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Behavioral Strategies for Changing Situations

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Abstract

This article sheds light on the changes to play habits when there is not as much time or possibilities to play as before. The research is based on a survey and interviews of Finnish former active players, who now played less or had quit some game types they used to enjoy. Most of the respondents still played something, but the playing had changed on the level of games, playstyles, time management, and context. These changes were then used as behavioral strategies to keep gaming as a part of the changing lives: shifting to lighter options, integrating playing into everyday life, redefining co-play, and focusing on opportunities. The results highlight the complexity and continuity of the changes and negotiations, and further hint at how the borders of casual and hardcore playing are fluid and mixed. This complexity and fluidity of play should be the starting point of a game design that must be heard in the public and academic discourses around gaming.

Keywords

Lapsed players; casual play; casual games; changes; digital games; analog games; leisure studies

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As people grow older and get more life experience and more responsibilities, their relationship with their hobbies changes. Hobbies get left behind, new ones are started, and old ones are replaced with something else (Iso-Ahola, Jackson & Dunn, 1994). Sometimes when faced with obstacles that limit the time for leisure, people behave reactively and might end up abandoning hobbies they once enjoyed. At other times, barriers are negotiated successfully, and people are able to continue their hobbies as before. The negotiation can also be partially successful and lead to adjusting the hobby to the new situation. Rather than being a strict binary of discontinue/continue, the level at which the person participates is affected and different strategies are used (Jackson, Crawford & Godbey, 1993).

Game playing is an activity that is typically affected by changing living situations. Games can become an important part of a person's identity, and the lack of resources can lead to difficult negotiations. The reasons for the diminished role for gaming may be caused by the clash between the demands of the games and the responsibilities players have. Taking care of family and home as well as working and studying leave players less time to play. Games demand dedication and effort, for example in the form of time, concentration, skill, and preplay that might be too much for a busy adult player (Wiik, 2023). However, how gaming as a hobby is negotiated to fit into changing life situations has been studied less. One suggested way to keep gaming as a part of one's life is to adopt a more casual approach to it (Juul, 2009).

The following sections discuss the background through leisure studies and game research, especially from the point of view of changes in the hobby and negotiating constraints by using behavioral strategies. We discuss how leisure studies have examined barriers to leisure and constraint negotiations of different hobbies for decades while game research has mostly covered the topic from the point of view of changes in the life course and different generations. In the empirical part of this article, we combine a survey and interview datasets, examining how Finnish players have adapted their playing when faced with barriers, and how play practices have been changed on several levels when play has become a smaller part of their lives. The article reveals how casual games and play styles take an important part in these negotiations. However, these more casual approaches might not be satisfactory to all, and previous gaming practices might be missed. As this direction is increasing with game players diversifying and aging, this should be taken more into account in game development as well as in journalistic and academic discussions.

The data collected for this article in the form of survey (n=243) and interviews (n=22) was analyzed using thematic qualitative text analysis (Kuckartz, 2014). The theoretical framework consists of the theory of negotiating constraints by using behavioral strategies used particularly in leisure studies as well as game research about changes throughout the different life phases of players. The results are discussed particularly in the light of casual approaches suggested to lapsed players. This article is also a part of a larger project that examines Finnish 'lapsed' players, or players that have either quit playing certain game types, quit playing altogether, or reduced their playing. As the previous article of this project focused on the multitude of constraints these players face that can lead them to abandon their hobby, the focal point of this article is on the games and play types that do remain in these players' lives (Wiik, 2023). We want to bring more voices to the fore that represent players who struggle to maintain their hobby and find ways to continue it, maybe in a changed form. Understanding these players can also help game developers to find ways to better understand and cater to these audiences in the future.

Changing leisure practices

Changes in leisure practices have been studied in leisure studies for decades, especially from the point of view of constraints to leisure (Crawford & Godbey, 1987; Crawford, Jackson & Godbey, 1991) and the negotiation of those constraints (Ho & Cho, 2021; Jackson, Crawford & Godbey, 1993; Kleiber et al., 2008).The negotiation is a complex process, and different quantitative models have been created to explore the factors that contribute to the negotiation (Alexandris, Funk, & Pritchard, 2011; Hubbard & Mannell, 2001). Related to games, Tan, Yeh and Chen (2017) studied several models of the negotiation process and found that the intention to play massively multiplayer role-playing games is affected by the constraints the person is facing, attachment to that particular activity, social capital of the person, negotiation-efficacy, and motivation for the activity. Gender and constraints have been studied as well and according to Bergstrom (2018) women might have less leisure time than men because they are expected to take care of the children and the home on top of their job. In addition, if a particular game seems hostile to women and new players, it affects the desire to even try the game.

