Finnish Lapsed Players and (Game) Cultural Expectations

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on narratives that approach the topic of game cultural and cultural expectations from the point of view lapsed players. The interviews of 22 Finnish lapsed players were analyzed by using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2022) and examined through the lens of narrative expectations analysis (Hyvärinen 1994). The analyses resulted in two themes: defying normative behavior and feeling the pressures of implied player. These themes illustrate that the expectations related to players entangle with expectations related to adults and mothers and reveal the need to update these cultural scripts to make game cultures more welcoming and diverse.

Keywords

expectations, game cultures, lapsed players, expectation analysis, implied player

INTRODUCTION

Games are not only a pastime that is becoming more and more prevalent in everyday lives of people, but also gathering places and ways to cultivate relationships. According to Steinkuehler and Williams (2006) massively multiplayer online games can be seen as "third places" where players can gather outside of work and home and where they can acquire especially bridging social capital, meaning shallow but broad connections to other people that can expose them to different viewpoints and experiences. The same can be said about other game platforms and physical venues where players congregate. However, women and other marginalized game players around the world often face harassment in different game cultures (Brenner-Levoy 2023; Dashiel 2020; Fox and Tang 2016), are not counted as "real" gamers (Bergstrom 2018; Consalvo and Paul 2019) or reject the label of gamer themselves (Shaw 2013).

In addition, especially digital games and game cultures tend to valorize competition, skill, and winning to the point of toxicity (Paul 2018). These exclusionary practices can revolve around the notions of perceived normativity, expectations, beliefs, and behavior in game cultures. The practices and notions can push active players away from games and game cultures or even further alienate players that are already at the margins because of their identity, playstyle, or life situation. Game research can make these harmful norms visible, so those can be addressed. This article examines the implicit and explicit game cultural and cultural expectations narrated in the interviews of lapsed players. In this case, lapsed players mean players that have reduced or

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abandoned their playing hobby, digital or analog. By analyzing the detailed expectation markers in the narratives and connecting those to the larger, implicit, normative expectations related to Finnish culture and various game cultures, I will answer my research questions. The questions are: How do Finnish lapsed players narrate belonging and their place in game cultures? What do the narratives reveal about game cultural and cultural expectations in Finland? First, to address these questions, a short look of the theories of hegemony of play, constructed gamer identity, toxic meritocracy, and implied player is needed.

CONSTRUCTED GAMER IDENTITY AND HEGEMONY OF PLAY

Both researchers and player's themselves have long been preoccupied by the (digital) gamer identity, and, for example, who counts as a gamer. Although in 1970's and early 1980's girls and women played in arcades, bars, and at home, the construction of a digital gamer as a man started in the early 1980's. One of the examples of this was the 1982's Life Magazine. In the "Year in Pictures" issue featured top video game players in the world – all white young men posing in a photograph as victorious, while anonymous women cheerleaders were presented like props (Kocurek 2015). In addition, the term gamer was consciously constructed in the 1980's and 1990's game magazines, as a target audience for game related content and games. A real gamer, according to these magazines, had fast reflexes, was smarter than non-gamers, was cool and was a young man. (Kirkpatric 2015). While there was a concerted effort to move away from that stereotype by a small group of game developers already in the 1990's, the idea that a gamer means men and boys (perpetrated by the gaming press) was so strong, that the effort backfired (Cote 2015). The stereotype was felt in the 1990's in Finland too, according to Saarikoski (2012) who examined letters sent to the editors of a gaming magazine Pelit from the readers in 1992-2002. According to him, even though things had improved from the 1980's, girls had to underline in the letters that they were gaming girls and they also talked about being excluded and discriminated.

