

The Interplay of Family Life and Digital Gaming

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Gaming has the potential to strengthen familial bonds and enrich shared experiences among families. However, a more complete understanding is needed to maximize benefits, circumvent shared play barriers, and avoid issues such as tensions created by family dynamics (e.g., parental mediation). This study explores the intricate relationship between digital gaming and familial dynamics, investigating how gaming habits within households influence and are influenced by family interactions. Leveraging a thematic analysis approach, we examine discussions on Reddit gaming communities (139 posts along with top comment) related to gaming experiences within families. It highlights how gaming experiences are affected by family life, how games are selected and gaming places are shared, the constraints for sharing gameplay, how games strengthen family member bonds, how family members experience gaming through each other and how games support interaction outside of gameplay. We discuss what games mean to families today, and highlight how some of its characteristics are by design (e.g., co-located cooperative game), while others are unintentional (e.g., relating game components to deceased family members) that we should learn from to create games that potentiate positive shared experiences.

CCS Concepts: • **Applied computing** → **Computer games**.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: Games Research, Family Play, Qualitative Analysis

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1 INTRODUCTION

Gaming has become increasingly prevalent, with a significant portion of people embracing gaming as a leisure activity. Accordingly, the impact of digital games on individuals' cognitive, emotional, and overall wellbeing has garnered considerable attention in both scientific research and popular discourse [19, 23, 31, 40, 43]. Research shows that individuals from different generations in the same household find value in playing video games and families often engage in multiplayer experiences together [29, 43]. These experiences can facilitate spending time together [18, 43, 56], promoting deeper and stronger relationships [14, 18, 41, 51, 58], for example by creating new conversational topics [43, 59].

The introduction of gaming has changed the way families pass time together and shaped new dynamics among members. As households adopt this form of entertainment, new patterns of interaction, communication, and shared experiences emerge, shaping the dynamics of modern familial relationships [7, 28, 43]. Past work that intersects family and gaming characterizes instances of shared play and barriers that stand in the way, such as lack of time [43, 56]

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and disparate skills [13]. Others [27, 51] focus on parental views of children's gaming habits and mediation strategies, highlighting different ways the family manages gaming in the household. In light of this, strategies have been explored to create games that can cater to different generations, needs, and preferences within the family [7, 43, 57].

Despite the intersection of familial relationships and individuals' gaming habits, its impact is still underexplored, creating an opportunity for exploration of the interplay between family dynamics and gaming experiences. Research has mostly approached this topic through controlled qualitative studies by employing questionnaires and interviews [35, 48], sometimes with a new game intervention to evaluate design strategies or elicit new perspectives [7, 28, 43]. These approaches typically capture participants' responses to specific prompts or situations, which may limit the range of insights.

In contrast, our study analyzes discussions in Reddit gaming communities, where individuals, at times, voluntarily share their lived experiences. Reddit is a pseudonymous social media platform that affords users a degree of anonymity, which can support more candid, uninhibited expression of personal experiences [11]. This makes it a particularly useful venue for accessing spontaneous narratives that may be less visible in researcher-driven settings.

Similar to previous research on other domains [46, 54], we conducted an analysis of user created content on Reddit gaming communities, observing 139 posts (along with top comment) through 27 subreddits, where posters discussed their gaming experiences with or affected by their families. By analyzing publicly shared Reddit posts, we access a discursive space where individuals reflect on family and gaming in ways not prompted by researchers, offering a complementary lens to existing research.

To guide our analysis, we ask the following research questions:

RQ1: How do individuals describe and make sense of gaming within the context of family life in public online forums like Reddit?

RQ2: What tensions, relational dynamics, and forms of engagement around family gaming practices are discussed in Reddit posts?

Our findings outline how 1) gaming is affected by family life, 2) gaming spaces are shared and how games are selected, 3) families are constrained when seeking to play together, 4) games strengthen family bonds, 5) family members are able to experience games through each other, and 6) games support interactions outside of gameplay. We contribute with an overview of how gaming experiences are affected by families and the opportunities raised by family members. We discuss how to identify constraints to find matching games, the spectrum between spectating and playing, how shared gaming spaces potentiate spontaneous interactions, facilitating (re)engagement with the medium for non-gamers and how sharing gaming moments can contribute to the identity of the player and their relationships.

2 RELATED WORK

In recent years, the landscape of family life has been influenced by the integration of digital media and gaming into many routines. Gaming has been shown to foster prosocial behavior [22], encouraging players to cooperate and help each other. Additionally, co-play, or playing games together, has been found to strengthen ties between players, enhancing relationships within families and among friends [13–16, 24, 25, 41, 56, 58, 59]. Beyond social benefits, gaming also provides motivational and emotional benefits for players, contributing to their overall well-being [12, 24].

While the positive aspects of gaming within family settings are evident, it is equally important to acknowledge the concerns and barriers that accompany the incorporation of this medium in the household [35]. In the following sections, we discuss past research surrounding gaming and digital media within families, shedding light on both the benefits and

challenges they present. Subsequently, we explore how research has identified implications for the design of games intended for family or mixed-age group play.

2.1 Gaming and digital media within families

Gaming has been found to support a number of familial contexts, particularly parent-child interactions. Some works show how families choose to play together in a shared room when they are able, negotiating what games to play [21, 35]. The interactions created by games are valuable to family members [35, 43] and to parents in particular, who are able to leverage these interactions to transition to different, more meaningful topics [35]. These experiences become part of the identity of families members through the negotiation of norms and the socialization surrounding games [21]. Importantly, games can also be experienced as a spectator, by giving feedback and suggestions, or simply watching, and families have mentioned this as a form of vicarious engagement, which is a dimension that previous works have mentioned as relevant for exploration [35, 52].

Much research is focused on how parents regulate their children's device usage [8, 21, 27, 35], including in the particular case of gaming [21, 35]. Parental mediation can range from a more restrictive approach, where parents simply set rules and boundaries for media consumption, to a more active one, where parents engage in active conversation or even co-use [21, 27]. These active forms of mediation align closely with the concept of Joint Media Engagement (JME), which describes moments when people, particularly children and adults, interact together around media in ways that are mutually attentive, reciprocal, and meaning-making [52]. JME moves beyond simple co-use by emphasizing learning and relationship-building through shared experiences. Mediating approaches may include gatekeeping (regulating exposure to technology), discursive (openly discussing technology use and content), investigative (seeking information to accurately assess the situation), and diversionary activities (diverting children's attention from technology) [27]. While these experiences can foster connection and learning, they may also lead to friction within families, as evidenced by clashes over usage rules and concerns about its impact on child development [21, 35]. JME provides a useful lens for understanding how such engagements can become opportunities for relationship-building, negotiation, or even conflict.

