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GENDER AND GAME CULTURAL AGENCY IN THE POST-GAMER ERA

Finnish women players' gaming practices, game cultural participation, and rejected gamer identity

Usva Friman

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University of Turku

Faculty of Humanities
School of History, Culture and Arts Studies
Digital Culture
Doctoral Programme in History, Culture and Arts Studies (Juno)

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The originality of this publication has been checked in accordance with the University of Turku quality assurance system using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

ISBN 978-951-29-8876-1 (Print)
ISSN 0082-6987 (Print)
ISSN 2343-3191 (Online)
Painosalama, Turku, Finland 2022

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Faculty of Humanities
School of History, Culture and Arts Studies
Digital Culture
USVA FRIMAN: Gender and game cultural agency in the post-gamer era: Finnish women players' gaming practices, game cultural participation, and rejected gamer identity
Doctoral Dissertation, 208 pp.
Doctoral Programme in History, Culture and Arts Studies (Juno)
May 2022

ABSTRACT

This doctoral dissertation study, positioned in the field of game culture studies, seeks to understand women's game cultural agency by examining the various aspects of gaming practices, game cultural participation, and gamer identity, as well as effects of gender in Finnish women's digital gaming. Its main research question is: How can women's game cultural agency be understood beyond the gamer identity? This main research question is divided into three sub research questions:

1. What are women players' gaming practices like?
2. How does gender affect women players' game cultural participation?
3. How do women players construct the idea and identity of a gamer?

The theoretical framework of the study is built upon the concepts of game culture, game cultural participation, gamer identity, and gender. In the study, game culture is understood as a Bourdieusian field of culture, hierarchical in its nature. Within this cultural field, an individual's position is defined by her game cultural capital, based on consumption of game cultural products, participation in game cultural activities, gaming skill, and game cultural expertise. Game cultural participation refers to both participating in game cultural activities and the feeling of belonging in game culture. Gamer identity is seen as a cultural identity – experienced and performed within a specific game cultural context – that requires both identification (from the person seeing herself as a gamer) and validation (from other members of game culture). A person's gamer identity is performed through the gamer habitus: embodied dispositions and displays of game cultural capital. Gender is understood as embodied performance, set in specific game cultural contexts and against the expectations of hegemonic gamer masculinity.

The primary research material of this study consists of semi-structured theme interviews with 20 interviewees and an online questionnaire with 737 respondents, both collected from Finnish adult women who play digital games. Both the interviews and the online questionnaire report women's current gaming practices and gaming histories, participation in gaming events, production and consumption of game media, following of and participation in electronic sports, gamer definitions and gamer identity, how gender affects their gaming, and the meanings of gaming in

the women's lives. The material is analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Additionally, narrative literature reviews are conducted to provide theoretical context for the analysis.

The analysis shows that women are active players and game cultural participants (albeit more as consumers than as producers) who display significant game cultural expertise. Importantly, women define their game cultural agency on their own terms, affected by but standing against the gendered norms and expectations of the hegemonic game culture. However, women also encounter significant gender-based barriers to their game cultural participation and agency, leading them to suffer from misogynistic discrimination and harassment, limit their participation for their safety, or even opt out entirely from certain game cultural activities. Most women participating in the study reported their gender having affected their gaming, mostly in negative ways. Supportive social environments appear central to women's gaming.

The main contribution of this study is providing understanding of how game cultural agency is constructed beyond the idea and identity of a gamer and the gender-specific issues affecting women's game cultural agency. The results offer valuable insight into gaming practices, game cultural participation, and (rejection of) gamer identities of women players, as well as into women players' game cultural position as a group that is simultaneously actively participating in and being rejected from game culture. The study increases our understanding of the structures of marginalisation within game culture, which do not only affect women but many other player groups as well.

The results of the study can be applied in efforts to increase the cultural accessibility, inclusivity, and equity of game culture by a variety of game cultural agents, including gaming event and esports tournament organisers, gaming community managers, gaming education and youth workers, and game journalists. Even though the material is focused on Finnish women players, these results can also be applied to other player groups as well as international contexts.

KEYWORDS: players, gamers, gaming practices, game cultural participation, gamer identity, game cultural agency, women, gender

TURUN YLIOPISTO
Humanistinen tiedekunta
Historian, kulttuurin ja taiteiden tutkimuksen laitos
Digitaalinen kulttuuri
Usva Friman: Sukupuoli ja pelikulttuurinen toimijuus pelaajuuden jälkeisellä aikakaudella: Suomalaisten naispelaajien pelaamiskäytännöt, pelikulttuurinen osallisuus ja torjuttu pelaajaidentiteetti
Väitöskirja, 208 s.
Historian, kulttuurin ja taiteiden tutkimuksen tohtoriohjelma (Juno)
Toukokuu 2022

TIIVISTELMÄ

Tämä pelikulttuurien tutkimuksen alaan paikantuva väitöstutkimus pyrkii ymmärtämään naisten pelikulttuurista toimijuutta tarkastelemalla pelaamiskäytäntöjen, pelikulttuurisen osallisuuden ja pelaajaidentiteetin eri piirteitä sekä sukupuolen vaikutuksia suomalaisnaisten digitaalisessa pelaamisessa. Päätutkimuskysymys on: Miten naisten pelikulttuurista toimijuutta voidaan ymmärtää pelaajaidentiteettiä laajemmin? Päätutkimuskysymys on jaettu kolmeen alatutkimuskysymykseen:

1. Millaisia pelaamiskäytäntöjä naispelaajilla on?
2. Miten sukupuoli vaikuttaa naispelaajien pelikulttuuriseen osallisuuteen?
3. Miten naispelaajat rakentavat pelaajakäsitystä ja -identiteettiä?

Tutkimuksen teoreettinen viitekehys rakentuu pelikulttuurin, pelikulttuurisen osallisuuden, pelaajaidentiteetin ja sukupuolen käsitteiden varaan. Tutkimuksessa pelikulttuuri ymmärretään bourdieulaisena, luonteeltaan hierarkkisena kulttuurikenttänä. Yksilön aseman pelikulttuurin kentällä määrää hänen pelikulttuurinen pääomansa, joka perustuu pelikulttuurituotteiden kuluttamiseen, pelikulttuurisiin toimintoihin osallistumiseen, pelaamistaitoihin ja pelikulttuuriseen asiantuntijuuteen. Pelikulttuurinen osallisuus viittaa sekä pelikulttuuriseen toimintaan osallistumiseen että pelikulttuuriin kuulumisen tunteeseen. Pelaajaidentiteetti nähdään kulttuurisena identiteettinä – joka koetaan ja jota toteutetaan tietyissä pelikulttuurisissa konteksteissa – joka vaatii sekä identifioitumista (henkilöltä, joka kokee itsensä pelaajaksi) että yhteisöllistä vahvistusta (muilta pelikulttuurin jäseniltä). Pelaajaidentiteetti tulee näkyväksi pelaajahabituksessa: pelikulttuurisen pääoman kehollisina ominaisuuksina ja osoituksina. Sukupuoli ymmärretään kehollisena esityksenä, joka asettuu tiettyyn pelikulttuuriseen kontekstiin ja hegemonisen pelaajamaskuliinisuuden oletusta vasten.

Tutkimuksen ensisijainen aineisto koostuu 20 puolistrukturoidusta teemahaastattelusta ja 737 vastaajan verkkokyselystä, jotka kerättiin digitaalisia pelejä pelaavilta aikuisilta suomalaisnaisilta. Sekä haastattelut että verkkokysely käsittelivät naisten pelaamiskäytäntöjä ja pelihistoriaa, pelitapahtumiin osallistumista, pelimedian tuottamista ja kuluttamista, elektronisen urheilun seuraamista ja siihen osallistumista, pelaajamääritelmiä ja -identiteettiä, sukupuolen vaikutuksia

pelaamiseen sekä pelaamisen merkitystä osallistujien elämässä. Analyysimenetelmänä hyödynnettiin refleksiivistä temaattista analyysiä. Analyysin teoreettisen kontekstualisoinnin tueksi tehtiin myös narratiivisia kirjallisuuskatsauksia.

Analyysi osoittaa, että naiset ovat aktiivisia pelaajia ja pelikulttuurisia osallistujia (joskin enemmän kuluttajien kuin tuottajien roolissa), joilla on myös merkittävää pelikulttuurista asiantuntijuutta. Tärkeä havainto on, että naiset määrittelevät omaa pelikulttuurista toimijuuttaan omilla ehdoillaan, hegemonisen pelikulttuurin sukupuolittuneiden normien ja odotusten vaikutuksen alla mutta niitä vastaan asettuen. Tästä huolimatta naisten pelikulttuurisen osallisuuden ja toimijuuden tiellä on merkittäviä sukupuoliperusteisia esteitä, jotka asettavat heidät alttiiksi naisvihamieliselle syrjinnälle ja häirinnälle ja saavat heidät rajoittamaan osallistumistaan turvallisuutensa vuoksi tai jopa jättäytymään kokonaan tiettyjen pelikulttuuristen toimintojen ulkopuolelle. Enemmistö tutkimukseen osallistuneista naisista kertoi sukupuolensa vaikuttaneen heidän pelaamiseensa, enimmäkseen negatiivisin tavoin. Pelaamista tukevat sosiaaliset ympäristöt vaikuttivat naisten pelaamisen kannalta keskeisiltä.

Tutkimuksen keskeisin kontribuutio on ymmärrys siitä, miten pelikulttuurinen toimijuus rakentuu pelaajaidentiteetin ulkopuolella ja sitä laajemmin, ja millaiset sukupuolikohtaiset seikat vaikuttavat naisten pelikulttuuriseen toimijuuteen. Tulokset tarjoavat arvokasta tietoa naispelaajien pelaamiskäytännöistä, pelikulttuurisesta osallisuudesta ja pelaajaidentiteeteistä (ja niiden torjumisesta) sekä naispelaajien pelikulttuurisesta asemasta pelaajaryhmänä, joka samanaikaisesti osallistuu pelikulttuuriin ja tulee torjutuksi sen piiristä. Tutkimus lisää ymmärrystä pelikulttuurissa vaikuttavissa marginalisaation rakenteista, jotka eivät vaikuta ainoastaan naispelaajiin vaan myös moniin muihin pelaajaryhmiin.

Tutkimuksen tuloksia voidaan hyödyntää monenlaisten pelikulttuuristen toimijoiden – esimerkiksi pelitapahtumien ja turnausten järjestäjien, peliyhteisötoimijoiden, pelikasvattajien ja pelinuorisotyöntekijöiden sekä pelijournalistien – pyrkimyksissä parantaa pelikulttuurin kulttuurista saavutettavuutta, inklusiivisuutta ja yhdenvertaisuutta. Vaikka tutkimusaineisto keskittyi suomalaisiin naispelaajiin, tulokset ovat sovellettavissa myös muihin pelaajaryhmiin ja kansainvälisiin konteksteihin.

AVAINSANAT: pelaajat, pelaamiskäytännöt, pelikulttuurinen osallisuus, pelaajaidentiteetti, pelikulttuurinen toimijuus, naiset, sukupuoli

Acknowledgements

First of all, I would like to thank the advisors for my doctoral research and studies at the University of Turku, Professor Jaakko Suominen and University Lecturer Riikka Turtiainen. Jaakko has been the person to always push me forward professionally, both through my master's degree studies and my path as a Doctoral Researcher, and occasionally he has even managed to steer me forward on the path I was intended to follow. I am thankful for all the advice, support, and time (the most valuable resource of all in the academia) he has offered me throughout the years. I am especially grateful for the countless times he has offered me a challenging opportunity that at first has felt like something impossible for me to handle but has ended up showing me what I am capable of.

Riikka has been not only a brilliant mentor but also a dear friend and a great colleague to me throughout this process. Together, we have written, chatted, and laughed through the deadline nights, ran away from zombies, and shared the blood, sweat, and tears of both the gym and the academic working life. There is no topic we could not have had endless discussions about, and that has been and continues to be incredibly valuable to me – both in terms of intellectual stimulation and friendship. Our joint research projects have taught me invaluable lessons not only in their subject matters, but also research ethics and methodology, and the value of true collaboration.

Secondly, I wish to sincerely thank the pre-examiners of this dissertation, Senior Lecturer Emma Witkowski (who also acts as my honourable opponent in its defence) and Senior Lecturer Jessica Enevold, for their insightful comments on the manuscript. Their expertise did not only help me improve the manuscript for its publication as a doctoral dissertation, but also inspired me to keep working on this topic and material to go deeper than and beyond of what I was capable here.

To the somewhat unofficial champagne seminar gang at the Department of Digital Culture at the University of Turku – Riikka Turtiainen, Lilli Sihvonen, and Elina Vaahensalo – every single one of our sessions, regardless of their academic intensity, has been incredibly insightful and joyful to me. Thank you for sharing the ups and downs of this journey with me, and always being on my side and only a message away despite our current physical distance.

To my current and upcoming post-doc-partners-in-crime, Maria Ruotsalainen and Matilda Ståhl, I am endlessly happy and grateful for having met you both during this process, and for all your support. Moving forward from here (finally), it is invaluable to have a team like this to share all enthusiasm and aspirations with – especially one that really gets stuff done. I cannot wait for all our future academic achievements and adventures together!

My current research groups, Tampere University's Game Research Lab (Gamelab) and the Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies (CoE GameCult), have been simply incredible research and work environments for an early career game researcher. For this, I would like to express my gratitude especially to our research group and team leaders, Professor Frans Mäyrä and Professor Olli Sotamaa, who have provided me not only with a great and inspiring job, but also invaluable encouragement, support, and mentoring. I wish to extend these thanks to all my colleagues at Gamelab and CoE GameCult for making these research groups the best possible environments for doing this work.

One of the most significant forms of support I have received during this process are the countless discussions – in research seminars and conferences where I have been presenting my work, in our peer support groups for doctoral researchers, while having coffee or drinks during conference trips, during gaming sessions, in the university corridors and coffee rooms, and on various online platforms. These discussions have been vital in offering me critical feedback and new perspectives that have helped me improve my research, but also in creating a friendly and supportive environment for me to work in. There are too many people who have been important for my doctoral research work in this sense for me to list them all here, but I would like to send my special thanks to Jaakko Stenros, Jonne Arjoranta, Raine Koskimaa, Tanja Välisalo, Joleen Blom, Kati Alha, Elina Koskinen, Ville Kankainen, Riikka Aurava, Elisa Wiik, Jani Kinnunen, Heikki Tyni, Niklas Nylund, Maria Garda, Lobna Hassan, Mikko Meriläinen, Tom Apperley, and Sabine Harrer.

I would also like to thank the many great colleagues at the Degree Programme in Cultural Production and Landscape Studies and the Department of Digital Culture at the University of Turku that have encouraged and supported me during my time working there.

I have been in the privileged position of having this first stage of my research career as a Doctoral Researcher continuously funded. I am grateful to the University of Turku School of History, Culture and Arts Studies for awarding me with an encouragement grant for starting my doctoral studies in December 2013, to the Turku University Foundation for receiving their doctoral dissertation grant from May to October 2014, to Satakunnan korkeakoulusäätiö for receiving their doctoral research grant in May 2014, and to the Finnish Cultural Foundation's Satakunta Regional Fund for the grant awarded to me in May 2019 for finalising this dissertation,

although I was unable to use it due to my employment. I am also grateful for all the conference and field work trips paid for me to advance and present this work.

As a Doctoral Researcher, I have also been fortunate to work in two significant game studies research projects funded by the Academy of Finland, Ludification and the Emergence of Playful Culture (2014–2018) and the Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies (2018–), as a researcher first employed by the University of Turku and then Tampere University. Alongside my position as a Doctoral Researcher, I have also been employed as a University Teacher in Digital Culture at the University of Turku (from August 2017 to December 2019) and as the Main Research Coordinator for the Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies at Tampere University (from January 2020). I am thankful for the financial security and of all the learning opportunities, professional experiences, and collegial relationships these positions have provided me with – even if and especially when they may have distracted me from this dissertation study.

My sincerest thanks to Dr. Mahli-Ann Butt for proofreading this manuscript as well as for the delightful and encouraging comments left in the document. All the errors in this final version result from the edits I have made after the proofreading.

Finally, to my partner Pekka, thank you for playing the support role in my dissertation game, always knowing when to boost me or shield me, and making sure my health and stamina bars have remained on acceptable levels when I have been too narrowly focused on optimising my DPS (dissertation-per-second).

In Tampere on the 9th of May 2022
Usva Friman

Table of Contents

Tables

Figures

1 Introduction

In this dissertation, I will explore different aspects of game cultural agency and the gendered structures of game culture from the perspective of Finnish women who play digital games. The study examines various aspects of women's gaming practices, game cultural participation, and gamer identity, both empirically and theoretically. In this first, introduction chapter, I will first present the starting points, research questions, and aims of the study. Next, I will present the motivations of the study, describing women's position in game culture and explaining the importance of studying women players. Finally, I will present the dissertation structure and contents of chapters to follow.

1.1 Starting points, research questions, and aims of the study

In the 2000s, digital gaming has become a significant part of mainstream popular entertainment culture globally. Games and play are also an integral part of Finnish culture and society (e.g., Friman et al., 2022; Kinnunen et al., 2020). In Finland, 76.1% of the population play digital games at least occasionally, and 60.5% play them at least once a month (Kinnunen et al., 2018). Finland is one of the three biggest countries for game development in Europe, and in 2017 the industry's turnover was 2.36 billion euros (Neogames, 2018). In addition to the game industry, the independent and hobbyist game development scene in Finland is extremely active. For example, Finland is the most active country per capita to take part in the annual Global Game Jam event (Kultima et al., 2016), and the Finnish Game Jam organisation was awarded by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture with the Finnish National Prize (*Suomi-palkinto*) in 2018 (Finnish Game Jam, 2018).

Finland is also a pioneering country in electronic sports (esports): the Finnish Olympic Committee was the first in the world to accept the Finnish Esports Federation (Suomen Elektronisen Urheilun Liitto – SEUL ry) as an associate member in November 2016 (Suomen Elektronisen Urheilun Liitto [SEUL], 2016) and full member in 2019 (SEUL, 2019), and Finnish esports world champions have been celebrated in national media and have even been invited to the president's Independence Day reception (Yle News, 2018). In 2018, Sampo Terho, the Minister

for Sport at the time, suggested that Finland should be developed into a leading country in esports (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2018).

Finland is also a trailblazer in preserving and exhibiting game culture. At the beginning of 2017, the Finnish Museum of Games was opened in Tampere after a historical crowdfunding campaign (Suominen et al., 2018), and the museum was awarded with a prestigious international Dibner award in 2018 (City of Tampere, 2018). As the above examples show, digital gaming is a significant part of Finnish culture and export industry alike, and game culture has blended in with the structures and institutions of Finnish culture and society (see also Friman et al., 2022). Because of this, Finland provides an excellent field for studying game culture.

The more central role digital games and their culture gain in our culture and society, the more important it becomes to study them from the perspective of cultural and social equity. In addition to being based in Finland, this study is focused on digital game culture, and women players' position within that cultural field (see chapter 2 Theoretical framework). Even though statistical differences between men and women in digital gaming are quite small (I will describe these in more detail in chapter 4 Women's gaming practices), game culture is gendered in many ways (Friman, 2022). The gendered nature of game culture can be seen, for example, in who can consider herself or is assumed to be a gamer, who design games and for whom, whom are games marketed to, who are defined as the target audience of and who are represented in game media, who are visibly members of game culture in the roles of streamers, esports athletes, and so on. The gendered nature of game culture is structural, but it comes near individual players in situations in which the player feels that her gender becomes a barrier for how she is perceived and treated as a gamer. Because of this, in order to understand the gendered structures of game culture, it is vital to study the lived experiences of players that reveal them.

As I have described earlier, Finland provides an interesting national context for studying game culture, as it is a country with an active player population, a distinctive game development ecosystem, a long history of gaming events and organisations, a vibrant esports scene, and a significant role in recognising and preserving game heritage. Furthermore, as a society, Finland known for its strong democracy and is also ranked high in the areas of social justice and gender equality (Economist Intelligence [EIU], 2021; Hellmann et al., 2019; World Economic Forum, 2021). As such, focusing on Finnish women players allows me to examine the gendered limits of women's game cultural agency in a seemingly gender-equal environment.

Against the backdrop of the national and game cultural context described above, in this study, my aim is to bring to light and develop our understanding of the gendered and marginalising structures of game culture from the perspective of women players, on both empirical and theoretical level. The theoretical framework

of the study is built around the concepts of game culture, game cultural participation, and the gamer identity. I approach game culture as a Bourdieusian field of culture, which is hierarchical in its nature (Bourdieu, 1993; Kirkpatrick, 2015). The agents in the field of game culture are battling each other for their position within the field, defined most of all by their game cultural capital. The concept of game cultural participation is based on the concept of cultural participation (Virolainen, 2015), and it simultaneously refers to both participating in game cultural activities and the feeling of belonging in game culture. I examine gamer identity both as an experienced (Shaw, 2014) and constructed (Chess, 2017) identity. In the context of this study, I also view gender first and foremost as a cultural identity which is experienced and performed within a certain game cultural context (Butler, 1999; Shaw, 2013). In addition to these central theoretical concepts, I connect my analysis to a variety of earlier research related to gender and game culture, gender and technology, gamer identity, and cultural participation (for a detailed description of the theoretical framework, see chapter 2 Theoretical framework).

My methodological choices in this study are guided by my two-level goal to create a synthesis of the current research-based understanding of women's position in game culture, and to offer women a space in which they are free to discuss their gaming and their relationship with game culture and gamer identity. My primary research materials consist of semi-structured theme interviews with twenty Finnish women, and an online questionnaire collected from Finnish women (737 respondents). Both the interviews and the online questionnaire, which I have personally collected for this study, report the women's current gaming and gaming histories, participating in gaming events, producing and consuming game media, following and participating in esports, the definition of 'gamer' and gamer identity, how gender affects gaming, and the significance of gaming to them. My method of analysis for this material is reflexive thematic analysis. Additionally, I will present several literature reviews, each focusing on the different aspects of gender and game cultural participation from the perspective of women players (for a detailed description of the research methods, see chapter 3 Methodology).

Through the analysis, my aim is to answer the main research question of this study: How can women's game cultural agency be understood beyond the gamer identity?

I have divided the main research question into three sub research questions:

1. What are women players' gaming practices like?
2. How does gender affect women players' game cultural participation?
3. How do women players construct the idea and identity of a gamer?

By answering these research questions in this study, I will describe women's gaming practices, different aspects of their game cultural participation, and how they construct the idea and potential identity of a gamer, as well as how these topics have been approached in earlier research. Overall, the study will provide insight on how game cultural agency is constructed beyond the idea and identity of a gamer, and of the gender-specific issues affecting women's game cultural agency. Furthermore, the study will increase our understanding of the structures of marginalisation within game culture, which do not only affect women but many other player groups as well.

1.2 Why study women players?

I started actively working on this doctoral dissertation study in 2014, after having finished my master's thesis on the topic of the representation of women characters in digital games in 2013 (Friman, 2013). During both of these projects, I have been actively following the discussions related to gender and gaming, especially the ones concerning women, in both public and private settings, gaming communities and game and mainstream media alike. At the same time, I have also been following and taking part in the academic discussions concerning this theme. I have noticed that these topics and arguments are intertwined in the private and the public, and both academic and popular arenas, and often span across various platforms. Following and taking part in these discussions have greatly influenced this study and my position as both a researcher and a woman player in many ways – including discussing these topics with the women taking part in this study (see chapter 3.3. Studying women players as a woman player).

While I was beginning my journey for this dissertation project, an internet movement known as GamerGate (to be described later in this section in more detail) had just begun to form, and my work could not have avoided being affected by it. GamerGate exemplified the gendered limits of the gamer identity as well as the exclusion and harassment that women face within game culture. At the same time, I do not wish to overemphasise its significance here: in the end, GamerGate highlighted some of the issues already known to exist in game culture, but it did not radically transform or redefine the gamer identity or game culture in any significant way. In fact, GamerGate is one of various examples of the seething misogyny and anti-feminism appearing in neoconservatist online communities. As a phenomenon, GamerGate is more closely related to the so called MRA (men's right activism) and alt-right (alternative right) movements (Mortensen, 2018, p. 788), than it is about gaming and gamers, although it is worth acknowledging the problematic connections between those cultural areas. What GamerGate did for game studies scholars, such as myself, was further emphasise the significance of understanding the power structures affecting the possibilities for game cultural participation, and to offer

valuable insight on the challenges related to communicating about game studies – and especially research topics related to gender and marginalisation – to wider audiences (Chess & Shaw, 2015; Mortensen, 2018).

It is worth noting that even before GamerGate, back when I was working on my master's thesis and starting to plan this doctoral dissertation study in 2012–2013, the issues concerning women and games were already being discussed in gaming communities, social media, as well as both game and mainstream media. In the following section, I will offer a few examples of the public discussions concerning women and digital gaming in the 2010s. In doing so, I describe the game cultural context in which this study has been conducted and demonstrate how the issues concerning gender – and gender-specific issues concerning women in particular – in game culture are also tied to a variety of gendered structures in our culture and society.

Women have encountered gender-based harassment in online and offline gaming environments for as long as those environments have existed. Gaming has been culturally coded as a masculine activity long before it has moved to online environments, and the gender-based discrimination has been built upon the cultural creation of the gendered idea of a 'gamer' (e.g., Kirkpatrick, 2015, pp. 3–4). While the harassment faced by women players has long remained hidden in individual encounters and personal communication, in January 2011, a website called 'Fat, Ugly or Slutty' (Fat Ugly or Slutty, n.d.) made these commonplace experiences public. The site was dedicated to messages women were receiving from strangers while playing online, publishing them in categories such as 'death threats', 'crudely creative', and 'Sandwich Making 101'. The website contains dozens of messages shared between January 2011 and October 2013. Even though it displayed some quite gruesome content, the site was first and foremost a platform of empowerment and agency for the women who had received these harassment messages: an opportunity for them to turn these hateful messages into a humorous narrative of their own choosing.

Another case of women in gaming reclaiming the narrative is the Twitter hashtag campaign #1reasonwhy. In November 2012, the Head of Games at crowdfunding site Kickstarter, Luke Crane, asked on Twitter 'Why are there so few lady game creators?' Women who currently or previously worked in games responded to the question with hundreds of tweets. Under the hashtag #1reasonwhy, they described their experiences of belittlement, discrimination, and harassment they had often faced in the field. The examples included descriptions of how women's contributions were systematically ignored in the work community, the regularity of open comments on women's appearances and the way they dressed, and how many women had been victims of sexual harassment in professional industry events. The #1reasonwhy movement brought to light how game culture is gendered all the way

to the level of creating game products, as well as the similarities between game production and other technological fields dominated by men and masculine work cultures (e.g., Styhre et al., 2018). It is worth noting here that although these issues were publicly discussed in the context of the game industry almost a decade ago, they are still ongoing. In August 2018, the game media site *Kotaku* published an in-depth story on the 'culture of sexism' at Riot Games (known for *League of Legends*) (D'Anastasio, 2018). In July 2021, Activision Blizzard (known for titles such as *World of Warcraft*, *Overwatch*, and *Hearthstone*) was sued by the California's Department of Fair Employment and Housing (DFEH) following a two-year investigation that found that the company 'discriminated against female employees in terms and conditions of employment, including compensation, assignment, promotion, termination, constructive discharge, and retaliation'. The stories on the case described the company's 'frat boy culture' which included various forms of sexual harassment systemically targeted at women employees (Good, 2021).

In May 2012, media critic Anita Sarkeesian launched a Kickstarter campaign for her upcoming project 'Tropes vs. Women in Video Games'. Presenting the project (Feminist Frequency, 2012), she wrote:

> I love playing video games but I'm regularly disappointed in the limited and limiting ways women are represented. This video project will explore, analyze and deconstruct some of the most common tropes and stereotypes of female characters in games. The series will highlight the larger recurring patterns and conventions used within the gaming industry rather than just focusing on the worst offenders. I'm going to need your help to make it happen!

The project in question was a video series focused on critical analysis of women characters in digital games. For the Kickstarter, Sarkeesian was collecting a funding of 6000 US dollars to produce the series under her YouTube channel *Feminist Frequency*, on which she conducted popular culture criticism from a feminist perspective. On her previous video essays, for example, she had analysed Lego products and Oscar movies. Interestingly, the response to those videos was very different from what happened when she took games as her subject of analysis.

Soon after the Kickstarter campaign was launched, a widespread harassment campaign begun. The harassment included misogynistic and otherwise hateful comments on Sarkeesian's YouTube videos, reporting her videos and flagging them as 'terrorism', attempts to shut down the Kickstarter page, vandalising Sarkeesian's Wikipedia page, and a constant stream of threats for rape, death, and violence. The systematic harassment campaign also took creative forms in its image based and interactive materials. To mention a few, these included hate memes, rape drawings, and even a digital game in which the player's goal was to batter Sarkeesian's face.

Assumedly, at least partially, as a counter-reaction to the harassment campaign, Sarkeesian's Kickstarter campaign greatly exceeded its financial goal, reaching a total of 158,922 US dollars. However, the harassment campaign targeting Sarkeesian continued for years. When Sarkeesian was granted the Ambassador Award in the 2014 at the Game Developer's Conference, the event was targeted by a bomb threat (Totilo, 2014). In October 2014, Utah State University was threatened with a 'deadliest school shooting in the history of United States' if Sarkeesian were to be allowed to speak on the university campus (Hern, 2014). These threats were connected to the GamerGate movement, aiming to silence women and non-binary people working in the field of games as game creators, media critics, researchers, and other critical voices. Similar behaviours and organising patterns are also seen in the so-called alt-right social media movement (Winter, 2019).

The GamerGate movement originates from a blog post published in August 2014 by Eron Gjoni, an ex-partner of game developer Zoë Quinn, who accused Quinn of cheating on him with five other men, including game journalists. The blog post rapidly spread online, circulated on 4chan amongst other platforms, creating a conspiracy theory that Quinn had slept with game journalists in order to receive favourable reviews of their free-to-play game *Depression Quest* (Quinn, 2013). The post sparked a massive harassment campaign targeting Quinn, who was threatened with violence, rape, and death on an unprecedented scale. Quinn had to leave their home, the address of which was spread online (a practice known as 'doxxing'). Actor Adam Baldwin tweeted about Quinn, using the hashtag #GamerGate, after which the hashtag spread online – thus creating a more-or-less united online movement under the same name. The swarm of harassment performed under the hashtag quickly spread to target others working or being otherwise involved in gaming – especially women, most well-known examples of the targeted harassment being the aforementioned media critic Anita Sarkeesian and game developer Brianna Wu. The women received threats of violence, death, and rape, and their home addresses were spread online. There were even attempts for sending a SWAT team to their homes (a practice known as 'swatting').

While the movement's actions were obviously hostile to women, from early on those defending GamerGate created an argument that the movement is 'actually about ethics in game journalism'. By its supporters, GamerGate was described as an attempt to defend the 'purity' of games and their culture from what was perceived as 'feminist propaganda' and from those who they called 'social justice warriors'. To defend themselves from the accusations of misogyny, GamerGate even adopted a female mascot: a drawn woman character named Vivian James. However, it is worth noting the character can also be read as the opposite of its goal: a representation of the misogyny of the movement (Butt & Apperley, 2018).

Game scholars too have become targets of the GamerGate harassment campaign (Chess & Shaw, 2015; Mortensen, 2018). According to scholars such as Torill Mortensen (2018) and Shira Chess (2017), GamerGate formed in response to a perceived threat of its members' cultural and economic identity and position of power from outsider voices. Arguably, the birth of GamerGate was an important historical and cultural moment that increased our understanding of online, image board, and game cultures, and the mechanisms of influencing and harassment originating from them (Chess & Shaw, 2015; Mortensen, 2018).

Competitive gaming and esports are game cultural spaces particularly exclusive to women (Ruotsalainen & Friman, 2018; Friman & Ruotsalainen, 2022). The gendered structures of esports were highlighted in the summer of 2014 when the International Esports Federation (IESF) announced that they were reserving the world championship competitions of *Dota 2* (Valve Corporation, 2013)*, StarCraft II* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2010)*, Hearthstone* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2014), and *Ultra Street Fighter IV* (Capcom, 2014) only to men players. The reasons given for this limitation varied from 'promoting female players' to an 'effort to promote esports as a legitimate sports' (IESF, 2014; Friman, 2015a) – as if it could not be considered a real sport if women were competing alongside men. IESF received a vast amount of negative feedback, and consequently decided to remove the gender limitations from the tournaments originally reserved for men, while keeping *StarCraft II* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2010) and *Tekken Tag Tournament 2* (Bandai Namco, 2011) tournaments limited to women competitors. The reason given for women-specific tournaments was that IESF wished to promote women's position in the men dominated space of competitive gaming by increasing the visibility of women competitors and offering women broader possibilities to participate in competitive gaming.

Beyond individual tournaments, esports and competitive gaming are, in general, areas of game culture dominated by men and hostile to women (I will also examine this topic in more detail in chapter 5 Women player's game cultural participation). In May 2017, media site *Mic* published a story (Mulkerin, 2017) of a case in which a woman playing competitive *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016) experienced harassment from the men on her team, who were previously unknown to her, for the duration of a whole match. The woman, who goes by the player tag Glisa, recorded the event, and uploaded the video on YouTube. The recorded voice chat is rough to hear: the men say, for example, that Glisa is not entitled to express her opinions because of her gender, and that they assume her to be ugly. They also describe 'raping' her with their comments. In her description for the video, Glisa says she did not publish the video only for its entertainment value, but because she wanted to show how women are treated in online games. Indeed, the case is not unique, and many women and girls often experience this type of gender-based

harassment. Unfortunately, particularly in competitive gaming and game genres based on competitive playstyles, such as first-person shooters, harassment and 'trash talk' are often quietly accepted as an inevitable – even a necessary or important – part of the game's culture (Nakamura, 2012; Ortiz, 2019). The harassment does not, however, impact all players equally and more often targets women and other marginalised gamer groups (e.g., Fox & Tang, 2017; Richard & Gray, 2018).

Stemming from different areas of game culture and from various points on a time frame of the previous decade, these selected examples presented above are not isolated incidents. On the contrary, they represent only a few of the most visible examples of the gender-based exclusion, discrimination, harassment, and hostility women face in current game culture. In their gruesomeness, they show why it is important to develop our understanding of the hostile structures and behaviours women face in game culture due to their gender. With the help of increased knowledge on this topic, we can aim to fix the current problematic and discriminatory aspects of game culture and construct more equal and inclusive, culturally and socially sustainable environments and practices.

1.3 Dissertation structure

This dissertation consists of seven chapters. Following this first introduction chapter, in the second chapter, I will position the study within the field of game culture studies and the area of research on gender and games, introducing its central theoretical concepts. In the third chapter, I will present the methodology, including the methods used for collecting and analysing the research materials, and the central epistemological and research ethical perspectives of the study.

After introducing the starting points, the theoretical framework, and the methodology of the study in the first three chapters, I will present the analysis in the three following chapters, each focusing on one of the sub research questions. In chapter 4 Women's gaming practices, I will focus on the first sub research question: What are women players' gaming practices like? In the chapter, I will first describe how women's gaming have been described in previous studies, namely player statistics from Finland, Europe, and the United States, and how gender differences between women and men have been constructed in those studies. Next, I will explore the gaming practices of women participating in the study: what games they play and on which platforms, how much time they spend on gaming, and what kinds of social forms their gaming takes. I will also compare these findings to the Finnish and international player statistics and market studies, as well as academic player studies to place them within a wider national, international, and game cultural context.

In chapter 5 Women players' game cultural participation, I will tackle the second sub research question: How does gender affect women players' game cultural

participation? After presenting the theoretical background for the different aspects of game cultural participation, I will examine the different ways women participating in the study take part in the consumption and production of game culture: participating in gaming events, watching (but not participating in) esports, and consuming and producing various forms of game media. The focus of this inspection is on what kind of a role gender plays in creating and limiting the possibilities for game cultural participation, and what kinds of gender performances are involved in women players' participation.

In chapter 6 Constructing the idea and identity of a gamer, I will examine the third sub research question: How do women players construct the idea and identity of a gamer? I will begin the chapter by presenting the theoretical background of the gamer identity based on earlier research on cultural identity and gamer identity. Then, I will examine how women participating in the study, drawing from questionnaire responses and interviews, describe 'a gamer' and its variations. Thirdly, I will explore if the women identify themselves as a gamer, or refuse that definition, and what reasons they offer for this decision. Finally, I will describe the various meanings gaming holds in these women's lives, and how those meanings expand beyond the gamer identity.

In chapter 7 Conclusions, I will summarise the findings made in the analysis chapters for each sub research question, and, drawing from them, answer the main research question of this study: How can women's game cultural agency be understood beyond gamer identity? Finally, in the last section of my conclusions, I will discuss the research process as well as the limitations and rigor of the study, and present suggestions for applying its results as well as for potential future research opportunities based on them.

2 Theoretical framework

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework of the study. I will begin by positioning the study within the research field of game culture studies and explaining the background and significance of this field of research in the context of this work. Then, I will describe how women's gaming and gender have been previously studied in the context of digital gaming, and how this dissertation builds upon and contributes to the academic discussions on the topic. Finally, I will present the central theoretical concepts and the theoretical starting point of the study.

2.1 Game culture studies perspective

This dissertation is situated in the area of game culture studies, an orientation within the field of game studies that focuses on studying games and related phenomena from a cultural studies perspective.

Game studies is a relatively new multidisciplinary field. In his textbook *An Introduction to Game Studies: Games in Culture*, Frans Mäyrä describes game studies as 'a new field of study focusing on games, particularly in their different digital forms' (2008, p. 1). Even though various forms of games and play have always existed in all human cultures, and studied from various perspectives in many academic disciplines, game studies as an independent academic field of study is generally considered to have formed in the beginning of the current millennium. In earlier game research, games have been perceived more as a means to another end (for example, in the areas of simulation, education, and military studies) instead of as an interesting form of culture in themselves, which has been the focus of game studies as a new academic discipline (Ibid., p. 13). The field of game studies has been defined by the formation of academic institutions such as the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA; 2003) and related annual conferences, as well as academic journals *Game Studies* (2001) and *Games and Culture* (2006). These fairly recent developments have been described as 'the third wave of game studies', and 'modern game studies' (Juul, 2001). Much of the research done in game studies has focused on games as culture (Mäyrä, 2008; Shaw, 2010). This research orientation can also be described as game culture studies (Mäyrä, 2020).

In cultural studies, the concept of culture is understood widely, covering the entire sphere of human life and existence, human interaction, as well as all the spoken and unspoken knowledge, values, beliefs, behaviours, and practices. The research conducted in cultural studies is focused on the different manifestations of culture – both abstract and material – and the various layers of meanings attached to them (Kouri, 2015, p. 15). Game culture studies can be understood both as the study of games *as* culture and the study of games *in* culture. In game culture studies, games are seen as cultural products similar to other forms of art and entertainment with their own intrinsic value. They are seen as produced within a specific cultural context and in relation to a variety of production and consumption cultures surrounding them. At the same time, games are examined as a part of culture and society. The cultural contexts of games, players, and gaming – in which games as cultural products, players as cultural actors, and gaming as a cultural activity are given different meanings – are chosen as the focus of research. The dual nature of the relationship between games and culture is also taken into consideration: the meaning of games is determined by the culture surrounding them (their production and play), and at the same time games themselves can be read as commentaries of this culture (Arjoranta, 2022).

Mäyrä discusses the study of games as culture as the study of games, the study of players, and the study of the various contexts of the two, noting that 'in reality, these three spheres of inquiry cannot be separated, but must be seen both as mutually interacting and complementary, and informed by historical processes' (2008, p. 2). In Mäyrä's definition, context can refer to multiple frames of reference and multiple possible realities. Simply put, they can mean anything that can be used to increase our understanding of games and their players. Mäyrä further describes the study of games in culture as 'a particular model of sense-making for digital games that is aimed to help distinguish the multiple layers and processes of meaning involved in playing and discussing them' (Ibid., p. 3). In this definition, the various meanings we attach to games, playing them, and being a person who plays them, becomes the centre of interest in studying games. Furthermore, Mäyrä discusses game culture studies as studying games as cultural systems and as studying the cultures around games (Ibid., pp. 13–27).

As Adrienne Shaw (2010) notes, studying game culture should not only mean studying games as culture, but more importantly, studying games from the perspective of critical cultural studies. Shaw further notes that focusing so much on the perspective of games as culture might lead to separating game culture from other forms of culture, directing the way games are studied towards a point where we might lose sight of their wider cultural and societal contexts.

Within game studies, there have been several ways to approach the concept of 'game culture', both from the higher-level perspective of institutionalisation, and

from the perspective of individual practices and identities. For example, Daniel Muriel and Garry Crawford (2018) describe game culture as the institutionalisation of gaming practices, experiences, and meanings. On the other hand, Graeme Kirkpatrick has depicted the formation of gaming culture as a process in which 'a new cultural practice with its own meanings' was actively being constructed around computer games as cultural objects, also opening a way to the possibility for the construction of the gamer identity (2015, p. 5).

In this study, I examine the social and cultural activities and practices surrounding digital games as a Bourdieusian field of culture that is at the same time independent from and in interaction with other fields of culture (Bourdieu, 1993). My approach is based in game cultural studies, examining game culture through the lens of cultural studies, particularly focusing on the cultural ideas and social structures used to create and enforce the hegemonic game culture, including the values attached to different kinds of play practices and the idea of a 'gamer'. According to Shaw, 'the issue of who "counts" as a member of video game culture is central to studying games within a cultural studies framework' (2010, p. 407). This is one of the central ideas behind this study: my aim is to understand what kind of opportunities and limitations are affecting women players as they navigate their belonging and agency in game culture.

2.2 From essentialism to intersectionality: research on gender and gaming

When I started my work towards developing this dissertation in 2014, there was already some research on gender and gaming, but gender was not a central topic in game studies. In 2015, I conducted a systematic review of the papers presented in the Digital Games Research Association's (DiGRA) conferences and published in the two game studies journals ranked as 'leading level' academic journals by the Finnish Publication Forum: *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, and *Games and Culture: A Journal of Interactive Media* from 2001 to 2014 (Friman, 2015b). A total of 1074 conference papers and journal articles were included in the analysis and, depending on the publication, 2.6–7.8% of them examined gender as their primary or secondary topic. Since then, it seems that much more attention has been paid to the topic, and a significant amount of interesting and important research has been published as conference papers, journal articles, book chapters, edited collections, and monographs. It has been an exciting time to work on this topic, as the research-based knowledge on it has been accumulated at an amazing speed from so many different perspectives. Much of the research on gender and digital games has focused on the perspective of women and girls (Ibid.). One reason for this is how women and girls have been historically excluded from game

culture, and how the aim for fostering greater inclusiveness for them has been a significant factor motivating the research in this area (e.g., Consalvo, 2012). In this section, my aim is to present some of this work, and position this dissertation within this wider academic discussion on gender and games, particularly from the perspective focusing on women players.

According to Gabriela T. Richard (2013), gender has been a topic of study in relation to digital gaming at least from the 1980s. Outside of game studies before the 1980s, the topic has been researched within other fields such as media studies, education, and psychology. The study of gender and gaming is also closely attached to the topic of gender and technology, which itself has a long history of research, and in its current intersectional form has increasingly focused on feminist and post-colonial technoscience (see Subramaniam et al., 2017). Another central attachment to this area of research is in gender studies, and the understanding of the effects of gender in gaming in game studies has developed through similar stages to the understanding of gender in gender studies (Richard, 2013).

The research on gender and gaming is sometimes presented as a unified area of study, in which its early history is commonly presented as 'three waves' of research on gender and games set along a timeline of the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s (Richard, 2013; Friman, 2015b). These research waves are centred around three key volumes on the topic (Richard, 2013), published approximately ten years apart: *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games* (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998), *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New Perspectives on Gender and Gaming* (Kafai et al., 2008), and *Diversifying Barbie and Mortal Kombat: Intersectional Perspectives and Inclusive Designs in Gaming* (Kafai et al., 2016). Although, as noted before, gender and digital gaming has been a topic of research before and outside of these collections, these three are some of the most well-known – and often cited – examples of research perspectives and discussion points in this area at the time of their publication. At once, it is crucial to keep in mind that they only represent a small portion of the research in this area and are mostly focused in a narrow geographical and linguistic area of the academic community studying gender and games.

Early research on gender and games, particularly its 'first wave' commonly placed in the 1990s (e.g., Richard, 2013), was motivated by the gender essentialist assumption that girls were not interested in gaming (see Cassell & Jenkins, 1998). The research was also largely focused on the theme of gender difference in gaming: games were viewed as 'toys for boys' based on their masculine themes and conceived audience, and girls were not seen as actively engaging with games or even being interested in them. The apparent lack of participation from girls was considered a problem because digital games were seen as a vital pathway into a wider technological skilfulness, seen as a crucial area of expertise in ever more

technological society, education, and work life. In other words, girls were seen as being in danger of missing out of the variety of advantages to be gained from digital gaming. As a response to the perceived problem, some of the research at the time was focused on girls' preferences regarding digital games. Furthermore, the so called 'girls' games movement' built on that research, producing games specifically designed for girls (also known as 'pink games'), characterised by bright colours, social themes, and simple gameplay mechanics. Even though it claimed to be offering girls the kind of products they wanted, only a few of the pink games were commercially successful. These early interventions have since been criticised for how they are primarily based on a binary, essentialising, and stereotyping conception of gender. Furthermore, despite their good intentions to encourage girls to play games, they further marginalised girl gamers and girls' gaming. Since the aims were founded on the assumption that girls do not play nor are interested in digital games, the girls and women who already played games were rendered invisible, and the image of digital gaming as a field reserved for boys was emphasised even further.

Gender differences seen in some player statistics (see chapter 4 Women's gaming practices) are not simply influenced by an individual's interests but are shaped by the cultural environment. In the research conducted during the latter half of the first decade of the 2000s, also called the 'second wave' of research on gender and games, the focus moved from the assumed gender differences to the social and cultural contexts of gaming (Richard, 2013). The central questions of research became how one gains access to game culture and becomes a 'gamer' (e.g., Taylor, 2008; Yee, 2008). The game industry association in the United States, the Entertainment Software Association, began to publish statistics on digital gaming in the United States in 2004. These statistics showed that the gender differences in digital gaming were not quite as large as had been assumed before. In fact, women and girls already formed 40% of the digital games' audience in 2004 (Entertainment Software Association [ESA], 2004, p. 2). The statistics also showed that digital gaming was not only a hobby of children and youth, but the average age of players was constantly on the rise. This kind of information helped to broaden the perspective on who were seen as gamers, and emphasised the significance of the questions of the cultural and social aspects of gaming beyond the assumed and gender-essentialised differences.

From the 2010s, sometimes referred to as the 'third wave' of research on gender and games, the perspective has broadened towards a more intersectional perspective on players and game cultural agency (Richard, 2013). Intersectionality is a concept originally created by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1989), and further developed by Black feminist theorists to address differences between groups of people leading to positions of difference or marginalisation. For example, White women are in a privileged position when compared to Black women because they are not targeted

with racism, even though both groups are targeted by gender-based discrimination (Gray, 2020, pp. 26–27). In the context of game studies, intersectionality means that alongside gender, other individual qualities such as ethnic background, age, sexual orientation, ability, or class, as well as how their crossing affects in an individuals' position and agency within game culture, have become the point of interest. As Gabriela T. Richard puts it, 'the current research on gender and game culture is heading toward understanding nuance of expression and experience, particularly by looking at how gender relates to intersectional concepts, like sexuality, ethnicity and class' (2013, p. 278). It is worth noting that in this change in focus, the research on gender and games seems to be following in the footsteps of gender studies. In that field too, the theoretical focus has moved from the idea of a gender difference to a broader understanding of gender and its various intersections (Shields, 2008; Rossi, 2010, p. 35).

One central example of this perspective in game studies is Adrienne Shaw's study *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (2014), focusing on marginalised gamers from an intersectional perspective, and exploring how race, gender, and sexuality affect players' experience with games and representation. Another central example is Kishonna L. Gray's study *Race, Gender, and Deviance in Xbox Live: Theoretical Perspectives from the Virtual Margins (Theoretical Criminology)* (2014), in which she examines the effects of race, gender, sexual orientation, and abled-bodiedness in Black players' gaming experiences. In her later study *Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming* (2020, p. 3), Gray has pointed out that even though game studies scholars have, at this point, widely addressed the various issues concerning women as well as the structures of toxic masculinity within game culture, a great majority of the research conducted in this area has focused on White women and the White men who harass them, which in and of itself helps to maintain the structures of White hegemony within game culture, and makes racialised players invisible and further marginalises them.

In addition to taking intersectional perspectives into account, the understanding of gender and sexuality has expanded to cover a variety of gender and sexual identities in the research on gender and gaming. One early important example of this kind of work is Jenny Sundén's and Malin Sveningsson's twin ethnography *Gender and Sexuality in Online Game Cultures: Passionate Play* (2012), in which they reflect on straightness and queerness found in different types of encounters in the player culture of *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004). The variety of gender, sexuality and their expressions in gaming has been examined particularly in the field of queer game studies. Central publications in this area include two edited collections: *Queer Game Studies* edited by Bo Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (2017), and *Queerness in Play* edited by Todd Harper, Meghan Blythe Adams, and Nicholas Taylor (2018). More attention has also been paid to various aspects of masculinity

in gaming, as seen from the edited volume *Masculinities in Play* edited by Nicholas Taylor and Gerald Voorhees (2018).

While all the aforementioned examples are important for understanding the variety of research perspectives into gender and gaming, from the perspective of this study and my research questions, the most relevant are the earlier studies focusing on the different aspects of women's game cultural agency, participation, and gamer identities, as well as the gender-based obstacles specific to women. Especially within the last decade, there have been numerous studies focusing on women's position in gaming and game culture from various perspectives. For example, Shira Chess' study *Ready Player Two: Women Gamers and Designed Identity* (2017) investigates digital games as constructors of femininity and feminine gamer identity. The collection *Feminism in Play* edited by Kishonna L. Gray, Gerald Voorhees, and Emma Vossen (2018), brings together different perspectives into women's representation in games, participation in game culture, and contributions in the game industry. There is also research focusing on women's position in specific areas of gaming and game culture, for example Emma Witkowski's work on women in competitive gaming and esports (2018), as well as Jessica Enevold's and Charlotte Hagström's work on gaming mothers and gendered play in domestic contexts (2014).

