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Gamer-Parent Identity: Positioning Parenthood Between Fun Screentime and Ideals of Responsibility

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Abstract

This paper is part of a project on Norwegian gamer-parents and how they domesticate digital games for their families (GAME). Here we explore how gamer-parents, that is, those who were gamers before becoming parents negotiate and position themselves. In this paper we explore the hybrid identity of two seemingly opposing identity categories, namely, gamer and parent. Gamer-parents can be said to have a double role, as they are doing parenting, however they also both position themselves- and are positioned by non-gaming parents as gamers. How do gamer-parents negotiate and position themselves in the tension between fun screentime and ideals of responsibility?

Introduction

Current discourse on parenthood is, at best, ambivalent about the role of digital games in children's life and is still concerned with potential negative effects of gaming and how to reduce or control play time. The discourse tends to presume children are the ones who play and that parents are not interested in games. However, this is an increasingly wrongful assumption. According to the Norwegian Parents and Media survey as many as 46% of parents play games (2018), prompting questions about how to combine a passion for games with parenthood. In this paper we analyze the identity work of parents who are also gamers. We ask how gamer-parents negotiate and position themselves as both parents and gamers and discuss how these two seemingly oppositional identities produce a hybrid identity. Our work contributes to the plentiful research on digital games in families by giving insight into a relatively new and understudied parental identity as well providing alternative perspectives and narratives about the role of games in families.

Exploring Identity Work of Gamer-Parents

Our call for participants was for gamer parents, thus we are interested in the identity work of those who are both parents and gamers. While anyone who plays may be described as a gamer (someone who games), the question of who identifies as gamers, and thus what characterizes gamer identities, are more complex. A passion for games is a given, but many people who play games do not identify as gamers. The stereotype of a gamer is an adolescent, white, cisgendered, heterosexual male who is socially awkward, isolated, overweight, unattractive, professionally unsuccessful, and unmotivated (Stone, 2021). Research has debunked the accuracy of this stereotype (e.g. Williams et al., 2008), however, it remains relevant as the negative characteristics discourages self-identification (Stone, 2019). The gamer identity is built on an understanding of "us" (who 'get' games) versus "them (the outsiders out to destroy games), where outsiders are – in the view of gamers – legitimately excluded, derided, or harassed in a defence of game culture (Butt & Apperley, 2018). However, gamer identity should not be understood purely as a stereotype or gatekeeping device. Of the more positive traits associated with the gamer identity we find high intelligence, technical proficiency, nerdy, competitive, funny, collaborative, and strategic (Stone, 2019). Gamers are known for their dedication and creativity, exemplified in how they co-create game content (Acharya & Wardrip-Fruin, 2019) and paratexts to support gameplay (Ask, 2017).

Parent identity on the other hand can be said to be a part of the individual's lifelong learning and part of one's identity work (Aarsand, 2011). Being a parent also comes with ideas about how do parenting and how to be a good parent. Research on parenting in western society the past decades links good parenting to responsibility (Aarsand, 2014), being involved (Forsberg, 2009) and being reflexive (Dermott, 2016; Lind et al., 2016). Being responsible can be understood as making the right decisions for their children. In relation to digital games, this can mean performing the "right" type of parental mediation, and there has been an array of research looking at family life and children's use of computers and gaming (Clark, 2012; Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020). Parents are also held responsible for fostering of their child into a digital literate citizen (Sandberg et al., 2021). Here we explore how both contentious and positive aspects of gamer identity, and how ideas about being a good parent are part of the gamer-parent identity work.