In addition, JME, can significantly enhance the advantages of shared media usage, and parents' positive perceptions toward gaming [52]. Parents with positive or neutral views often opt to engage directly with their children in gameplay rather than imposing strict regulations [35]. Past work [2, 3] has documented gaming practices within households, focusing on how the family appropriates and negotiates space, technology use, and other habits (e.g., bedtime). Based on the analysis of video recordings of family life, these studies highlight how communal areas for gaming can serve as an opportunity for adults (e.g., parents) to both control use (e.g., restricting for how long and the types of games children are allowed to play) and getting involved in children's interests, through co-playing experiences and interaction outside the gameplay (e.g., conversations at the table). These works also illustrate how disparate expertise with gaming can lead to positive interaction, where adults position themselves as the less knowledgeable and seek help from children [2].

Previous research has also explored how players disengage from play sessions, highlighting concerns about individuals, especially children, struggling to stop playing [5]. Additionally, the prevailing view of disengagement in both academic and industry discussions is that it represents a failure in game design. This perspective encourages a focus on design strategies that maximize engagement, which can lead to unhealthy player habits (e.g., dark patterns [60]).

There exists a promising prospect to leverage games as a platform for family interaction. Gaming in families not only fosters stronger bonds [13, 14, 41, 51, 55, 56, 58, 59] but also promotes reciprocal learning, mutual understanding, and reduces social anxieties [13]. From the perspective of parents, gaming in the family can be seen as a benefit when stimulating creativity and problem-solving for their children [34] and when promoting quality time, shared interests,

and bonding [51, 55]. Games serve as a democratizing space where leadership roles are fluid and determined by expertise and insight rather than age or traditional family hierarchies [35] and their social elements of games spill over into familial interactions, enriching daily experiences [51]. Additionally, studies [14, 36, 45] have noted instances of vicarious family play, where individuals contribute to gameplay without necessarily holding a controller.

Previous research has utilized controlled methods to observe and analyze family gaming behavior under specific conditions. To broaden this understanding, we examined unsolicited, self-initiated accounts shared in public forums, capturing a wider variety of everyday experiences and reflections that may not emerge through direct researcher prompting.

2.2 Catering to family gaming

Families are an heterogeneous context where people can have vastly different requirements. These challenges, such as cost barriers and time constraints, have been raised regarding family gaming [43, 56], for example, showing how the imbalance of time availability can make it difficult to schedule time to play together.

Other studies have explored the dynamics and design considerations of mixed-age gaming experiences [10, 42, 48], with a particular focus on family play contexts [7, 28, 37, 51, 55, 56, 58, 59], suggesting paths for new designs to be conceived. Research by Kow et al. [29] has outlined design features for facilitating family play in social network games, emphasizing elements such as accessibility, flexibility, and themes that resonate with real-life relationships. Similarly, Wang et al. [58] have identified desired features like cooperation and critical thinking in family gaming experiences. Recommendations from Costa [10] stress the importance of physical interaction, collaboration, and user-friendly interfaces. Rice et al. [48] have proposed design concepts for intergenerational games through collaborative workshops, emphasizing simplicity and knowledge exchange. Abeele and Schutter [57] propose the use of enactive interactions to ensure ease-of-use for different generations. Pais et al. [43] leveraged asynchrony to cater to different time requirements and promote interaction between family members.

There is a lack of tools that make it easier for families to find a game they will enjoy and be able to play. One exception is the Family Game Database [1], which positions itself as a tool to “help parents and guardians navigate the world of gaming”. It has a “game picker” feature to help families pick games to play together, with filters for different types of content, age requirements and modes of play (e.g., co-located or remote). It also has a page populated with different stories of how children have experienced games, created from interviews with families, teachers and professionals. It portrays different ways through which people can enjoy games, from finding calm in collecting things to supporting intergenerational relationships with games. Other tools, like game genre categorization and the Tags feature available on platforms like the Steam store, offer ways to classify games according to overarching design structures. These tools aim to provide potential buyers with valuable insights into the nature and characteristics of the games they are considering.

While existing research has identified both constraints and advantages, there remains a crucial need for better understanding the family dynamics surrounding games, how these affect the experience and which opportunities exist for future designs to better support family relationships.

3 A THEMATIC ANALYSIS TO UNDERSTAND THE INTERPLAY OF FAMILY LIFE AND GAMING

In this work, we sought to capture the perspectives of families discussing how gaming experiences are shared within the family or constrained by it. We aim to achieve this understanding by analyzing data available online on Reddit, similarly to past work [54], which studied how Reddit and Twitch content moderation is different. Reddit is a social

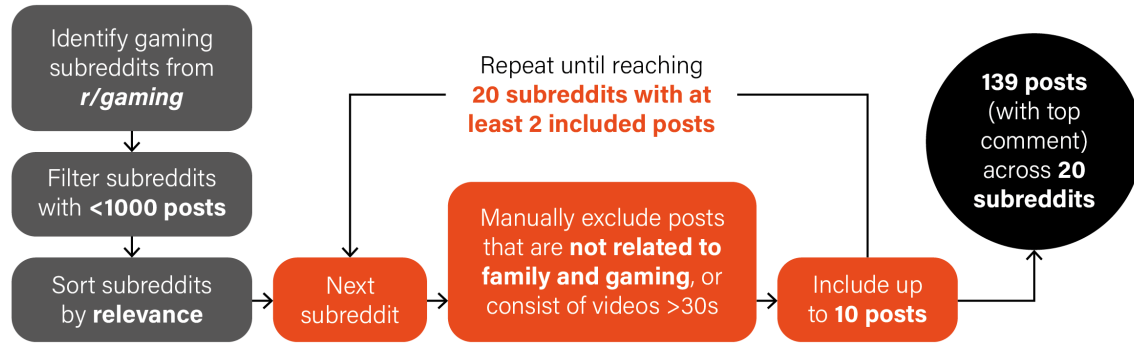


Fig. 1. Graphical representation of the methods.

platform where communities have a specific space for themselves and where content is curated by individual members through voting. It is organized into numerous topic-specific forums known as subreddits, each dedicated to a particular theme or interest. We selected a set of subreddits and collected a number of posts related to gaming experiences within families. This data was subject to a thematic analysis.

To interpret this data, we draw from the lens of Joint Media Engagement (JME) [52], which describes the ways in which media experiences are shared among family members. JME emphasizes not only co-viewing or co-playing, but also the broader interactions that surround media use within family life. We use this framing to understand Reddit posts not merely as reports of behavior, but as discursive acts that reveal how individuals make sense of their family's gaming practices. By combining this conceptual lens with an inductive thematic analysis [53], we aim to identify recurring tensions, values, and relational dynamics that shape how games are embedded within domestic life. We detail this process in the next subsections.

3.1 Data Collection and Selection

Our methodology, detailed in 1 consisted of first selecting a number of gaming-related subreddits from where to collect data. This selection was made based on a list provided in the r/gaming subreddit that was created and grown thanks to multiple contributions from the community in aggregating gaming-related subreddits¹. This first selection consisted of 981 subreddits, which included subreddits dedicated to specific platforms (e.g., Xbox) and games, as well as subreddits dedicated to specific demographics (e.g., GirlGamers) and to asking for or giving suggestions (e.g., gamingsuggestions).