In this study, I aim to bring together and build upon this wide range of previous research on the topic of gender and gaming, combining the different aspects of understanding gaming practices, game cultural participation, and the gamer identity from the perspective of women players and the effects of their gender in their gaming.

2.3 Central theoretical concepts

As outlined in the introduction, the theoretical framework of the study is primarily built on the concepts of game culture, game cultural participation, and the gamer identity. I approach game culture as a Bourdieusian field of culture, which is hierarchical in its nature (Bourdieu, 1993; Kirkpatrick, 2015). The agents in the field of game culture (gamers) are battling each other for their position within the field, defined most of all by their game cultural capital (Consalvo, 2007). Membership in this field requires game cultural participation, which is based on the concept of cultural participation (Virolainen, 2015), and simultaneously referring to both participating in game cultural activity and the feeling of belonging in game culture. Gamer identity is performed through gamer habitus (Kirkpatrick, 2015): embodied dispositions and displays of game cultural capital. I examine gamer identity both as an internally experienced and externally constructed (Shaw, 2014; Chess, 2017). In the context of this study, I also view gender first and foremost as a cultural identity which is experienced and performed within certain game cultural context (Butler,

1999, 2009; Shaw, 2013). In addition to these central theoretical concepts, I will also connect my analysis to a variety of earlier research related to gender and game culture, gender and technology, gamer identity, and cultural participation.

2.3.1 Field of game culture and game cultural capital

In the essay collection *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (1993), French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu describes how cultural fields are formed around specific cultural objects, such as art or literature, and how they are independent, to a varying degree, in relation to other cultural fields with their specific values. Contrary to society writ large, Bourdieu also notes how these fields in their values often allow for movements to be formed against capitalism and the class system – although they cannot be fully escaped. For Bourdieu, the cultural fields are hierarchical in nature, defined by people's constant struggle for power within the field. This power is gained through a possession of cultural capital: the more cultural capital a person holds, the higher in the power hierarchy within the cultural field she is positioned. An individual's position is 'defined by possession of a determinate quantity of specific capital (recognition) and, at the same time, by occupation of a determinate position in the structure of the distribution of this specific capital' (Ibid., p. 30). As Bourdieu describes, 'when we have to re-emphasize that the principle of position-taking lies in the structure and functioning of the field of positions, this is not done so as to return any form of economism. There is a specific economy of the literary and artistic field, based on a particular form of belief' (Ibid., p. 35). This is the definition of *cultural capital*, a concept first introduced by Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1977) and further developed by Bourdieu (1986).

In his essay 'The Forms of Capital' (1986), Bourdieu separates three primary forms of capital: economic, social, and cultural. The social and cultural forms of capital usually also take a symbolic form, although they can be derived from economic capital. Economic capital refers to monetary forms of capital, and social capital refers to the social networks available for the individual. Cultural capital, however, is what defines an individual's position within the culture and its embodied displays in the form of *cultural habitus*. According to Bourdieu, cultural capital can exist in three different forms: embodied, objectified, and institutionalised (Ibid., p. 243). In my study, I focus mostly on its embodied form, which Bourdieu calls the habitus: 'external wealth converted into an integral part of the person, into a habitus' (p. 18). I will describe this in more detail in section 2.3.3 Gamer identity and gamer habitus.

In this study, I understand game culture as a Bourdieusian field of culture. Although there exist countless different forms of games and play, and cultures

surrounding them, I focus on the hegemonic mainstream culture surrounding digital games – what has been called the 'hegemony of play' (Fron et al., 2007) – and will refer to it simply as game culture. As Bourdieu (1993) describes cultural fields forming around cultural objects, in the case of game culture, the field has formed around digital games – mainstream AAA titles in particular. Accordingly, I will refer to the currency defining an individual's position and power within the field of game culture as *game cultural capital*.

In her book *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Video Games* (2007), Mia Consalvo adopted Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital into the context of serious digital gaming, discussing it in terms of 'gaming capital'. According to Consalvo (Ibid., p. 184), gaming capital is:

> highly flexible, able to adapt to different types of gameplay, various games, and changing notions of what's important to know about games. Players can accumulate various forms of gaming capital not only from playing games but also from the paratextual industries that support them. And depending on a player's social circle, that capital can be quite valuable in building a reputation.

In Consalvo's definition, it is worth noting that gaming capital is not only limited to playing games skilfully, but, following Bourdieu, also refers to wider game cultural expertise based on knowledge, consumption, and production of game-related materials outside of the games which she calls paratexts. Consalvo also notes the commercial aspects of gaming capital: 'clearly, commercial entities have vested interests in commodifying as many elements of gaming culture as possible, to then sell those bits back to players as the most desirable forms of capital' (Ibid., p. 184). It is not sufficient to only purchase and consume games to gain gaming capital, but also other game cultural products. Moreover, game cultural practices of player production, such as community websites, video production, and streaming, are encompassed by consumerism.

While Consalvo (2007) describes gaming capital as specific to a certain game (or certain types of games) and their culture, in this study, I examine game cultural capital mode widely, covering the entire field of the hegemonic core game culture. I have also chosen to refer to it as 'game cultural capital' to emphasise the way it extends beyond gaming as an activity into various game cultural contexts. However, it is worth noting that some aspects of game cultural capital are specific to certain (types of) games: someone being a very skilled and knowledgeable in *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016) does not make them such in *Final Fantasy XIV* (Square Enix, 2010/2013). Although, playing and possessing expertise in both can increase their overall game cultural capital. It is also worth noting that the culture of

digital gaming has changed significantly since Consalvo's study was published, and game cultural capital has also adapted to the transforming game culture.

2.3.2 Game cultural participation

The concept of cultural participation is commonly used in the fields of cultural policy and cultural production, both in research and in the practice of creating cultural productions and strategies. According to cultural policy researcher Jutta Virolainen, cultural participation 'can be understood widely as a sense of community, belonging, social relationships, and participating in the activities of a community or the society' (2015, p. 101). From this definition, cultural participation can be seen to present two sides referring to both concrete participation in cultural activities, as well as the feeling of belonging in the culture. In my dissertation, I discuss cultural participation in game culture as *game cultural participation*. Game cultural participation, too, has two sides. On one hand, it refers to participating in game cultural activities – such as playing games, consuming and producing game media, participating in gaming events, and watching or participating in esports. On the other hand, it also refers to the feeling of belonging in game culture, for example, in the form of identifying as a gamer (see chapter 6 Constructing the idea and identity of a gamer).

Notably, game cultural participation is distinct from gaming as an activity. Although a person may play frequently – and gaming is certainly a game cultural activity – she may not see herself as a gamer or as a member of game culture. Furthermore, she might see herself as a gamer and a member of game culture even though she would not play actively – or at all (see Orme, 2021). Game cultural participation without gaming is typical to women players, who have many gender-based limits to their gaming, such as demands for their use of time and the misogynistic nature of game environments (Enevold, 2014; Orme, 2021). Stephanie Orme (2021) has studied non-players whom she calls 'just watchers': people who enjoy participating in game culture by watching others play, sometimes very actively and enthusiastically, but have no interest in engaging in play. Despite not playing at all, the participants in Orme's study considered themselves members of game culture (Ibid., pp. 13–14). In the same vein, game cultural participation does not necessarily lead to claiming the gamer identity – but it does create an opportunity for it.

2.3.3 Gamer identity and gamer habitus

Identity is a widely used concept containing vastly different meanings depending on the context in which it is used. Identity is a central concept in cultural studies, where the concept has been widely theorised in relation to race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and other intersections of human existence. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall

(2011) describes cultural identity as a constant and fluctuant process, that is based on creating differences, and can never be fully achieved. It is also a term related to subjectivity and agency, not only explored in cultural studies, but also in other fields and contexts such as psychology and philosophy. My understanding of the *gamer identity* is based on how the concept of cultural identity is understood in cultural studies and further builds on Bourdieu's (1993) idea of cultural fields. To put it simply, I view the gamer identity as a form of cultural identity that is based on game cultural participation and game cultural capital.

Unlike identities based on gender, ethnicity, or sexuality, the gamer identity is not based on the innate characteristics of an individual. As such, it may not seem as an identity that is as personal or sensitive compared to many others we carry as human beings. It may, however, still be a very important aspect of a person's sense of self and a way to relate oneself to a certain group of people, cultural environment, or lifestyle. Because of this, while studying this subject, we should consider the various and complex layers of meaning one may attach to the gamer identity. At the same time, we must keep in mind that the gamer identity is not accepted by all gamers, and even when the identity is claimed it may not be very significant to them.

The gamer identity is an artificially constructed cultural identity that has not existed for as long as there have been (digital) games. Instead, the gamer identity is a comparatively recent invention. The idea of a gamer identity had to be created before it could be assumed by players (see Kirkpatrick, 2015, pp. 67–70). As such, the construction of the gamer identity can also be examined from the perspective of game cultural history. In his study of the formation of digital game culture, Graeme Kirkpatrick (2015) describes how the image of a gamer was intentionally constructed through gaming magazines from 1985, partially as a marketing ploy to separate games from other types of technological hobbyism. Mapping this development, Kirkpatrick (Ibid. p. 14) describes the process of how:

> games begin to lose their association with computing as a technical pursuit and become focus of interest in their own right. In this process, some people are identified as 'gamesters', then 'gamers', and in the pages of the magazines they are encouraged to think of themselves as different from 'tech-heads', 'computer nerds', even 'board game bores'.

Kirkpatrick further describes how the gamer identity is actively constructed in the magazines in connection to the definition and evaluation of games. Indeed, the concepts of games and gamers are being constructed in unison: 'gaming discourse, games and gamers emerge together and condition one another' (Ibid., p. 15). As a result, 'gamer becomes the preferred term [for the readers] in the UK magazines in the post-1985 period' (Ibid., pp. 68–69).

Referring to Bourdieu, Kirkpatrick describes the creation of the gamer identity as the formation of a *gamer habitus*. According to Kirkpatrick, 'the formation of gamer habitus is rendered intelligible through the development of ways of talking that are specific to gaming and come to be associated with the identity, 'gamer'' (Ibid., p. 7). As noted above, Bourdieu's concept of habitus refers to the embodied dispositions from which an individual interprets, reacts to, and interacts with her social environment in a sensible way that is understandable both to the individual and those sharing the same cultural field. The dispositions are social in nature as they are usually shared by people with similar backgrounds (e.g., class, nationality, ethnicity, education) and are acquired through imitation (*mimesis*) in the process of socialisation (Bourdieu, 1984). A person's habitus consists of internal aspects such as schemes of perception, classification, appreciation, and feeling, but also externally observable things such as the tendency to hold and use one's body in a certain way (*hexis*), such as posture, way of moving, and way of talking, dressing, and action (Ibid.).

In short, habitus is the way in which both individual and shared cultural background come together to shape a person's mind and body, and particularly how she functions in the world through them. In practice, the socially assumed habitus enables a person to act in, and to perceive and react to, social situations in the 'correct' way, and make her actions comprehensible to others who share a similar social and cultural background. As Graeme Kirkpatrick describes it (2015, pp. 18–19):

> *Habitus* involves an almost unconscious capacity for recognizing situations as instances of a given cultural routine or practice and a preparedness that precedes and conditions conscious participation. It makes us the kind of people who can know a specific set of rules make them our own and implement them successfully in a course of action. Without *habitus* there would be incomprehension and befuddlement that would prevent the kind of social functioning that we take for granted.

According to Kirkpatrick, in the context of his study on U.K. gaming magazines, gamer habitus 'refers to the socially acquired, embodied dispositions that ensure someone knows how to respond to a computer game' (Ibid., p. 19). Fittingly, Bourdieu too refers to habitus as having 'a feel for the game', as he describes a cultural field as a game requiring specific strategies – and cultural capital – to succeed (1993, p. 189). The gamer habitus manifests itself when, for example, getting her hands on a new PC shooter game she has not played before, the gamer is immediately able to automatically place her hands in the 'correct' position on her keyboard and mouse, easily reaching WASD and Space keys for movement, R for

reload, and being ready to shoot with the left mouse button. These automatic – perhaps even unconscious – actions signify the gamer's earlier experience with the genre and her readiness to play the new game in the right way. In other words, it is an example of the socially acquired embodied dispositions that ensure she knows how to respond to the game (Kirkpatrick, 2015, p. 19).

Gamer habitus can, however, also be understood much more widely than this. Following Bourdieu (1984), gamer habitus can be seen as internal and external manifestations of an individual's game cultural capital. These include an individual's ability to understand games, their genres, conventions, systems, and mechanics, along with the wider contexts of games, including their development, marketing, player communities and cultures, and potential competitive scenes surrounding them. In addition to being able to physically confront a game from a familiar genre through anticipating its control scheme in the correct way, gamer habitus may also manifest in how a gamer reacts to a game trailer, dresses in clothes referencing specific games or game series, or demonstrates expertise while discussing games with others and fluently using the lingo specific to that game or genre. Importantly, gamer habitus allows the gamer to react to games and game cultural products and to understand them in the 'correct' way. At the same time, it also displays the gamer's game cultural expertise to others inhabiting the shared social environment. Gamer identity and habitus are strongly embodied: they manifest in the way a gamer physically interacts with games, gaming technologies, and other game cultural products, as well as the way she dresses and talks about games.

In this study, I see gamer identity as a game cultural identity being constructed in a combination of two intertwining processes, one of them internal and the other external – the process of identification and the process of validation – and being performed through gamer habitus.

2.3.4 Performing gender in game culture

This study is about women players and how their gender affects their position and agency within the field of game culture. As such, gender is a central concept in the study. There are many ways to understand and conceptualise gender – and in academic research, many definitions have been developed in the field of gender studies in particular (Rossi, 2010). This study does not aim to define gender or 'a woman' as such, but rather to understand the significance of gender in the context of game culture, particularly from the perspective of women participating in that cultural field.

In the context of this study, I understand gender as a performance, following Judith Butler's performative theory of gender (1999, 2009). Butler is a philosopher and gender theorist from the United States, whose book *Gender Trouble: Feminism*

and the Subversion of Identity (Butler, 1999; originally published 1990) on gender as a social construction and performance has greatly affected the way gender is understood in both the academia and society at large.

To Butler, gender is an artificial, cultural, and social construction, becoming 'real' only through embodied performance. In other words, gender is something that is created by the act of 'doing gender' through the way we walk, talk, use gestures, and so on (Ibid., pp. 33, 173–181). Generally, the construction and performance of gender is based on binary, heteronormative, social expectations (Ibid., p. 173). Later, Butler (2009, p. iv) has further explicated how the performativity of gender is tied to precarity, to how 'subjects become eligible for recognition' – and to who counts as a subject in the first place.

It is worth noting that the gamer identity, too, becomes real through embodied performances in particular game cultural contexts (see Shaw, 2013), and that the embodied performances of the gamer identity are gendered in nature (see Witkowski, 2018). In this study, I wish to explore gender from the perspective of how it is performed by women – and what kinds of gender performances are expected from them – in different game cultural contexts. These contexts are related to, in particular, the various forms of game cultural participation (chapter 5 Women players' game cultural participation) and to the processes of constructing and performing a gamer identity and gamer habitus (chapter 6 Constructing the idea and identity of a gamer).

Another theoretical concept related to gender that is central to this study is *hegemonic masculinity*. As formulated by R.W. Connell,[1] the concept refers to the idea that there is a certain type of dominant masculinity that is seen as the most ideal and valued gender position in the society, which leads to other gender positions being less valued. By Connell's definition, hegemonic masculinity is 'the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women' (Connell, 2001, p. 38). Later, Connell and James Messerschmidt (2005) have reformulated the concept in several areas, including implementing a more complex model of gender hierarchy, emphasising the agency of women, taking into consideration the geographical

[1] The concept of hegemonic masculinity was first proposed in a 1982 study *Ockers and disco maniacs* on Australian high school students by S. J. Kessler, D. J. Ashenden, R. W. Connell, and G. W. Dowsett, further systematised in a research article 'Towards a new sosiology of masculinity' by T. Carrigan, R. W. Connell, and J. Lee in 1985, and then presented as a part of the sociological theory of gender in R. W. Connell's *Gender and power* published in 1987, which became the most cited source for the concept (see Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, pp. 830–831).

variety and interplay of masculinities, and emphasising the internal contradictions and other dynamics of hegemonic masculinity.

What is important to note regarding the concept is that the idea of hegemonic masculinity does not assume that there are only two gender positions, one of them representing masculinity and one representing femininity, but a variety of gender positions, all of them below the dominant ideal masculinity in the gender hierarchy (Ibid.). In other words, hegemonic masculinity does not exist only in relation to – or as an opposite of – femininity, 'but in relation to varying forms of masculinity that are contextually and historically situated, stratified, and often in contest' (Taylor, 2012, p. 113). It is also important to note here that according to the concept of hegemonic masculinity, there exist many different forms of masculinity, most of them subordinated by the hegemonic masculinity. As such, not only women and people from gender minorities are oppressed by hegemonic masculinity, but it affects people of all genders. In this study, I will examine how women players perform and are expected to perform their gender while participating in game culture, and also how women players' game cultural participation and agency are controlled and limited by the structures of hegemonic masculinity within game culture.

2.3.5 Theoretical starting point of the study

To summarise the theoretical starting point of this study, I am examining the hegemonic, mainstream, core digital game culture as a Bourdieusian field of culture. From this perspective, becoming a member of game culture requires game cultural participation, both through participation in game cultural activities and having a feeling of belonging in game culture. After gaining entrance into game culture, individuals begin acquiring game cultural capital: they will start to develop a distinct cultural taste (valuing certain types of games for certain reasons), their skills as a player, and their expertise on the games and their backgrounds. They will also learn new vocabulary and ways of talking about games. Together, these developments become a gamer habitus, a person's internal dispositions and embodied displays of game cultural capital, allowing them to act and communicate with other members of game culture in a sensible way. Game cultural participation may also lead to claiming the gamer identity, assuming the individual possesses sufficient game cultural capital to identify – and to be seen by others – as a gamer.

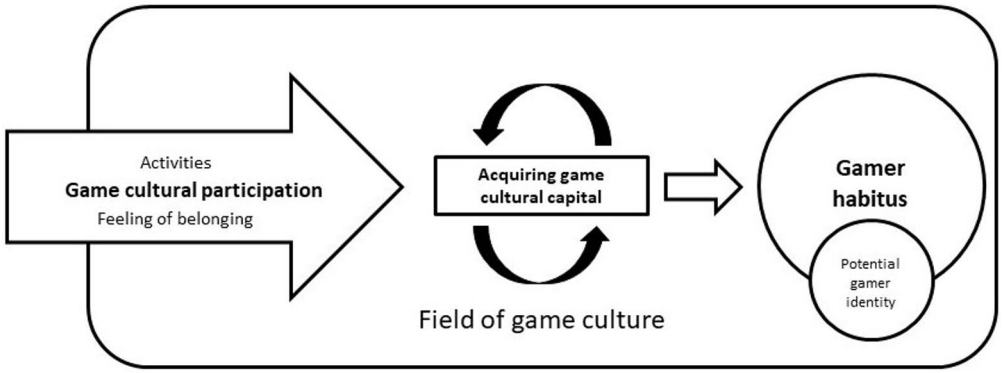

Figure 1. Central theoretical concepts and the theoretical starting point of the study: the process of becoming a gamer.

In figure 1, I have presented the connections between the aforementioned central theoretical concepts. Together, they form the theoretical starting point of this study, describing the process of becoming a member of game culture, a gamer. In this study, I will examine the different aspects and phases of this process, and particularly how gender affects them, from the perspective of Finnish women players.

3 Methodology

In this chapter, I will present the methodology of the study. I will begin by presenting the research materials and the methods I have used to collect them. Next, I will describe the chosen analysis methods: reflexive thematic analysis for analysing the primary research material and narrative literature review for producing a theoretical overview of the different aspects of women's game cultural participation. Finally, I will consider the epistemological and research ethical questions relevant to this study, focusing particularly on my own researcher position as a woman player studying women players.

3.1 Research materials and collection methods

The aim of this study is to bring forth and increase our understanding of the gendered structures of game culture from the perspective of women players, both empirically and theoretically. My methodological choices reflect this aim and are guided by my goal to make room for women to discuss their gaming practices, game cultural activities, potential gamer identities, and their relationship to game culture in general, while also building on the insights gained from earlier research on these topics.

My primary research material consists of semi-structured theme interviews with Finnish adult women who play digital games (20 interviewees) conducted in the years 2014–2017, and an online questionnaire material collected from Finnish adult women who play digital games (737 respondents) conducted in December 2016. I collected both materials specifically for this study. Both the interviews and the questionnaire included questions regarding the women's current gaming and gaming histories, participating in gaming events, producing and consuming game media, watching and participating in esports, their considerations of the gamer identity, the effects of gender in gaming, and the meaning gaming held to them.

During the research process, I also participated in various gaming events in Finland and abroad, aiming to gather not only interviews from women participating these events, but also observation material on the gendered construction of these events and women's participation in them. A summary of the empirical research materials used in this study is presented in table 1.

Table 1. Empirical research materials used in the study.

Type	Description	Collected
Primary	Interviews with Finnish women players (N = 20)	2014–2017
Primary	Internet questionnaire for Finnish women gamers (N = 737)	2016
Secondary	Observation in gaming events	2014–2016

In the following sections, I will describe these empirical research materials as well as the methods I have used in collecting and analysing them in more detail.

3.1.1 Interviews with Finnish women players

Between October 2014 and January 2017, I conducted a total of twenty interviews speaking with Finnish women, aged between 19–52 years, who play digital games. At the time of their interviews, the women were residing in Satakunta, Southwest Finland, and Uusimaa regions. In these semi-structured theme interviews, I asked these women about their current gaming and gaming histories, their participation in game media, and their relationship to esports. I also asked the women to describe their gamer identities, their definitions for 'a gamer', and how they experienced their gender having affected their gaming hobby.

I conducted the first six interviews in 2014 and 2015 during a large-scale LAN event called Insomnia, organised yearly during the last weekend of October (during the local schools' autumn break) in the city of Pori. Attending the event as a researcher, I interviewed a total of six women participating in the event in 2014 or 2015.[2] Four women were interviewed alone and two of them were interviewed together. Four women attended the event as visitors (without a computer place of their own) and two of the women attended as representatives of the event's partner organisations.

I conducted the following two interviews in December 2015 at the University Consortium of Pori. I had recently attended the National Games Day event organised in the Pori Art Museum, where I had met two women who were volunteering at the

[2] I had asked and received a permission from the event organisers to attend the event as a guest and conduct the interviews. For the 2014 event, the organisers also distributed an interview invitation I had written, aiming to spread information about my study for the event participants, and to get women attending the event to sign up for an interview beforehand. Since no one signed up for the interview, I did not send the invitation letter on the following year, and on both years, I found my interviewees by approaching them at the event.

event as ‘game professors’ (young adults who were playing and presenting some of their favourite games for the event audience). Speaking with them about the games they were presenting in the event became an opportunity for me to explain my research topic to them and ask if they would like to take part in my research interviews.

I conducted the last twelve interviews in spring 2016 (seven interviews), autumn 2016 (four interviews), and spring 2017 (one interview) at the University Consortium of Pori. For eleven of these interviews, I sent an e-mail call for interviewees to the mailing list of the students of the Degree Programme in Cultural Production and Landscape Studies of the University of Turku (located at the University Consortium of Pori campus) as well as to the mailing list of PANA (the local students’ organisation for ‘geek culture appreciation’). As the PANA organisation originates from the students of the Degree Programme, some of the interviewees were involved in both. Since I am one of the founding members of the organisation and – at the time of the interviews – I was working as a researcher and a teacher in the Degree Programme, I was familiar with some of these women before their interviews, unlike the eight previous interviews. The last interviewee was personally invited for the interview, taking part in January 2017, following an introduction by a mutual acquaintance.

In summary, I conducted all twenty interviews between October 2014 and January 2017. The interviewed women were aged between 19–52 years during the time of the interview, and currently living in the southern or western Finland in the cities of Pori, Ulvila, Rauma, Turku, Helsinki, and Vantaa. Some of the interviewees were personally invited to participate in interviews when I met them in gaming-related events, we were introduced through a mutual acquaintance, or they answered a call for interviews sent to games academic or hobby related e-mail lists. Despite varying times and locations, all the interviews were conducted in a similar manner. In my study, interviewees are anonymised and referred by coding: I1–I20.

I used a semi-structured theme interview approach to conducting these interviews. According to Sirkka Hirsjärvi and Helena Hurme, theme interview is a form of semi-structured interview focused on certain themes that are defined beforehand by the researcher (2008, pp. 47–48). This interview method is semi-structured in the sense that the interview themes are set beforehand and remain the same for all the interviews conducted for the study. A set of questions is used as a framework for interviews, but unlike fully structured interviews, the same questions are not necessarily asked from all interviewees or not asked in the same order (Ibid., p. 48). However, all interview themes are discussed with each interviewee (Ibid., p. 48). The interview themes are usually defined deductively, often based on the central theoretical concepts of the study (Ibid., p. 66).

In the semi-structured theme interviews, I focused on four themes: 1. gaming practices, 2. gaming history and gamer identity, 3. game cultural participation, and 4. esports. Although, for the most part interview questions in each theme were predetermined (I used the same question sheet as a framework for each interview; see appendix 1), during interviews I aimed to let the interviewees direct their speech to the topics they deemed important to them, and bring up other topics that I had not directly asked about. I also presented additional questions that were not originally included in the question sheet based on what the interviewees reported, and I did not always ask all the planned questions. Because of this, there were some mild variations between different interviews regarding which questions were asked and how they were asked, but every theme was approached to some extent in all interviews.

The interviews I conducted often resembled discussions. That is to say, I did not simply ask a question, wait for the response, and ask another, but I was actively interacting with the interviewee by reacting to and commenting on what she was saying. Johanna Ruusuvuori and Liisa Tiittula (2017) note that research interviews are generally based on the same practices and rules of interaction than all other forms of face-to-face human communication. Even though a research interview may resemble an everyday conversation, it is still an 'institutional' situation, organised for the specific purpose of obtaining knowledge possessed by the interviewee: interviews are guided by the research question, the researcher is actively directing the discussion, and the institutional setting of the interview is emphasised by the researcher recording and taking notes of the discussion (Ibid.). Because of the institutional nature of the situation and the power imbalance between the interviewer and the interviewee that follows, it is important for the researcher to critically reflect on her own positionality in the interview and how that affects the research material produced in that situation. For this purpose, in addition to analysing the interview material in its textual form, while finalising this manuscript at the end of the research process, I also listened all the interview tapes again, not only paying attention to what the interviewees said and how, but also to my own role in the discussion. To make my own role in the process of producing this material transparent, I have also included my own speech in all the interview excerpts included in this study. I will reflect my own researcher position during the interviews in more detail in the last section of this chapter (3.3 Studying women players as a woman player).

At the beginning of each interview, I provided a document to interviewees explaining what the study was about, and listing the name and contact information of me, the researcher, the names of the dissertation advisors, as well as the information that the study was conducted at the Department of Digital Culture at the University of Turku. The document explained that the interview would be recorded and transcribed, and the interview material would be used in my doctoral research in

written form and with all personal identifiers removed. The interviewees were asked to give their permission for this by ticking a box in the document and signing it. I gave the participants time to carefully read through the document and discussed each point with them, encouraging them to also ask questions in case they had any. The interviewees signed two copies of the document, one for my records and one for themselves. Through this process, I have attained the informed consent of all interviewees to use the material in this study, according to the guidelines of *The Ethical Principles for Research with Human Participants* by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK (2019, p. 9).

3.1.2 Online questionnaire for Finnish women players

The second part of the primary research data consists of a large-scale internet questionnaire for Finnish women players I conducted in December 2016. The questionnaire reflects the game cultural studies approach I have adopted for this study, as its intention was not to provide quantitative information based on a representative sample of Finnish women players, but rather to supplement the interview material and offer the women responding to the questionnaire an opportunity to describe their lived experiences in and relationship to gaming, in their own words (on the use of online questionnaires in cultural studies, see Suominen, 2016). As such, the questionnaire was designed to collect material for a qualitative analysis, which in practice meant that it included a great number of open-ended questions, and the respondents were able to choose which questions they wished to answer. As Jaakko Suominen (2016) notes, creating online questionnaires in this manner is typical to qualitative research, and such questionnaires may even resemble the structure of a semi-structured theme interview.

Since the questionnaire's aim was to broaden the material provided by the interviews, its questions were largely based on the questions used in the interviews that I conducted with the women players. While all the interview questions were completely open, questions in the questionnaire were partly structured. For example, while I asked the interviewees to freely describe the games that they were playing at the time, in the questionnaire the respondents were given a multiple-choice question in which they could choose specific game genres that they were currently playing, as well as name game titles for each of their chosen genre if they wished to do so. While the individual interview questions were often presented as wider thematic topics, those topics were split in smaller parts and were also more detailed in the questionnaire. For example, in the interviews I usually asked the women if they define themselves as a gamer, a player, or a game hobbyist, and what they thought about those terms. In the questionnaire, the same topic was divided into three questions: first the respondent was asked who or what kind of a person is a player, a

gamer, or a game hobbyist, then she was asked if and how strongly she defines herself as one (or as something else), and finally she was asked why she does or does not define herself as such.

The questionnaire, published on 1 December and closed on 31 December 2016, received a total of 737 responses[3] during the one-month period it was open. The questionnaire was created with Webropol using a licence provided by the University of Turku. The questionnaire included a total of fifty questions in six sections: 1. Background information and current gaming, 2. Being a gamer, 3. Game media and gaming events, 4. Electronic sports, 5. Gaming history, and 6. Final thoughts (see appendix 2). Only the two first background questions were mandatory to respond to: the respondent's age and current place of residence.[4] All other questions were optional. Many tightly structured questions also provided additional space for respondents to supplement their answers if they wished to do so. Before opening the questionnaire publicly, it was tested by two volunteers.

The questionnaire link was distributed solely on Facebook.[5] I posted the link on my personal Facebook wall as a public link, and I also shared the link in various gaming-related Facebook groups that I was a member. Additionally, the link was shared by a few Facebook sites – and by private Facebook users as well. The various Facebook channels used to distribute the questionnaire link are presented in table 2 (private Facebook walls are excluded from the table).

3 There were three additional responses which were excluded from the data. One of these was from a 14-year-old respondent, one identified as a man, and one was a mock response.

4 It was mandatory for the respondents to disclose their age to make sure they were at least 18 years old. However, the respondents could choose to not disclose their current place of residence.

5 Originally, I had planned to possibly distribute the questionnaire link on certain e-mail lists, discussion forums and websites. But it became evident quickly that Facebook distribution alone would provide me with enough responses.

Table 2. Various Facebook channels used to distribute the questionnaire (private Facebook walls excluded).

Channel name	Channel type	Description	Number of members or followers 6.1.2017
IGDA Finland Satakunta Hub	Public group	Group for International Game Developer Association in Satakunta area	134
Nörttinaisten peliryhmä	Private group	Group for Finnish geek gamer women	155
Pelinaiset	Public group	Group for Finnish women who play games	210
Women in Games Finland	Public group	Group for Finnish women in games business	522
Geeks Unite! (Finland)	Public group	Group for Finnish geeks	1889
Geek Women Unite! (Finland)	Public group	Group for Finnish geek women	4375
Play Finland	Public group	Group for Finnish game industry	4734
Jimm's PC store	Commercial page	Commercial page for Jimm's PC store	30179
Peliviikko	Organisation page	Organisation page for the Finnish Game Week	2589
Jyväskylän eSports-seura	Organisation page	Organisation page for the electronic sports organisation in Jyväskylä	1015
Porin yliopistokeskus – UCPori	University page	Official page of the University Consortium of Pori	1631
Turun yliopisto – Digitaalinen kulttuuri	University page	Official page of the Digital Culture studies (University of Turku)	475

In this study, the 737 questionnaire respondents will be referred to by coding R1–R737. The respondents were Finnish women, aged 18–72 years. The average age of a respondent was 31.46 years, and the median age was 29 years (figure 2).

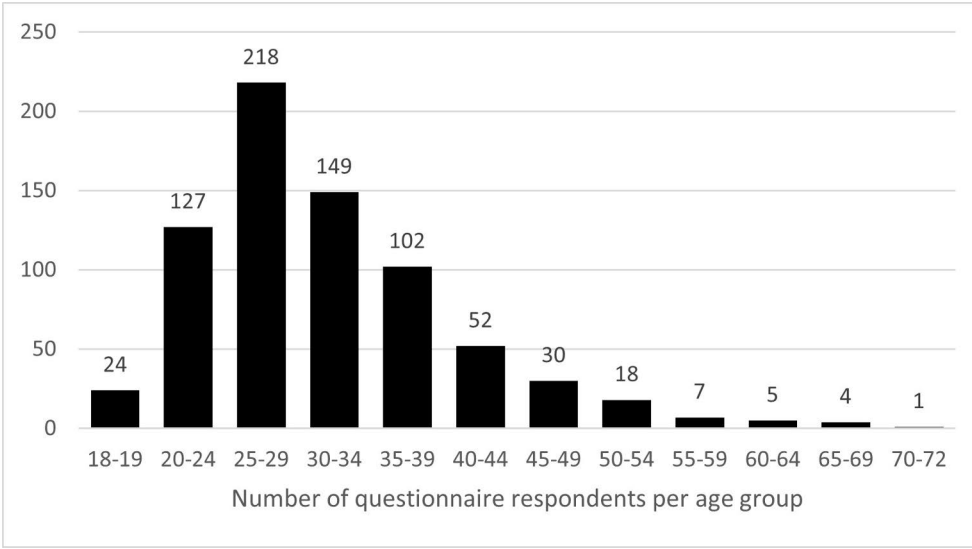

Figure 2. Questionnaire respondents' ages (N=737).

Apart from Åland, there was at least one respondent from all the nineteen regions of Finland. As expected, most respondents were currently living in one of the three most populated regions of Finland: Uusimaa (284 respondents, 38.53%), Pirkanmaa (84 respondents, 11.4%), and Varsinais-Suomi (83 respondents, 11.26%). Respondents from these three regions formed 61.19% of all the respondents. Nine respondents (1.22%) were currently living outside Finland and two respondents (0.27%) did not disclose their current location.

On the first page of the online questionnaire, I described what the questionnaire was about, that it was aimed at all Finnish adult women who play or had played digital games in some form at some point, and that the responses would be used in my doctoral research with all personal identifiers removed. The page also listed the name and contact information for me, the researcher, the names of the dissertation advisors, as well as the information that the study was conducted at the Department of Digital Culture at the University of Turku. Through this process, I have attained the informed consent of all questionnaire respondents to use the material in this study, according to the guidelines of *The Ethical Principles for Research with Human Participants* by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK (2019, p. 9).

3.1.3 Observations in gaming events

During the research material collection period, I also participated in several large-scale gaming events in the years 2014–2016, three of them in Finland and one in

Germany. I participated in these events as a researcher with the aim to observe the various aspects of the gendered nature of these events, as well as to interview some of the women participating in them. The events included Assembly Summer 2014 (in Helsinki, Finland), Insomnia 2014 and 2015 (in Pori, Finland), and Gamescom 2016 (in Cologne, Germany). All of these are very established and significant gaming events in their local area, and Assembly and Gamescom also on an international scale.

Assembly is a Finnish computer festival with a history spanning thirty years, the first event having been organised in 1992 (Assembly, 2021a, 2021b). The event was originally built around the Finnish demo scene and still has a great focus on demo competitions. From 1992, Assembly has also been a LAN party event, and, throughout the years, gaming has become an increasingly central part of it. Since 2007, Assembly has been split into two separate yearly events, Assembly Summer and Assembly Winter, the latter focusing more on gaming. The Assembly events are internationally well-known and draw over 5000 visitors from around the world. In addition to the demo competitions and gaming, the events also include other programme such as music, 'geek sports', robot wars, and seminars.

For the purpose of this research, I participated in the Assembly Summer 2014 event held in Messukeskus, Helsinki (from 31 July to 3 August 2014). The event marked a historical moment for Finnish esports for two different reasons. Firstly, it hosted the Finnish national qualifiers for the yearly esports world championship tournament organised by the IESF, and the event made international headlines after originally excluding women competitors from several tournaments – as per the IESF rules (see chapter 1 Introduction). In the end, the event included six professional tournaments: *StarCraft II* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2010), *Dota 2* (Valve Corporation, 2013), *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (Valve Corporation, 2012), *Tekken Tag Tournament 2* (Bandai Namco, 2011), *Hearthstone* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2014), and *Ultra Street Fighter IV* (Capcom, 2014). Additionally, it hosted several casual tournaments (Assembly, 2014). Secondly, when the Finnish national broadcaster Yle broadcasted the final match of the *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (Valve Corporation, 2012) from the event live on channel two (Jalonen, 2014), this marked the historical moment when esports was broadcasted live for the first time in the Finnish television network.

I participated in Assembly Summer 2014 event in the role of a researcher, with a visitor ticket on three days (from 31 July to 2 August). My research goal for participating in this event, which I had not visited before, was to explore the event and its contents related to digital gaming, and the ways in which the event and its participatory roles appeared to be gendered. I was particularly interested in the event's biggest esports tournaments (*Hearthstone* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2014), *StarCraft II* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2010), *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*

(Valve Corporation, 2012), and *Dota 2* (Valve Corporation, 2013) in a separate area), and spent the majority of my time in the event watching them from the stands built for the purpose, following the game live from the giant screen, listening to the two commentators offering their insight on the current and past events, as well as possible outcomes of the match. I was especially hoping to see some women competitors participating in the tournaments, but unfortunately, while some women were listed as participants on the event site, none were playing during the times I was watching from the stands.

In addition to watching the tournaments, I spent most of my time wandering around the event area, paying attention to my surroundings. For this first 'field trip' in my study, I did not have a preconceived plan for my observations. Instead, my plan was simply to get on the spot and get a feel of the field, its happenings, and participants. Throughout my three-day visit, I was taking notes of my observations, but not in what one might describe as a systematic manner.

Insomnia is a LAN gaming event organised yearly in Pori (located in Satakunta region) on the last weekend in October from Thursday to Sunday during the local schools' autumn holiday. As another example of the longevity of the Finnish LAN gaming scene, the event has been organised yearly since 2002 – first as a small-scale local school LAN limited to thirty participants, and then gradually expanding to accommodate hundreds of visitors each year (the twentieth Insomnia event included almost 1000 computer seats in addition to the unlimited visitor tickets). The event also includes both professional and casual esports tournaments. Compared to Assembly, Insomnia is a smaller event with smaller space, less participants, and less additional programme. The event is also aimed for a slightly younger audience: they announced their target audience to be 13–20 year olds, the event is organised during the local schools' holiday time, and the event is alcohol-free (Insomnia, n.d.).

Unlike Assembly, I was already familiar with the Insomnia event, and previously participated in it through my studies and work at the Department of Digital Culture at the University of Turku which had previously been an event partner. When attending Insomnia in October 2014, I was invited to attend the event as a researcher by the organisers. I had a written research material gathering plan in which I set three goals for my participation during the event: 1. to observe the gaming event (and particularly its esports tournaments) as a gendered space, 2. to conduct interviews with women participating in the event, and 3. to test my interview questions for the future gathering of my interview material. While the event organisers had kindly spread my invitation for the women participating in the event to sign up for the research interviews beforehand, no one signed up, and instead I found my interviewees by approaching them onsite. I used the same approach a year later at Insomnia 2015. While my primary focus was to gather interview material for this study in attending these two events, I also aimed to observe the events and their

esports tournaments in particular. However, there did not seem to be much focus or a huge audience for the esports tournaments at Insomnia compared to Assembly.

The last gaming event I participated in as a researcher for this study was Gamescom, organised yearly in Cologne, Germany (figure 3). Gamescom has been organised from 2009, first in Leipzig and from 2009 in Cologne. It is the largest gaming event in the world: in 2018, Gamescom attracted 370,000 visitors and 1037 exhibitors from 56 different countries. Unlike Assembly and Insomnia, Gamescom is not a LAN gaming event, but a trade fair that is focused on game development companies and publishers promoting their newest and upcoming products through stands and press conferences. The visitors do not bring their own computers but can only play on the promotion stands – usually after extensively waiting in a queue. I visited Gamescom 2016 on three days from 17 to 19 August 2016. While the event was open to public from 18 August, I was able to get myself a limited pre-entry ticket for the 17, allowing me to access and roam around the giant exhibition area before the arrival of the visitor masses. During the three days, my aim was to see as many of the several exhibition halls as possible, and again to observe the event from the perspective of gender: who were participating and in what roles, how were the games being promoted and to whom, and so on. I recorded my observations with notes and photographs. I played many different games showcased (even though some of them were only available in German – a language I do not know very well), and even played on the Square Enix' *Final Fantasy XIV* (2010/2013) stage to battle an extreme difficulty dragon boss together with a German team (we lost). While I later decided to focus this study primarily on Finnish game culture, my participation in Gamescom provided me with additional perspective into women's game cultural participation in large international gaming events.

Figure 3. A crowd of people in the Koelnmesse hallway at Gamescom in August 2016.

My participation in these events could be loosely described as a form of participant observation (see Brennen, 2013, pp. 163–165), as I participated in them in the role of a researcher, I spent extensive periods of time in the events, observing their different aspects, I had a plan for collecting research material in the events, and I recorded my observations with written notes and photographs. I also conducted some of the research interviews in the events – 'in the field', so to speak. However, my practice of observation and note-taking was not systematic, and I did not create extensive field notes. I also did not conduct a systematic analysis on the material I produced in the field, but I used these observation materials to help me recall details of the event.

Even though I did not gather systematic observation material from the events, attending them provided me with valuable context for the study. Through my participation, I was able to explore different types of gaming events as gendered

spaces and activities, observe how games were played and promoted in these events, and how women were and were not present in them. Different events allowed me to observe a variety of things. At Assembly, I watched esports tournaments as a part of the live audience onsite, whereas in Insomnia events, as they were smaller in scale, I was able to move in the participant gaming areas, follow all the events up close, and gather interviews from the participants. Gamescom, on the other hand, allowed me to see how – and for whom – games were promoted by the companies behind them. In this study, I draw from my observations and documentations of these events as a secondary research material, using them to offer additional insight and context in the analysis of my primary research material: the interviews and the online questionnaire.

3.2 Analysis methods

3.2.1 Reflexive thematic analysis

This study is not a quantitative one, and its aim is not to produce statistically representative information describing Finnish women's gaming. The study is qualitative, and it aims to produce in-depth knowledge of Finnish women's gaming and other game cultural practices and their social and cultural contexts. The thematic interviews and online questionnaire I have used to collect the primary research material are common methods for collecting research material in qualitative research. As the analysis method for this empirical research material, I have chosen to use reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2022). I applied this method for analysing all the responses to open-ended questions within the material. Additionally, some of the material is reported in a numerical form (e.g., time spent on gaming), or results from predetermined options given to the participants (e.g., genres of games played), and I will report those results accordingly.

Thematic analysis is a widely utilised analysis method in qualitative research, and there exist many different methodological approaches to it. In this study, I will utilise *reflexive thematic analysis* specifically, which is a qualitative analysis method developed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (Ibid.). Reflexive thematic analysis is quite flexible as a method because it can be used with many different types of research material, and it is not tied to any specific theoretical or epistemological approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). However, when applying the method in an individual study, it is important to identify the research paradigm, including the ontological and epistemological perspectives framing the selected methodological approach (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2022). As I have described in chapter 2 Theoretical framework, this study is based in the field of game culture studies. The study is qualitative, and its research approach draws from cultural studies as well as feminist

game studies and media studies, and its theoretical framework from theorists representing different aspects of social constructivism and feminist theory. Following Donna Haraway (1988), my epistemological approach in this study is based on the idea of academic research as a process of producing situated, embodied knowledge (as I will discuss in more detail in section 3.3 of this chapter). All these framings play a part in its methodology, and, as a result, in how I apply reflexive thematic analysis in this study. As reflexive thematic analysis can be applied in different ways depending on the study (see Braun & Clarke, 2022), I will next describe how I have processed the research material and applied reflexive thematic analysis here.

To prepare the primary research materials (interviews and the online questionnaire responses) for the analysis, after selecting which parts of the material I would be using in my analysis,[6] I first made notes of all the interviews, one interview question at a time, and transcribed the relevant parts of the interviews. The questionnaire responses were already in a written form, divided based on the questions. Next, I placed all the research material, both from the interviews and the online questionnaire, related to specific questions asked from the participants into three sections based on which of the three sub research questions it concerned: 1. gaming practices, 2. game cultural participation, and 3. the idea and identity of a gamer. Within these three main sections, I divided the material into smaller subsections, usually consisting of the material related to one or two of the questions asked of the participants in the interviews and the questionnaire. Then, I performed an initial reading on the material, one question at a time, making notes of the materials related to each question.

During this initial reading, I began developing the codes to be used in the analysis, and I continued (re)forming the codes iteratively as I continued the close reading of the material (Ibid.). In practice, I created a text processing document for each separate question asked of the participants (separately for the interview materials and the questionnaire materials), including each individual response to the question, and colour coded different sections of the responses based on the codes I was forming in the process (figure 4). I created separate coding for each subset of the research material (i.e., material related to a specific topic).

[6] Due to the large amount of interview and questionnaire material, I was not able to use it all, and had to exclude certain parts of the material (i.e., certain interview and questionnaire questions) from the analysis. This selection was based on the relevance of the material in terms of the research questions.

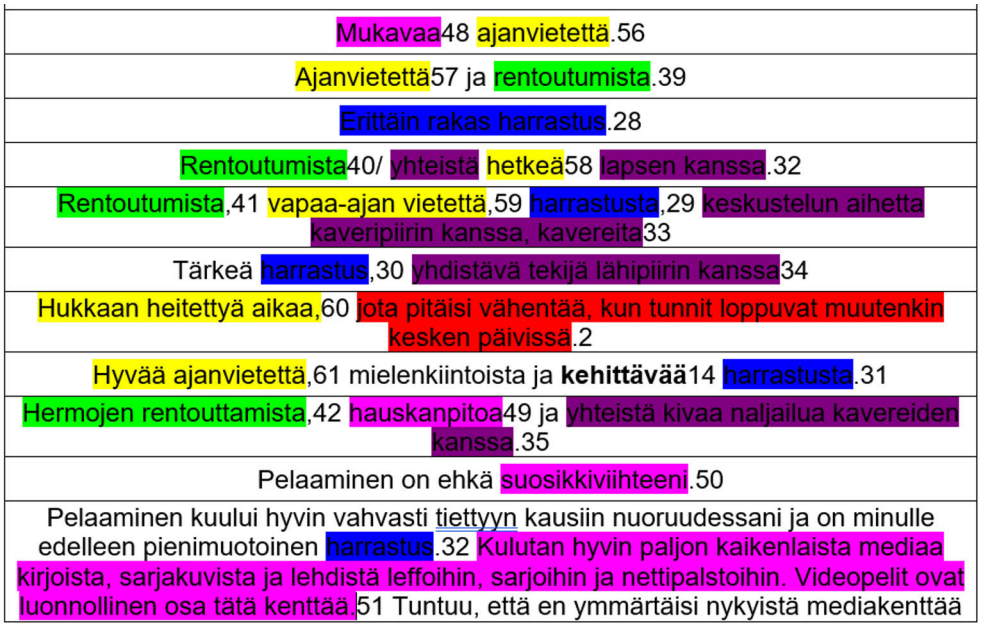

Figure 4. Screen capture of the thematic coding of the research material.

I also counted how often each code appeared in the material (figure 4). It is important to note here, however, that the frequency of the codes' appearances does not signify their validity in terms of the research question or theme formation. According to Braun and Clarke, in reflexive thematic analysis, 'a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set' (2006, p. 82). In other words, a theme is not necessarily something that comes up in the material most often – it is not quantifiably defined – but instead something that the researcher finds capturing something important in relation to the research question (Ibid.). This is why the researcher's reflexive, active, role is considered a central part of this analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2022).

After coding the research materials, I began developing the themes. In the same way than code development, theme development, too, is an iterative process in reflexive thematic analysis, beginning with clustering the codes into initial themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The process of forming the analysis themes was partly inductive, partly deductive. It was inductive in the sense that I began forming the themes based on the coding I created while close reading the research material, as described above. In other words, the themes were created as a result of the analysis, not beforehand as its starting point. It is important to note, however, that my reading of the material, and, consequently, the forming of the themes was informed by the research questions, the earlier research on the topic, the secondary research materials

(i.e., my observations in the gaming events and the media materials I have used in contextualising the analysis), and my personal experiences as a woman gamer (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As such, the final themes, as presented in the analysis, were formed in the reflexive process of my analysis of the research materials in dialogue with earlier research and my own researcher position.

As an analysis method, reflexive thematic analysis is used to identify, analyse, and report thematic patterns within data, organising the data to create rich and nuanced descriptions of its content in relation to the research question (Ibid.). The researcher aims to explore and describe how the analysis themes are present in the material. Furthermore, the aim of the analysis is to describe the different aspects of the material within the themes, not only by describing what explicitly appears in the data but also the implied meanings found through contextualisation. As such, the themes presented in the analysis are not the starting points but the outcomes of the researcher's analytical work, 'creative and interpretive *stories* about the data, produced at the intersection of the researcher's theoretical assumptions, their analytic resources and skill, and the data themselves' (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594). The successful application of this method requires an active, reflexive role from the researcher throughout the analysis process. As researcher's reflexivity is an integral part of reflexive thematic analysis (see also Braun & Clarke, 2022), I have aimed to acknowledge, interrogate, and openly describe my own positions in this research process, both as a part of this methodology chapter (see section 3.3 Studying women players as a woman player) and throughout this work.

