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# Self-Determination Theory in HCI Games Research: Current Uses and Open Questions

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## ABSTRACT

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), a major psychological theory of human motivation, has become increasingly popular in Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) research on games and play. However, it remains unclear how SDT has advanced HCI games research, or how HCI games scholars engage with the theory. We reviewed 110 CHI and CHI PLAY papers that cited SDT to gain a better understanding of the ways the theory has contributed to HCI games research. We find that SDT, and in particular, the concepts of need satisfaction and intrinsic motivation, have been widely applied to analyse the player experience and inform game design. Despite the popularity of SDT-based measures, however, prominent core concepts and mini-theories are rarely considered explicitly, and few papers engage with SDT beyond descriptive accounts. We highlight conceptual gaps at the intersection of SDT and HCI games research, and identify opportunities for SDT propositions, concepts, and measures to more productively inform future work.

## Author Keywords

Games; Gamification; Motivation; Play; Player Experience; Self-Determination Theory; Theory

## CCS Concepts

•Human-centered computing → HCI theory, concepts and models; Empirical studies in HCI; •Applied computing → Computer games;

## INTRODUCTION

One aim of games and play research in Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) – hereafter abbreviated to HCI games research – is to understand what constitutes engaging player-computer interaction [117]. These insights may in turn be applied to design more appealing games and playful interactions, evaluate qualities of the player experience, and create interactive systems that motivate people to engage with purposes beyond entertainment (e.g., serious games, gamification). Theories and

concepts from motivational psychology have proven particularly popular with HCI scholars to describe and analyse games [30, 99]. The notion of *flow* [128], for instance, has been influential in studying the player experience [79, 124, 177] and modelling optimally challenging games [40, 113]. Another theory that has proven influential is Self-Determination Theory (SDT), a major psychological theory of human motivation [48, 163] that has been successfully applied to study motivational processes in a variety of domains and contexts (e.g., academic, work, relationships). SDT has been used to study the motivational appeal of games [160, 166], inform gameful design [60, 149, 187], analyse the player experience [93, 150], and applied within the games industry for evaluation and testing [7, 85, 189]. In fact, the original papers on SDT and games by Ryan, Rigby and Przybylski [144, 166] have been cited over 3000 times on Google Scholar.

While these numbers attest to the popularity of (citing) SDT in games research, they say little about *how* SDT has contributed to HCI games research, nor the ways in which HCI games scholars have applied and engaged with the theory. Some of the purported benefits of applying (psychological) theories to HCI include establishing a common understanding and terminology around specific phenomena, formulating predictions concerning these phenomena under common and novel circumstances, as well as generating original hypotheses and design implications [13, 132, 153]. However, the extent to which SDT has informed HCI games research remains unclear. Concerns have also been raised around the misrepresentation of external literature in exertion games research [120], and with respect to SDT in gamification research [116, 169]. Not only does this risk the proliferation of misunderstandings and lack of clarity regarding SDT-based concepts – it may also give rise to invalid research findings around the motivational appeal of games, ineffective design implications, or even negative effects on player wellbeing.

Following endeavours on the use of theory in HCI [38, 121, 153, 195], we present findings from a systematic literature review encompassing 110 CHI and CHI PLAY papers that cite SDT in the context of games, play, and game-adjacent systems. We take stock of how and why SDT and its various concepts (e.g., intrinsic motivation, need satisfaction) have been applied to HCI games research. Our contribution is threefold: first, we find that SDT, particularly the concepts of competence need satisfaction and intrinsic motivation, have been widely applied to analyse the player experience, inform game design, and model player-computer interaction. However, despite this

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popularity, certain core concepts and mini-theories, such as relatedness or organismic integration, have received little to no attention. Second, while many works resort to SDT-based questionnaires to analyse the player experience, few papers engage with SDT beyond merely descriptive accounts. Third, based on our analysis, we highlight conceptual gaps at the intersection of SDT and HCI games research, and identify opportunities for SDT propositions, concepts, and measures to more productively inform future work.

## SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY

SDT is a psychological macro-theory of human motivation, growth, and wellbeing [47, 48, 163] that characterises humans as fundamentally active organisms. In particular, SDT posits *intrinsic motivation*, an innate human propensity for activities perceived as interesting and enjoyable, and *organismic integration*, which directs the assimilation and organisation of external stimuli into the developing self. Individuals are considered to “thrive” and experience wellbeing to the extent that their actions reflect the truest values of the self [156]. Motivation, internalisation, and wellbeing processes are energised by the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs – autonomy, competence, and relatedness (discussed further below).

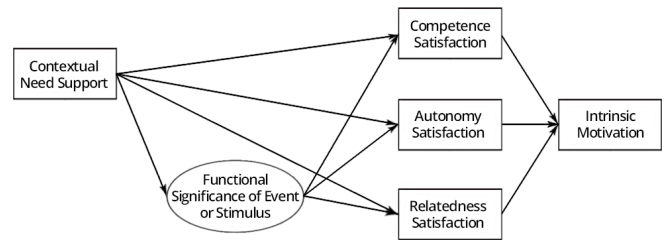
At its core, SDT is a *scientific* theory [163], in that it contains a number of empirically-testable propositions [199] that generalise across varied contexts, which serve to explain and predict the impact of certain events on motivation and wellbeing. Moreover, Ryan and Deci have described SDT as *practical*, “as it points to how features of contexts [...] facilitate or undermine motivation” [164, p. 4], as well as *critical*, “as it examines proximal social contexts [...] as well as more pervasive cultural, political, and economic conditions in terms of their adequacy in supporting versus impairing human thriving” [164, p. 4].

SDT is broadly organised into six mini-theories, whose underlying concepts are continuously developed, critiqued, and revised (e.g., [186, 190, 191]). In the following, we briefly describe the key tenets and mini-theories of SDT, according to their frequency of use in the reviewed CHI and CHI PLAY literature. Moreover, we highlight key findings from SDT-based games research. A comprehensive description of SDT is beyond the scope of this paper, but we refer readers to [163, 187] for more detail.

### Need Satisfaction

*Basic psychological needs theory* (BPNT) posits three basic psychological needs that energise organismic processes: *competence*, the feeling of having an effect; *autonomy*, a sense that actions are self-endorsed and performed willingly; and *relatedness*, a sense of reciprocal care, value, and belonging in relation to other social figures and collectives [158]. *Satisfaction* of these needs promotes intrinsic motivation, internalisation, and wellbeing (see also Figure 1).

