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Fun Versus Meaningful Video Game Experiences: A Qualitative Analysis of User Responses

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Abstract

Emerging research on video games has suggested that feelings of both enjoyment and meaningfulness can be elicited from gameplay. Studies have shown enjoyment and meaningfulness evaluations to be associated with discrete elements of video games (ratings of gameplay and narrative, respectively), but have relied on closed-end data analysis. The current study analyzed participants' open-ended reviews of either their ''most fun'' or ''most meaningful'' video game experience (N = 575, randomly assigned to either condition). Results demonstrated that ''fun'' games were explained in terms of gameplay mechanics, and ''meaningful'' games were explained in terms of connections with players and in-game characters.

1 Introduction

The purpose of this study is to expand this line of inquiry into the distinction between meaningful and enjoyable video games by examining users' rich descriptions of their gaming experiences. In *Pac-Man* players attempt to beat one another's high scores and in *Call of Duty* one team tries to outperform the enemy team. Likewise, a game like *Grand Theft Auto V* is celebrated because it ''punches the rule book, steals its car, and then reverses back over the battered, leathery remains just to be sure'' (Pearson 2014). Indeed, games are noted to be ''toys'' meant for hedonic pleasure (Banks and Bowman 2014) and games are closely related to the idea of ''play'' (Huizinga 2014). In short, video games may not be defined in terms of their narrative or other more meaningful dimensions—indeed the 2013 Game Developers Conference focused on the problems facing narrative in games (Spector 2013).

However, like all media, video games have evolved and continue to evolve into increasingly complex experiences. Sid Meier, a successful game developer, described video games as a ''series of interesting decisions'' (Kelly 2012), and recent research suggests that video games can be imbued with meaningfulness (Banks and Bowman 2014; De Schutter and Vanden Abeele 2010; Oliver et al. 2015), including serious games with social messages such as *Darfur is Dying* and *Papers, Please* in which players engage narratively with characters (refugees in the former, migrants and the immigration system in the latter) in the service of social justice and awareness, as part of their general abilities as persuasive technologies (Ijsselsteijn et al. 2006).

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1.1 Meaningful Entertainment

Traditionally, entertainment research has focused on the hedonic gratifications of media consumption (e.g. Zillmann 1991, 2000). However, media scholars have recently begun to expand their focus to include both meaningfulness and enjoyment as orthogonal dimensions of the audience's experience (e.g. Oliver and Bartsch 2010; Oliver and Raney 2011). Oliver and Raney (2011) argue that whereas experiences of enjoyment result from the fulfilment of hedonic needs, such as enhancing positive mood and decreasing negative mood, experiences of meaningfulness result from the fulfilment of eudaimonic needs, such as insight into the human condition or understanding of life truths. The affective correlates of meaningfulness can be characterized as a mix of positively and negatively valenced feelings, such as poignant feelings of being moved or touched (Oliver 2008). The extent to which eudaimonic and hedonic motivations drive media selection are thought to vary both between individuals as a trait and among individuals as a state (Oliver and Raney 2011). That is, different people tend to be motivated more by either eudaimonic or hedonic considerations overall, but those same people likely vary in their preferences from time to time. As far as the outcomes of consuming entertainment, Oliver and Bartsch (2010) suggest that whereas evaluations of experiences of fun, pleasure, or positive affect may be characterized as enjoyment, evaluations of experiences of meaningfulness may be best characterized as appreciation.

While acknowledging that meaningfulness is ultimately a subjective experience of an entertainment text, Oliver and colleagues have argued that some content is more likely to evoke meaningfulness than others (e.g., Oliver and Bartsch 2010). More specifically, media texts that explore difficult life questions tend to evoke meaningful responses, while media texts that are more light-hearted tend to lead to enjoyment (Oliver et al. 2012a). Oliver and Hartmann's (2010) qualitative analysis of viewer descriptions of film experiences demonstrated that viewers described meaningful films as those that contemplate fundamental moral values, life lessons and difficult questions of human existence. Tamborini (2011) more specifically argues in his model of intuitive morality and exemplars (MIME) that the reappraisal of ambiguous or complex moral dilemmas in media narratives can lead to appreciation—both in appreciation for the reappraised content as well as appreciation of the process of the mental exercise. In any case, it would appear that at their core, meaningful film experiences appear to differ qualitatively from enjoyable film experiences, particularly in terms of the ways in which they invite the viewer to reflect upon human experience (Bartsch et al. 2014).