In terms of the research questions and goals of this study, the aim of the analysis process was to identify the most significant ways the participants described certain aspects of gaming practices, game cultural participation, and constructing the idea and identity of a gamer, from their perspective as women players. For this reason, it would not have been sufficient to simply find the most common themes within the responses and rate their significance based on their frequency within the material. Instead, I sought to closely examine nuances within responses to identify the implied meanings and latent themes that could be read between the lines. The resulting analysis, as presented in chapters 4–6, will describe the most central themes I have identified in relation to my research questions regarding women's gaming practices, game cultural participation, and constructing the idea and identity of a gamer, and how these themes were present in the research material.

3.2.2 Narrative literature reviews in reflexive TA

Contextualising the analysis with existing research through literature reviews is a central part of reflexive thematic analysis. In reflexive thematic analysis, the literature review's function is to support the development of an argument rather than

to identify gaps in earlier research, to ‘set the scene and provide a theoretically-informed and located rationale’ for the research (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 120). For this purpose, in addition to presenting the research history on gender and games and the central theoretical concepts of the study in chapter 2 Theoretical framework, I will also begin all the analysis chapters, each focusing on a different sub research question, with a review of earlier research findings and central theoretical perspectives related to the sub research question at hand.

The method I have applied for conducting these reviews is known as descriptive or narrative literature review (Salminen, 2011). Ari Salminen depicts descriptive forms of literature review as general reviews without specific, restrictive rules regarding the material selection (Ibid., p. 6). According to Salminen, narrative literature review is a form of descriptive literature review, aiming to either produce a wide-ranging description of its topic, or to describe its history and development, but it is not a systematic analysis process aiming to answer a research question in a comprehensive manner (Ibid., pp. 6–7). In this study, I utilise narrative literature review in this manner to construct the theoretical background and context for the empirical analysis.

In each of the upcoming analysis chapters (4–6), I will first present a narrative literature review summarising the central theoretical perspectives that I have identified from the previous research regarding the chapter’s sub research question. Then, I will present the central themes related to the sub research question that I have formed in the reflexive thematic analysis on the empirical research material (interviews and online questionnaire responses), reflecting on them against the earlier research on the topic – both within and beyond the initial narrative literature review. With this approach, my aim is to create a dialogue and synthesis between the empirical and theoretical analysis to answer the research questions from both perspectives (table 3).

Table 3. Theoretical (based on the narrative literature reviews) and empirical (based on the reflexive thematic analysis on the interview and questionnaire materials) perspectives examined to answer each sub research question.

Chapter & research question	Theoretical	Empirical
Chapter 4. Women's gaming practices RQ1: What are women players' gaming practices like?	Gender differences in player statistics (particularly in Finland): 1. Gaming frequency 2. Gaming platforms and game genres 4. Social gaming habits and attitudes towards gaming	Participants' gaming practices: 1. Gaming frequency 2. Game and genre preferences 3. Gaming platforms 4. Social play
Chapter 5. Women players' game cultural participation RQ2: How does gender affect women players' game cultural participation?	Gender and women's game cultural participation: 1. Barriers to entrance into game culture 2. Women players' invisibility and gender performances 3. Gendered gaming expertise	Participants' game cultural participation: 1. Entering game culture 2. Different ways to participate in game culture - Participating in gaming event - Watching (but not participatin in) esports - Consuming and producing game media 3. Effects of gender in women' gaming
Chapter 6. Constructing the idea and identity of a gamer RQ3: How do women players construct the idea and identity of a gamer?	Gamer as a game cultural identity: 1. Constructing gamer identity individually and socially 2. Rejecting or abandoning gamer identity	Participants' ideas and identities of a gamer: 1. Who is a gamer - A gamer, a player, or a game hobbyist - Hardcore or casual 2. Not identifying as gamers 3. Meaning of gaming beyond the gamer identity

Due to this approach, the contributions of this study are not only empirical but also theoretical. I am approaching the primary research question of the study, 'How can women's game cultural agency be understood beyond the gamer identity?', not only by analysing the empirical research material collected from women players, but also by aiming to identify the central theoretical perspectives and findings from earlier research regarding women's gaming. Choosing reflexive thematic analysis as the primary analysis method for the study allows me to conduct and present the analysis as a dialogue between the empirical materials and existing research, while also

emphasising my own active role in this process – not only as a researcher but also as a woman player studying women players.

3.3 Studying women players as a woman player

From a cultural studies and feminist research perspective it is epistemologically and ethically important for the researcher to reflect on her own position(s) in relation to the research topic (Kouri, 2015, p. 32; Liljeström, 2004, pp. 11, 15). In this final section of the methodology chapter, I will reflect on my experiences as a researcher and a woman gamer studying gender and game culture, specifically in conducting research interviews other women who play digital games (some of whom identify as gamers or gamer women).[7] In this methodological reflection, I focus on my own role(s) as a researcher, gamer, and woman, and their contribution to the production of my research material from epistemological and research ethical perspectives. I will particularly focus on the perspectives of producing embodied, situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988) and the significance of game cultural capital (see chapter 2 Theoretical framework) in this process.

3.3.1 Producing situated, embodied knowledge

The concept of situated knowledge was first presented by Donna Haraway (1988) in the context of 'academic and activist feminist inquiry' and its response to the scientific question of 'objectivity'. In her essay 'Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective', Haraway describes 'a doctrine of embodied objectivity that accommodates paradoxical and critical feminist science projects', claiming that 'feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledges' (Ibid., p. 581). Haraway argues that 'only embodied perspectives within limited locations constitute sustained and rational inquiry' (Chia et al., 2018), as 'feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see' (Haraway, 1988, p. 583).

From the perspective of my research, this approach means that it is the researcher's duty to acknowledge her own position(s) in relation to the topic of study as well as in relation to potential study participants. It also signifies blurring the boundaries between the 'subjects' and 'objects' of the study – while at the same time

[7] The section is partly based on a panel presentation entitled 'Situating the body of the researcher: Cultural capital, affect, and vulnerability in qualitative approaches to play' (Chia et al., 2018) presented at the DiGRA Nordic 2018 conference (November 28–30, University of Bergen, Norway).

being keenly aware how different positions cannot be fully transcended. For Haraway, this is the imperative condition for academic inquiry when producing knowledge in the context of research. It can be considered, not only as a question of epistemology, but from the perspective of research ethics as well: it is a question of the researcher's – active, situated, and embodied – role in the knowledge production process and in relation to the study participants. The ethical considerations are related to the researcher's and participants' positions of power and vulnerability, the (verbal, written, and embodied) communication between the researcher and the participants, and the interpretations and conclusions made from a specific, situated, and embodied position.

For the purpose of this research, embodied research refers to research in which the researcher's body is not considered irrelevant or left transparent, but instead where the research process itself is considered an embodied practice (Spatz, 2017). I approach my interviews as an embodied process where the researcher's positionality vis-a-vis participants is a central defining factor. This is a process in which the knowledge regarding individual experiences is produced in dialogue between interviewer and interviewee. It is a process where the researcher's task involves, as Annamaria Marttila beautifully describes it, 'no less than throwing oneself in and surrendering oneself in their research as an individual, emotional, and embodied person' who navigates between various roles and positions (2018, pp. 363–365, 388).

Unlike researchers such as Ben Spatz (2017), who has written about the methodology of embodied research in the context of repeatable physical practice and its structure, I do not emphasise the obvious embodied nature of the research subject (such as gaming as an embodied activity) or the method (such as participatory play). Even though my focus is on the experiences related to – and not the mere act of – gaming itself, I believe that looking at how research as an embodied practice is understood in more performance-focused research can offer valuable insight into how researchers working on different types of topics may utilise the concept to deepen their methodological perspective.

A researcher is always an active participant in their research material production, and this is particularly true in the case of methods involving presence in the field and interaction with study participants. In my interviews with women who play digital games, I was an active participant not only in the role of a researcher, but also as a woman gamer – at times, the interviewees may also have considered me as a teacher, as I was a member of the teaching staff at the university that some interviewees attended, although I was not involved with their teaching during the time of the interviews. I actively selected and performed some of these positions – mainly the roles of a researcher and a gamer – and I was not actively performing others, but they were nevertheless present. Depending on the interview and the topic of discussion,

certain parts of my role were emphasised more than the others, as I found myself moving between them. As Haraway puts it, subjectivity is multidimensional – a fact that does not only apply to the researcher, but the participants as well (1988, p. 586).

In the interviews, I was physically present as a researcher, a gamer, and a woman, performing all these roles, positions, and identities with varying emphasis, depending on the situation. My body played a significant role in this situation: the way I positioned myself in relation to the space and the interviewee(s), the eye contact (or the lack of it) with them, the way I moved my body (particularly my hands) while I talk, my facial expressions, my voice and its various tones, and so on. While listening, I was expressing interest, empathy, amusement, surprise, and many other emotions. Surprisingly often, I found myself laughing with the interviewees. This resonance was enhanced by my own game cultural capital and gamer habitus (see chapter 2 Theoretical framework), communicated through these embodied expressions of 'correct' word choices and reactions to interviewees' responses. This embodied presence and the nonverbal resonance between bodies is a significant part of research material production involving human interaction.

3.3.2 Positions of power and vulnerability

Even though women are often in a marginalised position in gaming, as players, game developers – even game researchers (Vossen, 2018; Humphreys, 2019; Phillips, 2020) – I was undoubtedly in a position of power in these interviews. From within this position, my aim was also to create a space where the women I interviewed could assume a position of power in taking over the narrative of their own gaming practices, gaming histories, and gamer identities, and performing the role of a person whose gaming actually matters in game culture. At the same time, I wanted to offer them a safe space for expressions of vulnerability. In this space, the women shared with me their experiences of gender-based discrimination from gamer men who had belittled their skill, knowledge, and even enthusiasm about gaming. Some of the women told me they had not really discussed their play practices with anyone before, or that they did not have other women with whom they could play or talk about games. Being present in that situation – not only as a researcher, but also as a woman gamer – allowed interviewees to share these experiences more freely.

> **R:** Have any of the negative comments or attitudes [related to your gender] you have faced ever made you change your behaviour while gaming or streaming?
>
> **I20:** Well, they have made me quit a few times. Not permanently, but, like, I have lost my nerves, shut the stream, shut the game, not talking to anyone, and

> had, like, this moment of despair, that this won't work, no one will take me seriously, like that.

I consider the quote above as one example of an interviewee accepting this position of vulnerability, first describing the harassment she had received as a streamer and member in a women's competitive gaming group, then telling me how it had made her feel: the feeling of despair and the fear of not being taken seriously.

However, what I find particularly important in these exchanges of knowledge is, as I mentioned earlier, the position of power and expertise taken as women talking about gaming. While Haraway argues that 'all knowledge is a condensed node in an agonistic power field' (1988, p. 577), it is perhaps particularly true in the context of women taking over game (cultural) expertise against the field of gaming which has been described as a field covered by hegemonic geek masculinity (Taylor, 2012; Witkowski, 2018) and toxic to women (Consalvo, 2012).

3.3.3 Exchanging game cultural capital

During the interviews, I utilised my own game cultural capital (see chapter 2 Theoretical framework) – gained primarily from my personal experiences as a gamer – to connect with interviewees. I was thus moving from my role as a researcher to the role of a gamer, and from a position of power to a more vulnerable shared position. One of the ways in which my game cultural capital became embodied – a gamer habitus – is the way I was able to use 'correct' vocabulary and to react in a 'correct' way to what the interviewee was saying. For example, as most of the interviewees were fairly close to my age and active players, we often shared similar memories and experiences of certain games and gaming platforms from our past or present. My game cultural capital – in this case my personal experiences of playing specific games on specific platforms – allowed me to present more detailed questions and build a stronger connection to the interviewees by sharing my own experiences with them in return.

> **I20:** That's one of the reasons why I don't really want to invest much in [a team-based shooter game] right now, even if I would be very successful, I don't see it having much of a future, really…
>
> **R:** [While] Overwatch is huge…
>
> **I20:** Yeah, it's like, crazy!

R: Yeah, I recently checked that the World Cup final match had been watched over 8 million times, so it's a bit… [laughing]

I20: Yeah, I was watching it too! [smiling]

The above discussion is one example of what could be described as a game cultural capital exchange during the interviews. In this exchange, the interviewee was explaining to me why she was considering giving up on a game because she was interested in advancing as a competitive gamer and felt like the game did not have much to offer to her in that sense. In this situation, I demonstrated my own game cultural capital by mentioning how another game that she had become recently interested had a very big competitive scene, even quoting numbers of the game's world cup viewers. Then the interviewee mentioned having watched the world cup too. What was happening in this situation was an exchange of game cultural capital between us: both of us demonstrating our belonging to this particular game cultural scene and our knowledge and experience related to it. This exchange was, again, emphasised by our embodied presence and things like the tones of voice we were using, our smiles, and our laughter. All of this also affected the research material that was formed in this embodied process.

3.3.4 Research ethical considerations

Following Haraway (1988), if we wish to produce valuable knowledge in our research, we need to be aware where that knowledge is coming from. While all Finnish academic researchers are obliged to follow the Finnish law as well as guidelines defined in the *Responsible conduct of research and procedures for handling allegations of misconduct in Finland* by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (2012), there is always a need for more thorough considerations regarding each individual research project, its materials, and applied methods. Although solved on individual basis, there are certain general questions present in all studies, such as the questions of the reliability and validity of the research. Situated and embodied knowledge is a useful epistemological approach to carefully reflect on these questions. Acknowledging one's embodied researcher positionality and one's own game cultural capital is vital to fully understanding one's role in the research process, particularly in the case where it requires personal presence and communication 'in the field'. At the same time, it is important not to let them direct the process in ways that could lead to misreadings and false assumptions. In the research interviews I conducted for this study, I needed to remind myself that what was meaningful or relevant to me may not be a shared experience by my interviewees. I could not assume that my interviewees would identify as gamers (as

most of them, in fact, did not), enjoy (or not enjoy) playing specific types of games, or find any particular meaning in their own gaming – let alone in being a woman who plays games (see also Shaw 2014, pp. 42–44).

Studying women players as a research topic requires these kinds of considerations, as women are, at the same time, historically and contemporarily rendered invisible and essentialised as representatives of their gender in game culture and its research (see chapter 1.2 Why study women players?). T.L. Taylor points out how (2008, p. 54):

> the sidelining of women gamers in the general culture has, unfortunately, been mirrored far too often within industry and research communities. The population of women that does play games is frequently seen as an anomaly rather than taken as a prime informant for understanding how play works.

Furthermore, Taylor formulates this issue as a methodological as well as research ethical question, asking (Ibid., p. 52):

> how can we do research and write on the subject [of women and games] in ways that do not a priori essentialize or assume difference through the very construction of our projects, the formulation of our questions, the performance of our ethnographies and interviews? And what does research into gender and computer games look like if *from the outset* it reflectively and progressively confronts and deals with the *always present* production and performance of gender?'

Taylor's questions describe my guidelines when I developed the methodological and epistemological frameworks of this study. As I have described in this chapter, my aim is to study gaming practices, game cultural participation, and construction of a gamer identity, using Finnish women players as the primary informants on these topics. While my goal is to understand the structures of inclusion and exclusion within game culture through the women players' experiences, acknowledging their marginalised position within hegemonic game culture, my aim is not to participate in their further marginalisation, but rather to try to deconstruct the structures leading to it through my research.

4 Women's gaming practices

In this chapter, I will tackle my first sub research question: What are women players' gaming practices like? I will begin the chapter by examining how women's and girls' gaming has been described in various Finnish and international player statistics, player studies, and market studies, particularly in terms of gender differences in gaming practices when compared to men and boys. Then, based on the interviews and the online questionnaire material I have collected, I will examine the gaming practices of the Finnish women participating in this study: what games do they play and on which platforms, how much time they spend on gaming, and what kinds of social forms their gaming takes. I will also compare these findings to the Finnish and international player statistics to place them within a wider national, international, and game cultural context.

4.1 Women's gaming and gender differences in player statistics from Finland and abroad

4.1.1 Player statistics from Finland, Europe, and the United States

There are several player studies and market statistics published on the popularity of digital gaming. This section examines how women's gaming and gender differences in gaming are presented in selected player statistics, particularly in Finland but also in international contexts.

The Finnish Player Barometer (Kinnunen et al., 2018) is a survey study about the popularity of playing games (digital and analogue alike) in Finland. It is a collaboration study created by game scholars in the universities of Tampere, Jyväskylä, and Turku, and it has been carried out seven times to date. In this dissertation, I will refer to the sixth *Player Barometer* study (2018) since its data has been collected closest to my own online questionnaire material, and therefore allows me to make close comparisons between the statistically representative findings of the gaming of all Finns, Finnish women, and Finnish men, and the Finnish women participating in my research. *The Player Barometer* study is 'designed to produce

comprehensive and topical information about various forms of game playing, and more long-term data about the directions these activities are evolving into' (Ibid., p. 9). The data gathered for *The Finnish Player Barometer 2018* was collected from a nationally representative random sample of 946 respondents, aged 10–75 years, and living in the Mainland Finland (Ibid.).

Other statistically representative studies on gaming in Finland are *The Children's Media Barometer 2012* (Suoninen, 2013) and *A Grip on Media: A Study of Children's and Young People's Leisure Activities in 2016, with an Emphasis on Media and Physical Activities* (Merikivi et al., 2016), both conducted by the Finnish Youth Research Network. As their titles suggest, both studies explore Finnish children's and young people's media use, including digital gaming. *The Children's Media Barometer* seeks to analyse children's and prepubescents' (aged 10–12) media relations on a national level and to produce information for profiling and developing media education. The data for *The Children's Media Barometer 2012* was collected from a representative sample of 988 Finnish speaking students, studying in 4th and 6th grades in 29 different schools in different sectors of Mainland Finland (Suoninen, 2013). For *The Study of Children's and Young People's Leisure Activities in 2016*, the data was collected with a total of 1205 interviews with 7–29 years-old Finns living in Mainland Finland, chosen for the study based on a random sample provided by the Population Register Centre of Finland (Merikivi et al., 2016).

For a more international perspective on digital gaming practices, I will also inspect two market studies from the United States and one from Europe. The two market studies concerning the United States are *The 2018 Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry*, published by the Entertainment Software Association [ESA] (2018) and the *Gaming and Gamers* report published by the Pew Research Center (Duggan, 2015). *The Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry* is an annual commercial study on the gaming habits, frequency, and attitudes in the United States, gathering data from over 4000 households in 2018 (ESA, 2018). *Gaming and Gamers* is a study conducted by the Pew Research Center based on survey data from a nationally representative sample of 2001 adults living in the U.S. and the District of Columbia (Duggan, 2015). *Gaming and Gamers* study examines the frequency of gaming in the United States, but also contains questions related to the gamer identity and attitudes towards gaming (Ibid.).

Finally, the *Videogames in Europe: 2012 Consumer Study* is a market study published by the Interactive Software Federation of Europe [ISFE] (2012). The study 'is designed to provide a better understanding of the societal context in which games are being played today in 16 European countries', providing 'detailed consumer statistics about gaming habits, broader media interests, online gameplay, gaming in a family context and the PEGI age rating system' (Ibid.). The data is gathered with

a combination of online self-completion survey and offline interviews (around 15,000 total) from targeted respondents aged 16–64, including both videogame players and non-players from sixteen countries: Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland (Ibid.).

The different purposes and motivations behind these different player statistics are important to note here: some are conducted as academic research (*The Finnish Player Barometer*, *The Children's Media Barometer*, and *The Study of Children's and Young People's Leisure Activities*), others for the industry stakeholders (*Videogames in Europe: 2012 Consumer Study*, *The 2018 Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry*), and one by a private research centre (*Gaming and Gamers* report). They are produced for different purposes and their results are presented with different audiences in mind, which are distinction that must be taken into consideration when interpreting and comparing their results. However, for the purposes of this study, the selected player studies and statistics provide an overview of the frequency of digital gaming in Finland, Europe, and the United States, as well as of some statistical gender differences in gaming between women and men.

4.1.2 Gender differences in player statistics

4.1.2.1 Gaming frequency

Finns are very active players of both digital and non-digital forms of games. According to *The Finnish Player Barometer 2018*, 97.8% of Finns play at least occasionally, when all different digital and non-digital forms of gameplay are taken into consideration, and 76.1% of Finns play digital games at least occasionally (Kinnunen et al., 2018, p. 24). Most of the Finnish population play games at least once a month, either playing digital games (60.5%) or all forms of games (88.1%) (Ibid.). *The Player Barometer* indicates that young and middle-aged Finns play more actively and diversely than older age groups. The average age of all Finnish game players is 42 years and for digital game players 38 years (Ibid., p. 3). *The Study of Children's and Young People's Leisure Activities* found that 96% of 7–9-years-old Finnish children play digital games (Merikivi et al., 2016), and according to *The Children's Media Barometer 2012*, more than half of Finnish 10–12-year-old (4th and 6th graders) play digital games almost every day, and 78% play them at least once a week (Suoninen, 2013, pp. 37–38).

Finnish men and boys are a slightly more active players than women and girls. However, when all different forms of play as well as occasional and casual play are taken into consideration, *The Player Barometer* found no significant differences between genders in the level of gaming activity (Kinnunen et al., 2018, pp. 7–8).

Most Finnish women (62.7%) and Finnish men (70.6%) play digital entertainment games at least occasionally, while women (38%) and men (55.4%) reported to actively game (i.e., gaming at least once a month) slightly less (Ibid., p. 77).

However, the digital gaming of Finnish children and youth seem to present a much more significant difference between girls' and boys' gaming frequencies, especially during adolescence. In *The Children's Media Barometer* study on Finnish children aged 10–12 years, 67% of girls and 90% of boys played at least once a week, 42% of girls and 33% of boys played almost every day, and 17% of girls and 34% of boys played daily (Suoninen, 2013, pp. 37–38). According to *The Study of Children's and Young People's Leisure Activities*, Finnish girls and boys aged 7–9 years played equally, but by the time they finished primary school (after 6th grade, when they are 12–13 years old), boys were playing more than girls (Merikivi et al., 2016). The gender difference in playing frequency was at its largest amongst adolescents aged 16–17 years: only 12% of teenage girls played digital games, compared to 53% of teenage boys (Merikivi et al., 2016).

Considering international player studies, according to the *Videogames in Europe: 2012 Consumer Study*, 43% of European women and 54% of European men play digital games (ISFE, 2012, p. 8). In the United States*, The 2018 Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry* suggests that 45% of the gamers in the United States are women and that adult women (aged 18 and older) 'represent a greater portion of the video game-playing population (33%) than boys under 18 (17%)' (ESA, 2018). According to the *Gaming and Gamers* report published by the Pew Research Center, 48% of the adult women and 50% of the adult men in the United States play digital games (Duggan, 2015).

Results from these selected studies are not fully commensurate, as they are conducted in different years using different methods, and have different target demographics. However, based on their combined findings, digital gaming is altogether quite popular amongst all age groups in Finland as well as in Europe and the United States. Together, these studies suggest that younger age groups are more active digital gamers than older ones, and that there do not seem to be significant gender differences in digital gaming frequency – although in general, men and boys seem to play slightly more actively than women and girls (table 4).

Table 4. Frequency of digital gaming and its gender differences in selected studies from Finland, Europe, and the United States.

Study	Target group	Digital gamers	Women and girls	Men and boys
The Finnish Player Barometer 2018 (Kinnunen et al., 2018)	Finns 10–75 years old, N = 946	66.8%	62.7%	70.6%
Videogames in Europe: 2012 Consumer Study (ISFE, 2012)	Europeans 16–64 years old, N = 15142	48%	43%	54%
Gaming and Gamers (Duggan, 2015)	U.S. adults, N = 2001	49%	48%	50%

Studies on Finns' playing digital games indicate that gender differences seem to diverge for active gaming – playing games at least once a month (Kinnunen et al., 2018). Divergences seem to also appear amongst certain age groups, particularly amongst 16–17-year-olds (Merikivi et al., 2016). Some other gender differences in gaming practices can likewise be noticed when surveying preferred gaming platforms and genres, social gaming habits, and attitudes towards gaming. In the following section, I will explore these differences more closely, focusing on the studies on Finnish players.

4.1.2.2 Gaming platforms and game genres

While Finnish preadolescent boys most often play on a gaming console, girls of the same age most often use computer and mobile phone as their preferred gaming platform (Suoninen, 2013, p. 51). Amongst various other factors, what devices the children have at their disposal and what kinds of limitations affect their uses shape the affordances and access to certain platforms over others. According to *The Children's Media Barometer*, Finnish boys aged 10–12 have significantly greater access to media devices for personal use than Finnish girls of the same age (Ibid., pp. 18–20). In the study, 95% of boys and 85% of girls had access to a gaming console at home (Ibid.). While 57% of boys had a gaming console in their personal use, the corresponding number for girls was 42% (Ibid.). According to interviews for the barometer, even when a girl had her own gaming console, it was often an old model, already abandoned by her older brother (Ibid.).

Furthermore, according to *The Study of Children's and Young People's Leisure Activities*, 83% of Finnish boys aged 7–14 have a gaming console in their use,

compared to only 52% of the girls of the same age (Merikivi et al., 2016). Even though the difference is statistically significant for the age group of 7–10-year-olds, the researchers note that it is particularly large amongst 10–14-year-olds: only 40% of the girls of that age have a gaming console in their use, while 82% of the boys do (Ibid.). These numbers combined with previous research suggest that technological and especially gaming devices are bought for, and their use is controlled by, boys more often than girls (e.g., Nieminen-Sundell, 2003). This practice significantly limits girls' access to gaming at home on various levels (I will discuss gendered access to gaming in more detail in chapter 5 Women players' game cultural participation).

According to *The Finnish Player Barometer*, mobile devices are the most popular gaming platform amongst Finns, and there are no significant differences in their use between genders (Kinnunen et al., 2018, p. 75). There are some differences in the use of other gaming devices, though, particularly in the use of what could be called more traditional gaming devices: 37.3% of Finnish women and 59.4% of Finnish men play on a computer, and 34.1% of Finnish women and 49.7% of Finnish men play on a gaming console (Ibid., p. 75).

In addition to playing on different platforms, Finnish girls and boys also play different types of games, and boys tend to play games from a larger variety of genres than girls (Suoninen, 2013, p. 42). In *The Children's Media Barometer*, the most popular game genre amongst 10–12-year-old Finns was action games, but only 28% of girls admitted to playing them regularly (Ibid., p. 43). It is also highly possible that the real number of girls playing action games is even lower than that, as *Angry Birds* (Rovio Entertainment, 2009) was mistakenly classified as an action game in the study, and the game most often referred in this genre by the girls. In contrast, 62% of boys announced playing action games regularly, and mentioned several different action game titles in their responses (Suoninen, 2013, p. 43). In addition to action games, Finnish boys aged 10–12 preferred sport games (43% of boys, 8% of girls), driving and flying games (40% of boys, 5% of girls), as well as adventure and role-playing games (31% of boys, 13% of girls). Meanwhile, Finnish girls of the same age prefer platform games (35% girls, 35% of boys), social games (28% of girls, 9% of boys), and simulation games (28% of girls, 11% of boys) (Ibid., p. 43). One of the most traditional forms of digital games, namely the platform genre, was the only equally popular genre for both girls and boys in the study. Other than platform games, girls seemed to deter from the genres traditionally considered masculine, such as action, sports, and vehicle games.

Looking at the genres played by Finns of all ages, men and boys are generally more active players of almost all genres (Kinnunen et al., 2018, p. 38). Women and girls are only more active in playing music and social games (23%) than men (16.9%) (Ibid., p. 80). Finnish women and girls have simulation games as well as

music and social games on their list of five most preferred genres. Meanwhile, men and boys' lists contain shooting games and strategy games (Ibid., p. 37). Puzzle games, adventure games, and action games have made it to both lists (Ibid., p. 37). However, these studies suggest that the aforementioned differences in gaming frequency still exist between genders.

The gendered differences in preferred game genres are likely tied to the differences in gaming platforms: certain genres are more often available for certain platforms than others. Secondly, they are also arguably tied to the gendered socio-cultural expectations about what kind of games, and entertainment in general, women and men – and girls and boys especially – are 'supposed to' be interested in. Thirdly, the social nature of gaming influences gaming preferences: especially young girls and boys tend to play and prefer similar types of games to their friends, and their friends tend to be of the same gender. All these various factors shape an individual's opportunities and affordances to become interested in certain types of games – or gaming in general – in the first place. Because of our current social and cultural environment, young boys tend to access more of these opportunities than young girls. For the same reasons, girls and women often need a boy or a man to open a proverbial door for them into game culture (Yee, 2008).

4.1.2.3 Social gaming habits and attitudes towards gaming

In many ways, digital gaming is very social by its nature. Games are often played together with others, either online or gathering in a shared offline space. In addition to shared gaming experiences, a plethora of social activities related to games can occur. For instance, discussing games with friends, taking part in gaming communities, as well as engaging in modding activities and gaming events, just to name a few. Even when games are played alone, gaming experiences can be shared with others in various physical and virtual environments (Mäyrä et al., 2017).

Social aspects of gaming tend to emerge in slightly different forms according to gender. Finnish girls aged 10–12 play slightly more often in the company of others than boys of the same age: 51% of girls (and 44% of boys) reported to most often play in a shared location with their friends, and 34% of girls (21% of boys) most often played in a shared location with their siblings in *The Children's Media Barometer* (Suoninen, 2013). On the other hand, only 11% of girls (24% of boys) played most often with a Finnish online community, and as little as 3% of girls (18% of boys) played with an international online community. Nevertheless, 30% of girls (34% of boys) replied that they play most often online if they were already familiar with their co-players (Ibid.).

These numbers show that girls play in the company of people they already know significantly more often than boys. At the same time, girls also play significantly less

often than boys in the company of strangers in both national and international online communities. Even though both girls (41%) and boys (48%) preferred playing games together with their friends in a shared location, the majority of both girls (76%) and boys (72%) played most often alone (Ibid., pp. 39–40). Compared to those of boys', girls' gaming is more strongly tied to their physical location and familiar social environment. Both can be enabling as well as limiting factors to girls' access to gaming.

The Finnish Player Barometer (Kinnunen et al., 2018) does not include data on the social gaming habits of Finns. However, compared against data on social gaming practices from the United States, 42% of gamers play with their friends, 19% with their family members, 17% with their parents, and 16% with their partners (ESA, 2018, p. 7). Furthermore, 56% of the most frequent U.S. gamers play multiplayer games at least once a week, spend an average of seven hours per week playing with others online, and an average of six hours per week playing with others in person (Ibid.).

Attitudes towards gaming seem to be the most significant difference between Finnish girls and boys. *The Children's Media Barometer* reports that it was easy to find boys who felt enthusiastic about gaming during interviews, and almost all the boys in the study were happy to talk about gaming, while no girls admitted to being particularly interested (Suoninen, 2013, pp. 49–50). The occasional nature of girls' gaming was emphasised in the interviews: girls' gaming took place simultaneously with or in between other activities, and did not seem to be very important to them (Ibid., pp. 49–50). During interviews, some girls reported to only play games if they were bored, and mostly focused on chatting with friends rather than the actual gameplay (Ibid., p. 50). Even though girls' play seemed more focused on social interaction with friends, boys' gaming remains centred on sociality: boys played more often with others, discussed games with others, and belonged to gaming guilds (Ibid., pp. 55–56). In other words, boys were stronger participants in gaming communities and game culture, than the girls. Adolescences acknowledged the differences in girls' and boys' attitudes towards gaming and made separations between games for 'girls' and 'boys', often valuing the latter more highly than the former (Ibid., pp. 48, 54). These findings suggest that teenagers acknowledge the gendered nature of game culture and can, at once, actively enforce it.

Beginning this chapter, I explored the gender differences found in Finnish player studies based on nationally representative samples of 7–75-year-old Finns, contextualised with key European and U.S. international player studies. Based on these selected studies, gendered differences in gaming could be found in the areas of gaming frequency, gaming platforms, and preferred genres, as well as social gaming habits and attitudes towards gaming. These types of differences are not apparent when only looking at the raw numbers of women and men playing without going deeper into what they play, how often, with whom, and why. Exposing and examining these differences is important because they are the manifestations of the

gendered nature of game culture, tightly linked to the question of game cultural participation and the gendered inclusiveness and exclusiveness of game culture.

In order to develop a full understanding of the gendered nature of game culture, however, it is not sufficient to only inspect statistical gender differences. By emphasising women's and girls' 'lesser' participation – compared to men and boys – these types of statistics risk obscuring the women and girls who are actively participating in gaming and related activities – those who have managed to 'infiltrate' the core game culture. Therefore, it is crucial to explore women's everyday experiences with game culture in addition to statistics to achieve a better understanding of the ways women are – and are not – participating and why – to understand the cultural reasons behind statistical differences. In the next section of this chapter, I will focus on this empirical perspective, looking at how women participating in this study described the various aspects of their gaming practices.

In the following section, I will make comparisons between the gaming practices of women participating in this study and those of Finnish women and Finnish men outlined above. There is a risk in these kinds of comparisons – as there is in gender-separated player statistics – that they may contribute to the construction of gaming as a gendered practice in which certain types of gaming practices are interpreted as 'masculine' or 'feminine', or the types of gaming practices generally preferred by men more than women are seen as more valuable from a game cultural perspective. Here, I want to stress that we must acknowledge the hierarchical structures in hegemonic game culture, how certain types of gaming practices are valued more than others, and how those value structures are gendered in nature. As such, in making these comparisons, my aim is not to reinforce, but rather to deconstruct, the gendered structures of game culture. In practice, a part of this process is showing how women who are actively participating in game culture – such as the women participating in this study – are gaming in similar ways to men who play actively but are generally still not considered to be 'as much' gamers due to their gender.

4.2 Finnish women's gaming practices in this study

4.2.1 Spending time playing digital games

In the online questionnaire, I asked the respondents to estimate the number of hours they typically spend playing digital games choosing one of six options: 1. 0–5 hours a week, 2. 6–10 hours a week, 3. 11–20 hours a week, 4. 21–30 hours a week, 5. 31–40 hours a week, or 6. over 40 hours a week. Of the 734 women who responded to this question, 20.71% (152 respondents) estimated they play 0–5 hours per week, 25.61% (188 respondents) 6–10 hours per week, 13.9% (102 respondents) 21–30 hours per week, and 13.1% (96 respondents) over 30 hours per week (figure 5).

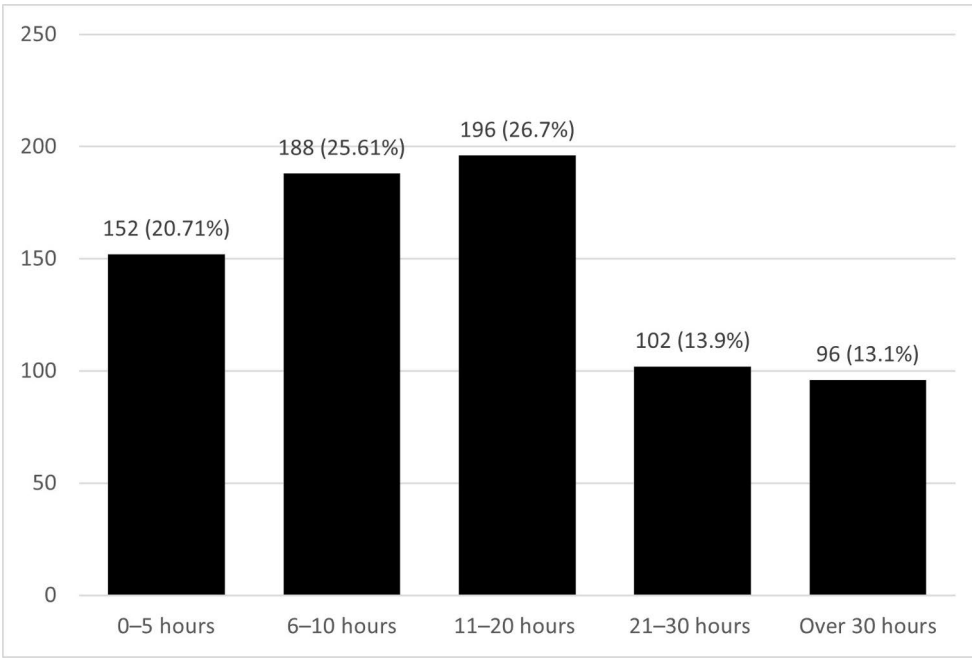

Figure 5. Estimated time spent weekly on digital gaming by the questionnaire respondents (N=734).

Overall, 79.29% (582) of the questionnaire respondents estimated that they spend at least six hours every week playing digital games, and 27% (198) of the respondents estimated they play more than 20 hours every week. According to *The Finnish Player Barometer*, Finns in general spend an average of 4.76 hours per week on digital gaming (Kinnunen et al., 2018, p. 45). On average, Finnish men spend more time (9.6 hours per week) on digital games than Finnish women (2.9 hours per week) (Ibid., p. 45). As such, the level of the respondents' weekly gaming activity was closer to Finnish men than Finnish women, but the respondents were even more active in their gaming than Finnish men on average. This can be partially explained by the fact that while the results of *The Finnish Player Barometer* represent all Finns, the women participating in this study have signed up to report on their gaming specifically, which is reflected on the results. This should be kept in mind when comparing the results of these studies.

Of the twenty interviewees participating in this study, nine played digital games every day, three play a few times a week, and five told me that their play time varies a lot from a day, a week, and a month to another. One interviewee did not specify her general time spent on games but told me she is currently playing two games regularly and 30–90 minutes at a time. Only two of the interviewees were not currently playing very actively, one of them saying that she plays maybe a couple of

times a month (I19), and the other that she had not really been actively playing for the past two years (I1).

Considering that the majority of both the questionnaire respondents and the interviewees were playing digital games (at least) every week, they represent a group of players significantly more active than the average. According to *The Finnish Player Barometer*, only 36.3% of Finns play digital entertainment games at least once a week (Ibid., p. 34), and based on *The European consumer study*, only 25% of Europeans play at least once a week (ISFE, 2012, p. 5). The exceptionally active level of the digital gaming of the respondents and interviewees needs to be considered when interpreting the findings from this material.

From both the interviews and the online questionnaire, it was clear that the amount of time the women spent on digital gaming varied greatly – mostly in accordance with available time, but also due to other factors, such as motivation. Different types of games were played for different amounts of time and in different situations. For example, casual mobile games were mentioned in the questionnaire responses as an activity for otherwise 'empty' moments of time, such as waiting for or travelling on public transportation. This type of gaming was often one aspect of multitasking – playing while watching TV or listening to university lectures. It is worth noting that *Pokémon GO* (Niantic, 2016) was frequently mentioned in the questionnaire replies as a game that was played daily. At the time of the questionnaire material collection, *Pokémon GO* was less than six months old and still widely popular in Finland (Alha et al., 2017). Had the questionnaire been done a half a year later, the answers might have already been different. This is an example of the rapidly changing nature of game culture, which needs to be taken into consideration while interpreting research material considering preferences towards specific games, genres, or platforms, or other gaming habits strongly affected by current trends.

For the most part, time spent on gaming was reported in either a positive or a neutral manner in the questionnaire responses. It was significantly more common to read how a respondent wished she had more time for gaming than a respondent feeling she was spending too much time on games. This may differ from how we are used to hearing time spent on games discussed. For example, in the *Gaming and Gamers* market study on digital gaming and attitudes towards gaming in the United States, 26% of the respondents considered most games to be 'a waste of time' (Duggan, 2015). On the other hand, my findings mirror those of *The Finnish Player Barometer*, in which the time spent on gaming was rarely experienced as problematic (Kinnunen et al., 2018, p. 49). In my study, only one of the interviewees replied with 'Is it enough if I say I play too much?' (I14) when asked to estimate how much time she spends on gaming, and another described the amount of time she spends on games as 'sick' (I20). But even those answers seemed to be given at least half jokingly. Overall, however, in both the interviews and the questionnaire responses,

gaming was not generally described as taking time away from other activities, but rather an activity done after everything else – if there remains time for it. This may at least partially result from gendered expectations concerning women's leisure time, as also seen in earlier studies examining women's gaming from a leisure studies perspective (see Bergstrom, 2019; Orme, 2021).

Some women who played a game, or several games, competitively, discussed their 'training' instead of playing in relation to time spent gaming. Describing gaming as 'training' reflects the perception of time spent on the activity as not leisurely in its nature but rather working towards a goal. Furthermore, 'training' was considered as not always enjoyable. Indeed, playing is not always fun: it can be a forced activity when performed for another goal (such as mandatory training to improve skill level), or as a commitment to others (when the player is, for example, committed to a raiding group schedule in a MMORPG), something a person is forced to do even if she would not feel like playing at that moment. In his doctoral dissertation *Modes of Play: A Frame Analytic Account of Video Game Play*, Sebastian Deterding (2014) writes about these varying ways of and attitudes towards gaming as 'modes of leisurely gaming' and 'instrumental keyings of gaming'. According to Deterding (Ibid., p. 246), leisurely modes activate when a person is playing for autotelic purposes of enjoyment, while the instrumental keyings present an exotelic focus of instrumental outcome. A person can play in either leisurely mode or instrumental manner depending on the gaming situation and its purpose. As Deterding points out, there are further participation norms related to gaming, affecting and occasionally overriding an individual player's choice on 'when to play, whether to play, what to play, who to play with, and when to stop playing' (Ibid.). In my interviews and questionnaire responses, however, playing was never described as an activity one 'must do' even if they would not want to.

4.2.2 The games women play

4.2.2.1 From puzzles to action and adventure

Both the questionnaire respondents and the interviewees played a great variety of game genres. Amongst the women who answered the questionnaire, the five most popular genres were 1. puzzle games (57.34%, 422 respondents), 2. roleplaying games (52.85%, 389 respondents), 3. simulation and building games (47.69%, 351 respondents), 4. adventure games (43.75%, 322 respondents), and 5. action-adventure games (38.99%, 287 respondents). Other popular genres, each gaining over 30% popularity amongst respondents, included platformer games (34.78%, 256 respondents), strategy games (33.7%, 248 respondents), MMORPGs (31.39%, 231 respondents), and shooter games (30.84%, 227 respondents). The category 'other genre' was also popular (34.65%, 255 respondents). Below 30% popularity, the respondents selected genres of music and social games (22.69%, 167 respondents), racing games (16.03%, 118 respondents),

fighting games (15.22%, 112 respondents), and MOBAs (13.72%, 101 respondents). The only significantly unpopular genre listed amongst options was sport games, chosen by only 2.99% of the respondents (22 respondents). The ten most popular genres amongst the questionnaire respondents are presented in figure 6.

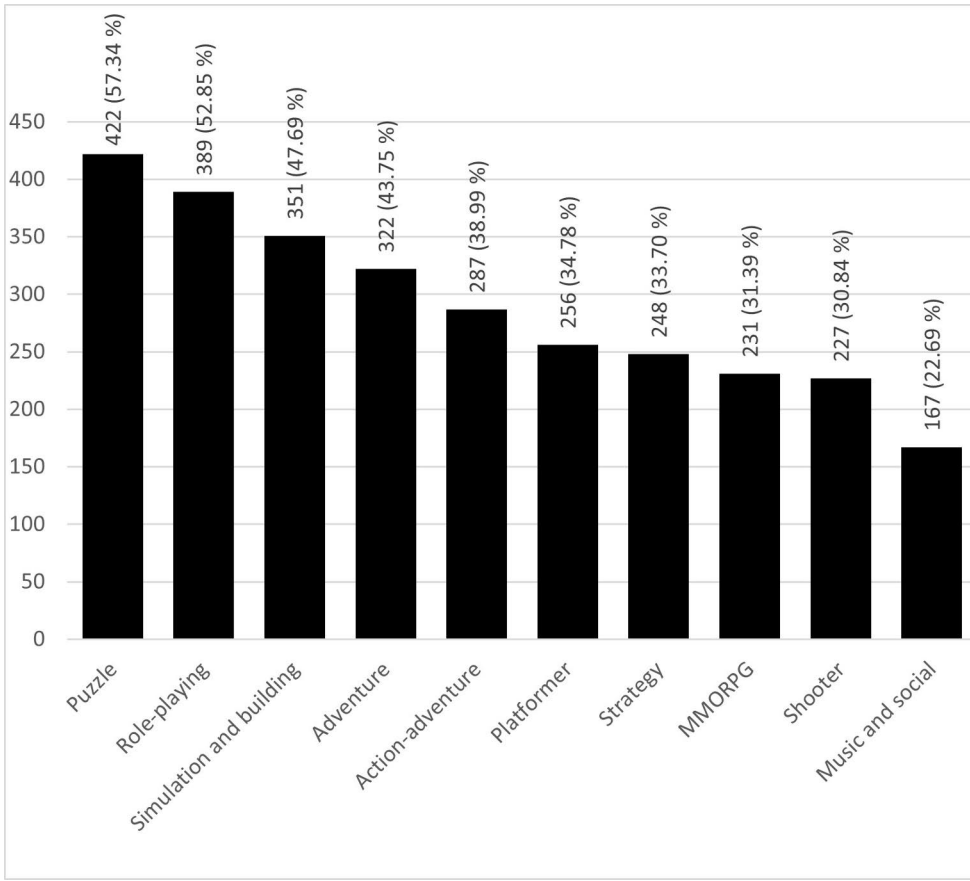

Figure 6. Ten most popular digital game genres amongst the questionnaire respondents (N=736).

According to *The Finnish Player Barometer*, the most popular digital game genres amongst all Finns are puzzle and card games (27.6% of Finns play actively), adventure games (17.3%), and shooter games (17.4%) (Kinnunen et al., 2018, p. 34). Additionally, 13% of Finns play action games actively, and slightly less popular genres (under 10% active players each), include strategy games (9.5%), driving games (9.3%), simulation games (9.2%), sport games (8.5%), multiplayer online games (8.3%) and role-playing games (7.9%). The least popular game genres amongst Finns are music and social games (5% of Finns play actively), online role-playing games (3.1%), and education games (3.5%).

Figure 7 presents a comparison between the most popular genres in the questionnaire responses and those in *The Finnish Player Barometer* (Ibid., pp. 77–80). The compared genres include nine of the ten most popular genres amongst the questionnaire respondents (black bar), and the comparison is made to all players in *The Finnish Player Barometer* (green bar), as well as active players (those playing the genres in question at least once a month) in *The Finnish Player Barometer* (blue bar). Platformer games were the sixth most popular genre amongst the questionnaire respondents, but that genre is excluded from this comparison as it was not included in *The Finnish Player Barometer*. There are a few other minor differences: I am comparing the genre 'simulation and building' from my questionnaire to 'simulation' in *The Finnish Player Barometer*, and the genre 'action-adventure' in my questionnaire to 'action' genre in *The Finnish Player Barometer*, and finally. the genre 'puzzle' in my questionnaire to 'puzzle and card games' in *The Finnish Player Barometer*. Despite these minor differences, the genre groups are likely to include similar types of games, and thus these comparisons are suitable for the purpose of this study.

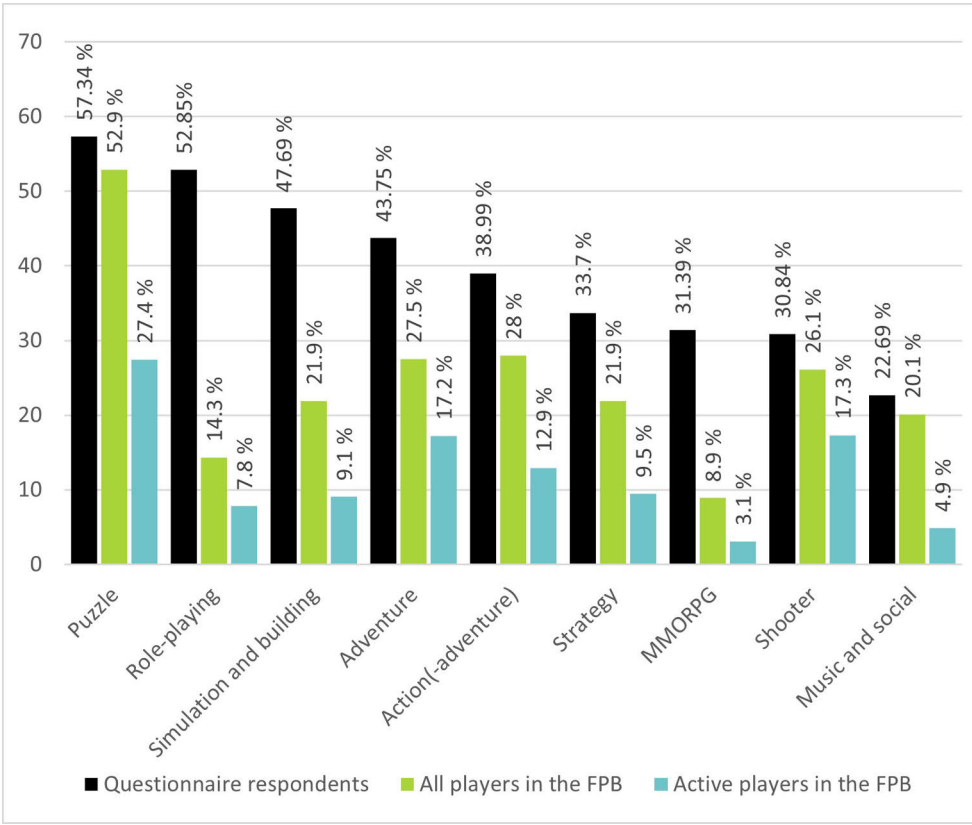

Figure 7. Most popular genres of digital games amongst the questionnaire respondents in comparison to *The Finnish Player Barometer* (Kinnunen et al., 2018, pp. 77–80).

Compared to all Finns, these questionnaire respondents played a large variety of genres more actively. Of the genres present across studies, only racing games and sport games were played more often by Finns in general than the women responding to the online questionnaire.

Interestingly, the respondents' gaming was more akin to the average Finnish man than woman. As can be seen from figures 8 and 9, women responding to the questionnaire played many genres similarly to Finnish men, and quite differently from Finnish women.