Gamer-Parent's Identity Work; Positionality and Hybrid Identities

To understand how gamer-parents construct and perform their identities as gamers, parents, and gamer-parents the analysis will use positioning. Positioning conceptualizes the individual identity construction as emergent in interaction (Davies & Harré, 1990). Employing a positioning perspective is well equipped to explore the work people to in ascribing and negotiating identities (Deppermann, 2013). Hacking (1999) argues that we "make up people" and that throughout history different "kinds of people" appear and disappear. Identity can thus be understood as the kind of person one is recognized as being and that can change depending on the context and can be ambiguous or unstable (Gee, 2000). For us, identity is a "who am I" albeit a flexible and dynamic approach to the matter. Thus, a positioning perspective sees identity is a flexible and a fleeting, constantly changing construction of the self. In other words, this perspective avoids essentializing and reducing identity to static categories and rather scrutinizes how identity is produced; how people create identities for themselves and others in interaction. Positioning is done partly through differentiation and positioning oneself means to also position others. In our data this can be seen as how the interviewees implicitly and explicitly compare themselves to parents (especially non-gamer parents) and to some degree other gamers.

The term hybrid is often used when exploring global and local identities and the processes and practices of cultural interpenetration (Callero, 2003), where hybrid identities can be seen as a transformation of existing cultural practices into new ones (Hermans & Kempen, 1998). Hybrid identities often deal with structured intersections of various culture and identities, yet we also find it useful to understand how gamer-parents negotiate social demands of doing and being a good parent, while simultaneously being a good gamer. As we use the concept of hybrid identity this does not mean that we see either parent or gamer as an essentialized identity category with fixed traits, rather from our data it did indeed seem that they positioned themselves as being a different type of parent than non-gaming parents.

Methodology: A Gamer Interviews Gamer-Parents

This paper is part of a research project on Norwegian gamer-parents and how they domesticate digital games for their families (GAME). The project is partially funded by the Norwegian Competence Center for Gambling and Gaming Research (SPILLFORSK). We have based our analysis on 28 qualitative interviews (N=29). All interviews were done with one parent from each family, except for one where the parents were interviewed as a couple. A call for participants with the heading; "Gamer and Parent?" was posted on the games and culture blog spillpikene.no, which two of the authors, Stine and Kristine, contribute to. Out of 44 respondents, a selection of participants was chosen for variety in representation regarding gender and age of both parents and children. Our selection consisted of 18

men and 11 women between the ages 32 and 48 (average=38,9 median=38) with children between of 0 and 17 years (average=8,08 median=8). Among our interviewees there were (to name a few) journalists, teachers, students, stay-at-home parents, but most were largely middle-class. 15 of the interviews were conducted face to face, while 13 were done via Skype. The interviews were focused on what strategies the parents used to mediate play in the family, like rules (or lack of rules) regarding play times, play spaces, and play titles, as well as the reasons for implementing such strategies. The interviewer clearly identified as a gamer, and the interviews were characteristically conversations between "us" gamers. Consequently, during interviews parents were not only positioned themselves in relation to other parents and gamers, but also in relation to the interviewer as a fellow gamer. We may also consider how the interviewees were engaging in *displaying families* (Finch, 2007) as they were socially performing and displaying parenthood in relation to the interviewer.

After the interviews were transcribed and anonymized, we engaged in a collective qualitative analysis where we jointly 1) read the material, 2) mapped key topics, 3) grouped topics into categories, and finally 4) made a shared outline and plan for writing (Eggebø, 2020). In this process we decided to focus on identity, and specifically positionality, as interviewees would frequently compare themselves to others, both gamers and parents. We chose this analytical approach to ensure that all three authors had a deep familiarity and understanding of the interviews (which were performed by Stine), where our dialogue about the data allowed for contextual information and other reflections about the interview situation to be brought into the analysis. Another strength of the collective approach is ongoing dialogue about possible theoretical lenses and the relevance of various bodies of literature from our respective backgrounds in STS, game studies, and childhood studies. Our analysis of gamer-parent identity is organized as three themes where the first address how gamer-parents position themselves as outsiders, secondly as involved and thirdly as representatives of game culture.

Gamer-Parents as Outsiders

There was a tension and an ambivalence in how gamer-parents positioned themselves in relation to gamer identity, even though they were dedicated players who had made gaming a central aspect of their life. Some took pride in labelling themselves as gamers, but the majority were hesitant about aligning themselves with a gamer identity. In line with research on toxic game culture, harassment and gatekeeping, several interviewees pointed to the poor reputation of gamers and bad behavior of gaming communities as something they wanted to distance themselves from. A way to circumvent the issues around gamer identity was to refer to themselves as "players", "parents who play" or other variations of identifying as geeky or nerdy. In families where everyone played games these descriptions were often a way to identify, not only themselves, but the entire family as involved with games and game culture, describing themselves as a "family that plays" or a "geek family". In this sense being a gamer was not only a personal identification, but a collective family identity.