1.2 Meaningfulness and Video Games

Classifying user experience of games is not a novel idea (IJsselsteijn et al. 2007, 2008). Thus far, Oliver and colleagues' particular conceptualization of meaningfulness has been examined primarily in the context of traditional media formats, such as film and television. The extent to which video games can also evoke experiences of meaningfulness is only beginning to be empirically examined, with data generally showing that gamers' self-report feelings of meaningfulness from a variety of gaming experiences (see Oliver et al. 2015 for some examples). Recent popular press coverage and critical reviews of games such as *The Last of Us*, *Undertale*, and *That Dragon, Cancer* suggest that contemporary video games increasingly present the

narrative depth that appears likely to evoke meaningful responses (Davenport 2016; Plagge 2016). While technological advancements might make these experiences more common, there is a history of meaningful video game experiences. For example, *Planetfall* (Infocom, 1983) is noted for making players cry when a key character dies (Meretzky 2008).

Beyond these narrative elements, it is also possible that certain technological aspects of games may function to either enhance or inhibit experiences of meaningfulness during gameplay, such as interactivity, immersion with characters, challenge and competition, and multiplayer interactions—each of these connections are explained below.

On a basic level, video games can be considered an interactive medium in that the nature of the content is contingent in part by user decisions within the gameworld—that is, the amount of control the users have over the form and content of the on-screen information (Steuer 1992). This basic characteristic of video games could theoretically enhance or inhibit experiences of meaningfulness. For example, meaningfulness could be increased by the intense experience of player agency over difficult moral decisions within a game (Banks and Bowman 2014). However, it is also possible that the near-constant necessity of user action could interfere with meaningfulness by either drawing attention to the task at hand rather than the emotional experience (Bowman 2016), or by interfering with the loss of selfawareness that often seems to accompany moments of insight.

Interactivity might be particularly relevant to meaningfulness to the extent that it can uniquely facilitate experiences of immersion such as presence (Lee 2004), flow (Sherry 2004) and identification (Cohen 2001). This is because video games most often simulate *being* a character rather than simply viewing a character. Extant research does suggest that interactive media environments are particularly adept at creating such immersive experiences, perhaps in ways that are qualitatively different from traditional media formats (e.g., Klimmt et al. 2009). To the extent that absorption facilitates experiences of meaningfulness (for example, increasing feelings of closeness with characters), it is possible that the interactive nature of video games works in their favor.

A similarly unique and near-universal element of video games which derives from interactivity is the requirement that players perform tasks or overcome challenges in order to advance or succeed in the game, often against an opponent (human or computer). These challenges might be particularly engaging (Csikszentmihalyi 1990; Kivikangas 2006; Marston et al. 2016). The player is required to participate in order for the game to proceed (blinded for review, in press). They might, for example, encourage viewers to engage in the kind of effortful sociomoral reasoning that Bartsch and Oliver (2011) suggest is related to meaningful entertainment experiences. For example, research has shown that video game decisions can result in guilt reactions in players (Grizzard et al. 2014). More specifically, players felt more guilt when committing acts of violence in a video game when the violence was unjustified than when it was not (Hartmann et al. 2010).

Finally, many video games provide the opportunity for players to work cooperatively toward a shared goal, or at least share in experiences of the game. To the extent that meaningfulness is contingent at least in part on experiences of relatedness (Przybylski et al. 2010), it is possible that

this aspect of gameplay facilitates meaningfulness. Extant research has demonstrated that co-playing can increase players' fulfilment of relatedness needs, and, in turn, enjoyment of the game (Tamborini et al. 2010). It is possible that the fulfilment of relatedness needs may be necessary for meaningful experiences, as well. Furthermore, recent research has demonstrated that media-induced feelings of elevation (a type of meaningful affective response, see Oliver et al. 2012a) after viewing portrayals of moral goodness are associated with experiences of connection to humanity (Oliver et al. 2012b).

