

The struggle and enrichment of play

Domestications and overflows in the everyday life of gamer parents

Kristine Ask,^I Ingvild Kvale Sørenssen,^{II}
& Stine Thordarson Moltubakk^{III}

^IDepartment of Interdisciplinary Studies of Culture, NTNU, Norway

^{II}Department of Education and Lifelong Learning, NTNU, Norway

^{III}NTNU University Library, Norway

Abstract

Gaming is a frequent source of conflict for families. Research on parents and gaming has identified a lack of gaming-related expertise, a general devaluation or fear of play, and authoritative and restrictive parenting styles as key sources of conflict. What happens when these deficits are addressed? What does mediation look like when parents are expert gamers, enjoy play, and encourage play for their children? Based on qualitative interviews with 29 parents who identify as gamers, we explore how gamer parents domesticate games. To explore the work of stabilising gaming as a wholesome and valued pastime, we combine domestication theory with overflows to address the struggles involved. The analysis investigates how gamer parents mediate play, with an emphasis on how games are interpreted, the family's player practices, and the role of gaming-related expertise in accordance with the three dimensions (symbolic, practice, cognitive) of domestication theory.

Keywords: digital games, parental mediation, overflows, domestication, everyday life

Introduction: Gaming parents – from deficit to excess

Gaming is a frequent source of conflict in the family. Such conflicts have been attributed to a series of deficits on the parents' part: authoritative parenting styles that are more concerned with limiting gameplay than engaging with it (Dralega et al., 2019; The Norwegian Media Authority, 2015), lack of gaming related expertise (Bergsjø et al., 2018), and a general dismissive attitude towards gaming as a pastime (Gregersen, 2018). Following this research, and the research-based advice given to parents about getting more involved with games (The Norwegian Media Authority, n.d.), is an expectation that gaming will be a relatively hassle-free element in everyday life once these deficits are addressed. However, is this really the case? Is addressing the aforementioned deficits enough to avoid conflicts about games in the family? How are games mediated and integrated into everyday life when starting from excess – that

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is, when parents love gaming, have plenty expertise, and approach gaming with an active mediation parenting style?

Where previous work on family and games assumed that parents do not play games (e.g., Dralega et al., 2019; Shin & Huh, 2011), this assumption is quickly becoming outdated. The Norwegian Parents and Media survey found that 46 per cent of parents play games (slightly higher among fathers than mothers, and lowest among older parents) (The Norwegian Media Authority, 2018). In Norway, gaming is a common pastime; according to the recent Children and Media survey, 86 per cent of Norwegian 9–18-year-olds reported playing digital games, and four out of ten reported they spend a lot of time gaming (The Norwegian Media Authority, 2020). The shift in who plays, combined with the mainstreaming of play in Norwegian society, necessitates a revisit of research into the role of parents in the mediation of children's play.

In this article, we explore how children's gaming is mediated by parents who identify as gamers. Based on 28 qualitative interviews, we explore the domestication (Sørensen et al., 2000) of games by gamer parents, specifically the meaning Norwegian gamer parents attribute to games, the practical regulations they put in place to make play a valued part of family life, and the expertise they draw on in the process. Initially we expected to find the domestication to be unproblematic, that issues identified in previous research would disappear, as there would no longer be an underlying conflict about the value of play or major differences in interests or skills related to games. Furthermore, we expected that the parents' expertise with, and passion for, gaming would support a smooth and effortless domestication process, with games easily being integrated into the everyday life of the family. However, during the interviews, we quickly learned that even though there were few conflicts, the domestication process was far from easy. If anything, the domestication was characterised by considerable directed efforts on the parents' part, and we identified a diverse set of struggles that parents had to overcome in order to domesticate games in a desired way. To explore and understand these struggles, we combine domestication theory with overflows (Callon, 1998). Overflows direct our attention to elements that challenge the domestication and the work to keep the domestication stable, while also avoiding framing struggles as something primarily pertaining to risk or reward. Together, the aim of employing this combined theoretical framework is to investigate how gamer parents mediate play in the family, the struggles – or overflows – they face, and the work involved in managing them.

Parents and gaming: The importance of parents in mediating play

While children's perspective is an important pillar in research on children and media, parents still have an authoritative role in their children's lives. Consequently, parental perspectives are important when investigating the relational context for media use. Previous research on parental mediation has drawn on literature on parents' mediation of children's television use (e.g., Livingstone & Helsper, 2008), but is increasingly also about the mediation of digital and online play (Nikken & Janz, 2006; Rodríguez-de-Dios et al., 2018). Mediation here refers to “the diverse practices through which parents try to manage and regulate their children's experiences with the media” (Livingstone et al., 2015: 7). In our use of the concept of mediation, we include regulation, meaning-making, and – as we explore the experiences of parents who are

gamers – we are also interested in how knowledge and gaming expertise plays a part in parental mediation.

