Too Much / Not Enough: The Theory Behind the Game

Mycelios

Core thesis

Self-reflection is a vital human capability, yet conventional reflective practice is largely inaccessible. Direct introspection often feels intimidating, time-consuming, or emotionally unsafe. In personal contexts, practices like journaling require high focus that many individuals struggle to maintain. Mycelios addresses this challenge through Too Much / Not Enough (TM/NE), a reflection game designed to make inner experience visible, tactile, and accessible through low-friction, repeatable, and fun reflective actions.

The foundational thesis of TM/NE is that structured play can reconnect people with their intrinsic motivation, turning self-reflection into a doable, engaging process. The game aims to achieve this transformation in four ways, integrating research across humanistic economics, cognitive psychology, and game design theory.

1. Grounding in fundamental needs

Player inquiry is grounded in human needs frameworks, ensuring that reflection addresses authentic drivers of human experience. TM/NE draws primarily on Chilean economist Manfred Max-Neef's (1986, 1991) Human Scale Development framework. Max-Neef establishes that fundamental human needs, such as Subsistence, Protection, Affection, Understanding, Participation, Idleness, Creation, Identity, and Freedom, are finite, universal, and constant across cultures and historical eras. He argues that what varies across societies and individuals is the manner in which these needs are satisfied.

TM/NE adapts Max-Neef's taxonomy, spanning physical, mental, and social dimensions, and explicitly introduces mourning as a fundamental need to honor endings, losses, and transitions. By grounding reflection in fundamental human needs rather than transient symptoms or external expectations, the system ensures that player inquiry targets root underlying drivers of thought and action.

2. Cognitive offloading

Introspective reflection imposes significant demands on working memory, which cannot hold, evaluate, and reorganize more than 10 abstract concepts at a time. TM/NE mitigates this through

cognitive offloading, a phenomenon defined by Risko and Gilbert (2016) as the physical or environmental reduction of internal information-processing demands.

By projecting complex psychological states onto physical life-experience cards, players perform what Kirsh and Maglio (1994) classify as epistemic actions: physical movements undertaken to alter cognitive demands rather than merely advance pragmatic goal states. In other words, a player does not need to remember which areas of life feel overburdened; the physical distribution of cards in the "Too Much" pile visually demonstrates the imbalance, allowing focus to move towards pattern recognition and insight generation. Stated another way, sorting cards into piles allows players to transform abstract mental friction into visual patterns that can be rearranged, examined, and evaluated without mental exhaustion.

3. Ritual progression

To allow honest self-evaluation, the game system creates an environment isolated from real-world consequences and social evaluation. TM/NE constructs this container by adopting the three-phase ritual architecture articulated by van Gennep (1909) and Turner (1969):

1. *Separation:* Narrative welcome letters and physical table-clearing establish a distinct boundary, signaling to the participant that normal social rules and pressures are suspended.
2. *Transition (liminality):* Card sorting occurs within a liminal zone where arrangements are temporary and non-binding.
3. *Return:* Reading the closing character toast and choosing one carry-forward action re-anchors the participant in everyday reality, equipped with additional clarity.

This ritual process operates within Huizinga's (1938) concept of the "magic circle," a safe, enclosed arena governed by voluntary rules where players enter and exit entirely by choice.

4. Intrinsic motivation

Traditional reflection frameworks often rely on extrinsic pressure or overwhelming action lists. TM/NE aligns its output mechanics with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan et al., 2006) and Freirean praxis (Freire, 1970; Fals Borda, 1978). The game system supports the three core psychological needs of Self-Determination Theory:

- *Autonomy:* Players maintain absolute control over card placement, interpretations, voluntary skips, and final takeaway selection.
- *Competence:* Eliminating fail states and score tracking shifts focus from performance to self-efficacy.
- *Relatedness:* The letter and toasts provide a companionable presence without intrusive or prescriptive advice.

This motivational foundation enables authentic praxis, a meaningful and continuous cycle of action and critical reflection. In TM/NE, players systematically analyze their current life circumstances, evaluate imbalances, explore generative themes, and select concrete insights to carry back into daily life.

About Mycelios

Mycelios creates games that make self-reflection safe, lightweight, and doable. By using physical game pieces for cognitive offloading within a three-phase ritual structure (separation, transition, and return), players can safely externalize complex inner worlds and gain meaningful, autonomous insights without the pressure of scoring or judgment.

References

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