Playing Is Not the Only Way:

Leisure Identity Positioning and Game Cultural Agency

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ABSTRACT

This study explores players that have stopped or reduced their playing, how they narrate their leisure identity, and what that reveals about their game cultural agency. Reflexive thematic analysis and pluralistic narrative analysis were used to analyze the interview data of 22 lapsed players of both digital and analog games. Lapsed players narrated their leisure identity through three themes: still part of the community, playing is not the only way, and general interest remains. Themes reveal that lapsed players are still attached to wider game cultures from many points of contact. However, the primary activity of playing has switched places with the secondary activity of other kinds of game cultural participation, enabling the interviewees to maintain a foothold in the leisure activity they enjoy.

Keywords

leisure identity, game cultural agency, digital games, analog games, lapsed players

INTRODUCTION

The most visible game culture in game development, game journalism, streaming services, and different physical game venues is for active and devoted players. You hardly see game clubs for busy parents, journalistic articles about best games for rewinding after work when your brain is fried, or games with settings that enable easy onboarding after a long break. Active and dedicated players are the core audience of game developers and thus also researched the most. Often in game development and game communities, the expected player is white, young, heterosexual man that is a devoted gamer (Consalvo and Paul 2019; Fron et al. 2007). And when other kinds of audiences are catered in design, they are often coated with stereotypes (Chess 2017; Lacey 2023; Lynch et al. 2016). But what happens when active players choose to, or are forced to, give up their leisure activity because of their life situation? Does it affect their self-identification and game cultural agency, do they still feel part of the community of players? This article shows that despite these problems, there is hope yet. Players are inventive and flexible in their ways of adapting to new life situations and playing as an activity is not the be-all end-all way of participating in game cultures. Even player identity is not always dependent on playing.

Gamer identity has been a very prevalent concept in game studies in the past. However, lately researchers have started to doubt the usefulness of it and have found that gamer identity has been constructed by game journalism (Kirkpatrick 2015) and the identity of a (digital) gamer can be seen as a hollow identity that doesn't include the sense of a community, since there are so many subcultures and subcommunities around games that do not have anything common to each other, beyond the act of play (Muriel and Crawford 2018). Often intertwined with the term gamer are concepts of core gamer and casual gamer. Those have faced similar kinds of criticism: play habits are so diverse that the binary division is not enough to cover all aspects of the phenomenon (Kuittinen et al. 2007; Leorke 2021). An integrated approach that takes account of different ways to play and participate in game cultures, the life stage of a person, and how those affect player identity seems to be missing. To address that, I am examining the identity work of "lapsed players" through the identity positions and narratives presented in the interviews of 22 Finnish persons that had filled a web survey (n=243) addressed to former players. In this case, "lapsed players" mean previously active players of both analog and digital games that have either quit their playing or reduced it.

According to Boudreau (2022, 188), "The future of game studies … is also constructive one; not only in identifying the issues and challenges such as toxic gaming culture brings, but also in playing a role in positive social change for players, player communities, and the hopes of a growing, diverse games industry." While some of my interviewees did not feel like they belonged to a particular game culture or felt alienated by certain aspects of those cultures, those experiences will be covered in a subsequent article. In the hope of highlighting also the positive, this article focuses on the positive experiences of belonging and the power of game cultural participation activities in achieving that. This article is part of a larger project on Finnish lapsed players and as such addresses only a portion of the data, focusing on game cultural participation, identity work, and game cultural agency of lapsed players. My research questions are: How leisure identity work of lapsed players is narrated in the interviews and what does it reveal about the game cultural agency of these players?

GAME CULTURAL AGENCY

Game culture can have many definitions, so it is important to establish what I mean when I talk about game culture(s). This article subscribes to the broad concept of game culture of Friman et al. (2022, 10): it consists of games as cultural products as well as the communities of play that "have their own habits, norms, and values". Instead of monolithic all-encompassing singular game culture, the plurality of game cultures is recognized. Related to that concept of game culture, is Friman's (2022) notion of game cultural agency. As she notes, many researchers have started to question the meaningfulness of the concept of gamer (Houe 2020; Shaw 2013), and there has been a turn to post-gamer era. This includes fighting the cultural norms and social hierarchies and finding meaning beyond gamer identity, while still recognizing that rejection of the gamer identity does not erase the exclusionary effects of game culture. Instead of gamer identity, Friman proposes the use of game cultural agency instead. She draws on Mäyrä's (2019, 29-30) definition of player as a hybrid and Mcnay's (2016) feminist view of agency.