Changes to gaming habits have been examined particularly in the context of the life course of older digital players (Brown & De Schutter, 2016; Brown & De Schutter, 2019; Nevala, 2017) and those recognize that playing styles and intensity of play will go through many changes throughout the different life phases of players. As the focus is on the whole life course, though, playing during adulthood is only one part of it and is addressed in broad strokes. What is more, these studies examine only digital games, emphasizing the gap of covering other kinds of games, as well. Game research that tackles play habits of different groups such as board gaming parents (Rogerson & Gibbs, 2018), Baby Boomer generation of gamers (Pearce, 2008), older adults (Quandt, Grueninger & Wimmer, 2009) and Generation X gamers (Brown & Marston, 2018) delves more into details and contrasts the habits to either earlier play habits of the informants or to other player groups. It is important to note that these studies mostly represent certain types of people and life courses; most of the informants are married or have a partner, have children and have progressed from studies to a job or a career. Sexual orientation or other gender identities besides men and women are not mentioned.

While having children and aging are big changes in one's life, those are not the only types of changes that can affect leisure life and gaming. Several studies have found that changes related to studies and work, fluctuations in the monetary situation, waning interest, other hobbies and games, mental problems, behavior and attitudes of other people and a lack of co-players can all lead to quitting, reducing or otherwise modifying playing (Bergstrom, 2019a; Bergstrom, 2019b; Jiang, 2018; Wiik, 2023). In addition, changes related to the objects of play, such as game servers shutting down, can lead to quitting (Consalvo & Begy, 2015). These constraints seem to

correspond to the framework Crawford and Godbey (1987) developed, where leisure barriers families face were grouped into three categories: intrapersonal, interpersonal and structural.

In this article we examine the concrete behavioral strategies the respondents have applied to their situation, besides simply quitting their preferred hobby or reducing the time spent for the activity. According to Jackson, Crawford and Godbey (1993), strategies to overcome constraints are divided into cognitive and behavioral strategies. The cognitive strategies include modifying thinking related to the hobby, such as devaluating the importance, and the behavioral strategies include modifying the behavior of the individual, such as affecting the timing of the hobby. While the division of strategies was only a theory at the beginning, it has been later studied and confirmed for example from the point of view of high school students (Jackson & Rucks, 1995), women with outdoor adventure hobbies (Little, 2000) older people with chronic illness (Kleiber, Nimrod & Hutchinson, 2011), and serious amateur triathletes (Kennelly, Moyle & Lamont, 2013).

While some researchers have concentrated on the complexities and interdependencies of the factors affecting negotiations, our scope is smaller and rooted in the concrete changes and behaviors of individual players. By directing our gaze to the practicalities of change, we can learn more about what happens on the everyday level and how that might affect the game culture and game industry. We do that by focusing on two research questions: How have the playing habits of lapsed players changed and what kind of behavioral strategies to games and play have been adopted?

Data and methods

The data was gathered in the form of a qualitative online survey and remote semi-structured interviews between 2019 and 2021. The survey was aimed at Finnish former active players, was open for four weeks in the spring of 2019, and had mostly open-ended questions. Playing was defined broadly: The examples listed included computer games, console games, handheld console games, browser games, mobile games, miniature games, role-playing games, board games, card games, live-action role-playing games, pub games, and paper-based puzzles. While game studies tend to focus on digital games, this recognition of the multiplicity of the ever-expanding ludosphere is important (Stenros & Kultima, 2018).