Several conceptual and empirical developments have emerged within SDT around psychological needs. *Need frustration*, for instance, denotes the active thwarting of basic needs – feeling incapable, controlled, or ostracised by others [163]. Although empirical studies of need frustration began only recently [12,



**Figure 1. The key tenets of Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET): the extent to which a stimulus influences experienced need satisfaction and intrinsic motivation is determined by the social context and its functional significance.**

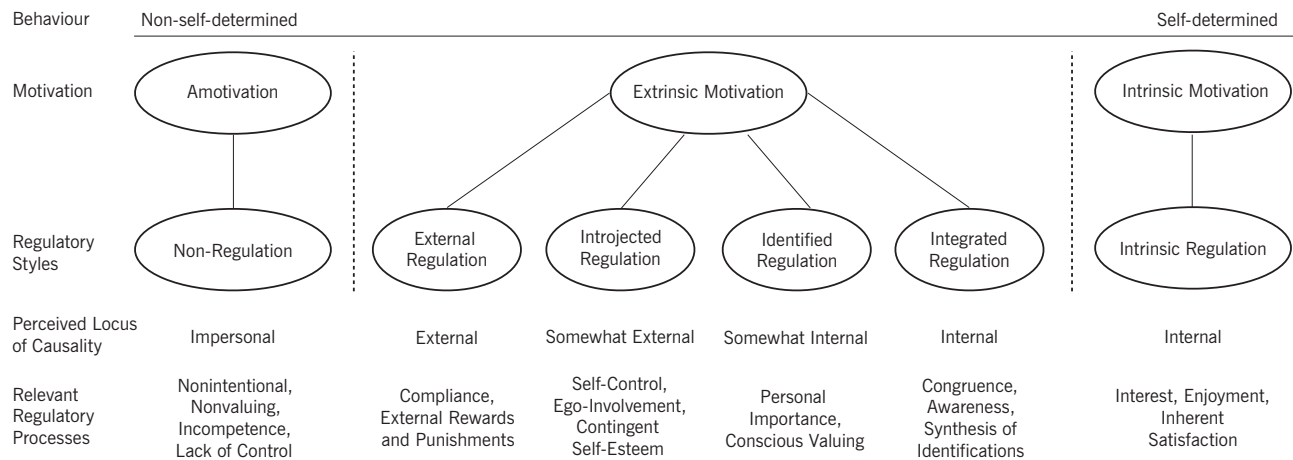
173], need frustration has been shown to predict negative psychosocial outcomes (e.g., burnout, stress) more effectively than need satisfaction [71, 76]. Other considerations [171, 172] differentiate need satisfaction as a *motive* for behaviour (i.e., pursuing an activity in the hopes of having one’s needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness satisfied) versus an *experiential requirement* (i.e., experiencing the feeling of autonomy, competence, and relatedness with valued others). In the context of videogame play, need satisfaction has repeatedly been found to predict game enjoyment [135, 166] and playing persistence [129], with fewer studies having investigated experiences of need frustration [3, 143, 184].

Need satisfaction during play is commonly indexed by the Player Experience of Need Satisfaction (PENS) scale, which comprises five subscales: competence, autonomy, relatedness, presence/immersion, and intuitive controls. The PENS was developed as part of the first SDT research into games [166]; the authors’ subsequent work also implies their (unpublished) validation of the scale [144, 150]. Independent validation studies have generally supported the PENS factor structure as originally specified [31, 92, 93]; however, it remains unclear whether intuitive controls and competence represent distinct subscales (particularly for experienced players) [92, 93], and issues with some presence/immersion items (#4 and #8) have recurred across studies [Johnson, personal communication]. Recently, a new measure of in-game need satisfaction – the Ubisoft Perceived Experience Questionnaire (UPEQ) [7] – was created by game developers, using items adapted from existing SDT instruments.

A notable development in SDT-based games research is the *need density hypothesis*, which proposes that individuals whose basic needs are poorly satisfied or actively thwarted [145] in day-to-day life are more likely to develop an unhealthy preference for the comparatively “dense, consistent, and immediate” [160, p. 529] experiences of need satisfaction in videogame play [152, 151, 160]. It was formulated to reconcile videogames’ need-satisfying qualities with the potential emergence of dysfunctional play behaviours. Although applied work on the topic is limited, early findings [3, 14, 145] have found some support for the hypothesis.

### Motivation

Together with need satisfaction, *motivation* arguably constitutes the key construct underlying SDT. According to Deci and Ryan [47], motivation consists of the *energy* to take action, as well as the *direction* in which this energy is then moved



**Figure 2. The different motivations and regulations posited by Organismic Integration Theory (OIT), ranging from the least self-determined (amotivation) to the most self-determined (integrated regulation and intrinsic motivation). Adapted from [161].**

(i.e., approaching or avoiding a given instance). As pictured in Figure 2, SDT broadly differentiates three types of motivation [157]: *Intrinsic motivation* denotes activity pursued for its inherently interesting or enjoyable qualities. *Extrinsic motivation* refers to activity pursued for a separable outcome. *Amotivation* denotes the absence of intentional motivation, where a person may no longer be aware why they pursue an activity.

One of the key mini-theories underlying motivation is *Cognitive Evaluation Theory* (CET), which is primarily concerned with the social-contextual factors that support or attenuate an individual’s *intrinsic motivation* towards an activity [41, 44, 45, 47]. CET distinguishes between the satisfactions inherent to an activity<sup>1</sup> (i.e., basic need satisfaction), and *extrinsic rewards*, which are separable from the activity itself (e.g., money). Extrinsic rewards undermine intrinsic motivation to the extent that their conferral devalues the activity itself and controls further engagement [43]. The extent to which rewards (or other stimuli) are perceived as comparatively informational, controlling, or amotivating (i.e., their *functional significance*) changes their influence on need satisfaction, and hence intrinsic motivation (Figure 1).

In contrast to CET, *Organismic Integration Theory* (OIT) primarily attends to the processes that influence *extrinsic motivation* [157, 49]. The quality of extrinsic motivation varies to the extent that instrumental outcomes become internally valued, which occurs through the process of *internalisation* [49] (Figure 2). *External regulation*, for instance, is the least self-determined form of extrinsic motivation and typically occurs in situations where people act to obtain a reward or avoid punishment. *Introjected regulation* describes a regulation which has been partially internalised but not truly accepted as one’s own. Such behaviours are pursued to avoid guilt or shame or to achieve feelings of self-worth or approval. In contrast, *identified regulation* follows from the conscious valuing of an activity as personally important. Finally, *integrated regulation*

is the most self-determined form of extrinsic motivation and results when an activity is congruent with personally endorsed values, goals, and needs that are already part of the self.