This stereotype of a gamer is connected heavily to hegemony of play. According to Fron et al. (2007), hegemony of play means that what kind of games are being made and valorized is affected by the game developers and game publishers that are predominately white males and secondarily Asian, together with hardcore gamers, game advertisers and game reviewers. They also note that these rigid structures affect the game developers themselves as well but might be hard to fight from the inside. The areas where these structures stem from are the production process and creative environment, the technologies and communities of play, and the cultural position of games and gamers. In addition, digital games are also permeated by meritocratic norms, where the mechanics highlight skill, luck is limited, and the stories emphasizes the ethos of trying hard and long enough leading to victory. This is due to the expectations of a target audience who want to "develop, prove, and show off skill." (Paul 2018, 91-92, 111). This kind of toxic meritocracy as dubbed by Paul (2018) along with hegemony of play, is connected to the next concept, implied player.

IMPLIED PLAYER

Aarseth (2007) talks about implied player, that is derived from the concept of implied reader by literary theorist Wolfgang Iser (1974). In Aarseth's definition, implied player is constricted by the mechanics and the rules of digital games. The game expects a certain kind of behavior from the player, a role to be fulfilled so that the game can

"exercise its effect". The interface of the game and the avatar of the player make those expectations visible. He sees implied player as a "boundary imposed on the player-subject by the game, a limitation to the playing person's freedom of movement and choice". He suggests that a way to break free of that is transgressive play, whether by willfully cheating or using of unexpected opportunities discovered by the player. Zhu (2015) notes that this concept can be used to direct our attention to the expectations and "normative traps" imposed to players. Farca (2015) describes Aarseth's concept of implied player as "physically prestructured role" and Iser's original theory of implied reader as focusing on the cognitive aspects. He also describes implied player representing the affordances and appeal structure of a game while talking about the aesthetic experiences of dystopic games (Farca 2018, 25).

In this article I am using the term "implied player" to mean the expected player of a game from the perspective of game developers, but also the expected player from the point of view of mainstream game cultures. This is entwined with the hegemony of play, constructed gamer identity, and the toxic meritocracy of games. Most often in the eyes of game designers, players themselves and other stakeholders, the implied player is a white male, who is interested in male fantasies, competition, and dedicating their time to the games. As can be seen later, implied player interlaces with the other normative expectations that are in turn connected to the wider culture the player inhabits.

METHOD

The data gathering of this study was done in two parts. The first part included an online survey aimed at lapsed players that was open for a month in the spring 2019 (n=243). It had mostly open-ended questions about playing, quitting and game culture. The link to the survey was spread through different online communities and printed flyers with a link and a QR code were posted to several libraries, university campuses and game related commercial venues. Based on the answers and the willingness to participate in interviews, 22 persons were selected to interviews. The interviews were conducted online in winter 2021 and were semi-structured. According to the guidelines provided by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity, an ethical review was not necessary. The focus of the data analysis in this article was on accounts that covered the topics of diversity in game cultures, belonging in game cultures, and expectations of other players or the respondent themself. These accounts were coded and themed according to the reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2022). The particular variant of it that was inductive, latent, critical, and constructionist.

While reflexive thematic analysis provided the tools used in "organizing, interrogating and interpreting" the data set (Braun and Clarke 2022, 4), the expectation analysis was used as a lens to identify the markers of expectations. According to Hyvärinen (1994, 63) the benefits of the analysis lie in close documentation of interpretation, making sure the data is discussed with detailed enough manner, and the interpretation can engage with the politics of action. Two themes were formed to illustrate the narratives of marginalized player groups' belonging and place in game culture: defying normative behavior and feeling the pressures of implied player.