2 Method

Since previous experimental studies have demonstrated that players can experience video games meaningfully and hedonically (Bowman et al. 2016; Oliver et al. 2015), formally stated, our research questions are (**RQ1**) *How* do players experience meaningfulness in video games? and (**RQ2**) *How* do players' descriptions of meaningful video game experiences differ from players' descriptions of fun video game experiences? To explore how video games might provide individuals with meaningful experiences, we conducted an online study that implemented open-ended questions, randomly assigning participants to discuss either the ''most fun'' or ''most meaningful'' video game experience they could remember. This data was gathered as part of a larger survey of gamers and intrinsic need satisfaction, with quantitative data analyses reported in [Blinded for review]. Participants could respond however they saw fit to best explain their answers to the questions, assuming the role of a critical video game reviewer. This allowed participants to describe in detail what they felt made a video game meaningful or enjoyable. All ethical rules governing research were followed, including IRB approval.

2.1 Participants and Procedures

Participants were recruited from various on-line venues such as gaming websites (e.g., IGN.com, Gamepot.com), gaming forums (e.g., PlayStation Community Forums, Xbox Forums), social networks (e.g., Facebook and Twitter), professional listservs (e.g., Communication Research Theory Network) and invitations forwarded to other individuals by participants in the study. The final sample consisted of 575 individuals. Of those, 90 left no text response resulting in 485 individuals analyzed. Most of the participants were male (67.8%), ranging in age from 18 to 56 (*Median* = 27, *M* = 28.98, *SD* = 7.44). On average, participants reported playing games for over 7 years (*M* = 7.47, *SD* = 6.41). In exchange for participation, with IRB clearance, participants were given the opportunity to enter their names in a lottery in which ten recipients were randomly selected to receive a $25 (USD) gift certificate for Amazon.com.

In the recruitment postings/emails, participants were provided a URL for an online questionnaire. Upon logging into the questionnaire, participants were randomly assigned to name and describe a game that they found to be either a particularly fun experience (*n* = 325) or a particularly meaningful experience (*n* = 250), following a method established in Oliver and Hartmann (2010).

2.2 Measures

The front end of this questionnaire asked a series of quantitative measures not used in this study. The items pertinent to this analysis were questions that asked participants to describe the game

they selected having been their ‘‘most fun’’ or ‘‘most meaningful’’—depending on which survey condition they were randomly assigned to. After identifying the game they thought was particularly fun or meaningful, participants were asked to explain why they chose that game as particularly fun (18,491 total words, *M* = 57.07, *SD* = 70.35) or meaningful (13,696 total words, *M* = 54.78, *SD* = 61.09). Then participants were asked to describe the overall point, theme, or lesson from the game they selected (fun 11,280 total words, *M* = 34.81, *SD* = 48.96 and meaningful 9164 total words, *M* = 36.66, *SD* = 65.66). Participants were also asked to provide details of thoughts, feelings, and emotions they experienced while playing the game (fun 14,903 total words, *M* = 46.00, *SD* = 65.86 and meaningful 11,503 total words, *M* = 46.20, *SD* = 67.47). Lastly, participants were asked to imagine they were reviewing the game they selected for a video game website, and they wrote a brief review justifying their opinions on the game (fun 18,624 total words, *M* = 57.48, *SD* = 64.16 and meaningful 13,398 total words, *M* = 53.59, *SD* = 65.52). In sum meaningful game response were 190.71 (*SD* = 189.65) words on average for a total of 47,486 and fun game responses were 195.836 (*SD* = 201.32) words on average for a total of 63,298 words. A series of t tests revealed no significant differences for word count between conditions on any of the questions.

3 Results

Any grammar and spelling errors in quotes that did not dramatically impact readability were preserved as to not change the participants’ meanings.