Valkenburg and colleagues (1999) categorise parents' mediation styles as active mediation, restrictive mediation, and social co-viewing. Active mediation involves parents talking with their children about the content of television or digital games. Restrictive mediation refers to the set of rules parents use to regulate media use, including when, where, and for how long. The third type of mediation is co-viewing, where parents and children watch television or play games together. Clark (2011: 335) identifies a fourth mediation style that she calls participatory learning, where “rather than advice, insights, or moral judgment, parents provide prompts to continue conversations, and aim to learn from as well as with their children”. When it comes to children's use of digital media, two additional strategies have been identified when regulating Internet use: monitoring (of online activity) and technical mediation (restricting online content) (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Sonck et al., 2013). This framework of parental mediation styles has increasingly been applied to the study of parental mediation of play. Several studies found that parents use similar strategies for mediating gaming as for television (e.g., Nikken & Jansz, 2006; Schaan & Melzer, 2015; Shin & Huh, 2011), but co-viewing, in the case of digital games, turns into co-playing, where parents and children use media together.

According to Shin and Huh (2011), parents' perception of videogames play an important role in how they regulate play. Parents with negative views on the influence of games are more likely to use restrictive mediation, while those with positive views more often use co-playing. The strong link between how games are interpreted and how they are used is also reflected in other research on play and player practices (Ask & Sørensen, 2019), indicating that the symbolic position of games is of great importance when investigating play.

Research on gamer parents show both differences and similarities when compared to non-gamer parents. Gamer parents are more likely to co-play with their children (Nikken & Jansz, 2006), use both active and restrictive mediation, care less about PEGI-ratings (Pan European Game Information age recommendations and content descriptors) (Nikken et al., 2007), and are less concerned about time use and more about game content (Yee, 2008). Gamer parents like to share their favourite pastime with their children, and the family becomes an important social context for them to keep playing after becoming parents (Eklund, 2015; Ito, 2010). In these families, gaming is a way to bond, even across generations (Shen & Williams, 2011; Volda & Greenberg, 2012), and many parents continue to play together to keep in touch with friends, siblings, and extended family through online games (Siyahhan & Gee, 2018). While this research shows games as a source of joy and bonding in the family, there is still a pressure on parents to monitor and mediate children's (potentially risky) media consumption including which games they play, with whom, and how much (Clark, 2011; Siyahhan & Gee, 2018).

Research on parental mediation shows that parents mediate children's engagement with media in various ways, but there are also clear patterns and similarities across types of media – indicating that there are limited ways parents may engage with and regulate children's media use. As an alternative to the presented mediation styles, Livingstone and colleagues (2017) argue that parents' mediation strategies broadly fall into two categories: enabling and restrictive. The two strategies are used independently, or at the same time, to varying degrees – from enabling and encouraging children's media use to

restrictive monitoring and use of technical controls to avoid risks. The first is associated with more risk, but also more opportunities, than the latter.

Livingstone and colleagues' (2017) research highlight the need to include skills and expertise related to digital technology when analysing parental engagement with children's media. Parents who are unsure about their own skills and parents of children with low digital skills tend to favour restrictive over enabling mediation, and when perceiving risks to be very high, they use more of both. Policy advice tends to encourage parents to learn more about games as a way to reduce conflicts about games in the family (The Norwegian Media Authority, n.d.), presuming that being knowledgeable about games will ease negotiations about games. Though this is sound advice, research has found that parents and grandparents use their lack of knowledge as an asset, as a way to initiate conversations with children about games, for example, encouraging them to explain the rules of the game (Aarsand, 2007). Consequently, there appears to be a complex relationship between knowledge about games and mediation practices, where the presence or lack of knowledge about games in and of itself is not determining if games are seen as a valuable addition to family life.

Much research on mediation is based on a risk–reward framework, where concerns about adverse effects or individual benefits are driving factors. This dichotomous framework did not fit our material, nor our interest in an empirically driven analysis focused on how interpretation, everyday routines, and digital skills (all identified in previous research as shaping factors for mediation) work together to shape mediation practices. To investigate these aspects, we turn to domestication theory.