The expectation analysis was developed by Matti Hyvärinen (1994) by combining elements of Tannen's (1979) list of surface evidence of underlying expectations in a narration of an event with elements of Labov's (1972) types of evaluation used in

highlighting the "so what" of the narrated event. We as humans learn from very young age the scripts of society. These scripts, for example, going to a restaurant, form as a master narrative in the act of people following them and talking about their experiences. Along with scripts and master narratives, expectations are part of narrativity, and narratives are often in juxtaposition with the expectations (Hyvärinen 2008). In expectation analysis (Hyvärinen 1994) the researcher pays attention to repetition of words or statements, false starts, temporal backtracking of narrative, hedges or hedgelike words or phrases (such as even, just, really), negative statements, contrastive connectives (such as but), modals (such as must, should, may), evaluative language (adjectives and adverbs), evaluative verbs (such as sulk or hate), and intensifiers (such as lengthening of vowels, all or other quantifiers). The basic premise of the analysis is that oral life story that is the data the researcher is examining, tells the story of "changing, failing or realized expectations" and the expectations are always "social, local and conventional" (Hyvärinen 2008, 456).

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This section details the two themes of defying normative behavior and feeling the pressures of implied player. The two themes complement each other by looking at the expectations from two different angles: defying and conforming. The themes are illustrated by examining case examples from the data through the lens of expectation analysis and previous research. While most of the expectations were brought forth by women, some of the male respondents had experiences related to game cultural expectations as well. The quotes used in this section are translated from Finnish to English by the author and accompanied with a pseudonym created by the author. A particular care was used in making sure the translation was as close to the original as possible since the expectation analysis focuses on words and phrases used.

Defying Normative Behavior

This theme includes narratives that revolve around the expectations of normative behavior. The behavior described by the participants includes three groups: a normative adult, a normative player, and a typical lapsed player. All of these narratives also deal with defying the expectations somehow, for better or for worse. The first case example is Anna who had discovered playing single-player games as a hobby again after a long break but would have also liked to find other adults to play with. She talks about encountering a difficult challenge in a digital game:

> But then, I had played it a long while, and then comes this orc killing I couldn't do. So many dozen times I [tried] and every time that I thought I had progressed…It really made me angry.[…] I am on level 52 so I am quite high but I just can't get it done. This surprised me, that I still..that I am almost 42 and I have this..I remember when I was a child and something dropped or in *Boulder Dash* [Liepa 1984] a stone dropped into my head I was like "argh!" But I still have it like that. (Anna, 41, woman)

Anna's narrative about a difficult game situation includes many markers of expectations. First, she describes the fight, starting with a *contrasting connective* 'but' and a negative statement indicating that she was expected to clear the fight. She is using plenty of *intensifiers* like 'long', 'dozen' and 'every' to highlight that she should have prevailed. When she continues describing her feelings, she *backtracks temporally* to her childhood experiences and continues using *intensifiers* and *the*

contrasting connective 'but'. Two different expectations are here at play. The first one is the competence of the player and the second is the emotional behavior of an adult. Both these unmet expectations are connected to her status as a lapsed player. Firstly, there is the expectation of skill and mastery from the point of view of game as designed. While players that play frequently keep learning cumulative playing skills, the same is not true for those that have longer breaks. Also, with age the fine motor skills can deteriorate.

These difficulties in meeting the expectations stem from the designed meritocracy of video games, where value is placed on "balanced" mechanics, meaning minimizing luck and maximizing skill (Paul 2018). Secondly, there is the expectation of good and proper adult. Play and being an adult are in juxtaposition. According to Deterding (2018), play is frivolous, pleasure seeking, and it teaches how to be an adult. Adults already know their role and they should be stable, productive, reasonable, norm abiding, and be mainly concerned about providing for their family. To surrender to play, adults need alibis, audience management, awareness management, and role distancing to avoid embarrassment. As Anna is in her forties, she herself expects to be more mature but she finds herself feeling similar emotions of anger when failing in a game challenge as she did as a child. Normative adults should not express anger when failing at a game no less, and at least they should be more mature in dealing with the anger.

Anna is surprised by her own emotions, and she later talked about also being amazed that she found herself looking at fan art, that she was still able to enthuse about a game, to be a fan. She doesn't report other people saying anything negative of her emotions, but she takes on the role of a generalized other. Generalized other is a concept theorized originally by George Herbert Mead where "a group or society places the individual in situations that require him to take up attitudes belonging to a variety of roles and to discern the common attitude and the rules. The individual actually becomes the Generalized Other internally by self-interrogation while being the object of personal though in taking up the imagined roles and reflecting upon himself in them" (Dodds et al. 1997, 498).