3.1 Preliminary/Descriptive Analyses

Preliminary analyses first examined the video games selected by participants in both the meaningful and fun condition. Across the sample of 575 participants, 262 different video games were named. *Final Fantasy Series* (Square Enix, n.d.), *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004), *Elder Scrolls* (Bethesda Game Studios, n.d), *Portal* (Valve Corporation 2007) and *Mass Effect* (Bioware 2007) were most frequently named (15 or more). Frequencies and percentages are reported in Table 1.

For those games most commonly listed by participants recalling their ‘‘most meaningful’’ game, *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) was the most frequently named meaningful game (N = 21). However, 23 participants named a game in the *Final Fantasy* (Square Enix, n.d.) franchise as meaningful. For those games commonly listed as ‘‘most fun,’’ the most frequently named game was *Angry Birds* (Rovio Entertainment 2009) (N = 10). However, games in the *Super Mario* (Nintendo, n.d.) franchise were also frequently mentioned (N = 16). As evidenced by preliminary analyses, some games were listed as both fun or meaningful. For example, *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) was listed as a meaningful game 21 times and a fun game six times. Table 2 shows the most frequently named fun and meaningful games as well as which games were named as both (10 or more total).

Game title	Frequency	Percentage
Final Fantasy	31	6
World of Warcraft	27	5
Elder Scrolls	21	4
Portal series	18	3
Super Mario series	16	3
Mass Effect series	15	3

Table 1 Frequencies and percentages for the most frequently named games

Game title	Fun	Meaningful
Final Fantasy series	9	22
World of Warcraft	6	21
Elder Scrolls series	12	9
Portal series	11	7
Super Mario series	15	1
Mass Effect series	6	9
Angry Birds	11	1
Call of Duty series	6	6
Halo series	5	6
Zelda series	4	7
Civilization series	8	2

Table 2 Frequencies for the most frequently named fun and meaningful games

To answer the RQs, we began analyzing the open-ended data for recurrent themes based on whether or not the game was noted to be fun or meaningful. The primary authors gave a thorough read of each response, treating each full response as a unit of analysis. The condition was not blinded to the coder. Instead, the researchers read the response noting any common or frequent themes for meaningful and fun games based on previous work (Blinded for review). Fun games appeared to focus on gameplay or aspects related to game mechanics and the way in which the player directly interacts with the game. Consequently, the researchers then coded the responses for feelings of flow, challenge, and detailed design. Meaningful games seemed to focus on feeling connected to others. Consequently, the researchers then coded characters, the story, and moral choices. All responses were coded on each of these dimensions as well as whether or not the game was a multiplayer experience. See Table 3 for a list of codes, definitions and examples.

Table 3 Codes, definitions, and examples

Code	Definition	Example
Challenge	Comments related to game competition, strategy used, and feelings of accomplishment	*Angry Birds* "is a game of strategy that includes many skills such as math, geometry, engineering, pysics."
Flow	Losing oneself in the game, feeling addicted, and compelled to keep playing	"*Diablo* was my first video game that I ever have had, and I was addicted."
Detail design	Comments noting large play spaces, refined controls, and variety in play	*Borderlands* "was a vast non-linear, non-corridor shooter with an impact bearing rpg skill tree."
Characters	A deep connection to the characters in the game	In *Final Fantasy VI*, "a few of the characters I identified with strongly."
Story	A narrative that provided meaningful themes and messages	*Dragon Age* had an "engaging story line, appealed to my values."
Moral choices	Decisions that altered the game in meaningful ways or presented thoughtful ethical dilemmas	*Knights of the Old Republic* was a "very morality based game where the player could change the world they were playing in."
Multiplayer	Whether or not the game was highlighted because it could be played with other human participants	*Left 4 Dead* had "great group CO-OP play."

3.2 Fun Games

Those recalling a fun video game tended to focus on aspects of gameplay. Notably, this was not exclusive but it was frequent. Some alluded to aspects of gameplay while others mentioned it directly (N = 44). For example, one participant chose *Uncharted 3* (Naughty Dog 2011) as a fun game because ''It has lots of interactive cutscenes and good use of quick time events.'' Likewise, another chose *Madden Football* (High Score Entertainment, n.d.) because he/she ''loved the realistic gameplay.''