Theorising struggles: Domestication and overflows

According to domestication theory, technology is required to undergo a process of “taming”, during which the use and meaning of the artefact is decided (Silverstone et al., 1992; Sørensen & Lie, 1996). Domestication theory embraces technology as undetermined and open to multiple interpretations (compare with interpretative flexibility; Pinch & Bijker, 1987), and argues that a user perspective is necessary if we are to understand how technology gains both meaning and function – as any design may be interpreted and enacted in various ways (Berker et al., 2006; Sørensen, 2006). It proposes that the meaning and use of technology are not given, but the result of a mutually shaping process where both technology and users are subject to change (Ask, 2011), and studies have shown how parents are highly influential in children's domestication of media (Sørenssen, 2018). The framework has been used to study a wide range of technologies, including digital games (e.g., Ask, 2011; Ask & Sørensen, 2019; De Schutter et al., 2015; Sigurdardottir, 2016), which demonstrates that games are appropriated in different ways, depending on factors such as interpretation of games and play, everyday life as a context, and the ways in which play is organised (both with other player and non-players).

Domestication theory has roots in both audience studies and the sociology of consumption, and it is used to explore not only how media and technology are used, but also how they gain meaning (Haddon, 2007). There are two strands of domestication theory, a media studies version and a science and technology studies version. The media studies version identifies four phases: appropriation, objectification, incorporation, and conversion, following a technology's trajectory from “wild and unknown” to “tamed and

integrated". The science and technology studies approach, on the other hand, considers domestication to be an ongoing process that is shaped along three dimensions that ultimately decides what a technology "is" and "does". The three dimensions are symbolic, cognitive, and practice, and represent mutually constitutive categories that often overlap and that consider the enactment of technology to be determined by meaning, knowledge, and use (Sørensen, 2006; Sørensen et al., 2000). In the following section, we outline these three dimensions further and explicate how we have related these dimensions to our own material.

The symbolic dimension of domestication is about interpretation and meaning, which in this case means the interpretation of, and meaning given to, digital games. Digital games have been at the centre of many controversies – from violent effects and addiction to games' potential for learning and questions about the artistic merits of the medium (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2020) – and they are still a highly contested technology in public discourse. This is of relevance to our study. The meaning given to games shape how parents mediate them (Shin & Huh, 2011), and when the public discourse on games is conflicted and contradictory, interpretations of the medium must be resolved by users (and related non-users) through negotiations in everyday life (Ask, 2011). For our analysis, where we combine domestication with overflows, it is important to understand what kind of meaning games hold for parents, including how they position themselves and their interpretation in relation to public discourses about games, and in what ways their interpretations are challenged.

The practice dimension covers user practices and routines surrounding games: how, when, and with whom one plays. It is also about what kind of rules, systems, or other regulations are in place to shape and ensure continued practice. To explore this dimension, we focus on player practices with a special emphasis on regulation practices that surround play in the families of our interviewees. As domestication theory is highly concerned with the interrelationship between morality and practice (Levold & Berker, 2007), the interest in regulations is twofold: it is a way to understand, first, user practices related to games, and second, how user practices are also expressions of moral judgments about use (in this case play).

The cognitive dimension concerns itself with knowledge and skills related to technology use and highlights how all technologies rely on specific, and often varied, knowledge and skill sets. The ability to understand and play games is broadly understood as gaming literacy (Buckingham & Burn, 2007), but in order to emphasise mediation as practice, we have chosen to focus the cognitive dimension on expertise (broadly defined as having high levels of applied and embodied knowledge) rather than literacy. We are interested in when and how gaming related knowledge is used, how it shapes mediation practices, and how it shapes the other two dimensions. As pointed out by Livingstone and colleagues (2017), parents with a high level of digital skills favour enabling mediation practices for children's Internet use. Is this also the case among expert gamer parents?

Domestication theory proposes that users work towards stabilisation in their everyday life, where technologies are integrated in day-to-day tasks and activities in a way that feels natural – even to the point of taking the technology for granted, as it simply falls into the background (Berker et al., 2006). In our preliminary analysis of the interviews, we noticed that the domestication stories, in addition to explaining how digital games were integrated into everyday life, were also ripe with exceptions, additions, reserva-

tions – and even contradictions. Equally important, we noticed that a considerable part of our interviews described efforts to reconcile ideals of mediation with practice. This suggested that the domestication was difficult to stabilise and required ongoing work. To address and explore factors that hinder stabilisation, we combined domestication theory with overflows (Callon, 1998).