According to Friman (2022), game cultural agency has two dimensions: 1) game cultural participation and 2) feelings of inclusion and belonging. In this article I am separating the game cultural participation from the act of playing games to address

the positions of lapsed players. As Friman argues (2022, 186), the concrete act of playing games is not a mandatory part of game cultural participation because a person can feel as a player/gamer and part of game culture(s) even though they are not currently playing, and for especially for women it is even common because of the constraints they face. Game cultural participation as an activity is closely related to the concept of extended leisure experiences. According to Scott and Harmon (2016, 482), extended leisure experience includes "activities that participants engage in following a primary leisure activity". They also argue that for some those activities might be as important as the primary activity, and that others can sidestep the primary activity altogether and participate only in the extended activity. Kankainen (2024) describes tabletop game hobbyists having the act of playing as the primary activity and curatorial online activities as secondary activities. In the same vein I am addressing the act of gameplay as the primary activity of players and the game cultural participation without playing as the secondary activity.

LEISURE IDENTITY WORK AND PLURALISTIC NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

As established previously, gamer identity is not a useful concept in research to hold on to anymore. However, Friman (2022) notes that the concept of game cultural agency could be developed further by "taking into account the plurality of players' identities and the resulting subject positions." For that reason, I am examining the leisure identities and leisure identity work of lapsed players. In this study, leisure identity refers to an identity defined by a specific leisure activity (Jun and Kyle 2012). The concept of leisure identity work in this article is inspired by LaPointe (2010, 2011, 2013) who used the concept of "identity work" in studying people during and after career transition, so in other words their career identity. Career identity is performed in interaction, through narratives and identity positioning. It is a narrative practice, where the identity is co-constructed with the participants of the interaction (LaPointe 2010). The practice includes the activities of "articulating, performing and negotiating a variety of identity positions in narrating our careers" (LaPointe 2011, 52).

In identity work "individual agency is accomplished through the capacity of individuals to actively craft narratives by adapting, resisting and selectively appropriating cultural storylines and discourses and by negotiating and modifying the positions available in them" (LaPointe 2010, 3). I suggest this method can be used for analyzing leisure identity work as well. According to Kelly (1983, 117-118), leisure, family, and work roles intertwine and affect each other, and leisure is not something that can be separated into a world of its own since it is interstitial. Kelly (1983, 116) also states that it is beneficial to examine leisure in the context of life course transitions, since those can affect personal and social identities. In addition, online media is so ubiquitous that it can be engaged with during work, commuting, doing household chores or even during dinner (Kankainen 2024, 11). What is more, as Chia (2020) notes, contemporary fan cultures include many practices that are work-like and possibly commercial, making it necessary to inspect hobbies as productive leisure (Gelber 1999), and boundary work (Nippert-Eng 2008). Because of these myriad entanglements of leisure and work, the analyzing methods used in examining career identities can be useful in examining leisure identities as well.

Identity work can be made visible by employing pluralistic narrative analysis (LaPointe 2010, 2011, 2013). It aims to bring forth different aspects of the data by analyzing it from multiple points of view, combining several styles of narrative analysis. According

to Zilber et al. (2008, 1064), text and context are intertwined, and analysis should include at the same time context, content, and form and each point of view brings to light different aspects of the text but form a coherent whole. In this article I am examining form from the point of view of Labov's (1972) form of narrative, content and form from the point of view of positioning (Wortham and Gadsden 2006; Wortham 2001) and context from the point of view of Zilber and colleagues' three spheres (2008). This approach echoes the ethos of crystallization where several theoretical frameworks, methods, and data are used to grasp the complexity and depth of the phenomenon, while still recognizing the partiality of the understanding (Tracy 2010). Next, I will shortly outline the basic building blocks of each approach.

