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# “I Just Can’t Commit to That Level Anymore”

## Players, Demands of Games, and Player Services

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ELISA WIIK

People, the author holds, instinctively believe quitting a game to be a simple choice: you are either playing or you are not. But she finds quitting play more complex. To understand better the whole ecosystem of play, she maps out the reasons Finnish players abandon or reduce their gaming and examines these reasons through the lens of specific demands. Using an online survey and interviews, she reveals that the dedication and effort needed to play—and the expected audience for a game—can drive players away from the games they once so enjoyed. She concludes that using the player service model promoted by Jaako Stenros and Olli Sotamaa in 2009 can identify the actions game designers might take to lessen the effect of these game demands. **Key words:** analog games; digital games; game demands; quitting game play; player services

Larps started to demand a really deep dedication and the level of propping rose to something incomprehensible; I just didn’t have the time for that. It felt like I was a bad larper and the joy vanished from it.

—Woman respondent, age forty-two

**W**HAT HAPPENS WHEN players abandon their games and take an extended leave from the various imaginary worlds they have been inhabiting—or at least devote less time to them? Trying out different games and hobbies, then giving these up when life changes, is of course a normal part of adult life. But games are an important part of popular culture and a lucrative, growing business. Bergstrom and Sherman (2021) note that exclusionary practices can keep women out of digital games and maybe even push them out. If the players are kept out (or pushed out) of that culture, especially diverse players, their departures can affect both the business and the culture of gaming.

As Bergstrom and Sherman (2021) note, documenting the constraints of playing digital games can reveal thresholds that might be lowered to help those still wishing to participate. I agree with their notion that the norms and structures of games and game cultures become more visible when we examine the entire ecosystem of playing, including different varieties of games and former players, current players, in-between players, and even nonplayers. In short, understanding the constraints of play can help us design games for everyone and not just for that stereotypical player, the young white male (Fron et al. 2007; Paul 2018; Booth 2021), and hardcore players who have a lot of time on their hands (Consalvo and Paul 2019).

In this article, I rely on a survey of—and on interview data from—Finnish players who have abandoned or reduced their gaming. I define games very broadly and include different varieties of digital and analog games to garner a wide perspective on games in these individuals’ lives and on their ideas about play. In reality, they might well use several devices to play games, and they do not fall neatly into either category of analog players or digital players. Abandoning one type of game might sometimes mean abandoning all others, too, but not necessarily. As Bergstrom (2019b) argues, different games and the types of games played depend on the situations, the needs of individual players, and those with whom they are playing. Focusing on one game only, or on one genre, Bergstrom (2019b) says, limits what we can discover out about nonplayers. It is important to know who abandons games, why they do so, and whether players are being excluded (Bergstrom and Sherman 2021).

To find this out, I posed two research questions: What reasons lead players to abandon or reduce their play? What kind of thresholds do the answers reveal when looked at through the lens of the demands made by games and play? For my purposes, I directed the lens of demands toward games as designed experiences. In other words, what does the design of the game demand of its players.

The difference between player and designer can be murky in analog games because players also enact the rules and sometimes take on a double role as player and game master. I, therefore, focus on the demands imposed on the player by the designers of the games, and thus my discussion includes examples of how the designers can take these experiences into account in the future. As I show, these demands act as barriers or thresholds that trigger a negotiation process that leads some players to cease participating. I first look at previous studies related to the quitting of games and to leisure constraints, then I present my data and the method I used to obtain it, and finally I describe my results. I close

with a discussion about the possibilities of the player service model (Stenros and Sotamaa 2009) as a useful tool for devising ways to lower the thresholds that hold some players back.

## Previous Research

### *Quitting and Leisure Barriers*

Previous research about quitting game play has included instances that were very public and often very dramatic because the developers decided to shut down online worlds (Consalvo and Begy 2015; Pearce and Artemesia 2009; Papargyris and Poylymenakou 2009). Even when the online virtual world itself does not end, sometimes players still share dramatic “quitting texts” in forum and blog posts or on YouTube and other video formats (Dutton 2007; Nagenborg and Hoffstadt 2009; Webber 2012). When it comes to more commonplace and less performative quitting, plenty of research has been devoted to the retention and churn prediction, meaning how to identify players who are about to quit playing an online game or to cancel their subscription fee (Debeauvais et al. 2011; Borbora et al. 2011; Runge et al. 2014). Other research concerning digital games and quitting have approached the issue from the point of view of abandoned avatars (Bergstrom, de Castell, and Jenson 2016), or the reasons for deactivating and reactivating accounts (Bergstrom 2019b), or rage quitting (Weber 2020). Some have looked at *Pokémon GO* (Rasche, Schlomann, and Mertens 2017; Butcher, Tucker, and Young 2021) and various mobile social games (Wei et al. 2015). Indeed, numerous studies use one or two individual games as examples, but there exists some research examining the issue from a wider perspective (Lee, Yu, and Lin 2007; Jiang 2018; Bergstrom and Sherman 2021). Research about quitting analog games has been more indirect—for example, research about parents finding time for board games or about conflicts between role players (Rogerson and Gibbs 2018; Bowman 2013). Although these examples do not directly concern the experience of former players, the topics touch on possible reasons some players abandon gaming—family life constraints or leisure time and social conflicts between players.