The survey consisted of 15 questions. The questions were loosely grouped into three sections: playing, quitting and game culture. The playing section had questions about the past playing habits of the respondents as well as how their loved ones felt about their playing, the quitting section had questions about quitting and reducing play as well as other changes to their playing habits, and the game culture section had questions about the game cultural participation of the respondents. In addition,

the background info asked participants' age, gender, and consent. It was also possible to give out contact information for interview purposes. A link to the survey was shared in Finnish Facebook groups and discussion forums devoted to geek culture and playing, Finnish pensioners' Federation social media channels, and as a news article in a Finnish web portal covering games and entertainment. Paper flyers with a QR code and a web address to the survey were distributed to the libraries of Tampere, Helsinki, and Jyväskylä, the campus areas of Tampere and Jyväskylä Universities, and game related venues in Tampere.

The survey was answered by 247 people with 243 valid answers (see Table 1). The first part of this article concentrates on one of the questions from the survey: "If you are still playing, has your playing changed since you played actively?" The question was voluntary and was answered by 222 people. The answers were coded and categorized inductively using thematic qualitative text analysis (Kuckartz, 2014) by the first author. The process was iterative, and the data was coded in several stages, starting from highlighting and progressing to coding and forming main categories: games, playstyle, time management, and context. Subcategories were formed after that by coding the text passages. The second author joined the project after the coding process and familiarized herself with the data and the analysis.

The interviews were conducted by the first author during the winter of 2021 with a total of 22 participants and were aimed at deepening and updating the survey answers (see Table 1). The interviews covered mostly the same questions as the survey and the old answers were used to check if something had changed in the interim, as well as deepening the themes that were covered. The interviewees were selected from the survey respondents based on their stated willingness to participate in the interviews and on their survey answers to include a wide selection of different kind of players: those that had not quit playing completely, those that stated they had quit, different play types that had been abandoned, different ages and genders, and the various reasons players had for quitting. As game research tends to highlight the experiences of men more frequently, the goal was to give voice especially to other genders. Initially a list of 22 interview subjects was created, along with backup names. If a participant did not answer or declined, a request was sent to a backup participant. Eventually another backup list was created, and requests were sent until 22 participants had been reached and interviewed.

	Survey %	Survey N	Interview %	Interview N
Age				
60–69	0.4%	1	4.5%	1
50–59	3.3%	8	0%	0
40–49	20.6%	50	27.3%	6
30–39	57.2%	140	54.6%	12

20–29	17.7%	44	13.6%	3
15–19	0.8%	2	0%	0
Gender				
Woman	38.7%	94	63.6%	14
Man	53.9%	131	27.2%	6
Other	2.5%	6	4.6%	1
Rather not say	4.9%	12	4.6%	1

Table 1. Age and gender of the respondents.

The interview data was used to focus in more detail on how the changes were used to form strategies to navigate gaming in new life situations. The whole interview data was coded inductively with thematic qualitative text analysis (Kuckartz, 2014) focusing on the behavioral strategies. Both authors coded the full dataset, and compared and discussed the resulting coding. When the coding differed between the authors, it was unified through a discussion. This helped the coding to be more reliable and consistent. The resulting codes were then grouped into four main behavioral strategies: shifting to lighter options, integrating playing into daily life, redefining co-play, and focusing on opportunities. Constraint negotiation and particularly the behavioral strategies guided our approach theoretically, similar to for example Li and Stodolska (2007) and Kennelly, Moyle and Lamont (2013).

Results

The first part of our study reveals how playing had changed for the survey respondents. When other aspects of life meant that there was not as much room for gaming, playing was adjusted. Changes had happened in the levels of games, playstyle, time management, and context, which all had undergone substantial changes. The second part uses the interview data, uncovering behavioral strategies that use these changes to keep gaming as a part of the new lives and circumvent the demands they have brought. The quotes have been translated from Finnish to English by the authors.

Changing playing habits

Looking at the survey, lack of time and energy was a common problem among the respondents, be the reason for that work, studies, family life, scheduling playtime with co-players, or immaterial reasons. To fit into new life situations, chosen games were affected, influencing specific games, preferred game genres, or game types. This could mean playing mobile games that could be played in short sessions, games that the player could pause or save and quit at any point, or playing games that could be played while doing something else. Casual games were not the only option,

and in some cases the games could be as demanding as before but selected more carefully and consciously. As there was less time for gaming, more effort and care were put into choosing quality games worth playing.