According to Labov (1972), the basic structure or a form of a narrative consists of abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution and coda. Evaluation has two roles in the narrative: reportability to convince the story is worth telling and not mundane, and moral evaluation to convince the hearer that the teller is a good and moral person. Through the narrative, the teller is offering a presentation of the self, convincing the hearer of the teller's values, and explaining the actions. This happens particularly in the evaluation part of the narrative (Linde 1993). Identifying the different parts of the form and especially the evaluation parts of the narrative aids in locating the next step in the pluralistic analysis; positioning. According to Davies and Harré (1990), positioning is an unintentional process produced in conversation together with others, and a person can position themselves or others for example by using metaphors and images. The tellers of autobiographical accounts usually involve a telling about an event that has happened to them, or they have been participants of. In the accounts they "voice" or describe themselves and others as being a certain type of people and at the same time evaluate those people. (Wortham and Gadsden 2006).

When analyzing positioning, the concepts of voicing, double voicing and ventriloquation, originally proposed by Bakhtin (1981, 1984) for analyzing novels, can be used. Voicing is connected to how certain social groups speak, double voicing juxtaposes several voices, and ventriloquation is the process of speaking through the voices of others and positioning self (Wortham 2001). The final piece of the analysis is the context. Zilber et al. (2008) have divided context into three spheres: intersubjective context, collective social field, and cultural metanarratives. The intersubjective content refers to the situation of the narrative: who is telling the story to whom and in what situation. The collective social field refers to the narrator's personal perception of the public collective sphere such as historical events, social groups and public figures, social structures, and the relationship between those and the narrator. Cultural metanarratives refer to the unconscious and implicit cultural patterns present in the narratives. While in actuality these spheres do not have distinct boundaries, Zilber et al. (2008) encourage researchers to use them as analytic lenses that can be used particularly in the case of identity-narrative data. In the next section I describe my data and how I used pluralistic narrative analysis in analyzing the data.

METHOD

The data consists of semi-structured interviews, based on an online survey addressed to players who had stopped or reduced their playing. The interviewees (n=22) were selected from the respondents that had included their contact information in the survey. The selection criteria used were both gender and the emphasis on different

types of playing phenomena the survey answers covered. Since game research often tends bring forth the opinions of male gamers, the goal was to highlight more of other genders. The goal of the interviews was to cover the same themes and most of the same questions as the survey but to deepen and update the answers.

The data was first analyzed by using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2022). In practice, reflexive thematic analysis has six phases. Those are: familiarizing with the data set, coding, generating initial themes, developing and reviewing themes, refining, defining and naming themes, and writing up. The order of these stages is not linear, the researcher moves between the stages during the whole process. In this case, coding and themes were based on the data instead of a particular theory and the analysis was interested in unpacking the implicit meanings and realities presented in the data (Braun and Clarke 2022, 10). After the codes were formed, mind mapping was used to generate preliminary themes. After that I analyzed the themes using the pluralistic narrative analysis as a lens that deepened the understanding of how the participants narrated their experiences.

First, Labov's (1972) model narrative was used to mark down the structures of narrative. The model was applied to the parts where game cultural participation was discussed and where the interviewee described themselves as a certain type of person. After this, the focus was primarily on the evaluative parts of the narratives but also on word choices and metaphors used. In addition, some remarks about the interview situation were noted. Through this whole process a reflexive journal (Braun and Clarke 2022) was kept where thoughts about coding and theming were recorded. In addition, case summaries were compiled about the interview participants that helped to see the patterns that were common to all. The codes and themes formed earlier were developed further and renamed based on the pluralistic narrative analysis. The analysis continued through the writing process. The analyzed quotes were selected to illustrate the different aspects of the themes and translated from Finnish to English by the author. Pseudonyms were created for interviewees. In the next section I will present the results and illuminate my approach to the pluralistic narrative analysis through interview excerpts and their analysis.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Several codes were formed based on the narratives of identity positions and game cultural participation activities. These were then refined and combined to form five codes representing identity positions and actions. The codes were then clustered into three themes: general interest remains, playing is not the only way, and still part of the community. These themes illustrate the narratives of leisure identity work. The breakdown of themes, codes, and descriptions can be seen in table 1.