The same kind of indirect exploration of my theme can be found in Deterding’s (2016) article about autonomy. The push and pull of wanting to play leisurely and the social obligation to play at work or as a team can affect the autonomy a single player enjoys over starting and quitting a specific game. Juul’s (2009) inter-

views with game developers about casual games and the meaning of casual touches on the busy life of adults, how casual games might better serve adult lifestyles, and how such casual games have brought in new kinds of players.

Leisure studies have been preoccupied with the topic, especially when it comes to leisure constraints. Crawford and Godbey (1987) developed a conceptual framework of the barriers to leisure that families face. They divided these barriers into three categories: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural. Later, Crawford, Jackson, and Godbey (1991) described a hierarchical process that develops in stages, which can be overcome or not, but sometimes ends in nonparticipation. These barriers, they note, must be faced again when someone wants to specialize in selected leisure activity. According to Jackson, Crawford, and Godbey (1993), overcoming leisure constraints requires negotiating. How successful this negotiating process proves to be depends on the strength of the constraints and the motivation of the individual. Recent game research has used leisure constraint studies to examine quitting (Tan, Yeh, and Chen 2017; Bergstrom 2018; Bergstrom 2019a).

### *Demands of Games*

Since I use game demands as one reason for quitting or reducing play, a glimpse at previous research about the demands of games seems also warranted. Starting with digital games, video games demand interactivity, cognitive skills, physical skills, emotional responses, and social engagement (Bowman 2018). Moving on to board games, as Booth (2021) remarks, many board games take hours to play, even after set-up and learning the rules. Board games are expensive and not accessible to people with mobility constraints and mental difficulties. Continuing to miniatures, miniature war gaming as a hobby includes several other dimensions besides playing, such as crafting, collecting, storytelling, displaying and appreciating, and socializing (Meriläinen, Stenros, and Heljakka 2020).

Finally, role-playing games also need to be considered. First, it is worth noting that, instead of the acronym LARP for live-action, role-playing games, I use the lowercase *larp* as is customary in Nordic Larp communities and scholarship (see *Nordic Larp* by Jaakko Stenros and Markus Montola 2010). Tabletop role-playing games require that the players listen to each other and the game master, roll dice, play by the rules, imagine what is going on and role play their characters. Players need to concentrate to accomplish all this and to maintain such concentration throughout the game. Larps require at least some kind of garb from the player, which can consist of clothes, props, and even such accommodations as tents

(Bienia 2016). Some high-end larps involve significant costs, both in terms of money and time. For example, the players of *College of Wizardry* larps in Poland prepare both physically and socially on average for thirty-two hours and spend around six hundred euros for the game in total (Montola 2017).

Larps also make cognitive, emotional, physical, and social demands (Korhonen, Nykänen, and Partanen 2020). In addition, larps can appear a form of labor to both the organizers and the players, and this labor can be divided into three types according to the needs of Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs. As described by Jones, Koulu, and Torner (2016), the first order of labor includes the basic needs of the players, such as hunger and security; the second order includes cognitive and artistic needs, such as teaching or playing music in the game; and third order of labor includes needs of the fiction such as pretending to do a task related to the role of the player.

As we can see, players cannot simply jump into the game world and forget about their real lives. Games demand many different skills, abilities, and resources.

### *Hegemony of Play*

While these demands are overt, there exist covert demands as well that concern only some players. Inclusivity in games and in game cultures has been studied from multiple perspectives, but for my purposes, the concept of hegemony of play seems important. Fron and her associates (Fron et al. 2007) talk about "the hegemony of play," in which hardcore games, hardcore male gamers, and white male developers are more valued than other types of games, players, and developers. Even though Fron and her colleagues examine only digital games for their analysis, hegemony of play exists in analog games as well. Mostly white men design and illustrate board games (and mostly white men appear on their covers) (Pobuda 2018), which have a host of other diversity problems as well (Booth 2021). Role-playing games and larps are no different.

Tabletop role-playing games essentialize race and have a history of poorly representing gender, sexuality, and disability (Tremmel 2018). The typical player and organizer of a larp in the United States is a white male (Amherst 2016), and this makes entering the larps difficult for players who are Black, Indigenous, or persons of color (Kemper 2018). Moreover, some larps have organizers and the players enact "racecraft," meaning essentializing the concept of race and portraying hurtful racial stereotypes in playing a character (S. Eddy 2020; Z. Eddy 2020). Other larps introduce prejudices into their game worlds that can

be harmful if not handled carefully (Holkar 2016). Many games, no matter the format, draw on racist stereotypes in fantasy, science fiction, and horror without even realizing it (Loponen 2019).

In addition to these issues, hegemony of play influences the attitudes of players and their behavior toward coplayers they perceive as “other.” Although this is an important area of study, it lies outside my scope here. I plan to cover it more fully in subsequent articles using this data set. For now, the next section provides more information about who these players are and the research method I used.