Overflows draws on Goffman (1986) and his work on frames in interpersonal relationships, where a frame establishes boundaries of what can, and cannot, be done in given situations, or frames. Callon expands on the concept of frames and framing to suggest that frames will always leak, or overflow. Overflows represent movement in the frame, elements that – either coming from inside or outside the frame – challenge its validity and make stabilisation difficult, and the frame remains contested, conflicted, and may even collapse. The theory directs attention to the work involved in managing overflows to keep frames stable, by incorporating overflows into the frame (and changing the frame) or rejecting them in favour of maintaining the original framing. Overflows can be described as either hot or cold. In cold situations, there is an agreement about the nature of overflows: “Actors are identified, interests are stabilized, preferences can be expressed, responsibilities are acknowledged and accepted” (Callon, 1998: 261). In hot situations, on the other hand, “everything becomes controversial” (Callon, 1998: 260), and the position and relationship between actors are destabilised and can lead to the original frame collapsing. For the frame to remain intact, the relationship between actors must be resolved and reestablished.

Both domestication and overflows have a shared ontology in actor-network theory (Callon, 1984; Latour, 2005; Law, 2009), where the relationship between actors (both human and non-human) and attempts of aligning and stabilising assemblages of actors are central. Where domestication is about the stabilisation and enactment of assemblages related to a given technology in everyday life (Ask, 2016; Sørensen, 2006), overflow is about resistance to stable interpretations and configurations as well as the ways in which interpretations change. By combining domestication and overflows, we move beyond the dichotomies of benefit and risk and explore the various ways in which digital games are interpreted, configured, and used.

Meet the parents: The Norwegian middle-class family

This article is part of a research project on Norwegian gamer parents and how they domesticate digital games for their families (GAME), partially funded by the Norwegian Competence Center for Gambling and Gaming Research. Our analysis is based on 28 qualitative interviews ($N = 29$, as one interview was with a couple) with parents from separate families who self-identify as gamers. A call for informants was posted on the blog *spillpikene.no*, which posts entries on games and culture, where both Kristine Ask and Stine Thordarson Moltubakk are contributors. Informants were then selected for variety in representation with regard to gender and age of both parents and children. Our selection consisted of 18 men and 11 women aged between 32 and 48 (median = 38) with children between the ages of 0 and 17 (median = 8). Our informants worked in different fields (e.g., education, journalism, and games); however, they were largely middle-class, and class has been established as an important aspect when choosing mediation parenting style (Clark, 2011; Ito, 2010). Consequently, it may be difficult

to differentiate between elements informed by class and those related to other factors, such as perception of gaming.

The main topics in the interviews were parents' own childhood gaming experiences, gaming practices as parents, how they regulate gaming within the family, and what they base their regulatory practices on. The interviews were conducted face-to-face or via Skype between late March and early May 2019. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and anonymised, and participants were given pseudonyms before data was coded using the analysis software NVivo. We translated all quotes from the interviews from Norwegian to English. The project is registered and approved with the Norwegian Centre for Research Data, which ensures that research data is gathered, stored, and used in ethically and legally approved ways.

After reading through all interview transcripts, we met several times to discuss and compare interpretations and calibrate codes. We used a qualitative collective analysis where joint readings of the material, mapping of topics, grouping of themes, and outline of arguments ensures collaborators learn from and correct each other throughout the process (Eggebo, 2020). As the research was initially designed as a domestication study, the initial coding was directed toward negotiations in everyday life, especially codes related to player practice (types of regulation and their reasoning), the meaning of games (how games were interpreted and their take on public discourse on games), and players' expertise (both how they became experts on gaming, and times when this expertise was used) – in accordance with the three dimensions of domestication. For example, substantial parts of the interviews revolved around parents' positive feelings around games, generating codes like “games as social”, “games as learning”, and “games as escapism”. These codes were later combined, through discussion and collaborative readings of the material, as the category “games as enriching” in the analysis, which is the dominant frame all interviewees wished to uphold, and the overall goal of their domestication. The other categories in the analysis are based on the three dimensions of the domestication process, where codes related to the symbolic, practical, and cognitive aspects were grouped.

Throughout the process, the domestication framework was used to highlight interpretations, contexts, user practices, and expertise, and it informed the codes we developed. This method of developing codes by moving back and forth between theory and empirical material is known as an abductive approach (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018). During the analysis, we became interested in challenges to this domestication and decided to expand our theoretical framework to include overflows.

Our analysis section starts by establishing what we consider to be the dominant framing of games and gaming among our interviewees and is followed by an exploration of overflows related to the symbolic, practical, and cognitive dimensions of domestication.