Theme	Codes	Description
General interest remains	Coincidental observer behaves opportunistically.	Satisfies curiosity or entertainment needs, does not actively seek information, possibly uses knowledge for non-personal reasons.
Playing is not the only way	Informed former player keeps themselves up to date, Vicarious enjoyer substitutes and supplements.	Follows news about games/game development/game culture, watches, reads, and participates instead of playing.
Still part of the community	Productive community member acts as a community builder, Community consumer participates passively in the community.	Organizes events, helps and supports actively the community they belong to, follows discussions, supports community passively, and attends events.

Table 1: Themes, codes, and descriptions of leisure identity positions and narratives of identity work

The themes are discussed below through selected case examples that were treated analytically. According to Braun and Clarke (2022, 138) this type of treatment goes beyond what is said and "produces rich interpretative account that describes aspects of the overall pattering of the theme but also provides a particularized analysis of elements of the patterning, in relation to the selected data extracts." The quotes are preceded by a short case summary of the person in question, detailing demographic info and aspects of their halted gaming lives. The game types they have decreased or quit playing have been active parts of their lives earlier and corresponded to the game types they had played most, the second most and the third most previously. Most of the interviewees' narrations of identity work included several leisure identity codes and thus were located in all three themes. There were some that were mostly positioned as coincidental observers and who participated in community only in the role of a consumer. One of the interviewees did not directly participate in the game culture but heard selected news from her spouse.

Still Part of the Community

This theme explores the narrative of belonging to a particular playing community. Even though the particular type of playing has been reduced or seized, these interviewees positioned themselves as part of that particular playing community by

the activities they performed. This belonging is examined from three different sides by three interviewees that position themselves as participants of community or productive members of community. Belonging to the community is investigated from the point of view of narratives of contributing to the wellbeing of community, finding special time and place to interact with a community, and following and learning from a distance.

The first case example of this theme is Tuija. She had quit playing live action role-playing games (larps), lottery and betting games, computer games and crossword puzzles. Larps had been affected by her demanding job.

> Even though I don't play that much anymore, my friends are in that scene though, so I want to follow the scene from the sidelines all the time, so that I know what my friends are doing. And if I can help, for example, by filling out a survey, I am happy to help. And in the game world, meaning the larp world, in Facebook topics like feminism or politics or things like that have been raising their head. … If my friends are feeling bad in a larp world and somebody is being an ass and is about to organize a game where X things are not considered, I want to be in on the conversation. Because even if I won't be in that game, I want to help the scene in a way, because it is easy for me to participate online stating my opinion about how this and that should go to make people feel comfortable. (Tuija, age 38, woman).

Tuija *voices* the larpers belonging to a "scene" and a "world". Even though she also talks about her friends who still actively larp, she is not referring to just individuals but leisure activity as a whole. She *positions* herself as someone who is interested in the state of the scene and is invested in the betterment of it. Even if she is not able to play anymore, she is connected to the world of larping through her friends and online channels and acts according to her values. Engaging with the community is not replacing the act of playing but she has game cultural agency through game cultural participation even without playing. She wants to make sure other players are treated fairly and the "scene" is progressing. This suggests that she has a very strong game cultural agency and is not being threatened by the fact that currently she is not able to participate in the core activity of larping. Kankainen (2024) notes that tabletop hobbyists construct their fan-identities often online, by forming emotional bonds with the materiality of the games and with the community around them. In this case, the materiality is missing, but the online community acts as a "third place", a social gathering place outside home and workplace, where an individual can amass social capital (Steinkuehler and Williams 2006).

The second case example of this theme is Ronja. She had reduced playing board games and card games and quit larping. Board and card games were affected by the hectic work life of her and her friends, larps were time consuming and cliquey. Here she talks about attending *Ropecon*, an annual three-day event on analog games.