Game enjoyment has been frequently assessed via the Interest/Enjoyment construct of the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (IMI) [124, 166]. The Gaming Motivation Scale (GAMS) [104] differentiates the six regulatory styles posited by OIT. More recently, Brühlmann et al. [32] and Peters et al. [136] developed OIT-based measures for UX research that could also be adapted for studies of games and play.

#### Other SDT mini-theories

Lastly, SDT contains mini-theories that focus on more temporally stable traits. According to *Causality Orientation Theory* (COT) [46, 190], for instance, people differ in the extent to which they experience their actions as self-determined. Autonomy oriented individuals are more likely to act according to their own interests and values and interpret external events as informational rather than controlling [46, 190], therefore experiencing more competence need satisfaction. Control oriented people are more likely to act due to external demands and perceive external events as pressuring, and consequently experience less autonomy. Lastly, an impersonal orientation describes the extent to which people focus on obstacles to goal attainment and perceive a lack of control over outcomes, rendering them more prone to amotivation.

While SDT is largely concerned with motivation – or “why” a goal is pursued [47] – “what” goals are pursued is central to *Goal Contents Theory* (GCT) [159]. GCT differentiates extrinsic goals, which reflect instrumental values (e.g., wealth and fame), and intrinsic goals, aspirations that are valuable in themselves (e.g. personal growth, fulfilling relationships). Intrinsic goals are more strongly linked to beneficial wellbeing outcomes. Finally, *Relationships Motivation Theory* (RMT) [162] emphasises the value of mutual autonomy support in developing and maintaining high-quality relationships with close others and in groups.

To date, these mini-theories have received limited attention within games-related research, with only COT having been studied in the context of gamification [125, 198].

<sup>1</sup>Early CET works employ the term “intrinsic rewards” [41, 45], which is no longer used in contemporary SDT research, but remains prevalent in computational approaches to intrinsic motivation that draw from SDT (e.g., [23, 131]).

## REVIEW METHOD

The purpose of this review was to investigate how, why, and (ultimately) to what effect SDT has been mobilised to advance HCI games research. The reviewing procedure followed previous systematic reviews on UX and HCI games research (e.g., [11, 106, 124]).

### Source selection

Publications considered for review were drawn from the proceedings of CHI and CHI Play, as they represent foundational venues for research on games and play in HCI. We acknowledge that this approach precludes works that have been published in other relevant venues (e.g., *Computers in Human Behavior*, *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies*, *Foundations of Digital Games*), but opted to focus on the flagship venues for HCI games research.

We searched the Scopus database, which (at time of writing) contains an up-to-date list of publications from both venues. Publications from any year were considered.

### Search procedure

Our query (see supplementary material) searched for the collective terms *self-determination*, *theory*, and *game* across all sections of the text (i.e., abstract, paper text, references). These search terms are featured in the title of the original paper by Ryan et al. [166], which has been widely cited in games research, as well as related research areas (e.g., gamification, [60]). Searching the CHI and CHI Play proceedings in this way returned 166<sup>2</sup> publications.

### Screening criteria

Only full papers were included for further consideration. Most screening at this step was automatic: Scopus lists CHI Play full papers and extended abstracts in separate proceedings, but fails to do so for earlier installments of CHI. Extended abstracts (n=37) were manually removed by the first author, as these papers are not expected to contain a complete literature review, and may have complicated interpretation of our findings. In total, 129 publications remained after this step.

### Selection of papers for inclusion in the review

Because we were interested in understanding the ways that games research within HCI applies and discusses SDT and its concepts, we excluded all papers lacking substantial relevance to either SDT or games (n=19, see supplementary material for the full list). Both authors agreed on all exclusions made on this basis. Papers were considered relevant to SDT when the theory pertained to the main content of the text (e.g., due to scale use). For example, the work of Harpstead et al. [80] was excluded for this reason, as it only mentions SDT in a list of theories applied in another study. When assessing relevance to games, we chose to avoid limiting ourselves to a particular definition of “game” or “play”, and accepted any interpretation of “game-ness” made by the paper’s authors. A paper excluded on this basis, for example, was [32], which, while drawing from SDT, is about technology use in general.

<sup>2</sup>Note that the initial search was conducted in July 2019, before the CHI PLAY 2019 proceedings were available, which yielded 150 publications. The query was repeated for the camera-ready version.

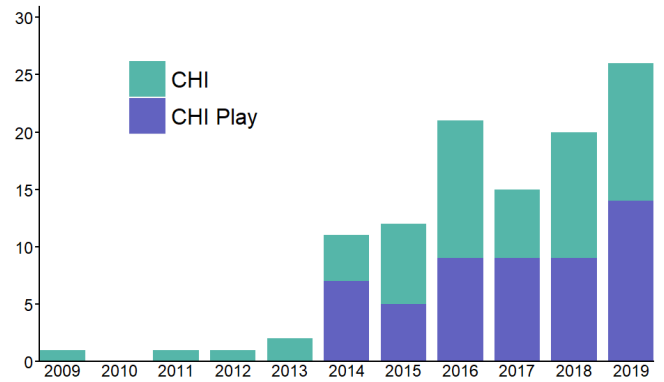


Figure 3. Number of reviewed papers (N=110) referring to SDT per year and per publication venue. Note that CHI PLAY proceedings were first published in 2014.

### Coding procedure

To generate initial coding categories, both authors read and discussed 6 papers randomly selected from the final sample (N=110), none of which were authored by us. The remaining papers were split between authors, with weekly meetings to discuss and iterate coding categories, after which previously coded papers were revisited. As a result, papers were coded with respect to venue, research domain (e.g., gamification), study type, SDT-related measures, purposes for citing SDT, SDT-related references, SDT concepts named, concept definitions (if provided), observed relations involving SDT concepts, claims made about SDT, and variations in terminology use. Papers co-authored by one of the authors or their research group were coded by the other author. The coding spreadsheets are included as supplementary material.

## RESULTS

As shown in Figure 3, the number of papers that cite SDT has increased substantially since 2014, both with the launch of CHI PLAY, but also at CHI. While we can only speculate as to why SDT grew more prominent then, we note a marked increase in papers employing the PENS in 2014. The following section reports our analysis of the 110 papers reviewed, in which we summarise where, how, and why SDT is applied in current HCI games research.