Domesticating games as a technology for enrichment

When talking about gaming, our interviewees described a diverse set of engagements, motivations, and pleasures regarding games. The high value placed on gaming was reflected in homes with an abundance of game consoles and machines, game titles of varying sorts, and various spaces dedicated to gaming. Gaming was described as a way to relax, challenge one's self, explore fantastical narratives, think deeply about strategic

choices, kill time, learn new skills, spend time with friends and family, and be alone, mirroring the many and multiple ways players find enjoyment through games (Yee, 2016). They all considered gaming to be an activity that added value to their life, and something worth striving to include and embrace in everyday life. Based on this, we argue they domesticated digital games as a “technology for enrichment”, where using the technology is supposed to produce enriching experiences.

The social aspects of gaming were integral to why gaming was understood as enriching. Playing together (co-play) or being able to sit shoulder to shoulder – what our interviewee Miriam named “next-to-gaming” – provided a sense of shared endeavour and interest for the family, even if they were not playing the same game. Several parents explicitly expressed how they felt privileged to have gaming as a shared interest with their children, and they placed high value on the social bonds they created and maintained through play. As an example of this, David told us about how he and his two children played *Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, *Minecraft*, and *Super Mario Odyssey*:

I really appreciated those three experiences, and I know the kids did too, and I think that experience of taking down Ganon, taking Ender Dragon, that whole journey leading up to it, that we shared it together. I compare it to hiking in Rondane [Norwegian mountain range] or other types of experiences. We did something together that we remember.

In this quote, David compares the shared play sessions and endeavours with hiking in the mountains – a common Norwegian pastime that is generally seen as wholesome (Nilsen, 2008). To David and his family, games have a similar function in that they become an arena where they are accomplishing something together, sharing a “journey” and making treasured memories.

These parents explicitly rejected scaremonger narratives about violent effects, addiction, or mindless entertainment, and in the interviews, they advocated strongly for the positive impact gaming had on their lives. They also fondly described their favourite games or treasured memories from gameplay. All interviewees seemed invested in portraying games as worthwhile, wholesome, useful, social, or advantageous. The explicit rejection shows that the interviewees were highly aware of the conflicting, and often negative, public discourses surrounding games, and also that they did not consider the risks in a risk–reward framing to be actual cause for concern. As the risk–reward approach is very present in public discourse about digital games and in discourse around screen use in general, it is no surprise that our interviewees referred to the risk–reward discourse in the interviews – and in their reasoning about mediation. At the same time, their dismissal of risks confirms a need for theoretical conceptualisations that go beyond this dichotomy.

Stories about the enriching qualities of gaming would frequently dominate the start of the interviews, with strong arguments for how important gaming was and how much they enjoyed it – both individually and as a family. They seemed to enjoy telling “their story” about how gaming had enriched their lives. However, as the interviews progressed, it became clear that it was a domestication that required effort to maintain, as there were plenty of situations that challenged its validity. In continuation, the analysis explores elements that challenged the domestication of games as an enriching technology, articulated as overflows in three sections correlating to the three dimensions of domestication theory (symbolic, practice, and cognitive).

Symbolic overflow: Undesirable game design

The symbolic dimension of domestication theory deals with the interpretation of technology and forefronts how integral meaning is to use. In our study, the many positive aspects of gaming that were highlighted in the domestication of games as an enriching technology relied on a general understanding of games as a medium with valued cultural expression and many desirable qualities. Trond exemplifies the high esteem to which interviewees held games:

I think games are a fantastic cultural expression and good entertainment and there is such a huge variation in what you can do and the experiences you can have. So, I feel a little sorry for those who just think that this is just nonsense.

In light of the favourable view these interviewees had of games, it was curious to discover that games themselves were a source of overflows that challenged their interpretations. Simply put, there were a number of games that did not fit with their view of what games should be, and certain game designs ran counter to their perceptions of what made games an enriching technology. Several types of games – or rather elements of game design – were brought up by interviewees as undesirable, and thus as overflows: hyper-commercial games (games with frequent advertising or microtransactions); games with addicting qualities (games with loot boxes or game mechanics that encourage repeated logins); games with violence (games centred on conflict and with realistic depictions of violence); and online games (not because of the games themselves, but because of the associated community known for harassing behaviour). These qualities came up frequently in interviews as problematic or unwanted. In addition, we found that games were also dismissed for being too simple (games without depth or complexity, e.g., when a game “only revolves around being pretty”, according to Kirsten) or too scary (horror games that they felt were inappropriate for children).

Such games were derided as inadequate, problematic, silly, “shitty”, or simply “bad”. As an example of this, Stian talked about how he encouraged his six-year-old daughter to play more advanced games instead of just simple children’s games, which he considered to be “crap”:

She enjoys simple point-and-click type of stuff, children’s games. I try to encourage [...] a bit more advanced stuff, so that she gets to flex those muscles, but there are a lot of crap-games on her mobile too.