We then followed a process to filter posts and find relevant ones i.e. posts that were both related with gaming experiences and family. To achieve this, we made exploratory searches on the platform to ascertain what type of terms were effective in returning relevant posts. This led to a set of keywords that mainly included different types of kinship:

Family OR Families OR Dad OR Mom OR Father OR Mother OR Brother OR Sister OR Bro OR Sis OR Grandma OR Grandmother OR Grandpa OR Grandfather OR Gran OR Uncle OR Aunt OR Nephew OR Cousin OR Siblings OR Niece OR Wife OR Husband

Our final search returned every post that contained at least one of these keywords in the title. To gather posts, we used the PushshiftAPI². Additionally to the title and body of the post, we decided to collect the top (i.e. more upvotes) comment of each post, as it could offer relevant insight related to the topic. The posts were collected on February 14th

¹r/gaming's list of Gaming subreddits in <https://www.reddit.com/r/gaming/wiki/faq/>

²PushshiftAPI Github repository - <https://github.com/pushshift/api>

of 2023 and the comments were collected on March 20th 2023. This resulted in an initial collection of 7210 posts (with corresponding top comments), across the 981 subreddits.

Given the high number of subreddits and posts in the initial collection, we had to take decisions to limit the scope of our analysis. We started by filtering subreddits. To achieve that, we established a *subreddit relevance score*, calculated by counting the number of relevant posts (i.e. containing at least one of the keywords in the title) and dividing this value by the total number of posts in that subreddit (number of relevant posts / total number of posts). To ensure the relevance score was not artificially increased in communities with a small number of posts, we filtered the list of subreddits to only contain those with at least 1000 posts. We sorted the final list by this relevance score, from highest scoring to lowest scoring—this ordering allowed us to select the subreddits with the highest probability of relevant posts in the next phase.

We started screening the posts, starting with the ones posted in the most relevant subreddits. We manually excluded posts that 1) were not related to digital gaming, 2) did not discuss gaming experiences that were shared with or constrained by the poster's family, 3) consisted of videos longer than 30 seconds. We continued this screening process until we had 20 subreddits with at least 2 (up to 10) included posts. This resulted in a final collection of 139 posts (with top comment) across 20 subreddits.

In online communities such as Reddit, posts are authored with the awareness of an audience and shaped by platform norms, subreddit rules, and community expectations. While these posts provide insight into family gaming practices, they also reflect how individuals choose to frame those experiences in public, often semi-anonymous settings. As such, we interpret them as discursive expressions that reveal how people make sense of their relationships with gaming and family.

3.2 Data Analysis

We performed an inductive thematic analysis [53] over the final list of posts and comments. We developed the codebook iteratively, first by having two researchers code 25 posts and discussing their process and resulting annotations. We reached an initial codebook, which the first author used to code the remaining posts, adding and refining codes as needed. The codebook was repeatedly discussed and iterated over with the team, across multiple meetings, creating new codes for non-annotated relevant data, merging closely related codes, grouping codes into hierarchical relationships, or removing unnecessary ones. At the end of this process, the team met to derive relationships between codes, organizing them into themes. The outline of themes was also iterated upon, with a final iteration round as this document was written.

The researchers involved are in their 20s or 30s, play or have played regularly digital and tabletop games with family and with friends and have been working on games research for 4+ years.

4 FINDINGS

The posts encompass a variety of topics related to gaming within and around familial relationships. Our themes are summarized in table 1 and detail: 1) Gaming Affected by Family Life, 2) Sharing Play: Spaces and Selection, 3) Constraints for Playing Together, 4) Strengthening Bond through Games, 5) Experience gaming through Others, 6) Interaction Outside of Gameplay.

Table 1. Summary of findings, organized into the resulting themes.

Gaming Affected by Family Life. Gaming habits and moments of gameplay can be affected by interruptions or perceptions of family members, which may lead to attempts at avoiding parental mediation.
Sharing Play: Spaces and Selection. Shared gaming spaces create opportunities for spontaneous and organic interactions, prompted by a game's imagery and sounds. Game selection is typically done by the more experienced person, seeking to sustain a shared hobby.
Constraints for Playing Together. Differing time schedules are the main complaint from family members, however, this may not be the full picture as what is felt as "lack of time" may be lack of will to learn the complexities of a game.
Strengthening Bonds through Games. Games were repeatedly mentioned as a way for families to strengthen their bonds. Either from simply doing a shared activity together or being able to momentarily forget about a particularly difficult moment.
Experiencing Gaming through Others. Even if games are typically designed with a set number of players in mind, there is a whole spectrum between spectating and playing a game that allow others to experience a game without playing it, which can be a way to lower the entry barrier for would-be players.
Interaction Outside of Gameplay. Apart from the gameplay itself, conversations revolving around different aspects of a game, including its narrative, gameplay mechanics, and music, offer a variety of discussion topics, providing a way to experience gaming outside of explicit gameplay.

4.1 Gaming Affected by Family Life

Family dynamics play a significant role in shaping individuals' gaming habits, with **stereotypical views** (e.g. asocial, lazy) [30] and **agency to disengage** [4] potentially contributing to unique challenges and concerns within familial environments.

The presence of stereotypical views surrounding gaming within families can create feelings of unease and guilt among players. Many individuals report feeling judged or misunderstood by family members who perceive gaming as a frivolous or unproductive activity. For example, the wife of this poster claims it makes them "*somewhat of an adolescent in her mind*" – P92 - r/xboxone. This can lead players to internalize negative perceptions of their gaming habits, feeling as though they are engaging in something inherently wrong or less valuable than other pursuits. As a result, individuals may experience heightened self-consciousness and anxiety while gaming, making them "*tired of feeling bad for enjoying my hobby*" – P28 - r/GirlGamers. This same poster describes how their family gives them a hard time for not following the path for someone their age and instead choosing to spend their time playing games:

"So what if I'm not married, who cares if I have kids, my sister had enough for the both of us. Whose business is it, other than mine, if I want to broadcast my gameplay or spend 100 hours on a game? ITS MY FREE TIME. Who cares if I bought an Atari shirt? ITS MY MONEY" – P28 - r/GirlGamers

In navigating these challenges, individuals employ various strategies to manage their gaming experiences within familial contexts. Our analysis uncovered instances where individuals actively sought ways to circumvent parental mediation in order to gain gaming autonomy. For example, we encountered a case where a child sought assistance in securing their gaming accounts to prevent parental interference, reflecting a desire for autonomy and control over their gaming activities.

"today my mom has gotten really mad at me for playing on a friday night, in which I usually relax after a week of school. [...] my mom has tried to delete my steam account [...] Can an account be deleted in the first place? ¿How can I further protect my accounts?" - P123 - r/Steam

Similarly, we observed instances where siblings attempted to intervene in other's gaming habits out of concern for potential addiction or excessive gaming. In one example, a sibling was concerned that their sisters were skipping their responsibilities to play games and wanted to find a new activity they could do to draw them away from what was perceived as an excessive activity.

