms of loss.

Secondly, when we discuss 'loss' – and this was the case during our interviews with our participants – we intentionally offered ambiguity in what we meant by the term. This is both in response to initial findings in our survey data (see Methods below) but also in response to literature on loss. For example, Jakoby (2015) argues that loss consists of three

categories: relationship loss (person or pets), status loss (job, health) and (im)material object loss (objects, locations or future plans). In the context of the pandemic, all three of these types of loss were possible for our participants, particularly given the on-and-off nature of lockdowns in the United Kingdom over 18-months. Grief, which we might think of as an approach to processing loss, can be experienced in these non-death contexts: for instance, Price et al. (2002) identify negative mental and physical impacts of job loss (such as depression and increased poor health), which mirror some of the reported effects of bereavement and grief. Similarly, Cooley et al. (2010) looked at non-death losses that students often experience, such as moving out of the family home, break-ups, parental divorce, and loss of friendships, and found that non-death loss responses in students often replicated that of disenfranchised grief.

Thirdly, we need to understand loss and the processes allied to coping with loss in context, and develop appropriate tools to explore how participants use different strategies to cope. The turmoil caused by loss, particularly traumatic loss, may facilitate the development of a 'buffer' (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006) between intrusive thoughts and memories, and quotidian experience so as to allow for the reconstruction of meaning in our lives. This is not always a successful process – where grief becomes 'complicated', or the process of grieving disrupted, people may be unable to achieve closure (Currier et al., 2006).

These reflections on loss and grief underpin Stroebe and Schut's development of the DPM (see M. Stroebe & Schut, 2010; M. S. Stroebe & Schut, 1999), where people oscillate between a focus on the loss itself (both positive and negative 'loss-oriented' reconstruction) and restoration-related activities (again, both positive and negative 'restoration-oriented' reconstruction). While their work has recently turned to the model's applicability to individual psychotherapeutic interventions in the context of COVID-19 (2021), this paper considers the usefulness of the model in relation to the self-care approaches of participants in terms of their gaming practices and complicated forms of loss.

Method

Data collection was split into two key phases. An initial survey ($n = 450$), that included closed and open questions, was conducted in collaboration with Qualtrics with a sampling frame of 18–25-year-olds from the United Kingdom and United States who identified as 'regular gamers' (66% of participants played for longer than 7 hours per week). Whilst this paper does not explore participant demography, it is important to highlight that over 75% of those who completed the survey identified as female, 20% as male and the remaining 5% selected non-binary/preferred not to say. Survey questions were developed in relation to participant responses from previous studies (Denham & Spokes, 2021) and contained 27 questions in 4 blocks including demographic characteristics (age, to aid with sifting filters, plus gender, ethnicity and gaming frequency). Two blocks explored coping and self-care, and how participants believed video games could be used to help with this, alongside prompts towards participant's experiences of loss and how games helped them during COVID: phase 1 data were collected between July and August 2021.

Phase 2 data ($n = 20$) involved semi-structured interviews lasting up to an hour using the same age and gaming frequency variables, though exclusively with participants from

the United Kingdom for practical purposes. Participants were recruited through local gaming groups using an adapted form of opportunity sampling, which also included a quota approach to ensure we reached a specific age bracket (Kemper et al., 2003); this replicates approaches utilised successfully in our earlier research (Spokes & Denham, 2019). Phase 2 saw an inverse participant skew (male $n = 14$; female $n = 5$; non-binary $n = 1$). Interview questions were developed following initial data analysis of Phase 1 data, with sections on habit-forming and COVID mirroring Phase 1 so as to ensure continuation in terms of thematic areas of interest: to mitigate probable self-reporting issues from participants in both phases, loss was loosely framed and participants were given scope to self-define; prompts related to education, employment, bereavement, mental health challenges and coping strategies were offered if necessary. Interviews were conducted between October and December of 2021.