Beyond gameplay broadly, there were several components of gameplay that emerged as important to fun video games. Specifically, fun games were described as being challenging, requiring strategy, addictive, intuitive, and detailed. Fun games were often noted for their challenge and competition (N = 46). *Mario Kart* (Nintendo, n.d.) was described as having ''an appropriate challenge curve (it's never impossible, but there are always challenges to continue to pursue).'' Likewise, another player selected *Street Fighter* (Capcom, n.d.) because ''I mainly enjoy the competition it allows for.'' Similarly, games were noted for encouraging the use of strategy (N = 25). *Tetris* (1984) ''involves strategy and intelligence'' and *Tropico* (Poptop Software, n.d.) was enjoyable because of ''the strategy and the politics— basically you have to be a really good capitalist to do well, or a good dictator, etc.''

Further, players tended to lose themselves in fun video games. One participant stated *Disgaea 4* (Nippon Ichi Software 2011) ''was the best out of an incredibly addictive series. I sank way too

many hours of my life into it.'' Another said of the game *Majesty: The Fantasy Kingdom Sim* (Cyberlore Studios 2000), ''Overall it is due to the simple fact that the game has a very nice 'flow' to it. It is a surprisingly immersive and challenging strategy game.''

Fun games were also described as well-crafted experiences such that they were easy to play but had a lot of detail. *Bayonetta* (Platinum Games 2010) is ''one of those easy to pick up but hard to master games.'' One way that games were described as ''easy to pick up'' was in terms of their intuitive control schemes. One participant stated that the game *Battlekid: Fortress of Peril* (Sivak Games 2010) was particularly fun because of ''solid, calculated game design'' noting that ''the controls are tight and responsive.'' Detail also was described in terms of the broad variety of things to experience in the game and/or the degree to which the game provides a complex system to explore: ''A sandbox game like Minecraft allows me to make up my own fun, and so every time I fire up the game I'm able to find something to do that gives me joy.'' Another said of *Batman: Arkham City* (Rocksteady Studios 2011), ''This game was so detailed and complex…it held my interest for quite some time.''

In short, video games are fun for many reasons. However, the responses tended to focus on aspects of gameplay.

3.3 Meaningful Games

Instead of aspects related to gameplay—though those were mentioned occasionally, meaningful games tended to provide experiences that spoke more directly to the human condition. Specifically, players noted that games were meaningful because: of a connection to characters in the game, of the story of the game, and of the moral choices allowed by the games. It should be noted, that some of the responses for meaningful games are presented as longer here not because the responses were longer but because many of the ideas conveyed seem to require more detailed responses.

In terms of story, one player named *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar San Diego 2010). This player described the plot of the game in detail noting the importance of ''vengeance'' that the player carries out by the end of the game's story. Another participant named *The World Ends with You* (Square Enix 2008), identifying themes pertaining to the story: ''Really the plot. It delves into the mind of a teenage boy from Shibuya, Japan who thinks the world would be a better place if he was alone in it.'' Concurrently, players noted how important characters were to meaningful games. The video game *Kingdom Hearts 2* features a wide array of Disney characters. In this series it is not uncommon for players to battle Maleficient with Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, and Goofy. Based on this premise, one player said *Kingdom Hearts 2* (Square Enix Product Development Division 2005) was particularly meaningful:

> The second game marked a very important point where I witnessed a maturity in the content, and began to reflect on my own maturing relationship with popular culture…It was fascinating to grow up with this game. In interacting with some of my favorite Disney characters, I was forced to consider how I really felt about them as I participated in abridged versions of these stories.

Another player named the video game *Metroid Prime* (Retro Studios 2002): ‘‘The protagonist, Samus Aran, is female. She is smart, powerful, compassionate, and has a deeply engaging story… my respect for Samus made the game most meaningful.’’

This emphasis on narrative and characters reflects aspects of video games that most closely resemble traditional media such as movies, television shows, and novels. In other words, our analysis reveals that meaningfulness in video games is derived from attributes similar to other forms of media. However, further examination demonstrates that meaningfulness manifested in more unique video game attributes as well.