To manage the overflow of undesirable game design, gamer parents made distinctions between “good games” and “bad games”, and to ensure that their children would only play “good games”, our interviewees would spend considerable effort reviewing game titles brought into the home to determine their suitability: reading game reviews, watching “let’s play” videos, talking to friends, and testing the games themselves. The ongoing curation was partly motivated by a felt need to reduce risk (e.g., concerns about violent content) and increase rewards (e.g., learning). However, risk and reward were not the primary selection criteria. Instead, parents were driven by a wish to pass on their own gaming legacy by selecting games from their own favourites, and finding games they believed suited the interests and personality of their child, or both. The curation work to weed out “bad games” was done in order to foster the specific type of enriching play their parents had in mind, and appears to be a combination of enabling and restricting

mediation strategies, where game content is both encouraged and limited at the same time. It is also worth noting that “crappy” games only became part of a domestication process because the children had a different interpretation of those games than that of their parents. This highlights how parents and children may attribute different meanings to games, and had this study included interviews with the children, we would have likely found other interpretations and evaluations of “good” and “bad” games.

The interviewees had the skills to review games and perform curation work. This had a cooling effect on this overflow and prevented “bad” games from being a reason to reject the main framing of enrichment – and thus reject games altogether. However, curation work as an overflow management strategy is not without struggles: the curation is both time consuming and ongoing, and the frame will only remain stable as long as this curation work continues.

Curating content took time and effort, but simply selecting the “right” games was not enough. They had to be enacted in specific ways for them to be used as a technology for enrichment. In order to do this, a combination of regulations was put in place as part of managing overflows in the practical dimension.

Practice overflow: The mess of everyday life and the need for exceptions

The practical dimension of domestication theory is concerned with user practices, especially established patterns of behaviour like routines and rules that govern them. In our material, rules surrounding play were not only normative, but also descriptive of the family’s playing practices; play was something that happened in shared spaces, often together, and was an integral part of how the family spent time together. At the same time, they did not want gaming to replace all other activities, so unlimited playtime was rare and regulations common.

When asked about what regulations regarding play they had, some interviewees would list a clear set of rules, while others had to think for a while before they could name any specifics. We identified four regulations in addition to the curation work: co-play regulation, spatial regulation, time regulation, and technical regulation, which we summarise in Table 1. There is great overlap between the regulations we identified and those identified in previous research on parental mediation. In our material, the different regulations were used eclectically, usually in different combinations, but did not easily map onto different parental mediation styles. Instead, interviewees would shift between active, restrictive, and co-play mediation. They would encourage play, limit how and when, initiate shared play sessions, and combine this with monitoring of solo play sessions and in some cases technical restrictions. Our findings thus support Livingstone and colleagues’ (2017) perspective of parental mediation as a combination of enabling and restricting mediation.

Table 1 *Gamer parents' regulations of play*

Type of regulation	Description	How regulations were enacted by gamer parents
Co-play	Playing together to moderate play	Co-play was a way to have fun and to bond, but also to ensure children were playing approved content and a way for parents to contribute actively to the framing of both content and play experience.
Spatial	Rules about where to use game technologies in the home	Making common spaces (like the living room) into gaming spaces, both for sociability and surveillance.
Time	Having set times or a limited amount of time to play	Some parents had time limits; others rejected the usefulness of time regulation in favour of a focus on the effects gaming had on the children's mood.
Technical	Using technical features such as parental settings to limit playtime or content	Used to restrict purchases of apps and games and keep track of Internet use, but with limited utility, as kids would eventually reject the regulation and find workarounds.

According to our interviewees, the overall aim of regulations was to encourage, teach, and model self-regulation. They wanted their children to become gamers who are able to recognise signs of fatigue or loss of enjoyment, so that they know when to take breaks or leave a game. This was seen as a necessary skill to avoid excessive gaming, but also to keep play enjoyable.

The regulations emphasised socialisation as a key aspect of the enriching qualities of games (rules about playing in shared spaces or with other family members). By centring play in communal spaces, the parents argued they were better equipped to intervene or support as needed, and in general they found it easier to stay involved in and be aware of their children's gaming interests. This also allowed parents to monitor the behaviour and moods of their children when gaming, and parents would end play sessions or remove certain game titles when they observed negative effects, such as excessive nagging or bouts of anger. Though some had set days or times during the week for play, time was generally derided as a poor strategy for regulating play, as it did not provide the nuances or flexibility they wanted.