### Research Domains

In total, we identified 24 distinct domains within HCI games research where SDT was applied. The most prevalent topic studied in our sample was *player experience*, which was investigated in over half (61.82%) of all reviewed papers. This category included work that was primarily concerned with how games shape the player experience; for instance, genre-specific experiences [89], the influence of avatar customisation on intrinsic motivation, [17], or experiences of emotionally moving play [24].

Other prominent categories included *design and interaction techniques* (21.82%), which featured a case study of a dungeon-crawling game with Twitter integration [84], and *gamification* (18.18%), for instance, on supporting driver engagement [176]. Less commonly, SDT was employed to inform the design of games or game-adjacent systems [8, 61].

The remaining papers varied widely in subject matter – for example, employing SDT to pursue more realistic player AI [73, 154]; understand women’s motivations, attitudes, and experiences with respect to videogame play [170]; and evaluate the effectiveness of game-based advertisements [4].

### Concepts, Mini-theories and Measures

#### *Engagement with mini-theories and key concepts*

To review, SDT’s formal propositions are situated in 6 mini-theories that are organised around central concepts (e.g., intrinsic motivation) and backed by empirical findings [165]. However, we observed only 3 instances of direct engagement, whereby a mini-theory was explicitly named in the reviewed literature, and all referred to Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET). Birk and Mandryk [16] summarise CET as foundational theory in their research on personality and game controllers, though it does not reappear as a lens with which to interpret results; Deterding [59] employs CET as a means to understand the ways that public and private contexts can influence player autonomy; finally, Guckelsberger et al. [73] discuss CET in conversation with their empowerment-based theory of intrinsic motivation, drawing comparisons between the two: “(CET) highlights the critical role of a person’s competence and autonomy in intrinsic motivation [...] We believe that empowerment relates to autonomy in that it quantifies the availability of actions in different game states, and relates to competence in terms of effectance” [73, p. 9].

In contrast, we observed substantial *implicit* engagement with SDT’s mini-theories through their organising concepts. Need satisfaction concepts were by far the most frequently mentioned – competence was discussed in 84.55% of the sample, with somewhat less interest in autonomy (65.45%) and relatedness (57.27%). This comparatively wide margin may reflect the conceptual relevance of competence in research on flow (e.g., [112, 113]), dynamic difficulty adjustment (e.g., [9, 40]) or self-efficacy theory (e.g., [82, 86]). Few papers examined need satisfaction as a means to develop knowledge of motivational and wellbeing-related outcomes via SDT (e.g., [192]). More often, competence, autonomy, and relatedness were mobilised for *evaluation* – as factors that “lead to a better gaming experience” [140, p. 4], or as evidence that “basic player experience was positive” [84, p. 5]. In these papers, the value of need satisfaction is largely inherent, and to some extent distinct from its importance to SDT. Reinschluessel et al., for example, combine aspects of CET with neurofeedback terminology [146, p. 186]: “positive reinforcement [...] has been shown to significantly increase the person’s perception of their own performance, which leads to increased intrinsic motivation to do a task”.

While intrinsic motivation was also frequently deployed (54.55%) as a concept, extrinsic motivation was only discussed in 20.91% of the papers reviewed. This comparatively muted interest extends to *internalisation* (5.45%), and Organismic Integration Theory (OIT), which governs both concepts but was not directly mentioned in any papers we reviewed. Finally, two papers implicitly referred to goal contents theory (GCT) through their discussion of intrinsic goals in game design [73,

p. 3] and the extrinsic goal orientation implied in cheating behaviours [94, p. 766].

#### *Inconsistencies and Misconceptions*

We noted some inconsistencies concerning how SDT concepts were understood in the reviewed papers. With regards to autonomy, for instance, some papers considered it with respect to engaging in play under one’s own volition (e.g., [59, 98, 110]), while others focused on in-game autonomy, “the interesting options the game offers” [52, p. 36], where “players are provided with a lot of freedom in strategy planning and action selection” [140, p. 3166]. The definition provided by Birk and Mandryk synthesises these two perspectives: “CET proposes that the experience of autonomy derives from volition and willingness to perform a task. For example, multiple in-game options give players cause to experience autonomy through willing decision-making” [16, p. 686].

Other works provided more cryptic definitions, describing autonomy as “seek to be causal agents while maintaining congruence with the self” [95, p. 6], or referring to it as “a sense of freedom and independence” [90, 91] – although outside of games, autonomy and independence were found to be empirically distinct [37]. In one instance, autonomy was defined in terms that do not readily correspond to its conceptualisation in SDT: “Autonomy means the more in control of a situation a person feels, the more likely they are to succeed” [180, p. 230].

Similarly, we observed variations in SDT terminology, where the exact meaning was left unclear. For instance, Reinschluessel and Mandryk state that “the inability of participants to exert control over the avatar through self-regulation resulted in demotivation” [146, p. 194]. What is meant by “demotivation” remains ambiguous, however; the term is linked to specific electroencephalography parameters, yet no significant effects regarding various SDT-based measures (i.e., IMI, PENS) were observed. In another example, Rooksby et al. [155] refer to various SDT concepts (e.g., need satisfaction, internalisation), before focusing on “individual-competence” and “social-relatedness”, concepts they attribute to [148] – even though the latter does not mention these terms or SDT.

A curiously prevalent misconception emerged in the ways extrinsic motivation was conceptualised, particularly with respect to internalisation. First, extrinsic motivation was frequently conflated with *external regulation* [28, 29, 53, 66, 147] – its least self-determined form – for example, when defined as being “driven by external rewards” [53, p. 3]. Second, proximal definitions of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation sometimes failed to acknowledge that need satisfaction benefits both forms of motivation [21, 66, 97, 147], as in Kappen et al. [97, p. 7], who introduce internalisation before noting that “intrinsic motivation is facilitated when autonomy, competence, and relatedness—the three psychological needs of human motivation—are satisfied”.

