

Understanding Adolescent Emotional Experiences During Gameplay: Insights from Participatory Design Workshops

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Abstract

Video game play is ubiquitous among adolescents, exposing them to emotionally dynamic experiences that require ongoing regulation. Understanding how adolescents experience and regulate emotions during gameplay is therefore critical to understanding the broader implications of games for their wellbeing. Yet existing work faces a methodological trade-off, struggling to capture both fast-paced gameplay dynamics and rich qualitative accounts of lived experience. As a first step, we conducted a pair of exploratory participatory design (PD) workshops with six adolescents aged 15–17. Emerging findings suggest that adolescents struggle to articulate emotions during gameplay, indicating that emotion terms alone may not capture the richness of their lived experience. Participants described emotion regulation as an active, context-dependent process tied to social and gameplay goals, underscoring the value of studying it in naturalistic settings. They also emphasised capturing emotion in minimally disruptive ways that preserve the flow of play. These findings offer preliminary methodological considerations for studying adolescent gameplay emotion.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → *Empirical studies in HCI*; **Participatory design**; • **Social and professional topics** → **Adolescents**.

Keywords

Participatory Design, Emotion, Emotion Regulation, Adolescents, Video Games, Gameplay Experiences, Research Methods

ACM Reference Format:

Isabel Georgia Miller, Bettina Moltrecht, Yifan Feng, and Aneesha Singh. 2026. Understanding Adolescent Emotional Experiences During Gameplay: Insights from Participatory Design Workshops. In *Companion Proceedings of the Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play (CHI PLAY*

Companion '26), November 02–05, 2026, York, United Kingdom. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 7 pages. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3800965.3834314>

1 INTRODUCTION

Video games are emotionally dynamic contexts in which >80% of teens spend hours every week [15, 27]. Games are both purposefully designed to elicit emotional reactions, but also contexts in which unexpected, challenging emotions can arise. The immersive and interactive nature of video games positions them not merely as pastimes, but as meaningful digital spaces that shape adolescent development. In particular, it is critical to understand how the rise in video game use may influence emotion regulation (ER) skills, as adolescence represents a key developmental stage for ER with important implications for wellbeing outcomes [2, 21, 25, 25]. In video games, players must manage the fluctuating emotional experiences within the game environment, where the affordances of the game shape which strategies are available. As a result, the video game context both influences the need to regulate, and how teens might be able to regulate. While research suggests that players actively engage with games to regulate their emotions [28, 36, 39], little is known about the specific strategies adolescents employ in-game, and the emotions they aim to upregulate or downregulate. This leaves a critical gap in understanding how game design factors may aid or hinder the selection and execution of emotion regulation strategies. Identifying the game-induced emotions adolescents are experiencing and regulating is crucial to improving our understanding of the broader impacts of video games on adolescent wellbeing and development, and informing future research and intervention design. However, current methods for studying emotions and ER in daily life may not be suitable for capturing the fast-paced, immersive, and interactive nature of teenage video gameplay. As such, there is a need for novel, context-sensitive assessment methodologies that can capture in-situ gameplay ER while being minimally disruptive and specific to the adolescent gaming experience.

This paper presents the preliminary findings from an initial set of exploratory participatory workshops, aiming to collaboratively explore how emotional gameplay experiences and emotion regulation during gameplay might be captured in ecologically valid ways. In doing so, we aim to provide a first step toward understanding the



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ACM ISBN 979-8-4007-2565-4/26/11
<https://doi.org/10.1145/3800965.3834314>

design implications and methodological considerations involved in capturing adolescent emotional experiences and emotion regulation during gameplay. We address the overarching research question: **What are the key considerations for capturing adolescents' emotions and ER during video game play?** Specifically, we explore (1) **what emotion constructs** are important to capture, and how can adolescents' lived experiences be represented authentically, (2) **what gameplay contexts** trigger emotions and are associated with ER engagement during play, and what implications do these have for future research and methodological tools, and (3) **how can we capture** these experiences alongside adolescent gameplay in an accurate, meaningful and non-disruptive way. These considerations were operationalised as the research questions guiding this exploratory study: **RQ1:** How do adolescents describe and make sense of emotions experienced during video game play and ER?, **RQ2:** When do adolescents experience emotions and engage in ER during gameplay?, **RQ3:** What preferences, expectations, and concerns do adolescents express regarding methods for capturing emotions during gameplay?

