The Demographics and Motivations of Trading Card Game Players

Vilma Varismaa
Independent Scholar
vilma.varismaa@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The study examines motivations for analogue trading card game (TCG) play by utilising Yee's (2006; 2007) research on MMORPG players as its basis. While TCG players share some motivations with MMORPG players, they also have unique motivators due to factors related to both the internal play experience and the playing environment. To measure player motivation, an online quantitative survey with over 300 responses was analysed by using exploratory factor analysis (EFA).

The results show thata there are five factors for TCG play: competitiveness, escapism, social, manipulation and design. While some of these factors, such as competitiveness, are directly linked to orthogamic gameplay, other factors showed how TCG play is more than the act of playing against other players. Factors such as social and design pointed towards topics outside of the orthogamic gameplay, such as meeting other players and building decks, being essential parts of TCG play.

An earlier version of these findings was presented in the author's master's thesis, *Why to Play? - What motivates players to participate in orthogamic trading card game play* (2025). The present article revises and expands that work for publication.

Keywords

trading card games, card games, player motivation, orthogames, analogue games, player studies

INTRODUCTION

Trading card games (TCG), although being a billion-dollar business (Research and Markets, 2023), remain a rather understudied genre of games. In TCGs, players collect shiny rectangles of cardboard, trade them, and compete against each other in both casual and competitive environments. Therefore, TCGs are more than just their gameplay, and their players are a diverse group of people with various motivations for participating in play. While one player wants to win the biggest tournament the game offers, the next player builds decks around the themes or characters they like, and the third player participates in the play to meet their friends. They all share the same genre of games, TCGs, yet their motivations for play diverge from each other.

This paper explores the question *"What are the underlying motivational factors for analogue TCG play?"*. The main aim of this study is to explore the motivations of TCG players, understand why they engage in play, and what they want to gain from both

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gameplay and interactions around it. To answer the research question, the study utilises prior research on massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), and what motivates players to participate in them. MMORPGs were chosen as a starting point because, although they are played in digital environments, they share characteristics with TCGs in other regards, such as shared gaming experiences. Also, as there have been no prior studies on TCG player motivation, Yee's (2006) study provided a previously tested basis for new studies across genres. Both genres have a competitive side, but players also interact with each other and form relationships through the game. Prior research on MMORPG players has shown that motivations for play vary by individual, but there are distinguishable categories across genres (Scheck et al., 2015; Yee, 2006; Yee, 2007). While Yee's (2006; 2007) model remains highly influential, it also has genre-specificity and limited theoretical grounding in its early item sets. I therefore approach Yee's (2006; 2007) framework as a basis for exploratory adaptation rather than as a definitive model of player motivation. Also, as prior studies have been conducted on games played in digital environments rather than being analogue games like TCGs are, the study offers a unique view on player studies.

TCGs differ from both digital and analogue games, as well as from other card game subgenres, such as party games and digital card games [1]. Therefore, defining what qualifies as a trading card game and TCG play were essential concepts for the study. When the definition of TCG was established, creating accurate questions for players was easier than it would have been otherwise. Afterwards, an online quantitative survey was distributed through Discord to measure player motivation within this defined subgenre. The survey gathered over 300 responses and was analysed using exploratory factor analysis (EFA). The analysis identified five preliminary motivational dimensions for TCG play: competitiveness, escapism, social, manipulation and design. Some of these factors are closely tied to the gameplay itself, whereas others foreground activities around the game, such as social interaction and deckbuilding, highlighting how much of TCG play takes place beyond individual matches.

TCGS AND ORTHOGAMIC PLAY

While all TCGs are card games, not every card game is a trading card game. Even the term "trading card game" is something game designers and game scholars alike seem to lack a standard definition of. It is easy to see how games such as *Magic: The Gathering* (Wizards of the Coast, 1993), *Yu-Gi-Oh!!* (Konami, 1999) or *Flesh and Blood TCG* (Legend Story Studios 2019) would qualify as a TCG. Similarly, Poker or Solitaire would often not qualify as TCGs, as they lack both trading and collecting aspects. With games such as *Hearthstone* (Blizzard Entertainment 2014) or *Pick Your Poison* (Dyce Games 2016), the line between a TCG, a digital card game and a board game blur, as they all have some characteristics of TCG, but are lacking in other ones. Therefore, in the context of this study, a *TCG is a game in which players use physical cards unique to a specific game to play an orthogame, and players acquire cards either by buying a possibly randomised product, trading cards with other players, or purchasing cards from a second-hand market*.

The definition raises a follow-up question of what an orthogame is, and why defining that is essential to understanding what games can be considered a TCG. According to Elias, Garfield, and Gutschera (2012, p. 8), an orthogame is "a category of games where two or more players play a game with rules that provide a clear ranking or evaluation of the players and where there is both a winner and a loser in the game".