“she literally skips dinner to play overwatch. Last night she tried to skip putting up Christmas decorations but we made her get off. I just want them to play something else i never hear the end of overwatch I’m losing my sanity” – P91 - r/ShouldIbuythisgame

Additionally, responsibilities and activities of daily living (e.g. having dinner) may at times clash with autonomy over engagement/disengagement of gameplay sessions. These can cause moments of conflict that have an impact on daily routines and game experience, often leading to frustration and difficulty in fully immersing oneself[5]. Some households, recognizing the potential for conflict, negotiate rules for play engagement (e.g. setting limits on gaming hours[39]). Others, seek methods to minimize the intrusiveness of interrupting game sessions.

“I know how upset she gets when I call her during a battle or whatever while she’s playing Overwatch. Is there an app to text her or call her through her headset while she’s playing?” – P61 - r/xboxone

These findings reveal the influence family dynamics exert on an individual's gameplay time. The effects of negative valence stereotypes in gaming, and the conflicts between games and other activities lead to players often having to justify or excuse their time spent playing, fostering negative feelings about their past time. Simultaneously, when gaming is chosen above other responsibilities it makes other family members concerned and seek ways to adjust play behavior (e.g. reduce play time) and incentivize other activities. Furthermore, these findings highlight the friction caused during disengagement, which frustrates all household members. These insights underscore the balance families must navigate in supporting each other's habits.

4.2 Sharing Play: Spaces and Selection

Families participate in gaming activities across various spaces, including both **co-located** and **remote** settings. Co-located play, where family members gather in the same physical space to engage in gaming together, was a common occurrence among posts. This often involved setting up gaming consoles or computers in shared living areas, such as the living room, to facilitate group gaming sessions. Multiple families mentioned these shared gaming spaces when describing playing together, such as this parent who explained how they were able to play again with their son by preparing a play space in the living room:

“But tonight it was truly wonderful, we spent 6 hours playing games and laughing and showing each other cool things on games we each like. A very nice change from both of us playing in different rooms all the time.” – P14 - r/Steam

In contrast, remote play, enabled by online gaming platforms and multiplayer capabilities, allowed families to connect and play together from separate locations. This mode of play, although less frequent, was particularly prevalent among families separated by distance, enabling them to maintain connections and share remote experiences. This poster explains how this functionality allows them to maintain the gaming ritual with their mother and father:

“I’m from Australia and I’ve since moved overseas. Playing Xbox live together can be a challenge but it’s a 10 year long tradition that we’ve kept up. Friday Night is Live night with the fam. [...] I loved every second

of this experience. When we lost we laughed, when we won we cheered. This is something I can't wait to bring my own kids in on to join in fragging with Grammy and Papa.” – P45 - r/xboxone

In some cases, a family member aims to cultivate or sustain a shared gaming hobby by seeking **game recommendations** to enjoy with their parents. For example, this child explains how they started playing Fortnite with their mother, who has since embraced the game, prompting the child to explore new gaming adventures they can share:

“I'm looking for a game I think my mom would enjoy, as video games has never really peaked her interest until about a year ago. She started playing Fortnite with me. [...] Now I want to see what other games she might like, or be willing to play.” – P68 - r/ShouldIbuythisgame

Additionally, we discovered a diverse range of gaming dynamics within family units, challenging traditional notions of parent-child interactions. Rather than solely children seeking opportunities to play with their parents, we observed a multifaceted representation across various family compositions. Parents, for instance, sought recommendations for engaging **games suitable for their children**, considering the different age groups represented within the family. For instance, this poster bought a console marketed as family-oriented to encourage gaming experiences between the whole family and is seeking suggestions on games:

“Don't tell my daughters, but they're getting a Nintendo Switch for Christmas! [...] I'm really keen that this is a "family" games console and therefore I'm looking for two games for the Nintendo Switch that all 4 of us can all play together.” – P88 - r/gamingsuggestions

Meanwhile, in couples, we saw the more experienced player seeking suggestions on what to play with the other, with less limitations as to where they are played (i.e. remote vs co-located or console vs computer) and with a greater focus on the type of content they offer:

“I made him buy Stardew Valley to play with me, because I wanted to just chill in a single player game, but also hang out with him. [...] This morning when I woke up, I heard the sounds of Stardew Valley coming from our computer room.” – P58 - r/GirlGamers

These perspectives illustrate how families engage in gaming both co-located and remotely, with the game selection process carefully taking all members into account. This decision-making reflects the diverse preferences and contexts of each family member and is often led by an individual dedicated to maintaining this shared activity. Family members seek gaming recommendations through various channels, taking into account factors such as age appropriateness, shared interests, and individual constraints, which greatly affect the available options.

4.3 Constraints for Playing Together

Despite the experiences of shared play we found, selecting a game that is enjoyable by all parts of a party is repeatedly mentioned as a challenge, as different people have different preferences and constraints. We found examples of people seeking games to play or describing constrained gaming experiences with their family.

Mentioned most frequently, the **complexity** of certain games can pose a significant barrier for inexperienced players. Factors such as controls and interfaces, how games convey information or the specific type of challenges they create, are some of the considerations posters expressed. This poster recounts their grandfather's gaming preferences, noting his enjoyment of games with simple learning curves. However, this limits his exposure to other gaming experiences that the poster wishes to introduce him to:

“I gave my grandpa my original PlayStation 4 [...] and he plays it every single day. He thoroughly enjoys playing video games in his downtime, but he only plays a handful of games that are easy to learn. [...] He also plays Minecraft pretty heavily, but he only ever plays creative mode. He enjoys the building aspect, but he has a hard time learning the mechanics of survival mode.” – P82 - r/ShouldIbuythisgame

Related to difficulty are **time constraints**, also identified in related work [43, 56]. The synchronicity of most games creates a requirement that players “have free time at the same time.” – P14 - r/Steam. Non-pausable cinematics were also specifically mentioned: “As a father of three, I think the ability to pause cinematics should be a requirement for all games.” – P24 - r/gaming. But, mentioned most often, the learning curve of some games might require players to invest a significant amount of time before they can fully enjoy the experience. This poster illustrates their predicament by explaining that they and their wife have minimal leisure time and seek a game to occupy the limited time they do have. They specifically highlight the issue of game difficulty, which demands more time than they can afford to invest:

“I’ve been working six days a week and my wife is stuck on with the one year old. We don’t get a ton of time together, but I want to find an enjoyable game that helps us both relax. [...] We both enjoyed Gloomhaven at first, but the difficulty has brought our game to a halt. [...] spending our rare free time together to fail the same dungeons over and over again is frustrating.” – P137 - r/gamingsuggestions

In addition to these factors, individual player **preferences** play a crucial role in determining the enjoyment derived from the gaming experience. While certain family members may adapt to playing a game that falls outside their typical preferences because “it’s easier for me to just play games he’s interested in rather than trying to convince him to try games that I already have.” – P33 - r/GiftOfGames, this adjustment can still detract from the overall enjoyment. For some, this may be enough to decide not to play altogether. This is highlighted by a user seeking recommendations for a game to enjoy with their spouse, recounting their shared experiences, particularly with Minecraft, known for accommodating various play styles. However, it appears one partner’s interest wanes more quickly than the other’s:

“We both really enjoy playing Minecraft together... the only problem is we play it very differently. [...] I enjoy building a world with little stories and mini-dungeons in it. [...] she enjoys building large basements and packing them with chests for stuff. [...] The problem becomes... she doesn’t want to explore the areas I build, and eventually gets bored when she finishes her project and wants to restart, leaving all my hard work to be discarded” – P137 - r/gamingsuggestions

Other mentioned constraints refer to barriers related to **accessibility**, for instance when one poster refers a particular setting that enables their children to play: “Thanks to auto-accelerate and staying on course features my 4 year old son and quadriplegic sister can enjoy Mario Kart.” – P26 - r/nintendo. Lastly, some posts addressed language barriers, where lack of proficiency in English can be a significant obstacle, as explained by this poster: “we both are mainly into text-heavy and very complex WRPGs, and my sister doesn’t speak english well enough to play those games” – P75 - r/ShouldIbuythisgame.

The various constraints highlighted by these perspectives underscore the challenge of finding a game that meets the diverse needs of a heterogeneous group like a family. Although not explicitly mentioned in the posts, the lack of effective game categorization further complicates this task.

4.4 Strengthening Bonds through Games

Multiple posters explained how playing together creates bonding opportunities through a shared activity. In particular, some parents explained how playing games with their children allowed them to have an opportunity to step into their child’s world, creating a space where the child is more available to share: “Best part of being a mom that games. I got

to play with my teenage boy yesterday and he told me all about what's going on in his life." – P65 - r/GirlGamers. A step-parent regularly played with their step-child, and was surprised when they were called "dad" for the first time, expressing "I never realized how much it made us bond." – P87 - r/PS4. This motivation is not only found in parents but also in their children. In this example, a child is seeking to be gifted the latest game of the Sid Meier's Civilization franchise (in r/GiftOfGames, a subreddit specifically for this purpose) because they fondly remember watching their father play a previous game:

"the other day I heard him talk about how Civilization 6 looked good but he wasn't sure it was worth the money. That's when me wanting to get the game really sparked, as I noticed it would be a moment to re consolidate our relationship. I know I could get some time with him on weekends, and I'm sure he'd love it, for the nostalgia, for being with me, for the game." – P64 - r/GiftOfGames

When family members eventually move far away, maintaining contact can become hard. For instance, pursuing a higher education can force people to move away from their families: "our college careers took us to different parts of the country" – P33 - r/GiftOfGames, where they do not know anyone, prompting feelings of loneliness: "the fact I literally have no friends after a year at college means I've been fairly lonely and he is my best friend." – P33 - r/GiftOfGames. The ability to play games remotely can help bridge this distance and create new ways to share new experiences, as suggested by P33: "if we're able to play games together, like we used to, I'm hoping our relationship will remain solid rather than weakening as I hear other families have done due to college." – P33 - r/GiftOfGames. This capability is sought after by family members, asking for suggestions of "a good starter video game for a noob father to play with his teenage son living thousands of miles away" – P32 - r/gamingsuggestions or seeking to bypass limitations imposed by family, asking for suggestions when a "brother missed his birthday trip to Paris because of lock down and now we can't even meet up for board games on his birthday" – P69 - r/gamingsuggestions.

Games can serve as a means of escaping from difficult moments for families, providing a temporary reprieve from life's challenges. The poster's uncle experienced a stressful period after a car accident damaged his new vehicle, which he had saved up for, and soon after, his wife underwent a difficult surgery following a heart attack. To alleviate the stress of their uncle, the poster brought over their Nintendo Switch console so they could all play together for a while. The poster describes how the console helped their uncle forget everything for a while:

"it brought so much joy to everyone that he forgot anything has happened for a brief moment [...] I brought my switch again and was amazed that he was eager to play it as soon as I visited my parents again (I guess he was trying to forget everything fast). [...] I can't stress enough how switch has helped us survive this horrible period of our lives." – P41 - r/nintendo.

Additionally, games can facilitate shared moments of connection and closure during the final stages of life. In situations where a family member was terminally ill, gaming provided an opportunity for loved ones to spend quality time together and create lasting memories. This poster shares how they spent the last moments of a loved one's life playing a game for them to watch: "Before she passed away I spent time with her and she wanted to see the series first hand. I replayed the whole series for her, she watched, laughed and even cried at moments." – P51 - r/KingdomHearts

Participating in cherished gaming traditions or revisiting favorite games associated with the deceased provides a sense of continuity and connection. This was portrayed by some posters, for example, seeking to play a game their spouse used to play, as a way to grieve: "My husband used to play super mario brothers on our original nintendo while I was cooking, and I want to hear the music again. I feel like getting good at this game will give me something fun to focus on in my grief, as well." – P20 - r/gaming. The same poster from before shared how playing the next installation of a

franchise was special after having established those memories with a late loved one: *“Although she didn’t get to see it I will still be playing it for her. [...] This game will be bittersweet for me but I look forward to seeing how it ends.”* – P51 - r/KingdomHearts.

Games can become an important part of how people in a relationship interact, sometimes serving as the main way they spend time together. These perspectives also show that games can provide a shared activity during tough times, offering distraction or just a way to connect and enjoy each other’s company. Additionally, games can be a meaningful way for people to spend their final moments with a loved one, providing comfort and a shared experience during difficult times.

4.5 Experiencing Gaming through Others

Games offer an immersive experience not only to those who actively play them but also to those who engage with them indirectly through observation, discussion, and interaction with players. This section delves into how individuals can experience gaming vicariously through others, whether it is by **spectating gameplay**, **discussing game components**, or being **introduced to gaming through various mediums**.

We encountered numerous instances where individuals shared their experiences of spectating gameplay, ranging from passive observation to active participation. In some instances, the act of simply watching someone else play was sufficient to create a shared experience. One such example involved a poster (P79 - r/PS4) who convinced their hesitant father to watch them play a game on the television. Assuring their hesitant father by stating *“This game is basically a movie. I’m 99 percent sure you will love it.”*, they played it, with the father spectating. Throughout the experience the poster eventually asks *“how you like it so far, dad?”*, to which the father responded positively, eventually consenting to the game being played regularly on the television. Furthermore, the poster noted how their father became increasingly engaged with the game, even offering insights into “some weaknesses in one of the enemies”, which proved instrumental in their success during gameplay.