Normative behavior of an adult was also talked about in another interview, but in this case the thoughts of normativity came from the outside rather than from the inside. Leea had started to play computer games only ten years prior and described that at some point she had her own virtual café in one of the *Sims* (Maxis 2000) games. Later on, she grew bored of the repetitiveness of the game but in the survey when asked how her loved ones viewed her playing hobby, she said that they were amused by it. In the interview she elaborated:

> It must have been the *Sims*-phase, they laughed a bit like "why are you taking care of something like that". But it wasn't anything malicious but some such, some laughing at it. [..]and everyone accepted it, but they of course chuckled a little like "oh dear, a grown person and to go silly over something like that". (Leea, 65, woman)

Leea describes her family members as not understanding her playing and uses *evaluative words* such as 'laugh', 'chuckled', 'grown' and 'silly' to bring forth their expectations. They had expected that she would be old enough not to enthuse so much about a game. I was interested in hearing more about the situation and asked some more about it, but Leea just reiterated that they jested good-naturedly. While

she does not seem to mind their mirth, their initial reaction to her playing and the *evaluative language* Leea chooses to describe their words point towards the expectation of a normative adult and the behavior fit of an adult. Older women are not expected to enthuse about games. Even though games have long been entertainment for adults as well, there is a persistent attitude that games and play are for children and engaging with those as an adult is childish.

Like Anna, Ilmari encountered expectations related to the behavior of a normative player. In his case it was at a role-playing game he joined and after a couple of sessions decided to leave the group and form a role-playing group of his own.

> It was not a tale told together but it was a continuous string of weird situations the characters were thrown into, without having the narrative means to respond to it. [..] The themes and the game master's way of speaking about matters and other people was not something I was that into. [..] It had maybe some kind of gender-based underestimation or discrimination, difficult to say because I don't know the person outside the game. But it could be interpreted as hostile, and it was quite clear to me that I don't want that kind of themes in my roleplaying game. (Ilmari, age 35, man)

Ilmari uses negative statements to imply that he expected that the player characters would have had more agency in the game and that the themes and language used by the game master would have been different. He uses *evaluative language* like words 'weird', 'thrown into', 'underestimation', 'discrimination', and 'hostile' to describe the way game master was speaking and *intensifiers* such as 'quite' and 'that kind' to express his own feelings. As a player, he was expected to be fine with a game where the players did not have as much as agency as the game master did and where the themes and language were discriminatory. Ilmari is very careful of not explicitly stating the problematic themes and to what gender those were aimed at. However, based on other parts of the interview, he is very aware of game cultures' tendency to exclude marginalized players, so it is safe to assume that the discriminatory vocabulary was aimed at non-males, especially as role-playing game tables can be seen as geek male preserves where accepted behavior includes rules lawyering, gamesplaining, and hooliganism (Dashiel 2020). Ilmari defied this expected behavior by leaving the game table and forming his own, where the players discuss beforehand about the upcoming themes of the game.

While Anna, Leea, and Ilmari overcame the expectations of normative behavior and kept on playing (at least at the time), Maria's narrative illustrates defying expectations by not playing what is thought to be the go-to of lapsed players.

> But I haven't started to play any games and I am even a bit surprised myself I haven't started to play any mobile games. Because probably for many ex-gamers it is something that you don't longer play with computer a console but you have some mobile game you are hooked on really badly and funnily enough I am not into those either and I don't really play those. (Maria, age 31, woman)

Using a *constractive connector* 'but', Maria addresses the expectation that as a lapsed player she should have started to play mobile games. She reinforces this by using the *quantifier* 'many' and 'really badly' to describe the behavior of other lapsed players. She narrates herself as an ex-gamer that defies those expectations, surprising even

herself. Even though lapsed players haven't been researched extensively nor there have been a wide range of public discourse of this phenomenon, Maria was aware that mobile games seem to be particularly suitable for or aimed at lapsed players and she was puzzled by the fact that she doesn't fit the mold. Later on in the interview she reflected on that a bit and noted that a reason for that might be because she doesn't like single-player games.