Deriving from the word's origins, orthogames can also be defined as “what players see as the right and correct game” (Carter et al., 2012, p.14). When defining TCGs, the definition of orthogames by Elias et al. (2012) raises an essential point by stating that an orthogame should have a winner and a loser. This limitation removes more board game-oriented games from the definition of TCG, as although they might have a clear winner, there is often not a clear ranking between the rest of the players, nor an evaluation of the level of their gameplay. Similarly, by defining that TCGs utilise physical cards for the gameplay, the definition separates analogue TCGs from their digital counterparts, and also considers game collectors, who do not wish to participate in the gameplay but simply collect the cards due to their visual appeal. Therefore, card game subtypes can be categorised roughly as seen in Table 1.

Card game type	**Publishing type**	**Revenue model**	**Gameplay / Orthogame**	**Examples**
Trading card game (TCG)	New card set every couple of months	Booster packs / loot boxes	Yes/Yes	*Magic: The Gathering*
Collectible card game (CCG)	New card set every year	Booster packs / loot boxes	No/No	*F1 Turbo Attax*
Board game with cards	Single-time release	One-time payment	Yes/ Sometimes	*Dominion*
Digital card game	New card set every couple of months	Booster packs / loot boxes	Yes/Yes	*Hearthstone*
Party game	Single-time release	One-time payment	Yes/No	*Cards Against Humanity*

Table 1: Card game subgenres

TCG hobbyists, such as *Pokémon* card collectors, do not necessarily participate in the gameplay but simply partake in the hobby due to the visual appeal of the cards. They still have the ability to play with the cards, unlike with the collectors of collectable card games (CCGs), a card game subgenre which consists of football cards, baseball cards, and other cards of a similar manner. As those cards lack the gameplay aspect, they cannot be included in the same subgenre as TCGs. However, as the terminology has been inconsistent for decades, both scholars and game designers lack a common understanding of what games are considered part of TCG, CCG or other card game subgenres. Because of the rise of card game collectors in recent years, there needs to be a clear separation between TCGs and CCGs. While TCGs offer both gameplay and the possibility of card collection, CCGs lack the gameplay aspect. Similarly, while digital card games have gameplay, they lack the analogue gameplay environment and sometimes the possibility to trade cards, which is why they have been differentiated from TCGs. They also have different communication requirements between players, as seen in Table 2.

Attribute	TCGs	Digital card games	MMORPGs
Examples	*Magic: The Gathering, Pokemon TCG*	*Hearthstone, Shadowverse*	*EverQuest, World of Warcraft*
Cost for the player	Physical cards	Software + optional purchases	Software + subscription
No. of players in the same game instance	usually 2-4	usually 2	0- multiple thousands
Gaming environment	Physical	Digital	Digital
Player social interaction	Essential to the gameplay	Minimal	Rich, collaborative, social interactions, but not always mandatory

Table 2: Attributes of TCGs compared to digital card games and MMORPGs

Defining what game counts as TCG is not an easy task. While some scholars refer to all games played with cards as CCG, others refer to the same game as TCG or simply as a card game, causing challenges with terminology and which games are part of the same subgenres. Because of these differences in categorisation from one work to another, in this study, TCGs are not their own genre but rather a subgenre of the games which utilise cards as their main gameplay piece. With CCGs, digital card games and party games, they all fall under the same card game umbrella. This limitation allows for a more reliable analysis of player motivation, as the games within the TCG subgenre are compared with each other. While games are played with their unique pieces, they all share the same goal and physical gaming environment, which is why TCGs can be treated as a subgenre.

RESEARCH METHOD

To study motivations for TCG play, I used a 30-item quantitative online survey based on Yee's (2006) MMORPG motivations as the basis for the study. Items were adapted to reflect the institutional structure of analogue TCG play. For example, tournament participation was used as an indicator of organised competitive motivation, not as a synonym for all competition. The survey was first tested on a small group of participants to gather feedback and later distributed to a larger group of players through Discord. Respondents (n=360) used a 5-point Likert scale (1-5: strongly disagree–strongly agree) to respond to the questions. The respondents were gathered from 12 different Discord servers related to card game play, and among those servers, three focused on *Magic: The Gathering*, three on *Yu-Gi-Oh!!*, two on *Lorcana* (The Walt Disney Company, 2023), and one on *Flesh and Blood TCG* and *Cardfight!! Vanguard* (Bushiroad, 2011), *Pokémon TCG* (The Pokémon Company, 1996) and *Digimon TCG* (Bandai, 2020) each. The sample was obtained through a convenience strategy, recruiting respondents via online communities, which necessarily limits the representativeness of the data. As a result, my findings are more accurately interpreted as reflecting the motivations of engaged, digitally connected players within these specific communities rather than the full population of TCG players. Generalisability beyond this context, for example, to more casual players, offline-only communities, or other settings, should therefore be approached with caution.