## **Data and Method**

The data I used for this article consists of a Finnish language survey ( $n = 243$ ) and interviews ( $n = 22$ ) I conducted of former players. The survey questions were informed by a pilot study conducted by Frans Mäyrä, a short paper survey distributed in the Finnish Museum of Games in 2018, but I did not include that data in this article. Both those answering the survey questions and those providing contact information for interviews were self-selected, and the survey was not intended to be representative. A qualitative online survey is a good way to gather data that is at the same time diverse, deep, and rich, but one of the problems with an online survey can be that it excludes those without access to the internet and those who do not have computers (Braun et al. 2020). Bethlehem (2010) also discusses the problems of coverage related to surveys. According to the statistical office of European Union (Eurostat 2021), 92 percent of Finland’s households had internet access in 2016. In 2021, the number had risen to 97 percent, so the internet coverage was quite good in Finland at the time of the survey in 2019.

I tried to mitigate the remaining problems of coverage by distributing fliers with a link to the survey to the libraries of three big cities. This offered the limited possibility of finding information about the survey offline and answering its questions without the need of owning a device with internet service because Finnish public libraries provide computers with free internet access. The electronic survey data was gathered using a web forum open from May 2019 to June 2019. It offered a combination of open-ended and closed questions about aspects of quitting or limiting one’s game playing, how gaming has changed, the consumption and usage of other game-related media, and attitudes toward game culture. The emphasis on the open-ended questions allowed respondents to write answers in their own words.

Playing and games were defined very broadly, and the available selection listed in the survey was informed by the Finnish Player Barometer, a biennial survey “about the popularity of different varieties of game playing in Finland” (Kinnunen, Taskinen, and Mäyrä 2020, 13). The game playing I asked about in the survey included computer games, console games, hand-held console games, mobile games, browser games, board games and other parlor games, card games, miniature games, role-playing games, larps, pub games, gambling, and paper-based puzzles. I also provided a blank selection for “other” games so the respondents were not restricted to those I had listed. I used this list in questions that asked about the most frequently played game types and for what types of games respondents had quit or limited their playing.

The pilot study results showed that when asked in general terms about quitting or limiting a game playing, the respondents talked almost exclusively about digital games. The overarching goal of this new survey aimed for as wide a perspective on playing as possible and to tease out play habits that do not immediately come to mind when games are discussed in public. As Stenros and Kultima (2018) argue, games and play are moving targets that constantly expand. According to them, it is not fruitful to concentrate just on digital games or on games as products. Instead, a more encompassing point of view requires understanding the expanding ludosphere and the multiplicity of games. I attempt to do this by understanding games as “interactive systems and playful activities” (350) that can be categorized within the nonexhaustive selection of varieties listed in my survey.

I posted the link to the survey to various Facebook groups and discussion forums devoted to different types of games, or to geek culture, and to the social media channel of the Finnish Pensioner’s Federation. A Finnish gaming news portal, V2.fi, also shared a link to the survey. Paper flyers with an address to the survey were distributed to the libraries of Tampere, Jyväskylä, and Helsinki, the university campus areas of Tampere and Jyväskylä, and game-related stores, cafés, and arcades in Tampere. I asked in the survey for consent to participate and for possible publication of the data, and I informed the participants of their rights. I provided the opportunity for them to give contact information, but I did not make it mandatory. According to the guidelines provided by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (Tampere University n.d.), an ethical review was not necessary.

I conducted the interviews remotely from December 2020 to February 2021, and they lasted from thirty to ninety minutes each. I provided the interviewees with information about their data privacy and had them sign a consent

form before the interview. The interviews were transcribed using a professional service and both the survey answers and interview transcripts were analyzed with the qualitative analysis tool Atlas.ti. The analysis method for both the survey and interviews was qualitative thematic analysis (Kuckartz 2014). The analysis was iterative and cyclical, beginning with highlighting important portions and writing memos, and forming the main categories during partial coding of the data, then writing additional memos and coding the rest of the data. The subcategories were formed by partially coding the data and then, after writing memos, coding the rest of the data. Memos are reflective notes the researcher writes during the analysis process (Kuckartz 2014) and in my case were reflections and draft versions of the coding, categories, and subcategories. The categories and subcategories were further refined and renamed after that, continuing the iterative cycle. Some of the memos were constructed as a codebook in the style of Guest, MacQueen, and Namey (2012), and the code book was followed and updated throughout the different cycles. There were 243 survey answers, after excluding duplications and two respondents who had not actually quit or reduced their playing. Figure 1 shows the gender of the survey respondents and the interviewees, and figure 2 shows the age distribution of both groups.

Because a slight majority of the survey respondents were men, I felt it important to give voice to women and nonbinary persons in the interviews, counteracting game research’s tendency to be male oriented. More than half of the survey respondents and interviewees were in their thirties, an age often defined by work, child rearing, and other adult responsibilities. However, it is important to note that this was not the only age group represented and not all of the respondents talked about having children, for example. The interviewees

<i>Gender</i>	<i>Survey N</i>	<i>Survey %</i>	<i>Interview N</i>	<i>Interview %</i>
Woman	94	38,7 %	14	63,6 %
Man	131	53,9 %	6	27,2 %
Other	6	2,5 %	1	4,6 %
Rather not say	12	4,9 %	1	4,6 %