She admitted though that while she has played a bit of *Among Us* (InnerSloth 2018) with her child and her co-workers, it is a game she could get hooked on. Casual mobile games and free-to-play games are often suggested as a solution to the perceived lapsed player predicament (Juul 2009; Paul 2020). These games are cheaper, available on your phone wherever you are, are often quick to play and easily paused. But it is not a cookie cutter type of solution to be offered to every lapsed player. On the other hand, most of those games are not thought of as "real games" (Consalvo and Paul 2019) and in game magazines the attitude to mobile games can be conflicted and the games can be talked reluctantly and in condescending manner in game media (Rannanpiha et al., 2021). The information on mobile games that would suit the individual preferences of lapsed players is thus not easily obtained and is colored by prejudices.

Feeling the Pressures of Implied Player

As opposed to the theme of defying normativity, this theme explores partially yielding to the expectations. The narratives deal with the expectations of a normative player, marginalized person as a player, and normative behavior of a mother, gamer and/or an adult. In these case examples the pressures of the expectations have led the players to quit playing a certain game, to tough it out, to build better communities, and conform to the expectations of a mother and an adult.

The first case example is about normative player behavior in a miniature game tournament and illustrates the fact that toxic meritocracy can appear in analog game cultures as well. Johannes had quit playing in *Warhammer 40 000* (Games Workshop 2012) miniature wargame tournaments, and one reason for it were the unpleasant encounters with people there:

> When you are playing for the last places [of the tournament], those tables have the best games. There are the guys who have come there to have fun and enjoy themselves. Not like I have the best possible army that can win the whole kit and kaboodle and I can interpret the rules as much as possible and nit-pick everywhere and everything. Is that even fun anymore? That is something everyone can judge themselves. (Johannes, age 39, man)

Johannes uses *negative statement* to express the expectation of tournament behavior that valorizes toxic meritocracy (Paul 2018). He uses *repetition* and *intensifiers* like 'the best possible' and 'as much as possible' and *evaluative words* in describing the behavior of some of the players such as 'interpret' and 'nit-pick'. At the end he is using *modal* 'can'. These expectation markers tell the story of expected tournament behavior that is all about winning no matter the cost to the enjoyment of other players. While at some point he seemed to be able to defy these expectations with other players like him that were there to have fun, in the end it was too much for him.

In another case example the expectations lead Oona to quit as well, but the expectations were related to her abilities and sense of humor. When she was ready to start playing *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) again after a long break, her teammates had quit and when she tried to find new people to play with, she met some difficulties:

> When you are a woman, and maybe especially when I was away for a couple of years from the game circles, and I hadn't been dealing with men/young men that much then maybe I couldn't quite deal with the humor and the fuss happening there sometimes. [..]On the other hand, I haven't really especially suffered because of my gender while I have played or encountered anything special like that. [..] And maybe I went there with a mentality that I have less time than when I was a student, because I was working full time, so I don't have the energy for random messing around. I would have like to go there and raid and concentrate and they were just kind of prattling on and somehow maybe didn't take into account that I had been away for a while and maybe I didn't know the tactics for the newest bosses. (Oona, age 34, woman)

Oona connects her gender and status as a lapsed player as a reason she was not comfortable with staying in the game, after returning to it. As a lapsed player she wants to be efficient with her play time and as she had been away for a while, there were new adversaries in the game she was not familiar with. She expects that her situation would be taken into consideration, but it clashes with the other players' expectation of the playing situation as an occasion to socialize. Her gender is also a factor in the situation as she is not able to deal with the humor of young men, indicating with the use of negative that she is expected to be fine with the humor. She doesn't clearly say what kind of humor that was, but uses *evaluative words* like 'fuss', 'random messing around', 'prattling' as well as *repetition* and *intensifiers* highlighting the differences between herself and her co-players.