The survey was anonymous, and the only requirements to answer were being over 18 years of age and having an adequate proficiency in English. Although the majority of people in the channels the survey was distributed to were located in Finland, it is not possible to know respondents' exact geographical locations due to the anonymity of the survey. The data for the study were gathered in February 2025.

Out of all the respondents, 79% were men, 13% were women, and 7% were non-binary individuals. 1% did not want to specify their gender. It is essential to note that the survey distribution platform might affect the demographics. Some players simply opt not to use Discord for communication, and stay in other platforms like Facebook or WhatsApp, which were not included to this study. Another point to note is that some players, especially in minority groups, might choose not to be part of the chosen Discord groups, which might affect the demographic data of the survey. However, as TCGs and card games in general are a male-dominated genre of games, gathering even 20% representation of women and non-binary respondents is more than what was hypothesised before analysing the results of the survey.

The data analysis started with a demographic analysis to address questions related to the question of who plays TCGs. After the demographic analysis, the responses to the 30 motivation questions were analysed using exploratory factor analysis (EFA). Before answering the survey, the participants were informed about the purpose of the study. They were also presented with a privacy notice, and they consented to partake in the survey. The participants also confirmed that they were over 18 years of age. The survey responses were gathered anonymously, and the survey consisted mostly of questions that were not open-ended. The only open-ended questions on the survey were the age of the participant and the possible additional games not listed in the survey. The motivational factor part did not contain any open-ended questions.

RESULTS

Player Demographic

When people talk about TCGs and who plays them, they might think that all of the players are what a typical gamer looks like: a stereotypical man spending time in the local game store. While TCGs have a majority of male players, there is still diversity, especially among players under the age of 35. Games such as *Lorcana* had higher than average non-male representation, which contributes to the overall diversity of the genre in age groups under 35. Although the focus of this paper is on the motivational factors, it is essential to know who plays TCGs, as that might affect the results of the study.

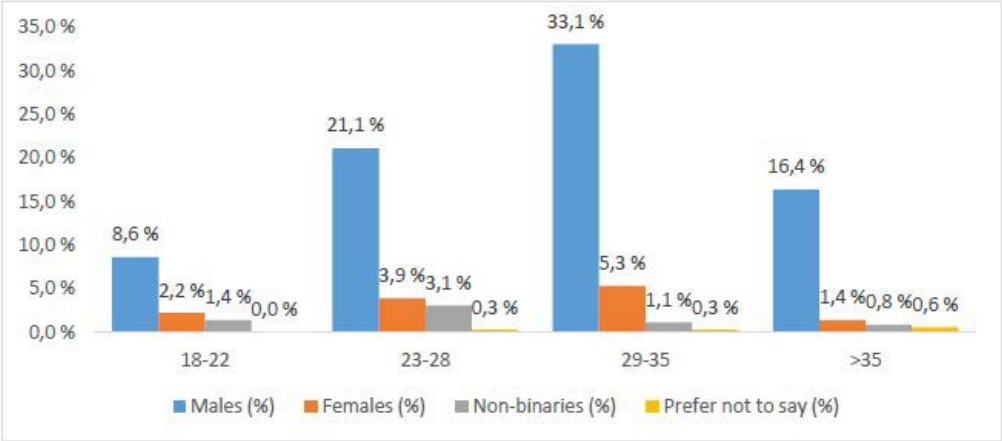

Figure 1: Age distribution by gender (n(men) = 285, n(women) = 46, n(non-binary respondents) = 23, n(prefer not to say) = 4

As seen in Figure 1, most of the respondents were men (79,2%, n = 285), while the rest of the genders covered a smaller part of the respondents. The average age of the respondents was 30 years old, while the median was 30 years old, with an age range from 18 years old to 52 years old. The most prominent player representation was in the male respondents in the 29-35 years old age range, with 33,1% (n=119) representation. Even though 20% of players being non-male individuals might seem like a low number, it is still relatively high compared to the stereotypical representation of TCG players. Turn-based strategy games had 11% women representation (Yee 2017), so the 13% women representation in this study aligns with the data acquired from previous studies, as turn-based games are the closest genre to which TCGs can be compared. However, the study by Yee (2017) does not consider non-binary identities, so TCGs might have more diverse gender representation than their turn-based strategy counterparts. To confirm this, the study would need a larger sample from various platforms. The initial results show that a fifth of players are non-male, which is a positive change for a game genre with a historically homogeneous player base.

Represented Games

The respondents had played 60 different card games in total. Of those games, 44 different games qualified as trading card games, while the other 16 were digital card games or board games that used cards as their main gameplay components. The most notable game, which was not included as a trading card game, was *Hearthstone* (n=10); as stated before, it is played in a digital environment instead of a physical one.