#### *Measures*

Overall, 63.64% (n=70) of the reviewed papers employed at least one measuring instrument based on or adapted from SDT, although the rationales for doing so varied widely.

| Scale          | Subscale             | N  | %     |
|----------------|----------------------|----|-------|
| IMI<br>(n=44)  | interest/enjoyment   | 44 | 40.00 |
|                | effort/importance    | 25 | 22.73 |
|                | pressure/tension     | 26 | 23.64 |
|                | value/usefulness     | 3  | 2.73  |
|                | perceived competence | 15 | 13.64 |
|                | perceived choice     | 3  | 2.73  |
| PENS<br>(n=44) | competence           | 42 | 38.18 |
|                | autonomy             | 40 | 36.36 |
|                | relatedness          | 27 | 24.55 |
|                | presence/immersion   | 28 | 25.45 |
|                | intuitive controls   | 26 | 23.64 |

**Table 1. IMI and PENS use in HCI games research. Data do not sum to 100% (Sample N=110), as many papers use multiple measures.**

The Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (IMI) was used in 40.00% of the reviewed papers to assess intrinsic motivation or enjoyment (see Table 1). Almost half of these did not state reasons for using the IMI. Rationales otherwise referred to the scale's prior use in games research, independent validation, or other factors – for example, one study employed IMI subscales "...as additional dimensions rooted in SDT to augment the PENS results" [174, p. 5]. The most common citation to accompany the IMI describes an independent validation study from McAuley et al. [122], which may represent implicit justification for using the scale.

Notably, McAuley et al. [122] did not validate the full 42-item IMI (which is publicly available on the official SDT website [35]); instead, the authors pre-selected 4- and 5- item measures of interest/enjoyment, perceived competence, effort/importance, and pressure/tension for their analyses. Contra the scale authors, who consider interest/enjoyment "the self-report measure of intrinsic motivation" [35], McAuley et al. conclude on a factor analytic basis that intrinsic motivation is a function of the four IMI dimensions they assessed.

Crucially, these conflicting approaches to measuring and operationalising intrinsic motivation have quietly carried into the HCI games literature (only Phillips et al. [139, p. 4] appear to concede that "there are numerous versions of the measure, with minor variations to certain items"). Some scholars (e.g., [196, 62, 193]), in line with the scale authors, employed the interest/enjoyment dimension only. Others matched McAuley et al., operationalising intrinsic motivation as a function of interest/enjoyment, perceived competence, effort/importance, and pressure/tension (Table 1). One paper [1] describes using the Task Evaluation Questionnaire – a 22-item IMI variant listed in the official Scale Description document [35] – with attribution to Deci et al. [42], who used a different IMI variant. Finally, a minority of studies selected individual questionnaire items patterned after the IMI [72, 114, 115].

The PENS was employed in 40.00% of papers reviewed, with competence (38.18%) and autonomy (36.36%) dimensions most frequently assessed (Table 1). This likely reflects their centrality in CET. PENS use was often justified with respect to its apparent capacity to "explain" [16, 28], "assess" [84, 65], or "measure" [89, 197] player experience as a whole, where need satisfaction was referred to as a "core PX concept" [24]. Other reasons for employing the PENS included its use in

previous HCI games research (e.g., [83, 89]), its capacity to "directly inform game design decisions" [174, p. 5597] or by reference to other authors' claims of its utility – which, in one example, included the scale authors themselves [95].

A smaller number of papers explained their use of the PENS in greater detail. Phillips et al. [139, p. 396], for example, highlight that "player experience is multifaceted in nature, and no holistic measures exist [...] due to the large conceptual overlap between rewards and motivation, we opted to focus on player experience constructs that relate to self-determination theory". While not explicitly referring to SDT, a study on emotional challenge notes that "in PX research, challenge and competence are often considered to be related, albeit distinct constructs" [26, p. 4], suggesting the potential relevance of the PENS competence measure.

While the PENS and IMI were clearly the most popular SDT-based measures used, a total of 15 papers assessed SDT concepts by alternative means. Specifically, we observed the measurement of basic need satisfaction via the Ubisoft Perceived Experience Questionnaire (UPEQ) [108], Player Experience Inventory (PXI) [83], and Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction scale (BPNS) [54]; intrinsic motivation via measures of free-choice behaviour [17, 29, 112, 113], and scale items adapted from other measures [15, 133]; intrinsic and extrinsic motivations via the Situational Motivation Scale (SIMS) [2, 20, 87], Gaming Motivation Scale (GAMS) [170], and Exercise Self-Regulation Scale (SRQ-E) [86]; and autonomy support via the Sport Climate Questionnaire (SCQ) [6].

### Purposes for Citing SDT

Somewhat surprised by the limited explicit engagement with SDT mini-theories, and the fact that few of the reviewed papers provided a theory-driven rationale for employing SDT-based measures, we became interested in the reasons *why* SDT was cited, following similar endeavours on the uses of Activity Theory and the Trajectories Framework in HCI [38, 195]. We initially coded papers in our corpus according to the purposes of HCI theory outlined by Rogers [153], Bederson and Shneiderman [13] – for instance, using theory to "describe objects and actions in a consistent and clear manner to enable co-operation" [13, p. 239]. However, as these categorisations alone were not sufficiently granular, our analysis also examined where SDT was cited in the text (e.g., Related Work, Discussion), and to what extent each paper related their own work to the theory. Note that purposes for citing SDT were not mutually exclusive.

### Descriptive

Overall, the majority of papers (82.73%) treated SDT mainly in a descriptive manner, restating the core tenets – often cursorily only – without properly explicating or positioning them in the context of the work. Many of these "throwaway" citations [121] seemed rather tenuously related to the presented work, and in some cases tautological, as in "designing (the activity) to be intrinsically motivating through appealing to intrinsic motivation" [119, p. 377], or "Ryan et al. have demonstrated that video games can be a means of needs satisfaction because they allow players to experience competence, autonomy, and

relatedness” [69, p. 1581] – both the only statements linked to SDT in their respective papers.

As the previous section might suggest, several works chiefly cited SDT because they *employed SDT-based measures*, with few providing more than a (brief) description of the theoretical considerations underlying these questionnaires. Bowey et al. [28], for instance, employed the IMI and the PENS, and provide a relatively lengthy description of the corresponding concepts, noting that “The most prevalent model that explains player experience is the satisfaction of needs during play, which is part of the broader context of self-determination theory” [28, p. 1532]. However, SDT is not mentioned again in the paper. Indeed, few papers employing SDT-based measures brought up SDT in the Discussion section beyond a simple summary of their study findings; for example, “Player experience was also strongly affected [by latency], with substantial changes to enjoyment, frustration, perceived competence, and attribution as latency increased” [114, p. 293].