Whereas the choice of regulations was explained thoroughly, the interviews also made clear that most regulations had regular exceptions for weekends, holidays, sick days – or times when the need for a “digital babysitter” was simply too strong. For example, the rule about only playing in common areas, a rule most parents agreed on, had, for Aina, regular exceptions for weekend mornings when the parents liked to sleep in:

We have decided they [the children] aren't usually allowed to have computers or game consoles in their room, but they are allowed to do so on the weekend mornings. Then they go and get game consoles and bring them into bed. But they have to ask first. So that they don't get up at five to game for example.

Frequently, regulations were set aside for other priorities, like keeping the children calm or occupied during situations that required them to sit still, such as during travel or dinnertime, or when the parents' attention was needed somewhere else (from housework

to looking after siblings). For example, Truls's son, who has ADHD, was sometimes allowed to use his iPad at the dinner table to help keep him focused and calm, even though meals were set aside as screen-free time. Monica and her partner also let their son use his iPad during breakfast to keep him happy and occupied while they bathed his little brother, even though they found it less than ideal.

Regardless of which regulations our interviewees used, it seemed as if exceptions were the rule. Stories about exceptions were often relayed with laughter, indicating both an awareness of how they were imperfect, but also unavoidable. Initially, we classified the exceptions as the overflow, but on closer inspection, our interviewees interpreted the exceptions neither as a regulation problem nor a gaming problem. Instead, the source of overflows was the inevitable chaos of everyday life, and exceptions were considered necessary to keep the family together and the household running through the many and messy situations that take place in the day-to-day running of a family.

The overflows were cooled and managed successfully for two reasons: first, an acceptance among our interviewees that everyday life is messy, and second, because of how they enacted their regulations. As regulations were based on ongoing monitoring, participation, and modelling, rather than a single rule "set in stone" that needed enforcing, there was flexibility inherent in the regulations. A focus on context for play, and the well-being and mood of their children as the most important metric, meant regulations were already fluid and allowed for exceptions to exist. While useful, the combination of enabling and restricting strategies that centred on sociability, enjoyment, and monitoring found in our material were also work intensive. Furthermore, they might not be for everyone, as they were highly reliant on parents' high levels of gaming expertise, which is the focus for the next section.

Cognitive overflow:

When children "act out" and parents doubt their expertise

The cognitive dimension of domestication is about knowledge and expertise related to use. The domestication of games as an enriching technology was built on extensive and varied game expertise, and these experiences (and related preferences) were used to curate games and make decisions about regulation. In the interviews, parents repeatedly referred to experiences and lessons learned through gaming when explaining their choices and would, for example, refer to themselves (and their relative success in life) when dismissing conceptions about games being addictive or a source of increased aggression. Being game literate was also a huge asset in conversations about games, as parents were able to understand and relate to the experiences their children were detailing. Their expertise precluded a mediation strategy of participatory learning, as advocated by Clark (2011), as they were already experts, but did support the family's ability to bond over games as a hobby. However, there were times our expert gamers doubted themselves, their expertise, and their choices, and this is the third and final set of overflows we address: "children acting out".

"Children acting out" is a category that broadly describes situations where children would break rules, behave inappropriately, or in ways that caused parents' concern. This included situations where children would not follow directions or make a scene, and

particularly situations where they displayed aggressive behaviour such as name-calling, biting, and kicking. Stories about “children acting out” were often linked to reflections and doubt about their interpretation of games and their effects.

When children acted out, the domestication of games as enriching was destabilised, as games became a possible cause of undesirable behaviour and in our material was the most prominent threat to the enrichment-framing. When Hilde’s son started acting out, she first suspected games and other screens to be the cause and decided to temporarily remove all electronic entertainment. During this time, the overflow was too hot and the domestication destabilised; suddenly she was no longer sure about the value of play and nor her assessment of the risks involved. In the end, she learned her son had an issue at school, and all electronic entertainment was reinstated. However, the situation shows how overflows, if left unmanaged and hot, may lead to dis-domestication (where the technology is rejected) or re-domestications (where other patterns and meanings of use are established).

Similarly, Rune let his four-year-old son play *Diablo 3*, a game with a PEGI rating of 16, because he could configure the game in a way that let his son practice controlling a character in a 3D environment in ways that “age appropriate” games did not. Rune initially felt confident in his decision, but had doubts when his son exhibited aggressive behaviour like kicking and name-calling:

Did I let him play something he shouldn’t, or too much? Am I responsible here or is it just a natural reaction to – or a struggle for autonomy or independence, testing boundaries? I’m not entirely sure, but I’ve told him that “if you act like this after playing then I don’t think we should play together”.