New playstyles emphasized relaxation and sociality. On the other hand, as social playing required more planning and effort, playing alone could be preferred as well. Sometimes playing together was missed, and the player could find opportunities in brief multiplayer sessions if friends happened to be online at the same time. Time management had become an important part of planning play sessions since opportunities to play whenever were scarce. Co-players had busy lives and schedules, and players with family or demanding jobs had to find the time to play at night, on weekends, and during the holidays. The players also had to regulate their playing by having a shorter playtime. This could mean playing for two to four hours, or for ten minutes, depending on the person.

Changes to context, both tangible and intangible, happened as well. A few players had found they appreciated playing more than before because they got to do it so rarely. Other players felt they could not give their games as much attention as before and could not concentrate on playing for long periods of time anymore or on games that demanded time and devotion. Moving to a new location reduced the opportunities to play, or playing games happened in a specific place devoted to the activity.

These changes along with examples from the data are presented in a table below.

Level	Object of change	Example
Games	Curation of games	"Decreased time for my own hobbies forces me to choose the games I play more carefully. In other words, quality requirements have increased" (m, 40).
	Game genre	"When I was younger, I didn't care about first person shooters at all, but now I play them quite a lot. Mostly due to their popularity and multiplayer possibilities" (m, 34).
	Game type	"I can play mobile games with the minimal time I have for myself, for example on work trips or at night for a few minutes before going to sleep" (w, 43).
Playstyle	Motivation to play	"I still play browser games and a couple of simple puzzle games periodically, mainly for killing time. Back in the day playing was more strongly connected to the thought that it was supposed to be fun and not just passing the time" (w, 35).
	Casualness of play	"If games have side stuff in addition to the main story, I no longer do the side quests and I am not so much of a perfectionist anymore" (m, 25).

	Sociality of play	"I try to play social games, in practice board games. I am optimizing my time management so I can manage social relations in addition to playing. Before, I played mostly alone, timewise" (w, 42).
Time management	Playtime scheduling	"As we can start only after my child has gone to bed, gaming sessions are shorter and finding suitable game days is more difficult. We still play weekly though, or at least bi-weekly" (w, 30).
	Playtime length	"These days playing is rarer and the time available for it is shorter. The game is continued occasionally, and it might not progress for a long time. There must be a suitable time for playing and that leaves less time for other activities" (m, 40).
	Amount of playing	"I don't play even monthly, excluding smaller mobile and browser games. Proper game sessions (2–3 hours or more) no longer exist" (m, 36).
Context	Feelings toward games and play	"Playing has more weight and meaning. I appreciate gaming night with friends when I know that organizing it even couple times per month is challenging" (w, 30).
	Physical location of play	"I have to go to the cabin for instance for the weekend, if I want to play in peace" (m, 43).
	Concentration	"Before I might have played several hours in a row. Now I play for an hour, if that, but at any rate not over two. I just don't have the energy to concentrate on a game for that long" (w, 30).

Table 2. The levels, objects, and examples of changes from the survey.

Negotiating barriers through behavioral strategies

Based on the interviews, there are four main strategies to answer the restrictions and barriers for play due to changing possibilities and life situations: shifting to lighter options, integrating into everyday life, redefining co-play, and focusing on opportunities.

Shifting to lighter options

As games could be too demanding for the player's current life, an answer to this could be to then shift to lighter options. As playing immersive, long digital games might not be possible or wanted anymore, shorter, more casual games and mobile games sometimes replaced the earlier games. Especially starting new games was in some cases described as taxing, as getting into more engaging games required time and energy. Respondents had chosen games that for instance had no story, could be finished in a certain number of hours, or games that had short sessions and did not require remembering what had happened before, such as digital sports games.

Often this came with a caveat: the replacements offered very different experiences and could be used for different purposes as well. This type of compromise where the frequency and intensity were affected was similar to Little's (2000) findings of adventuring women. Respondents could imply that now they "had to" play only short mobile games, when before they had played long stretches regularly. Similarly to Amanda Cote's (2020) findings on women players, casual games were not always seen as real games.