Figure 1. Gender makeup of survey respondents and interviewees



<i>Age</i>	<i>Survey %</i>	<i>Survey N</i>	<i>Interview %</i>	<i>Interview N</i>
60-69	0,41 %	1	4,5 %	1
50-59	3,3 %	8	0 %	0
40-49	20,6 %	50	27,3 %	6
30-39	57,2 %	140	54,6 %	12
20-29	17,7 %	44	13,6 %	3
15-19	0,8 %	2	0 %	0

Figure 2. Age distribution of survey respondents and interviewees

were selected from the participants of the survey who had given their contact information and consent to being interviewed. The selection was made based on gender, age, and the answers given to the questions. The goal of the selection process was to provide a variety of genders and ages among the interviewees. Another goal was to offer a deeper, more comprehensive view of the topics covered in the survey and to explore possible changes to a respondent's status as a player. I compiled a list of potential interviewees to further these goals, along with possible backup names if initial contact proved to be fruitless. In the end, the majority of the interviewees were women, because women responded more often to my interview requests. It may be that women felt a particular need to talk about these issues, and the gender of the interviewer might have played a role, too. Next I detail the results of the survey and interviews. I translated the interview quotes and created a pseudonym for each of the interviewees I quote. The translated quotes from the survey are accompanied by the gender and the age of the respondent.

## Results

### *Reasons for Quitting and Reducing Gaming*

The coding process resulted in six broader categories for quitting or reducing

Main category	Subcategory	Description
Immaterial resources	Dedication	Attention and right frame of mind needed to play
	Effort	Effort needed to play and maintain skills
Material resources	Money	Lack of money to buy games and devices
	Availability of games	Poor availability of desired games
	Devices	Problems with functionality or ownership of devices
Wellbeing	Mental Wellbeing	Mental problems caused by or preventing gaming
	Physical Wellbeing	Physical problems caused by or preventing gaming
Social aspects	Lack of co-players	Lack of people to play with
	Playstyles and priorities	Differences of playstyles or game tastes, prioritizing time with non-players
	Social tensions	Tensions between players or in private life of a player
Responsibilities	Family life and domestic responsibilities	Prioritizing taking care of children or home
	Work and studies	Prioritizing work/studies or the effect those have on gaming
Appeal	Gaming as a hobby	Loss of interest towards gaming in general
	Games and devices	Loss of interest towards a game, game type, genre or device
	Other hobbies	Prioritizing other hobbies

Figure 3. Reasons and subcategories for quitting game play or reducing playing time

gaming: immaterial resources, material resources, well-being, social aspects, responsibilities, and appeal. Each of them has several subcategories, listed in figure 3.

These categories resemble the reasons given for leaving a social networking game *YoWorld* (Bergstrom 2019a), for leaving a massively multiplayer online game *Eve Online* (Bergstrom 2019b), and for quitting online games in China (Jiang 2018). It is interesting that the same kinds of reasons appear whether the game is digital or analog, although the emphasis may vary (the lack of coplayers seems to be more commonly related to analog play, for example). The boundaries between the categories were not clear cut, several of them overlapped, and most