Both Phase 1 and 2 data were analysed thematically (Boyatzis, 1998) in Nvivo utilising Fereday and Muir-Cochrane's (2006) hybridised inductive and deductive coding approach. Participant data presented in this paper adopts random IDs for Phase 1 and anonymised participant numbers for Phase 2. All data were collected in line with the BSA Statement of Ethical Practice (2017), and the research was approved by the Ethics Committee at York St. John in May 2021.

Dual process model

Prior to unpacking the findings from our two phases of data collection, it is necessary to detail both the model and how it might be utilised in the face of different types of loss. Loss has been defined broadly by the research team, building on approaches used in earlier studies where maintaining an intentional genericism in surveys and interviews allowed participants considerable interpretive flexibility in exploring the topic (see Denham & Spokes, 2019; Denham et al., 2021) whilst minimising, as much as is possible, the impact of undue influence (Spokes & Denham, 2019).

Primarily, as with our earlier work, this approach is data-driven: our participants in both phases of data collection highlighted 'loss' as multi-faceted. This also appears to reflect Stroebe and Schut's most recent observations (M. Stroebe & Schut, 2021) that the range of stressors – both loss and restoration-oriented – have shifted as a result of the pandemic. Alongside this, they emphasise the need for more engagement with theoretical modelling, and this paper therefore seeks to test the applicability of the DPM as a lens through which 'loss' can be expanded.

The DPM outlines how grief dynamically oscillates between coping processes aligned with loss-oriented and restoration-oriented stressors (M. S. Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Loss-oriented stressors include those approaches that involve direct grief work, where loss intrudes on daily life and is directly engaged with, or where restoration-oriented stressors are actively denied. Restoration-oriented stressors are secondary to the loss itself but include those aspects of loss that can be considered a by-product (for example, impacts on employment in lieu of a deceased partner's income) (ibid 213). To offer some contemporary context, Stroebe and Schut suggest COVID-19 requires us to consider new stressors in terms of the speed at which a loss occurs, the absence of cultural/social recognition of the loss, potential suppression to avoid emotional vulnerability in the context of loss-oriented stressors (and future uncertainty), disruption to social normality,

and the erosion of support structures in the relation to restoration-oriented stressors (M. Stroebe & Schut, 2021, pp. 510–11).

Coping with loss routinely takes place in the context of quotidian life – it is not necessarily constant, and includes both avoidance and conflict with stressors, as well as oscillation in relation to other stressors at a familial and cultural level. When moving between loss and restoration-oriented stressors, part of coping requires – consciously or otherwise – meaning-making activity to take place before adjustment can take place, so responses to loss and restoration-oriented stressors takes place at different junctures.

Lastly, our present research focuses on those stressors which participants identified as needing to be dealt with, and their reflections on how they have sought (or otherwise) to deal with loss, rather than the outcome of these processes (M. S. Stroebe & Schut, 1999, p. 214). These have been presented below as 'stressors' and 'reactions' to demonstrate how individuals oscillate between the two. Our central contention, which we shall unpack in detail below, is that there is scope for the DPM to be extended to include how gaming impacts grief management. As such, this is in line with Stroebe and Schut's statement that the DPM can be used as 'a framework for understanding forms of complicated grief'.

Loss-orientated stressors and reactions

As Stroebe and Schut argue, the model does not result in a straightforward move from one set of stressors and reactions to another, but rather 'a waxing and waning, an ongoing flexibility, over time' (M. S. Stroebe & Schut, 1999, p. 213), which can be seen in our data. In relation to loss-oriented stressors, Phase 1 and 2 responses showed a variety of stressors impacting everyday life, alongside coherent coping efforts, with a focus on mitigating the intrusion of grief through play, and gaming used as an avoidance strategy: this shows oscillation between loss-oriented (grief work) and restoration-oriented (avoidance of grief) factors.