> Ropecon is, for many people it might seem funny, but it is bigger than Christmas or Midsummer for me. I have never had a bad time there; I have always had fun. It is a place where I can see friends, like I have now a whole weekend just to play and just do these fun frivolous things. In a way it is permission to do something useless, well that is maybe a wrong word, but anyway especially as an adult it has given an

> opportunity to disengage from work, and other everyday things in a really nice way. In a way it is its own bubble, inside of it I can just be and do nothing and eat chips and play games, even late at night. (Ronja, age 32, woman)

Using *collective social field* of annual celebrations as examples, Ronja implies that the event is the highlight of the year that is eagerly anticipated, and she sees the people attending the event comparable to her family and friends. She uses strong words like "never" and "always" that frames her experiences as extremely positive. By using words like "frivolous*"* and "useless*"* about games she is evoking the *cultural metanarrative* of protestant work ethic popular in Finland where hard work is valued and being productive keeps people out of trouble (Helkama and Portman 2019) and *ventriloquating* the people who see games as less important. The *abstract* of her narrative acknowledges the expectation of people finding her opinions weird and her *ventriloquation* positions her as opposing the façade of a serious adult. The *collective social field* of the event itself is framed as a world of its own, "a bubble", separated from everyday life where adults can act like children. Even though friends are mentioned only in passing, the permissive attitude that is present in the event is the product of the whole community. Unlike Tuija who does not have time to play but integrates the larp scene into her everyday life digitally, Ronja supplements her game cultural participation with rare opportunities of play. While the opportunities in everyday life are scarce, she revels in the role-playing community once per year and treats this event as a celebration, a party, and a respite from daily life. As Masek and Stenros (2024) note, parties "can be people's favourite times of year" and repeated parties transform activities into customs that "reinforce emotionally and socially satisfying components of being a society member at large." Thus, Ropecon can be perceived as a yearly party that reinforces Ronja's feelings of being a member of role-playing community.

The third case example of the theme is Juhani. He had decreased role-playing games and quit computer games. Role-playing games had been affected by the birth of his son and child-rearing.

> One of the most interesting things is to see character concepts and plot concepts. Somebody can build a very interesting character, and I can get inspiration for my own characters, or just be impressed about how creative people are in the roleplaying crowd. I think half of the population are artists and half are technical types, and both are strongly represented by these people. It is great to see that they are creating very precise mechanics for character actions but still with very expansive, illustrative backgrounds and things like that. (Juhani, age 42, man)

Juhani *positions* himself as a learner and admirer of the skills of other players. He does not talk about participating in the discussions, so it is inferred that mostly he just follows the group without participating. He uses a *metaphor* of dividing people into two types to describe the virtuosity of the people in the group and emphasizes it with words like "precise" and "illustrative." He *voices* those people as someone he looks up to and at the same time, he positions himself as unlike them. He continues to *voice* other players as his superior in the follow-up answer but brings up the learning aspect when he describes that it challenges his thinking. By *voicing* himself as being inspired and challenged he is positioning as a person who wants to strive to be better in their

leisure activity. Juhani can be described as a lurker, a person who visits the community regularly but participates in the discussion seldom (Rafaeli et al. 2004). Lee et al (2006) however describe lurking as participating and lurkers as "less competent learners". They are "worried about their performance" and use strategies of not posting anything, are on standby, or post collected information instead of producing their own information. Instead of passive freeloaders, lurkers' participation includes skillful strategies that "sustains their relationship to the community". As can be seen from the example, a community member doesn't need to be a productive member or attend group meetings. Just following conversations can be enough and it can foster the feeling of belonging and carry the person over the less active times.

Playing Is Not the Only Way

This theme is examining the narrative of engaging with the games without playing. Playing the games was not the only way to enjoy what games have to offer and the interviewees posited themselves as vicarious experiencers and informed former players. The examples illustrate narratives of game cultural participation substituting the act of playing games, playing being only one part of fan activities, and maintaining social relationships by keeping up to date with the current news.