Analog games could be replaced with lighter versions as well. Trying quicker and less demanding versions of preferred game types was seen as a possible option, such as board games instead of tabletop roleplaying games or casual board games instead of intense ones. One interviewee talked about possibly getting "larp-like enjoyment" from short escape rooms, larp hybrid experiences, and playing a non-player character in larps. Non-player characters (NPCs) in larps function as helpers to game masters and are used to fulfill certain scripted events. Another interviewee had planned to play the then upcoming mobile version of the analog collectible card game *Magic: The Gathering,* and Game Workshop's *Warhammer 40,000: Kill Team* miniature game that requires less miniatures and thus less money. According to Lauritano (2022), the digital versions of *Magic: The Gathering* are more accessible because of automation of several features, faster learning of rules, and timers that limit the length. Instead of being a "full-time hobby" (Lauritano, 2022), it can be played intermittently, and it helps players to fit the matches to their lives, even though not all of the players are satisfied with these features.

One way to lower demands for play was to make compromises not in the digital games, but in the ways they were played, especially focusing on changes in the playstyles. Lack of time or patience could cause the player to resort to guides and walkthroughs, where before the situations would have been resolved without help, or the player might consider no longer trying to achieve everything in a game. One respondent described the use of an autoplay option, decreasing the need to do all the actions by themselves and speeding up the game progress. The progress could also be slowed down; one interviewee described a case of the *Cookie Clicker* game that had been going on for years. While before it had been played more actively, since then the playing had transformed into checking the situation every now and then, possibly once a week. The game still advances in the background, and the player can do actions to progress it every now and then. This can be likened to the ways adventuring women adjusted their hobbies by enjoying the activity with less challenging conditions in rock climbing and expeditions (Little, 2000). Kleiber, Nimrod, and Hutchinson (2011) found that using adaptive aids was one way to adapt a hobby, and that was evident in our interviews when one of our respondents described constructing a playing platform for PlayStation Portable out of cardboard boxes and other office supplies so her hands would not tire so easily.

Another approach to a lighter direction was renegotiating the participation in the gaming activities in a way that not all players would be actively gaming. This could

include playing together, where one person would play the game and another would watch. These sessions could include making decisions together or passing the controller back and forth or helping the other player: if the game had a particularly difficult challenge, the other player could jump in for a while. This way the player did not need to keep retrying but could still participate in playing. The games that were participated in either by watching, helping, or exchanging controllers seemed mostly to be single-player digital games.

This type of playing has been labeled as 'tandem play' by Consalvo and colleagues (2018) and is described as "when two or more players engage with a single-player game together, moving through the game with a variety of potential motives". While both Consalvo and colleagues (2018) and Voida and Greenberg (2009) found that in tandem play sociability with other players was more important than the game itself, our findings suggest that tandem play can also act as a way to cross barriers when wanting to play a particular game. This seemed to be especially true when the skills of the primary player were not sufficient to progress in the game and help was needed, but games could also be seen as joint entertainment likened to a movie. In addition to help and entertainment factors, the demanding nature of games could be circumvented by tandem play. Preferring to watch instead of exerting effort to play is similar to Orme's (2021) findings of 'just watchers', those who just want to watch when other people play and not play themselves. She found that motivations for these watchers were that playing was seen as work that requires time, skill, affect, and the game culture is often toxic.

Integrating play into everyday life

As growing responsibilities—including family, work, and other activities—often take time from gaming as people get older (Wiik, 2023), these activities could also bring new possibilities for play. Family members could function as co-players, and playing with children was mentioned as a new opportunity to play. This type of play was described as "opportunity for cross-generational play" by Rogerson and Gibbs (2018), and many of our interviewees played especially board and card games with their children. Other opportunities could be actively sought, such as combining playing games with meeting friends, playing in connection with movie nights, or seeing friends in a café that had board games to play while socializing. Some had found opportunities for playing games at work, either playing alone or with colleagues during breaks, or bringing gaming as an activity for work. The latter could mean cases of youth work, where playing together was one of the activities to connect and discuss with the youth. Playing could also find its new place as a subsidiary activity while doing something else, such as listening to audiobooks or watching television.

As with the strategies connected to finding lighter options, the experiences these strategies provided often differed substantially from the previous experiences with games. Games played with children needed to be less intense and were often chosen by the children. Playing at work might restrict playing to coffee or lunch breaks,

keeping the sessions short and the games quick. When bringing games to activities, the social aspects were frequently seen as more important. Therefore, gaming could be secondary to talking and, for instance, having coffee together. Similarly, playing while doing something else means dividing the focus between the activities, and therefore restricts the games into certain types. In a way, these strategies helped to keep playing games as a part of the player's life but made them subordinate to other parts of life, where those activities dictated what kind of games and ways of playing could be chosen.