Papers that did not employ SDT-based measures appeared to cite SDT primarily as a means to *motivate the authors’ own work*. Hall et al. [77, p. 122], for instance, deployed SDT as Related Work to draw links between games and learning, commenting that “designing games to support autonomy, competence, relatedness [...] can help facilitate enjoyment, ongoing gameplay and consequently result in meaningful learning outcomes”. However, no further explanations of how game design might promote need satisfaction nor how it may enhance learning are provided, and SDT is not brought up again in the paper. Other papers only referred to SDT in their Discussion, perhaps with the intent to *situate their work within a well-established theoretical framework*; e.g., “Drawing from SDT [...] the appeal and well-being effects of video games are based in their potential to satisfy basic psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. [...] In a similar vein, our study showed how players developed negative emotions from the sense of loss of control in interactions with the complex game systems” [100, p. 9].

Notably, descriptive uses of SDT were not necessarily brief – several papers provided lengthy descriptions of SDT concepts and listed numerous SDT references. Kappen et al. [97], for instance, cite 12 SDT-based papers on games and physical exercise, yet eventually resort to a questionnaire that, according to the scale authors, “presents problems trying to embed the study of surface-level participation motives within self-determination theory” [118, p. 374].

#### *Explanatory*

Although the majority of papers engaged with SDT in a descriptive manner, several papers (27.27%) quoted SDT to provide *theoretical explanations that formed the starting point for their empirical investigations* – sometimes in conjunction with other theories (e.g., empowerment, flow, motive disposition theory, [73, 141, 174]). A few works formulated specific hypotheses derived from SDT or SDT-inspired studies [110, 174], or otherwise clearly built upon SDT propositions, e.g., “One interpretation is that autonomy is thwarted when playing for money and unimpeded when internalised by a sense of value from the task [...] Another interpretation is that different

types of rewards may have different behavioural or motivational outcomes. Examining the role that reward types play may better position future research exploring the impact of rewards” [139, p. 395]. In other instances, SDT’s relevance to the work was less clearly explicated; for example, citing competence satisfaction to explain the motivational benefits of exaggerated avatar movement in virtual reality: “Games can empower players beyond reality, [...] Such superhuman abilities can be argued to support basic psychological needs such as the feeling of competence (which) is also central to sport and exercise motivation” [72, p. 201].

However, the difference between descriptive and explanatory uses of SDT was not always obvious, as some papers provided post-hoc explanations of their findings – that is, it is unclear to what extent SDT figured into formulating the research question, before the study findings were known. For example, in explaining their findings in the context of their previous work on games and wellbeing, Johnson et al. note that “it is encouraging given that the PENS measure of relatedness is based on self-determination theory and hence, feelings of relatedness experienced during gameplay can be expected to contribute positively to overall wellbeing” [91, p. 3727].

Beyond explanation, two papers discussed the potential for SDT to *predict and simulate player motivation* in AI-based playtesting [73, 154]. However, Roohi et al. note that ““appraisal theory provides more clear concepts that can be implemented as AI code, although it might be less well known in the game research community than player type research or SDT” [154, p. 8], suggesting that more work is necessary to translate SDT propositions into AI models.

Importantly, explanatory engagement with SDT did not preclude theoretical misconceptions: Tondello et al., for instance, claim that “Especially, SDT provides the theoretical background for the Hexad model concerning the expression of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation” [180, p. 230]. However, statements such as “Players are motivated by extrinsic rewards. They will do whatever to earn a reward within a system, independently of the type of the activity” [180, p. 231] are not backed by SDT, nor have they been empirically supported by the Hexad authors through SDT-based measures.

#### *Design*

Several works (8.18%) cited SDT to *formulate design recommendations*, thereby employing the theory in a more prescriptive or even generative manner [13, 153]. However, some of these “Implications for Designers” remained fairly descriptive, as in the case of varying health bars so that “we can artificially manipulate competence, which has implications for perceived game difficulty” [202, p. 10], or “breaking” player autonomy, as “deliberately restricting player autonomy can make for an intensely emotional experience, when players care for characters” [24, p. 3003].

However, a few works explicitly “discuss how theories of motivation (and in particular SDT) were useful in encouraging a design focus that was broader than the individual, and furthermore this helped to guide very specific design decisions” [8, p. 3079]. The same authors later note, however, that “theory



offers little insight into identifying what will be motivating for an individual”. In contrast, Vanden Abeele et al. [188] appear more successful in applying SDT – among other work linked to intrinsic motivation (e.g., [117]) – to critically analyse an existing game design used to assess young children’s perception of acoustic stimuli, and inform their own (more motivating) design with the same aim; e.g., “To provide a way to increase learner control and autonomy, we added an extra scene [...] While this has no influence on the actual performance on the tests, this does give the child freedom of choice, and perhaps a feeling of control and autonomy” [188, p. 334].

SDT-inspired design considerations were not only concerned with *game* design, as in the case of Doderer et al., who drew from SDT to gamify the co-design process for school children: “Progression maps can also be used to connect with others and satisfy relatedness needs [...] and are available for sharing their co-design experience and acquired expertise” [61, p. 79].

Again, despite more in-depth engagement with SDT tenets, we observed some ambiguous statements among SDT-based implications for design. For instance, one paper describes points as “external rewards” that promote extrinsic regulation [21, p. 292], but in the discussion suggests promoting intrinsic motivation through “feedback in the form of scores, stars, or achievements to reinforce the experience of competence” [21, p. 299], without specifying the circumstances under which points might function as informational or controlling feedback.

#### *Conceptual*

Finally, two of the reviewed papers were notable for applying SDT to *develop and advance conceptual frameworks* of motivation in the context of games, play, and game-adjacent systems. First, several of the Hexad player types [130, 180] – despite certain theoretical misconceptions – are largely based on satisfaction of the needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, as well as extrinsic motivation. Second, Deterding [59] established a grounded theory of contextual autonomy support in leisurely play. Based on an extensive review of SDT and an interview study about leisurely and work-related game play, the model outlines concrete and empirically testable propositions about the impact of social, spatial, and temporal factors on autonomy satisfaction.

## **DISCUSSION**

Self-determination theory (SDT) constitutes one of the major motivational theories in mainstream psychology, and has increasingly risen to prominence in the domain of games research, as well as the games industry [7, 85, 189]. This paper has presented a review of 110 papers that cite self-determination theory to investigate how, why, and (ultimately) to what effect SDT has been mobilised to advance HCI games research. It is clear from our findings that SDT has had a substantial impact on HCI games research, as evidenced by the growing number of CHI and CHI Play papers that cite the theory. Key SDT concepts, such as intrinsic motivation and need satisfaction, are quoted across a range of research domains, methodologies and contributions – including design [6, 155], player modelling [40, 73], and gamified wellbeing interventions [20, 194]. Moreover, more than half of the reviewed papers employed SDT-based measures to investigate

aspects of the player experience. However, the majority of papers engage with SDT in a limited manner: mini-theories are rarely mentioned, and few works appear to consider theoretical propositions in detail.