2 RELATED WORK

Historically, video game research has widely explored the potential negative impacts of video game play, such as increased aggression, antisocial behaviour, and addiction [3, 12, 13, 24, 33]. However, recent studies suggest that moderate amounts of video game play can support emotional wellbeing, emotional stability, prosocial behaviours, and social and emotional skill development [16, 18–20, 32]. In particular, a growing body of literature suggests that players engage with games not only for entertainment, but also for mood repair and ER. Studies have shown that video games can reduce negative mood, decrease stress, and help even teach adaptive ER strategies [7, 26, 35, 36, 39]. Despite this growing literature, much of the existing research on ER in games has focused on video games as a tool for regulating emotions that arise outside the game context [16, 39], rather than examining how players regulate the emotions experienced within the games themselves. Furthermore, this area of research remains underexplored in adolescent populations, despite both the prevalence of gaming at this age, and the likelihood that motivations and behaviours in gameplay differ during this developmental stage [34, 39]. As such, we lack insight into which emotional experiences and regulatory behaviours are most meaningful to adolescents during gameplay, how these experiences contribute to ER skill development, and whether these skills transfer beyond the game context. Investigating these processes is crucial to developing a more comprehensive understanding of the role video games play in adolescent wellbeing.

Researchers have employed a wide range of methods to investigate emotional experiences during gameplay, each offering different trade-offs between capturing emotions as they occur and understanding how players make sense of those experiences. Laboratory-based approaches commonly use psychophysiological measures or validated self-report scales to capture emotional responses in real time [5, 6, 9, 14, 30]. Furthermore, many commonly used measures focus on a restricted set of emotions or ER strategies, potentially overlooking the breadth and complexity of emotional experiences

that emerge during gameplay [1, 2]. While these methods provide valuable insight into moment-to-moment emotional states, they often require controlled settings, specialised equipment, and researcher involvement that may alter natural gameplay behaviours. Furthermore, because they typically rely on predefined emotional constructs, they are less suited to exploring how participants themselves define, interpret, and describe their emotional experiences. In contrast, qualitative and retrospective approaches, including interviews, diary studies [26, 36, 38, 40], and content analyses of online forums [23, 29], provide rich contextual understanding of players' experiences, but rely on recollection and interpretation of past events, introducing recall bias, peak-end effect [17, 30], limiting access to emotional and regulatory processes as they unfold. Although ecological and electronic momentary assessment approaches may help address some of these limitations [10, 37], their suitability for gameplay contexts remains unclear, particularly given the frequency, rapidity, and contextual nature of emotional experiences during play.

Overall, this current state of the literature highlights a broader challenge of understanding not only how emotional experiences and ER can be captured during gameplay, but also which aspects of these experiences should be captured in the first place. In order to address this challenge, we utilised Participatory Design (PD) methods to explore approaches for capturing emotions and ER in gameplay that are grounded in adolescents' lived experiences. PD offers an alternative to traditional qualitative methods by positioning participants as active contributors rather than passive respondents. This is particularly valuable when studying adolescents, as conventional methods may struggle to fully engage young people or capture their perspectives in ways that reflect their lived experiences [31]. Prior work has shown that involving adolescents in design activities can surface insights that may otherwise be overlooked by adult researchers and produce outcomes that better reflect young people's values, interests, and experiences [4, 11]. Given the complexity, contextual nature, and subjective interpretation of emotional experiences during gameplay, adolescents themselves are well-positioned to provide insight into both the experiences that matter and the challenges of capturing them. Therefore, involving adolescents directly through PD approaches will not only empower adolescents to contribute meaningfully to this research, but also centres their perspectives in identifying how best to capture their game experiences and ER occurrences during play.