The self-doubt displayed by Rune is reflective of how parents questioned their values and interpretations when fearing for the well-being of their children. This demonstrates that even highly game-literate parents, who love games and want games in their children’s lives, are concerned that there is a thing as “too much” gaming and that games might have negative effects. We have no examples of parents making drastic or permanent changes based on children acting out, but in our material, those situations stood out as a shift in their narratives about the role of game expertise as the only time when they questioned it and found it lacking. And, as a consequence of doubting their expertise they also, however temporarily, doubted their positive views of gaming.

Discussion: Overflow management to make gaming enriching

Whereas previous research has indicated that involved and game-literate parents should have an easier time configuring play for the family, our research only partially confirms this assumption. There were few conflicts surrounding games, and games held a largely positively valued position in the family. Games were domesticated as a shared endeavour that played a key part in the family’s identity, how they bonded, and how they went about their life on a day-to-day basis. Our study found gaming to be a source of joy, togetherness, and cherished memories, and our interviewees wanted dearly for their children to share their passion and partake in shared playful endeavours. We have shown how the meaning and use of games (like all technology) are indetermined and context dependent. The way games are domesticated as enriching by our interviewees

relies on an interpretation of games as valuable (symbolic), a diverse set of regulations (practice), and high levels of gaming expertise (cognitive). These three dimensions are mutually shaping, intertwining, and overlapping: the high regard of gaming is based on years of experience enjoying the medium, the expertise would not make sense if gaming was not considered valuable, and the time consuming and complex regulation practices are reliant on both gaming-related skills and a certain view of games.

Digital games were domesticated as technology for enrichment, but keeping this domestication stable was not without its struggles. In all three dimensions, overflows were managed and included. To deal with overflows in the symbolic dimensions, curation work was added to ensure only “good” games were being domesticated. In the practical dimension, the overflows could be absorbed because the regulations in place were flexible, and the overflows were normalised as the result of the messiness of everyday life. In the cognitive dimension, however, we saw the domestication being threatened by children acting out, and how this led to destabilisation and temporary dis-domestication. Across the three dimensions, it appears that because our interviewees had such strong convictions about gaming being an enriching activity, the overflows were “cooled” in different ways and treated as minor issues caused by something outside of, or unrelated to, games.

The domestication and continued enactment of games as enriching was not hassle-free or easy, and our material shows that a considerable amount of work went into positioning actors (both human and non-human) to keep overflows at bay. From the continued evaluation work in sorting out acceptable games from “bad games”, to the ongoing monitoring and flexibility required by regulations that emphasise the children’s mood and reactions (rather than, for example, time spent playing), the domestication processes were characterised by ongoing and time-consuming work of curating, encouraging, and regulating play. This type of time intensive and involved parental mediation practice appeared successful in that they reported relatively few conflicts and much joy, but may in itself be a source of struggle. Several parents explained their need to deviate from established regulations due to simply not having the time, energy, or will to uphold these rules in all situations. The domestication of gaming as enriching may appear robust, as it was able to withstand many overflows, but the considerable management required to do so also makes it precarious. Many changes in life, from health issues to changes in the family or parental relationship, may disrupt overflow management and thus threaten the stability of the domestication.

Based on our analysis, we find overflows to be a fruitful concept to make sense of challenges and struggles in the parental mediation of play, as it moves the focus away from risk–reward evaluations and toward complexities of interpretation and enjoyment – without sugar-coating the hard work that is involved in parental mediation. With the emphasis placed on ongoing work to keep domestications stable, overflows also appears to be a useful addition to domestication theory to address struggles in the domestication process.

Conclusion: The persistent struggle for enriching play

Previous research leans toward deficit models when explaining why there are so many conflicts between parents and children about gaming. This deficit model highlights what

is lacking: there is not enough passion for games, not enough expertise, and no shared and meaningful play practices. In stark contrast to this, our analysis has examined a domestication and parental mediation of games characterised by *excess*, where passion abounds and there are high levels of expertise, lots of shared playtime, and many established everyday practices surrounding games.

Our analysis shows that gaming is a way to bond, have fun, and create lasting memories; it also shows these positive experiences are not given. Bad game design, an everyday life that needs flexibility and exceptions, and children acting out are all examples of overflows that challenge the desired domestication of gaming as an enriching activity. The successful management of overflows relies on ongoing and continued work, which itself may become a threat to the stable interpretations of gaming as enriching – as the domestication relies on this work.

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