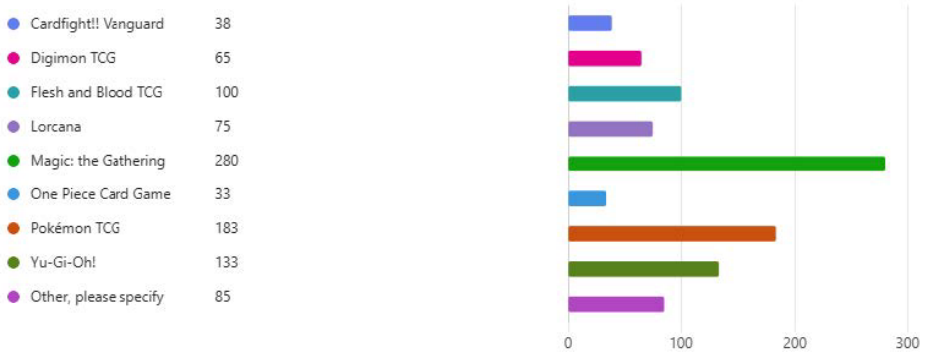

Figure 2: TCGs respondents had played

From the respondents, the majority (n = 280) had played *Magic: The Gathering*, followed by *Pokémon TCG* (n = 183) and *Yu-Gi-Oh!!* (n = 133) (Figure 2). *Flesh and Blood TCG* (n = 100) was not far behind and has gathered an audience at a fast pace, which, considering the game started its publishing in 2019, is notable. Unlike the previous three games, which started publishing in the 1990s, *Flesh and Blood TCG* has gathered a noticeable scene in just a few years and seems to continue attracting new players with every new release, which could make it an interesting candidate for future TCG studies.

All respondents (n = 360) reported that they had played at least one game which qualifies as a TCG in this thesis. Therefore, no responses were removed due to the game not being of the studied genre. Overall, the diversity of TCGs was wide and consisted of games from the modern day all the way to the early 1990s, and from European, American and Asian publishers.

Motivations for TCG Play

Questions designed to measure factors for player motivation were based on the questions in Yee's (2006; 2007) research. The study's goal was to utilise EFA to identify the latent constructs to determine motivations for TCG play. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) is a method used when a researcher has little to no prior information about the latent structure within the set of observable variables. EFA helps to uncover potential factor structures without enforcing predefined assumptions or constraints (Finch 2019, p.5). As there was no prior research regarding the motivations of TCG players, and there was no certainty whether the same motivations apply to them as to MMORPG players, the goal of the study was to understand the motivations of the players of the genre that had not been researched in a similar way before. Therefore, EFA allowed the data analysis without prior assumptions, which made it a logical choice for the study as it was also used in Yee's (2006) study.

The first step was to determine the suitable number of eigenvalues for the study. The scree plot showed an inflexion point at eight components, and together, those eight components consisted of 53% of the total variance. However, as three of the components showed low Cronbach's alpha values (< .25) and/or consisted of only two items each, they were removed from the final components. The rest of the items had a modest internal consistency value (> .54), which is why five items were determined as the final number of components in the study. The data set had a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO) of 0.692. Although the score of 0.60+ is

considered suitable for factor analysis (Nkansah, 2018, p.53), a larger sample size would have made the data even more reliable. However, with a <.001 significance value in Bartlett's Test of Sphericity, the data were deemed to be suitable for the research. The acquired data was then analysed with EFA to determine factors for TCG play.

Competitiveness	Escapism	Social	Manipulation	Design
Tournament play, mastering the game, reaching goals, metagame, game mechanics	Immersion, stress-relieving, playing for the leisure	Chatting, interacting, playing together, making friends, organising	Oppositional play, achieving goals alone, taunting others	Creativity, community, tinkering, theorycraft, originality

Figure 3: Interpretive map of the motivational dimensions identified in the factor analysis

Figure 3 offers an interpretive synthesis of the quantitative findings by mapping the identified factors onto gameplay, play environment, and activity outside formal gameplay; these relationships should be treated as heuristic rather than as a tested model. The motivations: competitiveness, escapism, social, manipulation and design, are not limited to only the TCG gameplay but also span outside of the orthogamic game, making TCGs different from many other game genres in both analogue and digital gaming spaces. The motivational factors extracted from the data are explained in more detail in the following part. All the factors, their respective items, alpha values and factor loadings are listed in Appendices.

Competitiveness

Competitiveness-motivated players participate in the game due to the competition and ranked play. Players in this category are interested in sanctioned play, likely because that is the version of the game that offers the clearest ranking system within the game. The competitive environment also provides clear rules for the game, which further helps to master the game. Even though competitive motivations stay across game genres, in TCGs, the competition is not just a desire to win and play the best possible deck. Instead, players enjoy challenging others and themselves in strategic ways instead of relying on constantly changing the best strategies available, as long as their option is still a competitive one. In this sense, competitive play is closely tied to the orthogamic nature of TCGs, where clearly defined rules and ranking structures the experience.