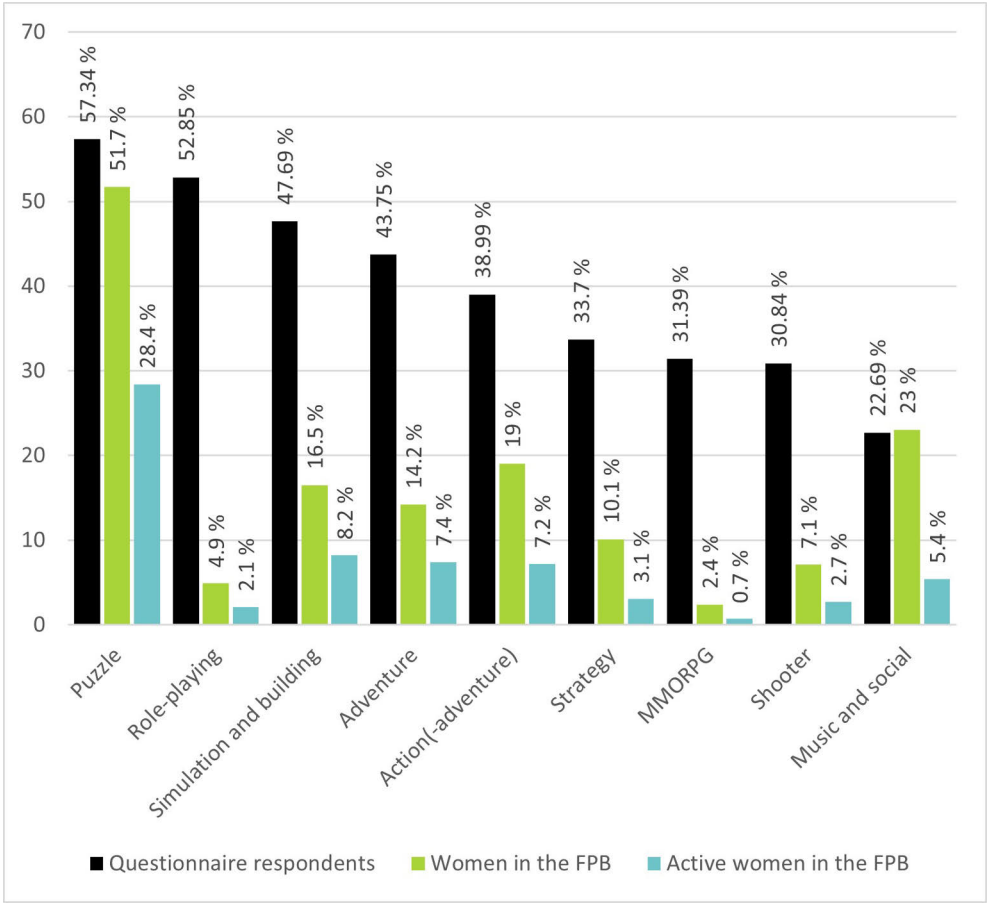

Figure 8. Most popular genres of digital games amongst the questionnaire respondents in comparison to women in *The Finnish Player Barometer* (Kinnunen et al., 2018, pp. 77–80).

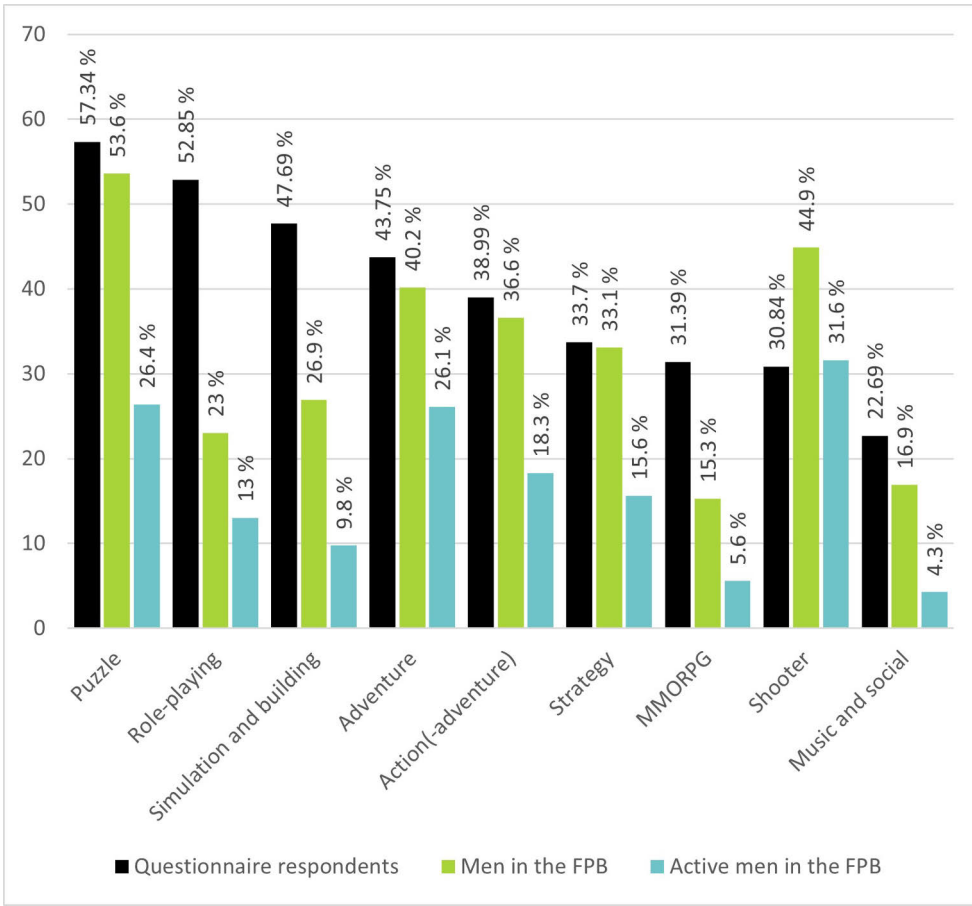

Figure 9. Most popular genres of digital games amongst the questionnaire respondents in comparison to men in *The Finnish Player Barometer* (Kinnunen et al., 2018, pp. 77–80).

In *The Finnish Player Barometer*, the five most popular digital game genres amongst Finnish women were puzzle games (28.4% of Finnish women play actively), simulation games (8.2%), adventure games (7.4%), action games (7.2%), and music and social games (5.4%) (Kinnunen et al., 2018, p. 37). While puzzle games were the most popular genre amongst both the questionnaire respondents and Finns in general, and music and social games were fairly evenly popular in all groups, my respondents played the genres of role-playing, simulation and building, adventure, action-adventure, strategy, MMORPG, and shooter games significantly more commonly than Finnish women in general.

At the same time, questionnaire respondents' preferences were very close (less than 5% difference) to those of Finnish men in the genres of puzzle, adventure, action-adventure, and strategy games – respondents playing all these genres slightly

more often than Finnish men. Shooter games were the only genre in this comparison played more often by Finnish men than my respondents (14% difference).

When comparing the questionnaire respondents to Finnish women and men who play digital games actively (at least once a month), the gap grows wider, and the respondents become more active than both gender groups of Finns in all selected genres. Amongst the compared genres, shooter games are only exception to this: 30.84% of questionnaire respondents played shooters, whereas 31.6% of Finnish men played them actively. Even in this case, the difference is less than one percent.

Questionnaire respondents played digital games from a great variety of genres. Likewise, the interviewees played many types of games, mentioning first-person shooters, roleplaying games, MMORPGs, MOBAs, action-adventure games, fighting games, racing games, online collectible card games, turn-based strategy games, online war games, platform games, mobile games, trivia games, music games, sports games, graphic adventure games, and point-and-click games during the interviews. Questionnaire respondents were also given an opportunity to mention examples of the games they play from each genre. The games mentioned most often in each genre are presented in table 5.

Table 5. Most popular games or games series in each genre amongst the questionnaire respondents.

Puzzle	**Roleplaying**	**Simulation and building**	**Adventure**	**Action-adventure**
Candy Crush Saga Farm Heroes Saga Tetris Portal Bejeweled Blitz	The Elder Scrolls Dragon Age Mass Effect Fallout Final Fantasy	The Sims Cities: Skylines Minecraft Sim City Prison Architect	Life is Strange Telltale Gone Home The Legend of Zelda Pokémon The Secret of Monkey Island	Assassin's Creed Grand Theft Auto Tomb Raider Dishonored Uncharted Fallout Saints Row
Platformer	**Strategy**	**MMORPG**	**Shooter**	**Music and social**
Super Mario Ori and the Blind Forest Trine Spyro Rayman Donkey Kong	Civilization Age of Empire Heroes of Might and Magic	World of Warcraft Elder Scrolls Online Guild Wars STWOR Final Fantasy XIV Diablo 3	Overwatch Counter-Strike Battlefield Borderlands Call of Duty	Singstar Guitar Hero
Racing	**Fighting**	**MOBA**	**Sport**	**Other**
Mario Kart Rocket League Crash Team Racing	Tekken Soul Calibur Street Fighter	League of Legends Dota 2 Heroes of the Storm	NHL Wii Fit & Wii Sports	Pokémon Go Hearthstone

The ten most often mentioned games and game series in the questionnaire responses are presented in table 6.

Table 6. Ten games and game series most often mentioned by the questionnaire respondents.

Popularity:	Game or game series name:	Times mentioned:	Genre:
1.	**Pokémon Go** (Niantic 2016)	106	Other
2.	**The Elder Scrolls series** (Bethesda Softworks 1994–2016)	88	Role-playing
3.	**The Sims** (Electronic Arts 2000–)	79	Simulation and building
4.	**Dragon Age series** (BioWare / Electronic Arts 2009–2014)	74	Role-playing
5.	**The Witcher series** (CD Projekt 2007–2015)	61	Role-playing
6.	**Overwatch** (Blizzard Entertainment 2016)	57	Shooter
7.	**World of Warcraft** (Blizzard Entertainment 2004–2016)	53	MMORPG
8.	**Sid Meier's Civilization series** (MicroProse / Actvision / Hasbro Interactive / Infogrames / 2K Games 1991–2016)	48	Strategy
9.	**Mass Effect series** (Bioware / Microsoft Game Studios / Electronic Arts 2007–2017)	43	Role-playing
10.	**Cities: Skylines** (Colossal Order / Paradox Interactive 2015)	31	Simulation and building
10.	**Super Mario Series** (Nintendo 1985–)	31	Platformer

Comparing the ten most often mentioned games or game series played by the respondents to the list of sixteen most popular games amongst all Finns published in *The Finnish Player Barometer* (Kinnunen et al., 2018, p. 38), the three games or game series included in both lists are *Pokémon* (*Pokémon GO* (Niantic, 2016) was the game mentioned most often by the respondents, and *Pokémon* game series (Nintendo, 1996–) was the 9th popular amongst all Finns), *The Sims* (the 3rd most popular amongst respondents, 6th amongst all Finns; Electronic Arts, 2000–), and *Super Mario* (10th amongst respondents, 14th amongst all Finns; Nintendo, 1985–). The same three game series can also be found on the list of ten most popular games or game series amongst Finnish women (Ibid., p. 40). However, none of the games on the list of ten most popular games amongst Finnish men (Ibid., p. 40) were mentioned by the questionnaire respondents.

As mentioned in the previous section concerning time spent on gaming, while looking at the popular game genres and individual games and game series, it is worth noting that the results of my questionnaire as well as *The Finnish Player Barometer* are greatly affected by the time when the data was collected. Individual games and genres may quickly gain tremendous popularity – and then again fade just as quickly. For example, during the time of the online questionnaire, *Pokémon GO* (Niantic, 2016) had been recently released and still enjoying a huge worldwide popularity. If the questionnaire had been conducted six months later, it might not have been mentioned as often. In the same vein, when comparing the most popular games in the questionnaire material to *The Finnish Player Barometer 2018*, the latter includes *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017) and *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* (PUBG Corporation, 2017*)*, both representing a new genre of online multiplayer battle royale games that became hugely popular in 2017 and 2018 but had not yet been released during the time of the questionnaire.

4.2.2.2 Reasons to play specific games

There has been much research on different player types and player mentalities. As Kirsi Pauliina Kallio, Frans Mäyrä, and Kirsikka Kaipainen have pointed out, player motivations form an interesting area of study for multiple reasons and perspectives: game producers have a commercial interest in understanding the attraction and holding power factors of games for specific audiences, and there exists also an academic interest to understand 'the cognitive, affective, social, and spatial processes that characterize different player and play styles' (2011, pp. 328–329).

One of the earliest known writings on the topic is Richard A. Bartle's 'Hearts, clubs, diamonds, spades: Players who suit MUDs' (1996). In the paper, Bartle identifies and describes four different approaches to playing MUDs, categorising their players as achievers, explorers, socialisers, and killers. He places each player type on a field divided in four by two axes: the x-axis moving from an emphasis on players (left) to an emphasis on the environment (right), and the y-axis moving from acting with (bottom) to acting on (top). Achievers are focused on the game world and acting on it, while the socialisers are focused on the other players and interaction with them. Similarly, explorers are focused on the game world and interaction with it, while killers are focused on other players and acting on them.

Bartle's original player type model is outdated, limited to one game genre, and heavily criticised for oversimplifying player motivations and mentalities. Nevertheless, it presents an important early perspective on a topic that is still central to understanding digital gaming as a social and cultural phenomenon. Bartle has also later updated the model to be applicable to a wider range of virtual worlds, and to include a third dimension, implicit/explicit, to describe how different player

motivations may appear either implicitly or explicitly in players' actions (Bartle, 2004).

Kallio and others (2011) have developed a model of gaming mentalities they have named 'InSoGa' for intensity, sociability, and games. The model is based on 'gamer mentality heuristics', aiming to build a more comprehensive model than presented in earlier studies, including a variety of game genres and play styles, 'very light, casual, and social gaming motivations and practices as well as those involving dedicated attitudes and heavy playing' (Ibid., p. 329). The model consists of three components: intensity, sociability, and the games played. Each of the components contain further three indicators. The intensity of gaming considers length of gaming sessions, the regularity of gaming, and the level of concentration, resulting in a continuum between what the authors define as 'heavy' and 'light' gaming. The sociability of gaming is similarly a continuum ranging from solely lone gaming to entirely sociable gaming, and the researchers also define 'three distinct spaces in which the social aspects of gaming may be mobilized': physical space, virtual space, and outside gamespace (Ibid., p. 329). The third component of the model, games, again consists of three separate indicators: individual games and devices, game genres, and accessibility (Ibid., p. 337).

As demonstrated by Kallio's and others' InSoGa model (Ibid.), the (types of) games people play depend on a variety of factors. The most evident factor is what kind of games people enjoy – for various reasons. When given a chance to expand their answer about the types of games they were currently playing, some of the women who answered the questionnaire wrote some delightfully well-thought-out descriptions of the types of games they preferred to play:

> **R189:** Most of the time, I play games of small productions that are graphically or plot-wise ambitious and interesting.

> **R352:** I prefer playing games in which action and story are well balanced, the story still being the main focus. A graphically bad or technically weak game can be saved by an excellent story, but a poor story can't be saved by any graphical or technical solution. I have recently fallen in love with sneaking games, although I also enjoy a more action-packed game if it is done well. This is mainly because I like to tease my brain by, for instance, planning the routes I'm taking or the tactics I use on enemies. If the only challenge in the game comes from the amount of damage the enemies are doing and how little damage you're doing to them, the game practically is not interesting.

People may like to play certain types of games at a time, and then another type at another. Some women taking part in the study described how they may focus on only

one game at a time, playing nothing else. On the other hand, there were also women, especially in the interviews, who told me how a game or a game series or a few different games have followed them throughout their lives. These women kept playing the same games over and over and might not have even been interested in any other games at all. And then again, some questionnaire respondents specifically brought up the wide range of different types of games they played and owned. Holding onto a narrow selection of games one plays as well as having a diverse taste and extensive collection held significant meaning to the respondents.

Available time impacts people's choices about what games they play. If a player only has thirty minutes to spare, logging on to a MMORPG or loading a save of an epic role-playing adventure game may end up being nothing but a frustrating experience. Different types of games are played, not only for different amounts of time, but also in different ways and for different purposes. One respondent, for example, explained how she plays *Pokémon GO* (Niantic, 2016) in a more goal-oriented and thoughtful manner, while *Candy Crush* (King, 2012) and *Farm Heroes Saga* (King, 2013) were 'brainless relaxation' for her during breaks from studying or work (R271).

Access to devices also has a great effect on the games people can play, as one cannot play a game if she does not have a device that runs it. Some of the respondents described issues with games that were either too old to be compatible with their current gaming devices, or too new for their devices which lack the power to run them. Certain devices and thus games may also only be available for players in specific locations, as in the case where an interviewee told me she noticed herself visiting her boyfriend a lot because she was able to play *Call of Duty* (Activision, 2003–present) on his PC (and how she eventually realised that she was more interested in the game than the boyfriend). When an old gaming console is stored in the childhood home or a summer house, visiting that location allows the player to also revisit those old, familiar game worlds, and memories related to them.

I found Kallio's, Mäyrä's, and Kaipainen's (2011, p. 339) InSoGa model very useful for interpreting these findings because it highlights the way a person's gamer mentalities may, and often do, switch depending on the context in which gaming happens: what is played, with whom, and what for. This multitude of often overlapping gamer mentalities was clearly present in the way that many women participating in the study described their gaming.

4.2.3 Gaming platforms

4.2.3.1 Active play on various devices

In many ways, devices are a central part of gaming with many opportunities, challenges, emotions, and memories related to them. A user's attachment to a certain gaming device is not necessarily because the device is new or powerful – although these aspects can certainly matter to many players. An old device may be kept only to play old, cherished games on, to hold on to its sentimental value, even if newer remakes of those games and devices are now available. For example, digging up the old original PlayStation, inserting a disc in the machine, and playing the game with the original controller inspires different feelings from playing a new (and probably a much more user-friendly) version of the game on the PS4. Like the games themselves, gaming devices are collected and treasured by hobbyists, and occasionally tinkered with in various ways (see Swalwell, 2021).

In the online questionnaire, I asked which devices the respondents were currently using for gaming. I also asked who had bought the devices in the respondent's household – from where and for whom. The respondents were also given an opportunity to tell me more about the devices in their use if they wished to do so.

When asked which devices the respondent was currently using for gaming, a computer (PC or Mac) was selected by 78.2% (574) of the questionnaire respondents, a mobile device (smartphone or tablet) by 63.22% (464) respondents, and a gaming console (such as PlayStation or Xbox) by 54.09% (397) of the respondents. Handheld consoles (such as Nintendo 3DS or PlayStation Vita) were chosen more rarely, by 19.35% (142) of the respondents (figure 10). Finally, 2.45% (18) of the respondents chose the option 'other device', their specified answers including mostly things already included in the other categories, such as specific consoles, or additional accessories, such as emulators, or music game or VR devices. One respondent mentioned playing with a slot machine.

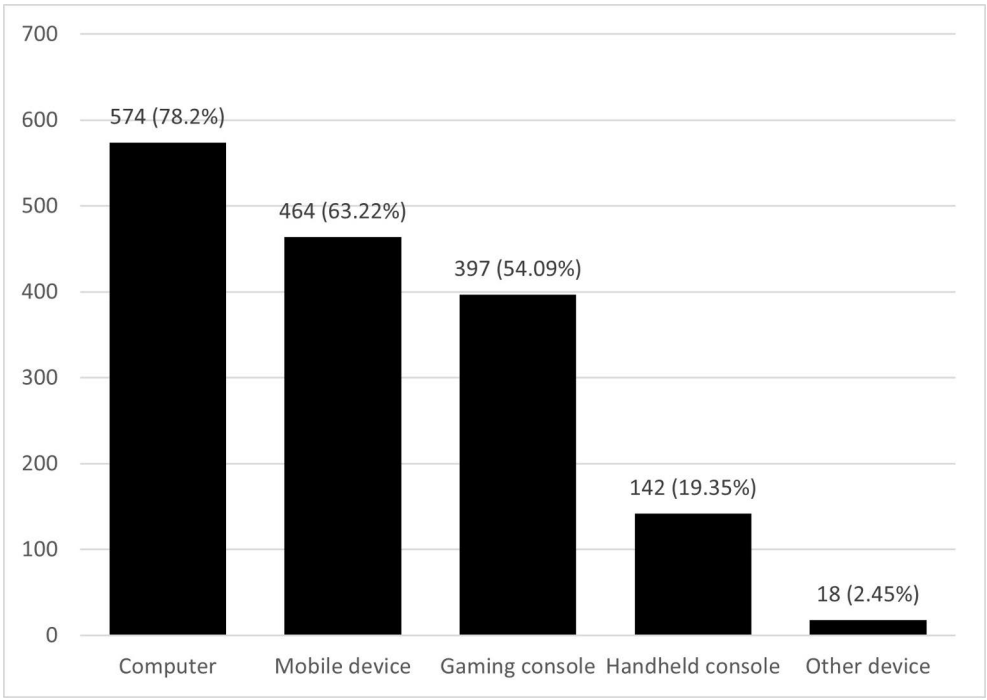

Figure 10. Gaming devices used by the questionnaire respondents (N=734).

According to *The Finnish Player Barometer*, mobile devices are the most popular platform for digital gaming amongst Finns in general (Kinnunen et al., 2018, p. 31). Because of this, it was interesting to see that a computer was chosen more often by the questionnaire respondents. On the other hand, the popularity of a computer as the participants' preferred gaming platform was in line with other signs of their access to the core game culture and game cultural capital, and reflecting the hegemonic idea of a 'PC master race' as the 'real' gamers (see Consalvo & Paul, 2019, pp. 70–78). I did not specifically ask interviewees about the devices they use for gaming, but they too mentioned that they played mostly on a computer or a gaming console while answering other questions.

Comparing the findings from the questionnaire responses to *The Finnish Player Barometer*, the questionnaire respondents were playing more actively on all platforms than Finns in general (figure 11) or actively playing Finnish women or men (figure 12).

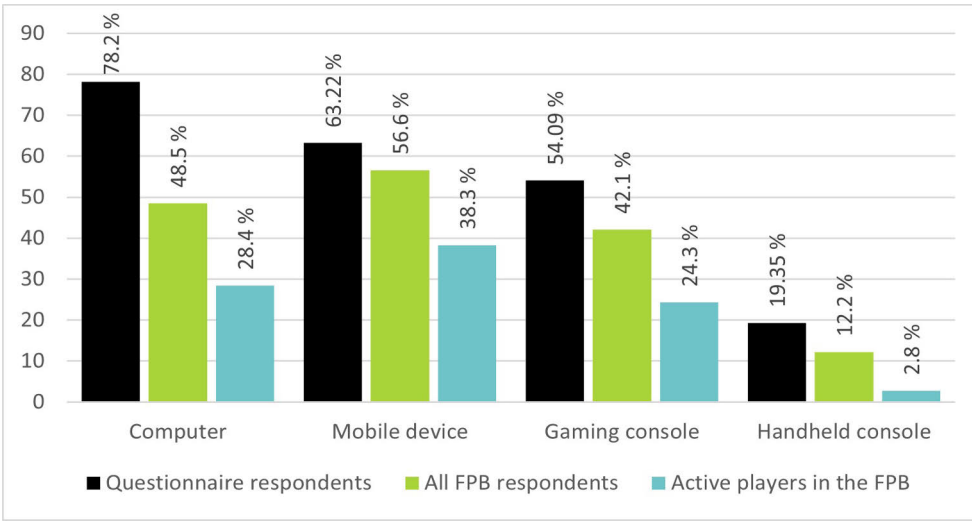

Figure 11. Gaming devices used by the questionnaire respondents in comparison to *The Finnish Player Barometer* (Kinnunen et al., 2018, pp. 75–76).

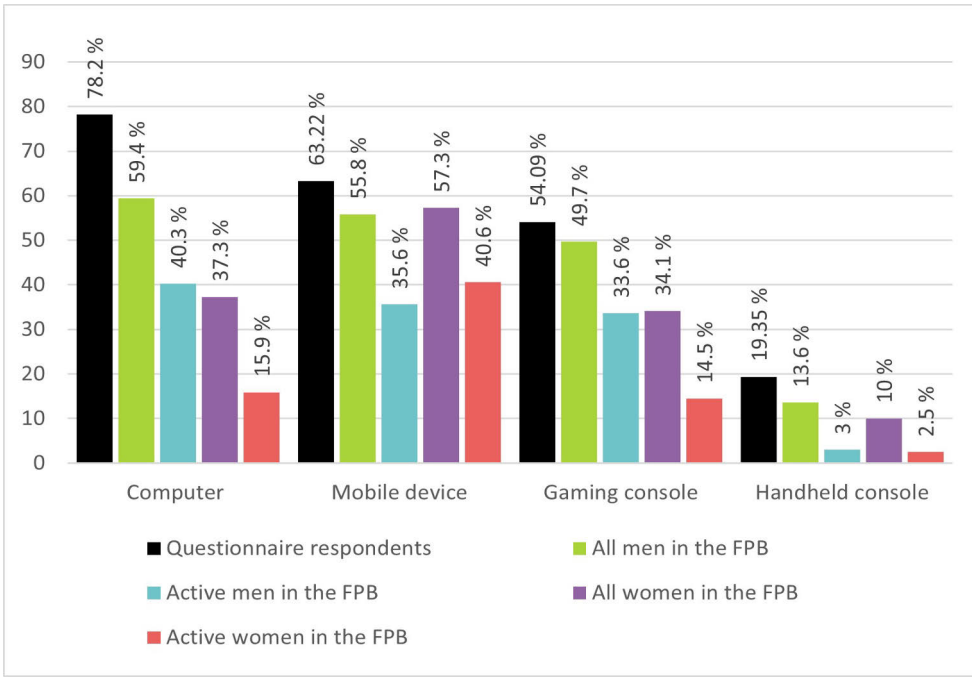

Figure 12. Gaming devices used by the questionnaire respondents in comparison to women and men in *The Finnish Player Barometer* (Kinnunen et al., 2018, pp. 75–76).

As already mentioned, the greatest difference between the questionnaire responses and *The Finnish Player Barometer* results can be seen in the use of a computer for gaming purposes. While 78.2% of the questionnaire respondents played on a PC or Mac,

48.5% of Finns and 28.4% of actively playing Finns do the same. The only gaming platform more popular amongst Finnish women than men in *The Finnish Player Barometer* was mobile device, although the difference was negligible (57.3% of Finnish women and 55.8% of Finnish men play on mobile devices). Finnish women and men play on handheld consoles in around equal measure. On the other hand, Finnish men play significantly more actively on computers and gaming consoles than Finnish women (59.4% versus 37.3% on computers and 49.7% versus 34.1% on gaming consoles). Questionnaire respondents' platform choices demonstrated greater similarities to Finnish men than Finnish women. The difference to Finnish men was less than 10% on all compared platforms, apart from computers, which 78.2% of the respondents and 59.4% of Finnish men used for gaming.

While the study participants' gaming often happened on more 'traditional' gaming platforms, such as a PC or a gaming console, and they played the kind of games that could be considered as 'hardcore', such as shooter or action games, some participants had found the joy of playing due to the 'casual revolution' in gaming (see Kultima, 2018; Juul, 2009). One of the interviewees described how she was never interested in 'traditional gaming', but since she had started playing on a tablet, she actively played and tried new games every month (I10). At the time of the interview, she was particularly interested in social games that had some connection to reality, such as quiz games, or party games, such as *Singstar* (Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2004–), which she also played on a console.

4.2.3.2 Owning and sharing devices

In the questionnaire, I asked if the gaming devices were in the respondent's personal use or if they were shared with someone else. Because the question was open ended in the questionnaire and the responses were given in various forms, there were some challenges related to processing them during the analysis. However, it seemed around 60% of the 728 respondents answering this question had gaming devices solely or mainly in their personal use. In some responses, the respondents emphasised the significance of having gaming devices they do not need to share with anyone else:

> **R649:** My husband and I both play, and we often play together. Because of that, we both have our own computers. We both see a computer as a very personal thing, just like a mobile phone, or a toothbrush. It won't be shared. Consoles, on the other hand, we can share without problems, as long as one doesn't touch the other's unfinished game without their consent.

The second most common response, as reflected in the quote above, was that the respondents had some gaming devices solely in their personal use and some were

shared, most often with a partner, and slightly less often with other family members, such as children or siblings. Smartphones were most often mentioned as a strictly personal gaming devices (and their personal nature seemed to be so self-evident that it was not even always mentioned in the responses), while gaming consoles (such as PlayStation or Xbox) seemed to be most often shared. Even when the respondents reported that their PC was reserved for their personal gaming only, they sometimes shared their gaming consoles with their partner or family. Even though the question related to devices used for gaming, most gaming devices may also be used for many other purposes: a smartphone may be used for keeping touch with other people, a PC may be used for work or studying, a gaming console may be used for watching television, and so on. In other words, gaming may or may not be the primary function for how the device is used. Most respondents also used various devices for gaming. Different types of games are played on different platforms, and a person's gaming can be focused more on certain platforms and game types, or spread around game genres and devices.

Access to a gaming device is a distinct question from owning and purchasing them. It is one thing to be able to use a device to play, and another to be able to choose to purchase a device and control its use. While I did not ask directly who the owner of the gaming devices is, in these words, I did enquire who had acquired the devices, from where, and for whom. Again, because of the open form of the question, the results were somewhat difficult to measure exactly. However, based on the open replies, around 70% of the 719 respondents answering this question had bought a gaming device for their personal use. Of importance, mobile phone purchases were excluded from this number and it thus only represents devices such as computers and gaming consoles.

As women and girls are known to face gender-based limitations in accessing and controlling gaming devices (Nieminen-Sundell, 2003; Suoninen, 2013; Merikivi et al., 2016), it is a significant finding that women participating in this study often described having gaming devices in their personal use, having control over the use of gaming devices in their household, and having bought gaming devices for their personal use. Communicating significant control over their own gaming and technological expertise, the participants also described having built their own gaming computers.

4.2.3.3 Building one's own gaming devices

As mentioned in the previous section, a computer was the most common gaming device used by the questionnaire respondents. Many respondents also shared stories of their home-built gaming PCs. The respondents seemed to place significant value in building one's own device from parts they had selected – sometimes with some

help from friends or family members. One respondent even wrote that she held a 'building party' to receive help from her friends in building her gaming PC:

> **R39:** My current computer is the second machine I have built, and it moved in with me a couple of months ago. I hosted a building party and received help from friends. The machine is partly an over-scaled power monster at least right now, even though some components will still get exchanged: the graphics card is a barely sufficient second hand GTX 460. I bought the largest possible case (Fractal Design Define XL) with three fans so that it would be easy to build and change parts even after years. Quietness (good fans) was a mandatory feature after the old wasp nest. It was a hit in the building party, there was enough room for four people's hands to do the screwing! The operating system (Win 7) and the games run lovely on the SSD. Basic keyboard and a mouse, 24-inch screen. I saved hundreds of euros when a friend's old computer broke down, I got parts of it, I exchanged the damaged BIOS chip from the motherboard (hotflash fix 300€, new component 10€ from Ebay) and now I have a proper machine that would otherwise exceed my budget.

Many respondents listed and described individual components of their gaming PC in their responses and explained why they had selected specific parts. These types of responses indicated that the women were highly familiar and experts in gaming hardware. On the other hand, some mentioned relying on the help from friends or a partner to choose components and in assembling the machine. Despite writing detailed descriptions of their gaming hardware, some respondents were actively downplaying their own expertise in those same responses, describing how they 'do not really know much about these things'. For example, in the response quoted below, the respondent describes waiting for a specific graphics card for a specific price – both of which she can name – right after she expresses that she asked her husband to choose parts for her PC because 'she does not understand so much of the technical side':

> **R34:** I could write all kinds of odes of praise for my desktop computer! I used only a laptop for about five years, and even though the Toshiba that served me during the time fared quite reasonable in gaming use as well, an upgrade to a desktop has been a truly brilliant decision. Early this year I had enough money together that I urged my husband to gather a machine for me from parts, since I myself do not understand so much of the technical side. A separate graphics card was left waiting for acquisition for a whole longer, as I was waiting for the release of Radeon RW480 and for its price to drop even a little bit closer to the promised two hundred [euros]. Finally now that too has been attached to the

> machine. Along the way, more memory has come along, and for example speakers, headset, and a mouse have changed for better ones, as I started with old ones I had lying around. The price for the whole package sneaked up to a bit over a thousand [euros] with the monitor included, which would have been an impossible crack in a student budget as a lump sum, but doing it bit by bit like this, it was relatively painless.

It is typical for women to undermine their own technological expertise, also when it comes to gaming (see Toft-Nielsen, 2016), since in the hegemonic discourse, technological expertise is seen to accumulate 'naturally' to men and boys, and elude women (see Corneliussen, 2011). As expertise related to games, gaming devices, and game culture is one of the central forms of game cultural capital, this gendered perception of expertise negatively affects women's position in game culture.

Many respondents greatly valued the specific components in their self-built gaming PC (e.g., with the newest graphics card on the market), how powerful it was, and which newest games it could run on full settings. But the gaming PC as self-built was also reported as valued in and of itself – there was a sense of pride achieved from building a functioning, and perhaps very powerful, machine from a collection of individual components. There was also a sense of power expressed in being capable of selecting the parts and having the technical knowledge to do so. Even if the computer was not built from scratch, some respondents mentioned regularly updating their machines to keep up with requirements of the newest games. Being up-to-date with the current possibilities and requirements of gaming technology was a theme strongly present in many responses – even though respondents often downplayed their own expertise in this area.

As can be seen in both responses quoted earlier, money was a topic frequently brought up regarding self-built gaming computers. Only monetary value was explicitly described as the machine's value for many respondents: it seemed natural to mention how much the machine had ended up costing. Interestingly, this was never brought up in the answers about pre-made gaming computers, consoles, or other gaming platforms. Money was also a central theme, either directly mentioned or implied, when respondents wrote about their aging devices that were no longer capable of running the newest games, and the subsequent upgrades needed.

Money has been an important aspect of gaming more generally. The industry is estimated to be worth almost 140 billion USD globally in 2018 (Wijman, 2018) and 2.36 billion euros in Finland in 2017 (Neogames, 2018). As a hobby, gaming is thoroughly commercialised with the constant stream of new games and other content releases, devices and components, sideline products such as character figures and clothing, and events such as LAN-parties, fan conventions, and game music concerts. Many games (mostly MMOs) and gaming services (such as PlayStation Plus and

Xbox Live) require monthly or yearly payments, and downloadable content (DLC) and micro-transactions have become an industry standard covering all platforms. As such, a person's access to gaming and the game cultural capital she possesses is not merely based on immaterial possessions and qualities, but it is also impacted by material, infrastructural, and financial limitations. The gamer identity can thus be viewed as a consumer identity, even though it can be perceived differently by someone identifying as a gamer (see Chess, 2017). I will examine this topic more closely in chapter 6 Constructing the idea and identity of a gamer.

In questionnaire responses, some women mentioned that they selected and bought their computer specifically for the purpose of gaming in mind, and computers were often talked about as 'gaming computers' and 'gaming machines'. A few mentioned also taking this into consideration for other devices, such as mobile phones, as well. There were, of course, also respondents who had originally bought their devices for other purposes, even though the devices were then also used for gaming. One respondent (R310) commented that she intentionally bought a computer which did not allow any gaming but did not specify her reasons for this choice in more detail.

In addition to gaming computers, gaming consoles, tablets, and mobile phones, some peripheral devices were reported to be vital parts of the respondent's gaming setup, such as having multiple monitors or a mouse specifically designed for certain type of games (e.g., a MMO mouse). In general, device acquisitions were directed by the types of games the person wanted to play, personal preferences, or loyalty to certain brands – not to forget financial limitations – but also personal needs, such as those related to physical accessibility. One respondent mentioned, for example, that she needed a left-hand MMO mouse, and another explained that for 'her age', only one specific tablet seemed to have a large enough screen size for her gaming needs. Needs related to physical accessibility of gaming devices are not specific to women, but concern many different types of players, players with physical disabilities in particular (see Ellis & Kao, 2019).

4.2.4 Social play

4.2.4.1 Alone and together, online and offline

In many ways, digital gaming is very social in its nature, which is one of the aspects that draws many people to gaming (e.g., Kallio et al., 2011; Mäyrä et al., 2017; Consalvo et al., 2018). In their InSoGa model, Kallio and others (2011) present the sociability of gaming as a continuum, ranging from (solely) lone gaming to (entirely) sociable gaming. They define three distinctive places in which the sociability of gaming may manifest (Ibid., p. 337):

> First, gaming can take place in the same *physical space* with other people, where it is possible to play *in cooperation* (i.e., work toward a shared goal), *against each other* (on opposite sides), or *alongside* (simultaneously, taking turns, advising, and keeping company). Second, all the aforementioned roles can also be acquired in *virtual space*, as common action taking place *within* the game. Third, the social aspects of gaming may take place *outside* of the actual gaming situation, both physically and virtually. This social aspect refers to sharing ideas, understandings, tips, opinions, successes, and other experiences of games and gaming with other people.

In the questionnaire, I asked the respondents if they currently played most often alone or in the company of others, either online or in a shared offline environment (figure 13). Over a half of the 734 respondents answering this question (57.08%, 419 respondents) replied that they played most often alone, and around a quarter of the respondents (25.89%, 190 respondents) said that they played alone and in the company of others in equal measure. A slightly fewer number of respondents (17.03%, 125 respondents) answered that they mostly played in the company of others, either online (9.54%, 70 respondents) or in an offline environment shared with others (8.49%, 55 respondents).

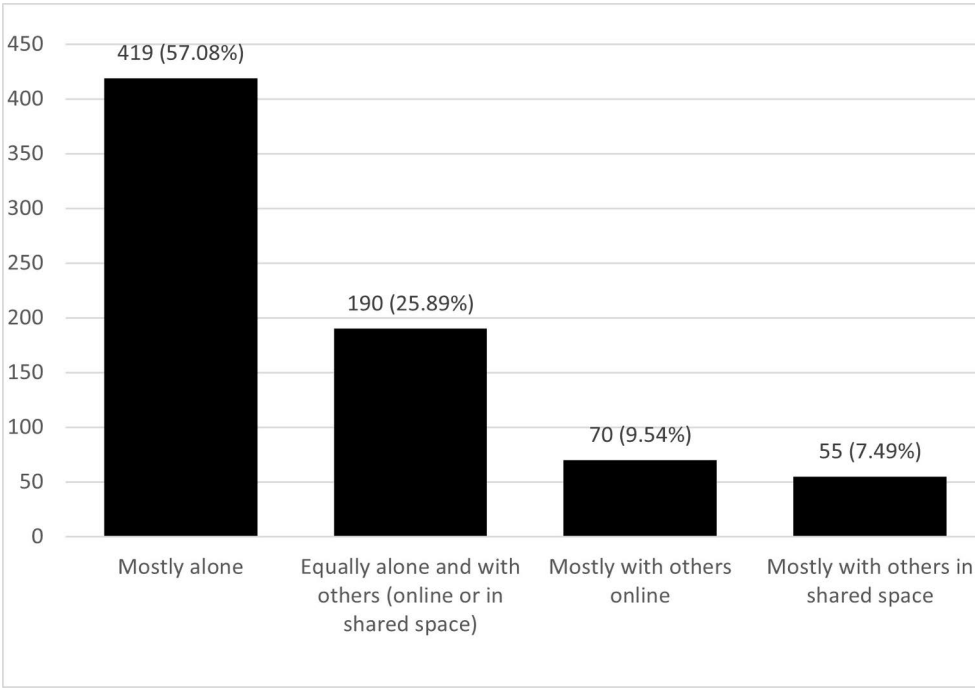

Figure 13. Most common gaming company of the questionnaire respondents (N=734).

When given an opportunity to expand their answers, many respondents brought up negative experiences and feelings that they attached to online group play. Some respondents even wrote how they had chosen not to play any multiplayer games at all because they feared that they would be mistreated. Some mentioned that this was at least partially due to their gender:

> **R39:** I never play online games with strangers, I do not feel like getting targeted by a wave of filth just for being a woman. I get on better on my own, without any pressure to perform.

It seemed to be something quite a few respondents took for granted, that revealing their gender in an online gaming community would cause other players to treat them differently than if they were assumed to represent the norm – men players. It was not clear from the responses if these assumptions were based on the respondents' own experiences, or what they had heard or witnessed someone else experience, or simply what they assumed would happen. However, earlier research too has shown that women players are treated differently than men in gaming environments (e.g., Cote, 2017; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018).

There were, of course, other reasons for the respondents to choose not to play online games, such as one respondent stating that she simply 'detests the mere idea of playing with others (online)' (R234). And some, like the respondent in the previous quote, pointed out that they do not enjoy playing multiplayer games in which they feel pressured to perform at certain level, or where others relied on them.

Some respondents mentioned playing multiplayer games without communicating with other players. For example, playing a MMORPG alone, focusing on the so-called 'solo' content, or intentionally opting out from social interactions in games either partially or completely, such as turning off text or voice chatting, and thus not being able to see or hear any communication from other players – all the while playing together with those players. These respondents were actively setting limits to their own sociability and interactions from other players while still participating in multiplayer games on their own terms. Women are known to use such strategies to prevent gender-based harassment in gaming environments (e.g., Cote, 2017; Fox & Tang, 2017; Richard & Gray, 2018).

On the other hand, some respondents mentioned logging in to multiplayer games with no intention of playing the game but just to socialise with other players – simply using the game as an online chat environment. Games were also described as platforms for forming and maintaining friendships (respondents meeting friends through gaming or spending time with friends in games) as well as romantic relationships (see also Butt, 2022). The varied responses showed that the women held very diverse views about multiplayer games: some chose to stay out of them

completely for various reasons, while others gladly engaged with them. Meanwhile, others chose to participate while limiting their interactions with other players or staying out from – at least some of – the multiplayer aspects of these games.

Some respondents described playing in the same offline space with others. One described, for example, having her wife's computer on the same desk than hers, and playing the same games near each other. Other respondents mentioned having their partner's computers close – or at least in the same room – and playing at the same time, either the same or different games. Even if people in the room were playing different games, they would tell each other about their progress and what was happening in their game, commenting each other's gameplay. In this way, the gaming experience can be a shared experience, even without playing the same game together.

In the interviews, the women shared similar stories of playing together with partners, family members, or friends – online and offline – while some preferred playing alone. For those women who enjoyed social aspects of gaming, social gameplay could take many forms. One of the interviewees regularly played some online multiplayer games with others online, she played at home with her partner in the same room – both playing their own games – and organised in-person LAN parties with her player friend groups:

> **I8:** Often at home, for example, I play so that my partner also plays, but he plays a different game. So we play in the same space, we're together and apart at the same time. Then we also have these small LAN things with a group of girls, or couple of different groups of girls, even. Then we play WoW, usually.

All in all, gaming can be social in various ways. People can play together, either online or offline, watch each other play (again, online or offline), or share their gaming experiences in discussions, streams, or videos. At the same time, gaming does not always have to be social. For some players, it can be important to be able to spend time alone with a game, and some are careful about setting their own limits of sociability even in multiplayer games. From the perspective of women players, it is important to pay attention to the ways in which their gender may limit the sociability of their gaming. Based on the participants' descriptions, their choices regarding social interactions in games were not solely based on personal preferences, but also their wish to avoid gender-based harassment.

4.2.4.2 Player communities

In the online questionnaire, I asked respondents if they were members in any player group, online or offline, such as a MMO guild, an esports team, or a hobbyist

community (figure 14). The majority of the 718 respondents answering this question (63.79%, 458 respondents) did not belong to any such group at the time. Some mentioned being members of some gaming community (17.97%, 129 respondents), or a MMO guild (16.16%, 116 respondents). Even fewer replied that they were members in a gaming association (1.95%, 14 respondents) or an esports team (0.42%, 3 respondents). Of all respondents to this question, 6.82% (49 respondents) answered that they belong to 'some other' gaming group. Respondents described a few examples, such as WhatsApp groups, LAN organisations, and groups of friends who play together regularly.

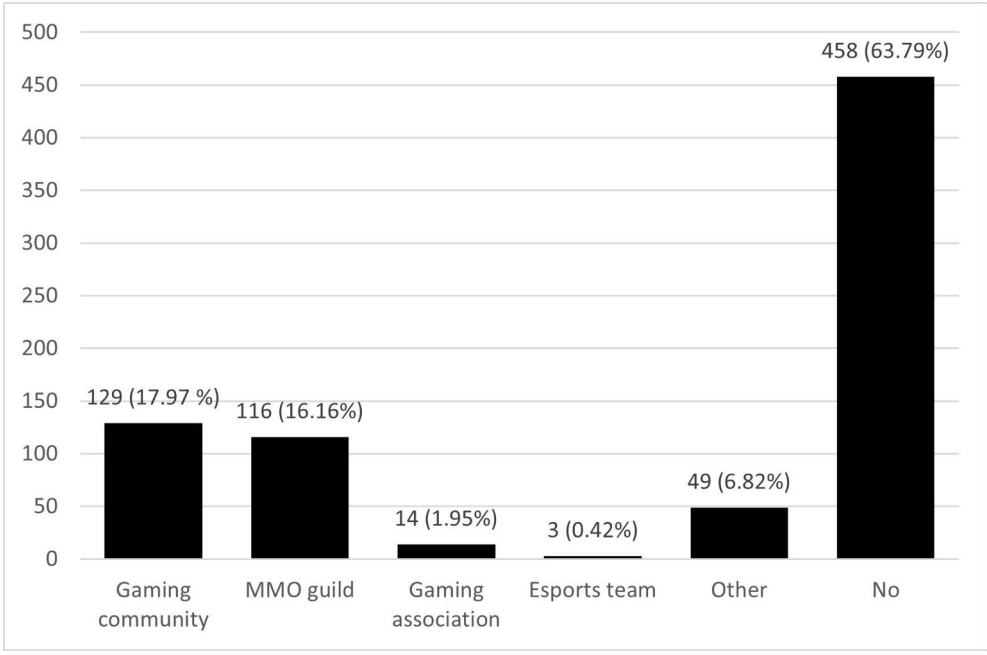

Figure 14. Questionnaire respondents' belonging to a player community (N=718).

Interestingly, several respondents mentioned still using, or at least having used, discussion forums as an online platform for gaming communities, even though those had been replaced with newer platform types for the most part. Unsurprisingly, Facebook and Discord were mentioned more often than more old-fashioned online discussion boards. Facebook seemed to be a platform for a variety of different gaming communities: from 'Pokémon GO seniors' (the community most often mentioned in the answers) to 'retro gamers' and 'geek women's gaming group' (one of the Facebook groups where I shared the questionnaire). Discord, on the other hand, is a platform that is more clearly dedicated to gaming and not as widespread as such, but was still often mentioned in responses as a popular communication

platform amongst gaming hobbyists. Other platforms, more rarely mentioned, included WhatsApp, Steam, and IRC.

Regarding communities built around specific games, alongside MMO communities, *Pokémon GO* communities were often mentioned in responses. Several *Pokémon GO* Facebook groups, such as the previously mentioned 'Pokémon GO seniors', and groups like 'Geek Girls' Pokémon GO group', and 'Pokémon GO Helsinki', were explicitly mentioned by name, and even more respondents simply mentioned belonging to one or several *Pokémon GO* player groups without detailing which ones. Most of these groups seemed to be located on Facebook, but WhatsApp was also noted as a platform used.

Based on the responses, academic communities are also a fruitful environments for forming player communities in Finland, as 'Academic Gamers' from Tampere University and 'CRYO' from the University of Oulu were mentioned by name, alongside other gaming clubs of subject associations at various universities and universities of applied sciences.

I asked questionnaire respondents to estimate if their inner circle of people (e. g., family, friends, colleagues) included many people who played games. On a scale from one to five, where five describes them perfectly, 61.83% of the 730 respondents answering this question replied four or five (figure 15).

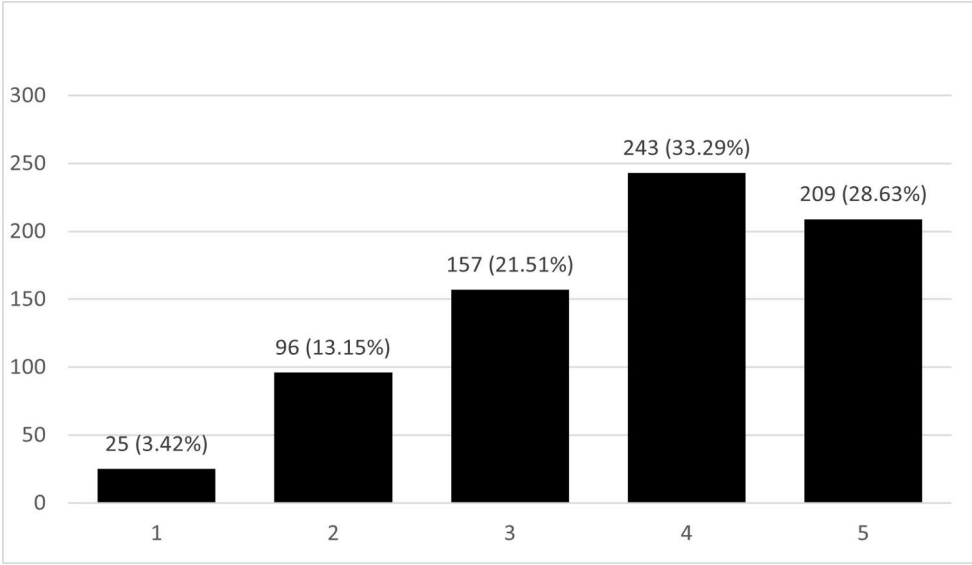

Figure 15. Gaming in the respondents' inner circle of people (on a scale of 1 to 5, does the respondent's inner circle contain many people who play games, N=730).

This, together with other findings from the questionnaire and interview material, suggests that gaming often happens, and is sustained as a hobby, in a social environment which supports the activity. This may be particularly true for women players due to the gendered limits to their game cultural participation, which I will examine more closely in the following chapter.

5 Women players' game cultural participation

In this chapter, I will focus on my second sub research question: How does gender affect women players' game cultural participation? I will begin the chapter by presenting the theoretical background on the different aspects of women's game cultural participation: entering game culture, invisibility and gender performances of women players, and collecting game cultural capital. Next, I will examine the different ways that Finnish women in the study participated in the consumption and production of game culture: participating in gaming events, watching (but mostly not participating in) esports, and consuming and producing various forms of game media. In this examination, I will focus on what kind of a role gender plays in creating and limiting the possibilities for women's game cultural participation, and what kinds of gender performances are involved in women players' game cultural participation. Finally, I will describe how women participating in the study described the various ways that their gender affected their gaming.