Many posts described experiences where family members took on a more active role as spectators, engaging in commentary on gameplay events as they unfolded and occasionally even contributing to decision-making processes. For instance, this poster describes how they have been playing a Red Dead Redemption 2 [20] for their father to watch, hoping it will be entertaining. They make a point of asking the father to participate in the narrative decisions, which turned out to be an engaging experience for both:

“I’ve been bringing my PS4 over to my parent’s house every other weekend or so and he watches me play. Anytime a moral decision, stranger mission, random event, or an NPC that needs help comes up, I let him decide what to do. [...] He loves the dialogue [...] We’ve had some good conversations about the story, the characters, their motivations, and he’s even theorized on how some plot points will turn out.” – P49 - r/reddeadredemption

Experiencing gaming through others can also serve as a catalyst for **(re)initiating gaming habits**. Individuals may become intrigued by a game after witnessing someone else play it or discussing it with someone else, leading them to explore the medium further. This initiation can occur through various channels, including exposure to related media such as TV shows or movies based on a game’s universe. For instance, one poster shared their experience of introducing their family to the TV show of The Last of Us, which sparked their interest in the game’s universe. Subsequently, the poster’s sister expressed interest in playing the games themselves.

“Next day I get a text from my sister who’s never played a video game in her life saying “I wish I could play the games now.”” – P6 - r/thelastofus

Additionally, thematic elements in games, such as farming or fishing activities found in western-themed games like Red Dead Redemption, may resonate with individuals based on their past experiences. This resonance can reignite or strengthen interest in gaming. In this example, the poster illustrates how the game’s theme helped to overcome initial obstacles, such as the learning curve associated with mastering the game’s controls:

“my father who is well into his 70s and grew up being as much as cowboy as a man from the Mid-West can be [...] So I and my sibling convinced him to try [Red Dead Redemption 2] [...] Outside of struggling with the controls, he’s having a blast. He’s telling us about what’s going on in the game like we don’t know, or like he’s there. It’s really adorable honestly.” – P116 - r/reddeadredemption

Most of these shared experiences happened in shared gaming spaces, such as common rooms or living areas within households, which seemed to facilitate organic interactions around gaming. People who see glimpses of gameplay images might start casual conversations or make comments, leading to unplanned interest in the gaming content. These interactions have the potential to evolve into full-fledged spectating experiences or even prompt newcomers to join ongoing gameplay sessions.

4.6 Interaction Outside of Gameplay

Apart from the gameplay itself, **conversations revolving around different aspects of a game**, including its narrative, gameplay mechanics, and music, offer rich discussion topics, providing an additional way to experience gaming, even if indirectly. Casual interactions sparked by glimpses of gameplay images or interactions initiated by one of the parts can evolve into deeper discussions or inspire individuals to join ongoing gameplay sessions. For instance, one poster (P100 - r/dragonage) described how they engaged in a lengthy conversation with their mother, explaining the intricacies of a game’s plot. We also found discussions prompted by gameplay images, such as asking questions about specific parts of the universe:

“One day, when I was playing a thief’s guild only character, my dad noticed me stealing from a bunch of people’s houses. He asked me why, and I told him I was a part of the thieves guild. He said that he wouldn’t have made such a stupid decision to get involved in a group of thieves, so I offered him to play the game.” –

P10 - r/skyrim

Additionally, several posters shared their enthusiasm for **cosplaying** with family members, illustrating how they collectively dress up as characters from their beloved games. One notable example involved a sister who shared her and her brother’s transformation into characters from the Dragon Age series, underscoring their shared passion for this specific gaming franchise:

“I adore Hawke and my little brother likes watching me play Dragon Age - Varric is his favorite - so we tried our hand at making some costumes” – P13 - r/dragonage

Moreover, posters revealed their fondness for **collecting artifacts** that represent the worlds of their favorite games. These artifacts, often gifted by family members, serve as tangible reminders of cherished gaming experiences and contribute to the creation of a shared gaming culture and identity within the family. For instance, one parent sought to delight their daughter, an avid fan of “The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim,” with a handcrafted book tailored to the thematic essence of the game:

“My 16 year old daughter is always geeking out on Skyrim.. [...] I want to make her a Skyrim book [...] i want to make it badass!” – P7 - r/skyrim

Lastly, the experience of playing games together as a family cultivates a unique shared culture characterized by inside jokes and references specific to the games they’ve played. Posters recounted instances where family members would reference memorable moments from past gaming sessions, eliciting laughter and nostalgia. These shared experiences help create a close family gaming group, where everyone bonds through laughter and working together.

“I knew my wife was a keeper when I married her, but she definitely verified it this weekend.. [...] we decided to drunkenly stumble to our car and grab the cases of beer [...] we started running back to the hotel, at which point she said(while struggling mightily) “I’m over-encumbered³ and can’t run!”. I dropped everything and kissed her.” – P67 - r/gaming

Overall, experiencing games outside of gameplay with family members encompasses various activities, from discussing game components to cosplaying together and collecting game-related artifacts. These shared experiences foster a sense of unity, create lasting memories that become at times deeply tied to how we perceive and remember a specific family member, or moment in time.

5 DISCUSSION

Gaming is a part of the life of many families and there is a complex interplay between them and the gaming experiences that are shared and enjoyed individually. This is visible in how the daily routines and responsibilities of different family members can affect an ongoing experience. On top of this, different family members have different constraints and preferences[43, 56] which makes it harder to select a game that everyone will equally enjoy. Aside from this, multiple families expressed the potential for games to create and strengthen familial bonds, highlighting how shared gaming experiences can foster communication and cooperation. While many games boast remote multiplayer options, families still prefer to have a dedicated, shared place for entertainment and this can create opportunities for unassuming family members to walk by and engage with imagery or sounds coming from the game being played in this shared space. In addition to this, family members often engage with gaming not only directly but also vicariously, by watching others play or discussing game-related topics. These interactions, generated by gaming, extend beyond the gameplay itself, finding their way into family conversations and activities. Overall, these dynamics underscore the multifaceted influence of gaming on family life, highlighting the need for further research into its impacts and benefits.

5.1 Identifying Constraints and Matching Games

A prevalent issue identified in our study lies in the challenge of selecting a game that aligns with the diverse constraints of a group such as a family [43, 56]. These constraints vary widely and are sometimes challenging to discern. Many of the constraints identified by previous works are related to the inability to schedule time to play together, but this may be how the constraints present themselves and not the whole picture. As games grow more complex, they start to assume knowledge from their players and, for a newer player, this creates a steeper learning curve which they have to dedicate larger amounts of time to overcome (i.e., to learn the game). In these cases, a player may refer to “lack of time” as a constraint, but the truth may be that, if the game was simpler or assumed less knowledge from its players, this constraint would disappear or be reduced.