In the analysis, competitiveness encompasses items related to tournament participation, goal-setting, metagame awareness and interest in game balance. A majority of respondents indicate at least some interest in tournaments, while almost three-quarters disagree with the statement that game balance and metagame issues do not interest them. At the same time, only around one quarter of respondents agree that it is very important to build the best deck possible for the current metagame, and over half disagree with this claim. Taken together, these findings suggest that

competitive TCG players are motivated less by constant optimisation and owning the objectively strongest deck, and more by the opportunity to stick to the strategy, which is still strong in the competitive environment, but which they are at the same time comfortable with.

Escapism

Players who participate in the game due to escapism motivators want to use the game to forget their day-to-day life and problems. They are motivated by escapism and immersion, and do not necessarily participate in the game because of the gameplay, but because of the environments in which the games are played. Escapism-motivated players view intrinsic aspects outside of the gameplay as essential to their experience, as TCGs offer them a way to relieve stress, instead of just focusing on the metagame or competing. For these players, TCGs function as a structured yet low-stakes space where attention can be redirected from work, studies, or personal concerns to the immediate demands of the play and interaction with other players.

In the factor analysis, escapism comprises items related to immersion, relaxation, and playing for leisure rather than focusing on performance-oriented goals. A large majority of respondents agree that they enjoy the escapism aspects of TCGs, with 65.7% indicating that they like how the game lets them step away from everyday life, and 75.5% agreeing that playing helps them vent and relieve stress from the day. Similarly, most respondents agree that TCGs help them forget at least some of their real-life problems, although this item also reveals meaningful gender differences. Women and non-binary respondents are more likely to strongly agree with this statement. The findings on escapism factor suggest that players motivated by said factors do not view TCGs as games which are meant to be “won”, but as an activity which provides emotional relief and a temporary shift in focus, where the gameplay environment and social settings are just as important as the outcome of the match.

Social

Like many other analogue games, TCGs have players who are motivated by social factors. However, unlike in other analogue games where communication is not necessarily mandatory to the gameplay, in TCGs, players are required to talk to each other to ensure the gameplay proceeds without issues. Therefore, social aspects from in-game interactions to the outside-of-the-game social aspects are a strong motivation to some of the players. To this group of players, the game might not be the central reason to participate in the play, but rather an environment where they can connect with like-minded individuals. Whether the reason for social play is meeting friends, talking outside of the game itself or hosting organised play, social motivators for TCG are diverse. Because TCGs are typically played in physical environments such as game stores, they also provide a semi-structured setting where players can interact in person, share interests that might be stigmatised elsewhere, such as their interest in games or other geeky topics, and therefore gradually build a sense of belonging.

The analysis shows that social motivation includes items related to chatting, interacting, playing together, making friends and organising events. A vast majority of respondents (86.4%) agree that they have made good friends through TCG play, while only 3.6% disagree with the statement, showing how central friendship formation is within this factor. Around half of the respondents (53.6%) also agree that friends

made in TCGs have offered them support during real-life problems, even if many players do not primarily use the game space to discuss deeply personal topics. Socially motivated players are thus less focused on escaping everyday life and more interested in seeing people, maintaining peer groups and sometimes taking community roles such as tournament organisers. For socially motivated players, TCGs might be a secondary activity to spend time with friends, talk about both game and topics outside of it, and participate in a community that extends beyond the orthogame.

Manipulation

Although the word manipulation might have a negative feel to it, it does not mean that players who participate in the game because of manipulative motivations are the ones who cheat and play in unpleasant ways, but rather that they want to achieve the goals by themselves and gain an advantage within the game. Instead, those motivations should be called oppositional play rather than manipulative and dominating play. While oppositional play might include traits such as manipulating the gameplay situations to one's advantage, it does not mean breaking the rules or harming other players' gaming experience while participating in the game. Rather than that, it centres around individuality and wanting to achieve the game's goal by utilising the environment and communication in advantageous ways. In TCGs, where constant verbal and non-verbal interaction is part of orthogamic gameplay, this can include, for example, steering opponents towards certain lines of play, or using subtle behaviours such as how cards are handled to create advantageous situations for oneself.