5.1 Gender and women's game cultural participation

5.1.1 Barriers to entrance into game culture

The first step of game cultural participation is gaining entrance into gaming – and game culture writ large. It is only after a person has been able to gain this entrance that she will be able to start accumulating game cultural capital. In studying gender and game culture, it is interesting to look at the ways and terms that allow people to enter game culture – and how those ways and terms are gendered in nature. There are different types of barriers for women's entrance into gaming: physical, economic, social, and cultural.

Physical barriers are related to gaining access to gaming devices and having the physical ability to use them. Access to technology – gaming technology included – is historically gendered in many ways. Riitta Nieminen-Sundell's (2003) study of Finnish families' domestic technology relationships outlines the ways that home

environments produce the gendering of technology: whom the technology was bought for, whose room it was placed in, who gets to use it (when and how often), what are considered 'correct' ways of using it, and how other members of the household talk about each other's use of technology. A common example is placing a 'shared' computer in a boy's room instead of his sister's room or a shared space such as the living room, thus allowing the boy to physically have control over the device and related activities. Decisions such as these, constantly made within households, send a message of whom the gaming device and gaming as an activity is for, and whose play time is valued within the family. These types of practices actively produce the gendering of technology, its use, and users, by turning a potential family computer into a masculine boy's gaming toy (Ibid.).

Jessica Enevold (2014) has studied the domestication of digital play in terms of digital materialities and everyday family practices in Scandinavian households from the perspective of mothers who play digital games. Enevold reminds us that play cannot be detached from our material surroundings and everyday environments. Digital play, too, happens through physical devices and in a material environment, and is an embodied practice. It is important to understand that marginalised player groups like women do not only need to negotiate their participation and belonging in the online gaming environments, but also in their physical surroundings – both at home and in other spaces, such as gaming events and competitions. In these physical environments – and at home, in particular – women players may not only be performing play, but also gender, in addition to their family roles of partnership and motherhood (Ibid.).

In addition to gender-based limitations related to questions of the physical location of devices and amongst the physical barriers to gaming, it is worth noting there are also limitations concerning other marginalised player groups, such as limitations related to physical accessibility for players with disabilities (see Ellis & Kao, 2019).

Economic barriers to gaming are related to game culture's nature as consumer culture. Gaming devices, such as gaming PCs, consoles, and smartphones, are expensive, and, following the increased production costs for the sixth-generation gaming consoles, the price of games is also on the rise (Gilbert, 2020; on the economic barriers to gaming, see also Bergstrom, 2019, pp. 3–4). Many new mainstream AAA games also require advanced hardware and a stable, high-speed internet connection to play. Some games, such as MMORPGs like *Final Fantasy XIV* (Square Enix, 2010/2013) or *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), and game services like PlayStation Plus or Xbox Live, require monthly subscriptions. Monetary barriers are not necessarily gender-based, although it is worth considering that at least in Finland women and girls generally have less money to spend on their personal consumption than men and boys, and men and boys have

more power over entertainment technology purchases within families (Raijas & Wilska, 2007; Wilska & Lintonen, 2016). Following Bourdieu (1986), game cultural capital is partially tied to economic capital, and gendered limits affecting women's opportunities for accumulating economic capital also affect their opportunities for accumulating game cultural capital. Furthermore, games and related cultural products are generally designed and marketed for men, excluding women from the consumerist gamer identity (see Richard, 2012; Chess, 2017). However, for women, the consumerist nature of gaming as an activity and identity is not necessarily just a limiting factor to accessing them. On the contrary, Shira Chess (2017, p. 123) suggests that women may consume their way into gaming, and the game industry has indeed started to consider women as a valid target audience due to their consumption – although often in a very limited and reductive manner.

Social structures, networks, and cultures around games are crucial in gaining access to gaming, and those are strongly gendered in many ways. Having extensively studied professional and competitive gaming, T.L. Taylor notes the importance of paying attention to the context and structure around game play, as 'social networks and access […] are core considerations for play' (2008, p. 53). As Taylor explains, one often becomes a player through social networks and learns how to be one in specific social contexts. According to Taylor, 'how people come to know about a game, get reviews of it (formal or informal), get their hands on it, are taught how to play it, and indeed have people to play with is deeply informed by their social networks' (Ibid., pp. 53–54). Taylor further explicates (Ibid., p. 55):

> Part of the work of any leisure activity is coming to understand – practically and symbolically – that it is something you can do, that it is not at odds with your sense of self or your social world. The game industry (and, I would argue, the larger community) knows this at some level and is constantly working to give players information about new games, where to get them, why they are fun, and how to play them. Just as powerfully, it is always mirroring back to boys and men that 'this is your and your friends' play space' and 'you belong here.' Rarely are women gamers given this kind of attention.

In the same vein, Nick Yee's study on MMORPG players notes that it is not necessarily the games themselves, their contents, and mechanics, that are turning women away, but the culture around games (2008, p. 84). According to Yee, women play online multiplayer games as much and in the same ways as men, and the central difference between these players is how they enter the game and its culture (women are often introduced to the game by a man), and how women are treated in these games. As Taylor notes, 'we should not overlook the power such introductions provide in both legitimating inhabitation of that space and providing the tools to stay'

(2008, p. 53). Comparatively, Yee's study found that 'men are allowed relatively free access to online games, but a woman's presence in an online game is seen legitimate only if it occurs via a relationship with a man' (2008, p. 87). Following heteronormative assumptions and expectations, a woman in these spaces can only be accepted as a 'real' woman after her existence has been justified by a man companion (Ibid.). A woman seeking to enter this environment, to play for and by herself, is breaking the cultural norms of the scene.

It is precisely because of this, when trying to understand the game cultural structures of exclusion towards women (and other marginalised player groups), one should not only look at their current gaming activities, but also their wider game cultural participation, and to identify the gendered elements of game cultural capital beyond gameplay.

5.1.2 Women players' invisibility and gender performances

Visibility is central to game cultural participation, and for the embodied performance of game cultural capital in the form of gamer habitus. It is not sufficient for women – and other player groups marginalised within game culture – to play games and participate in game culture in invisible and hidden ways. For game cultural participation to be real, it must be active and visible. Women's digital gaming has long been invisible and still remains obscured in some ways. This may cause women players to feel alone in their gaming hobby and within game culture. However, as T.L. Taylor has noted, 'this social isolation [of women players in gaming] may not always be, as it can appear at first glance, because they do not have women friends who play but because they do not *know* their friends play. Far too often we find that women gamers occupy a kind of closeted gamer identity' (2008, p. 54). This is one of the reasons why it is so important to make women's gaming and game cultural participation visible – although the environment must also be made safe for them.

As noted in the previous chapter on women's gaming practices, there are many women playing digital games very actively and diversely, but their gaming is often limited to private environments and to playing with previously familiar company. However, it is not just their gaming habits that make women invisible in game culture, but also gaming communities, game industry, game media – and even game research for a long time (Taylor, 2008). It is difficult, if not impossible, to determine which is the chicken and which the egg in this situation: the women's tendency to play out of sight or them being pushed into hiding by game culture. In 2008, Taylor wrote that 'the sidelining of women gamers in the general [game] culture has, unfortunately, been mirrored far too often within industry and research communities. The population of women that does play games is frequently seen as an anomaly rather than taken as a prime informant for understanding how play works' (Ibid., p.

54). Indeed, some researchers of gender and gaming have suggested that the goal of this line of research should be to make the 'invisible women gamers' visible (Bryce & Rutter, 2002; Taylor, 2008).

The invisibility of women players is caused, in one part, by the cultural assumption of who plays digital games. Women are also actively made invisible in player communities by, for example, making constant jokes about how women players do not actually exist, or by assuming all players to be men – even a woman team member on the voice channel can be interpreted as a teenage boy. The stereotypical image of a gamer as a White, young, heterosexual, cisgender man is so strong that it does not only exclude women, but all other kinds of players too, based on their gender, sexual orientation, or ethnic background, leaving them in the invisible marginals of game culture (Cote, 2017; Richard & Gray, 2018).

On the other hand, remaining invisible may also be an intentionally adopted tactic for the marginalised players. For example, some women choose to remain silent in team voice chats or use a 'neutral' gamer tag that does not make them be assumed as women, as I described in the previous chapter based on the stories of women participating in this study. These choices may be acts of defence against gender-based harassment and discrimination women often face in online multiplayer games. Based on their research, Gabriela T. Richard and Kishonna L. Gray (2018) note that voice discussions in games can also lead to racial profiling of players and racist harassment, and that women and players of colour have developed strategies to hide their identities in order to protect themselves from harassment.

When women players are visibly present in gaming, they are often seen as representatives of their gender (see Witkowski, 2018; Choi et al., 2020; Friman & Ruotsalainen, 2022). Emma Witkowski (2018) has studied how women engaging in high-performance play and esports perform and deconstruct femininity within those environments – living and producing, confronting and contesting the identity of a 'gamer girl'. Through her analysis, Witkowski shows that in esports, 'femininity is toyed with and managed' by women participating in the scene in different roles (Ibid., p. 187). Witkowski notes that 'women at the high-performance level of play regularly communicate how they run the gauntlet as a gendered object in their path towards serious esports competition' (Ibid., p. 187). They are, in other words, simultaneously performing gender and aiming to control it, to be considered as 'just a player', like everyone else. As Witkowski describes (Ibid., p. 194):

> For those engulfed in the mainstream terminology of the girl gamer, playing to win might really mean to engage in substantial performance management in order to preserve basic mobility and safety on a high-performance gaming scene, while simultaneously chipping away at entrenched modes and forms of gendered participation therein.

At the same time, competitive women players are often seen primarily as representatives of their gender, not as competitors, and face many different forms of gender-based discrimination and harassment on their path to higher ranks and competition opportunities (Friman & Ruotsalainen, 2022). It is also worth noting that for aspiring women participants, gender is not a barrier of entry only into esports competitions, but also to many financial and career development opportunities in this area (Witkowski, 2018, p. 187).

As I described in chapter 2 Theoretical framework, Judith Butler (1999, 2009) has theorised gender as a performance, describing how people are socially expected to perform their gender in a 'correct' manner. This is similarly true in the context of games, and particularly in the context of the most visible forms of public gameplay, such as esports competitions, as well as in streaming and gaming videos. Women entering the scene of professional gaming – as players, streamers, and competitors – face gender-based harassment and discrimination (see Fox & Tang, 2017; Uszkoreit, 2018; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018; Richard & Gray, 2018). Within these scenes, women players are not only evaluated as players, but also in terms of being 'real' and the 'right kind' of women or not (see Ruotsalainen & Friman, 2018; Witkowski, 2018; Siutila & Havaste, 2019; Choi et al. 2020; Friman & Ruotsalainen, 2022). Women competitors' gender is often overly emphasised (Cullen, 2018; Witkowski, 2018) and their presence is interpreted through problematic gender-based stereotypes (Siutila & Havaste, 2019). Whether they succeed or fail when competing, women are seen not only representing their team but also their gender (Ruotsalainen & Friman, 2018). As Emma Witkowski notes (2018, p. 188):

> For women engaging in such expert gaming endeavours, their gender performances (while varied) are made alongside productions of hegemonic sporting masculinity as a gender performance that is locally dominant, associated to traditional sports, and aligned to male body skill superiority, antagonistic competitiveness, and heterosexual virility.

Women players must attempt to align themselves with this expected, masculine image of an esports player but, furthermore, are constantly positioned as an 'other' within the scene and pressured to perform their gender in an acceptably feminine manner. In other words, the gamer habitus, and the habitus of an esports athlete in particular, seems to demand masculine performance of gender.

One area where these gendered expectations become visible is how women esports players are discussed in the player and fan communities, and the media. Yeomi Choi, Janine S. Slaker, and Nida Ahmad (2020) examined the gendered surveillance mechanics in professional gaming, analysing the case of Korean *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016) player Kim 'Geguri' Se-yeon, who was

the first (and, so far, the only) woman to play in the Overwatch League (the highest level of *Overwatch* esports) from 2018 to 2020. In 2016, Geguri, at the time 17–years-old, was accused of cheating when she competed for the first time in the Nexus Cup qualifiers of *Overwatch*. There were several men players who did not believe that her skills were as good as her performance. Two of them proclaimed that, if Geguri could prove her skills to be true, they would quit their own professional careers. One player even threatened to 'visit her house with a knife' (Ibid.). To prove that she was not using any kind of forbidden software to assist her aiming, and that her skills were indeed at the level of her exquisite performance, Geguri agreed to a live broadcast of playing the game with cameras following her mouse use while simultaneously displaying the gameplay footage for over an hour of continuous play (Ibid., p. 4). Analysing online discussions on Geguri regarding the suspected cheating and disproving those doubts, Choi and co-authors noted how Geguri was not only evaluated as a player but as a woman: 'making violent statements against her gender, appearance, and function as a female in society' (Ibid., p. 4). Instead of focusing on her gameplay, Geguri was criticised for not having a heteronormatively womanly appearance due to her short hair and not wearing any makeup, and her appearance was negatively commented in other ways, as she was not seen as representing the normative feminine beauty ideals for Asian women (Ibid., pp. 7–8).

Maria Ruotsalainen and I (2018) have studied community discussions regarding women in competitive *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016) and *Overwatch* esports on the official *Overwatch* forums. In the study, we found that women were simultaneously being written out of existence and written into existing in extremely limited ways; their possibilities for participation determined by and their active presence interpreted through their gender. In another study, we (Friman & Ruotsalainen, 2022) examined how the community and media discussed the competitive *Overwatch* player behind the account handle 'Ellie'. In late 2018, Ellie was recruited by an Overwatch Contenders league team Second Wind, stirring speculations that they were a man player posing as a woman. We found that Ellie's legitimacy as a player entirely revolved around the question of their gender and if they were a 'real' woman player or not. In both studies, we found that women players in competitive gaming and esports face a variety of gender-based expectations, and that breaking gender norms may lead to questioning the legitimacy of their identity (Ruotsalainen & Friman, 2018; Friman & Ruotsalainen, 2022). In Miia Siutila's and Ellinoora Havaste's study (2019) of community discussions on all-woman teams in two biggest esports games, *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009) and *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (Valve Corporation, 2012), they found that women must hide their gender and tolerate harassment to be accepted as competitive players by the community.

In competitive gaming and esports, women constantly face contradictory requirements asking them to simultaneously perform the role of a competitive gamer embracing hegemonic masculinity, while also embodying the role of an 'other', marked as an outsider of the scene because of their gender (Taylor et al., 2009; Witkowski, 2018). Women are expected to hide their gender and perform the right kind of 'girl gamer' femininity. They must play the role of a feminist hero, taking on the responsibility of actively advancing women's position in esports, even if they were only interested in being a professional gamer and focusing on their career like other players (Choi et al., 2020, pp. 4–5). Women's gender performances in competitive gaming and esports are positioned at the crossroads of these contradictory requirements, making it almost impossible to exist as a woman in these spaces. Even though the studies mentioned here focus on specific types of games and play styles (competitive gaming and esports), these games and their communities represent the mainstream 'core' game culture, and thus also reflect women's position in game culture more broadly. This particularly highlights the ways in which opportunities for embodied displays of game cultural capital through gamer habitus escape from women, as their gamer performances are repeatedly assessed through their gender instead of their gaming skill and expertise.

5.1.3 Gendered gaming expertise

Game cultural participation leads to accumulation of game cultural capital, which, in its most visible forms, is performed through gaming skill and gaming expertise. Both displays and interpretations of gaming skill and expertise can be gendered in nature. Concerning gaming expertise, Claus Toft-Nielsen observes that expertise in this area is constructed socially and materially through the intertwining of technology and gender (2016, p. 72). Conducting focus-group interviews with heterosexual couples who played *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) together, Toft-Nielsen found that women who played with their men partners systematically undermined their own expertise regarding the game (2016, p. 76): 'Despite the fact that the couples played together every day and two of the women played more often and in longer sessions than their husband/boyfriend, the three women all positioned themselves as less able, less skilled and less knowledgeable than the men'. In Toft-Nielsen's interviews, it was not only the men that claimed the gaming expertise to themselves, but the women were also actively rejecting it from themselves. As Toft-Nielsen describes it, 'by *not* claiming gaming capital and positioning themselves as ignorant in regard to the out-of-game practices, the women claim what Walkerdine has termed "the habitual feminine position of incompetence"' (2016, p. 77). These women were actively rejecting the expert position and performing ignorance instead – a role better fitting to the gendered

expectations within game culture, as noted in the previous section of this chapter describing women's gender performances in gaming. While women participating in Toft-Nielsen's study engaged with the game and gaming technology as often as the men (playing *WoW* almost daily), their room for 'appropriate' participation was much more limited in terms of ways of playing, skilfulness, and expertise (Ibid., p. 78).

Gaming as an activity – and related expertise – is an embodied practice performed in material, often domestic, but also public and online contexts. Toft-Nielsen (2016), in the same vein with Enevold's (2014) earlier work, notes that gaming expertise cannot be separated from the everyday material contexts in which gaming happens. In previous research, Nieminen-Sundell (2003) and Witkowski (2018) have noted that, despite displaying technological expertise and even virtuosity in high-performance play, women's technological and gaming expertise is frequently challenged in both domestic and public contexts. Gaming expertise is constructed as gendered in the same ways to their wider technological expertise, which in hegemonic discourse seems to be accumulated by men and boys through their 'natural' skill and enthusiasm, whereas women and girls are seen as unskilled non-users (Corneliussen, 2011, pp. 29–55).

In game culture, too, expectations of skill and expertise are placed on certain types of players, while marginalised players, such as women, are not expected to possess either. At the same time, standards for women players are placed much higher, and their skills are put under scrutiny (Choi et al., 2020). These double standards make it much more difficult for women to collect game cultural capital and advance in the game cultural hierarchy. Gendered expectations regarding different aspects of game cultural capital, such as gaming skill and expertise, are further tied to the image and identity of a gamer (which I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter 6. Constructing the idea and identity of a gamer).

In the next section of this chapter, I will describe how women participating in this study described their entrance into gaming, the different aspects of their game cultural participation, and how their gender affected these.

5.2 Entering game culture

To understand how women participating in the study originally entered game culture, I asked participants about their early experiences and first memories of gaming, in both the online questionnaire and interviews. The central themes in participants' entrance to game culture are summarised in figure 16.

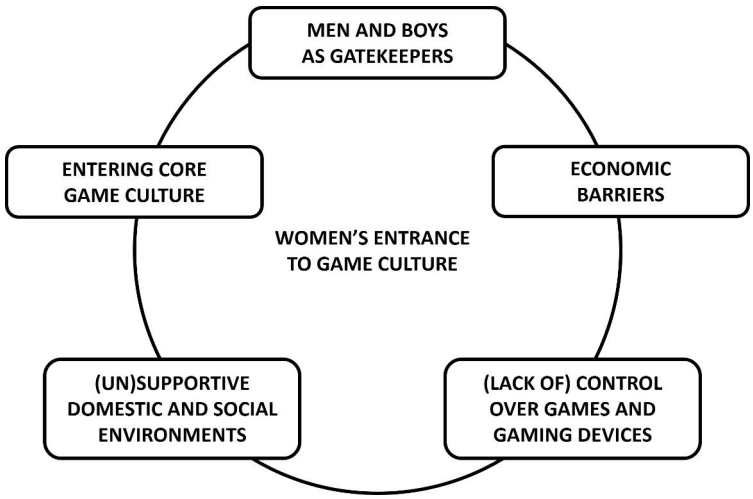

Figure 16. Central themes in participants' entrance to game culture.

As noted in the previous section of this chapter, based on prior research, women's pathways into gaming are often opened – or closed – by men (Yee, 2008). Stories like these were frequently present in my own participants' descriptions of their early gaming experiences and memories. For example, two women that I interviewed together (I1 and I2), told me that they had tried to – but were at first prevented from – entering game culture through their older brothers. One of them (I1) described to me that she had watched her older brother playing a *Counter-Strike* (Valve Corporation, 2000–) game on his PC, and wanted to play but her brother would not allow her because, according to him, she 'wouldn't know how'. This description is a very concrete example of how men and boys may hold power over both gaming devices and gaming expertise within domestic settings and beyond (see also Nieminen-Sundell, 2003; Enevold, 2014).

The interviewee vividly remembered that her brother finally allowed her to play for the first time on New Year's Eve when she was twelve. Interestingly, she told me she had played other games on their family's Nintendo and Sega consoles before this, but gaining access to PC gaming and *Counter-Strike* through her brother was nevertheless what she described as the starting point of her gaming. As such, she did not seem to consider her childhood console gaming as 'real gaming' but felt that her gaming had not truly begun until she got her hands on the type of games more valued in the core game culture (on these 'real games', see Consalvo & Paul, 2019). In other words, that New Year's Eve and her first experiences with FPS gaming on PC was when she first started accumulating game cultural capital, her first entrance into the core game culture. According to John Vanderhoef's analysis, so-called hardcore games like competitive PC games, such as *Counter-Strike* (Valve Corporation, 2000)

are 'paired with masculinity and celebrated as the authentic and superior game design as experience', whereas more casual games are feminisised and devalued in game culture (Vanderhoef, 2013; see also Consalvo & Paul, 2019).

It was quite common that the study participants separated significant games and game-related experiences from others in their responses. When asked about how they ended up playing, some first talked about the most significant game or event in their memories – and then proceeded to describe how they had played some other games even before that point. Based on this, it seems clear that some games, devices, and experiences may become much more significant than others. For some participants, the significance seemed to stem, at least partially, from the game cultural value – i.e., game cultural capital – attached to certain games, and the stories from those early gaming memories were often about starting 'real' gaming, as in the previous example. On the other hand, some memories related to significant games also described games of importance to the participants for other reasons.

The participants' childhoods had mostly happened when people in Finland did not usually have their own personal gaming devices. According to Jaakko Suominen's study (2015), five percent of Finnish households owned a Nintendo console by the end of 1991, and the number of Commodore 64 computers in the country was around 150,000 in late 1980's and early 1990's. In the early 1990s, Finland suffered from an economic depression, losing the value of its currency. In turn, the economic downturn impacted the local consumer electronics and gaming markets (see Suominen, 2015). Because of gaming devices being rare in Finnish households during many participants' childhood and early youth, some described their earliest gaming memories as playing at a friend's, cousin's, or neighbour's home. Some explicitly mentioned that their family had never afforded a gaming console of their own, or that they could only afford a device which was not the most popular or what they really wanted. However, the participants described playing on whichever devices were available to them in various locations:

> **R257:** My family couldn't afford Nintendos or other consoles, so I played them at my friends' homes. When I was at the end of preliminary school my parents bought a computer and at the same time I got interested in computer games, since I now had a special opportunity to play them.

The quote above demonstrates how the financial situation of the family (i.e., their ability to purchase gaming devices or not) affects children's opportunities for play, and, as such, their opportunities for game cultural participation, from an early age.

On the other hand, many participants also described their childhood play on a family console (usually Nintendo or Sega) as their introduction to gaming. Based on these descriptions, accessibility to games at home is an important pathway into a

lasting gaming hobby. Supporting this, digital gameplay was a common hobby in the childhood homes of many online questionnaire respondents: 62.86% of respondents said that digital games were played either fairly or very much in their childhood home, whereas 26.67% of the respondents said they were played very little, and 10.47% that they were not played at all. In some cases, when gaming was present in their childhood homes, respondents felt that their gaming had not really started at any particular point in their lives, but felt that they had always been playing:

> **R277:** I have played computer games since the 1980s, from my early childhood. It has been a natural part of spending my free time, and I don't particularly see myself having "ended up" as a game hobbyist, but rather grown up as one.

Other questionnaire respondents, too, criticised the formulation in the question: 'I don't know how I "ended up" playing, because I always have' (R380), or said that they simply could not remember a time they had not played, having 'grown up with a controller in hand' (R619). Although many participants could not recall any particular point in time when they started gaming, some described the purchase of the first household gaming device as a starting point, as mentioned earlier.

Despite actively playing their childhood home, some participants felt that they had not been in control of their own playing until moving out into their own household. Some participants described how they had not bought their own games and gaming devices, not starting their 'active' gaming hobby until they were adults despite playing actively in their childhood. Some participants mentioned that their childhood homes (i.e., parents) were not very supportive of their gaming and did not want to buy a gaming device for the household. For some participants, getting into gaming required the space and independence (in the financial sense as well) to find out what they enjoy doing and getting into the hobby on their own terms.

Reflecting findings from earlier research (Nieminen-Sundell, 2003; Taylor, 2008; Yee, 2008), the participants shared many stories about their early gaming as being prevented or controlled by boys. On the other hand, some of the stories were also about the men and boys in the participants' lives enabling their entrance into game culture. They described, for example, how they got into gaming because 'their brother had a Super Nintendo' (R9), by 'watching their brother play' (R453), or simply 'through their brother' (R493). Some questionnaire respondents wrote that they arrived to gaming through a boyfriend or a husband:

> **R193:** As a child, I watched my brother play on a commodore 64 computer and an amiga, but I wasn't tempted to play until by a boyfriend I had when I was 28. I used to watch him play too and be interested.

Some wrote that their fathers played games and introduced them to the hobby, or that their father purchased a gaming console for the household. It was common to see descriptions of women's introductions to gaming as tied to their fathers: fathers purchasing a gaming device, playing their father's game, or watching their father play:

> **R198:** Back in the day, my father installed logic circuits for a living, and from there, due to computerisation, fixing and programming followed organically. Dad brought the first VIC-20 computer borrowed from a workmate home somewhere around 1986, and already a couple of years later we got our own C-64 machine with a cassette deck for a Christmas present. Dad taught how to play, bought games, machines, and magazines. Dad still plays, right now probably the newest GTA, as a 65-year-old. <3 Daddy is a hero.

Sisters, mothers, girlfriends, or wives introducing women to gaming were significantly rarer. Men and boys were mentioned as 'the ones playing games', buying or bringing games and gaming devices into the household. The respondents often described themselves as getting into gaming through watching their brothers and fathers play, not by actively playing (see also Orme, 2021). Sometimes the participants even described themselves as if they had drifted into gaming without any personal motivation or real agency. They described themselves as having no say to what games were played and on which devices in their homes. Instead, they depicted their gaming forming and changing according to the choices made by their fathers, brothers, and men partners (although some also mentioned siblings and partners in gender-neutral terms). Some directly expressed that, because they were a girl, they were not expected to be interested in gaming and their wishes were not listened nor taken into consideration in their childhood home. It was not until they moved out into their own place, or started earning their own money, that they could start playing on their own terms:

> **R734:** A friend's brother had a Nintendo in the early 1990's. I got to try, and that world immediately pulled me in. I had to ask a few times before I got a Nintendo of my own. It was probably because I was a girl with no brothers, and playing games was a "boys' thing". I have put all of my own money into my hobby, and it wasn't until my first job at 14 years-old that I got the freedom and the opportunities to acquire games and devices as I wished.

Another questionnaire respondent wrote that:

> **R371:** I had been interested [in gaming] since I was little, but as a child I didn't get a machine because I was a girl. My younger brothers did, though. I bought a machine and some games when I moved out from my parents.

Similar kinds of family practices to Nieminen-Sundell's (2003) study continued to present in this study's participant's lived experiences, and seem commonly present in gaming histories of women players more generally. As mentioned in the previous chapter, according to studies on Finnish children and youth from 2013 and 2016, Finnish boys can access gaming devices and have them in their personal use more often than girls, and girls' personal gaming devices are usually outdated models inherited from older brothers (Suoninen, 2013; Merikivi et al., 2016). Many participants of this study also described how their gaming was significantly less supported, both financially and in spirit, than their brothers':

> **R2:** The biggest affect [of my gender in my gaming] has been when I was a child, and gaming devices were bought for my brother, but I had to make the money and buy them for myself. A shared computer was placed in my brother's room.

Some parents, relatives, or childhood friends considered gaming inappropriate for a girl, but more often participants described gaming in their childhood as a common activity for children of certain age regardless of gender.

Respondents sometimes mentioned their friends as an important support for continuing the hobby, through sharing information and recommendations on games and playing together. Some described how they had played quite actively in their childhood but stopped playing at some point (often in their teenage years), until reintroduced to gaming by friends or a partner. Sometimes participants said that they had gotten into gaming through their children or, more rarely, because of their work. In addition to accessing games and gaming devices in their childhood home, friends or a partner who also played supported the participants' gaming hobby in their adult lives – even if they mostly played alone, as described in the previous chapter.

Notably, entering game culture did not mean starting to actively play for all participants. Instead, some described the beginning of their game cultural participation through other activities, mainly watching others play:

> **R705:** I have followed my big brothers' computer play since I was born. The first picture of me playing on a computer is from when I was 4-years-old. For the most part, though, I have watch others play, maybe tried a bit in addition to that, if my older siblings and their friends have let me.

> As a teenager, my group of friends included fanatic computer gamers (boys) and I was occasionally also able to try new games on my big brother's computer. That said, I wasn't really all that interested in playing per se, I just liked to watch from the sidelines and listen to the chatter about games.

Looking through the lens of leisure studies at different obstacles for participation in playing, Stephanie Orme (2021) points out that the social contexts of play include many structural barriers. Orme lists access to gaming as one of these, noting that there exist notable gender-based differences to it: in her study, while men shared stories of playing, all the way from their youth, women shared stories of watching others play instead (Ibid., pp. 12–13). Orme argues that this is a result of gendered leisure constraints in their households, echoing the findings of Nieminen-Sundell (2003) and Enevold (2014), who write about how gaming is constructed as a gendered practice in domestic environments. In her study on barriers to play, Kelly Bergstrom (2019) notes that there are many kinds of gendered restrictions to women's leisure time, and due to cultural circumstances, women's participation in gaming – or lack of – is not necessarily up to a personal free choice, even though this is often assumed as such.

As I have described in this section, gender played a role in women's entrance to game culture for participants in this study, too, from the perspectives of having men and boys act as gatekeepers to their gaming, lacking control over the games and gaming devices in their household, and experiencing unsupportive social environments. Entrance to game culture is only the first step towards game cultural participation, although required for accumulation of game cultural capital and development of gamer habitus. Next, I will describe how women participating in this study described the different aspects of their game cultural participation, and how and why they choose to participate or not participate in different game cultural activities.

5.3 Participating in game culture

5.3.1 Participating in gaming events

When it comes to public gaming events, Finland has had a long and active history even on a global standard. Although it began as one and can still be considered a demoscene event, Assembly, held twice a year, is currently one of the largest computer festivals in Europe, and very involved with gaming – as can be seen, for example, in the variety of esports tournaments organised during the event. Assembly was first organised in 1992 in collaboration with several demo groups, attracting over 700 visitors. Currently, the event is organised twice a year, as Assembly Winter and Assembly Summer, both events attracting around 5000 visitors each. In addition to the traditional demoscene

programme and competitions, the events include, for example, 'arttech' programme, esports tournaments, and streaming. Other large-scale gaming events held in Finland every year include LanTrek (organised in Tampere since 2001, around 1500 visitors) and Insomnia (organised in Pori since 2002, around 500 visitors).

For this study, I participated in Assembly Summer 2014, Insomnia events in 2014 and 2015, and also the world's largest gaming fair Gamescom (organised in Cologne, Germany, around 350,000 visitors) in 2016. These three events were all quite different in various ways (e.g., their size, their programme, their target audience). However, they shared one thing in common (games aside): they were all men-dominated. In all of them, most of the visitors and event staff were men. But there were also other ways in which the event spaces were gendered. For example, in a central part of the Assembly event hall, there was a big lounge dedicated to Axe (a.k.a. Lynx) – a brand for men's grooming products. Named 'Axe Peace Lounge' (following their newest product brand), the space provided beanbag chairs, a ping-pong table, and a popcorn machine (figure 17).

Figure 17. Axe peace lounge at Assembly Summer 2014. Photo: Assembly official gallery / Aleksi Kinnunen.

Each time I passed the area, there were usually two young women overseeing it and working as promoters for the brand. While women visitors were not explicitly excluded from the area, the brand and the presence of the promotional models

effectively marked it as a space built for men. Writing on gaming environments as gendered spaces, Jo Bryce and Jason Rutter (2003, pp. 12–13) describe LAN events as spaces where men participants dominate and women who attend need to 'fit into acceptable non-gamer roles': mothers accompanying their sons to competitions and women playing the role of a 'cheerleader girlfriend' to their gamer boyfriends. Nick Taylor and others (2009) report similar findings on women's limited participation roles as 'cheerleaders' and 'booth babes' in LAN events.

At Gamescom, many companies had opted for advertising their games by hiring young women (and, significantly more rarely, men) to dress in style of – or as – characters from the game (figure 18). These models are meant to promote the game by attracting visitors and posing for photographs – mostly with men visitors (see also Taylor et al., 2009, pp. 247–248).

Figure 18. Two promotional models posing for a photograph with a visitor at the Wargaming.net's *World of Tanks* stand at Gamescom 2016.

The presence of these promotional models – generally, and quite problematically, referred to as 'booth babes' – in gaming events has been a topic of heated discussion for well over a decade (Harding, 2017), also in academia (Taylor et al., 2009). A few

global gaming trade fairs have since placed strict rules and guidelines regarding models' dress code (e.g., nudity or partial nudity is not allowed) and their role in promoting the products (e.g., the models must have knowledge about the products they are promoting), amongst them E3 (Electronic Entertainment Expo) in 2006 and PAX (Penny Arcade Expo) in 2010.

While the debate has largely excluded the voices of those it primarily concerns – the promotional models themselves (Harding, 2017) – the discussions shed light on the audiences that these events are targeting and who feel welcome in them. If most participants are men, and women are only significantly present in the event in roles primarily intended for pleasing the heterosexual male gaze, this significantly shapes the limits and possibilities for women's presence and participation in these spaces. As an attendee myself and in discussion with others, it felt important that women visiting gaming events could see other women as equal participators in them – as visitors, organisers, and in various other roles that are not purely to serve men, unlike the aforementioned 'cheerleaders' and 'booth babes' (Bryce & Rutter, 2003; Taylor et al., 2009).

Currently, these environments may also be unsafe for women. For example, in Amanda Cote's study (2017), women players reported experiences of being touched and photographed without their permission when attending LAN events. According to A. Luxx Mishou (2021), who studies cosplayers from the perspective of gender and identity, such experiences are devastatingly common in the context of cosplay in fan events, particularly for people whose bodies are perceived as feminine. Because cosplaying as game characters is a common practice in gaming events, for both hobbyist cosplayers and professional models hired to promote games, it is crucial to consider the safety of women taking part in these activities. Ultimately, the goal here should be to ensure that there is equal room for women's participation in a variety of roles on their own terms in gaming events, and making sure that women can feel safe at them regardless of their role.

In recent years, various initiatives have been developed aiming to make gaming events more accessible to women. For example, lowering the social threshold for women's participation to Assembly Summer 2018, two Finnish women's networking groups on Facebook, 'Ompeluseura LevelUP koodarit' (for Finnish women programmers) and 'Women in Games (Finland)' (for Finnish women working in the game industry)[8] organised a special event entitled 'Girls go Assembly!'. Through this initiative, participants could book computer tickets in an area reserved for women, and partake in special programme during the festival. 'Girls go Assembly!' is one example of these initiatives that have been created

[8] Currently We in Games Finland, 'a non-profit organisation for everyone looking to improve diversity and inclusiveness within the games industry' (https://weingames.fi).

outside the official event organisations. But some events themselves are also implementing measures to encourage women's participation. For example, Assembly Winter 2022 was declared as an event 'free of all kinds of harassment, discrimination, and inappropriate behaviour', and its theme was 'equality and equity in game culture, and especially women's position in gaming' (Assembly, 2022). In practice, the event's theme and its aim to prevent harassment could be seen in how the visitors were provided with a guide instructing them on making the event safe for all participants and what is considered appropriate behaviour in a LAN event, and having harassment contact persons available for the duration of the event. The event programme also included a panel discussion concerning inclusivity and gender-based discrimination in game culture.[9]

When I attended the Finnish gaming events, Assembly and Insomnia, there were women attending these events, although the great majority of their audience seemed to consist of young adult men and teenage boys. As a researcher with an intention to conduct interviews with women attending, when I first entered Insomnia 2014 and met with the event organisers, one of them said to me something along the lines of 'I think I saw a couple of women here somewhere', humorously acknowledging women's minority position in the event.

Being familiar with existing research on gaming events (e.g., Bryce & Rutter, 2003; Taylor et al., 2009; Taylor & Witkowski, 2010; Taylor, 2012; Witkowski, 2012), participating in gaming events for this study, and following current journalistic and community discussions on the topic, it has become clear to me that women are not, in general, actively participating in these events for various reasons. Because of this, I was curious to ask both the interviewees and the women responding to the online questionnaire about their experiences related to gaming events. I had met eight of the twenty interviewees at a gaming event, so it was not surprising that thirteen of them had attended a gaming event of some kind at least once. Additionally, some had attended events related to non-digital games (such as Ropecon[10]) or other popular culture conventions (such as Animecon[11]).

Contrary to earlier research on this topic, participating in events related to gaming was surprisingly common amongst the questionnaire respondents: almost a half of the respondents (48.29%, 353 respondents) had participated in an event related to gaming, either in Finland (46.24%, 338 respondents) or abroad (8.76%, 64 respondents). T.L. Taylor and Emma Witkowski (2010) also describe women's active presence they encountered during their field work in DreamHack, the world's

9 This information is based on the event's website (Assembly, 2022).

10 Ropecon is the largest non-commercial role-playing convention in Europe, organised annually in Espoo, Finland.

11 A Finnish convention for fans of Japanese popular culture.

biggest LAN event based in Sweden. In the event, Taylor and Witkowski noticed women participating very differently from the aforementioned limited roles of 'cheerleaders' and 'booth babes': playing on their own computers, participating in competitions, and taking various active roles within the event. Importantly, women were participating in the event with other women, and not for the benefit of men but for their own gaming pleasure. As such, Taylor and Witkowski argue that women also have the opportunity to occupy these spaces, claim them as 'a space of their own', and take on the role of gatekeepers and provide alternative access points into game culture for other women (Ibid.).

In my study, events mentioned in the participants' responses were not limited to gaming events (which varied from small scale LAN parties with friends and small gaming tournaments held by local hobbyist organisations to huge international events such as Gamescom and E3) but also included game development events (from Finnish Game Jam to the Game Developers Conference), social events with gamer friends (e.g., a cruise with a *WoW* guild), and other gaming-related events, such as music concerts, art shows, and museum exhibitions. Based on the responses, women's gaming hobby was usually not limited to gaming as an activity but included a wide range of social and game cultural events and activities.

Since I only asked questionnaire respondents if they had participated any events or not, they did not describe their event experiences in detail. The interviews too approached this question from the same perspective. I did not ask explicitly if the participants had experienced their gender having impacted their event participation. One interviewee did, however, mention that participating in gaming-related events as a woman made her a target of particular attention:

> **I6:** I sometimes go to cons [conventions] and if there was a gaming area in there, and if I went there with my friends, I noticed everyone staring at me, since there was basically one or two girls in there. So you somehow get a lot of attention, like, as a girl player.

This experience highlights the way that women's gender performances do not align with the expected gamer habitus, and how women who enter game cultural spaces are still often seen as outsiders due to their gender. This is particularly true in competitive gaming and esports.

5.3.2 Watching (but not participating in) esports

Within recent years, organised competitive digital gaming, known as electronic sports (esports), has become part of the mainstream entertainment culture, a significant global business, and an increasingly central part of many gaming events.

New games are designed with esports potential in mind, and many current games include competitive game modes, such as ranked play, or player-created competitive rankings. New organisations and teams dedicated to esports have been formed, esports events are created, and esports has been increasingly incorporated into existing gaming events. There are countless websites and other online channels dedicated to following esports and related news, and even mainstream television channels and news outlets are now broadcasting and following major tournaments.

In many ways, Finland has been at the forefront of these developments. In Finland, several traditional sports organisations started forming their own esports teams and divisions in late 2016 and early 2017. The Finnish Esports Federation SEUL (Suomen elektronisen urheilun liitto) was accepted as an associate member of the Finnish Olympic Committee in November 2016 as the first esports organisation in the world (IESF, 2016; SEUL, 2016), and as a full member in 2019 (SEUL, 2019). The Finnish national broadcaster Yle has been broadcasting selected national and international esports tournaments online and on TV since 2014 (Hartikainen, 2015). These developments are a few examples of the ways in which esports continues institutionalising and legitimising itself as a part of our sports culture, entertainment culture, and society, in Finland and globally.

As all game culture, esports too is heavily gendered. In the past decade, a great amount of research on the role of gender and competitive gaming has grown alongside the development of the esports industry (e.g., Maric, 2011; Groen, 2013; Groen, 2016; Ruotsalainen & Friman, 2018; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018; Voorhees & Orlando, 2018; Witkowski, 2018; Zhu, 2018; Siutila & Havaste, 2019; Hayday & Collison, 2020; Taylor & Stout, 2020; Friman & Ruotsalainen, 2022). As with the earlier research on gender and gaming in general, a large part of the work on gender and esports focuses on women – and for many of the same reasons. As noted earlier, while women are actively playing digital games, their opportunities for participation in competitive gaming, particularly esports, is still extremely limited, both in terms of presence and ways of participation. Prior research on the topic finds that the cultures and communities surrounding esports and competitive gaming are defined by a combination of hegemonic, geek, and athletic masculinities (Taylor, 2012; Witkowski, 2012; Witkowski, 2018). There are many similarities in the cultures and representations of esports and traditional sports to the extent that esports can be considered as sportified competitive gaming (Turtiainen et al., 2020). As such, expectations for esports athlete often align with traditional sports. As Emma Witkowski (2012, p. 112) describes it:

> A certain type of young male is marketed as the high performance computer game player: He is competitive; he is heterosexual (and typically white); he is lean; he performs with a raised fist in victory and shows zero tolerance for flaws. He is in other words a vision of the (North American) digital sporting hero.

In the interviews and the online questionnaire, I asked about the women's participation in esports from two perspectives: as tournament participants in some role (competitors, casters, managers, etc.), or as audience members (attending tournaments in person, or watching them online or on TV). Almost a half of the questionnaire respondents (47.06%, 345 respondents) had at some point followed esports either through an online broadcast (32.2%, 236 respondents), from television (27.29%, 200 respondents), in person (10.1%, 74 respondents), or some other way (2.05%, 15 respondents). Thirteen of the twenty interviewees had also watched an esports tournament at least once. According to *The Finnish Player Barometer 2018*, 15.3% of all Finns aged 10–75 watch esports streams and recordings, and 8.5% watch them actively, at least once a month (Kinnunen et al., 2018, p. 85). Looking at gender differences in the barometer responses, 4.2% of all Finnish women and 25.8% of all Finnish men watch esports streams and recordings sometimes, and 0.9% of Finnish women and 16% of Finnish men watch them actively (Ibid.). As such, the participants of my study were more active in following esports than Finns in general, particularly when compared to Finnish women (figure 19).

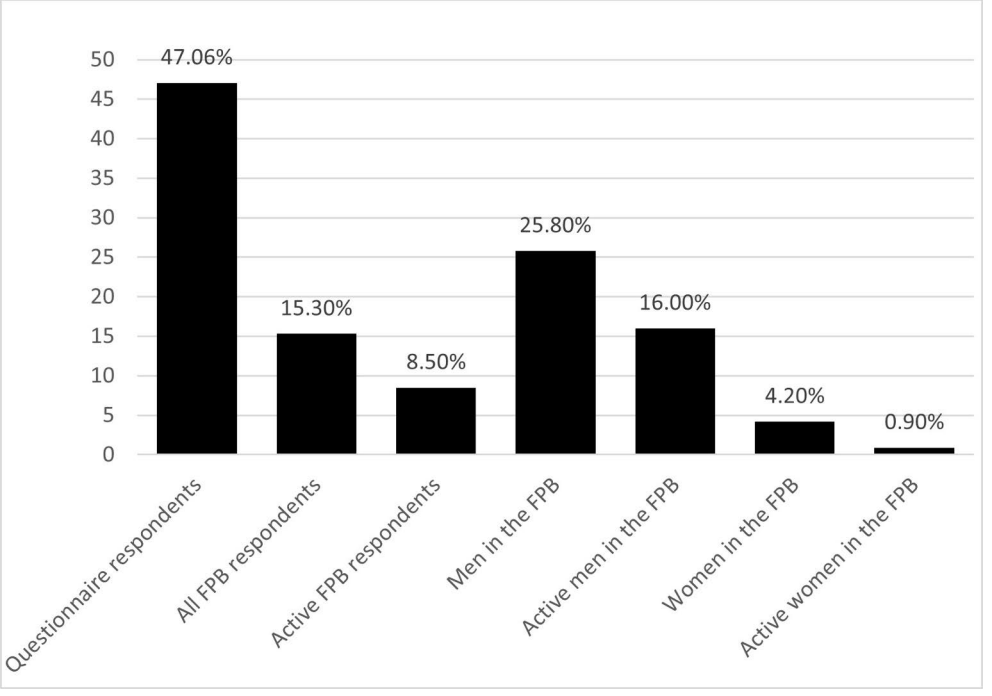

Figure 19. Number of questionnaire respondents watching esports (N=733) in comparison to *The Finnish Player Barometer* (Kinnunen et al., 2018, p. 85).

As noted in *The Finnish Player Barometer*, competitive play, as well as the production and consumption of game media, are gendered activities (Ibid., p. 42). Demographics of audiences spectating esports seem to skew even more heavily towards men than traditional sports. Previous studies have suggested that esports broadcasts are mainly watched by people who play the games themselves (Taylor, 2012), which may contribute to this narrowing of audience demographics compared to more traditional sports. *The Finnish Player Barometer* similarly found that people who actively play digital entertainment games would more often play competitively, stream their gaming, and consume game media than the general population (Kinnunen et al., 2018, p. 43).

Although almost a half of questionnaire respondents had watched esports at some point, considerably fewer had participated in esports tournaments in any role (apart from perhaps spectating). Only 6.55% (48) of the respondents reported that they had ever done so. Four interviewees had participated in some kind of a tournament as a competitor, varying from local hobby association's casual tournaments to a world championship competition.[12] According to *The Finnish Player Barometer 2018*, 3.6% of all Finns participate in esports play, 1.8% of them actively (at least once a month) (Kinnunen et al., 2018, p. 85). For Finnish women, 0.8% participate in esports play, and 0.4% actively. For Finnish men, 6.4% participate in esports play, and 3.3% actively. As such, the questionnaire respondents' participation in esports closely aligned to Finnish men, although the questionnaire included all forms of participation, not only play (figure 20). Compared to Finnish women in general, the respondents participated in esports more frequently.

[12] The question was asked from sixteen and not asked from four interviewees.

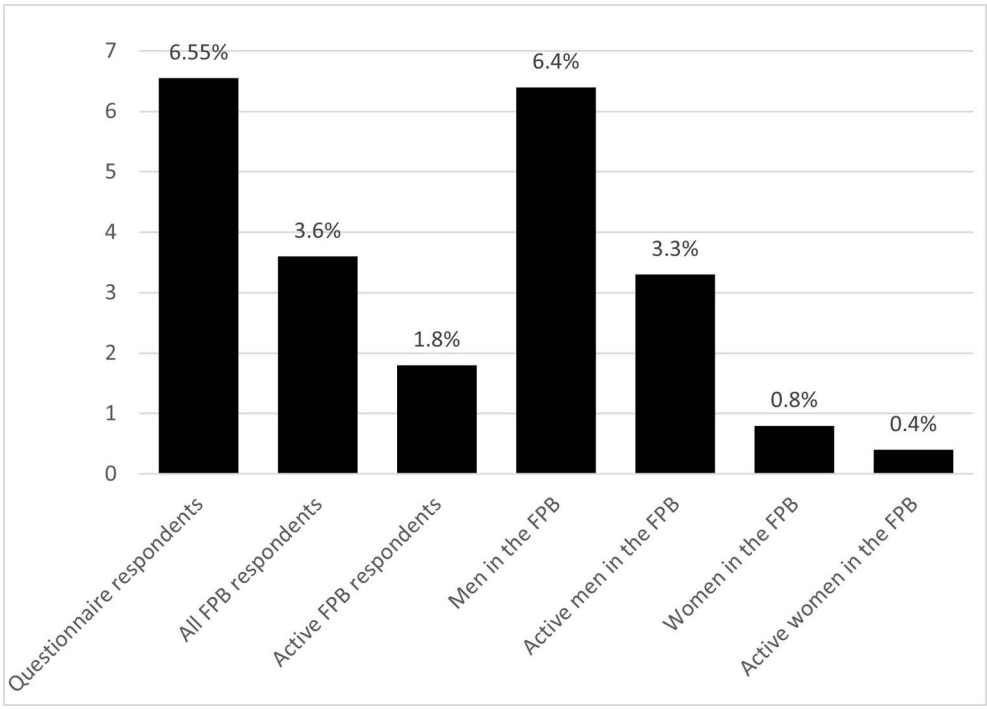

Figure 20. Number of questionnaire respondents participating in esports (N=733) in comparison to *The Finnish Player Barometer* (Kinnunen et al., 2018, p. 85).

To understand the disparity between the high number of respondents watching esports (47.06%) and the low number of them participating in esports in any role (6.4%), I wanted to investigate why respondents and interviewees did not want to participate.[13] In the online questionnaire, 511 women answered the question: 'If you have not [participated in esports tournaments in some role], have you ever considered participating? Why?' Of the 511 respondents answering this question, 69 (13.5%) wrote that they had considered or would consider participation in gaming tournaments – mainly as competitors. Other respondents provided various reasons for not having considered participation, the most common reasons directly related to the games played as esports and playing games competitively, such as dislike for competitiveness (22.1%, 113 respondents), not being interested in the games or genres played as esports (12.5%, 64 respondents), and not considering oneself skilled enough to participate in tournaments (11.2%, 57 respondents). Interestingly, other reasons did not directly relate to the games or playing them. Although these reasons

[13] An early version of this analysis, limited to the online questionnaire responses, has been previously published in a conference paper written in collaboration with Maria Ruotsalainen (Ruotsalainen & Friman, 2018).

were significantly rarer, they were still repeated in multiple responses. In these responses, two types stood out: reasons related to the nature of the esports community, and reasons related to gender. The respondents' reasons for not participating in esports are summarised in figure 21.