She narrates her co-players as inconsiderate chatterboxes with questionable humor (possibly gender-based humor) and herself as a person who has little patience for that kind of socializing who would have just wanted to play. However, in the middle of the description there is a *temporal backtracking* of sorts to her past experiences as she highlights that she hasn't 'suffered' or encountered anything 'special' because of her gender. With this *negative statement* she addresses the possible expectations of the researcher and refutes it. While she recognizes that other women players probably have encountered worse, she also downplays her own experiences at the same time. In the end though, her experiences with these players led to her abandoning the game all over again. Her narrative is similar to Pobuda's (2023) encounter with role-players in a role-playing club, where the male players did not overtly harass her, but shut her out of the character and player interactions. She never did go back either.

While Oona decided to leave because of the bad behavior, Eija has stayed in another game community in spite of the toxic atmosphere. In addition to that though, she is elsewhere building a better community. She had started to play computer games again, specifically *MapleStory* (Wizet 2003), because she had progressed in the game enough and found a guild to join.

> My view of game culture is pretty toxic. Fragile masculinity and ableism are really strongly part of that culture and I don't want to be part of it. But I am

> part of it in supporting disabled players. And I am chronically ill too. I am interested in that culture. I try to be part of creating a safe place for playing. But I am not interested in the area that has been occupied mostly by men and young boys what is really toxic. And my *Maple* guild is too, the culture is visible right away. But I haven't had the strength to say anything about it. (Eija 28, woman)

Eija uses plenty of *contrastive connector* 'but' as well as *negative statements*. As a player she is expected to be interested in game culture. Another 'but' tells about the expectations that she wouldn't engage at all with game culture since she doesn't want to be part of it, but again she defies the expectations by making room for marginalized players. The third expectation is that as she is creating safe spaces for play, she would also fight for those in the guild she is part of. This interview together with Oona's excerpt highlights those ways to deal with toxicity marginalized players have mostly access to: they can either leave, stay and be silent, or possibly form or join a community that is specifically designed to be safe for marginalized players. Standing up alone and trying to make the community less toxic is not really an option. Building safer communities still rests in the shoulders of marginalized players themselves or nonprofit organizations. According to a study by Kilmer et al. (2024) those in charge of game companies are not aware of the importance of the issue, are not interested in combatting the toxic culture because it might cut down their profits, are prioritizing keeping their game up instead of community care, fear bad press and retaliation, and/or do not have enough education and expertise on the matter. Collective action from the biggest companies, aided with the expertise of organizations like the Electronic Software Association and Fair Play Alliance was called out by the participants of the study. The researchers also noted that the pervasive notion of losing profits due to non-toxic efforts is not supported by the research done by Steinkuehler (2023) as well as Kowert and Kilmer (2023). The latter found that 72% of players avoided a game that had a bad community reputation. This was evident in Bergstrom's (2018) study of women gamers as well, the reputation of being hostile to beginner players affected their interest in even trying out digital massively multiplayer online roleplaying game *EVE Online* (CCP Games 2003). In my data, even those players who had not encountered toxic behavior themselves, were very much aware that it is a common occurrence and were vary of it.

The final two case examples deal with the expectations of a gamer and a mother. Taru would like to identify as a gamer but feels conflicted. In her case the identity of a gamer and the identity of a mother are strongly juxtaposed and the amount of play is the defining characteristic of a gamer:

> It was so strongly part of my persona before children. Playing was my hobby and my life. [..] All of my active friendships, those who I was most in touch with, were in that game or through that game. And I felt I didn't have identity outside playing, so with children, I am not sure what I am. But then I would like to still think that I am a gamer but if I haven't played actively in many years, can I still call myself even a gamer anymore. The fact that I don't have the energy or interest [to follow game culture] is partly influenced by that also the thought that I am not playing anymore would feel somehow more bitter or harder if I would actively follow the game scene and would be there. It would feel worse when I would see that others can live the kind of life that has been once so important to me. And it also makes easier to run the family life and concentrate on it, when the playing is not always there pounding that