Manipulation factor encompasses items related to oppositional play, playing against the norm, gaining advantage in-game, taunting others and achieving goals with as little help from others as possible. These items produce some of the most divided responses in the entire dataset. For instance, 54.2% of respondents disagree with the statement “I like to manipulate other people so they do what I want them to”, while 20% agree, suggesting that a minority openly embraces a more assertive or controlling approach to interaction, whereas over half reject it. Similarly, 76.9% disagree that they like to taunt or annoy other players during gameplay, and only 10% agree, indicating disapproval of overtly hostile verbal behaviour. However, almost a third of respondents agree that they enjoy dominating other players in gameplay situations, and many remain neutral, pointing to a distinction between toxic behaviour and desire to feel in control of the game state. Overall, manipulation emerges as a shared motivation between TCGs and MMORPGs, but in this context, it is better understood as a drive toward in-game dominance, autonomy and strategic control within the rules, rather than as an endorsement of cheating or aggressive behaviour.

Design

A significant portion of TCG play happens outside of the orthogamic gameplay. TCGs are not played when players enter the game store or tournament. Instead, players work towards the gameplay even before acquiring the cards or playing with them. The design parts of TCG play include but are not limited to deckbuilding, theorycrafting and creating guides for other players. When discussing TCGs, it is not uncommon for players to talk about the design aspects of the game even when they are not actively participating in the game, which differentiates it from many other genres. For some players, these activities are not merely preparatory but the primary source of enjoyment. They think through card combinations, build decks and tinker with lists,

which can become an ongoing creative practice that continues regardless of how often they actually sit down to play.

Design motivations consist of creating and thinking about decks and gameplay while not actively playing, as well as theorycrafting possible scenarios. This is also the most widely shared motivation among respondents. Almost nine out of ten players (89.1%) agree that they like to think of decks to build, with only 3.9% disagreeing, strongly suggesting that mental deck building and planning are central to how players engage with TCGs. A majority (72.8%) also agree that they are fascinated by game mechanics, charts and tables, which can range from probability calculations to following metagame statistics across events. However, players differ in how systematically they approach this aspect of the game. 37.2% report that they research everything about the deck before building it, whereas 41.4% disagree, indicating a split between highly analytical builders and more exploratory designers. At the same time, only about a quarter (24.2%) would create guides for others and over a half (53.1%) are unwilling to do so, which suggests that design-motivated players are primarily focused on their own creative process, rather than on sharing their insights for a wider audience. Overall, the design factor highlights how TCG play extends beyond the orthogame, as for many players, the creative labour of building, refining and theorising decks is as important as, or even more important than, the games those decks are eventually used in.

DISCUSSION

By utilising Yee's (2006) questionnaire of MMORPG players with modifications to fit TCGs, it was possible to identify motivational factors for analogue TCG play. As Yee's (2006; 2007) Daedalus Project, from which the questionnaire was originally drawn, has been used in various other studies related to player motivation, it was a logical starting point for TCG motivational factor research, as this subgenre of card games has remained understudied in scholarly settings. The study has also not been the first to utilise Yee's (2006) research as its basis, as scholars across game genres (Kallio et al. 2010; Scheck et al. 2015) have used it previously. Therefore, it provided a solid basis for the research in this paper.