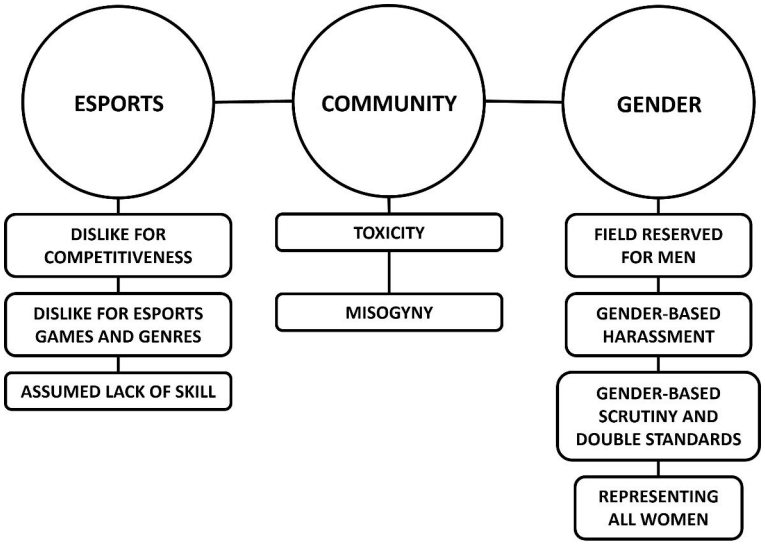

Figure 21. Questionnaire respondents' reasons for not participating in esports.

Some women wrote that they had not considered participating in esports because of the perceived nature of the community. Not all of the responses were very elaborated on: one respondent simply replied with 'because the community is what it is' (R16), without further explanation. One respondent wrote that she did not 'have the will to develop a skin thick enough to endure that shitstorm' (R185). Another one said that she had witnessed harassment related to gender in competitive gaming, and that it was one of the reasons she did not consider esports to offer any addition to her gaming compelling enough for her 'to cross that threshold' (R698). A couple respondents brought up their perception that the negative atmosphere is maintained by men, one saying she had heard that 'the esports are filled with chauvinist boys' (R275) and another that, while she had occasionally considered participating in esports, 'the gamerhardcore men would just ruin it anyway' (R383). Responses such as these highlight the way esports culture (or game culture in general; see Consalvo, 2012; Cote, 2017) is perceived and experienced as toxic by women.

The women who had not considered participating in esports because of their gender expressed various views and feelings related to esports being a field reserved for men. One respondent simply replied with 'I am old and a woman, I do not fit in there' (R47), and another that 'as a woman, I feel insecure about going to gaming

events' (R91). Some respondents felt that, as women competitors, they would be seen as representing their gender: one respondent explicitly wrote that 'I would be scared of the pressure coming from the audience regarding my gender' (R397), and another explained that she 'would not want to be on display as a Woman Gamer' (R431). A few women described that they would assumedly be facing negative reactions, comments, and treatment because of their gender if they participated. One respondent even described being a woman in esports as 'pouring gasoline on the fire' (R427). These responses point towards esports being a field dominated by structures of hegemonic (geek) masculinity (Taylor, 2012; Witkowski, 2012; Witkowski, 2018), as the participants explicitly described it being a field reserved for (certain types of) men – and, even more so, hostile to women.

While 13.5% of the women had considered participating in esports, gender still appeared as a barrier to participation even in those responses. For example, some women considered participating but were afraid of 'the harassment women gamers unfortunately still experience' (R487). One respondent brought up that her appearance would 'certainly get criticised a lot' (R112). Some respondents assumed that their skills would be under scrutiny because of their gender, raising the threshold of participation even higher. As one respondent put it, 'I doubt my abilities and possibilities to develop to be good enough before a tournament, because, as a woman, I feel the need to show everyone that we should not be underestimated' (R619). This example highlights how women playing competitively are often viewed as representatives of their gender – and some of them may consciously assume that role, willingly or not. Based on the responses, women competitors are held to a higher standard than men, and their performance is heavily scrutinised – and not only their performance as an esports athlete, but also their performance as a woman (see also Witkowski, 2018; Choi et al., 2019; Friman & Ruotsalainen, 2022).

Even though most participants did not specify if their perceptions of esports as a field hostile to women were based on personal experiences or something else, one interviewee described the gender-based harassment she had personally experienced when she played a competitive team-based FPS game in an all-women clan:

> **I20:** When I was in the clan that was only for girls, then we received a huge amount of, like, negative feedback of the whole clan, and we all received that.
>
> **R:** What for?
>
> **I20:** Because we were girls. It was entirely due to gender, and because we tried something, like, this big. And we were a very well-known clan. And we had good players, too.

As an all-woman section of one of the best clans in the game, the expectations directed at them were extremely high:

> **I20:** But there was quite a lot of – sort of – bitterness towards us, probably because we were so well-known even though we hadn't done anything to deserve it yet. I think that's the reason there was so much negative feedback. But there was also encouragement. So it's not always one-sided.

The interviewee further described how their all-woman clan ended up coming apart under the extreme pressure and being 'constantly under a magnifying glass' with the entire community waiting for them to mess up. When one of the clan members made an embarrassing mistake, the entire group was publicly shamed for it on platforms such as Twitter, and the clan disbanded for a while due to the social media and community storm of negativity. The interviewee had the option to join another competitive clan, but she expressed that she was unsure if she would be willing to 'put herself under that magnifying glass' again.

Even though amongst the questionnaire responses there were those who explicitly mentioned gender as a reason to not participate in esports, these were likely not the only reasons influenced by their gender, but simply the ones in which it was visibly present. In fact, previous studies have shed light on the complex relationship between gender and gaming, demonstrating how gender may very well play a part in responses that spoke of a dislike for competitiveness, lack of interest towards the types of games typically played as esports, and feeling that their skills were inadequate. Ratan and others (2015) suggest that the social climate hostile to women, and stereotype that women do not belong or are not skilled at the game, are likely to be central factors in what they call the systematic gender gap in competitive games. It is important to note that, because of these negative attitudes faced by women in competitive gaming culture, gender influences the ways that women are seen as players and competitors – both by themselves and others. Because of this, gender may also be a part of the reason for not participating in esports and competitive gaming, even when it is not explicitly mentioned as such. This is supported by earlier research such as Gabriela T. Richard's work on women's gender-supportive gaming communities (Richard & Gray, 2018). In the study, Richard found that while women players often suffer from stereotype threat that may cause them to underperform in gaming, gender-supportive communities help them to not only increase their gaming skill, but more importantly their coping skills, resistance strategies, and confidence in a way that leads them to perform at the level men players are able to reach in a regular gaming environment (Ibid.).

Some respondents brought up that they would like to see more women as professional players. One respondent said that she would participate if she could be

certain that there were other women present in active roles, and that she 'would not have to fit in any box' (R88). Women who play competitively and professionally are often considered as representatives of their gender rather than individual players (see also Cullen, 2018). This was mentioned in the questionnaire responses, in which some women described experiencing extra pressure regarding the need to display high level of skill in competitive play because of their gender. Interestingly, for some women it was important to see other women participating in esports in active roles, but at the same time they generally did not wish to participate as 'Woman Gamers', put on display because of their gender.

To summarise, the women described their own lack of will to participate in esports, because of their gender and for various other reasons, while at the same time hoping there would be other women present – and, most importantly, that the environment would be safe for women to participate. The participants strongly depicted their perspectives and experiences regarding esports as a field hostile to women: how their skill is assessed more critically than men's, how they are expected to receive commentary on their appearance and other misogynistic comments, and how they are constantly 'under a magnifying glass' because of their gender. These findings highlight how women are not free to enter and exist in esports in the same way that men are, but instead face many gender-based barriers to their participation and progress in that field. Despite this, esports has a culture of 'toxic meritocracy' (Paul, 2018), the false idea that everyone's success is based on their skill alone (see Ruotsalainen & Friman, 2018; Siutila & Havaste, 2019). While the ideal of meritocracy is strongly upheld within esports communities, women are actively excluded from the game cultural capital tied to high-performance play and the embodied habitus of an esports athlete due to their 'unfitting' gender performances (see Witkowski, 2018).

5.3.3 Consuming and producing game media

According to *The Finnish Player Barometer* (Kinnunen et al., 2018, p. 42), both competitive gaming and game media consumption are gendered practices: 6.4% of Finnish men play competitively and 30.8% of Finnish men consume game media, while the correspondent numbers for Finnish women are significantly lower: 0.8% and 6.8%. Additionally, less than one percent of Finnish women stream their gaming (0.9% occasionally, 0.7% actively), and almost none of them publish recordings of their gameplay (Ibid., p. 86). In general, both competitive gaming as well as game media consumption – and game media production in particular – in Finland are mostly practiced by young men who are actively playing digital entertainment games (Ibid., pp. 43–44).

While women and girls were initially part of the game media – both as creators and consumers – they were actively excluded from this sphere in the 1980s. In his study on the early history of the UK gaming magazines, Graeme Kirkpatrick (2015)

describes how this new media form aimed for a particular audience – gamers – actively participated in defining and constructing that audience. Through gaming magazines, audiences of digital games transferred from 'anyone who plays games' into a more clearly defined image of a 'gamer' (Ibid., p. 14):

> Games begin to lose their association with computing as a technical pursuit and become focus of interest in their own right. In this process, some people are identified as 'gamesters', then 'gamers', and in the pages of the magazines they are encouraged to think of themselves as different from 'tech-heads', 'computer nerds', even 'board game bores'.

Kirkpatrick further notes that while the magazines started as inclusive to women, also including them in their staff of journalists, in the process of a more clear-cut audience construction, they took a turn towards more sexist, even misogynistic tones: 'Between 1987–9 gaming discourse acquired a gender-exclusive inflection, so that by the time we get to the early 1990s the magazines are explicit in their focus on a young male readership' (Ibid., p. 3). Amanda C. Cote's (2018) analysis on North American *Nintendo Power* magazines from 1994 to 1999 shows a similar trend of constructing 'gamers' as men through targeting men as the intended audience, featuring men in the magazine covers, hiring men as journalists, and sexualising women characters.

During the 21st century, game media has moved, for a great part, online, and become extremely diverse in terms of content and platforms. In addition to the good old-fashioned paper magazines, there are countless websites dedicated to gaming journalism and information, and many mainstream media outlets have dedicated sections for gaming, or esports, or at least have included games in their range of news topics. Most importantly, as with other media topics, much of the game media production has been taken over by the players. While players have been active producers for content, such as walkthroughs, mods, add-ons, blogs, and online community platforms, the field of game-related player production has exploded on video platforms such as YouTube – and Twitch in particular (Taylor, 2018). Alongside esports, online media platforms provide some of the most visible positions within game culture, which is why it is important to pay attention to who are the people occupying them. Both production and consumption of game media are strongly gendered in similar ways to other areas of game culture (see also Kirkpatrick, 2015; Cote, 2018; Kinnunen et al., 2018; Uszkoreit, 2018; Ruberg et al., 2019). Therefore, I wanted to ask interviewees and questionnaire respondents about their participation in the consumption and production of various game media forms.

Consumption of game media was popular amongst the study participants (figure 22). Almost all interviewees (seventeen of twenty), consumed some form of game

media at least occasionally. Most questionnaire respondents (70.99%, 519 respondents) followed some game media as well. The most popular media forms were video channels on YouTube or another service (48.15%, 352 respondents), followed by online magazines and sites (45.28%, 331 respondents). Streaming channels and services such as Twitch were also fairly popular (26.4%, 193 respondents), alongside traditional paper magazines (19.97%, 146 respondents) – still retaining their place as a relevant gaming media form in the age of online alternatives. Slightly less popular forms included blogs (10.4%, 76 respondents) and podcasts (4.51%, 33 respondents). Other media forms received 12.04% of replies (88 respondents), including TV shows dedicated to gaming. Additionally, 35.71% (260 respondents) of questionnaire respondents. followed specific players or player groups in media (e.g., on Twitch or YouTube). On the other hand, 29.01% of respondents answered that they do not follow any game media.

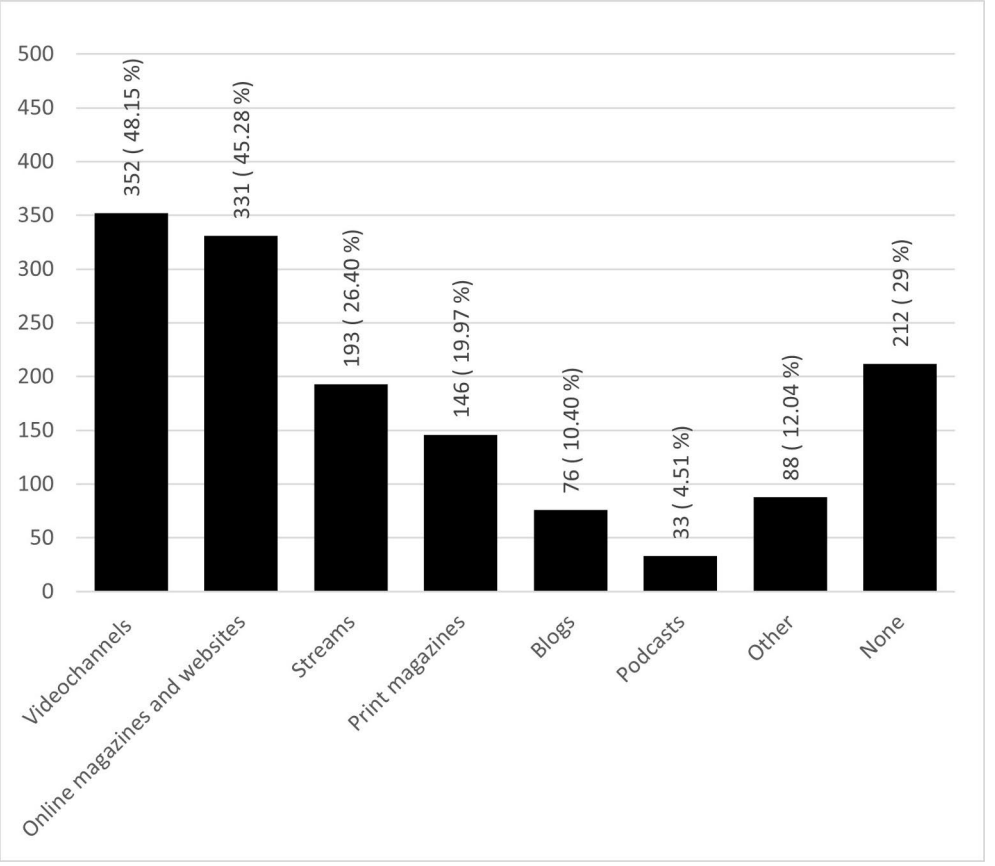

Figure 22. Number of questionnaire respondents following different types of game media (N=731).

While almost 71% of the respondents consumed game media, much fewer participated in its production. While 22.34% (164) of respondents produced game media by themselves, such as streaming or publishing videos of their own gaming, or blogging about it, 77.64% of the respondents had not. I did not ask more about the participants' game media production in the questionnaire but discussed the topic in further detail with some of the interviewees.

Consuming game media is much more common than producing it amongst Finns in general, too. Of all Finns, 19.1% watched game streams and recordings, and 11.7% watch them actively (Kinnunen et al., 2018, p. 86). 6.8% of Finnish women and 30.8% of Finnish men watch game streams and recordings, and 3.3% of women and 19.5% are watching them actively (Ibid., p. 86). From the perspective of game streams and videos, 2.6% of Finns (0.9% of women and 4.1% of men) have at some point streamed their gaming, and 1.1% (0.7% of women and 1.5% of men) stream their gaming actively, whereas 3.3% of Finns (0% of women and 6.6% of men) have published recordings of their gaming online at some point, and 0.3% (0% of women and 0.5% of men) do it actively (Ibid.).

Only three of twenty interviewees had ever produced game media, and only one was doing it actively through streaming. Akin to the responses that considered participation in esports, some interviewees described how they would not even consider streaming their gaming because of the expected reactions to their gender:

> **R:** Have you ever considered streaming your gaming?
>
> **I12:** Well, no. I don't really try to advertise on the internet that I'm a woman and I don't want any special attention for it.[...]
>
> **R:** Do you think it would necessarily mean that you would get some special attention if you'd stream?
>
> **I12:** Yeah.
>
> **R:** So you wouldn't be able to do it and not get it?
>
> **I12:** Yeah.

One interviewee also described the gender-based harassment women streamers receive on Twitch influencing the way that she watches them on the platform, covering the chat with her hand:

> **I7:** Because it's so shocking the stuff that is put there, for the most part like "show your boobs, show your ass", like that… And also like, if she messes up, she will immediately get called an idiot for doing so. So it's really rough the text that women will receive there in general, men streamers don't get the kind of stuff that women streamers do in their chat.

Her observations above reflect findings in prior research on women streamers. According to Bo Ruberg, Amanda L.L. Cullen, and Kathryn Brewster (2019), women streamers' bodies are both performed and policed, women streamers face gender-based harassment targeting their bodies, and are often referred to in misogynistic, derogatory terms such as 'titty streamers', downplaying their competence and devaluing their labour, and aiming to exclude them from the scene. Other studies too show that women receive objectifying and sexualising comments and sexual harassment while streaming (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018).

One interviewee, an active streamer, confirmed that she had experienced her gender having greatly impacted her experiences of streaming:

> **R:** Have you ever experienced that your gender has somehow affected your gaming hobby?
>
> **I20:** Yes I have. It's continuous. Well, it's kind of connected to my streaming, I don't know if it would make any kind of difference without that. Because without it, everyone wouldn't know I'm a girl. But because I stream, I'm very open about being a woman, because of my voice and the camera. So yeah, it can be negative and it can be positive, there are all kinds [of reactions].
>
> But generally, when I meet someone and go to play with them, with some random, without any streaming or anything, there's nothing negative in there.
>
> But then, on the stream, through the stream, or then if someone knows me through someone else, or something like that, then that may be like, judging me, like I'm not as good because I'm a girl, by default, or then, I don't know, there's also been a lot of using the 'e' word within our community recently, that they will easily call girls who play 'e', just like that, without any larger meaning. So there's a bit of a negative tone there, sometimes. Our community in [a certain game] is a bit… it can be a bit sour. But it's much worse in other games.

In the above excerpt, the interviewee describes how her gender continuously affects her gaming. In her view, it is not as strongly – or, at least, as negatively – present in

private settings, in the moments when she just 'meets someone and goes play with them' but derives from shifting into a more public role as a streamer, allowing everyone to know she is a woman gamer.

Later in our discussion, she added that she also receives in-game hate messages from people who recognise her from her stream. At the same time, she also acknowledged that the community of the game she plays (a team-based FPS game with competitive options) has a common way to refer to women players degradingly as 'e', which is short for e-girl, a newer version of a misogynistic stereotype of a 'fake geek girl' (Scott, 2019). When I asked the interviewee if facing these types of comments and attitudes influenced her behaviour in game or on the stream, she was very open about how they made her feel:

> **R:** Have any of the negative comments or attitudes you have faced ever made you change the way you act in games or on the stream somehow?
>
> **I20:** I've stopped a few times because of it. Not permanently, but, like, I've just lost my nerves, haven't had the energy to listen to it, closed the stream, closed the game, not talking to anyone. And then there's this moment of desperation, like 'nothing will come of this, no one will take me seriously'. But those moments have been like, then I've just thought about it for a little while, that 'this is exactly what they want, this is why they do what they do'.
>
> **R:** You need to possess pretty sizable mental resources to get into [public streaming and competitive play].
>
> **I20:** As a girl, at least [laughs]. Well, it is, as a guy, too, of course, demanding.
>
> **R:** But it's an entirely different situation.
>
> **I20:** It is. As a guy, you don't get as much, this sort of, advance critique, before anyone has any clue about your gameplay, and as a girl you do receive that. But it is easier to make yourself known as a girl.
>
> **R:** Because they're rarer?
>
> **I20:** Exactly.

In the interviewee's experience, a woman streamer receives a lot of gender-based judgement and belittlement, and even hate messages. She sees that being a woman streamer can present a positive side too, though: because women streamers are much

rarer than men, in her view it is easier for them to make yourself known – in positive and negative ways.

In general, the majority of women participating in the study followed game media, but most did not participate in its production in any form. Significantly, the women described game media – streaming in particular – as misogynistic environments. Participants described gender-based harassment women streamers receive, and how women are treated differently than men in those environments because of their gender. Importantly, this created gendered barriers to women in this area of game cultural participation, making it difficult for them to not only participate in streaming but also to watch other women's streams. As areas designed for performing gaming skill and expertise – i.e., game cultural capital – esports and streaming provide some of the most central areas for visibility and power within game culture. Because of this, it is highly problematic if and when women are facing discrimination and harassment in these environments, forcefully excluding them from this area of game cultural participation.

5.4 Effects of gender in women's gaming

While the topic of gender was frequently brought up, either implicitly or explicitly, in participants' descriptions of the different aspects of their gaming, I wanted to ask about it directly, both in the online questionnaire and in the interviews.

When asked if they had experienced their gender affecting their gaming hobby, 7.62% (56) of the 735 questionnaire respondents answering this question said it had affected their gaming very much, 24.49% (180 respondents) responded that it had affected their gaming fairly much, and 43.26% (318 respondents) said that it had affected their gaming very little. In other words, three quarters (75.37%) of women responding to the question had experienced their gender affecting their gaming hobby at some level, while 24.63% had not experienced it affecting their gaming at all (figure 23).

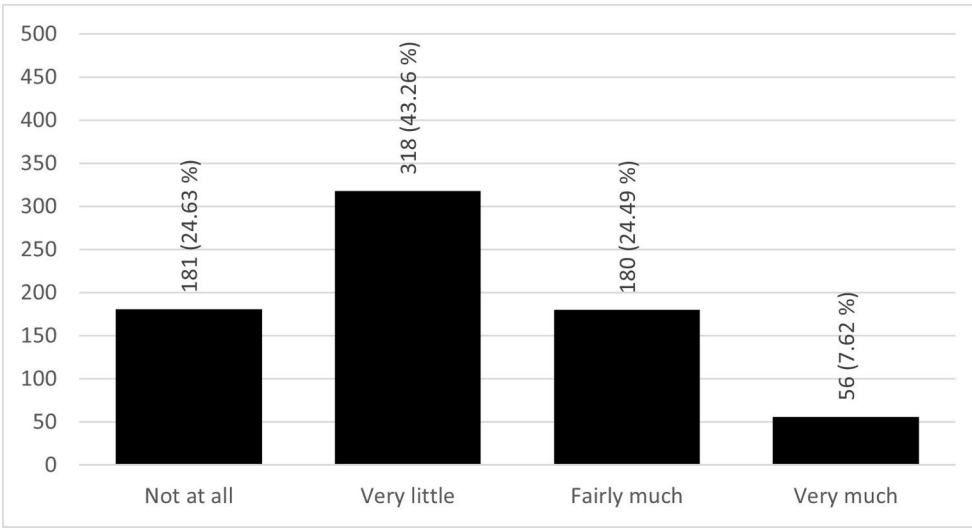

Figure 23. Number of respondents having experienced their gender affecting their gaming (N=735).

I gave the respondents an opportunity to describe the ways that they experienced gender affecting their gaming, or to specify their response in some other way, and asked eighteen of interviewees the same question. Of the eighteen interviewees I asked this question, only one responded that she had not experienced her gender affecting her gaming at all. Two responded that it may have had some very minor effect, but nothing negative. Thirteen felt that their gender had affected their gaming, some in major ways. Altogether, an overwhelming majority of women participating in this study experienced their gender affecting their gaming. Furthermore, most of these effects were described to be negative. The effects of gender to the participants' gaming identified in the analysis are summarised in figure 24.

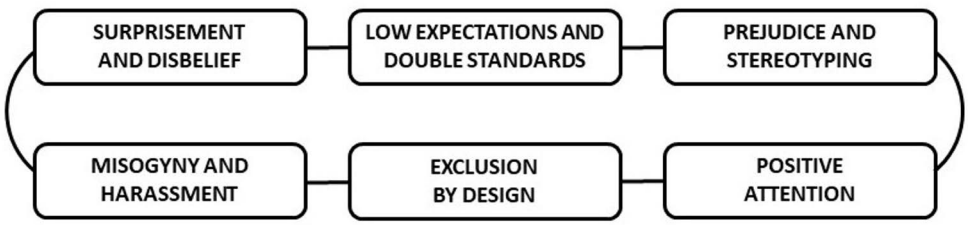

Figure 24. Effects of gender in participants' gaming.

People's surprise of women's gaming was one of the effects of gender often described by the participants. These responses highlight the ways that women are still, generally, not expected to play games actively, and women who play game frequently encounter reactions of surprise – even disbelief.

While one interviewee said that she had not experienced similar reactions in the game she plays (and she does not play that game socially), her gaming was met with surprise in everyday encounters outside the game:

> **I8:** Not in games themselves, no, but in real life. It's like… 'Oh, so you play? Well, what do you play then? Say what, you play WoW?!' It's almost like 'Are you sure, like, do you even know what WoW is?' I've heard that kind of stuff.

Such interactions were not necessarily always viewed in a negative light. Some participants described certain instances when knowledge of their gaming was met with enthusiasm – often by men.

Even in game environments, where the use of player tags and avatars can anonymise individuals, players often continue to presume the gender identity of other players, imagining men as their default co-players. As an example, one interviewee explained that, when her gender was 'revealed', she was assumed to be lying about being a woman player:

> **I18:** My gender is suddenly revealed to someone in the middle of a conversation [in game], and either they are horrified by it, or then, often, if they are a bit younger boy, they don't believe it. And I have many examples of this happening. One of them is in this one [MMO] game, in a guild chat, my gender came up in a discussion, and there was a group of maybe five raiders, and they presented it pretty aggressively somehow, like "don't claim something like that, are you pretending to be a woman?"

Many team-based online games feature a voice chat, and those are common places for these kinds of 'gender revelations':

> **I12:** Usually everything goes well until we get to TeamSpeak or Vent[rilo]. And then I say something, and then it goes quiet, and then something happens like am I a 15-year-old boy or something, or am I a woman.
>
> **R:** But you haven't hesitated to use voice chat despite of this?
>
> **I12:** Well, usually I just use it normally. And the thing is, if I don't make a number out of it, then they will make less of a number out of it, I've noticed that.

> You just need to try not pay attention to it. But then there have also been a few unfortunate cases where the entire game has gone completely haywire, like [imitates a shocked voice] "there's a woman here!", and I find that really annoying.

As the interviewee describes, when a woman starts speaking in the voice chat, the other players – who are usually men – immediately question her, asking if she is a teenage boy or a 'real' woman. The shock of having a woman in the team may even cause the team to lose their focus on the game, instead focusing on analysing the woman team member's gender identity.

Based on the participants' descriptions, women players are met with surprise both in and out of games. The social and cultural expectations regarding womanhood do not easily include participation in digital gameplay. Some participants described this as 'women players are thought to be extremely rare – and weird in some way' (I6). These gender expectations – and, by consequence, the reactions faced by women players – are targeted more strongly towards some women than others. One interviewee, who is a mother of three, noted that she is even less expected to be a player, especially when a woman is a mother:

> **I17:** Maybe I have somehow acknowledged that I play more than my friends of the same age, mothers with families in particular. [...] Maybe in some situations I don't always tell the truth about my own gaming [laughs], if there are the kind of people present who are also mothers, and who may criticise their children's gaming, then often I'm there just like [in an awkward voice] 'mmh, well… I guess it depends…' After all, I've always been pretty open to gaming, and I've always been the one who has purchased the consoles to the children, the games and all.

The interviewee further explained that she does not start discussing the topic in those situations, since she does not wish to be provoked into arguing about it or have to defend her own or her children's gaming. One questionnaire respondent also described how the father of her children does not receive complaints for his gaming hobby, but she, as the mother, does. In general, it seems that mothers are still not expected to be gamers. Instead, they are expected to be the ones supporting – or, more likely, according to the stereotypes, controlling and complaining about their family members' gaming, while spending their own time on various domestic responsibilities (see Enevold & Hagström, 2008).

Based on the participants' descriptions, these gendered expectations are stronger in certain contexts than others, which sometimes leads participants to become more open about their own gaming in some social environments and not mention it in

others. One interviewee, for example, said she 'probably wouldn't put her gaming on display at work' (I18), since it is an environment 'dominated by 30 to 60 year-old women', and, as such, she assumed that her co-workers would not understand her hobby. Other participants, too, mentioned that they only spoke about their gaming in certain social contexts. For some respondents, these contexts were also gendered, such as only talking about games and playing with their friends who were men. This shows how the participants, too, had certain expectations regarding what kind of people would be open to hearing about their gaming hobby.

Another subject commonly brought up by participants was the expectation that women are bad players and lack expertise regarding gaming. Previous studies have found gaming expertise to appear as gendered (see Toften-Nielsen, 2016). One interviewee (I11) described the existing situation as 'an environment of belittlement', adding that, at this point, she is already so used to it that 'it doesn't even register anymore'. When I asked two interviewees about how they had experienced their gender affecting their gaming hobby, one of them immediately blurted out that 'well, everyone else will think you're sh… bad' (I2). Based on the participant's descriptions, a woman is always assumed to be a bad player and is treated condescendingly by opponents and team members alike.

At times, the belittlement may be framed in a positive way: 'When playing with strangers, I've encountered surprise in a positive sense, when I've played something really well and they're like 'oh you can actually play pretty well although you're a girl' (I11). Several participants reported to have received these types of backhanded compliments about 'playing well for a girl'. However, because women were always expected to play badly, losing to women often seemed to really hurt a man's ego. Two interviewees (I1 and I2) told me that even their own team members (who were all men) mocked their opponents for 'losing to a girl' when their team won. According to participants, because women are assumed to be lower-skilled at gaming and possess no game-related expertise, their advice is also systematically ignored. Based on these descriptions, it is extremely difficult to accumulate game cultural capital based on skill and expertise as a woman.

On the other hand, some participants who recognised the common assumption of women being unskilled players explained that it could be used for their own benefit, in a way:

> **I11:** I don't know, because it's also related to my actual playing skills, like I can do something stupid in the game [laughs]. […] But it's maybe that way around, that I notice that I may be more easily forgiven things, so it's like, if I do something stupid, they're like 'well, you're a girl, so you play badly, it's ok'. So they're giving more hard time to the other guys, and I can get away with it, because [they think] being a girl explains my behaviour. Which I'm aware of

> and have used to my benefit, even though I probably shouldn't. I'm enforcing the stereotypes, sorry [laughs]!

In addition to assumed lack of skill and expertise, some participants described that, as a woman, they were not taken seriously as players. One interviewee described that, when she plays with her partner who is a man, 'Those who don't know me don't treat me as much as a gamer, but more like as someone's girlfriend who just plays a bit' (I3). Another interviewee described how women who play games are 'imagined to be like the "gamer gurl" meme' (I4) – posing as gamers while lacking any real game cultural capital (see also Ruberg et al., 2019; regarding 'fake geek girl', see Scott, 2019).

For some participants, not being taken seriously as a player led them to perfectionism and completionism:

> **I17:** As a child especially, I felt that my gaming wasn't taken seriously, the way boys' gaming was. And, because of that, well, this is like, here I go starting to analyse this, but I've thought about is before as well… That maybe one of the reasons why I want, in my games, clear all the levels as well as possible, and perfectly, I'm completely sure it comes from there, back then the gameplay had to be so insanely good to somehow get to a similar position with the boys. So I at least have experienced that a lot.

Even though one interviewee felt that she was given more room for making mistakes due to her gender – and related assumed lack of skill – many participants described the opposite effect. These participants described that women's mistakes were treated much more seriously than men's mistakes, and that the standards for women were set much higher:

> **I8:** As a woman, when you mess up, it's not good. There will surely be words exchanged. […]
>
> As a woman, you somehow have to be really good to be considered average. For a man, it's ok to be a bit bad at start and to practice, but a woman has to be pretty good from the get-go. And then there are of course specific words for women, that might be used when someone gets upset, and so on, so it's surely really difficult to go anywhere as a beginner.

Another interviewee described how, while women players' skills are constantly undermined and they are not taken seriously as players, their skills are also placed under special scrutiny:

> **I17:** In CS [Counter-Strike] too, I had a nickname that referred to a woman. And my boyfriend back then said that 'if I were you, I'd change that. No one will take it seriously if a woman plays'[…] And then when I got accomplished in the game, I got comments like 'you're pretty good even though you're a girl'. So that's something I definitely noticed there, that there was a clear rift. Like also, if you weren't as good of a player but were a boy, no one would comment on that or evaluate his skills in gaming, but somehow as a girl was put like under surveillance regarding her skill.

Based on the participants' descriptions, there seems to exist a strange double standard: women are expected to be unskilled and unknowledgeable about games, but at the same time, they are not allowed to make mistakes. It is very much a no-win situation. There exist also other stereotypes attached to women players affecting individuals in this position, as described by one interviewee who plays a MOBA game competitively:

> **R:** You said that you've been treated differently in some ways [because of your gender], so where can you notice the difference, in what things? You said at least that they won't expect as much from you than others, but is there something else too that comes to your mind?
>
> **I12:** Well maybe the kind of, like... Maybe stereotypical women are the kind who may get angry if they get feedback [from team members]. So they [unknown men players] maybe think I'm the same. So, then, if they give me some feedback, either they will offer it with a lot of sugar-coating, or if they give it to me, and I respond with "ok", they're like [imitates an angry voice] "you don't fucking need to get angry" [laugh]. And I thought I just gave the minimum acknowledgement, like "ok, clear", but they're expecting something of me that I'm maybe not, or what they've experienced with some other people.
>
> **R:** So they are kind of attaching this, like, gender stereotype to you?
>
> **I12:** Yes.

The interviewee further described that these types of experiences made her feel a bit more insecure when playing with strangers, as she felt that they did not trust her abilities, which negatively reflected on her gaming performance. Other participants too shared similar experiences of this stereotype threat negatively affecting their performance. One questionnaire respondent directly addressed the issue of stereotype threat:

> **R62:** When I was younger, I often experienced some kind of a stereotype threat while playing, that if I can't do something, it's because I'm a woman. I hadn't played platformers as a kid, because we didn't have a Nintendo or anything, and I'm still not really into playing those. But when I was younger, I attached the fact that I couldn't play them to my gender, and I'm not sure about this now, but I feel that the others (boys) too had offered that kind of explanations at some point.
>
> My desire to play and my low skill levels combined to this gender have led to some pitying looks from men who have played better than me. Sometimes it has even felt as if I would have been breaking some unwritten rule when I haven't given the Wii controller away to some better player, but have instead wanted to learn and play that damned Mario Kart, even though I'm in the ditch half the time. In these situations, too, there have only been other men players in the room.

Another interviewee also described that, at some point in her gaming career, the gender-based treatment women received when playing made her question herself to the extent that she gave up on trying to get into a clan that she initially had been very excited about:

> **I17:** I don't think that I wasn't accepted because I was a girl, or anything like that, I don't mean like I would have been discriminated against in that way. But more like, at that point I myself gave up, I was thinking that I can't hold against them, that I'm not as good.

When I asked if it affected her in the way that she started setting high standards for herself, she agreed. In her statistical analysis on stereotype threat in gaming, Gabriela T. Richard (2015) found that women and ethnic minorities were more vulnerable to stereotype threat and experienced lower self-confidence in gaming than other players, resulting from inequity in game culture. On the other hand, in another study Richard found that women's lower performance caused by stereotype threat could be prevented with the support of a gender-inclusive community (Richard & Gray, 2018). Richard's research demonstrates the importance of to creating and implementing measures focused on countering gender discrimination in gaming environments and communities.

In her study on women's experiences of harassment in online gaming, Amanda Cote (2017) describes the continuous harassment, including sexualised insults and threats of violence, her interviewees described receiving in online gaming environments. In their study, Jesse Fox and Wai Yen Tang (2017) found that toxic behaviour and harassment in gaming are prominent and particularly affect women's

opportunities for participation. The women participating in my study similarly described various forms of harassment, toxicity, and misogyny that women face in game culture, including sexual harassment:

> **I20:** And then there's like… When people realise that you're a girl, from your player tag or something, then there will be some really bad 'jokes', like sexual stuff, or something like that, like completely insane. So you get all kinds of stuff.
>
> **R:** So you will experience these kinds of things because of your gender?
>
> **I20:** Yeah.
>
> --
>
> **R:** Have you experienced that your gender has had any significance in your gaming?
>
> **I12:** Yes I have [laugh]. Well, in the group of friends whom I play with, gender doesn't matter at all, and there are other women there too. It's like, everyone's just another human being. But then when you go to a group you don't know, you feel like you're somehow different, and that they maybe expect less from me, and maybe... Usually they're men, and usually they may make some comments with sexual tones. But then when I say that I just play and I'm not interested in these sort of things, they will usually end it there. But you can notice that it still affects.

In their responses, participants emphasised that negative attitudes towards women were mostly encountered when playing with strangers in certain types of games: competitive online multiplayer games, such as FPS games or MOBAs. Many questionnaire respondents also expressed fear towards playing certain types of games, or, more precisely, playing certain types of games as a woman, due to their toxic and misogynistic culture. These descriptions overlapped with those regarding not participating in esports – as the games were often competitive in nature, such as team-based online games. Based on the responses, even when women have not experienced these attitudes themselves, they were keenly aware of them, and they were reflected in the constant choices that women made regarding what to play, with whom, and how:

> **R19:** I probably will not dare to play shooters at least for a while yet, or if I will, then it will be either with a group I already know or without the voice chat. I've

> heard from the sidelines what kind of language is used in those games even between men, and, as a woman, I'm really not interested in getting into a game whose chat is filled with phrases like 'fuck these teammates shoot like girls' and 'let's rape that enemy!'

In the previous chapter, I described how women participating in this study mostly played alone, in private environments, or in the company of people that they already knew. Based on the descriptions of gender-based hostility women face when playing with strangers, the decision to only play alone or in familiar company seems less like a free choice based on personal preferences and more like a personal safety strategy. Prior research finds that players who are marginalised in game culture, such as women and players of colour, develop and use strategies to hide their identities in online gaming to prevent harassment. Amanda C. Cote (2017) identifies five strategies women players use to encounter gender-based harassment in games: women leaving online gaming, avoiding playing with strangers, utilising gender camouflage, performing skill and experience, or adopting an aggressive persona. In the same vein, in their study on harassment women experience in online gaming, Jesse Fox and Wai Yen Tang (2017, pp. 1298–1300) identify five different coping strategies that women used to deal with the harassment, including hiding their gender, avoiding social interactions, tolerating or denying the harassment, seeking help or reporting the harassment, and self-blame. In their extensive studies on gender and race in digital gaming, Gabriela T. Richard and Kishonna L. Gray (2018) have also found that women players use strategies such as 'hiding' their gender behind a 'neutral' gamer tag or refusing to participate in voice chat to avoid harassment, but they also create for example gender-based communities to create supportive gaming environments for themselves. Based on these studies, women players need to conceal their gender – to try to exist in gaming spaces in some other way than as women – to be safe from harassment.

The participants of this study, too, used such strategies. Importantly, the harassment, misogyny, and toxicity directed at women players are so prevalent that most women players seem to be aware of the possibility of experiencing harassment and thus carefully take precautions. Gabriela T. Richard notes that women do not need to be personally harassed to make them marginalised in gaming, but this 'overwhelming atmosphere of potential harassment' is enough to limit their participation (Richard & Gray, 2018, p. 130). This could be seen in the participants descriptions of their gaming, as it seemed that the women were always prepared for the possibility of harassment, whether they had personally encountered it before, or not yet. As one questionnaire respondent put it:

> **R277:** As a woman gamer, simply for the sake of your own wellbeing, you have to occasionally think about how to bring up, or not bring up, your gender. There are so many alarming examples of the harassment targeted at women players that it's very difficult to ignore the issue while playing.

As an example of these safety strategies, one interviewee described how she used to face negative attitudes from others when playing FPS games, so she decided to hide her gender and changed her player tag: 'I just didn't want it [her gender] to affect how I was perceived by others' (I3), she explained. With a gender-neutral battle tag and not participating in the voice chat, there was nothing making her stand apart from other players. As another interviewee phrased it: 'It may be easier, you can be more neutral [in online spaces] when you're anonymous by gender, too' (I18). When women use these kinds of strategies to ensure their safety in this environment, they are simultaneously wiped out from existence in these spaces, resulting in the invisibility of women gamers (Cote, 2017).

It is worth noting that gender does not only affect women's game cultural participation in gaming environments, but much more widely. One interviewee, who was studying to become a game designer, had concerns about her safety as a woman in the industry – especially due to GamerGate, which was a topic of very active discussion during the time of the interview. She had discussed the topic with other women students:

> **I3:** We have discussed how does one dare to be a woman in this kind of a game development world. […] It does worry me a bit, that do you dare to tell you've been a part in [designing] some game, or do you have to use a fake name so you won't get shit for it. […] I've been thinking about it even before [GamerGate], since it's not really a new thing, now it's just more visible.

I asked the interviewees if they had noticed the (at the time) recent discussions in the media and player communities about the various aspects of sexism in games and game culture, related to Anita Sarkeesian's Tropes vs. Women in Video Games project and the GamerGate movement. Quite a few of the interviewees were familiar with these discussions, and some of the questionnaire respondents brought them up despite not being asked about them.

One interviewee (I9) was particularly frustrated with the discussion. She thought that it was extremely one-sided and was limiting game designers' creativity and placed unreasonable expectations on game content and character design. In her opinion, game content should not be limited or designed to please specific audiences, but the audiences should simply pick the kinds of games they were happy with and leave the others be. The interviewee felt that there was no actual discussion on the

topic happening, since those who wished to speak against game censorship were branded as being on the wrong side on the issue. She said that, in her experience, the people criticising the games were not players and were talking about a topic that did not really affect their own life in any way.

On the other hand, game design was a theme frequently brought up in the participants' responses to the effects of gender in their gaming. Many women felt that games are, in general, designed for men. As one questionnaire respondent pointed out:

> **R48:** Many games are still designed for men. Even though there's an option to create a woman character, the game and it's storytelling may still be constructed solely from a man character's perspective.

The lack of well written and believable women characters was one aspect that was repeatedly brought up in the questionnaire responses:

> **R116:** I feel that, as a woman, I will better relate to women characters in games, and because of that, I'm usually more interested in games with well-written women characters. Occasionally I have also left certain games unplayed only because they didn't include interesting women characters.

In this way, women are excluded from game culture by game design and marketing, too, as Shira Chess (2017), Gabriela T. Richard (2012), and myself (Friman, 2015c), amongst various others, have pointed out in prior studies on the topic.

It is worth noting that participants did not perceive all effects of gender on women's gaming as negative. Due to their marginalised position, women players may stand out under a negative or positive spotlight. Some surprising positive effects were expressed, too. For example, one interviewee (I15) told me about how her gaming hobby had helped her connect with men as friends. She described being the only woman in her gaming group at first, and enjoying the positive extra attention. Before starting her gaming hobby, she had not really interacted with men a lot, and had even felt nervous about it. But as a woman player, it felt 'more natural' to her to connect and make friends with men, too.

For some women, their marginalised position within game culture made them feel particularly proud of their gaming hobby – and being a woman gamer in particular. This is one of the perspectives I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter.

6 Constructing the idea and identity of a gamer

In this final analysis chapter, I will focus on my third sub research question: How do women players construct the idea and identity of a gamer? I will begin by examining the theoretical background of the gamer identity, describing how cultural identity has been understood in cultural studies and how that translates into the context of gaming, and presenting the various perspectives through which the gamer identity has been approached specifically in game studies. Next, in the empirical section of the chapter, I will first examine how the Finnish women participating in my study, in their questionnaire responses and during the interviews, described a 'gamer' and its variations. Then, I will explore if the women defined themselves as a gamer, or refused that definition, and what reasons they gave for this decision. Finally, I will describe the various meanings gaming held in the women's lives, and how they constructed their game cultural agency beyond the gamer identity.

6.1 Gamer as a game cultural identity

6.1.1 Constructing gamer identity individually and socially

As I have described in chapter 2 Theoretical framework, gamer identity is an artificial and a relatively new cultural identity tied to game culture, based on game cultural participation and game cultural capital, embodied in and performed through the gamer habitus. The construction of gamer identity is a complicated process. As cultural theorist Stuart Hall notes on identity construction in general, to understand the process of identification it is important and interesting to inspect the contradictory elements within the process (2011, pp. 13–14):

> Which individuals as subjects identify (or do not identify) with the "positions" to which they are summoned; as well as how they fashion, stylize, produce and "perform" these positions, and why they never do so completely, for once and all time, and some never do, or are in a constant, agonistic process of struggling

> with, resisting, negotiating and accommodating the normative or regulative rules with which they confront and regulate themselves.

This can be applied to game cultural context, where various gamer identity positions are created, and some individuals on this field are expected to assume and perform those positions in specific ways, while others are excluded from them. Hall emphasises that identity is something to be performed and articulated in various ways – as Judith Butler (1999, 2009) has extensively described in the context of gender. The gamer identity is performed and articulated in an embodied and visible from through gamer habitus (see chapter 2 Theoretical framework). Assuming and performing a gamer identity through gamer habitus is a cultural struggle, both individually and socially, involving an effort to perform the ideal gamer identity as well as to reject and renegotiate its limits. This is particularly true for marginalised players such as women, whose gender performances do not easily align with the expected gamer habitus (see Witkowski, 2018).

Gamer identity is constructed in a combination of two intertwining processes, one of them internal and the other external: the process of identification and the process of validation. Identification is an internal process during which a person identifies as a gamer (see Shaw, 2013). It is worth noting, however, that this outcome is not a permanent condition: one does not become a gamer at one point in time and then simply forever identify as one (Ibid.). Hall writes about this perspective, which he calls the discursive approach to identification, emphasising the nature of identification as a constructive process, never completed but always 'in process', and how '[i]t is not determined in the sense that it can always be 'won' or 'lost', sustained or abandoned' (2011, pp. 2–3). In other words, a person's idea and experience of herself as a gamer may change over time, both in nature and in strength. This is also because her idea of a gamer may change over time to something she can see herself in more strongly at some point and more faintly at another time, and eventually, she may even want to abandon the identity altogether.

Furthermore, Hall notes that identity and the process of identification are built on differences: 'as a process it operates across difference, it entails discursive work, the binding and marking of symbolic boundaries, the production of "frontier-effects". It requires what is left outside, its constitutive outside, to consolidate the process' (2011, pp. 2–3). To put it simply, identity is recognising shared characteristics within a group of people and setting those characteristics as a basis for a group identity. However, identity is also defining what this group of people is *not* about, and what are the characteristics closing individuals outside of it – although these distinctions are not clear cut.

According to Hall, identity is and remains an ideal never to be fully absorbed. In reality, no one can meet the ideal of an identity, but is always read as an 'other' in some ways (Ibid.):

> Identification is, then, a process of articulation, a suturing, an over-determination not a subsumption. There is always 'too much' or 'too little' - an over-determination or a lack, but never a proper fit, a totality. Like all signifying practices, it is subject to the "play", of *différance*. It obeys the logic of more-than-one. And since as a process it operates across difference, it entails discursive work, the binding and marking of symbolic boundaries, the production of "frontier-effects". It requires what is left outside, its constitutive outside, to consolidate the process.

Hall further emphasises that 'identities are constructed through, not outside, difference', and only in relation to what is considered the Other (2011, pp. 4–5):

> This entails the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its constitutive outside that the "positive" meaning of any term - and thus its "identity" - can be constructed[…]. Throughout their careers, identities can function as points of identification and attachment only because of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render "outside", abjected. Every identity has at its "margin", an excess, something more. The unity, the internal homogeneity, which the term identity treats as foundational is not a natural, but a constructed form of closure, every identity naming as its necessary, even if silenced and unspoken other, that which it "lacks".

Importantly, Hall also notes that the 'unities' of identities are not natural, but 'constructed within the play of power and exclusion' (Ibid.).

From the perspective of gamer identity, a cultural identity based on consuming a specific type of cultural products and participating in their culture, the constructive and exclusive nature of the identity is clearly visible (see Chess, 2017; Richard, 2012). As Graeme Kirkpatrick (2015) describes in the context of the United Kingdom, game culture and gamer identity were constructed around consuming specific types of games, valuing them for specific things (e.g., gameplay above any other features), and by certain types of players (young men). In this process, gamer was clearly constructed as a player-consumer identity.

The concept of identification is useful for understanding the construction of gamer identity because it acknowledges the variety of intersecting identity positions within us. As Adrienne Shaw notes in the context of gamer identity (2012, p. 30):

> An identification-based approach allows scholars to recognize that an individual may identify with a variety of social categories (e.g. being a woman and Latina and bisexual and a gamer), without the a priori privileging of a particular category at the outset. Identification recognizes that people work within contexts in which particular identities are articulated, and that inhabiting certain identity categories can shift one's relationship with another category (e.g. being both a woman and a gamer). This type of identity theory offers a way of addressing the relationship between identity, game play, and representation in games, which does not rely on labelling players based on their actions nor over-privileging certain identity categories over others (e.g. gender over race).

Discussing cultural identity, Hall too notes how identities are never unified, but rather 'increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions', and constantly transforming (2011, pp. 3–4). Because of this fluctuating nature of identity, he describes it as (Ibid.):

> the meeting point, the point of *suture*, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to "interpellate", speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be "spoken".

In summary, Hall views identities as temporary attachments to particular subject positions, constructed on 'otherness', never completely fulfilled, and pursued through the process of identification. (Ibid., pp. 5–6).

Understanding the process of identification allows one to see that gamer identity is not clearly defined or stable, or identical to all who carry it. Nor does it override all the other identity positions a person holds within them. Instead, a person's gamer identity, too, is a unique, complex combination of intersecting identity positions, all affecting how she views and positions herself alongside the idea of a 'gamer'.

Partner to the internal process of identification in the construction of gamer identity, validation is an external process during which a person is accepted as a gamer by others. Gamer identity is, first and foremost, a cultural structure which does not concern only the gamer herself. Shaw (2013) describes how the gamer identity is produced by performing it within the borders set by a specific cultural context in a way that is recognisable to the other members of that culture – a process I refer to as gamer habitus. As mentioned earlier, defining oneself as something is always about making distinctions and drawing lines between those who are and those who are not. One cannot define herself as being something without simultaneously defining what she is not.