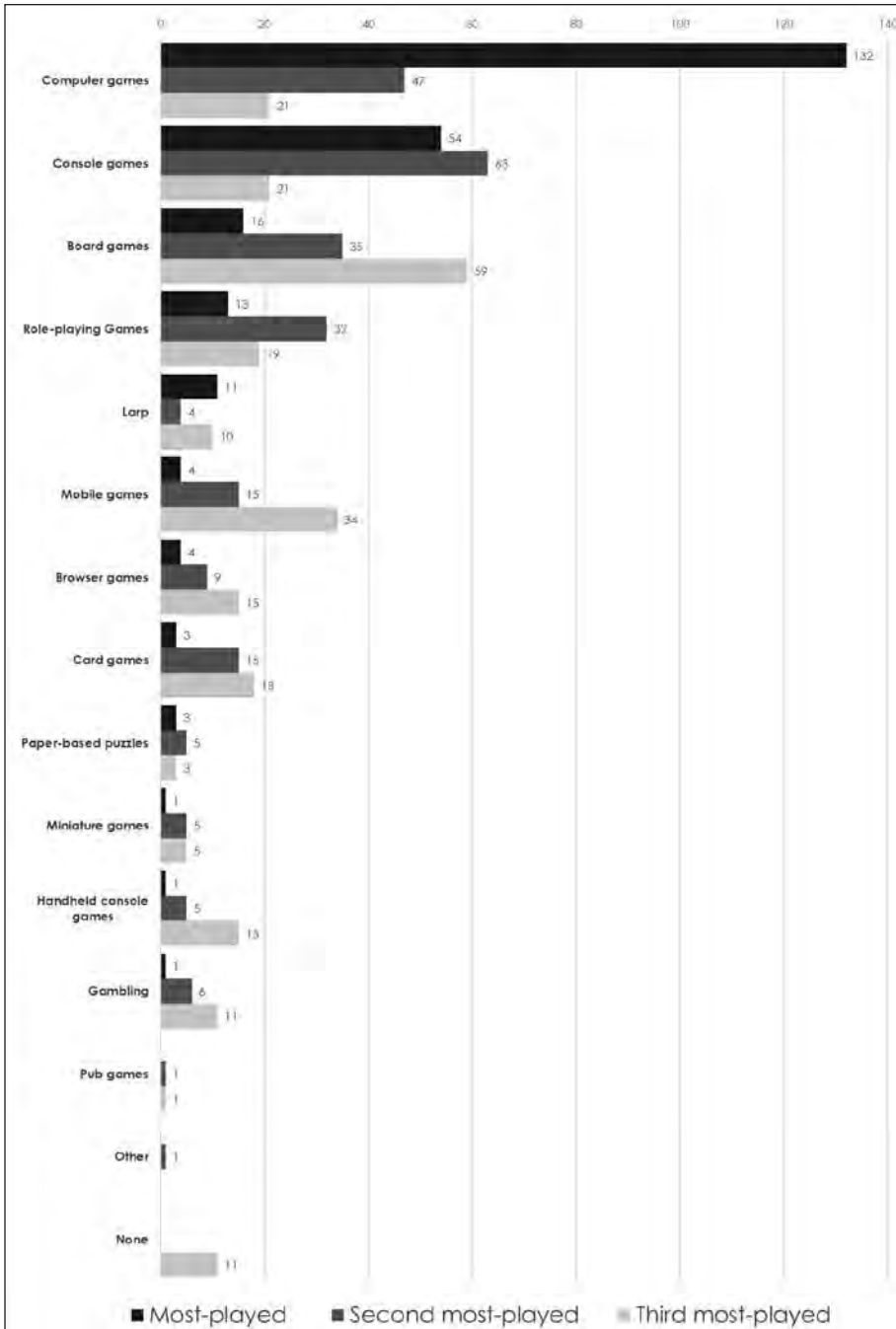


Figure 4. Game varieties played by survey respondents

of the respondents gave several reasons that contributed to their abandoning or reducing their game play—for now, or for good.

When asked what game varieties the respondents had played most frequently, computer games, console games, and board games proved the most popular but all of the varieties listed in the survey were represented.

Game varieties for which players quit or limited their play ranged from one to even ten per person, the most common being two and three types. This shows the multiplicity of gaming: the players had mixed and matched play types indiscriminately in their lives, not necessarily following the digital-analog divide. Another aspect that illustrates the multiplicity of playing games is the intermittency of play discussed in the next subsection.

*Fluctuations of Everyday Play and the Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic*

The number of different types of games has varied a lot. I get easily hooked on doing something entertaining, so I do it in an “intensive period” a great

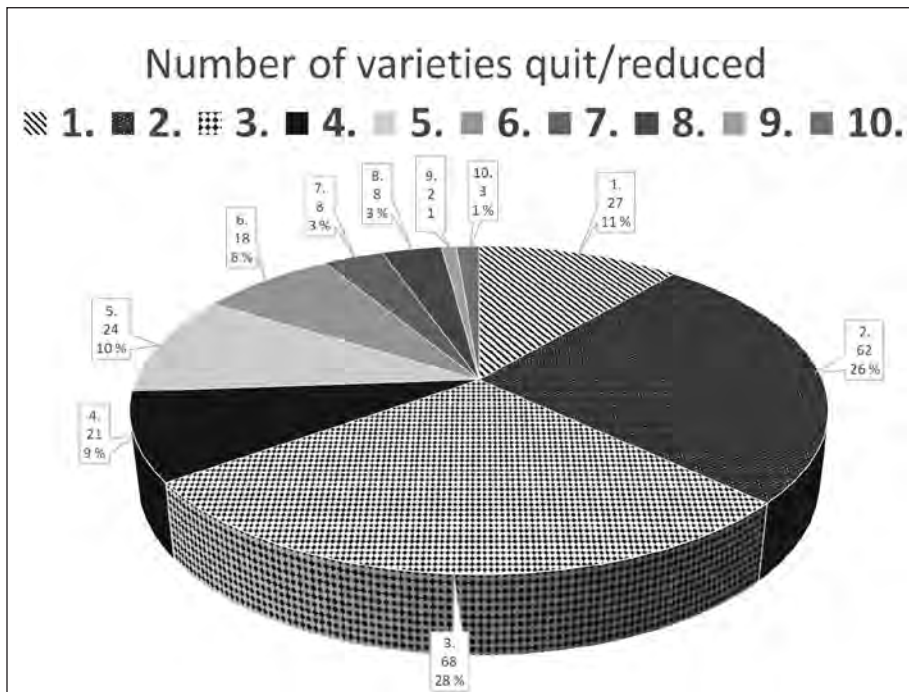


Figure 5. Game varieties survey respondents quit or reduced play

deal, and then I take a long break or quit entirely. From time to time, I take deliberate breaks from gaming because I know I need all my free time for something else.

—Woman respondent, age thirty-six

As Bergstrom (2019b) has discovered, playing games can also be fluid and fluctuating. What was thought a permanent departure, turned out to be just a break; and what was intended to be a short break, might extend and transform into a permanent state. This became evident in the interviews because some of the players found new types of games with which to engage, or they dropped some of the game types they played earlier. Even when this is normally the case, much can change if something more disruptive to society happens.