The first case example is Ronja. She is quoted here a second time to illustrate that the categories are not limited to one per person, as one person can narrate their game cultural agency in several avenues.

> And now I seriously fell for the *Critical Role* (Mercer 2015) role-playing stream that I have been watching because in a way I do not have time to roleplay myself, I can at least watch entertaining people roleplay. …
> I think that the appeal is the same as with reality tv, but this is the only form of reality tv that I feel like watching. It is really good-humored, firstly all the drama happens between the characters, so the people do not fight, only the characters at most, it is like this happy stuff. They are really skillful; the guys of *Critical Role* are all voice actors, so it is totally different from games played at home because none of us happen to be professional actors, so it is maybe a bit different. (Ronja, age 32, woman)

This other excerpt from Ronja shows how a game culture consuming that started as one thing can transform into another. Watching the stream started as a substitution for playing role-playing games, a vicarious experience in want of something else. But then it transformed into an enjoyment of its own right, something that she fell for. Ronja likens the stream and the fascination of it to a reality tv show but *voices* herself as a person who does not usually watch reality tv. But how she describes the streaming show and what fascinates her with it, is characterized quite differently from most reality shows, that are according to McCarthy (2007) "neoliberal theater of suffering" and where the interpersonal drama is high. Ronja *voices* the players in the show as professionals and her own group as the opposite and thus the play situations are different. Still, even as the experience is different from playing role-playing games herself, she can use it as a substitute. Wyndow (2022) calls this "participatory nonparticipation". He found that watching *Critical Role* can be pure fun and the enjoyment is enhanced by the chemistry and charisma of the cast. On the other hand, watching can alleviate the need for a community, it can teach how to play *Dungeons and Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson 1974), it allows watchers to play D&D vicariously,

and it can give "the same experience of playing a game without directly playing the game" (Wyndow 2022, 124) Ronja's answer regarding novels and comic books later during the interview reveals that the substitution has evolved into being a fan, as she has bought comic books related to the show for herself. She *voices* it as a Christmas present to herself, so it is a special treat.

The second case example in this theme is Juha. He had decreased playing computer games, board games, card games, role-playing games, and miniature games. *Warhammer 40,000* miniature war game (Games Workshop 2012) playing in tournaments had decreased because he moved to another city away from his tournament friend and because of waning interest.

> I have fallen for the *Warhammer* world completely, so I have bought novels and a couple of comic books. I like to read them, and they are the [books] I mainly read. (Juha, age 39, man)

Unlike Ronja, who first used *Critical Role* as a substitution for playing role-playing games herself and then becoming a fan of the stream and the world, Juha first became a fan of the *Warhammer* franchise that led him to buy and read novelizations and comics related to the world. Juha infers that those are the only types of books and comics he reads and lot of the other game cultural activities he engages in are related to *Warhammer* as well. When I asked about books being an inspiration for the act of playing, the inquiry was met with a weak agreement but with reservations and hypotheticals. This suggests that the reading is not done for the sake of playing but because of being a fan of the world. Comics and novels related to games are transmedia extensions that expand the storyworld of a game in another media. While in some cases book and comic extensions are not readily available everywhere and might be poorly known (Wiik 2019, 15), these answers infer that both fans and lapsed players can benefit from transmedia as a way to maintain their game cultural agency.

The third case example of this theme is Paju. They had decreased computer games, console games, handheld console games, board games, and miniature games. The reason for that was a job that took a lot of time and energy.

> Even though I cannot play myself, I am still interested in what is going on. I have played the first *Mass Effect* (BioWare 2007) maybe ten hours in total, but there's a new version and a new game coming out, so it interests me an awful lot just because even though I am not playing, I want to surf on the wave so to speak. … I feel that these are also important because of my job. A young person comes up to me like "hey have you heard about this game" and I am like "I just read an article about it". And then I swap information with another friend, and I always tell my mom. (Paju, age 33, nonbinary)

Paju's relationship with game culture in textual form seems to be quite meaningful in several different ways and it helps them to stay connected to both the games and the players in their life. Paju *voices* themselves as a person who is deeply interested in digital game news and keeps themselves informed on what is going on. They want to "surf on the wave" so they want to be on top of what is interesting, what is new and what causes a stir. In addition to that, they use that information in their job as a youth worker and *ventriloquate* themselves as both a good worker and a person who has game culture knowledge. They also use that knowledge in maintaining their

relationship with their friends and their mother. This is similar to what Kankainen (2024, 12) describes as "situating the self in social world", when tabletop hobbyists curate their identity by connecting with people they already know. Via sharing images and text, they are creating "immaterial mementos for collective remembering".