Gamer identity can be viewed as a game cultural status. It contains values, and in order to achieve it, it is not sufficient to 'merely' play digital games. As a status, it is not stagnant, but a process: it changes with time, becoming stronger or weaker at times (see also Shaw, 2014, p. 151). As described above, gamer identity is born from an internal process of identification (Shaw, 2013), but it is also affected by many external factors. One of these elements are the game products and their marketing, which 'performatively constructs (not reflects) a group as a particular kind of audience and can shape a person's relationship with a medium, a genre, and an industry' (Shaw, 2014, p. 171). Games are designed and marketed for certain kinds of players (still often White, heterosexual, cisgender men). This assumed target audience can be reflected in the marketing as well as the player's experience: a player may suddenly realise that the game assumes her to be someone different (e.g., Richard, 2012). Shira Chess (2017) writes about the gamer identity as a designed identity, often excluding women by design. According to Chess (2017), in addition to women often not considering themselves as gamers, for the game industry, women will forever be the 'player two' – or even a genre of their own. It is worth remembering that gamer identity is – perhaps even primarily – a consumer identity, excluding women and other marginalised groups, not only by their fellow consumers but also the product design and marketing. When a person receives the message that certain game products are not meant for her, it raises the threshold for identifying as a consumer of those products.

Other external challenges may come from the player community, in the form of individual players and player groups, online communities, game media, gaming events and so on, who are all taking part in producing the general image of a gamer. One then compares herself to this communally constructed image, and either is or is not able to see herself in it.

6.1.2 Rejecting or abandoning gamer identity

Gamer identity can be used as a tool for maintaining hegemonic cultural power, when acts of defining the 'right' way of being a gamer are used to construct and enforce discriminatory structures and to exclude certain groups of people from the gamer identity. Because of this, gamer identity has also been examined critically within game culture studies – especially after the GamerGate movement, but also before that (e.g., Vossen, 2018).

For players, gamer identity is not necessarily something to be pursued, but it can be intentionally rejected or abandoned. The reasons for deciding to refuse or abandon gamer identity may tell us a lot about the cultural context in which gamer identity is constructed. Adrienne Shaw (2013) argues that in game studies, we should pay attention not only to those players who have assumed gamer identity, but especially

to women and other marginalised players who have refused to do so, and the reasons behind their refusal. She criticises initiatives seeking to broaden the definition of a gamer to cover an ever-expanding group of different types of hobbyists. According to Shaw, it is not relevant to fit everyone under a single conceptual umbrella, but instead we must understand how the concept is constructed and some people are consequently excluded from it.

The idea of letting go of the concept of gamer identity has been echoed in game media. As a part of the criticism concerning the GamerGate movement born in 2014, on 28 August 2014, two writings were published concerning the end – or even death – of the gamer identity. First was game journalist Leigh Alexander's (2014) article titled '"Gamers" Don't Have to Be Your Audience. "Gamers" Are Over', published in *Gamasutra*, and the second a blog post titled 'The End of Gamers' by media scholar and journalist Dan Golding (2014). In these texts, the authors interpreted the GamerGate movement as an attempt to control the gamer identity, and to aggressively – violently, even – exclude others from it (see also Chess & Shaw, 2015; Mortensen, 2018). As a solution, the authors suggested letting go of the gamer identity: according to them, because everyone is playing digital games in today's world, it is no longer meaningful to talk about 'gamers' as a separate group of people and design games just for them. There were several articles, blog posts, opinion pieces, and commentaries like these published around the same time, describing gamer identity as 'regressive and harmful to gaming culture', and arguing that 'if it is not already a thing of the past, it is now or should be "over" or "ending"' (Houe, 2020, p. 6).

Players too are often reluctant to identify as gamers. One thing affecting players' willingness to identify as gamers are the negative, stereotypical images of them. In their study on player mentalities, Kirsi Pauliina Kallio and co-authors (2011, p. 347) note that the realities of gaming practices often clash with assumed stereotypes, turning players away from the gamer identity that is constructed simultaneously as the hegemonic 'mainstream' or as the marginalised 'other'. Indeed, they argue that 'perhaps, the most serious problem of the current public discussion is that it produces images of gamers and game cultures that make it impossible for most gamers to identify themselves as "gamers" at all' (Ibid.). In the following section, I will explore if and how the Finnish women participating in this study viewed themselves as gamers of some kind, and what was their perception of a 'gamer' like.

6.2 Who is a gamer?

6.2.1 A player, a gamer, or a game hobbyist

As described in the previous section, the construction of gamer identity is a complicated process. Who, then, manages to complete this process to become – or

to become seen as – a gamer? To find out, I asked the online questionnaire respondents and interviewees to describe, in their own words, who or what kind of a person is a player, a gamer, or a game hobbyist.[14]

The question of defining a gamer is central to identifying as one: it reveals the conditions under which someone can be seen as a gamer, and, by extension, define herself as one. The differences in definitions given to a player, a gamer, and a game hobbyist, on the other hand, reveal what kind of resources and activities related to gaming can make someone considered more of a gamer than others. In other words, how a gamer is described and defined reveals the hierarchical power structures within game culture: what kind of gaming and game cultural participation leads to the greatest amount of game cultural capital.

When asked, the questionnaire respondents were able to make distinctions between a player, a gamer, and a game hobbyist. The most loosely defined of the three, a player, was most commonly described simply as someone who plays games; by far the greatest number of responses describing a player contained the idea that it can be anyone who plays (any type of) games. In other words, in the largest number of responses, a player was defined by the activity of playing games, without any further requirements. The second most common response was defining a player through consumption of time. Interestingly, the respondents who defined being a player through time spent on gaming were basing their definitions both to playing occasionally and playing regularly. Some mentioned that one must spend at least a certain amount of time to be considered a player, and some simply said that one must play a lot. Occasionally, although rarely, it was even described as a fully situational status: a person is a player in the moment when she is playing a game (and stops being a player when she is not playing anymore).

Gamer, on the other hand, was seen as a status that extends beyond gaming as an activity. A gamer was described as someone who does not only play games, but is also interested in them, has expertise related to them, participates in social activities around them, and is a skilled and a goal-oriented player who might play competitively or even professionally. In other words, a gamer was described as someone in possession of significant amounts of game cultural capital (Ibid.). 'Hardcore' was a term often used in association with these descriptions (see section 6.2.2 in this chapter for more about the similarities between the descriptions of a gamer and a hardcore

[14] The options in the Finnish questionnaire were 'pelaaja', 'gamer', and 'peliharrastaja' (see appendix 2). In Finnish, the word 'pelaaja' is commonly used to refer to a player of any type of games or sports. However, the English word 'gamer' has also been quite widely adapted from the English-speaking game hobbyist scene into the Finnish-speaking one, which is why I used both words in the online questionnaire as well as in the interviews.

gamer). While a player was often described as someone who could play almost any type of game on any platform, descriptions of a gamer were often tied to specific game genres and platforms. Most commonly, a gamer was described as someone who plays digital games, either on a (gaming) PC or a gaming console, and often online. Gamer was more explicitly described as a consumer identity: while spending money on gaming and the devices required for it were not mentioned in the responses concerning a player, a gamer, on the other hand, was described as a person who plays on expensive hardware. This might be because being a gamer is often tied (and not only in the responses, but even more generally) to PC gaming and building powerful custom devices, or at least playing on the newest gaming consoles (Consalvo & Paul, 2019, pp. 70–78; Chess, 2017, p. 8). It is also tied to the commercial nature of game cultural capital: possessing economic capital leads to improved opportunities for acquiring game cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

The definitions of a gamer were narrowed further with genres: a gamer was seen as someone who plays competitive, team-based games online, such as FPS games, MOBAs, or MMOs. These are the types of games that are valued in the hegemonic core game culture – 'paired with masculinity and celebrated as the authentic and superior game design and experience' (Vanderhoef, 2013). According to Mia Consalvo and Christopher A. Paul (2019), in game culture, 'real games' are defined and valued based on their 'pedigree' (developer), the formal aspects of the game (such as aesthetic design and gameplay), and the game's business model and payment structure. Games that are considered difficult and offer opportunities for showing player skill and debating best strategies are highly valued in game culture (Ibid., pp. 81–82). As such, it makes sense for a gamer to be defined based on playing these types of games.

In the same vein, being a gamer was associated with goal-oriented, skilful play: in the responses, a gamer was described as someone who is always looking to improve her performance, defeat challenges, and maybe compete against others. Alongside skill, a gamer was described possessing expertise: knowledge on the games she plays (and perhaps the devices she plays on), their background and creators, for example. Some expected a gamer to possess even wider game cultural knowledge and expertise in the form of staying on top of gaming news and community discussions. Both gaming skill and wider game cultural expertise can be considered important forms of game cultural capital (Consalvo, 2007).

Often indirectly, being a gamer was described as something social in nature: in addition to playing team-based games online with others, a gamer was described as participating in social game cultural activities outside games, such as discussing games on online forums or participating in gaming events. Gaming is seen to be a great foundation for many different types of social activities and communities (Siitonen, 2022). Consalvo and Paul have also noted that the games considered as

'real' or legitimate within game culture require a certain type of social richness closely attached to game cultural capital: 'real games aren't just played on a platform; they are also a social platform through which to show skill, expertise, depth of knowledge, or offer a subject for extended discussion and analysis' (2019, p. 81). As such, the respondents' descriptions concerning the social aspects of being a gamer align with other elements of game cultural capital attached to the idea of a gamer.

In the questionnaire responses, a gamer was occasionally described as someone who either plays or aspires to play professionally. These descriptions were often tied to competitive gaming in the form of esports, or playing professionally through streaming or creating gaming videos. The background of these associations is the thought that being a 'real' gamer means playing in a serious manner (Vanderhoef, 2013). It is not only for fun or enjoyment or to pass the time, but instead something one does for a purpose, either as a serious hobby or a profession.

While a player was occasionally defined situationally, i.e., as anyone who is currently playing a game, these kinds of descriptions did not exist at all for a gamer. In the same vein, while definitions of a player most commonly described them as 'whoever', these kinds of descriptions were extremely rare in the case of a gamer. Instead, the descriptions of a gamer described the gamer habitus (Kirkpatrick, 2015; Bourdieu, 1984): the different aspects of game cultural capital required to transform a person from a player to a gamer. Interestingly, while a player seemed to be used as a neutral term, simply used to name the activity a person is currently participating in, descriptions of a gamer were, even though not for the most part, notably often negative in nature. Sometimes GamerGate was explicitly mentioned as a source of this negative association.

Additionally, there were a few mentions of 'fake gamers'. Even though a 'fake gamer girl' is a well-known misogynistic meme in game culture (see Scott, 2019), these mentions did not only concern women. Describing someone as 'fake' in relation to being a gamer may happen in two different contexts, first coming from inside and the second from outside the core game culture. Firstly, the description can be meant to dispute a person's credibility as a gamer, which emphasises the cultural power of a 'true' gamer identity – based on game cultural capital. Secondly, it can be a statement regarding the gamer identity in and of itself, meant to ridicule the idea and disregard the whole identity as false, thus questioning and dismantling the cultural power of the identity. These latter kinds of negative descriptions can also be read as a way for the respondents to reject the game cultural values – the current foundations of game cultural capital – and an attempt to shift the expectations and appreciations within the field.

Unlike a player, who was often defined by her current gaming activity, or a gamer, who was defined by playing certain types of games on certain platforms and in a certain way, a game hobbyist was not described as much through her gaming.

Instead, a game hobbyist was described as someone enthusiastic about games, and not even necessarily about playing them, but rather consuming and producing the culture surrounding games. In practice, game hobbyism was often seen as defined by the act of collecting games and related items. In this way, being a game hobbyist was – similarly to being a gamer, and unlike being a player – clearly defined as a consumer identity. However, in the descriptions, while the consumption of a gamer was focused on expensive, powerful PC hardware and the top trending games, a game hobbyist's consumption was focused on collectibles and nostalgic items such as retro games and consoles. Indeed, the respondents' descriptions of game hobbyists were reminiscent of how members of retrogaming communities have been portrayed in research. Jaakko Suominen, Markku Reunanen, and Sami Remes have described retrogaming, not only as the practice of playing and collecting 'classic' hardware and games, but as a wider cultural phenomenon including activities such as 'the production of a broad range of consumer products, textiles, accessories, game related music videos, literature as well as various artistic, museum and academic practices, and the online circulation of game-oriented information and discussion' (2015, p. 77). In a similar manner, the respondents described game hobbyists as not only players, but collectors, producers, and consumers of game culture in a wider sense.

In the responses, a game hobbyist's gaming was associated with different platforms than those of a gamer. While a gamer was usually described playing digital games, and on a PC more often than on a console, a game hobbyist was quite often described playing analogue games, such as board games or tabletop role-playing games, and sometimes playing 'more than just digital games' was even seen as a requirement for being one. When it came to digital games, game hobbyists were described as playing on a console more often than on a PC, and especially retro consoles were mentioned often. Retrogaming is all about playing original, 'classic' games, usually from the 1970s', 1980's, and early 1990's, on the original devices or emulators (Suominen et al., 2015).

Unlike a gamer, a game hobbyist was not described as someone who plays in a goal-oriented manner but rather as someone who plays for her own enjoyment. Then again, based on the responses, a game hobbyist can be a very dedicated enthusiast, for example, in relation to a certain game or game series, and spend a lot of time on gaming and related activities. Unlike a gamer, who was notably often described as a current or aspiring professional, being a game hobbyist was clearly separated from being one. Instead, a game hobbyist was described as 'someone who may play seriously, but not professionally' (R86). Separating a game hobbyist from a gamer, the first was not described as particularly skilled at gaming (although the opposite was not implied either).

Unlike a player, sometimes described even as a situational identity referring to the current act of gaming, or a gamer, strongly tied to the act of playing (certain types

of games on certain platforms in a certain way), a game hobbyist was not defined by the act of playing games. Instead, a game hobbyist was described as not necessarily playing games but doing other things related to games, and for some respondents, the term was used for those who participated in game-related activities but did not actually play games. Indeed, it is entirely possible to see oneself as a part of game culture and maintain a game cultural identity without playing games. For example, in her study on people who do not play games themselves but actively watch others play, Stephanie Orme (2021) found these 'just watchers' often considering themselves as members of game culture. Instead of playing, they enjoyed games by watching, for their interactive stories and for the thrill of watching others achieve spectacular feats or showing highly skilled gameplay (Ibid., pp. 11–12).

The main similarities and differences found in the thematic analysis on the descriptions of a player, a gamer, and a game hobbyist are summarised in table 7:

Table 7. Main features of a player, a gamer, and a game hobbyist.

	Player	**Game hobbyist**	**Gamer**
General description	Based on the activity of playing games, even situational	Based on enthusiasm about games, not necessarily playing them	A status extending beyond playing as an activity
Time spent on playing	Occasional or regular	Not necessarily any	Playing regularly, spending a significant amount of time on gaming
Game types	Any	Retro games and non-digital games	Competitive, team-based, online games
Platforms	Any	Retro consoles	PC/console
Playstyle	Playing for fun and entertainment	Not necessarily any	Goal-oriented, competitive, and skilled play
Sociability of play	Social (playing with friends)		Social (also beyond gameplay)
Other features:		Consumerism (acquiring and collecting games, hardware, and related items)	
		Interest, enthusiasm, and dedication	
		Game cultural expertise	
			Professional play
			Sometimes negative

The fact that there were so many differences between these terms was, assumedly, partially due to me asking about them. In other words, if I had not asked the respondents to first define a player and then a gamer, they might not have seen any need to make a difference between the two. Indeed, some respondents pointed out that they simply do not see any differences between these terms, or that they only described some differences because 'they had to', due to the question. That said, differences found in the responses still reflect the cultural values and expectations related to these terms and the idea of a gamer (identity). The significance of gamer identity as a cultural status was summarised by one of the interviewees:

> **I7:** If you say that gaming is your hobby or that you're a gamer, then it's maybe a bit like… The more you play, and the larger variety of games you play, and for example… It's not only about if you can play them, but like what you know about their backgrounds, and other stuff like that, like how much are you able to discuss them with other people, or tell about them. Those are the kind of things, that if you're not capable of this kind of almost deep discussion about games and all that other stuff, then you may end up feeling a bit inferior there.

Digital gaming was strongly emphasised in the responses, either implicitly or explicitly. This is likely because of the wider theme of the questionnaire (titled 'Finnish women's digital gaming') and the preceding questions (see appendix 2). However, despite the focus on digital gaming in the questionnaire, there was still some variation in the responses: a gamer was clearly seen as the most digital gaming oriented of the three, while a game hobbyist was seen as the least digital gaming oriented.

In addition to the themes described above, the terms were also generally associated with positive feelings towards gaming: pleasure, joy, love, and passion towards gaming were often mentioned as the defining features of all three terms.

For the most part, these three terms were not described by the respondents in relation to themselves, but on a more general level. Occasional identifications were nevertheless made, as were references to people the respondents knew. While self-identification was not commonly mentioned as a defining feature for these three terms, interestingly, it was mentioned in connection to a gamer more often than to a player or a game hobbyist – perhaps defining a gamer as a more of an identity than a descriptive term based on specific types of game cultural activities, and acknowledging its value as an identity to some people.

6.2.2 Hardcore or casual

Games, play, and players can all be discussed as 'casual' or 'hardcore' (Kuittinen et al., 2007). Casual games generally refer to games that can be played for a short

amount of time and have simple mechanics, so that they offer fun and entertainment in an easily accessible manner due to not requiring much time or skill (Kuittinen et al., 2007, p. 106; Chess & Paul, 2019). There are many different genres of casual games, and they can be played on many different platforms, although casual games are often connected to mobile and browser gaming as well as certain consoles such as Nintendo Wii in particular (Kuittinen et al., 2007, p. 105; Vanderhoef, 2013). Casual gaming, on the other hand, is not a question of the game but the playstyle, either in relation to time or commitment: play may be called casual when the player only plays occasionally when she feels like it, or when the player does not take her progression in the game very seriously. Whereas casual as a game type refers to game design, casual as a playstyle refers to a certain type of attitude or a level of commitment to a game (Kuittinen et al., 2007, p. 107; Juul, 2009, pp. 53–54). A casual gamer, on the other hand, is someone who either plays casual games or plays games casually, or both (Kuittinen et al., 2007, pp. 107–108).

What is intriguing about the definitions of a casual gamer, casual games, and casual play is that they only exist in relation to and are primarily defined by their counterpart, the 'hardcore': a hardcore gamer, hardcore games, and hardcore play (Juul, 2009, p. 8; Chess & Paul, 2019). Hardcore games are thought to require more skill and commitment, which raises their status within the game culture (Vanderhoef, 2013). In other words, hardcore games, their players, and the playstyle are seen as more 'real' gaming than their casual counterparts (see also Consalvo & Paul, 2019), providing their players with more game cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). This could also be seen in my research material, as both the questionnaire respondents and the women I interviewed described a 'hardcore gamer' in a very similar way they described a 'gamer'.

Casual games and their players have been seen as a threat to 'real' gaming (Vanderhoef, 2013; Chess & Paul, 2019, pp. 113–114). This feeling of a threat is also gendered in nature, as the majority of players of casual games are women and girls, and casual gaming is actively feminised within game culture (Kuittinen et al., 2007, p. 106; Vanderhoef, 2013). In the juxtaposition between casual and hardcore, the requirements set by a game for its player are placed above the player's personal experience and motivations within the game cultural hierarchy. This is despite the fact that only a few players identify as either category, and people's gaming is often diverse. One player may begin her morning by checking the state of her virtual farm on her gaming console, hunt a couple of pocket monsters on her mobile phone during her lunch break, and play a few rounds of ranked play in a PC shooter game in the evening to try to climb the leader board. All these different forms of play may be equally valuable parts of her gaming. Indeed, many women participating in this study found the hardcore-casual categorisation artificial, value-loaded, and old-fashioned

– to the extent that many did not even want to evaluate themselves in relation to either category.

When asked if the questionnaire respondents had heard (on the media, in discussions, or elsewhere) of distinctions between 'casual' and 'hardcore' gamers, of the 719 respondents answering this question, 80.67% (580 respondents) answered that they had, and 19.33% (139) of the respondents answered that they had not. In other words, most of questionnaire respondents had heard of the division between 'casual' and 'hardcore' gamers. This again shows that the study participants were generally well acquainted with game culture to be aware of these terms.

I asked questionnaire respondents to describe again, in their own words, who or what kind of a person is a casual gamer or a hardcore gamer.[15] In their responses, some of the respondents brought up their distaste for these terms and use of them. This may be because the terms are based on game cultural power structures used to separate those who are considered more 'real' gamers from others – in sort of a culmination of the gatekeeping related to the gamer identity (Vanderhoef, 2013). Based on the responses, some women participating in the study acknowledged and held a distaste for such gatekeeping, and some actively spoke out against it.

The respondents' descriptions of a hardcore gamer were more like the descriptions of a gamer than a player or a game hobbyist. In general, it seemed that the image of a gamer was very similar to the image of a hardcore gamer for the respondents. This, in and of itself, says something about the gamer identity: someone possessing the traits viewed as typical to a hardcore gamer is seen as more of a gamer than someone who does not. As with the definitions of a gamer, a hardcore gamer was most commonly described through playing games – with some purpose other than spending time or for enjoyment – in a goal-oriented, and often competitive, manner. Like the descriptions of a gamer, a hardcore gamer was often defined through the time spent on gaming as well as playing certain types of games (digital games with competitive aspects such as rankings) on certain platforms (a (gaming) PC or a gaming console) – the types of gears considered legitimate in core game culture (Consalvo & Paul, 2019). Significantly often, a hardcore gamer was described as someone who plays competitively in esports and even professionally, competitively or otherwise, as a gamer was too. Like a gamer and a game hobbyist, a hardcore gamer was also described possessing, in addition to gaming skill, expertise regarding gaming – another central form of game cultural capital (Consalvo, 2007).

Interestingly, a hardcore gamer was often described as dedicating her time on one specific game and progressing within it. This enthusiasm surrounding a specific

[15] 'Kasuaalipelaaja' and 'hardcorepelaaja' were the terms used in the Finnish questionnaire and interviews (see appendices 1 and 2).

game or genre was something the descriptions of a hardcore gamer had in common with those of a game hobbyist. A hardcore gamer was described as putting effort and spending money on the best gaming equipment available, creating similarities between gaming hobbyist and hardcore gamer as consumer identities. However, the idea of spending money as a defining feature of the identity was brought up much more often in the case of a game hobbyist, which was the most focused on collecting game cultural items.

Like a gamer, a hardcore gamer was often described in some type of a negative manner. However, there were some differences in these negative characterisations. Whereas the negative associations of a gamer were related to the toxic gamer culture and sometimes GamerGate in particular, in the case of a hardcore gamer they were brought up in relation to the so-called casual gamers: a hardcore gamer was negatively described as someone who cannot stand those who are less skilled or dedicated as she is, and who looked down at other players.

Unlike a player, a hardcore gamer was never defined as someone who simply plays games, and instead as someone who is very dedicated to games and the culture surrounding them, either as an important or serious hobby or professionally. Unlike a gamer, a hardcore gamer was very rarely described to be based on self-identification. On the contrary, it was seen more as a status achieved by dedication.

In the case of a casual gamer, similarly to a hardcore gamer, the descriptions were most often tied to time spent on gaming, playing certain types of games, and having – or, in the case of a casual gamer, lacking – a certain level of skill and commitment. In their research article critically analysing casual as a concept, Shira Chess and Christopher A. Paul point out that casual is an industry moniker referring to 'those who were less committed and less knowledgeable about the larger themes, technologies, and practices of the video game industry' (2019, p. 110). In player communities, too, it is used to describe those who possess less game cultural capital: less skill and expertise (Consalvo, 2007).

In the questionnaire responses, a casual gamer was generally described as someone who only plays occasionally, or only for short periods of time, without any other goals than being entertained, or to spend time, or to escape boredom. In the responses, playing for the sake of playing, for the joy of it, and for entertainment, were emphasised when compared to other gamer categories. A casual gamer was described as a social gamer in the sense that she may play because her friends play, and in their company, perhaps even without a personal motivation for playing. On the other hand, a casual gamer was not described as participating in social activities around gaming or being a member in gaming communities.

Casual gamer was the only category where not being skilled at playing was constantly mentioned as a defining feature. This might be since so-called casual games are often considered to not require skilled play. The description of casual as

less skilled might be affected by the tendency to separate between 'hardcore' and 'casual' players within certain games in genres like MMORPGs, considering the first as skilled and the latter as unskilled players. Indeed, in relation to MMORPGs, such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), a 'casual' playstyle was described as less focused on high-performance play in raids, clearing difficult instances, competing for world-first kills, or gearing up one's character. On the other hand, game types like free-to-play mobile games, such as *Candy Crush* (King, 2012), Facebook games, and sports games played on gaming consoles, such as *NHL* (Electronic Arts, 1991), and mainstream or 'trend games' in general were mentioned as games seen played by casual gamers. This selection of mentioned games and playstyles highlights the way a casual gamer is seen as someone who 'just' plays, mainly for her own entertainment, without any specific gaming skills, game cultural expertise, or goals. In other words, a casual gamer is a person with very limited amounts of game cultural capital. Interestingly considering the participants' active and varied gaming practices, game cultural participation, and game cultural expertise, compared to other gamer categories in the questionnaire, a casual gamer was most often described through the respondent's own gaming.

The main similarities and differences found in the thematic analysis on the descriptions of a hardcore gamer and a casual gamer in comparison to the descriptions of a player, a gamer, and a game hobbyist are summarised in table 8.

Table 8. Main features of a player, a gamer, and a game hobbyist in relation to hardcore and casual.

	Casual	Player	Game hobbyist	Gamer	Hardcore
General description	Playing for fun and entertainment	Based on the activity of playing games, even situational	Based on enthusiasm about games, not necessarily playing them	A status extending beyond playing as an activity	
Time spent on playing	Occasional, short periods of time	Occasional or regular	Not necessarily any	Playing regularly, spending a significant amount of time on gaming	
Game types	MMOs, free-to-play mobile games, Facebook games, sports games, trend games	Any	Retro games and non-digital games	Competitive, team-based, online games	
Platforms	Any	Any	Retro consoles	PC/console	
Playstyle	Playing for fun and entertainment		Not necessarily any	Goal-oriented, competitive, and skilled play	
	Unskilled play				
Sociability of play	Social (playing with friends)		Social (also beyond gameplay)		
Other features:			Consumerism (acquiring and collecting games, hardware, and related items)		
			Interest, enthusiasm, and dedication		
			Game cultural expertise		
				Professional play	
				Sometimes negative	

Next, I will examine if and how the respondents identified (or chose not to identify) themselves as gamers of any kind.

6.3 Not identifying as gamers

6.3.1 Players, not gamers

In addition to asking women participating in the study in the online questionnaire and interviews about their definitions of a player, a gamer, and a game hobbyist, as well as a hardcore gamer and a casual gamer, I asked them if they would describe themselves as one, why, or why not.

In the online questionnaire, I asked respondents if they considered themselves as one or several of the following: a player, a gamer, or a game hobbyist. The respondents were given a scale of 1 to 5, on which 1 meant they do not consider themselves as one at all and 5 meant that they fully considered themselves as such. A total of 709 respondents answered this question, but a different number of respondents estimated their relationship to each term (figure 25).

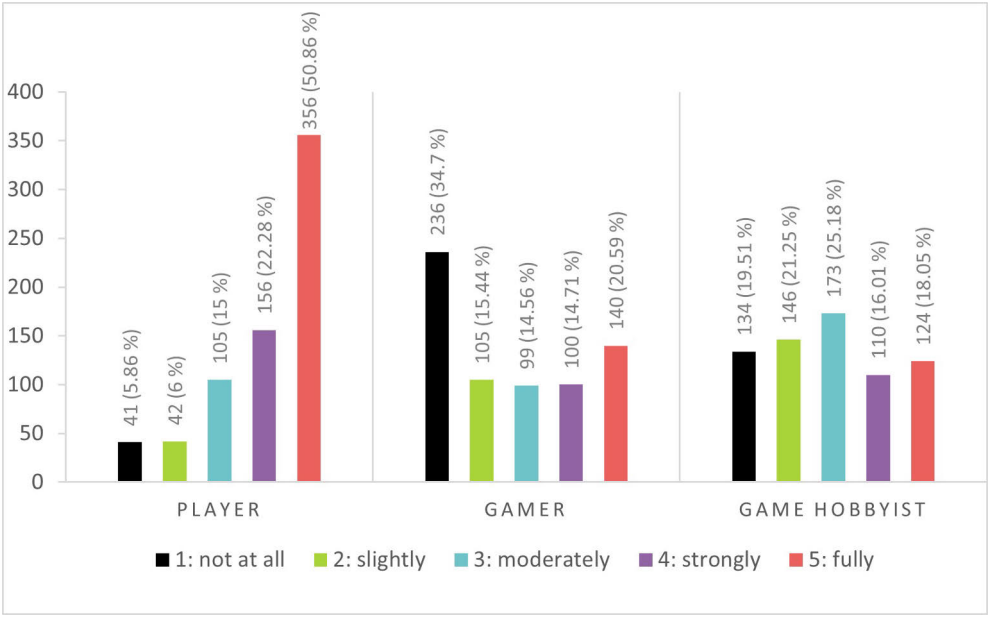

Figure 25. Number of questionnaire respondents considering themselves a player, a gamer, and a game hobbyist (N=709).

Of the 700 respondents estimating themselves in relation to a player, 50.86% (356) considered themselves fully, and 22.28% (156 respondents) strongly as one: a combined score of 73.14% (512 respondents) answering 4–5 on a scale from 1–5. A total of 21% (147 respondents) viewed themselves as slightly or moderately a player, while only 5.86% (41 respondents) did not consider themselves as one at all.

Of the 680 respondents estimating themselves in relation to a gamer, the numbers on the higher end of scale were clearly lower: 35.3% (240 respondents) selected 4 or 5. At the same time, 30% (204 respondents) selected 2 or 3, and as many as 34.7% (236 respondents) did not consider themselves a gamer at all.

Finally, 687 respondents estimated themselves in relation to a game hobbyist. Of these respondents, 34.06% (234 respondents) selected 4 or 5, and 46.43% (319 respondents) selected 2 or 3. A greater number of respondents did not consider themselves a game hobbyist at all (19.51%, 134 respondents) than a player or a gamer.

In addition to the options of identifying as a player, a gamer, or a game hobbyist offered to questionnaire respondents, they were given the option to describe themselves as 'something else'. There were 67 open descriptions, including comments related to working with games (e.g., in the industry, as a game educator, or as a game researcher), or being a player of a certain game or certain types of games (e.g., a *World of Warcraft* player, a role-player, or a retro gamer). Some respondents did not consider themselves a gamer, but more of a geek. Some respondents defined themselves through the occasional nature of their gaming. There was also a great number of individual descriptions, including definitions such as 'someone who enjoys gaming', 'an escapist', 'a machine hobbyist', 'a nostalgy player', and 'an esports player'. Some described themselves as a casual or a hardcore gamer.

During interviews, I asked participants if they identified themselves as a player, a gamer, or a game hobbyist, and what they thought about those terms. The question was recorded for nineteen interviews. While most of the interviewees played very actively, either at the time or at an earlier time in their lives, not all of them defined themselves as a gamer. This was not a surprising result, as previous studies have shown that simply playing games is often not enough for a person – and especially a person who is not a White, young, heterosexual, cisgender man – to define themselves as a gamer. In Adrienne Shaw's study on marginalised gamers, even though all the interviewees played games, only around half of them identified as a gamer (2014, p. 227). A previous study on adult gamers in the United States conducted by the Pew Research Center has also shown that even though equal number of men and women are playing digital games, men are twice as likely to call themselves 'gamers' – and young men (aged between 18 and 29) are three times as likely to call themselves a gamer – compared to women of the same age (Duggan, 2015, p. 2).

Of nineteen interviewees, seven would call themselves a gamer. Additionally, four would call themselves a game hobbyist, and one would call herself both a gamer and a game hobbyist. Seven interviewees would not call themselves either. As a result, an equal number of seven (36.84%) interviewees would and would not describe themselves as a gamer. On the other hand, twelve of the nineteen

interviewees (63.16%) would call themselves either a gamer, a game hobbyist, or both, which is a surprisingly large number in comparison to the results from earlier studies described above.

Asking why the questionnaire respondents either would or would not see themselves as a gamer, a player, or a game hobbyist, many of the responses, too, highlighted the game cultural context of gamer identity: almost none of them described the activity of playing games as a basis of being a gamer (or a player or a game hobbyist). When asked to describe a gamer, a player, and a game hobbyist earlier, many responses (particularly in the case of a player) attached the term to the act of playing games, whereas, when considering themselves in relation to these terms, this did not seem to be sufficient to claim such identity.

Respondents who did identify as a gamer, a player, or a game hobbyist, often described some additional game cultural criteria filled to justify their gamer identity in addition to their gaming. Furthermore, respondents that did not identify as a gamer, a player, or a game hobbyist, referred to the cultural aspects of gamer identity. Some respondents explained that they did not see themselves as gamers because gaming did not mean anything to them apart from being a way to spend time and to have some entertainment. As one respondent put it:

> **R3:** I play to spend time, but I am not particularly interested in game culture.

Another explained that:

> **R28:** Gaming is not truly meaningful to me in the sense that I would be unhappy if I didn't have a gaming console, for example. I can do perfectly well without, gaming is mostly about killing time comparable to watching television.

In some cases, the respondents compared themselves to others around them, whom they thought to be more gamers:

> **R92:** There are several game hobbyists around me, and I feel inadequate next to them, because I am not interested in games in as varied way. On the other hand, I do play different types of games and I like to talk about gaming and to read game magazines.

Interestingly, even though the participants were very active in their gaming and game cultural participation, there were almost no responses in which the respondents would have explicitly described themselves as more gamers than some others.

Notably, respondents often did not want to call themselves a gamer because of the negative connotations of the term (as described in the previous section of this chapter). One respondent, for example, replied:

> **R74:** Absolutely, I am a player and a game hobbyist, as I do play a lot, am interested in reading many things about the games I play and, in my own way, I take games seriously. Due to the negative connotations attached to the word Gamer I do not wish to describe myself with it.

Additionally, the term 'gamer' was sometimes rejected due to it not being in Finnish, as it was not considered appropriate to use an English word to describe something in an otherwise Finnish context.

6.3.2 Neither casual nor hardcore

I asked questionnaire respondents to estimate how well the terms 'casual gamer' or 'hardcore gamer' described them on a scale from 1–5, where 5 is fully and 1 is not at all. Although the respondents did not commonly see neither word fitting them, a greater number of respondents – over a half of them – considered themselves fully (5) or strongly (4) a casual gamer (58.62%, 408 respondents) than a hardcore gamer (18.43%, 127 respondents). On the other hand, 30.32% (211) of the respondents considered themselves slightly or moderately a casual gamer, while the responding number for a hardcore gamer was a bit higher: 41.95% (289 respondents). While only 11.06% (77) of the respondents did not consider themselves a casual gamer at all, 39.62% (273 respondents) did not consider themselves a hardcore gamer at all. While the respondents seemed to be leaning towards considering themselves as casual gamers more often than hardcore gamers, it was interesting to notice the relatively high number (almost 42%) of respondents considering themselves slightly or moderately hardcore gamers. At the same time, for the casual gamer, the most popular option amongst the respondents was fully considering oneself as one, while for a hardcore gamer the most popular option was the opposite: not considering oneself as one at all (figure 26).

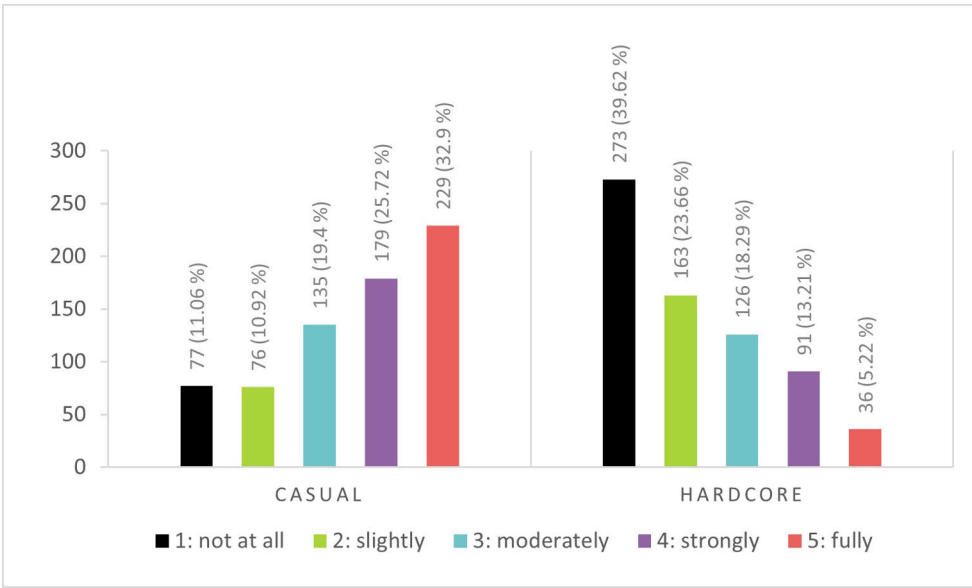

Figure 26. Number of questionnaire respondents considering themselves a casual or a hardcore gamer (N=703).

When asked why the respondents would or would not consider themselves as casual or hardcore gamers, in the responses, a hardcore gamer was understood both in terms of playstyle and the games played, which was well in line with the respondents' previous descriptions of a hardcore and a casual gamer. Although many respondents described their position within these two categories based on how they had described them in their previous response, many pointed out, again, how the categories are value-loaded in a way that they wished to separate themselves from. Some also pointed out the shifting nature of these identities (see also Shaw, 2014, p. 151): a person may consider herself a hardcore gamer in one moment or regarding one specific game, and casual in another. As one respondent described it:

> **R2**: I put a lot of time into games, I take them seriously and they are important to me. I'm not afraid of even difficult games. This attitude does, however, depend on the game – some games I play very casually, some I immerse myself in and invest time and effort. The timing matters, too. Sometimes there isn't as much time for gaming, and then gaming is more casual.

Of all the different categories (a player, a gamer, a game hobbyist, a casual gamer, and a hardcore gamer), the respondents found a player and a casual gamer clearly the most relatable, and a gamer and a hardcore gamer the least relatable. The reasons given by the respondents to the questions of why they would or would not consider

themselves a player, a gamer, a game hobbyist, a hardcore gamer, or a casual gamer, reflected descriptions the respondents had given to those gamer categories: often based on time spent on gaming, the types of games played, playstyle and skill level, and wider game cultural participation and expertise. In their responses, the women recognised the game cultural structures and meanings related to the terms, but often chose to separate themselves from those. First and foremost, the responses reflected what gaming and (not) being a gamer meant for the respondents, whether that was in line with the cultural expectations connected to the identity or not.

6.3.3 Gender in women's descriptions and self-definitions of a gamer

Gender was not often explicitly mentioned in the respondents' descriptions of a player, a game hobbyist, a casual gamer, or a hardcore gamer, but it was often mentioned in connection to a gamer. However, even when gender was not explicitly mentioned, it was present in the underlying cultural expectations and meanings attached to those terms. Furthermore, sometimes respondents intentionally stood against the gendered cultural expectations attached to the idea of a gamer and its variations, explicitly stating that they were aware of them but decided to define the terms differently.

When gender was explicitly mentioned, it was usually done in the context of excluding women from the type of a gamer that was currently being described, for example: 'A young (White) man who identifies through gaming, or an adult stuck in that phase' (R561). On the other hand, in some cases the respondents explicitly stated that the term described covers gamers of all genders, such as in this response describing a gamer: 'Active game hobbyist, age or gender insignificant. Plays more than 10h a week. Visits events in the field or follows communities actively' (R536). In some cases, gender was explicitly present in the way the respondents included themselves in the definitions, like in this case of a respondent describing a player: 'Whoever. For example, a middle-aged, middle-class woman like me' (R574). At the same time, some respondents were not quite sure if they would 'fit the box' due to their gender:

> **R655**: A player is a person who plays games. On a computer, a console, on mobile. On whatever there is. For marketing purposes, they may try to define a player to fit some specific ethnic, gender, or age box, but I don't see any that limits of that kind in the definition of a player. I'm sure there exists some kind of a "generic" player but then again I don't know if I would fit into that box as a young woman?

Of the different gamer terms (a player, a gamer, and a game hobbyist), gender was most often brought up in the case of a gamer. As gamer as a term had negative connotations in the minds of the respondents, gender too received negative connotations in these descriptions. Interestingly, these connotations were different when discussing men gamers and women gamers, but both were described through negative stereotypes.

In the case of men gamers, they were described through stereotypes of teenage boys' and young men gamers' and GamerGate supporters' toxic masculinity, misogyny, and bad behaviour towards other players (women in particular), as in these two examples: 'Gamer is a man, who can't stand women in "their territory", but despise and belittle them. Upholds rape culture and masculine hegemony' (R624), and 'An angry young man. Visits dubious discussion platforms to badmouth women gamers' (R9). Responses such as these highlight both the negative stereotype of a gamer as a misogynistic, young man, but also gaming as a cultural field that is defined by the structures of hegemonic masculinity and is toxic and hostile to women (Consalvo, 2012; Houe, 2020).

Women gamers were described as 'fake gamer girls' (see also 'fake geek girl': Scott, 2019) who play to seek attention and can only pretend to have any game cultural expertise: 'Some tryhard woman interested in cosplay who streams Overwatch or LoL. Visits cons. Does not necessarily know what she's talking about' (R250) and 'This only reminds me of for example gamergurrll 6969 girlies in Twitch who actually even can't/don't want to play but are showing off their obtrusive breasts and posing for the viewers to get some dough through the subs, so fake gamers' (R428). These responses reflect the misogynistic attitudes targeted at women who are taking active and visible roles in game culture, such as women who stream their gaming. As Bo Ruberg, Amanda L. L. Cullen, and Kathryn Brewster (2019) describe in their study on gender-based harassment in game live-streaming, women streamers are perceived as receiving undeserved attention by using their bodies, and their labour and legitimacy are constantly undermined and devalued.

In the responses in which the women identified themselves as casual gamers, the idea of a casual gamer was occasionally defined through gender, as women and girls were sometimes mentioned in the responses as typical casual gamers. Although gender was often presented as a factor excluding women from gamer definitions, one respondent described considering herself a hardcore gamer partially because of it, as she saw her gaming as exceptionally active and versatile when compared to other women she knew:

> **R61**: In the geek circles, I have never met another woman my age who would play more or more diversely than I. I never have, but I'm very much looking forward to it! I can't help feeling a bit HC when my whole life all other women

> players I've met, when talking about gaming, have sounded to me like they don't actually play all that much or at least are belittling their own playing' (R61).

As such, the identification or lack of identification with the idea of a gamer can be based on comparing oneself to others and considering if one possesses more or less game cultural capital than them. Finally, for some participants who identified as a gamer, gender was a significant part of that identity:

> **R:** Do you consider yourselves as players, or do you possess the kind of a player or a gamer identity, or do you think of yourselves as game hobbyists? Have you thought about this? Or what do you think about when you hear these words?
>
> **I2:** I think I have that one [identity] a bit maybe.
>
> **I1:** Yeah, because you play like, so regularly, after all. I think I did have one at some point, but now that it hasn't really been my hobby for a couple of years, now I don't anymore, as strongly. But I did at some point, I at least did consider myself as a woman player at one point.
>
> **R:** Was it a woman player specifically?
>
> **I1:** Well maybe a girl still, back then, but…
>
> **R:** A girl player. Would you say it's important in some way, that you're a player, that it's a part of….
>
> **I1:** Well I've always thought of it great to be a woman who plays, it's always been a sort of a cool thing, because it isn't so common, after all. So in some way it has been a pretty nice thing.
>
> **R (to I2):** How about you?
>
> **I2:** Well, for me it has really always been a matter of pride that I'm a woman player.

As can be seen from the excerpt above, being a gamer – and a women gamer in particular – was a source of pride for some women who participated in the study. However, the participants did not, in general, wish to define themselves as gamers. Regardless, gaming held much meaning to them beyond the gamer identity.

6.4 Meaning of gaming beyond the gamer identity

As I have described in the previous chapters, the Finnish women participating in the study were very active and versatile players, participated in game cultural activities beyond the act of gaming, and seemed to possess a great amount of game cultural expertise. Despite this, participants did not generally consider themselves gamers, but rather 'merely' players. What kind of meanings did gaming, then, hold in the women's lives? In the online questionnaire, I asked the respondents an open-ended question: 'What does gaming mean to you?' The responses to this question were overwhelmingly positive. They showed that gaming was very significant to the women in many ways, and that the meanings these women attached to gaming were not only related to gaming as an activity but extended far beyond that (figure 27).

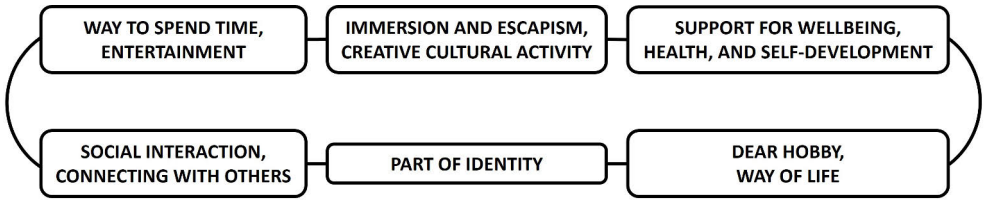

Figure 27. Meanings of gaming in the questionnaire respondents' lives.

In the responses, gaming was primarily seen as a pleasant, fun way to spend time and to be entertained. It was, for example, described as 'Enjoying a good plot and characters so that I can immerse myself in it in a way that isn't possible in other media forms. Own time, entertainment, emotional experiences' (R42). For many respondents, games seemed to be the preferred form of home entertainment over reading or watching television: 'Way to spend time that is not passive like for example watching TV – I would rather play fantastic space operas in which I can affect the way the story develops than passively watch something I cannot affect' (R124). In general, games are played for fun and enjoyable experiences, although these can mean different things for different players (Ermi & Mäyrä, 2005, p. 3).

As seen in the previous quotes, game stories were described as significant because they provide players with opportunities for immersion and escapism. In addition to forms of entertainment, games were described as a culture and creative activity. For many respondents, playing was an important way to experience great stories and adventures – and not merely in the role of a passive reader or viewer, like in the case of books and movies, for instance, but also having an active role in the story, and living it through one's own experience. Laura Ermi and Frans Mäyrä (2005) describe immersion as a central component in gameplay experience, which can be characterised as an escapist experience due to the player's active participation

and various types of immersion. On the other hand, in some responses, games were described simply as just another form of media and entertainment consumed alongside all the others.

Gaming was described as a form of entertainment and a pleasant way to spend time and to relax, either by 'turning one's brain off' or focusing it on the game challenges while mentally letting go of tasks related to work or studying. Respondents described this and other ways to use gaming to support their wellbeing, or as a form of self-development, such as playing to give the brain some exercise or to enhance vitality, with an aim (or added benefit) to keep one's brain healthy and active and to improve logical thinking. Gaming was also used as a form of dealing with certain feelings and managing aggression. In some responses, gaming was even described as a form of therapy:

> **R191:** After my depression, I used gaming as self-therapy – one of the first things I had the energy to do was to play wow and because it is so easy to get a sense of accomplishment in an online RPG, you gain EXP, levels, loot, you can choose when you're social and when you're not, you can practice schedules and working in a community, responsibility in a safe environment, so it was the first step towards my recovery – a safe environment for practice.

For some respondents who experienced mental or physical health issues, gaming provided support. Earlier research on psychological effects of gaming shows that gaming may have many positive effects on wellbeing and mental health (Reer & Quandt, 2020).

In the responses, gaming was described as a way to connect with others, to create memories and share experiences: 'It's also a way to do something together with for example your partner or a friend, to immerse yourselves in something together, to adventure together, and to succeed together!' (R127). Gaming with others was also seen to alleviate loneliness: 'Gaming is an all-encompassing, connecting experience, whether you play alone or in a group, apart or in a shared location. Skyping while playing eases the feeling of loneliness, when most of your gaming friends are living in another city' (R105).

Many of the respondents described gaming as a highly significant part of their lives, a dear hobby, some even as a way of life. The same themes were also present in the interviews:

> **I12:** In my view, it [gaming] is a way of life, I've heard you can see it from me, and I'm proud of it [laughs].

> **R:** Is it, in your view, like an identity? Or, you said, a way of life, so you see it that way?
>
> **I12:** Yes. And an identity too, sure. If I would have to classify myself somehow, a player is one of them.

As seen in the above quote, some considered gaming as an important part of who they were, even part of their identity:

> **R266:** Gaming is a part of my way of live. Gaming is a way to relax, to reflect on my thoughts and to expand my world view, and to develop my skills and to socially interact with my friends. Gaming is a part of my identity and it is also important to me professionally.

It is worth noticing that the significance of gaming was only very rarely described as being part of the respondent's identity, which was also in line with the way the participants were reluctant to identify as gamers when asked about that specifically. However, based on the responses, gaming was clearly a very important part of many respondents' lives in various ways. The only negative responses describing the meaning of gaming in the respondents' lives were related to use of time: in these responses, gaming was described as something that takes too much time from their lives for little benefit or at the expenses of other, more important ways to spend time.

I asked the questionnaire respondents how they would see games and gaming as a part of their future. Based on the responses, women participating in the study could see gaming being a part of their lives forever – quite a few described their imagined futures in an elderly care facility with an excellent internet connection. Some hoped that, in some way, gaming could become a part of their working life as well. On the other hand, some suspected that, in the future, they might not have as much time or interest in gaming than they have now or have had in the past. Some noted that some of their gaming companions stopped playing at some point, and suspected that this would be happening more in the future, leading them to lose interest due to the lack of friends to play with. On the other hand, some respondents described planning to play with their current or future children (or other young relatives) and create new companionships and memories around gaming with the next generation.