Despite gaming being a mainstream hobby, gamer identity is still tied to being an outsider and this characteristic was also included in the gamer-parent identity. They expressed that their interest in games made them different than other parents, and because there were no communities for gamer-parents, they were somewhat alone in their role. This lack of belonging seemed particularly strong when having to defend games as a hobby to non-gamers who questioned the value and safety of playing video games. When looking back on their own gaming past they reflected on how their hobby was seen as uncommon or weird, which to some degree explaining where the outsider aspect of their gamer identities emerged from. However, they also had an abundance of stories about belonging, having play as a shared social endeavor with friends and family, and being a valued member of various gaming communities, indicating that being an outsider and being alone/being excluded is not the same in this

context. In summary, the outsider aspect of gamer identity appeared to remain, and even strengthened as there was little space in parental discourse for hybrid identities like gamer-parents.

Gamer-Parents as Involved

The identity work of our interviewees was made visible in how they positioned themselves as present and involved, in contrast to non-gamer parents that were framed as distant and uninvolved. Across our material there was a strong agreement about the need for parents to be involved and present in their children's gaming habits, echoing the notions that being a good parent is being involved (Forsberg, 2009). When describing non-gamer parents, a frequent critique was their absence from play situations and experiences. As David stated:

> Parents today, if they don't bother with knowing games at all, you really miss out on a big part of their lives, and what they think is important. And if you don't engage in that sort of talk, you miss out on the good conversations with you kids, right?

David argued that parents who do not involve themselves with their children's interests miss out on "the good conversation" with their kids. He also suggested that it was unfair towards the children that non-gaming parents did not engage in what their children cared about. Taking children seriously can be argued is a component of doing good, reflexive parenthood (Dermott, 2016).

To our interviewees, a part of taking children's play seriously is to be physically present. Sissel explained that she had a rule about being present in the same room (or being close by) in part by criticizing how other parents let their children play without any support.

> So, I can hear it at once if the temperature rises, or if it's something, like someone trying to ruin the game, or not pay attention. So, I can go in and say, "calm down", and he knows that we hear everything, and that's the difference, cause a lot of kids probably sit alone at home with this, in the basement of a loft, with the parents not being there.

Sissel as a parent was close by, ready to step in on a moment's notice if something happened in the game that caused upset, like being trolled (where other players engage in harassing or hostile behaviour) or having technical issues (like having an account banned). Here she positions herself as involved by contrasting with other parents who she sees as absent and frames the absence as more dangerous than the games or game related conflicts themselves.

According to the gamer-parents, non-gamer parents, due to their lack of involvement and dismissal of play were not doing good parenting. Our interviewees critiqued non-gamer parents for failing to see how games could be a valuable pastime, a fun experience and a way to stay engaged with games. They thus positioned their identity as differing from non-gamer parents, as focus was not on reducing screen-time and enforcing regulations, but rather be present and involved with their children - underlining how they perceive a good parent as being an involved parent.

Gamer-Parents as Representatives

Gamer-parents were experts on games, but this expert role was fraught with ambivalence and even contradictions. On the one hand, they positioned themselves, and were positioned by others, as expert-gamers worth consulting on questions about games and gaming. As shown in the above section, the gamer-parents considered their gaming background a boon in parenthood and something that enabled them to develop superior parental strategies. Because gamer-parents had years of experience with games, across genres and platforms, they argued that they were better equipped at dealing with parental mediation around games. Non-gamer parents, on the other hand, were defined as having no

idea of what gaming is. This was articulated as a critique of how non-gamer parents dismissed games as a medium, their lack of interest in curating game titles, and finally by how they applied misguided regulation strategies, like using arbitrary time limits, because they did not understand how the medium that they were regulating works (e.g., the use of save points or that you cannot merely leave a co-op online game).