At the time of the interviews, the COVID-19 pandemic raged, and it affected the playing of the interviewees in various ways. Face-to-face engagement in role-playing games, larps, and board games decreased, as did spontaneous play sessions with others and digital playing during commutes. A few gamers found more time to play, and for some the pandemic did not affect their playing whatsoever. Digital tools that enable remote analog playing became popular during the pandemic, and most of my interviewees tried at least a few times to play analog or digital games remotely with their friends. They mentioned platforms such as Board Game Arena, Tabletop Simulator, Roll20, Zoom, and Discord and used them to play board games or tabletop role-playing games remotely. A few interviewees said their role-playing sessions became more frequent because it was easier to gather the group online. And one praised the automation in Board Game Arena.

On the other hand, technical issues were bountiful, board-game collection was limited on these remote services, and dice rolls could not be checked to prevent cheating. Although a few interviewees began to play remote role-playing games regularly, some spurned remote play for its lack of the social connection present when players gathered in the same physical space. Both the positive and negative aspects of digital analog play that they mentioned resembled examples found in Meriläinen (2022) and Scriven (2021).

The fluctuating nature of everyday play seems to resist clear boundaries and binaries. Some who reportedly stopped playing altogether and confirmed it at the beginning of the interview actually still played occasionally. These occasions were usually a result of others, such as children, needing help in a difficult game or needing a coplayer, of co-workers inviting them to a game, or of workplace Christmas parties. This contradiction might be explained by the word choice of

the question: “Have you quit your gaming hobby?” These kinds of more casual play sessions might not come to mind immediately when thinking about playing as a hobby. There seems to be a clear division between playing as a hobby and just playing. Hobby as a word was not defined in the survey, but the responses seem to indicate that playing as a hobby means playing regularly, as a result of an individual’s own instigation and playing certain types of games.

Bergstrom and Sherman (2021) encountered similar answers: some former players still played mobile games or computer games as part of their current leisure habits despite reporting earlier that they had not played at all. Likewise, in an article about the life cycle of digital gaming among Finns, Nevala (2017) reported that one interviewee denied gaming having any importance in her adulthood, but she still played casual games in the evening for relaxation. These types of answers might be connected to the individual’s player identity and to misconceptions about certain kinds of games because some responses included value-laden expressions about “real games.” I examine these attitudes next.

### **Attitudes Towards Casual Digital Games and Future Playing Prospects**

According to my survey, most of the players had reduced or quit playing several types of games, and most of them still reported playing some games. When asked about changes in their play, many reported now playing only digital casual games, mobile games, free-to-play games, or digital games casually in short bursts. Some of the players seemed content with this, but others appeared clearly unhappy about the situation. For these unhappy players, mobile casual games proved a means of passing time or of filling the need to play when other games were not possible.

They described mobile games as “clicking games,” “brainless,” and “surrogate.” They showed their preference for longer games when they were asked if they wanted to play more and why. Some players felt they were missing out on new digital games, such as narrative computer games, action adventures, and “milestone games” (for example *Red Dead Redemption 2*). Others missed immersion, and some even evidenced a nostalgic longing for the times when they could immerse themselves in games without interruptions.

Three groups could be identified: those who would have liked to play more and were not satisfied with their situation; those who wanted to play more but

with a caveat (for example, if they had more time); and those who were content with their situation and did not feel the need to play more or at all. If the thresholds of playing could be lowered, two of these three groups might be able to play more.

From the point of view of sales, retaining these players could be valuable to game publishers. What is more, understanding the myriad reasons behind abandoning games might help game designers tackle these thresholds, leading to the development of games designed for a broader consumer base. This in turn might help keep the game culture diverse in terms of age, gender, and play style. One type of threshold involves the demands games make on their players, and the latter part of my description of the results concentrates on these. The categories I examined related to such demands are: dedication, effort, and appeal.

## **Demands of Games and Play**

### *Dedication: Time*

Especially these huge fantasy worlds where you can play the plot, or you can stay in that world doing nice things practically forever started to feel somehow distressing. Not that you have the freedom of choice, and you can do what you want there, but if you get stuck in there yourself and then you just hang around there, it feels like something that just doesn't fit in my life.  
—Titta, age thirty-eight

The time-consuming nature of games came up several times in the survey responses. Respondents mentioned long role-playing game campaigns requiring commitment from everyone involved, larps requiring free weekends and time for preparation, and certain types of digital or board games being long and massive. Some participants felt that they needed to have at least a couple of hours of uninterrupted playtime to achieve immersion and that starting up a console or a computer for a mere half-hour session felt pointless.

On the other hand, several interviewees expressed apprehension about investing their time in certain types of activities that lead to their losing time or losing the sense of time such as raiding in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG's), in immersing themselves for months on end, or in joining international servers of text-based role playing that included action twenty-four hours a day. (Raiding means joining forces with other players to

defeat a powerful foe or groups of foes in a game.)

For some respondents, gaming felt like a waste of time, and they preferred doing something more productive. These feelings of wasted time seemed to be connected to what the player expected from the game or what the game expected from the player (such as dedication and effort). These sentiments might also be connected to the ideas of the appropriateness of games as a hobby for adults and of the productivity demands of modern society, but these hypotheses would need to be explored further.

*Dedication: Concentration*

But it feels somehow really hard that I should start the game, start playing it, pay attention to the plot and continue playing when I know that I might have to have a break. That I can’t play, and I will forget the plot and then it is troublesome to remember where the plot was going and from where I am continuing.