General Interest Remains

Although some of the interviewees only rarely played anymore, they positioned themselves as people that were interested in game culture in general. These interviewees did not reject game culture even though they did not play as much as they used to, or because leisure activity had been transformed into an occasional activity. The narratives examined in this theme include gathering game cultural information for the sake of being a good worker, active citizen, a good mother and satisfying curiosity and entertainment needs.

The first case example of this theme is Tanja. She had decreased computer games and quit role-playing games and larps. The latter was affected by her friend moving away and both finding other creative outlets, the former by waning interest and games demanding too much time.

> We have this big video projector downstairs and if somebody is watching something with it, people see what is being watched. In that way I have watched playthrough videos of many games. … I have followed some interesting games that way, like "okay, now somebody is playing". And of course, they follow *Paqpa* and others who are making these game videos. So, in a way I have followed certain games through these vloggers or have seen whatever is in at the time. And sometimes even a bit lagging behind since not all of these vloggers are necessarily at it with the latest games at all. (Tanja, age 38, woman)

Tanja is exposed to game culture almost accidentally, when her children are watching gameplay videos or YouTube. She still *voices* herself as interested in the games and up to date what are the trends amongst the "vloggers". YouTuber Paqpa was mentioned in this and other interviews as someone their children were following. Tanja refers to her and others as using the *evaluative indexical* of vlogger (video blogger) instead of newer terms such as streamer or Youtuber, characterizing her social relationship to them as more of an outsider than insider of that particular culture. Despite using the older term, she is *positioning* herself as knowledgeable about the new and older games and as a mother invested in the activities of her children. This can also be described as vicarious playing, although it is different from the vicarious playing of Ronja. In this case vicarious playing is not substitution, but more akin to watching any entertainment. The draw can be the story, the drama, and the skills of the players (Orme 2021).

The second example of this theme is Leea. She had reduced playing computer games. The appeal of the games had decreased after a personal crisis was over and she had devoted more time to social media.

> I am following very actively everything related to games and these gurus, Mikko Meriläinen, Frans Mäyrä and Heikki Marjomaa. I follow game culture, and we have had some program items in different events, like we have visited these *Counter-Strike* (Valve 2000) dens and

> such and have gotten to play. … And I read articles related to children and gaming from YLE's website [Finnish Public Service media company] and magazines. It is one sector that I am following actively. [..]It is partly professional and partly one area I want to follow. I am very socially active, and this is one sector of it these days, I think. (Leea, age 65, woman)

Leea *positions* herself as knowledgeable, eager to try out new things and as an active information seeker. *Voicing* a place she visited as "*Counter-Srike* den" she *positions* herself as adventurous. She isn't afraid to go there and try out a game that is more frequently played by young men than 60-year-old ladies. She knows who "the gurus" of Finnish digital game culture are, follows them on *Twitter* (currently called *X*) and pays attention to what they are saying. These experts are Finnish game researchers and game educators that mostly talk about digital games. While seeking information about interesting topics and people is part of her job, she is interested in the game culture for the sake of herself as well. But this interest is different from Paju's, talked about earlier. While Paju is maintaining their game cultural capital for their own sake, Leea sees game culture as part of being socially active and socially aware. Koskimaa and Välisalo (2022) examine the ludification of Finnish society and culture and remark that as playing spreads into all aspects of culture, it will affect the construction of cultural identity. Meriläinen (2020, 43) describes gaming literacy being, among other things, a societal ideal that strives to understand game cultures and that understanding is important and valuable in itself. That strive can be seen in the quote and reveals that Leea *positions* herself as cultured person, who has plenty of game literacy.