Phase 1 participants reflected on how gaming helped participants to 'not focus on the negative that a death can leave' [ID54], or that gaming enabled you to '[not] think about much else whilst you play' [ID28]. This was echoed in the Phase 2 interview data:

> It's the ability of a game to take you out of yourself and just be absorbed by something. And suddenly you aren't over thinking, you aren't thinking what am I worth why am I here and everything [P4]

> When I found out [my grandma has breast cancer] and I was just playing through Spiderman 2 on PlayStation 2. and even if it was for 10 hours or something, I was Spiderman . . . I wasn't me, grieving in my room. I was Spiderman [P7]

> As bad as it sounds it helped me forget about the grief and the event [P19]

P4 shows how gaming experiences can offset grief intrusion through distraction, that the action of play provides an alternative to reflection, if a game is sufficiently engaging. P7 takes this a step further, suggesting that gaming has transformative potential in displacing the individual, enabling them to occupy a different role through an in-game avatar. Contrastingly, P19 offers a cautionary note, that avoidance is a 'bad' coping strategy; if gaming is a type of self-care in response to loss, this sort of self-reflection – which we saw across our data – is an interesting contributory factor.

The reaction participants had to loss-stressors differed across our data depending on the type of loss experienced, but gaming tended to operate consistently as a form of escapism. Gaming was identified as filling a 'gap of loss' because 'sometimes people need to be distracted rather than talk about things' [ID55], though the ability to escape was seen as time-limited in many cases: 'a good distraction to leave reality temporarily' [ID311]. Likewise, P1 reflected that 'I think if I was just sat there, I'd just cry all the time. But just having my game there to play, it got my mind off it and stuff, and made me way better'.

There were also examples in the interview data where we could identify bond-breaking as a reaction to loss. In the DPM, this is framed through bereavement (M. S. Stroebe & Schut, 1999, p. 213), which P13 discusses in depth:

> Video games definitely help because through the years my mental health has gradually gotten worse. I've lost a lot of family members [and] I've been using video games to cope a lot of the time. I remember playing Rayman Origins after my uncle passed away. I was like 'yeah, funky no arms man – he just has hands and runs around!' – and just separate myself from the really impactful stuff [P13]

P13 identifies the direct connection between grief following the loss of loved ones, and the use of gaming as a coping mechanism, an opportunity to push back against the intrusion of grief (the 'impactful stuff') into the everyday. Bond-breaking can also be considered in the context of our expanded notion of loss, incorporating myriad impacts of COVID on social opportunities. P2 demonstrates the ways in which the pandemic has changed the landscape of their social world through breaking social bonds:

> Being social online [. . .] does have a different feel of being in here [in the interview] in person and talking to people. I think I've become less social and less open to people now because I used to enjoy being a social person. I could go up to people in a bar and have a conversation. After COVID I don't have that [. . .] or I find it a lot harder to make a connection [P2]

Here loss has real personal impact, and we see how the oscillation between different types of sociality has been sufficiently disruptive that in some cases restoration-orientated reactions – such as attending to life changes or adopting new identities (2010:276) – are overwhelmed by loss-oriented stressors. That said, whilst our data show that participants reactions to loss initially centred on using gaming for escapism, in the context of the oscillation in the DPM between loss and restoration, participants tended to have a clear idea that loss-oriented stressors and reactions were finite, that there was a need to move on and 'reorient oneself in a changed world' (ibid:277): this situates gaming as part of the necessary grief work required to understand and cope with loss.

> Whether that's for the best or the worst. [. . .] And the days I was out I was just distracting myself. I just felt awful and just didn't want to be - I just wanted escapism I didn't want anything [. . .] [P3]

P3's justification for playing video games is similar to earlier data, with escapism front and centre, an initial stage of grief work prior to active mourning. But their opening sentence is an indication of self-reflection, that choosing to escape into a virtual world may not always be the best choice. Earlier, P2 struggled to reorient

themselves after COVID, but P6 outlines why it is important to move towards restorative approaches:

> I feel like [games] may be a distraction from dealing with stuff that you probably should deal with. I think you can feel like you've found a place where you belong if you find a good community of people, playing a game can help you sort of be happier as long as you don't get too dependent on it [P6]

P6 neatly encapsulates the oscillation process here, where the individual is able to move towards attending to life changes and differing roles following loss, through a developing sociality facilitated by gaming. This movement from loss-orientation to restoration-orientation has parallels with Stroebe and Schut's argument that 'there will gradually (and unevenly) be less attention to loss-oriented and more to restoration-oriented tasks' (M. Stroebe & Schut, 2010, p. 283).