Crucially, our review has established that HCI games research figures SDT less as a *theory*, and more as what Rogers [153] has described as a *paradigm* – “a set of practices that a community has agreed upon, (including) questions to be asked and how they should be framed; phenomena to be observed, how findings from studies are to be analyzed and interpreted” (p. 4). In the following, we integrate our findings – regarding *how* HCI games scholars employ SDT in research, *why* the theory is cited, and *what* is already known – to highlight conceptual gaps, and identify ways that HCI games research could employ SDT more productively in future.

### **How SDT Has Contributed to HCI Games Research**

While the citation numbers of the original SDT games papers [144, 166] hint at their impact, we were specifically interested in *how* SDT has contributed to HCI games research. First, HCI games scholars employ SDT to study a variety of topics, ranging from more common intersections such as player experience and gamification, but also AI player modelling, Feminist HCI, and in-game advertising. This variation in subject domains reflects the multiplicity of research conducted within HCI games research, and SDT’s suitability as a general framework for studying human activity [165].

Second, as our review shows, SDT has been useful for establishing a vocabulary to describe and discuss PX. SDT concepts, such as intrinsic motivation and need satisfaction, are often quoted to motivate novel research and broadly situate it within a well-known theoretical framework. Arguably, one of the major strengths of SDT is the provision of concepts that are intuitive to understand and relevant in the context of games, even for researchers (and reviewers) with no background in motivational psychology.

Third, HCI games research often turns to SDT for instrumental reasons – in particular, to employ the PENS or IMI as a measure of player experience. In light of the plurality of player experience measures [52, 93, 106, 124] – few of which have ever been formally validated – a set of commonly accepted measures is valuable for discussing and comparing findings across different studies and domains, and help establish a growing corpus of knowledge around HCI games research. Whereas prior reviews of HCI research on UX or game enjoyment observed a tendency towards unstandardised and ad-hoc measures in the literature [11, 124], the popular use of independently-validated instruments in our review indicates substantial progress in this area.

Lastly, beyond merely motivating the presented work, we observed a variety of ways in which SDT informed research and design. As expected from a scientific theory, several works posited specific hypotheses or otherwise formulated research questions derived from SDT, which were subsequently empirically examined – often using SDT-based measures. Moreover, several works applied SDT as a lens to formulate game design recommendations, inform the design process, or analyse

existing designs. This suggests that SDT may indeed also serve *practical* purposes [164] – although the resulting design recommendations may be more effective as fairly general best practices and heuristics [187] rather than what will be motivating to an individual [8, 141]. That said, our sample also included endeavours to translate SDT propositions into parameters that can be implemented into AI models to predict and simulate the player experience [73, 154]. Finally, SDT also formed the starting point for the development of conceptual frameworks around games and gamification [59, 180].

### Shallow Engagement with SDT

Surprisingly, given the aforementioned contributions, we observed that the majority of papers engage in a rather shallow manner with SDT. Few papers made explicit reference to SDT mini-theories and the majority of reviewed papers provided merely descriptive accounts of the theory, with SDT used as a stepping stone to the principal topics of study.

We also note that several papers we analysed were fraught with dubious (and often uncited) claims as to how individual game elements relate to SDT concepts (e.g., [82, 180]), in line with similar observations in the context of gamification research [116]. As noted earlier, SDT champions itself as being practical, in that “it points to how features of contexts [...] facilitate or undermine motivation” [164, p. 4]; and critical, as a means to “examine proximal social contexts [...] as well as more pervasive cultural, political, and economic conditions in terms of their adequacy in supporting versus impairing human thriving” [164, p. 4]. These strengths are not currently reflected in HCI games research. Indeed, the prevalence of incorrect or specious interpretations of SDT concepts and propositions is concerning – at worst, a tenuous grasp of SDT could produce misleading implications for the design and evaluation of games, play, and game-adjacent systems, with potentially adverse effects on player motivation and wellbeing.

The prevalence of the PENS and IMI in player experience literature may seem self-evident, given that the PENS was developed to capture aspects of PX [150], and the IMI is fairly well-established as a measure of game enjoyment [124]. However, despite their prevalent use, there is no consensus as to what phenomena the IMI and PENS are intended to capture: it remains unclear whether PENS measures of need satisfaction *constitute* PX, or rather its antecedents; separately, the field is split as to operationalising intrinsic motivation either as IMI interest/enjoyment alone, or additionally incorporating its effort, tension, and (potentially) perceived competence constructs. We highlight that consensus has remained elusive not as the result of cogent and well-considered arguments from all sides, but rather, the absence of such debate in HCI games literature. As noted earlier, the divergent views on the IMI originated in SDT, reflecting positions maintained by the scale authors [35, 164], relative to claims made in a widely-cited validation study [122]. Rather than arguing for either position, we emphasise here that this wholesale and undeclared adoption of a disagreement external to HCI games research has complicated comparisons of study findings between papers, and limited the pool of related work from which future studies may draw.

Curiously, even when SDT concepts are measured, the theory is rarely used to directly inform hypotheses or research questions, or to analyse results. Indeed, many publications in our review appear to primarily refer to SDT to motivate their own work, or provide post-hoc explanations for study findings. With regards to need satisfaction, for instance, many papers describing game design interventions assumed their changes would influence the player experience in some way. However, fewer papers provided an explanation as to *why* or *how* they expected the intervention to affect need satisfaction.

### Future Directions: How to Use SDT More Productively

Despite its contributions, SDT remains underutilised as a theory in HCI games research, and this limits our ability to more productively use prior work to inform research involving need satisfaction, motivation, and wellbeing. These are problematic outcomes that occur largely due to lack of engagement with the theory. However, our findings highlight a number of ways that HCI games research can apply SDT to strengthen research contributions and help develop incremental knowledge:

First, we recommend that authors more systematically contextualise their research questions and findings within existing SDT-based research, especially HCI games research. This does not necessarily require in-depth engagement with SDT’s propositions, rather it serves to clarify and synthesise findings. This can be achieved, for instance, by specifying whether one’s work focuses on autonomy as a function of the game design (e.g., the options that a game provides) or the context of play (e.g., fully volitional play vs playing for learning). Moreover, works that employ SDT-based measures, such as the IMI and PENS, can easily compare findings with previous studies that have used the same measures.