As described above, the meanings that gaming held in the women's lives were not, for the most part, tied to a gamer identity. Despite being very active and versatile players and actively participating in game cultural activities, the participants were reluctant to view themselves as gamers – and did not seem to care for being viewed as gamers by others. This was not because they did not see themselves as 'sufficiently' gamers in terms of game cultural capital. Instead, while participants

seemed to be well aware of the cultural expectations and status attached to gamer identity, they chose to reject it. In other words, the women chose to define their gaming and its significance to them on their own terms – taking control of their own game cultural agency.

Agency is a central concept in feminist studies, where it is understood as situated, embodied, and relational, tied to specific social and cultural contexts (McNay, 2016, pp. 41–42). In the context of game culture, it is interesting to examine the construction of game cultural agency – both as a concept and as practice. In his article 'The Player as a Hybrid: Agency in Digital Game Cultures', Frans Mäyrä examines 'the player as a hybrid: a particular version of subjectivity that emerges from involvement with the contents, cultures and technologies of games' (2019, p. 29). As Mäyrä points out (Ibid., p. 30):

> Agency in digital games has evolved into a deeply complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon, partly due to the multiplicity of digital games and the vast differences between them, and partly due to the special characteristics of the technological, financial and sociocultural relations manifested in digital games.

Mäyrä understands player agency as two-layered cultural agency: it includes both collective elements, such as cultural history and cultural expression (the macro level of player agency) as well as the individual choices and actions (the micro level of player agency). In this study, I have examined the macro level of player agency, which I refer to as game cultural agency. It is worth noting, however, that the construction of game cultural agency is closely tied – in addition to the social and cultural practices and norms surrounding them – to the tangible, material objects of play (Mäyrä, 2019; see also Enevold, 2014). At the same time, as I have shown in my analysis, game cultural agency exists outside of situations in which a person is engaged in gameplay: in other forms of game cultural participation and, in some cases but not necessarily, in gamer identity.

In game studies, game cultural belonging is often approached through the idea of gamer identity (Shaw, 2012; Houe, 2020). However, based on the stories of women participating in this study, the idea of a gamer, or the possibility to identify as one, does not define their game cultural agency. Instead, while acknowledging the cultural structures defining what it takes to be counted as a 'gamer' in the hegemonic core game culture, the women chose to construct their game cultural agency on their own terms, against the cultural norms and expectations.

7 Conclusions: Understanding women's game cultural agency beyond being 'gamers'

In this final chapter, I will summarise the findings and conclusions I have made analysing the research material. I will begin by answering the three sub research questions: 'What are women players' gaming practices like?', 'How does gender affect women players' game cultural participation?', and 'How do women players construct the idea and identity of a gamer?' As a conclusion to answering these sub research questions, I will also respond to my main research question: 'How can women's game cultural agency be understood beyond the gamer identity?' After presenting the results and conclusions of the study, I will describe the research process behind the dissertation, and the limitations and rigor of the study. I will end the chapter by describing the implications and potential applications of the results, as well as the potential future research opportunities in this area.

7.1 Main results

7.1.1 What women players' gaming practices are like

To answer my first sub research question 'What are women players' gaming practices like?' I first explored how women's gaming has been presented in various player statistics, primarily in Finland but also internationally, and what kind of gender differences between the examined genders (women and men, girls and boys) were presented in these studies. The examined player statistics include three nationally representative studies from Finland: *The Finnish Player Barometer 2018* (Kinnunen et al., 2018), focusing of 10–75 years-old Finns, and two studies focusing on the Finnish children and youth (7–29 years-old): *The Children's Media Barometer 2012* (Suoninen, 2013), and *A Grip on Media: A Study of Children's and Young People's Leisure Activities in 2016, with an Emphasis on Media and Physical Activities* (Merikivi et al., 2016). Additionally, I examined three market studies from Europe and the United States: *Videogames in Europe: 2012 Consumer Study*

(Interactive Software Federation of Europe, 2012), *The 2018 Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry* (Entertainment Software Association, 2018), and the *Gaming and Gamers* report, published by the Pew Research Center in 2015 (Duggan, 2015).

Based on these selected studies, gender differences in gaming could be found in the areas of gaming frequency, gaming platforms and preferred genres, as well as social gaming habits and attitudes towards gaming. However, from the perspective of this study based in game culture studies, it is important to understand the social and cultural reasons behind the statistical gender differences by examining the ways in which women are and are not participating in gaming. For this purpose, I explored the gaming practices of the Finnish women participants through interviews and an online questionnaire, analysing these women's descriptions of the time that they spend on gaming, the types of games they play, their gaming platforms, and the social aspects of their gaming.

Women participating in the study played digital games very actively and on various devices. 78.33% of the questionnaire respondents estimated that they spend at least six hours on digital gaming every week, and 27% of the questionnaire respondents estimated they play more than 20 hours every week, while Finns in general spend an average time of 4.76 hours per week on digital gaming (Kinnunen et al., 2018, p. 45). Almost all interviewees described playing digital games very actively, nine of twenty interviewees playing every day. Compared to the selected player statistics, women participating in the study played digital games much more actively than Finns or Europeans in general. However, the amount of time spent on gaming was not stagnant but varied greatly – generally based on available time, but also on other factors, such as motivation.

Significantly, almost all descriptions of time spent on gaming were either positive or neutral in nature: for the most part, women participating in the study seemed to consider gaming as an enjoyable way to spend time – when time remained for it after all other responsibilities in life. For some women participating in the study, gaming was a serious hobby, a part of their profession, or a potential future profession. In these cases, spending time on gaming was not done, at least fully, for a purpose of entertainment, but for an external goal. Despite this, the women never described gaming as something that they were 'forced to' do, even if they would not have wanted to.

In addition to playing more often, women participating in the study also played a greater variety of game genres actively than Finns on average. The ten most popular game genres amongst the questionnaire respondents included many different game types: puzzle games, role-playing games, simulation and building games, adventure games, action-adventure games, platformer games, strategy games, MMORPGs, shooter games, and music and social games. When compared to the gaming of Finns

in general, the genre preferences of women participating in the study were much closer to Finnish men than Finnish women. However, the participants also played almost all genres more actively than Finnish men or Finnish women. The women seemed to be well aware of what they did or did not like in their games, and of the circumstances affecting their choice of playing a game at a given time.

While the most popular gaming platform amongst all Finns is a mobile device such as a phone (Kinnunen et al., 2018, p. 31), a computer was the most popular platform amongst my participants, followed by a mobile device, and a gaming console. Women participating in the study played more actively on all different devices, and on a computer in particular, than Finns in general. The participants had ownership and control over their gaming devices: around 70% of the questionnaire respondents had bought gaming devices (mobile phones excluded) for their personal use, and over a half of the respondents had gaming devices (other than mobile phones) solely or mostly in their personal use. Although money is a central factor in the accessibility of gaming, it was not frequently discussed by the participants – apart from the questionnaire responses concerning those who were unable to update a device due to lack of funds or building one's own gaming computer. The latter was a topic on which the respondents' technological expertise came to show – even though it was also explicitly downplayed by the participants.

Over a half of the women participating in the study (57.08% of the questionnaire respondents) played most often alone, and around a quarter (25.89%) of the respondents played alone and in the company of others in equal measure. It is worth noting that there were many women in both the questionnaire respondents and the interviewees who explained that they intentionally avoided playing games with others, especially strangers, due to negative experiences or expectations related to online games. Notably, some women said that they expected to be poorly treated in these kinds of games because of their gender, which shows that the toxic and misogynistic nature of online gaming environments is well known amongst women players. This was one of the reasons why some women participating in the study were very careful with setting the limits of their own identity and anonymity while participating in games containing social aspects. On the other hand, there were also women for whom these types of games were enjoyable, and those who were drawn into them primarily due to their social features.

A majority (63.79%) of respondents were not members of any player community, although some were members of a game-related online community (17.97%) or a MMO guild (16.16%), and a few were members of gaming associations, esports teams, or some other gaming communities. The sociability of the women's gaming could take many different forms. It could mean interacting with others in an online gaming environment, playing a game together with someone in a

shared physical environment, playing different games while spending time together in a physical environment, watching someone else play, and so on.

Overall, participants showed a variety of overlapping gamer mentalities (Kallio et al., 2011): for the most part, their gaming practices – the games they played and their gaming platforms, the amount of time they used on gaming, their gaming mentality – changed from one moment to another, based on the moment, the social environment, and other circumstances in their life and in the situation. At the same time, they could develop special relationships to specific games or game series and devices, to be carried with them throughout their personal gaming histories.

The remarkable activity and variety of the participants' gaming can be interpreted as the women's gaming practices being located at the very core of game culture. In terms of gender, this access to core game culture could also be seen in the way in which the participants' gaming resembled that of the average Finnish men more than the average Finnish women. At the same time, even though the women were participating in the core game culture through their active and varied gaming, effects of their gender on their gaming practices could be seen in their descriptions of the limitations to the sociability of their gaming, resulting from the perceived misogyny of social gaming environments. Based on participants' descriptions, as well as prior research regarding women's public play (Cote, 2017; Fox & Tang, 2017; Richard & Gray, 2018), it seems that gender affects women's gaming more strongly the more public their gaming is: less in private gaming practices – although still affected by the gendered social and cultural norms and expectations regarding women's interests as well as by the demands concerning women's use of time and money (Enevold & Hagstrom, 2008; Bergstrom, 2019; Orme, 2021) – and more in the various public forms of game cultural participation.

7.1.2 How gender affects women players' game cultural participation

To answer my second sub research question 'How does gender affect women players' game cultural participation?' I first explored how the different aspects of game cultural participation – entering game culture, invisibility and gender performances of women players, and collecting game cultural capital – have been described in previous research. Then I examined how women participating in the study had entered game culture, the various ways in which they were (and were not) participating in game culture, and how their gender affected their gaming.

Previous research shows that women face various gender-based barriers when trying to enter game culture (Nieminen-Sundell, 2003; Taylor, 2008; Yee, 2008). Women's game cultural participation is partially invisible and limited to specific ways of participation (Bryce & Rutter, 2002; Witkowski, 2018). Most visible – and

most highly valued – positions and ways of participation, as well as displays of game cultural capital through gaming skill and game cultural expertise, still seemed to be reserved mostly for men (Toft-Nielsen, 2016; Witkowski, 2018). Because of this, women do not accumulate game cultural capital as easily as men.

Regarding women's entrance into game culture, the participants' earliest memories of gaming were usually from their childhood, often from playing on the family's (or a friend's) gaming console, or sometimes on a computer. Childhood access to games and gaming devices appeared to be an important access point into game culture, and the foundation for a long-lasting gaming hobby as an adult. The participants' descriptions of their earliest gaming memories aligned with findings from previous studies (Nieminen-Sundell, 2003; Suoninen, 2013; Merikivi et al., 2016) showing that girls' early childhood gaming, in particular, is often controlled – prevented or enabled – by men and boys in their families, who are the ones purchasing and receiving the devices, and controlling their use through their location and ownership. Some participants had experienced that their childhood gaming was less supported than their brothers' – financially, practically, and emotionally – and that they had less control in terms of use of time and having influence on the game and device choices. Consequently, some described truly starting, or having found again, their gaming hobby after moving out from their childhood home. As adults, some were (re)introduced to gaming by their (often men) partners or friends – a pattern familiar from earlier research on women's social access to gaming (Yee, 2008).

For the women who described themselves as having long gaming histories, their gaming appeared to have been supported by their social environments: childhood families, friends, and partners. This seemed to be the case even though the women were usually playing alone. Additionally, 61.83% of the questionnaire respondents agreed either strongly or fully (4 or 5 on a scale of 1–5) that their inner circle of people (e.g., family, friends, colleagues) included many people who play games. These findings on women's entrance to game culture and their current social environment support the conclusions made in earlier research suggesting that supportive social environments are central for women's entrance into game culture, game cultural participation, as well as building and maintaining an active and lasting gaming hobby (e.g., Taylor, 2008; Yee, 2008).

Along with women's entrance into gaming, I examined the participants' game cultural participation (besides gaming) in three areas: participating in gaming events, watching and participating in esports, and game media production and consumption. In addition to being active players, women participating in the study were active in participating in gaming events: over a half (thirteen of twenty) of the interviewees and almost a half (48.29%) of the questionnaire respondents had participated in at least one gaming event in Finland or abroad. Despite the known limitations to

women's participation in gaming events (Taylor et al., 2009), only one of my interviewees described any gendered aspects of her participation in such events – although it is worth noting that such perspectives might have been brought up if I asked about them more directly. The women's active participation in gaming events supports the argument that women are starting to occupy these spaces and turn them into 'a space of their own' (Taylor & Witkowski, 2010). However, in the national and international gaming events I visited for this research project, women were a clear minority, and in some of them, men were clearly the primary target audience.

Compared to *The Finnish Player Barometer* (Kinnunen et al., 2018), the participants of this study were more active in following esports than Finns in general, particularly when compared to Finnish women. Over half (thirteen of twenty) of the interviewees and almost half (47.06%) of questionnaire respondents followed esports at least once in some form at some point, either from a broadcast of some kind, or in person. However, only a small minority of the participants (6.55% the questionnaire respondents and four of twenty interviewees) had ever participated in esports as a player or in any other role (apart from the audience). When asked about the reasons for not participating in esports, in addition to reasons related to the types of games played as esports and to playing games competitively, questionnaire respondents described reasons related to gender and the toxic nature of the scene. For many women participating in the study, it was clear that esports was a field hostile to women, leading them to avoid participation altogether.

In general, both competitive gaming as well as game media consumption – and game media production in particular – in Finland are mostly practiced by young men who are actively playing digital entertainment games (Kinnunen et al., 2018, pp. 43–44). However, a clear majority of women participating in this study (seventeen of twenty interviewees, and 70.99% of the questionnaire respondents) consumed, and over a fifth of all participants (three of twenty interviewees, and 22.34% of questionnaire respondents) produced some form of game media, at least at some point or occasionally. Within the last decade, gaming videos and online streaming have become a central and extremely visible form of game cultural participation. Streaming was the form of game media most discussed by the questionnaire respondents, from both the perspectives of consumption and production. While women in the study were more active in this area than Finnish women on average, women are still a clear minority amongst these kinds of content producers. In general, the participants saw women who streamed their gaming facing misogyny from the audience – an observation supported by earlier research (Ruberg et al., 2019). One interviewee, who was an active streamer at the time of the interview, shared her personal experiences of constantly receiving belittlement and hate messages as a woman streamer. On the other hand, being a woman streamer was seen as beneficial in some ways, as it is advantageous for a streamer to set oneself

apart from others, and in this sense, it can be considered useful to represent a minority group as a woman.

When asked directly if and how the women in the study experienced their gender affecting their gaming, around three quarters (75.37%) of the questionnaire respondents had experienced their gender affecting their gaming hobby at least at some point in some way, and around a third (32.11%) of the respondents had experienced their gender affecting their gaming very much or fairly much. The effects of gender described by the respondents were overwhelmingly negative, although some also experienced some positive effects. The described negative effects include reactions of surprise and disbelief towards a woman's gaming hobby, assumptions of low skill level and lack of expertise, double standards causing women to be treated more harshly for their mistakes, gendered prejudice and stereotyping, misogyny and harassment, and exclusive game design.

The participants also described a general atmosphere of toxicity and misogyny, particularly prevalent in competitive, team-based online games – in a similar manner that they described the culture surrounding esports. Importantly, based on the responses, the harassment, misogyny, and toxicity directed at women players were so prevalent that most women players seem to be aware of the possibility of facing them and actively developed and used various strategies to maintain personal safety. These strategies, also familiar from earlier research, often included hiding one's gender in online gaming environments, further increasing women's invisibility in those spaces (Cote, 2017; Fox & Tang, 2017; Richard & Gray, 2018). Despite women's marginalised position within game culture – and partially because of it – some participants described positive aspects of being a woman player, and, for some, it was a source of pride.

7.1.3 How women players construct the idea and identity of a gamer

To answer my third sub research question 'How do women players construct the idea and identity of a gamer?' I began examining the theoretical background of gamer identity, describing how cultural identity has been understood in cultural studies and how that can translate into the context of gaming, presenting the various perspectives through which gamer identity has been approached in earlier research within game studies. Then, I analysed the participants' descriptions of different variations of a 'gamer' – a player, a gamer, a game hobbyist, a hardcore gamer, and a casual gamer – as well as if and why they did or did not identify as one. Finally, I examined the different meanings that gaming held in the women's lives through analysing the questionnaire respondent's descriptions of what gaming meant to them and what kind of a role that they would expect gaming to have in their future lives.

When asked, the participants were able to describe differences between a player, a gamer, and a game hobbyist. While a player was often described as a situational status given to anyone playing a game in the moment, both a gamer and a game hobbyist were described as identities or statuses that extended beyond the act of playing a game. A gamer was described as someone who does not only play games, but is also interested in them, has expertise related to them, participates in social activities around them, and is a skilled and a goal-oriented player who might play competitively or even professionally. In other words, a gamer was described as a person in possession of game cultural capital. A game hobbyist, on the other hand, was described as someone enthusiastic about games, and not even necessarily about playing them, but rather consuming and producing the culture surrounding games, similarly to e.g., retro gaming hobbyists (see Suominen et al., 2015).

When asked to define a hardcore and a casual gamer, both were described through attitudes towards playing, playstyles, and the types of games played. Many participants expressed their distaste for the distinction and reluctance to describe them through differences, some refusing to do so completely. The respondents' descriptions of a hardcore gamer were more like descriptions of a gamer than a player or a game hobbyist, and, in general, it seemed that the image of a gamer was very similar to the image of a hardcore gamer. Similarly, a hardcore gamer was described through playing games in a serious, goal-oriented manner, perhaps even professionally. Both were connected to playing competitive, team-based games online, usually on a gaming PC or a gaming console. A gamer and a hardcore gamer were the two categories that were closely tied to game cultural capital, but also included a significant number of negative descriptions associated with toxic, misogynistic, and discriminatory game culture and the GamerGate movement.

Like a game hobbyist, a hardcore gamer was strongly described as a consumer identity, although with a different focus. This, along with enthusiasm and dedication towards (specific) games and the culture surrounding them, connected the descriptions of a hardcore gamer and a game hobbyist. A casual gamer, on the other hand, was described as someone who only plays occasionally, or only for short periods of time, without any other goals than being entertained, or spending time, or escaping boredom. A casual gamer was the only category where not being skilled at playing was constantly mentioned as a defining feature.

When asked if they would identify with any of the categories, the participants found a player and a casual gamer the most relatable, and a gamer and a hardcore gamer the least relatable. For the most part, however, the women in the study did not care for defining themselves, or for other people considering them, as gamers. That said, some participants considered being a gamer as an important part of their identity.

Although gender was not often explicitly mentioned in the descriptions of a player, a game hobbyist, a casual gamer, or a hardcore gamer, it was often mentioned in connection to a gamer. Importantly, even when gender was not explicitly mentioned in the descriptions, it was still present in the underlying cultural expectations and meanings attached to those terms. The women in the study were aware of these gendered, cultural expectations, and sometimes even took a stand against them in their responses.

While being a gamer did not seem meaningful or important to the participants for the most part, gaming itself clearly was very meaningful and important to them. The women described gaming as a pleasant, fun way to spend time and to be entertained, but also as a great way to experience and immerse oneself in stories, and as a form of art and culture. For many, gaming was a great way to relax and pull oneself away from stress related to work or studies. Some treated gaming as a form of self-care that improved their wellbeing: from taking care of one's brain to helping one recover from depression. It was also described as a form of self-development. Importantly, gaming was described as a means to connect with others, create memories, and share experiences. Many respondents described gaming as a highly significant part of their lives and cherished hobby – even as a way of life. It did not come as a surprise to me, then, that many of the women in the study viewed gaming as a part of their lives, in some form, forever. Although some suspected that they might not always have much time or interest for gaming in the future. Still, some respondents described planning to play with their current or future children (or other young relatives) and create new companionships and memories around gaming with the next generation.

To answer the question of how women players construct the idea and identity of a gamer, women participating in the study did so by acknowledging yet rejecting the game cultural expectations related to both. Despite being very active players and actively participating in game cultural activities, the participants were reluctant to view themselves as gamers, and did not care for being viewed as gamers by others. This was not because they did not see themselves as 'sufficiently' gamers. Instead, participants were well aware of the cultural expectations and status attached to the gamer identity yet chose to reject it. In other words, the women chose to define their gaming and its significance on their own terms – often separate from the gamer identity.

7.1.4 Towards game cultural agency in the post-gamer era

In this study, I have examined the hegemonic, mainstream, core digital game culture as a Bourdieusian field of culture. From this perspective, becoming a member of game culture requires game cultural participation, both through participation in game

cultural activities and having a feeling of belonging in game culture. After gaining entrance into game culture, individuals begin acquiring game cultural capital: they will start to develop a distinct cultural taste (valuing certain types of games for certain reasons), their skills as a player, and their expertise concerning the games and their backgrounds. They will also learn new vocabulary and ways of talking about games. Together, these developments become a gamer habitus, a person's internal dispositions and embodied displays of game cultural capital, allowing them to act and communicate with other members of game culture in an understandable way.

Game cultural participation can lead to developing an identification with the gamer identity, assuming the individual possesses sufficient game cultural capital to identify – and to be seen by others – as a gamer. However, as seen in this study, a person may also participate in game culture and possess great amounts of game cultural capital without identifying as a gamer, either by choice or not. Many players reject the gamer identity, either as a conscious choice or by simply not considering it relevant.

Because of this, it is important to examine game cultural belonging and activity from a wider perspective of game cultural agency. This is particularly important in the case of player groups marginalised within game culture, such as women, as their participation in game culture – however active – still often remains hidden or marginalised due to systematic exclusion, discrimination, and harassment. In this way, we can achieve a greater understanding on how people gain entrance into game culture, how they engage with games and participate in game cultural activities, and what kind of roles and meanings games hold in their lives. Importantly, we can better learn about the obstacles and obstructions limiting the different aspects of their game cultural participation.

The main research question for this study was: 'How can women's game cultural agency be understood beyond the gamer identity?' In the previous sections of this chapter, I have described, based on my analysis, women's gaming practices, women's entrance into game culture and game cultural participation, how women construct the idea and, potentially, the identity of a gamer, what kinds of meanings gaming holds in women's lives – and the many ways gender affects all of this, both from theoretical and empirical perspectives.

The theoretical inspection of earlier research concerning the different aspects of women's gaming practices, game cultural participation, and gamer identity has shown that (1) there exist statistical differences in gaming practices of women and men in gaming frequency, gaming platforms and game genres, and social gaming habits and attitudes towards gaming (Kinnunen et al., 2018; Merikivi et al., 2016; Suoninen, 2013); (2) women face gender-based limitations when entering game culture, women players are rendered largely invisible or, when in visible roles, are expected to perform their gender in specific, limited ways, and women are expected

to possess less gaming skill and game cultural expertise and men (Nieminen-Sundell, 2003; Taylor, 2008; Yee, 2008; Toft-Nielsen, 2016; Witkowski, 2018; Orme, 2021); and (3) gamer is a gendered identity and status, constructed culturally and socially, adopted through the internal process of identification but also affected by external factors such as game design and marketing and player communities, and it can be rejected due to irrelevance or negative connotations (Shaw, 2012, 2013, 2014; Chess, 2017; Houe, 2020). The findings drawn from my primary, empirical research material confirm and supplement these earlier results, as I have described in the previous sections of this chapter.

Based on my analysis of the empirical interview and online questionnaire material, women participating in the study were negotiating their game cultural agency through actively participating in game culture while consciously rejecting (and being rejected from) gamer identity. The women in the study were very active players, and played games from many different genres and on different platforms. They actively participated in game culture beyond gaming as an activity – although mostly in the role of a consumer – following game media, following esports, and participating in gaming events. However, even active gaming and game cultural participation of women still remains largely invisible. Women in the study reported to mostly play alone or only in the company of other people that they already knew, and the majority of them, despite very actively playing otherwise, were not taking part in producing game media or in esports tournaments. These women reported that their gender negatively affecting their opportunities for game cultural participation and described developing and using strategies to avoid being targeted by gender-based harassment while playing.

The women in the study seemed to be very aware of the gendered limits and expectations of game cultural participation and gamer identity. However, instead of accepting these limitations, many chose to actively reject them, and define their own gaming and its meaning to them on their own terms. In this way, I found that the women were standing against the limits and norms of the hegemonic core game culture and taking control of their own game cultural agency. It is important to note, however, that the gendered limits and norms cannot be fully escaped, but that they keep affecting women – and everyone else – who participate in game culture.

Many voices, including game creators, game journalists, and game researchers, have suggested to critically examine or depart from the idea and identity of a gamer (Shaw, 2013; Alexander, 2014; Golding, 2014; Houe, 2020). The gamer identity is closely attached to the norms of the hegemonic core game culture, and, as such, is too limiting (Houe, 2020). As digital gaming becomes ever more common, and many interesting and important new forms of digital play continue to emerge, it is increasingly questionable to estimate the value and authenticity of a person's gaming through the narrow lens of the gamer identity. At the same time, trying to expand the

idea of a gamer to cover all the different types of players and forms of play does not seem useful either since this only works to pluralise audience markets (see Shaw, 2013). As active players and participants in game culture, the women in this study similarly did not, for the most part, seem to find the idea or identity of a gamer valuable – generally or personally.

Based on this, it seems that game culture has turned towards a post-gamer era (see also Butt, 2022, pp. 51–89), in which people participating in game culture are fighting against its cultural norms and social hierarchies and finding new ways and meanings for their game cultural agency beyond gamer identity. This can be seen as liberating, almost as if the players previously marginalised within game culture would now be free from its hegemonic structures. However, letting go of the gamer identity does not erase the discriminatory structures and practices within game culture, as can be seen from the way women participating in the study described their gender affecting their gaming hobby.

To understand players from a perspective of game culture studies, we should not only investigate gaming practices, different forms of game cultural participation, and the question of who 'count' as gamers through the lens of gamer identity (Shaw, 2010), but the wider sphere of game cultural agency, and how its opportunities and limitations manifest differently to different player groups. The concept of game cultural agency, as subjectivity emerging from involvement with the contents, cultures, and technologies of games, manifesting on two levels, the macro level containing elements such as cultural history and cultural expression, and the micro level containing elements such as individual choices and actions (Mäyrä, 2019; pp. 29–30), is useful for understanding that game cultural agency is not limited to – or even necessarily dependant on – the act of playing games, but derives from many different forms of game cultural participation. However, we must also understand game cultural agency as situated, embodied, and relational to specific social and cultural contexts (McNay, 2016, pp. 41–42), and consider how a player's intersecting subject positions come to play in their game cultural activities and related social environments. While women are able to create their own gaming practices, their social interactions related to gaming, and ways of participating in and their relationship to game culture individually, are still enabled and limited by the cultural expectations regarding their gender in these contexts. In other words, it is crucial to note that women players' subjectivity in the field of game culture does not emerge only from their involvement with games and their culture, but also from how they are perceived as women inhabiting this field.

7.2 Discussion

7.2.1 Research process, limitations, and rigor

The process of creating this dissertation study has been a long and winding road. While I received my first funding and started to actively work on this study in 2014, and collected the primary research material in 2014–2016, the work has taken many twists and turns – and often, put on a side-track due to other research projects and work duties, and a global pandemic – until finalised in late 2021 and early 2022. During this time, much has changed: including, not only my perception of the area of this study, but the area of study itself, both academically and empirically. For example, when I wrote the initial research plan in 2013, GamerGate as a phenomenon did not yet exist, and there was a much more limited number of existing research available on women gamers. Since then, this area of study has gained much more attention within game studies, and a great amount of significant scholarship has been produced to widen our understanding of the meaning of gender – and other intersecting identities – in the context of gaming. As a doctoral researcher working in this area, this has been both an exciting and, in many ways, a challenging time. Looking back, I know that I could not have originally planned this study the way it has come to be because so much has changed. The delays and detours in the process have allowed me to include significant perspectives based on research that did not exist back when I started. On the other hand, the amount of time that the process has taken has also resulted in certain limitations: combining my original research plan with the changing research area, and my resulting increased understanding of the topic, has not always been a simple feat. This is also the case with drawing together the individual strands of this dissertation study, partially written at different points of the research process.

In addition to challenges regarding the length of the research process and the changing research field, the central limitations of the study are related to my choice to focus on the hegemonic core game culture, and the amount and analysis of the research material. My choice to focus on the hegemonic core game culture means that the focus of the study is solely on digital games and the type of play that happens on specific platforms (i.e., on a gaming console or a computer specifically built for gaming) and playing the types of games that are commercially popular and highly valued within game culture. In reality, there exists a great variety of different types of games and forms of play – as well as cultures surrounding them – in various digital, analogue, and hybrid forms. Many of these forms of play, and their players, are marginalised in the hegemonic game culture and game studies alike. Because of this, conducting a study focused on the hegemonic game culture contains a risk of enforcing the myth of a single, unified game culture, and enforcing the

discriminatory value structures within game culture. I have tried to counter this risk by being transparent about this focus being a conscious choice, not a necessity, and by acknowledging that the hegemonic core game culture is not the only, or the most important, form of game culture to exist.

In the same vein, despite the large number of women participating in the study (a total of 20 interviewees and 737 questionnaire respondents), due to the chosen focus and the way that the participants were found, the participants were, for the most part, very active players, and otherwise actively participating in various aspects of game culture. Many of them were playing the types of games and had invested in the types of platforms that are typical to mainstream game culture. While one of the central aims of the study was to describe the ways in which women are excluded from the hegemonic core game culture, the study seemed to reach and include the kind of women who had already broken that barrier. On the other hand, because of this participant selection, I have been able to see the types of gender-based limitations women experience in game culture while having already crossed that initial threshold.

Another limitation is my choice to focus on women and, besides gender, selecting the participants based on their age, nationality, and language spoken, thus limiting participants to Finnish adult women who speak Finnish. Gender is not the only feature defining a person's position within game culture, and the approach I have selected is lacking an intersectional perspective acknowledging the other factors affecting the women participants' game cultural agency. At the same time, it has allowed me to specifically examine the gender-based exclusion, discrimination, and harassment targeted at women – as perhaps the largest individual player group marginalised within game culture.

Methodologically, the most central limitation of the study is, ironically, the amount of research material available for analysis. After conducting the interviews with the twenty women and preparing the online questionnaire, I was not expecting to receive over seven hundred responses. Having designed the study as – and having been trained in – qualitative research, focused on carefully selected, small sets of research material, the number of questionnaire responses that I received was overwhelming. The biggest challenge in conducting this study was trying to find a way to handle and analyse this large amount of material as the sole researcher working with qualitative methods. Unfortunately, I feel that I was not able to make the most of it with the skills and resources available to me during this dissertation project, but I am planning to continue working with this material in the future.

Despite these limitations, the study has been conducted in a rigorous manner. The research materials and the methodology of the study have been carefully selected based on the study objective and research questions, and the researcher position, the research process, and the research ethical questions concerning the

study have been thoroughly described for transparency. I have been able to respond to the research questions set for the study with the selected research materials, the constructed theoretical framework, and the selected methodology, in dialogue with earlier research on the topic.

7.2.2 Applications and future research opportunities

The main contribution of this study is providing insight on how game cultural agency is constructed beyond the idea and identity of a gamer, as well as on the gender-specific issues affecting women's game cultural agency. The results of the empirical analysis include a description of the women participants' gaming, the different aspects of women players' game cultural participation and their construction of an idea and identity of a gamer, what kind of limiting or enabling roles their gender plays in these processes, and what significance gaming has in their lives. Theoretically, the study has summarised the central perspectives of earlier research regarding gaming practices, game cultural participation, and gamer identity from the perspective of women players, and argued for the usefulness of game cultural agency as a central concept for understanding women's gaming – and different types of players in general – from a perspective of game culture studies.

The results of the study increase our understanding of the relationship between gender and game culture from the perspectives of women's gaming practices, game cultural participation, and construction of gamer identity. They also show the importance of understanding game cultural agency more widely than merely focusing on gamer identity, particularly when trying to understand the game cultural structures of exclusion targeting women and other marginalised player groups.

The results can be used in efforts to increase the cultural accessibility of gaming, as well as game cultural participation and game cultural agency of women and other marginalised player groups, and in building more equal, inclusive, and socially and culturally sustainable game culture. They can be applied by a variety of game cultural agents, including gaming event and esports tournament organisers, gaming community managers, game educators and youth workers, and game journalists. Even though the study is limited to Finnish women players through its research material, the results can be applied to other player groups and international contexts.

Regarding future research opportunities, the study opens new perspectives for research on various player groups marginalised within game culture – such as women players, LGBTQIA+ players, players of colour and marginalised ethnicities, and disabled players – from the perspective of game cultural agency. The concept of game cultural agency should be developed further, particularly from the perspectives of feminist game studies and game culture studies, taking into account the plurality of players' identities and the resulting subject positions.

Future studies should examine game cultural agency, not only as a concept on a general level, but also in different specific game cultural contexts, such as in game media production (e.g., streaming) and esports. Gaming events provide an important venue for ethnographically oriented research focusing on women's participation and positions within those spaces in different roles. Importantly, more work should be conducted in close collaboration with significant stakeholders, such as gaming event and esports tournament organisers, gaming community managers, and game educators and youth workers, to find practical solutions for increasing the cultural accessibility of gaming for women and other marginalised player groups, on all levels of participation from hobbyists to professionals.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview themes and questions.

1. Tämänhetkinen pelaaminen ja pelaamiskäytännöt
- tämänhetkisen pelaamisen kuvaus (kuinka usein, millaisia pelejä)
- pelaako yksin vai muiden seurassa
- kuuluuko johonkin pelaajaryhmään tai useampiin
2. Pelihistoria ja pelaajaidentiteetti
- pelihistorian kuvaus (millaisia pelejä pelannut aiemmin, onko ollut tietynlaisia pelikausia tietyissä elämänvaiheissa)
- miten päätyi pelaamaan, varhaisimmat pelimuistot
- mieltääkö itsensä pelaajaksi (”gameriksi”) tai peliharrastajaksi, mitä tulee mieleen näistä sanoista
- mieltääkö itsensä ”hardcore-” tai ”kasuaalipelaajaksi”, mitä tulee mieleen näistä sanoista
- onko lähipiirissä pelaajia ja tietääkö lähipiiri peliharrastuksesta
- kokeeko sukupuolellaan olevan jotain merkitystä harrastuksessa
- miten näkee pelit ja pelaamisen osana tulevaisuuttaan
3. Pelikulttuurinen osallisuus
- seuraako erilaisia pelimedioita (esim. paperilehdet, nettilehdet, videokanavat, podcastit)
- onko seurannut pelimedioissa ja sosiaalisessa mediassa käytävää keskustelua pelikulttuurin seksistisyydestä, mitä ajattelee siitä
- onko tiettyjä pelaajia tai pelaajaryhmiä, joita seuraa (esim. Twitchissä)
- tuottaako itse pelimediaa (esim. striimaa, bloggaa)
- onko käynyt pelialan tapahtumissa tai seurannut niitä
4. Elektroninen urheilu
- onko seurannut elektronista urheilua paikan päällä, televisiosta tai striimeistä
- jos on, niin mitä pelejä ja turnauksia
- onko itse harkinnut kilpapelaamista, miksi on tai ei

Appendix 2. Online questionnaire.

Suomalaisnaisten digitaalinen pelaaminen

Tietoa kyselystä:
Tämä kysely on osa FM Usva Frimanin väitöskirjatutkimusta, jonka työnimi on *Suomalaisnaisten digitaalinen pelaaminen*. Tutkimus toteutetaan Turun yliopiston digitaalisen kulttuurin oppiaineessa ja sitä ohjaavat digitaalisen kulttuurin professori FT Jaakko Suominen ja digitaalisen kulttuurin yliopistonlehtori FT Riikka Turtiainen. Kysely toteutetaan myös osana Suomen Akatemian rahoittamaa tutkimushanketta Leikillistyminen ja pelillisen kulttuurin synty (276012). Kyselyvastaukset käsitellään luottamuksellisesti ja tallennetaan digitaalisen kulttuurin aineistokokoelmaan. Vastauksia voidaan käyttää aineistona myös myöhemmissä aihetta käsittelevissä tutkimuksissa. Lisätietoja kyselystä ja tutkimuksesta antaa tohtorikoulutettava Usva Friman: usva.friman(at)utu.fi.

Kyselyn tarkoituksena on koota digitaalisia pelejä pelaavilta täysi-ikäisiltä suomalaisnaisilta heidän omaa pelaamistaan koskevaa tietoa ja kokemuksia. Tutkimuksen kannalta on tärkeää saada vastauksia mahdollisimman monenlaisilta pelaajilta, joten sinun ei tarvitse pelata tietyntyyppisiä pelejä tai käyttää pelaamiseen tiettyä aikamäärää voidaksesi vastata kyselyyn. Kyselyssä on yhteensä 50 kysymystä, jotka käsittelevät vastaajan tämänhetkistä pelaamista ja pelihistoriaa, pelimediaa, elektronista urheilua sekä ajatuksia pelaajuudesta. Kysely on rakennettu niin, että **voit vapaasti valita, mihin kysymyksiin vastaat sekä miten suppeasti tai laajasti haluat vastata kysymyksiin**. Kysely on avoinna joulukuun 2016 loppuun asti, ja vastaaminen vie noin 30–60 minuuttia riippuen vastaajan kirjoitusinnosta.

Osa 1: Taustatiedot ja tämän hetken pelaaminen

1. Taustatiedot: *

   Minkä ikäinen olet vastaushetkellä? [avoin kenttä]
   Millä paikkakunnalla asut vastaushetkellä? [avoin kenttä]

2. Minkä lajityyppien pelejä pelaat tällä hetkellä? Voit halutessasi mainita kunkin valitsemasi lajityypin kohdalla pelaamiasi esimerkkipelejä kyseisestä lajityypistä.
   - □ Taistelupelit (esim. Tekken tai Mortal Kombat) [avoin kenttä]
   - □ Ammuntapelit (esim. Call of Duty tai Overwatch) [avoin kenttä]
   - □ Seikkailupelit (esim. Life is Strange tai Gone Home [avoin kenttä]
   - □ Toimintaseikkailupelit (esim. Tomb Raider tai Grand Theft Auto [avoin kenttä]
   - □ Tasohyppelypelit (esim. Super Mario tai Ori and the Blind Forest) [avoin kenttä]

- □ Ajopelit (esim. Mario Kart tai Gran Turismo) [avoin kenttä]
- □ Urheilupelit (esim. Fifa tai NHL) [avoin kenttä]
- □ Simulaatiopelit (esim. The Sims tai Cities: Skylines) [avoin kenttä]
- □ Strategiapelit (esim. Civilization tai StarCraft) [avoin kenttä]
- □ Roolipelit (esim. The Witcher tai Mass Effect) [avoin kenttä]
- □ Verkkoroolipelit (esim. World of Warcraft tai Final Fantasy XIV) [avoin kenttä]
- □ MOBA:t (esim. League of Legends tai Heroes of the Storm) [avoin kenttä]
- □ Musiikki- ja seurapelit (esim. SingStar tai Rock Band) [avoin kenttä]
- □ Pulmapelit (esim. Candy Crush Saga tai Tetris) [avoin kenttä]
- □ Muu, mikä? [avoin kenttä]

3. Voit halutessasi kertoa enemmän tällä hetkellä pelaamistasi peleistä tai tarkentaa vastaustasi muuten: [avoin kenttä]

4. Millä laitteilla pelaat tällä hetkellä?
   - □ Tietokone (PC tai Mac)
   - □ Kotikonsoli (esim. PlayStation tai Xbox)
   - □ Käsikonsoli (esim. Nintendo 3DS tai Playstation Vita)
   - □ Mobiililaite (esim. älypuhelin tai tabletti)
   - □ Muu, mikä? [avoin kenttä]

5. Ovatko edellä mainitut laitteet henkilökohtaisessa käytössäsi vai jaatko ne jonkun muun kanssa? [avoin kenttä]

6. Kuka edellä mainitut laitteet on hankkinut, mistä ja kenelle? [avoin kenttä]

7. Voit halutessasi kertoa enemmän tällä hetkellä käytössäsi olevista pelilaitteista: [avoin kenttä]

8. Kuinka monta tuntia viikossa arvioisit tyypillisesti käyttäväsi digitaalisten pelien pelaamiseen tällä hetkellä?
   - o 0–5
   - o 6–10
   - o 11–20
   - o 21–30
   - o 31–40
   - o Yli 40 tuntia viikossa

9. Voit halutessasi tarkentaa vastaustasi: [avoin kenttä]

10. Pelaatko tällä hetkellä useimmiten yksin vai muiden seurassa (samassa tilassa tai esimerkiksi verkossa)?
    - o Enimmäkseen yksin

- o Enimmäkseen muiden seurassa samassa tilassa
- o Enimmäkseen muiden seurassa verkossa
- o Tasapuolisesti yksin ja muiden seurassa (samassa tilassa tai verkossa)

11. Voit halutessasi tarkentaa vastaustasi: [avoin kenttä]

12. Kuulutko tällä hetkellä johonkin tai useampaan pelaajaryhmään (esim. MMO-kiltaan, e-sports-joukkueeseen, peliyhdistykseen tai -yhteisöön)?
    - □ En
    - □ Kyllä: MMO-kiltaan
    - □ Kyllä: E-sports-joukkueeseen
    - □ Kyllä: peliyhdistykseen
    - □ Kyllä: peliyhteisöön (esim. verkkoyhteisöön)
    - □ Kyllä: muuhun, mihin (tarkenna alle)?

13. Voit halutessasi tarkentaa vastaustasi sekä kertoa, jos olet kuulunut johonkin näistä aiemmin, mutta et enää: [avoin kenttä]

Osa 2: Pelaajuus

14. Kuka tai millainen on mielestäsi… (kirjoita, mitä sanasta tulee mieleen)
    Pelaaja [avoin kenttä]
    Gamer [avoin kenttä]
    Peliharrastaja [avoin kenttä]

15. Miellätkö itsesi joksikin tai useaksi näistä ja / tai joksikin muuksi? Arvioi asteikolla 0–5 miten voimakkaasti koet, että sana kuvaa sinua (0 = ei lainkaan, 1 = hyvin vähän, 5 = erittäin voimakkaasti).
    Pelaaja (0–5)
    Gamer (0–5)
    Peliharrastaja (0–5)
    Jokin muu (tarkenna) [avoin kenttä]

16. Miksi miellät tai et miellä itsesi joksikin näistä? [avoin kenttä]

17. Oletko kohdannut esimerkiksi mediassa tai keskusteluissa tai muualla erotteluun ns. ”kasuaali”- (tai ”casual”-) ja ”hardcore”-pelaajien välillä?
    - o Kyllä
    - o En

18. Jos vastasit edelliseen kysymykseen kyllä, kuka tai millainen on mielestäsi… (kirjoita, mitä sanasta tulee mieleen)
    Kasuaalipelaaja [avoin kenttä]
    Hardcorepelaaja [avoin kenttä]

19. Miellätkö itsesi jommaksikummaksi? Arvioi asteikolla 0–5, miten voimakkaasti koet, että sana kuvaa sinua (0=ei lainkaan, 1=hyvin vähän, 5=erittäin voimakkaasti).
    Kasuaalipelaaja (0–5)
    Hardcorepelaaja (0–5)

20. Miksi miellät tai et miellä itsesi jommaksikummaksi näistä? [avoin kenttä]

21. Onko lähipiirissäsi (esim. perheessäsi, ystäväpiirissäsi tai työyhteisössäsi) muita pelaajia?
    - Kyllä, todella paljon
    - Kyllä, jonkin verran
    - Ei lainkaan

22. Tietääkö lähipiirisi (esim. perheesi, ystäväpiirisi tai työyhteisösi) pelaamisestasi?
    - Kyllä, kaikki tai lähes kaikki lähipiirissäni tietävät
    - Enimmäkseen kyllä
    - Enimmäkseen ei
    - Ei, kukaan tai lähes kukaan lähipiirissäni ei tiedä

23. Miten muut (sinulle ennestään tutut tai tuntemattomat) henkilöt ovat suhtautuneet pelaamiseesi?
    - Yksinomaan positiivisesti
    - Enimmäkseen positiivisesti
    - Ei positiivisesti eikä negatiivisesti
    - Enimmäkseen negatiivisesti
    - Yksinomaan negatiivisesti

24. Voit halutessasi kertoa tarkemmin siitä, miten muut ovat suhtautuneet pelaamiseesi: [avoin kenttä]

25. Onko tuntemiesi pelaajien ja pelikavereidesi joukossa myös muita naispelaajia?
    - Kyllä, useita
    - Kyllä, mutta harvoja
    - Ei

26. Oletko kokenut sukupuolellasi olevan merkitystä peliharrastuksessasi?
    - Kyllä, erittäin paljon
    - Kyllä, jonkin verran
    - En juurikaan
    - En lainkaan

27. Voit halutessasi kuvailla kokemuksiasi tai tarkentaa vastaustasi muuten: [avoin kenttä]

Osa 3: Pelimediat

28. Seuraatko joitakin pelimedioita? Voit halutessasi mainita kunkin valitsemasi mediatyypin kohdalla esimerkkejä seuraamistasi medioista:
    - Paperilehdet [avoin kenttä]
    - Nettilehdet ja -sivustot [avoin kenttä]
    - Videokanavat (esim. YouTube-palvelussa) [avoin kenttä]
    - Streamauskanavat (esim. Twitch-palvelussa) [avoin kenttä]
    - Blogit [avoin kenttä]
    - Podcastit [avoin kenttä]
    - Jokin muu, mikä? [avoin kenttä]
    - En mitään pelimedioita

29. Onko sinulla tiettyjä pelaajia tai pelaajaryhmiä, joita seuraat (esim. Twitchissä tai YouTubessa)?
    - Ei
    - Kyllä, kuka tai ketkä [avoin kenttä]

30. Oletko itse tuottanut pelimediaa missään muodossa (esim. streamannut omaa pelaamistasi, julkaissut videoita pelaamisestasi tai blogannut pelaamisestasi)?
    - En
    - Kyllä, missä muodossa? [avoin kenttä]

31. Oletko osallistunut peliaiheisiin tapahtumiin (esim. verkkopelitapahtumaan tai peliturnaukseen) Suomessa tai ulkomailla? Voit halutessasi kertoa avoimessa kentässä, mihin tai minkälaisiin tapahtumiin olet osallistunut.
    - En
    - Kyllä, Suomessa [avoin kenttä]
    - Kyllä, ulkomailla [avoin kenttä]

32. Oletko törmännyt peli- ja muissa medioissa, sosiaalisessa mediassa tai muualla keskusteluun pelikulttuurin seksistisyydestä?
    - Kyllä
    - En

33. Jos vastasit edelliseen kysymykseen kyllä, millaisia ajatuksia tai tunteita tämä keskustelu on sinussa herättänyt? [avoin kenttä]

34. Oletko törmännyt peli- ja muissa medioissa, sosiaalisessa mediassa tai muualla keskusteluun ns. gamergate-liikkeestä?
    - o Kyllä
    - o En

35. Jos vastasit edelliseen kysymykseen kyllä, millaisia ajatuksia tai tunteita tämä keskustelu on sinussa herättänyt? [avoin kenttä]

Osa 4: Elektroninen urheilu

36. Oletko seurannut elektronista urheilua (eli digitaalisten pelien kilpapelaamista):
    - □ Paikan päällä
    - □ Televisiosta
    - □ Verkkostreameista
    - □ Muuta kautta, mitä? [avoin kenttä]
    - □ En ole seurannut elektronista urheilua

37. Jos vastasit edelliseen kysymykseen kyllä, mitä pelejä ja turnauksia olet seurannut? [avoin kenttä]

38. Oletko itse koskaan osallistunut peliturnauksiin?
    - o Kyllä
    - o En

39. Jos vastasit kyllä, mihin tai millaisiin turnauksiin olet osallistunut ja missä pelissä? [avoin kenttä]

40. Jos vastasit ei, oletko koskaan harkinnut osallistuvasi? Miksi olet tai et? [avoin kenttä]

Osa 5: Pelihistoria

41. Kerro varhaisimmista pelimuistoistasi. Pelasitko ensimmäisiä kertoja kotona vai jossain muualla? Minkä ikäinen olit? Mitä pelasit, millä laitteella ja kenen seurassa? [avoin kenttä]

42. Pelattiinko lapsuudenkodissasi digitaalisia pelejä?
    - o Kyllä, todella paljon
    - o Kyllä, jonkin verran
    - o Ei lainkaan

43. Jos vastasit edelliseen osaan kyllä, kerro digitaalisesta pelaamisesta lapsuudenkodissasi. Ketkä pelasivat, mitä pelejä ja millä laitteilla? [avoin kenttä]

44. Millaisia pelilaitteita sinulla on ollut käytössäsi pelihistoriasi eri vaiheissa ennen nykyhetkeä? [avoin kenttä]

45. Ovatko edellisessä vastauksessa kuvaamasi laitteet olleet henkilökohtaisessa käytössäsi, vai oletko jakanut ne jonkun kanssa? [avoin kenttä]

46. Ovatko tietyt laitteet olleet erityisen tärkeä osa pelihistoriaasi? Mitkä laitteet, milloin ja millä tavalla? [avoin kenttä]

47. Millaisia pelejä ja pelilajityyppejä olet pelannut pelihistoriasi eri vaiheissa? [avoin kenttä]

48. Ovatko tietyt pelit tai pelisarjat olleet erityisen tärkeä osa pelihistoriaasi? Mitkä pelit tai pelisarjat, milloin ja millä tavalla? [avoin kenttä]

Osa 6: Lopuksi

49. Miten näkisit pelit ja pelaamisen osana tulevaisuuttasi? [avoin kenttä]

50. Voit vielä halutessasi täydentää vastauksiasi sekä nostaa esille omaan pelaamiseesi liittyviä seikkoja, jotka jäivät kysymysten ulkopuolelle. Voit myös antaa palautetta kyselystä. [avoin kenttä]

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YLIOPISTO
UNIVERSITY
OF TURKU

Painosalama, Turku, Finland 2022

ISBN 978-951-29-8876-1 (Print)
ISSN 0082-6987 (Print)
ISSN 2343-3191 (Online)