3 METHOD

In order to address the research questions, we adopted an exploratory participatory design approach, using collaborative workshop activities to facilitate discussion, reflection, and creative expression. This approach positioned adolescents as experts in their own gaming and emotional experiences, enabling them to share their perspectives and collectively inform the design requirements and preferences for future methods of capturing emotions during gameplay.

3.1 Study Design

3.1.1 Recruitment and Ethics. Participants were recruited through a local youth centre, and all workshops were conducted in person at the centre, providing a familiar and informal environment, intended to support recruitment and mitigate perceived researcher–participant power imbalances [31]. Participants were eligible for inclusion if they were between the ages of 14–18, and played video games in any capacity. Participants were asked to attend both workshops, each designed for four to seven participants and lasting 60–90 minutes. Upon recruitment, participants provided basic demographic information (age, school year, and gender), which were considered sufficient for the purposes of this study. Participants received a voucher for each workshop attended as compensation for their time. All participants provided informed consent, with parental consent obtained for those under 16. The study received approval from the University College London Research Ethics Committee.

3.1.2 Workshop 1: How do games make us feel? Workshop 1 (WS1) addressed research questions 1 & 2, exploring the emotions adolescents sought and avoided during gameplay, and how participants described and conceptualised them. Following a brief introduction and ice-breaker, participants collaboratively created two emotion mind maps reflecting emotions experienced during video game play and the game elements that triggered them. The first mind map (MM1) documented emotions participants sought during gameplay ("When I play video games I sometimes want to feel..."), while the second (MM2) captured emotions they aimed to avoid ("When I play video games I sometimes don't want to feel..."). Participants were encouraged to express emotions freely using a range of expressive materials, including coloured pens, drawings, emoji stickers, and meme stickers, to support richer articulation of emotional experiences and intensity. After completing the mind maps, participants were asked to select six emotions that they felt best captured their gameplay experience. Finally, researchers facilitated a group discussion to encourage deeper reflection.

3.1.3 Workshop 2: How can we measure ER in gameplay? Workshop 2 (WS2) addressed research question 3, exploring teenagers' preferences, expectations, and concerns regarding methods of capturing their emotions during video game play. Participants were encouraged to critique existing approaches, and collaboratively generate ideas for alternative methods, positioning participants as active contributors whilst directly addressing RQ3. Participants were firstly introduced to existing approaches for measuring emotions and ER, before taking part in a participatory design activity in which they generated and developed design concepts. Building on a discussion of methodologies for capturing emotion and ER, participants engaged in an ideation exercise to develop concepts for a tool to capture their emotional experiences during gameplay. Participants individually generated 8 design ideas for a novel method to capture emotional experiences during video game play, using the crazy 8s ideation method [22]. This supported the rapid exploration of multiple design possibilities in a structured and accessible format, encouraging participants to generate and develop their own ideas individually, before a group discussion. After sharing and discussing their initial designs, each participant selected one of

their concepts to refine, and constructed a prototype using materials provided (sponges, pipe cleaners, lollipop sticks, card, paper, and glue). Prototypes were then presented to the group to gather feedback and facilitate collaborative reflection, with a discussion led by the researcher.

3.1.4 Follow-up Interviews. Two follow-up interviews were conducted with consenting participants to explore individual gaming experiences in greater depth. The interviews also highlighted limitations in the workshop methodology, informing refinements for subsequent workshops.