Restoration-oriented stressors and reactions

During the pandemic, Stroebe and Schut (2021) considered how COVID might impact the efficacy of the DPM, which resulted in restoration-oriented stressors including 'disruption to social norms' and 'care and treatment of existing illness' (ibid: 510) being identified, each of which elicits a particular reaction.

In our data, restorative responses saw participants using games for self-care through online sociality and emotional regulation, which helped with a variety of mental health struggles triggered by differing types of loss similar to Colder Carras et al. (2018) work.

Understandably the mitigations put in place to restrict the spread of COVID disrupted many social norms. This was keenly felt by our participants as a loss of productivity following extended periods of time spent in various forms of lockdown: for example, ID196 saw games as a de facto replacement for normal productivity: '[Games] help me feel productive. They stop me just obsessing. They give me purpose and something to do'. This is repeated in Phase 2 data:

> I think it's just that stream of conscious where my brain is focused [. . .] and I'm in that 50/50 space that I'm able to deal with it [the lack of productivity] [P9]

> [. . .] I was panicking about my career and then small things. Not being able to exercise had a massive effect [. . .] that's probably when I was like, well at least I'm gaming: at least I'm doing something productive . . . because there's nothing else [P12]

In these responses, the reaction to the stressor is to supplant quotidian productivity with gaming as an attempt to recapture something lost during the pandemic. A notable addendum to this disruption was the loss of sociality, which could be characterised as a 'painful separation from close friends' in the DPM (M. Stroebe & Schut, 2021, p. 510). In terms of restorative reactions to this stressor, participants highlighted the significance of a pivot to online gaming and shared experiences.

> It's definitely the loss of the social aspect - a lot of people moved back home for a year. And that's what video games can help with. You can connect with people that aren't near you [P4]

P4 acknowledges that the primary loss they felt during the pandemic was the ability to interact with others. This is similar in part to P2's response in the previous section, and the

reactive move towards online sociality facilitated by gaming shows a restoration-oriented reaction through which participants take on new roles and relationships (M. S. Stroebe & Schut, 1999, p. 276).

Following M. Stroebe and Schut (2021, p. 510) there is also an interconnection between norm disruption and treatment for illness in our data as well. Participants who self-identified as experiencing mental health issues or social anxiety exacerbated by the pandemic felt their lives were improved as a result of using gaming for self-care. Building on P2s earlier comments, they reflected that beyond their own personal experience other people they knew had benefited from this shift to peer-support online:

> A lot of people on there, they'd say they're very socially anxious in real life and they really struggle to talk to people in real life. But in VR chat you talk to them and it becomes a lot easier for them [P2]

P2's experience correlates with ID302 in Phase 1, who felt that 'by meeting all these people you can have really great connections and friendships which can help mentally', again underscoring the relationship between disruption and reacting to the changing landscape of loss in a restorative manner.

If we take a broader reading of 'treatment of existing illness' in the model to include our expanded typology of loss, participants achieved this by using games as an outlet for their emotions, thereby finding a means of effective regulation:

> It gets the anger grief out because there's always stages when you go through a loss. You have the sad phase then the angry grieving phase it's all a learning experience [ID282]

> It can make you forget the pain and sadness. It can help you relieve your emotions [ID422]

> I personally have trouble with my emotions and bottling it up so I play video games to let it all out [ID355]

In each case, participants detailed the causal relationship that enabled them to oscillate from an emotional state to a managed response, with games the conduit towards regulation. As we've highlighted, mental health struggles were a feature across our data, and both phases of data saw gaming as a therapeutic act of self-care. Participants in Phase 1 self-reported 'sadness', 'anger', 'anxiety/social anxiety' and 'depression', where playing games 'with friends online has improved my mood over the past year due to COVID' [ID132] or 'help[ed] me by letting me be able to interact with who I want and how I want' [ID225].