Redefining co-play

Lack of co-players is a common restriction to play (Wiik, 2023), and this became even more apparent during the Covid-19 pandemic. Remote play was a vehicle for maintaining relationships and spending time with loved ones especially during the pandemic. This allowed people to socialize through games when they could not physically meet, but also made distances between friends and relatives less restricting. Remote play brought new restrictions, too: games needed to be light enough to facilitate out-of-game social interaction, sometimes with people that were not that familiar with games. Digital multiplayer games such as the party game *Jackbox Party Pack* and the social deduction game *Among Us* were played online with friends, co-workers, children, and relatives. Board games owned by the interviewees were set up to play remotely via conference tools and cameras such as the paper-and-pencil game *Welcome to…* and the party card game *Imago.* Remote board gaming platforms such as Board Game Arena were utilized as well. This changing of the medium from analog to digital was also one strategy used by board gaming parents even before pandemic (Rogerson & Gibbs, 2018), but during the pandemic both video games and digital analog games became places to gather and socialize (Meriläinen, 2022). In addition, both digital and analog role-playing games were played in a relaxed manner remotely with friends. These games were compared to the other games these players had played earlier and were described as approachable and less intense. Other times remote role-playing happened with a mix of friends and strangers and could transform into a campaign played regularly.

Finding new co-players could be the catalyst to ignite the interest for a particular kind of game again. MMORPGs have bigger quests that need groups of players to collaborate. Joining a guild made of several people can help create a positive pressure to play. In the case of our respondents, joining a guild meant having people available for quests every day, and finding like-minded people to have fun with. In one case the respondent had "accepted the fact that she might not be able to play with her friends", so she found a group of strangers to play with. Several others had joined a group where they already knew a friend or a relative.

A few players went in the opposite direction; since playing with others was not always possible, a couple of respondents had played analog games with solo playing modes, meaning rules that are designed for one player only. Games mentioned were *Legendary* deckbuilding games and the *Warhammer Quest: Blackstone Fortress*

miniature game. One player mentioned solo roleplaying games, such as the narrative journaling game *Thousand Year Old Vampire,* as an interesting avenue to try out in the future. Journaling games have a narrative structure with writing prompts for the player. Selecting solo play does not necessarily mean that the player would not have anyone to play with, as Leorke found (2018). The motivations can be related to playstyle, genre and social reasons. And while having no one to play with is one of the latter, so are the struggles with frequency and preferences of play. Our three interviewees all had people in their lives to play with infrequently, but they sometimes played solo (or were interested in it) as well.

Focusing on opportunities

Sometimes the games could be as demanding as before but selected more carefully and consciously. As there was less time for gaming, more effort and care were put into choosing quality games worth playing. This could include preferring certain games or game types that the player knew they would enjoy. Respondents would describe replaying digital games they had loved, continuing to play genres they love, finding compact 10–20-hour games, and finding a game series that felt just right.

Finding the right time and place for play had become an important part of planning play sessions since opportunities to play were scarcer. Players with families had to find the time to play at night or on weekends. Even if the person did not have children of their own, their co-players often did, and especially analog joint play sessions required negotiating. Changing the playtime to occur in the evenings and nights is similar to older gamers interviewed by Quandt et al. (2009). Work schedules affected the playtime as well, and several players scheduled longer stretches of digital play during holidays. Some had a set time for playing, such as couple of hours before bedtime, or during morning if they had a night shift. Planning beforehand and time management were similarly important behavioral strategies of triathletes (Kennelly, Moyle & Lamont, 2013).

Finding the time needed for playing sometimes required a special place as well. Playing games happened in a specific place devoted to the activity such as a cabin, a bar with board games, board gaming café or just a friend's house. This could also mean organizing analog play sessions at home where it was possible to take care of children. The same kind of strategy of changing the location to either going out to play or moving the hobby from public venues to home was evident in Rogerson's and Gibbs' (2018) study. The placement of digital gaming devices at home was important too as age rated games were easier to play in one's own room out of the eyes of children, and a console that can be changed into a portable mode meant there was no need for a dedicated gaming corner in the apartment.