—Alina, age twenty-three

Some respondents mentioned that they found it difficult to concentrate on playing. This inability to concentrate seemed connected to long breaks between play sessions, taxing workdays or school days, game properties such as quests and intensive plots, long games, and progressing through a game in general. The physical and mental strain of working and studying seemed to be closely entwined with the effort and dedication games demand from players.

Massive story-based digital games such as *Red Dead Redemption 2* and the *Witcher* series came up in a few answers as games that are long awaited but turned out to be too difficult to complete. The problem might also be connected to the game design of such titles. They are narrative driven action, role-playing games that take tens to hundreds of hours to complete and have numerous side quests. Both also apply “slow game time,” *Red Dead Redemption 2* especially. Slow game time is presented as the counter to “hegemonic game time,” which gives players control and emphasizes efficiency and meritocratic mastering of the game, as described by Vanderhoef and Payne (2022).

Accordingly, slow meandering travel, unrushed unraveling of the story, and sedate chores run counter to the capitalistic ethos of performing efficiently and avoiding wasting time. Although some respondents decided to put effort into the quality of their gaming experience and concentrated on single player action adventures, others felt it impossible to do so in their current life circumstances.



Paradoxically, it seems that games that avoid the hegemonic game time of speedy achievement might still emphasize the hegemony of play by prioritizing players who have the opportunity to make time and space in their lives for it.

### *Effort: Preplay*

I think it is great that the larp scene went in that direction, that it is bigger and more professional, but as a player who is an entrepreneur, I just can't commit to that level anymore. When the organizers put so much effort into it, building huge worlds and creating the game for years, I don't want to spoil their work. If they would give me an important character and I haven't internalized the character information, had time for that workshop or pregame, or I am within an inch of dropping out, I don't think it is respectful for those that have created the game for years.

—Jessika, age thirty-eight

Certain types of games required effort even before the actual play session. Larps came up several times in the responses because they require the player to learn the materials beforehand and, in most cases, to make or purchase the weapons, props, and clothes. Often games even have workshops and pregames either in person or online before the actual larp starts. It is important to note that the larp tradition the respondents are talking about is Nordic larp, which focuses on joint storytelling, light rules, and atmosphere (Nordic Larp, n.d.). Cazeneuve (2020) remarked that participating in the Nordic larp community demands much special knowledge. Preparations, special knowledge, and rules make larping not unlike labor (Torner 2020), and even in game the players might need to perform several types of labor-like activities (Jones, Koulu, and Torner 2016). In addition, larp-related stress can be taxing for players. Korhonen, Nykänen, and Partanen (2020) found that a factor in larp-related stress was a feeling of failure, meaning a player's own feelings about not performing as expected. Although these examples show that larps place several types of demands on players and that these demands can be challenging to meet if the player has other, equally or even more demanding responsibilities in their real lives.

### *Effort: Learning and Maintaining Skills*

In the end, it was so laborious that my playing ended up consisting of buying *White Dwarf* magazines and reading battle reports and looking at pictures of nicely painted figures, because I felt that my figures were so ugly that I didn't

like them and did not have the energy to keep painting them. My miniature hobby started small and lasted a short time, and then it fell by the wayside; but I still like the *Warhammer* world a lot but if you would be serious about it, it costs a lot of money.

—Ella, age thirty-six

Playing games either by oneself or with others also requires an effort to learn the skills to play and an effort to maintain achieved skills. As Meriläinen, Stenros, and Heljakka (2020) noticed, there are two practices at the heart of the miniature war game hobby: playing and crafting. The researchers found that in addition to this dual core, the hobby includes collecting the miniatures, displaying and appreciating miniatures, and socializing with other players. While for the hobbyists the dual core can be a source of enjoyment, for new players like Ella, the demand of crafting skills can be too taxing.

Other examples of overly laborious activities from the survey included massive and complex board games with intricate rules, finding ways to progress in digital games when stuck, reacting to situations as one’s character in larps instead of just rolling the dice, and digital games with complicated combinations of controls.

According to Christopher Paul (2018), digital games are mostly based on skills and labor, and games reward players who have the opportunities to hone their skills and devote their time to such labor. Although Paul talks only about video games, it seems to be not so different with board games. Intricate rules and skilled tactics are at the core of massive board games. The cognitive load of learning the rules in board games has been recognized in other research (Sato and de Haan 2016; Booth 2021), and although this load is mitigated by players and YouTube celebrities who frequently make how-to-play videos in which they explain and showcase the rules, official rule videos by the designers are not offered as a default (Rogerson, Sparror, and Gibbs 2021). Long and complex rule sets can be a barrier for some players, so offering alternative ways to adopt the knowledge could be beneficial.

### *Appeal: Expected Player*

Maybe in a way it has alienated me from gaming because now, for example, the main character is usually a big guy with a crew cut and a stubble that might even be some kid’s dad at best. So, it is in a way evident what the

target audience is, and it isn't me, and I am not particularly interested in the adventures of that guy and the child necessarily.  
—Ella, age thirty-six

As time went by, some games and game types lost their appeal in the eyes of the respondents. Games they had tried became unrewarding, uninteresting, or not playful enough to continue playing. This seemed often connected to preference, but sometimes the loss of interest appeared more related to the implicit expectations of the kind of player engaging with the game—if, for example, a player was expected to be interested in an older man protagonist or in competitive gameplay.