³Being over-encumbered is a common warning in games, for when the inventory is too full

Compounding this challenge is the inadequacy of existing game classification systems, which often fail to accurately capture the nuanced constraints that games can accommodate. Alternative methods for classifying games exist. For instance, the Family Gaming Database [1] categorizes games based on their potential benefits, such as fostering an appreciation for science, which may influence family members' game choices. Meanwhile, Steam utilizes a Tag [9] feature driven by community input. While this could yield tags relevant to constraints, the focus often remains on genres and mechanics, which may not directly translate into constraints felt by players. Other efforts have focused on the accessibility needs of some players, categorizing games based on their accessibility options or lack thereof, such as Xbox's Accessibility Feature Tags. [17]

While these efforts give a generic sense of what to expect from a game, there is still to be an approach that can more directly translate to the constraints felt by players. For instance, games are typically not classified based on the minimum time required for a fulfilling experience or the learning curve associated with mastering the game, factors that are particularly relevant for parents managing limited time [43, 56]. Similarly, there is an absence of classification regarding the type of gameplay dynamics a game offers. Does the game encourage betrayal among players? Is it characterized by chaotic gameplay, requiring quick decision-making to navigate sudden events? These nuanced considerations are often overlooked in existing categorization systems, yet they play a crucial role in determining a game's suitability for individuals with specific preferences or constraints. Games, developers, and platforms have an opportunity here to be clearer, helping players make informed decisions about the type of experience they are purchasing and reducing barriers to entry into the medium. In research, there have been a number of efforts to categorize games based on their design structures[26, 44]. Some works have categorized games based on their asymmetrical features [26] while others have categorized the cooperative mechanics and patterns that are utilized in game design [44]. All of these works focus on the perspective of the designer but the categorization they provide is less useful to the common consumer.

To summarize, while families often say they lack the time to play together, the reality is likely more nuanced. This claim may reflect various preferences and constraints, such as an unwillingness to invest the time needed to learn a game. Understanding the deeper reasons behind this reluctance to play could guide future designs to appeal to a broader audience, for example, by considering the spectator experience when designing the interface. Additionally, the current game classification can be confusing, with many genres not clearly representing what the gameplay is like. Improving these game classifications would provide consumer's with a clearer picture of what to expect and may also ground the discussion around a game's design on clearer terms, allowing it to be more productive.

5.2 Spectating, Playing, and the In-Between

In our analysis, we discovered a rich array of ways in which families engage with games, challenging the traditional notion of a rigid dichotomy between spectating and playing. Some families found themselves immersed in the gaming experience, passively enjoying the sounds and music as they went about their daily routines, while another family member was playing a game. Others engaged in casual spectating, catching glimpses of gameplay moments as they moved through shared spaces like the living room. Additionally, some families set aside dedicated time to watch gameplay sessions, akin to watching television shows [21, 35]. However, beyond mere observation, some family members also actively participated in the gaming experience. This involvement spanned from offering assistance during challenging segments of a game to discussing the narrative and intricacies of gameplay. These diverse modes of engagement highlight the multifaceted nature of family interactions within and surrounding games, challenging the simplistic view often presented in public discourse, where spectating and playing are portrayed as mutually exclusive activities.

Research has explored innovative ways to create spectating experiences that can bridge the gap between spectating and playing games together, potentially enhancing the benefits of both. The concept of spectating gameplay holds immense potential for enhancing player engagement and social interaction and has evolved significantly with the advent of streaming platforms like Twitch, where spectators engage with the gameplay experience in real-time, offering commentary and feedback, influencing the player's decisions. Seering et al.[50] leveraged custom implementations to explore a remote context and find different spectator motivations and mechanics through which spectators are able to affect the game. Maurer et al.[33] explore the co-located context, leveraging the use of the spectators gaze to affect the gameplay, finding that this provided a positive experience, creating a symbiotic relationship between the players. Both studies found that this interactive spectatorship enriches the gaming experience, transforming it into a communal activity where players and viewers alike contribute to the experience [33, 50].

Drawing inspiration from these approaches to design experiences that foster positive family engagement with games is a promising direction. For instance, incorporating features that enable spectators to, through a different device, trigger events within the game can empower other family members to participate in the gaming experience, without having to invest time to learn how to play such a game and may be a way for parents to mediate their children's gaming experiences. Finding innovative ways to support these dynamics by making them part of the game may provide interesting new ways for families to enjoy this medium together.

These co-playing sessions have been seen to augment parent-child relationships and facilitate conversations [35, 43]. Considering these benefits and others encountered when playing in more general settings, it becomes clear that it is important to design games that support many different playing contexts. Most modern multiplayer games support remote, synchronous gameplay but other modes of co-play go unmet many times. For example, supporting asynchronous modes of play may allow people with different schedules to play together [43]. Mixing this with synchronous modes may create interesting dynamics where the game changes depending on who's available to play, such as a parent coming home and joining the child on the living room console.

5.2.1 Shared Gaming Spaces. Across multiple posts, we saw reports of families playing games in shared physical spaces such as living rooms. Family members passing through these areas were drawn into casual conversations or moments of spectating, sparked by glimpses of gameplay or ambient game sounds. These informal engagements reflect how shared gaming spaces can create a fluid interplay between playing and spectating, drawing in family members who weren't initially part of the gaming session. Such dynamics reflect how families configure their environments to support joint engagement, and how gaming often extends beyond the player to others in the room. These spontaneous interactions can evolve into new conversation topics [43] or gaming habits, enriching the overall family experience.

Given this perspective, it is pertinent for researchers and developers to contemplate how games can be quickly comprehended and how to enhance their accessibility at a glance. Many games fail to do this and are hard to assimilate if you do not engage with the whole experience, which is the particular case of spectators. For example, a spectator may lose 2 hours worth of the a game's story and feel lost when re-engaging with it. Some games, deliberately or not, offer systems that minimize this. In *Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt* [47], the loading screen presents a small narration of the latest main story developments, allowing for the spectator to quickly understand where the story stands and follow along as the gameplay progresses. In other games, the state of the game can be fully presented on the screen, allowing for a spectator to fully capture the important parts of the current gameplay session. An example of this is *Balatro* [6], a game based on poker which presents the power-ups the player received in a summarized way, in their own dedicated screens.

These are examples of the few games that provide such systems, even if they were not deliberately designed with the spectator in mind. Other approaches are still underexplored, particularly in the academic domain. For example, how can designers create systems that summarize the gameplay for players to select on demand? This would allow players to quickly bring a would-be spectator into the experience, without them feeling lost. Are there gameplay events that can prompt spectators into engaging with the experience? Perhaps a quick summary of the experience between levels or sections can facilitate would-be spectators to sit down for a while, creating a spontaneously shared experience.

This is not limited to spectating games. Features that enable family members to seamlessly enter or exit gameplay sessions without disrupting the experience for other players who continue to engage may leverage these considerations to prompt new players to join the experience spontaneously, even if for small moments. An example of effective implementation of these mechanics happens in *Stardew Valley* [32], a farming game where players have the freedom to join or depart gameplay sessions at their discretion, with the only repercussion being the reduction of screen space. As the game is sectioned in in-game days, which translate into small time intervals in real life, it creates natural starting and stopping points for players to join and leave. Coupled with screens quickly showing the progression achieved in the previous day, it may prompt players to join for small bursts of time (i.e., one in-game day) to assist in tending the virtual farm.