3.1.5 Data collection, processing and analysis. Workshops were led by the first author, supported by the third author. Data gathered across the study included audio recordings of the 90-minute workshops and 30-minute interviews, which were transcribed by hand for analysis. Additionally, photographs were taken of the physical artefacts from WS1 and WS2. The resulting data was multimodal, comprising transcripts, written artefacts, and design materials, and was analysed through a triangulation of inductive thematic analysis [8], affinity mapping, and artefact analysis. Initial codes were inductively generated from the workshop discussions, participant-created artefacts, and interview transcripts. These codes were iteratively reviewed, grouped, and refined to identify preliminary patterns across the dataset.

4 FINDINGS

Six participants attended the workshops, and two attended the follow-up interviews. Full participant demographics, including attendance, can be seen in Table 1. Throughout this paper, participants are identified using pseudonyms (PM = male participant; PF = female participant). Study images of the physical data outputs from WS1 and WS2 are shown in Figure 1.

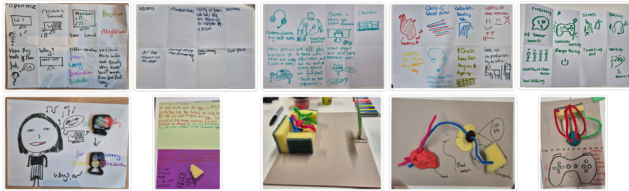
Here we present the emerging findings from the initial workshops and two follow-up interviews, synthesised according to the research questions. As this paper reports findings from an initial set of workshops, the resulting themes represent preliminary methodological consideration that will continue to be developed through engagement with subsequent data collection and analysis in future work.

Table 1: Participant demographics and study participation. N/A indicates information that participants elected not to disclose. WS1 = Workshop 1, WS2 = Workshop 2, Int. = Interview

ID	Age	School Year	Gender	WS1	WS2	Int.
PM1	17	Year 13	Male	✓	✓	✓
PM2	15	N/A	Male	✓	✓	
PM3	15	Year 10	Male	✓	✓	✓
PM4	16	Year 12	Male	✓	✓	
PM5	16	N/A	Male	✓		
PF1	15	Year 10	Female		✓	



(a) WS1 physical data



(b) WS2 physical data

Figure 1: Physical data collected during WS1 and WS2.

4.1 RQ1: How do adolescents describe and make sense of the emotions they experience in video game play and how they regulate them?

Findings from the workshops and interviews highlight the contextual and nuanced nature of teens' emotional experiences during gameplay. Participants described a wide range of emotions arising from different gameplay situations, sharing a total of 55 unique emotion words across both mind maps in WS1 ($MM2=33$, $MM1=23$) (Figure 2). This work also revealed insights into how participants articulated and communicated these experiences, raising important considerations for researchers seeking to measure these experiences in ecologically valid ways.

A good kind of anger. Firstly, participants demonstrated that singular emotion terms can encompass multiple and distinct emotional states, emotional intensities, and gameplay experiences. Two emotion terms, "anger" and "powerful", appeared across both MM1 and MM2 (Figure 2), yet participants described them as qualitatively different experiences. For example, anger participants wanted to feel was associated with focus, ambition, and success, whereas anger they aimed to avoid was characterised as disruptive and a barrier to success: MM1: "Anger helps with focus", MM2: "makes me feel unfocused and naive or not think things through". Similar contradictory patterns emerged across other emotional experiences, with participants continuously expressing a desire to balance emotions during gameplay across the mind maps: wanting to feel "excited" but not feel "too excited", "isolated" but not "alone", and "superior" but not "overconfident". These parallels suggest that adolescents' emotional experiences during gameplay involve an ongoing balancing act, with participants continually regulating and calibrating their emotional states to achieve both affective and gameplay-related goals.