Kennelly, Moyle and Lamont (2013) found that triathletes had varying intense periods and periods when they prioritized other things. They called this kind of fluctuation cyclical commitment. Some of our interviewees seemed to do that as well and

were consciously rationing their gameplay. This could happen according to seasons when the mobile location-based *Pokémon Go* was played only during the warmest months, or a digital game played with a friend was discontinued because of beautiful summer weather. Fluctuations happened also when opportunities presented themselves in the form of trying out a new game or game type that was not that interesting in the end, or special game types such as escape rooms were played once in a while with friends and relatives. Players could anticipate holidays when they knew they had a period to play more intensely but were also open to sudden surges of interest; when they felt they got hooked on a game, they made room for it in their lives. The amount of playing fluctuated as well, even though it might have been less than it used to be, it still could be more than what the interviewee had played when they answered the survey.

Discussion

Changing life situations can affect a gaming hobby in various ways, yet often instead of ceasing the activity altogether, the players find new ways to still fit games into their lives. While these changes and new needs for casual games have been discussed before as gaming audiences grow older and diversify (Juul, 2009), the players' perspectives on the actual negotiations that happen in players' lives have rarely been studied. Some of the respondents had transformed their playing toward a more casual style of playing by adopting lighter games or playstyles. In previous literature, casual in the context of games has had various meanings. Casual games typically have more acceptable and approachable themes that attract as large an audience as possible while being relatively simple, easy to access, and offer flexible ways to play and stop playing (Kultima, 2009). Platforms and distribution models can also relate to casualness, such as mobile and free-to-play games with easy, non-committal access and focus on smaller-scale games with shorter play sessions. A casual game can then be not only an easy way to be introduced to gaming, but something to turn to when there is a need for more flexible and less intensive gaming.

Casual games as the place where 'lapsed gamers' turn to has been recognized early in the casual games discussion (Waugh, 2006). So far, the discussion has been more on the sidelines (see Cote, 2020). This article has shed light on what levels the gaming hobby has changed and renegotiated and how casual fits into these negotiations. Our results show that lapsed players face the same kind of problems with games, playing and game culture as aging players (Brown & De Schutter 2016) and 'just watchers' (Orme, 2021). They all have found similar answers to cross the barriers they face: a turn to casual games and a casual style of playing. This turn is not limited to digital games either, as lighter versions were considered as replacements for more demanding analog games as well.

For those seeking to connect socially with other people, casual games seemed to work especially well. When the focus is not on the games, lighter or more casual

games can function as the catalyst to meet with people, have discussions while playing, and share quality time with loved ones. However, casual games cater to different needs than the earlier games had, and our respondents were not always happy with the situation, and old games or playing habits could be missed. More time-consuming games could offer more immersive experiences, deeper narratives, or competitive dedication that smaller moments with casual games could not. Some of our respondents had seemingly found their own approach to the dilemma. They focused on choosing only games they knew they were going to enjoy, made sure they had time to immerse themselves for longer and made changes to where the games would be played, though this could mean they would play less than they had done earlier.

In the strategies our respondents used, casual often mixed with hardcore, and playstyles were fluid. As Leorke (2021) noted, mobile games such as *Pokémon Go* can be played in an extreme fashion and those games that are considered to be more in the 'core' have started to reach varied audiences by providing easier modes. While some ease their playing by reaching help outside the game with walkthroughs or friends, some digital games have built-in modes such as autoplay and skippable action scenes or co-operative mode where the other player character mostly assists the primary player. While accessibility options have started to appear on the menus of games, progression is slow, and fluidity of play should be the starting point of a design instead of an add-on. Furthermore, our results show that negotiations and changes happen on multiple levels, and while casual solutions are a part of these negotiations for many, the changes and strategies are more complex than simply transferring to casual games or playstyles.

While casual games might not be the cure-all remedy for all lapsed players, they are not fully utilized either. For instance, there are numerous mobile and indie games covering interesting stories but that do not require the commitment of larger AAA titles. Smaller games are published at an increased rate and thousands of new games appear on different platforms, and looking for new games periodically already takes resources and energy that might not fit in the changed life situations. While new AAA games are discussed widely in the game media, casual and mobile games do not get the same treatment. Game magazines write about mobile games with conflicted attitudes and the games are often talked about reluctantly and in a condescending manner (Rannanpiha, Tyni & Sotamaa, 2021), while mobile free-to-play games rarely make their way to reviews at all (Alha et al., 2016). Casual games have been met with negative attitudes from gamers as well (e.g., Alha et al., 2018), while people actively playing casual games can themselves dismiss them as silly, lesser, or not real games, as seen both in our data and previous research (Cote, 2020).