Indeed, some video games allowed players to customize their own characters. For example, several of the games listed as meaningful, such as *The Elder Scrolls Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, n.d.) and *Dragon Age: Origins* (Bioware 2009), allowed for robust character customization. Yet another video game that allows for deep character customization that was noted as meaningful was *Mass Effect* (Bioware 2007):

> The game allows you to construct your own character… The characters were among the most developed I’ve ever encountered in a game with back stories Comput Game J (2017) 6:63–79 71 123 that you wanted to probe. By the end of the game, based on the decisions made and interactions with other characters, it felt like completing something of my own making rather than ‘making it through’ someone else’s.

Interestingly, video games can provide meaningful stories and characters in a traditional sense or video games can provide meaningful experiences by allowing the player to shape the story as well as the character.

Moreover, video games were noted as meaningful for the difficult moral decisions players were forced to make in the games. *In Knights of the Old Republic* (Bioware 2003), one player ‘‘found the way the ethics of the players choices affected gameplay and characterization to be especially deep for its time.’’ In *The Witcher* (CD Projekt Red 2007), ‘‘you face moral choices which truly have an impact on how the game goes and how it ends. That kind of sense of nonlinear wonder, where I am left to guess or think about ‘what would happen if I chose differently’ makes the experience meaningful for me.’’ And *Mass Effect 2* (Bioware 2010) had ‘‘genuinely tough ethical dilemmas it asked players to consider.’’ In this sense, the interactivity of games appears to distinguish games from other media by providing another potential location for meaningful experiences, as games allow players to personally tackle ethical or moral dilemmas.

3.4 Fun and Meaningful Games

There were also a handful of broad themes that emerged for both fun and meaningful games. Specifically, the ability to play the game in a multiplayer mode was listed as both fun and meaningful. However, the manner in which the multiplayer experience was described differed based on whether the player was describing a meaningful game or a fun game. Consistent with previous findings, players’ comments on multiplayer in fun video games often focused on aspects of gameplay. For example, *Starcraft II* (Blizzard Entertainment 2010) was fun because of ‘‘Competative multiplayer instead of cooperative multiplayer, complex strategy that is always

evolving within the community of players.'' Also, *Resident Evil: Operation Raccoon City* (Slant Six Games 2012) was appealing because it combined challenging gameplay alongside friends: ''I found it very challenging and great fun playing with your friends online either on Multiplayer or campagin mode with three other friends.'' Conversely, multiplayer modes in meaningful games were described as providing deep connections between players. *Madden Football* (High Score Entertainment, n.d.)) was ''the first video game I ever played with my father… it allows me to play the game with my friends as if I were still home even while I'm at college.'' In *NCAA March Madness 2004* (Electronic Arts 2003), one player and his friends ''bonded significantly over our love of the game and its multiplayer settings.'' Of *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004), one player said:

> As someone who began playing World of Warcraft during the recent recession I began to play it as a way to connect to friends I had no money to socialize with. As I became comfortable with the game I have met many interesting and wonderful people who have impacted my life in all areas, including my professional and dating life. It is these relationships with people that have come to mean so much to me, and having a place to interact with them with the dungeons and other group activities to bond us in overcoming challenges. It's very rewarding to accomplish something you have invested time in with people you enjoy associating with.

While challenge was noted as something that made a game fun, the related concept of ''accomplishment'' was more commonly referred to when games were described as meaningful. A player of *Kingdom Hearts* (Square 2002) said, ''I felt I had accomplished something when I beat the game. I don't always get that feeling.'' Another said that *Words with Friends* (Zynga 2009) was meaningful because it provided ''mental stimulation'' and ''expands my vocabulary.'' Lastly, a player stated that *Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo 1998) was ''one of the first that I spend a large amount of time playing. It's a complex enough game that I struggled to complete it, and I will always remember the sense of accomplishment of beating the game.''