"It's not really rage, it's something a bit more, I just don't know how to describe it". Participants reported sometimes struggling to find the words to describe their feelings. In several cases,

participants expressed uncertainty when attempting to label their emotional experience, often reflecting and adjusting words as they spoke: "If I can't do it I feel sad.. not sad, disappointed, because I couldn't do it. A bit frustrated." (PM1). When discussing their emotional experiences, participants often struggled to identify emotions and only used basic, broad labels. However, when prompted with the additional materials, including lists of emotion words and meme stickers, participants were able to draw on these prompts and relate these experiences to their own, identifying feelings from specific gameplay moments. These prompts enabled participants to elaborate on the breadth of emotional experiences they had in games, and aided in their reflection and expression. Together, these examples suggest that while participants were able to recognise their emotional experiences in gameplay, articulating these experiences was sometimes challenging, and prompts aided in the reflection, identification, and reporting of these feelings.

"I am already traumatised". Finally, emerging results suggest that some terms were used by teens in ways that differ from traditional psychological definitions. For example, using the term "traumatised" to describe a mildly uncomfortable game experience. This causal nature was also depicted in the memes chosen to be used alongside certain words, either downplaying or exaggerating the interpretation of their intensity.

4.2 RQ2: When do teenagers experience emotions and engage in ER during gameplay?

Our data shows that adolescent emotional experiences and regulatory behaviours in gameplay are shaped by interconnected social, gameplay, and achievement-related factors. Participants' emotional experiences were embedded within these overlapping contexts, which influenced both the emotional experience and how they were regulated. As such, they provide important insight into the contexts that future work should seek to capture when investigating and measuring emotional experiences and ER in gameplay.

"No matter what game you play, if you play with friends it's going to turn fun". Social interaction emerged as a central component of gameplay experiences and a key intensifier of emotions. Participants described multiplayer games as environments for deeper connections and shared experiences: "We can just be chatting about really deep topics" (PM4), with social engagement also being shown to influence game preferences, with games becoming more appealing when widely adopted within their peer groups. However, these social experiences also introduced emotional complexity and regulatory demands, with tensions arising from skill imbalances, perceived responsibility from and towards teammates, and trolling and unpredictable peer behaviour online. As PM1 noted, "[fear of messing up in the game] is much greater with friends, because [...] you don't know if they're going to forgive you.". Participants also described regulating emotions through social interaction online, including suppressing emotions to fit in socially or relying on friends for emotional support: "If I am angry then sometimes I will just ignore it so my friends do not laugh at me".

"Anger creates ambition, ambition leads to success". Achievement-related outcomes also played a significant role in shaping emotional experiences and regulation. Participants frequently linked emotions