> this is the thing I would want to do. Because I do want to concentrate in my children and enjoy being with them when it is possible. (Taru, 32, woman)

Taru uses words like 'strongly', 'life', and 'all' to underline the importance of games and being a gamer during the time when she didn't yet have children. The second *contrastive connector* 'but' reveals that she still feels like a gamer despite her saying she is not sure about her identity and the third 'but' reveals the expectation that a gamer is someone who plays often and does not have breaks that last years. The latter part of the quote addresses the possible feelings of lapsed players that are hidden beneath the simple reasons of lack of interest and lack of energy: feeling worse if she would keep herself up to date with what is going on in the game world. This reifies Bergstrom's argument (2018: 4) that conceptualizing leisure related decisions as individual's choice obscures the barriers of access. Taru also uses the *evaluative verb* 'pound' to describe the want to play and narrates herself as a good mother who wants to be there for her growing children and who sacrifices her own wants and needs for the sake of the family. This is similar to the findings of Horne and Breitkreuz (2018) when some of the interviewed Canadian mothers would sacrifice their free time and identities for the sake of their children. The last sentence echoes the thought often seen in Finnish public discourse that children grow up fast and parents should enjoy and appreciate the time when their children are adolescents. This is also connected to the societal expectations of a good mother who sacrifices her own needs and pushes them aside until her children are older (Horne and Breitkreuz 2018; Weaver and Usher 1997).

During the interview Taru also explained that when they had their first and second child, she was still able to play and her husband assisted her play by setting up the computer and game for her. Later when they had more children, her husband played massively multiplayer online role-playing games with the older children, while Taru took care of the younger ones and dreamt of having multiple computers so everyone could play together. In Finland, women still do more household work and child rearing than men (Finnish Institute of Health and Welfare 2023). This might be connected to the "motherhood myth", the societal ideal of motherhood and expectations of unconditional love, never being angry and being constantly attentive (Rotkirch and Jantunen 2010). According to Constantinou, Varela and Buckby (2020), failing to living up to the ideal can lead to guilt and that can in turn lead to "intensive mothering" that embodies the beliefs (Liss et al. 2013) that mother is the essential parent, parents are fulfilled by their children, parents should provide constat intellectual stimulation to the child, parents' lives center around the children, and parenting is difficult and exhausting.

While Taru talks about especially the label gamer and its connection to her playing habits, Maria does not mention identity nor the label gamer. In this second excerpt of her interview though, she touches on the same kind of dilemmas in practice. She mentions that her husband plays regularly with his friends, and she is envious about it.

> Yeah, missing playing is a funny feeling because I don't actually have any sensible reason for it. I don't have, I don't need playing in my life as such in any way but certainly it has been such a big part of my own history, and one remembers how nice it was and how fun it was to shoot the breeze with friends and play. And that feeling when you progress in a game or get to the next level. And in a way games are based on this kind of reward system, so

> you don't get constant rewards in work life maybe in exactly the same way as in games. And in a major way this social aspect, being an adult is relatively lonely, if you don't have a lot of friends with a family, I don't have that many friends with a family so this is in that way relatively lonely, this life. [..] But yeah, the feeling of longing is funny in that way that it is more like, especially a matter of emotions, it is in no way based on rational argument. (Maria, age 31, woman)