The starkest example of games being used in a self-care context to manage loss comes from P5. P5 had received a recommendation from their GP to be treated for PTSD and social anxiety during COVID following a bereavement, but they were unable to get a referral owing to a pandemic-related backlog. They go on to say:

> It's [been] awful. But I'd say to combat that, it's definitely been *Animal Crossing*. And I'd say definitely on the social anxiety side it's definitely been *Ark*. Because the way that me and my friends properly reconnected with all this COVID was definitely [through] *Ark*.

In closing this analysis, P5s experience encapsulates the multitude of ways in which loss has impacted young people, and how games have supported self-care interventions. To return to Stroebe and Schut's most recent reflections (M. Stroebe & Schut, 2021, pp. 510–

11), our data also show similarities with potential suppression to avoid emotional vulnerability, disruption to social normality, and the erosion of different support structures. Specifically, our participants oscillated between loss-oriented stressors (grief work; grief intrusion; bond-breaking) and reactions (escapism; distraction), and restoration-oriented stressors (disruption to social norms; treatment of illness) and reactions (pivoting sociality online; new roles and relationships) with video games providing the mechanism for that oscillation.

Conclusion

There are a number of factors to consider in addressing the value of using the DPM in relation to new forms of loss, which stretch beyond bereavement to include opportunity, sociality and education: an expanded definition of loss gleaned from participant data – which reinforces Jakoby (2015) work identified earlier in this paper – allied to a model designed for more traditional interpretations of bereavement is not without challenges in terms of application. The data analysis above has shown how the model can be used to think through participant agency in their own grief management, with video games offering therapeutic value with regards to both loss-oriented and restoration-oriented stressors and reactions.

We highlighted at the start of this paper how difficult a time young people have had as a result of the pandemic. Firstly, our data show that loss was experienced in numerous ways that encouraged self-reflection from participants: they discussed the weight and intrusive nature of grief, and the ways in which a loss of social bonds had impacted their lives, echoing Iacovides and Mekler (2019) discussion on transition and loss. Secondly, video games offered our participants both a form of escapism and a distraction from grief, similar to Kosa and Uysal (2020), Shi et al. (2019), and Ballou et al. (2022) respective findings. Thirdly, as with the Sapien Labs survey which opened this paper, we found that the disruption to social norms during this time had a damaging effect on mental health, with participants identifying how experiences of sadness, anxiety, anger and depression were all exacerbated by the uncertainty of repeated lockdowns and the temporary suspension of social relations: this finding mirrors that of Cooley et al. (2010) with regards to the impact of disenfranchised grief during periods of significant change. At the same time, reinforcing Colder Carras et al. (2018) work on the significance of sociality online, our participants spoke about how their play facilitated bonding through online networks, which mediated their ability to recast their social identity, reconsider notions of productivity and react to specific mental health triggers.

As a theoretical tool for conceptualising the grieving process, the DPM (M. Stroebe & Schut, 2010; M. S. Stroebe & Schut, 1999) can assist us in understanding the complexity of loss relationally, and is sufficiently malleable to respond to differing readings of how loss is constituted (Jakoby, 2015). We have seen that there are clear oscillations between loss and restoration reflected in our participants' responses in both phases of data collection, and we would argue that even when the complications of COVID are factored in, grief appears to operate similarly to the model, with participants oscillating between different types of stressors and reactions (M. Stroebe & Schut, 2021). In particular the DPM has enabled us to demonstrate how video games

can help with restoration-oriented reactions, and be utilised agentically by young people as a form of self-care to overcome a variety of stressors that emerged both during and after the pandemic.

Ultimately, in unpacking and adapting the DPM in relation to our data, we have shown that video games function as a catalyst for oscillation as part of the processing of grief, representing an important means for managing self-care.