Second, HCI games researchers should more explicitly consider SDT to identify gaps in the games literature and formulate novel research questions. As noted, several of the reviewed studies implicitly assume that their designs and manipulations will impact motivation and need satisfaction in some way (e.g., [15, 29, 168]), but few explicate why they expect these results. Instead, SDT may be used to hypothesise (apriori) and explicate (post-hoc) why a particular game aspect of interest relates to the player experience. A recent SDT textbook [163], for example, lists concrete propositions for each of the concepts and mini-theories, which could be applied to games. Similarly, Deterding’s framework of contextual autonomy support [59], provides a series of explanatory and testable propositions that is consistent with SDT and directly applicable to games.

Third, several of the reviewed papers reported mixed or inconclusive findings with regards to SDT-based measures, e.g., [146]. However, rarely were theory-driven explanations considered when discussing these findings. Explicit engagement with SDT would facilitate identifying theoretical propositions that do *not* readily generalise to particular games or research contexts, or are of limited usefulness to the research aims. Future work can therefore avoid retreading old grounds, or consider other theoretical explanations. Importantly, SDT may also be fruitfully combined with other theories and epistemo-

logical frameworks, as evidenced by some of the reviewed works (e.g., [59, 73, 141, 174]).

Importantly, more in-depth engagement with SDT is not without risks. The Hexad questionnaire [180], for example, claims SDT as foundational literature, and refers to a number of its key concepts – intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, internalisation, and need satisfaction – however, the work exhibits a misleading, and at times incorrect grasp of the theory.

Conversely, authors should highlight when SDT is not of primary relevance to a study (e.g., when merely leveraging the strengths of the PENS or IMI), which frees up space for more relevant topics, and prevents readers from misconstruing the intention of the work. Generally speaking, it is worth identifying relevant theoretical propositions, and whether they can be productively used to inform and strengthen the intended contribution of the work. Where this is not the case, it is fair to resort to the established and fairly well validated measures without delving into the theoretical underpinnings.

### **Avenues for Future SDT-Based Games Research**

With few exceptions, engagement with SDT mini-theories in HCI games research is primarily implicit, in that core propositions and concepts are described as originating from “SDT” generally, or without mentioning the theory at all. Regardless of attribution, HCI games scholars mainly employ concepts from CET (e.g., intrinsic motivation) and basic psychological needs theory. The comparative lack of research involving organismic integration theory is surprising, given the popularity of gamification research (e.g., [53, 97, 110]) and the notion of external rewards (e.g., [139]) in HCI games literature: the value of more self-determined forms of extrinsic motivation for sustained engagement has been consistently demonstrated in internalisation research outside games [63, 134, 200]. As need satisfaction benefits intrinsic motivation and internalisation alike [161], it may be productive to investigate how the design of gamified systems can better support users’ ongoing progress towards important and self-congruent goals and outcomes. Notably, questionnaires that assess the different motivational regulations posited by OIT already exist within HCI [32, 136]. The hierarchical model of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation [185], which conceptualises relationships between motivation and need satisfaction at situational, contextual, and global levels, could inform existing HCI games research concerned with sustained engagement (e.g., [20]).

Relationships motivation theory [50] could also contribute to the development of novel and original hypotheses, adding to existing HCI games scholarship around online multiplayer games and social play (e.g., [89, 193]) – for example, eSports scholars could build from RMT-based studies of ingroup identity (e.g., [107]) to understand the ways that player, coach, and analyst behaviours support or erode team cohesion. RMT could also be applied to research on livestreaming players and the audience communities formed around them; alternatively, the mini-theory could be extended to investigate the relationships that human players often form with (virtual) game characters, following recent work in this area [25, 183].

Research concerning autonomy is surprisingly uncommon in HCI games literature, despite its theoretical importance (i.e.,

to SDT) and complexity. It is notable that Deterding’s context-sensitive model of player autonomy [59] – a rare example of serious engagement with the theory that raises questions around its application to games and play – is yet to see substantial use in HCI games research. The obvious research opportunity here is for HCI games scholars to simply *validate the model* (e.g., with quantitative methods); moreover, a number of questions posed in the work regarding when, how, and why players experience autonomy satisfaction and frustration are yet to be explored in detail.

### **Limitations of the Literature Review**

As mentioned in the review method, we only focused on HCI games flagship venues. For instance, thereby omitting relevant work on SDT and games in media psychology (e.g., [135, 178]), gamification (e.g., [125, 167]), and player behavior modelling [126]. We note that games research outside of HCI may similarly lack sufficient engagement with SDT, as noted by previous work in the context of gamification [116, 169]. Moreover, in light of many of the reviewed papers in our corpus engaging with SDT in a cursory manner only, a more in-depth analysis of theory use – akin to the ones by Clemmensen et al. on applications of Activity Theory in HCI [38] and Velt et al. on the Trajectories framework [195] – was not possible. Assessing how and to what ends SDT has been applied in games research outside of CHI and CHI PLAY, or within different HCI domains (e.g., User Experience [32, 105]), could help uncover as of yet untapped avenues for future work.

### **CONCLUSION**

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) has increasingly risen to prominence in HCI games research. Our review of 110 CHI and CHI PLAY paper showcases that SDT has been applied across a wide variety of domains, disciplines and research contributions. Concepts such as intrinsic motivation and need satisfaction are considered core to the player experience and contribute to a shared vocabulary for discussing what makes games engaging. Moreover, the availability of standardised SDT-based measures, such as the IMI and PENS, facilitate empirical research and further popularise these concepts. Despite this popularity, however, prominent SDT concepts and mini-theories are rarely considered explicitly, and few papers engage with SDT beyond descriptive accounts. This is problematic for three reasons: First, it risks the proliferation of theoretical inconsistencies and misconceptions, which undermine the benefits of a shared vocabulary and could result in misleading and invalid research findings. Second, more in-depth engagement with the theoretical underpinnings of SDT-based concepts and measures would facilitate incremental knowledge gains, comparison between works, and integrating seemingly disparate research strands. Third, the propositions posited by the various SDT mini-theories (e.g., CET, OIT) provide largely untapped potential to advance empirical and conceptual research, thereby ultimately contributing to a deeper and more systematic understanding of human-computer interaction in the context of games, play and game-adjacent systems.

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