Maria uses *the evaluative word* 'funny' to evaluate her own feelings. *Negative statements* hint at the expectations that firstly one should have a sensible reason for missing a hobby and secondly that playing should somehow have instrumental benefits in player's life. She goes on by reflecting the reasons she has enjoyed playing games and uses repetition as an *intensifier* when narrating herself as lonely. After this reflection she *repeats* her evaluation of her own longing and frames it just an emotion and not rational. Maria's situation is connected to her role as a mother and as a sensible adult. While her husband plays regularly with his friends, she has drifted away from her earlier play groups and even though she thought about purchasing a gaming laptop she decided against it. The reason behind it was that a proper gaming hardware would be a big investment and besides work she must do chores, and she also feels the need for exercise so she wouldn't have time to play. This is connected to the thought of a normative, sensible adult (Deterding 2018), mother who uses their free time in managing their household (Horne and Breitkreuz 2018; Weaver and Usher 1997) and a woman managing herself in attaining the neoliberal preferred body (Harjunen 2021). Especially with women, the expectation of a "second shift" (Bergstrom 2018; Hochschild and Machund 2012) is strong, meaning the expectation that on top of their job, they will take care of the needs of their family and home after the workday has ended. This results in a leisure-gap between men and women and is seen in my interviews as well, where the male partners of the interviewed women still played.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

My research questions asked 1) How do Finnish lapsed players narrate belonging and their place in game cultures? 2) What do the narratives reveal about game cultural and cultural expectations in Finland? Based on the answers I constructed two themes: defying normative behavior and feeling the pressures of implied player. The two themes contain several expectations from the point of view of themselves, people close to them, co-players, and game designers. The expectations are connected to the role of an adult, the role of a mother, the role of a marginalized player as other, role of a normative player, and the invisibility of lapsed players. My interviewees recognized the normative models of how an adult is supposed to behave. They should be serious, no-nonsense type of people who have their emotions in check. Some of the interviewees resisted this norm and kept playing in spite of it, some of them had yielded to or internalized the norm. The role of a mother that came up in the interviews seemed to be harder to resist than the role of a normative adult. While it seems that adult play is starting to be more accepted, the motherhood myth and intensive mothering are strongly ingrained in Finnish society. The pressures of fulfilling the role of a good mother were juxtaposed with the more permissive role of a father and a husband, who could more freely play with his children and his friends. Neither the survey nor the interviews asked specific information about the family type or sexuality though. Those who spoke of having children, seemed to be in a monogamous heterosexual relationship but based on the data I can't be certain.

The role of a non-man in play spaces and in games seems still to be the role of an other. Marginalized players are expected to adapt to the environment of toxic masculinity or get out. The effort of building and finding safer spaces are mostly left for the individual marginalized players to shoulder as well. Lapsed players are still largely invisible in research, in popular discourse and in game-specific discourse, leading to stereotypes in characterizations and solutions aimed at them. The first instincts seemed to be that either they are not at all interested in games to a point of dislike or that they should all be playing mobile games since those are short, easy, and portable. While most of the expectations seemed to be connected to gender roles in one way or another, some men talked about expectations related to the toxic meritocracy of games. The results show that the combination of gender identities, cultural norms and specific life circumstances can compound each other and form a web that is hard to untangle. More research is clearly needed in mapping out the needs, preferences, habits, and life situations of lapsed players.

The depictions of the expectations form a bigger picture of the forces that influence marginalized players´ agency. The scripts in game culture related to games and implied players entangle with the scripts of being an adult and being a mother. Along with the hegemony of play, the toxic meritocracy of video games influences the script of a game. As implied player is influenced by the hegemony of play, any player that is not male, heterosexual, white and hardcore in their playstyle and selected games is relegated the role of an other, an interloper. This is complicated by the scripts of an adult and a mother that are influenced by protestant values of work and the patriarchal model of sacrificing mother. We need new scripts to combat these old, outlived models. This would mean providing better visibility of players who are marginalized, parents, lapsed in one way or another, in player communities, games, game industry, and game journalism. However, this responsibility should not be on these players themselves, and as Shaw (2014, 6) and Jenson and de Castel (2021, 204) note, the solution does not lie on just adding marginalized players to communities and workplaces that are toxic and expect them to thrive. For achieving that, leverage of research and mandated policies needs to come first.

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