The third and final case example is Kaarlo. He had quit playing computer games, console games, browser games and after the survey mobile games as well. The reason for this was waning interest.

> Well maybe in some library I can, if there is *Pelit*, some game magazine available, I maybe may browse through it quickly to see what is going on in the world. I am interested in the game culture but what else? Well, it is always possible to come across some news on the internet. Maybe those are not game websites, but it can be for example *Helsingin Sanomat* that has praised some game. I have then investigated the topic a bit based on that. (Kaarlo, age 42, man).

Kaarlo *voices* himself as an opportunistic when it comes to game cultural participation. His nonchalant interest towards game culture seems to be more accidental than both Leea's and Tanja's. He uses conditional and several maybes, indicating that he is not talking about a regular habit. The magazines he mentions are *Pelit* – a game magazine concentrating particularly on computer games, and *Helsingin Sanomat* – the biggest newspaper in Finland. Several other interviewees acted similarly: if they came across some news piece in social media, magazines or through their friends, they would read it with interest, but they were not regularly following game culture news.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results highlight the diversity and inclusion in game cultures. Prior to the interviews, the participants chose to answer to a research survey titled "Former players/gamers" (Finnish word pelaaja means both player and a gamer), so at least in

some superficial way they must have identified as such. Still, these narratives reveal that despite that label, they are attached to wider game cultures from many points of contact. In addition, the results reframe the game cultural narratives of gamers and gaming. Through the three narrative themes of *still part of the community, playing is not the only way,* and *general interest remains* the interviewees are producing their leisure identity that is more complex than a dichotomy of "gamer" and "non-gamer", no matter the game types. Game cultural participation allows them to form complex webs of action and meaning that keep them part of their leisure activity or at least somewhat up to date what is going on. The primary activity of playing has switched places with the secondary activity of other kinds of game cultural participation, enabling the interviewees to maintain a foothold in the activity they enjoy.

The interviewees that narrated their leisure identity work in terms of *still part of the community* and *playing is not the only way* expressed feelings of belonging, but the interviewees that talked about it mainly in terms of *general interest remains*, seemed to have a looser attachment and felt less belonging in game cultures. Their leisure identity related to games was not as important as other identities they expressed. Still, they did not reject game cultural participation even though the feelings of belonging were not that strong. Game cultures were not irrelevant or non-interesting to them even though some expressed apprehension towards the toxic aspects of them. Game cultural participation could be useful as part of profession or as part of parenthood and it was seen as part of bigger culture. Some of the interviewees even emphasized that they were in no way against games and game culture. Although this might reflect the increasingly important and visible standing of games and game cultures, it is also important to think about the research context here. The interview was done by a game researcher for a game studies dissertation, so that could have influenced the several emphases put on positioning on the side of game culture, rather than being indifferent or against it.

In conclusion, game cultural participation even without playing offers lapsed players feelings of belonging that can help in maintaining game cultural agency. Both virtual and physical gathering places of a game community can provide opportunities for lapsed players to feel as part of the community by offering places to influence the direction of the leisure community, to engage easily with the activity or to get inspired by others. Watching others play and reading about games can not only help with keeping up to date on what is going on but can actually substitute the act of playing. Reading, watching, and keeping up to date about the goings-on of game cultures can be a way to be socially active, participate in the activities of one's children or just satisfy the passing curiosity one gets when encountered with an interesting news piece related to games and play. Amidst declining reading habits, feelings of isolation and rampant gamer stereotypes, these results bring hope. Lapsed players value community, reading books and comics, going to events, connecting with other players, and helping communities thrive. Even those who only have a general interest left from their playing days use their interest in service of their work or family life. Another aspect of hope is that changing life circumstances are not always a crisis. Although temporarily the core activity of playing might wane, it doesn't have to mean separation from the community or the identity. It is also important message to game developers and producers of culture: the audience of game culture artifacts and venues is much bigger than just the "core gamers". It is time to acknowledge that and start to build communities with that in mind.

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