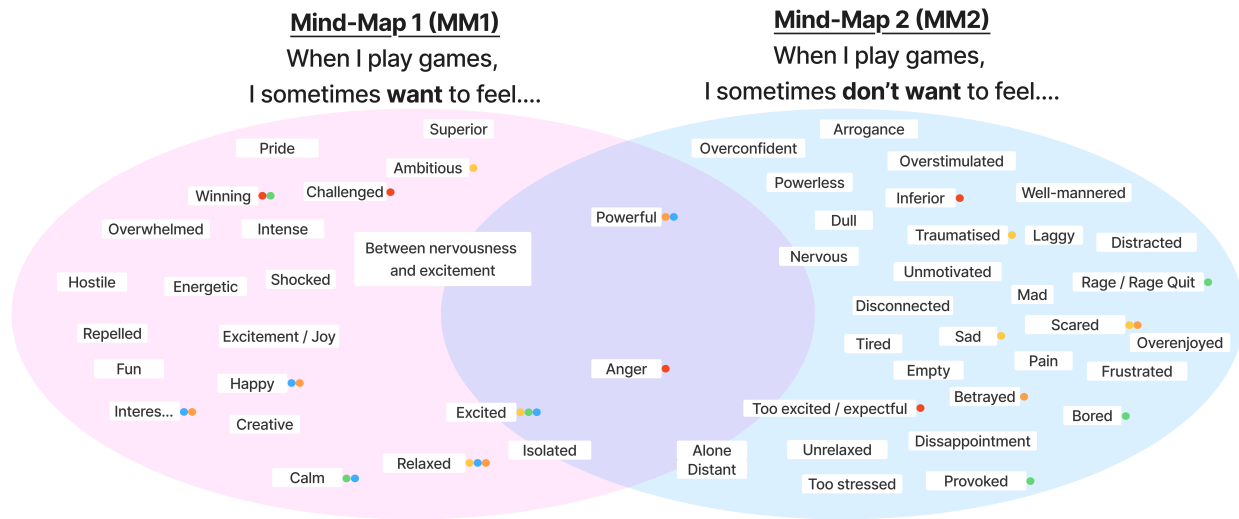


Figure 2: Unique emotion terms generated by participants in Workshop 1 (WS1) across Mind-Map 1 (MM1) and/or Mind-Map 2 (MM2). Coloured dots indicate each participant's six most essential emotions that best summarised their gameplay experience, with each colour representing a different participant.

to performance, describing positive emotions when meeting goals and negative emotions when failing to do so. These experiences were often socially situated, shaped by concerns around competence, status, power, and comparison with peers: *"If you mess up so badly, they are going to be mad at you"* (PM1). Participants also described regulating emotions both in anticipation of outcomes and in response to them, at times accepting negative emotions as necessary for improvement or success. As PM1 explained, *"You don't want to do it, but you just have to"*. Participants further reflected that gameplay involved an expected balance of positive and negative emotions, with emotional experiences shaped not only by isolated events, but by how these experiences met with their expectations of gameplay: *"I kind of go in expecting this, either over-joy, or over-rage"*.

"Why did I pay £5 just for this useless deck" Finally, participants highlighted how game design features and perceived investment influenced emotional responses and regulation. Emotional intensity increased when participants felt they had invested significant time or money into a game, particularly when gameplay failed to meet expectations or desired outcomes: *"When I don't get the results I wanted after a very long time. This leads to universal rage"* (PM1). Participants also described regulating emotional responses to avoid damaging gaming equipment or wasting financial investment, suggesting that emotional experiences during gameplay are shaped not only by mechanics and outcomes, but also by perceived personal value and commitment to the game.

Overall, these findings establish that participants' emotions and regulatory behaviours were shaped not only by gameplay itself, but by interconnected factors, highlighting the importance of understanding and capturing adolescents' emotional experiences in gameplay within their broader and natural gameplay context.

4.3 RQ3: What preferences, expectations, and concerns do adolescents express regarding methods for capturing emotions during gameplay?

Finally, this study identified preliminary insights into the preferences and concerns adolescents express regarding methods for capturing these experiences. The findings highlight the importance of recognising emotions as multimodal experiences, minimising disruption to naturalistic gameplay, and accounting for the contextual factors that shape both emotional expression and its interpretation.

Beyond self-report. Participants conceptualised gameplay emotions as experiences expressed through a range of observable cues, extending beyond verbal self-report. In WS2, participants proposed a range of behavioural, physiological, social, and gameplay-related indicators that could communicate emotional experiences during play. These included voice-related cues (e.g. swearing barometers, or volume detectors), gameplay behaviours (e.g. typing or hitting the controls faster or harder), and bodily expression such as posture, facial expressions and body movement (Figure 1b). The breadth of proposed indicators suggests that adolescents perceive emotions as being expressed through multiple channels, highlighting opportunities to explore a wider range of approaches for capturing emotional experiences during gameplay.

Preserving naturalistic gameplay experiences. Participants consistently emphasised that emotion measurement tools should not interfere with naturalistic gameplay experiences. Concerns centred on methods that disrupted gameplay, distracted attention, or required players to move away from existing controls: *"You wouldn't really want to take your eyes off of the game"*. These concerns emerged both directly in discussion and indirectly through participants' design decisions, such as proposing passive systems

that required minimal user input, or integration into existing gaming hardware and routines, reducing additional effort or disruption. Participants also express concerns that observation could alter naturalistic gameplay and emotional behaviours. As PF1 shared: *"You probably might suppress most of your emotions. [...] If it's being measured you'd probably want to look good"*. PM3 similarly described concerns about feeling "awkward" or unable to behave naturally when being observed by a researcher. Finally, participants emphasised the importance of contextual understanding when interpreting emotional experiences during play. PM3, for example, noted that *"the researcher has to learn more about you"* in order to better understand their behaviours, highlighting the perceived need for research familiarity with player context to support accurate interpretation of emotional states.