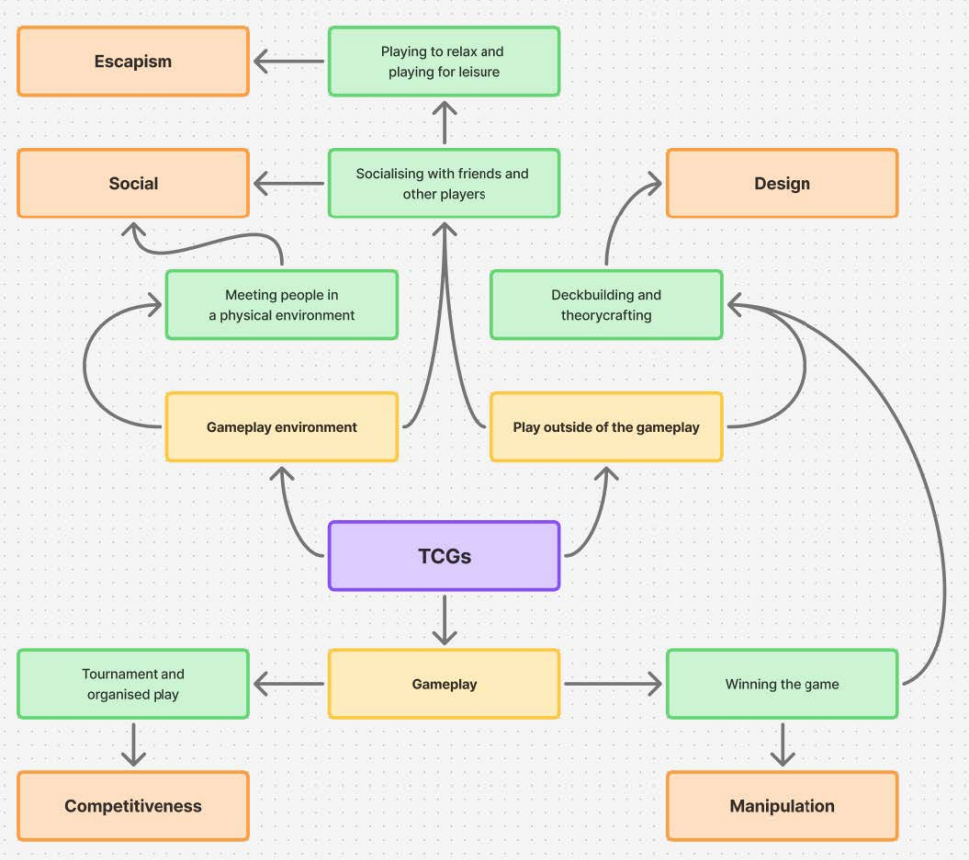

Figure 4: Motivations to play TCGs, mapped out by the areas of play.

The resulting five motivational factors both align with parts of Yee's (2006) findings and extend them in ways specific to TCGs. In particular, factors related to activities outside gameplay, such as deckbuilding and socialising with other players, emphasise the importance of what happens around the orthogame. As illustrated in Figure 4, three main areas of play, gameplay, environment, and play outside the orthogamical gameplay, together shape these motivations and help define the genre overall.

As there have not been that many existing studies regarding TCG players, understanding the basic underlying factors for the play was essential for future research. Although studies of other card game genres exist, they often focus on topics such as machine learning and mathematics (Gielis et al. 2021; Jaffe 2013; Konishi et al. 2018) or card games as educational tools (Fernandes et al. 2023; Kopf et al. 2023; Marks et al. 2024). Therefore, the study aimed not only to understand TCG players but to build a basis for future TCG studies. The study also touched upon other card game subgenres, partially to show how the categorisation of card game subgenres is far from clear. When looking at the naming conventions of various card game subgenres, there is an apparent lack of consistent terminology. While some scholars call TCGs collectable card games (CCGs), others refer to them simply as card games and thus put them into the same game category as, for example, Solitaire, Cards Against Humanity or Balatro (Playstack 2024). Therefore, to understand TCGs and what motivates their players, understanding what even qualifies as a TCG was essential for the study. The research in this paper is also one of the largest quantitative studies about TCG conducted as of the end of 2025, and because of that, there is a

possibility of continuing the study in the future, either by utilising the existing dataset or by expanding upon it.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study of motivations for TCG play utilised the survey created by Yee (2006) for MMORPG players as its basis, so there is a possibility that some of the motivations were not included due to the survey questions. Especially aspects related to gaming environments and orthogamic gameplay should be researched further. However, the questions included not only the motivations for the gameplay but also the motivations for the play happening outside of the gameplay, which reinforces the idea that the survey captured a reasonable variance of motivations for the TCG play. People might also be motivated by the learning aspects of the game, as after answering the survey, some participants reported that they would have liked to see that aspect of the game being asked about in the survey. This is an interesting point, as other kinds of card games have been used for educational purposes (Fernandes et al. 2023; Kopf et al. 2023; Marks et al. 2024), suggesting that TCGs could be used in learning.

Furthermore, as EFA does not offer answers to the hypothesis or confirmation of the final number of factors, but instead explores the possible factors (Finch, 2019, p.5), a confirmatory factor analysis would need to be conducted to get proper conclusions for the study. The study should therefore be viewed as exploratory rather than population-representative. Although 360 responses provided a sufficient basis for EFA, the sample cannot be taken as statistically representative of the global TCG player base. Given the scale and international reach of the TCG market, the broader player population is most likely far more heterogeneous than this study's database can capture. This is not necessarily a flaw in the study, as it offers a clear starting point for possible future work. An apparent gap in the research, as well as the reason why EFA was used to analyse the data, was the lack of existing research on TCG player motivation. Although there have been studies of other genres regarding player motivation, there were no existing studies for TCGs. While this might seem like a limitation for the study, it also points to a clear path for future research, as the study built a strong base for future research on the topic.

CONCLUSIONS

The motivations to play TCGs are diverse. While some players are primarily driven by elements directly related to gameplay, for others the surrounding activities and contexts are equally, if not more, important than the orthogamical gameplay itself. As an understudied subgenre within player studies, TCGs thus offer a distinctive lens on how competition, creativity and sociality intersect. The five motivational factors for TCG play, competitiveness, escapism, social, manipulation and design, demonstrate the depth of the topic and build a new understanding of TCGs by utilising existing research on player motivation across genres.