On the other hand, this expert role meant that gamer-parents were positioned as representatives of game culture as a whole, and many gamer-parents had the experience of being positioned as a go-to source for non-gamer parents for input on their children's gaming. For some this this entrusted an uncomfortable responsibility for the gaming practices of other people's children. While they clearly considered their gaming expertise as valuable, they were not always keen on being given the responsibility of configuring other parent's mediation. Others embraced the role of representative, and felt a need to voice their opinions and share their expertise:

> My pet peeve is that parents need to get involved and care about the games their kids play (…) So I'm a bit of a missionary in the parent group, I talk a lot to other parents about what I've played with the kids. (David)

David took on the responsibility as the expert and positioned himself as what he calls "a missionary" in an attempt to make non-gamer parents gain more knowledge about gaming, as well as asserting his identity as a gamer-parent who cares and is involved. This was partially argued as a necessary intervention because non-gamer parents were unaware of what games were suitable for children or set up rules regarding play that were only restrictive. In essence by not having the expertise that the gamer-parents have, the non-gamer parents engaged in "bad-parenting" regarding play and games. The gamer-parents, however, through curating the "right" games, teaching their children self-regulation and how to successfully manage emotions and relationships related to play took an active part in fostering their children's digital literacy (Sandberg et al., 2021). The "good-parenting" practices enabled by gamer-parent's gaming expertise included caring consumption and a common recognition, being engaged in the specifics of the games their children enjoyed and not reducing the gaming experience to "screentime".

Discussion Positioning the Gamer-Parent

The hybrid identity of a gamer-parent both conforms to, and challenges, current notions of good parenting. Our interviewees wanted to play with their children, to be part of the play experiences, and to facilitate meaningful play sessions. A desire based on their own passion and interest for games. The ways in which play was facilitated and enacted, as well as how play sessions were talked about, had strong similarities with how they approached play as gamers; maximizing fun, making it social, and finding games that suited their interests and passions. Their gamer identity, and its related experiences and expertise, guided them in how to make games social and enjoyable. Even though gamer-parenting is not without its struggles and require parents to engage in extensive work related to curation and mediation (Ask et al., 2021) they clearly demonstrate that there is nothing inherent in games that should indicate that it *must* be a source of conflict, and that games can be an important locus of social interaction and bonding within the family. Their approach, characterized by high levels of involvement and positive reinforcement, is strongly mirrored in current understandings of good parenting, where being supportive of and engaged in children's activities and passions is idealized. In this sense, the gamer-parent identity could be interpreted as an example of "good parenting" where the parents' interest in gaming both support and strengthens their involvement in children's activities and hobbies. In our material, the closeness that came from sharing play experiences and a passion for games, was frequently highlighted and something they clearly treasured. That other non-gaming parents sought

their advice on how to configure play in everyday life, may also be interpreted as an expression of how other parents acknowledged and even desired, the conflict free – and joyful – place games had in the families of gamer-parents that were made possible because the parents approached gaming from a position of closeness and appreciation.

In many ways our interviewees demonstrated values and practices related to current understandings of "good parenting". However, their encouragement of play – which is also an encouragement of screentime, and screen mediated sociality – conflicts with current discourse on parenthood. Screen time is framed as something potentially risky, and even though policy advice given in Norway is to get involved with children's play, the prevalent message given to parents remains that screen time is something that should be limited. In this sense, the very act of encouraging screen related interests and passions goes against current discourse on good parenting and makes the gamer-parent hybrid configuration contested and in need of defense. Furthermore, the gamer identity, which has several aspects which is easily translated to "good parenting", like engagement and encouragement, has little to offer with regards to risk reduction. Specifically, responsibility, which we have identified as a key value in current discourse about good parenting. This is not to say that gamers are somehow "irresponsible", but rather that gamer culture directs attention toward enjoyment, including escapism and transgression, which stands in stark contrast to the idea of responsibility. Consequently, being a gamer-parent, in light of discourses about good parenting, is also an attempt to merge opposing values and goals that are contradictory.

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