Since players were allowed to name their own game, it might come as a surprise that some of the same titles were named as fun and as meaningful. However, the responses indicated different types of experiences despite being descriptions of the same games. For example one player said that *Angry Birds* (Rovio Entertainment 2009) was fun because ''of silly scenarios or puzzles'' while another named it as meaningful because he/she played it with his/her children. Also, one player named *Portal* (Valve Corporation 2007) as a fun game because ''The mechanics were easy to learn but hard to master. The puzzles were intriguing.'' Another named *Portal* (Valve Corporation 2007) as a meaningful game because ''The game portrays a very clear picture of the human psyche, and makes you wonder if you would do the same in their place.''

One noteworthy finding here is that a game does not have to be one or the other. Indeed, a game might be fun and meaningful. The distinction appears to be based on which aspects of the game are salient to the user. Terms like ''friends,'' ''community,'' and ''social'' showed up in descriptions of both fun and meaningful games. We interpret this to mean that connections to other players can be found in both game types. Beyond the use of those words, however, the descriptions tended to vary such that games are fun because, as one noted in *Angry Birds*, friends can share

strategies and compete. While games are meaningful because they provide a context for friendship/relationship creation and maintenance, like one player said of *World of Warcraft*.

4 Discussion

Entertainment researchers have recently begun to investigate how viewers can experience both hedonic and eudaimonic gratifications from entertainment use (Oliver and Raney 2011). The current study attempted to extend this perspective to video games, and build on existing quantitative data by presenting a qualitative analysis of video gamers' open-ended responses to questions about fun or meaningful gaming experiences. Specifically, respondents were asked to write a review of the game, as well as reflect on the game's theme or lesson and thoughts and feelings they experienced while playing the game. We anticipated that participants would focus on gameplay and enjoyable content when discussing fun games, and would focus on connections with other players/characters and content related to the human condition when discussing meaningful games. However, the present research describes *how* players engage in these experiences. We further discovered that fun and meaningful experiences can emerge from similar game characteristics such as multiplayer gaming, which can serve to either enhance gameplay elements or deepen connections with others.

Notably, a majority of the games that were noted in this study could be considered mainstream AAA games—that is, video games usually made from large and recognizable studios (Electronic Arts, Rockstar Games, Capcom, etc.) akin to how one might refer to ''Hollywood'' movies compared to independent films. As such, we provide supplemental analysis of games that might fall outside of that categorization. While rare, some did list non-mainstrea, non-AAA games. Most of these were listed as fun: *Ace Attorney* (Capcom, n.d.), *Battle Kid* (Sivak Games 2010), *Bubble Pop* (Spilgames, n.d.), and *Where's My Water* (Creature Feep 2011). Though some were listed as meaningful: *Bastion* (Supergiant Games,), *Braid* (Number None Inc. m 2008), *Flower* (Thatgamecompany 2009), and *Limbo* (Playdead 2010). These games were listed, at most, twice.

Overall, this research presents interesting preliminary findings about players' perceptions of fun and meaningful video games. They suggest that while video games quite often implement their interactive nature to lead to fun experiences (e.g., by presenting challenges and immersive gameworlds), they also possess the ability to use their interactive nature to provoke meaningful experiences (e.g., by requiring players to make difficult moral choices in the context of complex narratives with highly developed characters). These findings generally coincide with previous research examining meaningful experiences in traditional media formats and to some extent in games research (Nacke and Lindley 2008). For example, these findings are similar to Oliver and Hartmann's (2010) thematic analysis of open-ended responses regarding fun and meaningful film experiences. These researchers found that when reporting on films they found particularly meaningful, participants would name films which emphasized lessons and themes which provided them insight into life purpose, human connectedness, and human virtue (Oliver and Hartmann 2010). Our analysis unveiled a very similar pattern of emphases on human connectedness and narratives relevant to human values. In this sense, our findings also confirm the importance of difficult moral dilemmas and sociomoral reasoning as they relate to experiences of meaningfulness (Bartsch and Oliver 2011; Bowman and Banks 2016; Tamborini 2011). This was perhaps the most

prominent way that responses about meaningful games were distinguished from responses about fun games. Conversely, fun movies are used as a means of escape or to forget about life's worries (Oliver and Hartmann 2010). As such, we may conclude that while people engage with meaningful video games similarly to how they engage with other forms of meaningful media, people do not engage with fun games like they do with other forms of fun media. This may be due to the interactive nature of games. For example, a fun movie cannot be challenging in the same way a fun video game might be. Or a fun movie cannot offer a wide variety of play while a fun game might. Indeed, fun video games may be somewhat unique in how they provide hedonic gratification as they seem to relate specifically to design aspects of the game.