5 DISCUSSION AND FUTURE WORK

These findings offer emerging insights into adolescents' emotional experiences and regulation during gameplay, approaches to capturing these authentically, and early methodological reflections for HCI research with teenagers. These insights have several implications for the design of future approaches to capturing emotions in adolescent gameplay.

Firstly, we found that adolescents are not simply experiencing emotions during gameplay, but actively regulating them. Participants described seeking some emotional experiences while avoiding others, and often sought to balance emotional states in ways that supported both social and gameplay-related goals. These findings support existing work suggesting that ER plays an important role in gaming experiences and highlight the value of exploring adolescents' lived experiences of regulation and the motivations underlying regulatory behaviour [26]. These findings emphasise the importance of continuing to investigate adolescents' emotional experiences and emotion regulation during gameplay, including the advancement of methodological approaches that can capture these experiences as they naturally unfold.

This study also highlights the importance of context when seeking to understand and capture ER in games. Participants' emotional experiences and regulatory behaviours were closely tied to social interactions, achievement-related concerns, and personal investment in gameplay. While retrospective methods, including those used in this study, provide valuable opportunities for reflection, they can only offer a partial account of experiences as remembered by participants. Capturing emotional experiences closer to the moment they occur may therefore provide richer insight into regulatory processes as they unfold. However, participants emphasised that such approaches should be minimally intrusive and preserve natural gameplay experiences. Future methods should therefore prioritise "in-the-wild" and "in-situ" approaches that integrate seamlessly into existing gameplay practices while maintaining the contextual richness of emotional experiences.

Finally, the findings illustrate the importance of hearing directly from adolescents about their emotional experiences. Although participants described a wide range of emotions, they did not always find these experiences easy to articulate, often relying on examples, prompts, and discussion to refine their understanding. This suggests that reducing emotions to predefined labels or categories risks

oversimplifying adolescents' experiences and may fail to capture their intended meaning. The methodological choices used within these workshops may provide useful insight into addressing this challenge. In particular, the meme-based prompts acted as effective scaffolds for recall and elaboration, helping participants identify and communicate emotional experiences that may have been difficult to express through direct questioning alone. Findings also suggest the importance of allowing adolescents opportunities to reflect on, revisit, and expand upon their reported experiences. As such, multimodal forms of expression may better support adolescents in communicating the richness and complexity of their emotional experiences compared to approaches relying exclusively on predefined self-report measures or physiological sensing alone.

5.1 Future work

Overall, this work-in-progress presents early insights into adolescents' emotional experiences and ER during gameplay, providing an initial foundation for future research and methodological development in this area.

Based on reflections from this study, future work will repeat the workshops with a larger participant sample to strengthen validity and reduce the influence of individual variation, while incorporating several refinements informed by this initial study. Most notably, we will explore participants' own desires, goals, and expectations regarding the measurement and reflection of emotions in video games, in order to better understand whether there is a genuine user need or desire to capture this data. In addition, modifications will be made to the design ideation stage of the workshops in order to address participant challenges in understanding and completing the design activities within the timeframe. In doing so, the broader work aims to identify how adolescents' emotional experiences and regulatory behaviours can be authentically represented and captured during natural gameplay, generating design implications guiding future research within both child-computer interaction and games research.

Acknowledgments

We thank our participants and the staff at The Reach Youth Centre for their invaluable support with recruitment, facilitation, and ongoing engagement throughout this project.

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