While the study lays the groundwork for future TCG player research, there is still much more to explore. The findings show that TCGs cannot be reduced to "shiny cardboard rectangles" or to the act of playing matches. Players participate not only to compete, but also to meet friends, cultivate communities, and design unique decks and strategies outside of formal gameplay. TCG spaces are places where people build meaningful friendships and find temporary relief from the stresses and problems of

everyday life. In this sense, the diversity of the cards is mirrored in the diversity of the players and the ways in which they engage with the hobby.

ENDNOTES

[1] As party games such as Cards Against Humanity (Cards Against Humanity LLC. 2011) or Pick Your Poison are rarely played with a competitive mindset, they are classified as a different card game subgenre. Digital card games, such as Hearthstone, often limit communication between players, which is why they were excluded from the study.

[2] Based on experiences as a long-term tournament player, it is not uncommon to see tournaments with a hundred players with only one or two non-male presenting participants.

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APPENDIX 1. BACKGROUND ITEMS

Age verification

1. You have to be 18 years old or older to participate in this survey. Please confirm your age.

● I am over 18 years old

2. Gender:

● Woman
● Man
● Non-binary
● Prefer not to say

3. Age:

● _____

4. Which of the following trading card games have you played before?

● Cardfight!! Vanguard
● Digimon TCG
● Flesh and Blood TCG
● Lorcana
● Magic: the Gathering
● One Piece Card Game
● Pokémon TCG
● Yu-Gi-Oh!
● Other, please specify

5. If you chose other, please specify:

● _____

6. Which trading card game do you play the most?

● Cardfight!! Vanguard
● Digimon TCG
● Flesh and Blood TCG
● Lorcana
● Magic: the Gathering
● One Piece Card Game
● Pokémon TCG
● Yu-Gi-Oh!
● Other, please specify

7. If you chose other, please specify:

● _____

APPENDIX 2. THE 30 ITEMS USED IN THE MOTIVATIONS DATA

1. I find myself having meaningful conversations with others during the gameplay.
2. I usually don't chat much during the gameplay apart from gameplay interactions.
3. I have made some good friends in the game.
4. Friends in the game have offered me support when I had a real-life problem or crisis.
5. I would rather organise events, such as tournaments, than play in them.
6. I like to play in competitive tournaments.
7. I constantly try to set and reach goals.
8. I can't stand those people who only care about building new decks.
9. It's very important to me to build the best deck for the current metagame.
10. I'm fascinated by the game mechanics, and love charts and tables.
11. I research everything about the deck before building it.
12. Game balance and metagame issues do not interest me.
13. Card games are too complicated.
14. I like to think of possible decks to build.
15. I would make guides on how to play a deck if they weren't available.
16. I have learned things about myself from playing the game.
17. I understand real-life group dynamics much more after playing the game.
18. I like the escapism aspect of the game.
19. I like to be immersed in a game.
20. Playing the game lets me vent and relieve stress from the day.
21. Playing the game lets me forget some of the real-life problems I have.
22. The way I am during the gameplay is the way I am in real life.
23. People who role-play during the gameplay bother me.
24. I keep the decks I've played with as memories even if they are not playable anymore.
25. I like to manipulate other people so they do what I want them to.
26. I like to dominate other players during the gameplay.
27. I like to taunt or annoy other players during the gameplay.
28. I scam other people out of their valuable cards if they don't know their price.
29. It's important to me to achieve things with as little help from other people as possible.
30. I am uninterested in tournament play.

APPENDIX 3. FACTOR LOADINGS OF ITEMS ON THE FIVE FACTORS

Factor	Item	Loading
Competitiveness		
(α = .79)	I like to play in competitive tournaments.	0.88
	I constantly try to set and reach goals.	0.61
	It's very important to me to build the best deck for the current metagame.	0.61
	Game balance and metagame issues do not interest me. (R)	0.56
	I am uninterested in tournament play. (R)	0.87
Escapism		
(α = .71)	I like the escapism aspect of the game.	0.74
	I like to be immersed in a game.	0.55
	Playing the game lets me vent and relieve stress from the day.	0.75
	Playing the game lets me forget some of the real-life problems I have.	0.86
Social		
(α = .59)	I have made some good friends in the game.	0.75
	Friends in the game have offered me support when I had a real-life problem or crisis.	0.85
	I would rather organise events, such as tournaments, than play in them.	0.45
	I understand real-life group dynamics much more after playing the game.	0.44
Manipulation		
(α = .59)	I like to manipulate other people so they do what I want them to.	0.76
	I like to dominate other players during the gameplay.	0.69
	I like to taunt or annoy other players during the gameplay.	0.73
	I scam other people out of their valuable cards if they don’t know their price.	0.41
	It's important to me to achieve things with as little help from other people as possible.	0.39
Design		
(α = .54)	I'm fascinated by the game mechanics, and love charts and tables.	0.62
	I research everything about the deck before building it.	0.60
	I like to think of possible decks to build.	0.56
	I would make guides on how to play a deck if they weren't available.	0.62