Furthermore, we have demonstrated the value of a robust conceptual framework in comprehending complex forms of loss, and the significance of understanding experiences and agency in young people in how their grief is managed through playing video games. This paper underscores how video games represent a key aspect of coping for young people, and an opportunity for meaning-making whilst grieving: as such, it is vital that video games are afforded due consideration with regards to grief management, representing as they do a significant area of study aligned with present calls for video games to be understood as supportive tools of social engagement (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2023).

There are a number of questions our analysis raises with regards to the applicability of the model. Firstly, we identified the DPM off the back of overlaps between initial data analysis and M. Stroebe and Schut (2021) updating their model reflecting on the on-going impact of COVID, but these similarities – and indeed the necessary focus of this paper – does not preclude the potentiality for other models to offer testable, useful insights along these lines: future work could focus on extant research on gaming and developmental models (see for example Coward-Gibbs, 2020 on 'productive grief') or the value of expanded socio-cultural contexts for more established psychometric models (Hogan et al., 2021). Likewise, gaming could arguably be conceptualised as a form of loss compensation, and a deeper engagement with models exploring complicated grief might prove beneficial in this regard (Shear & Shair, 2005).

Secondly, our approach to testing the model relied on data collection focused exclusively on the United Kingdom and United States (both in Phase 1; UK only in Phase 2), and future work would benefit from an expanded and more diverse sample frame. In part, this study was limited by financial constraints in terms of the scope of the survey, so more detailed demographic criteria, particularly focusing on age and ethnicity, would offer additional richness to follow-up studies.

Thirdly, and more practically, given the relatively short period of time between the end of concurrent lockdowns and our initial data collection, participants were not necessarily aware that what they were experiencing was a specific type of loss or grief per se (Scheinfeld et al., 2021) – despite the reflections underlined in this paper, they were too close to COVID to have fully processed their experiences, which has been found in other contemporaneous work on gaming and the pandemic (Ballou et al., 2022; Coward-Gibbs, 2021). As a result, follow-up work would be beneficial to ascertain any longitudinal change that has taken place: this may demonstrate parallels with other theories of loss (see for example Boss, 2004 on ambiguous loss) as well as further testing the DPM in terms of duration.

Fourthly, and finally, expanding the field of study to better understand the interplay between developers and gamers will have value in a therapeutic sense. Whilst participants in our research baulked at the suggestion of specific 'learning opportunities' being designed into games, building industry awareness of the agentic choices made

by gamers will be important: developers already deal with grief and loss in a narrative sense in current titles (Spindler, 2021) and the potential to conceptualise or incorporate ideas around grief management can augment the more formalised approaches that are currently in use, including creative art therapy (Smriti et al., 2022) and digital online/app-based interventions (Garrido et al., 2019), contributing towards a toolkit of support that is desperately needed during this contemporary crisis in young people's mental health.

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Notes on contributors

Matthew Spokes is an Associate Professor in Sociology at York St. John University. His research considers the intersections between video games, death and spatial theory. His most recent book Gaming and the Virtual Sublime is available from Emerald. He is also the co-director of the investigate.games research group.

Jack Denham is an Associate Professor in Social Sciences at York St. John University. His work has focused on connected and networked cultures, from lifelogging, to video games, to memes. Most recently, he researches the social functions of gaming, particularly with relation to education and mental health during the pandemic. Jack is the co-leader of the investigate.games research group.

Matt Coward-Gibbs is a Lecturer in Sociology and Criminology at York St John University and the Technical Director of investigate.games. Matt's work considers relationships between fun, play and the social world. His work can be read in: Leisure Sciences; Sociological Research Online; Information, Communication & Society; Pedagogy, Culture & Society; and the Journal of Global Buddhism. He is the editor of Death, Culture and Leisure: Playing Dead (2020).

Caitlin Veal is a doctoral researcher in Sociology at York St John University. Her research interests include the social value of video games, spatial structure of digital spaces, online identity, and digital culture. She has been a member of the investigate.games research group since June 2021.

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