There is a need for a cultural change in how different types of games are valued, discussed and examined. Casual games can be seen as a less important part of game cultures and gaming identities (Consalvo & Paul, 2019). Challenge, labor, and skill

have long been ideological values of gaming (Leorke, 2021; Paul, 2018,), while inclusion of elements that make games easier, more automated, and less tense and risky—also elements that may make games easier to play casually—have been called to be dissatisfactory, or even to remove the purpose of games (Conway, 2017). One reason for this is the hegemony of play, or the power structures in the digital games industry that valorize white male players, male developers and 'hardcore' way of gaming above all else (Fron et al., 2007). Casual as a term is not unproblematic itself. It can be a value-loaded term as it has been used to divide players and games into categories where the core or the hardcore is valued and centralized while the casual is marginalized, ridiculed, and feminized (Chess & Paul, 2019). Casual play challenges these views and offers alternative ways to both gaming and how we understand gaming.

It is noteworthy that changing life to fit gaming back into its previous form was not something that was consciously attempted or expected to happen. Seeing changing gaming practices as 'a problem' needing to be 'fixed' oversimplifies the phenomenon. The behavioral strategies used to negotiate the barriers all included changes in games, playstyle, time management, or the context of play; often several of these at once. Even when respondents managed to keep the games and playstyles as intense as before, the time or context for these moments had been changed, restricting them to holidays or other rare occasions. Similarly, each respondent could use several different strategies, sometimes simultaneously, to fit games in their different forms into their changing life situations. The respondents were not always happy about losing aspects from their previous gaming practices, and hours-long sessions in immersive narrative-heavy games or intense larp or role-playing game campaigns that were no longer possible were longed for. On the other hand, trying out casual games or styles of play could result in finding new joy and aspects from gaming instead of just functioning as replacements.

Many of our survey respondents and interviewees discussed their changed playing habits in relation to having and raising children. The family type was not asked in the questions nor elaborated on in any of the answers, so it is not clear if the respondents were single or co-parents. Many just expressed the lack of time because they had children or had "started a family". This was similar to Bergstrom (2018), where "having a baby" or "family matters" had kept the respondent busy. Bergstrom posited that these kinds of answers were not evident in previous studies (Bergstrom, 2019b; Debauvais et al., 2011) because those concentrated more on the games that were often played by men and because women having to carry a 'double duty' of their work and domestic responsibilities leave little time for leisure. This kind of double duty was clear in some of our answers, but family as a reason was reported by respondents of all genders included. Support the player gets from outside or inside the family, no matter the gender, plays an important role in continuing the hobby. The responses revealed that babysitters, equal sharing of the domestic responsibilities and childcare between spouses, as well as a supportive attitude toward the hobbies of the spouse, are important for the continuation of the hobby. While this

matter was outside of our scope for this article, this would be an important avenue of future research.

The often-stereotypical division of play and players to casual and hardcore is not a dichotomy, but a vacillating state, a process. Previous play experiences, public image of what it means to be a gamer or player, and player identity can affect that process. Playing as a practice constantly changes in everyday life. It is negotiated, paused, morphed, and started again. Neither casual nor hardcore concepts can easily be stamped on any one player; games, playstyles, time management and context can all have features of both lightness and intensity that ravel together in complex, individual ways to play that differ, evolve, and combine in various periods of lives. It is important that future game studies reflect the multifaceted nature of playing and the reality of this complex phenomenon. In this article, we focused on the behavioral strategies connected to keeping gaming in the respondents lives in one way or another. Indeed, most lapsed players rarely quit playing altogether but manage to transform the hobby into a form that, at least partly, fits the demands or needs of their new lives. In the future, it will also be important to study cognitive strategies that investigate reforming gaming identities or the changing role of games in general for the aging gaming generations. Similarly, future research can consider other ways to partake in game culture in addition to gaming.

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