'I prefer to play alone to recharge my social battery': Parent gamer identities in Australia

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INTRODUCTION

This paper presents findings from a mixed methods survey about gaming parents in Australia. Relatively little is known about the scale of parent gamers in the world, how parenting influences gameplay or what impact parents' gaming has on parental roles. These are important issues with relevance for social policy, for game studies, communication and media research and for the games industry.

Research in the family context emphasises the risks and harms associated with excessive gameplay by children and adolescents (Coyne et al. 2018; Li et al. 2020). Parents, however, are often studied in relation to the strategies they use to mediate children's gaming (Jiow et al. 2017; Martins, Matthews & Ratan 2017) as opposed to their own gaming practices. Some exceptions highlight potential benefits of gaming for parents, including helping them to cope with stress (Pearce et al., 2021), yet research about parents as gamers or how gamer identities are negotiated as parents, is rare. Furthermore, the nuanced and gendered gaming experiences of mothers and fathers are often masked by neutral use of the 'parent' noun.

The assumption that mothers are primarily responsible for unpaid labour including childcare and household chores, may, for example, constrain mothers' 'access to, and visibility in, contemporary gaming culture' (Enevold and Hagstrom, 2017, 36). For fathers, who traditionally spend less time engaged in parental activities and are able to create more leisure time for themselves then mothers (Harrington 2006; Winn and Heeter 2009; Veal et al. 2013), gaming may be more accessible. For both mothers and fathers, the actual and perceived social roles they are expected to enact in the home may influence their gaming practices and how they identify as gamers.

Furthermore, gamer identities created by the games industry, such as Newzoo's (2021) classification of gaming personas, may not adequately reflect or represent the player experiences of parents who are restricted to shorter play sessions or PG games. Our research about gaming parents is a first step toward acknowledging and legitimising the gameplay practices of mothers and fathers. The paper provides a demographical profile of parents in Australia based on a sample of almost 100 participants (41% mothers, 59% fathers) from 7 states and territories. It identifies socio-cultural factors that distinguish parents' gendered gaming experiences and perceptions of gamer identity and presents indicators of importance regarding gaming for parents.

By mapping the parental load of both parents with gamer behaviours, the study reveals insights into the unique challenges and opportunities of gameplay for mothers and fathers. It also highlights how both parents adapt their player preferences to meet parental obligations, self-regulating their gaming to engender positive role-modelling to children. Surprisingly, mothers prefer solo-play more so than fathers, but spend much more time gaming with children than male partners.

Although daily bouts of gaming are enjoyed in almost equal measure by both parents, 70% of mothers game for less than an hour a day. Industry insights about gamer behaviour would categorise mothers who have shorter play sessions as Time-Fillers (Newzoo 2021) or casual gamers who use predominantly mobile devices for quick access. But our findings show mothers do not have excess time to fill, and do not play nonchalantly on gaming apps alone. Rather, they deliberately create pockets of time in which to game on different devices around the multiple demands of paid work, unpaid domestic labour and childcare.

Our research shows that, to some extent, parents are finding ways of negotiating their gamer identities, with partners and with children and through their gaming practices. Nonetheless, the heavy parenting load carried by mothers suggests gendered assumptions about parental roles are reinforced through gameplay, issues that can inhibit mothers' engagement in gaming cultures and communities. Our research provides a novel perspective and contributes scholarly knowledge about the player experiences and practices of parent gamers in Australia.

AUTHOR BIOS
Dr Fae Heaselgrave
Fae is program director, lecturer and researcher in Communication and Media Studies at the University of South Australia. Her research examines how digital media technologies impact and support learning and family life and explores how social roles and identities are negotiated through media use. Fae is the Lead Chief Investigator with the Play and Pause Video Game Research Team, a project that examines the different ways video gaming is perceived, experienced, and engaged with by niche players. The project's current focus is on parent gamer identities and considers how social forces and technical factors shape the gaming practices of mothers and fathers.

Dr Ashlee Borgkvist

Ashlee (she/her) is currently working as a Research Associate at the University of South Australia, where she is involved in research projects exploring the impacts of family and domestic violence. Her own research focus is on the intersections of father's uptake of flexible working arrangements, gender, and workplace culture. She is interested in how work and care is managed within families, and the role of gender and workplaces in these constructions and negotiations. Her research interests are cross disciplinary and include intersections between gender, organisations, health, sociology, and criminology.

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