5.2.2 Context-Aware Game Design. Our data includes multiple accounts of gameplay being disrupted by everyday responsibilities or family members. In games, these interruptions can lead to frustration and, in some cases, disengagement [5], while not interrupting gameplay can have negative consequences to one's responsibilities, family routines and at times lead family members to becoming concerned. While some games offer Drop-in/Drop-out mechanics that allow players to leave and rejoin sessions, these systems only partially address the needs of families navigating dynamic household contexts. There remains a need for design strategies that make interruptions feel less jarring, or even meaningful, by supporting more flexible modes of engagement. For instance, gameplay that accommodates brief, self-contained sessions could help players feel a sense of progress or completion even when time is limited. Research has shown that hybrid asynchronous/synchronous formats can support play across varying schedules while still encouraging co-located moments of engagement [43]. These kinds of adaptive systems could better accommodate real-life constraints and foster flexible engagement across diverse family contexts.

There is still space for games to be more aware of the spaces and contexts they are played in. For example, a game could offer different mechanics if a person is on a work break and present more complex mechanics when the player is able to dedicate more attention to it (e.g., at home or after work hours). Similarly, games could be aware of people besides the player that are nearby or available to engage with the game. This could be in the form of a simple notification asking for help or be a fundamental game mechanic where the second player is a core part of the experience even if not actively engaging with the game. While this approach may draw dangerously close to unethical practices designed to manipulate players into playing more than they initially wanted (i.e., dark patterns [60]), it also has the potential for games to be truly flexible and facilitate the inclusion of players with significantly different requirements.

5.3 Games as a Source of Personal Identity

Games may play a significant role in shaping an individual's identity, both internally and in the eyes of others [38]. From the individual's perspective, games provide a platform for self-expression, personal growth, and exploration. Engaging in gaming activities allows individuals to immerse themselves in virtual worlds, assume different roles, and tackle challenges that resonate with their interests and values.

Moreover, games can also affect how family members perceive each other. We saw family members associate individuals with their gaming habits, viewing them as "the one who plays video games" or enthusiasts of certain game genres or franchises. These external perceptions seem to influence social interactions and relationships, as individuals may be recognized or approached based on their gaming preferences (e.g., being asked for game suggestions or for help overcoming a challenging level section). Additionally, societal stereotypes and stigmas associated with gaming culture can impact how individuals are perceived by others, further shaping their external identity.

Beyond individual identity, we saw games become ingrained in the culture of relationships, serving as a central activity through which those relationships are nurtured and maintained. Similar to other shared hobbies or interests, engaging in gaming activities together strengthens bonds within families by creating a shared culture. References to games or gameplay moments, such as memes or inside jokes, become a common language through which individuals communicate and connect with each other, which reinforce the relationship's identity, create lasting memories and strengthen bonds. [13, 24, 41, 56, 58]

Games have an opportunity here to support these interactions and promote the creation and sharing of memories either through purposefully designed features like buttons to record or share accomplishments or through other features that create a sense of shared presence in a game, such as ghosts of other player's attempts in a racing game, which allowed one player to race the ghost of their deceased parent [49]. Such attempts may facilitate the creation of shared memories, deepening the bonds between family members.

5.4 Facilitating (Re)Entry Into the Medium

Multiple factors contribute to the adoption or re-adoption of gaming as an activity within familial contexts. One such factor is the thematic resonance of games with past real-life experiences, which may enhance engagement and spark interest in gaming in the same way that enactive interactions do [57]. Games that evoke familiar themes or activities, such as farming or fishing in western-themed games like Red Dead Redemption 2 [20], may resonate with players on a personal level, facilitating engagement with them.

We also saw multiple mentions of how creating shared gaming spaces may play a crucial role in facilitating entry into the gaming medium. The organic and spontaneous nature of interactions in shared spaces allows for engagement prompted by glimpses of gameplay images, bypassing initial barriers associated with learning a game's mechanics or controls. Designers seeking to support backseat gaming or spontaneous spectating should take this into consideration when designing interfaces and gameplay or narrative summaries such as victory or defeat screens.

However, several other factors complicate the understanding of gaming culture and contexts for individuals, particularly those with limited knowledge of the gaming medium. For instance, specific terms, like game genres, may be perplexing to those unfamiliar with gaming terminology. Additionally, some games may contain content that certain individuals find unsuitable, such as violence, gore, or nudity, despite being common in the industry. The categorization of games by the industry aims to differentiate between various designs but often lacks consideration for the player's perspective, making it challenging to assess how a particular game aligns with an individual's preferences and interests.

While some family members initially lacked interest in gaming, once they engaged with it, they often developed a newfound enthusiasm, suggesting that their initial disinterest may stem from a lack of consideration rather than a genuine dislike for the medium. There is an opportunity here to decrease the entry barrier for this part of the population by understanding exactly the type of questions people seek to answer about a game they are considering playing and then exploring alternative ways to categorize games that map more clearly to these questions.

6 LIMITATIONS

To gather our data, we selected communities that were, themselves, highlighted by the r/gaming community the third top Reddit community, at the time of writing. Although this list is, most likely, frequently scrutinized by other users, it is still handpicked by specific members of the community. Additionally, posts on Reddit are authored for a public and often semi-anonymous audience. As such, they reflect not just individual experiences, but also how users choose to present those experiences within the norms and expectations of each subreddit. This means our data should be interpreted as discursive acts and stories shaped by the platform's affordances, genre conventions, and community culture, rather than as direct, objective reports of behavior. As such, it is bounded as any other qualitative method without direct observation.

We used the Pushshift API to gather the posts, where the results may not map one-to-one with searching directly through Reddit. Lastly, since we were interested in posts that related to shared experiences surrounding gaming, we queried gaming communities, which may have left out perspectives from people that do not frequent these communities, such as parents asking for suggestions or help in other communities. While the majority of posts reflect the viewpoints of gamers themselves, our dataset also includes some posts written from the perspective of non-gaming family members (e.g., concerned sister), even if such perspectives are less represented.

7 CONCLUSION

In this paper, we explored the multifaceted nature of family gaming experiences through the analysis of Reddit posts discussing gaming experiences shared with or constrained by the family. We uncovered the various ways in which games become shared experiences, serving as a catalyst for bonding, communication, and connection within family units. From co-located gatherings to remote gaming sessions, from parent-led initiatives to collaborative decision-making, and from genre preferences to skill level considerations, families navigate a complex landscape of factors in their quest to enjoy meaningful gaming experiences together. Still, families found ways to share gaming experiences through remote or co-located multiplayer experiences, or through spectating games and discussing the gameplay and narrative.

As games continue to evolve and become an increasingly prevalent form of entertainment, understanding the dynamics of family gaming experiences and how they constrain each other becomes ever more pertinent. Further research is needed to further explore the nuances of family gaming interactions, including the role of parental mediation, the impact of game design on family dynamics, and the potential benefits and risks associated with gaming within family contexts. Additionally, the existing tools are not enough for families to easily sift through the available information about a game's design and understand how it can fit their own family context. With this research, game developers become better equipped to predict how their games will impact families, allowing them to better finetune the games they create to provide the desired experience.

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