Our findings also suggest that some elements of gaming may serve to increase meaningful outcomes for players that other media formats cannot. Most notably, our findings support the notion that rich interactive experiences of game characters can, at least in those instances cited by our responses, increase meaningful outcomes. Deep interactions with *others players* were also commonly mentioned in the meaningful game condition. These findings suggest that video games might indeed be uniquely suited to fulfill relatedness needs (Przybylski et al. 2010), which in turn may facilitate meaningful experiences. This suggests that the fulfillment of relatedness needs is indeed important to meaningful experiences, reflecting previous research on the importance of social bonds in games (Domahidi et al. 2014). However, given the current methodology, we cannot assess whether or not the interactive nature of video games in some instances inhibited what otherwise *would have been* meaningful outcomes as suggested earlier in the paper, by (for example) drawing focus to game tasks and away from game narrative. Nonetheless, such data does suggest that fun and meaningful experiences are neither orthogonal nor diametrically opposed from each other but how the player engages with the game may make it more meaningful, more fun, or both.

4.1 Limitations

In addition to the limitation noted above in interpreting our findings, some additional limitations must be noted. The sampling strategy of posting to gaming websites and forums may have over-selected participants who are likely to be more reflective about their gaming experiences. In this case, it would still be true that they found the games reported to be meaningful or fun, but perhaps such experiences are far less likely to occur in the general population of gamers. Furthermore, it is possible that the prompt itself (asking participants to report a fun or meaningful game) presented demand characteristics which the participants felt compelled to abide by. That is, perhaps evoking the concept of a ''meaningful'' or ''fun'' game experience caused respondents to tailor their responses to what they perceived as normative expectations of ''meaningfulness'' or ''fun.'' Lastly, all of the responses were recollections of games rather than based on any actual gameplay. On the one hand, the ''most fun'' and ''most meaningful'' games could be the most salient. On the other hand there is no indication of how long ago these experiences were. They could be anywhere from one minute to one decade. Indeed, this was an online survey of recalled gaming, but did not involve any gaming directly.

5 Conclusion

Given the preliminary nature of the study, this section provides detail on future directions of research. The purpose of the present study was, in part, motivated by need to garner greater insights into users' perceptions of the hedonic and eudaimonic elements of gaming via the collection of broad, open-ended comments. With this in mind, future research would undoubtedly benefit from research that employs experimental approaches that allow for more focused identification of the elements that lead to more meaningful experiences. For example, using a MIME approach, future research may consider varying the portrayals of morality to see if conflicting moral standards play influential roles in users' responses (Tamborini 2012). Likewise, research may consider varying the depth of processing required to successfully play the game to examine propositions outlined by recent dualprocessing models of media entertainment (e.g., Bartsch and Schneider 2014; Vorderer and Reinecke 2015). Other possible areas of exploration would explore the role of game difficulty on audience engagement with narrative as well as investigating the role of awe in the domain of eudaimonia. Lastly, many of the items noted here are closely related to the Player Experience of Need Satisfaction (PENS) model (Deci and Ryan 1985, 2000). While this study draws from the information garnered form previous PENS studies, direct comparisons would be useful.

In closing, while this research was exploratory, we do think it supports the notion that digital gaming can present, at least for some individuals, a meaningful experience as well as a fun experience. These meaningful outcomes seem to be tied to experiences of richly textured gameworlds, complex and provocative narratives, and carefully drawn characters. At this point, perhaps we can say that video games can be meaningful experiences just as much as they can be enjoyable ones.

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