A few survey responses touched on the topic of meritocracy in games: the competitiveness of miniature gaming, superficial storytelling in digital games, and the emphasis on the competition instead of exploration in location-based digital games. In addition, two interviews touched upon the hegemony of games as a reason to abandon playing, such as the sexism of crossword puzzles or—as we have seen—the prevalence of male characters in digital games.

Ella's thoughts about game characters illustrate the trends in character design in digital games. Williams and his associates (Williams et al. 2009) studied the top selling console and PC games in the United States in 2005 and early 2006 and found that 90 percent of the main characters were male. Harrison and her colleagues (Harrison et al. 2020) repeated the census with the United Kingdom's top selling one hundred digital games of 2017, and there was only a 1 percent increase in the playable female characters. It seems the expected player for digital games remains still a man who loves to compete and test his skills. As I discussed earlier, this expectation is not limited to the digital realm. However, diversity continues to be a key issue to consider, unless game developers want simply to turn away players identifying as nonmale and noncompetitive.

## Discussion

Tan, Yeh, and Chen (2017) have shown that several factors influence the response of a player who confronts a barrier to participation. However, constraints and failed negotiation processes are not necessarily negative forces in an individual's life. According to Kleiber and colleagues (Kleiber et al. 2008), ceasing participation can result in negative emotions such as disappointment or frustration but not always. Limiting or ceasing participation can start the adaptation process,

which has three different benefits: players can devote their time to other goals in their lives; adaptation can lead to personal growth or new discoveries; and players can see the possibilities life has to offer in a new light.

In addition, players can choose to pose constraints on themselves for goal attainment. Goal attainment was evident in my data because some respondents had paused their gaming for the sake of a large study project and others had chosen to prioritize different hobbies or time spent with their loved ones. For those who felt that their physical or mental health suffered because of games, quitting seemed to be the right response. In addition, some of the respondents proved content with their situation and did not feel the need to play as much as they once did or even not to play at all.

However, quitting becomes a problem when players would like to continue their hobby but are pushed out or excluded from the game cultures in which they participated, such as in the case of a game design that favors only certain types of play styles or players. By using demands as a lens, it is possible to identify some of the structures in games that influence players detrimentally. Even though the reasons for quitting mapped out in this study are consistent with previous research, the use of this lens illustrates thresholds that can be affected, for example, by the design of services. Retaining diverse players and inviting back “lapsed players” through accessible game design could have a positive impact on both the financial profitability of games and the diversity of game culture.

One way to lower the thresholds could be to provide better service for players than currently available. Stenros and Sotamaa (2009) have outlined a player service model with five service categories that games and other playful activities offer, both in digital and physical venues: maintenance of environment, support of initiation, facilitation of playing, assistance of play, and the socialization of players. Using the player service model, I suggest some possible solutions. Next, I use two examples of the player service model to discuss the possibilities of providing better assistance to play.

### *Providing Better Service*

According to Stenros and Sotamaa (2009), assistance of play includes possibilities to customize play—for example, with the aid of difficulty settings and game-specific, walk-through guides both online and offline. At the moment, the digital game design of popular narrative AAA games—games developed with large budgets for production and marketing—seems to be invested in providing huge worlds to explore and a wealth of content to consume. While these games

appeal to players, their demands can be too high for busy adults. Even though shorter and more accessible games are available in the form of indie games, free-to-play games, and mobile games, the attitudes and preferences of a subset of former players seem to skew toward these bigger experiences.

My survey respondents and interviewees talked about wanting to play but not having the mental energy or time to do so. For example, Alina mentioned that concentrating on a complex game was difficult when she knew a break would soon come. Designing AAA games spearheaded by the ease of use and accessibility might help adults with busy lives to retain their play hobby. Although most digital games have at least some kind of difficulty settings, and accessibility settings have become more frequent in the past few years, a lot of work still needs to be done. Instead of providing the basic easy, normal, or hard choices for difficulty, games such as *The Last of Us 2* offer more than sixty accessibility options (Leite and Almeida 2021), should serve as a starting point for how to approach accessibility. In addition to customizable accessibility and difficulty options, features that offer easy onboarding to the game and mitigate the effect of long breaks would be needed. Kultima and Stenros (2010) proposed an expanded game experience model that includes three stages even before the act of play itself: information retrieval that happens before choosing to play, enabling that precedes choosing a game, and preparations preceding choosing to start. Taking these stages into account while designing and marketing AAA games could help players find what they are looking for and ease the chore of starting.

According to Stenros and Sotamaa (2009) supporting initiation means helping players choose playing as an activity and choose a particular game. It also means “providing physical and mental accessibility to games” (6), but they give no examples of this. In my survey, larps were described more frequently than board games as too laborious, especially when it came to the preparations required. The survey response I include at the beginning of this article talks about feelings of failure when not meeting these expectations, as Jessika’s interview reveals. Even though the Nordic larp scene is committed to offering high-end experiences, there exists a danger in making the games inaccessible to players who do not have the resources to commit but would still like to play. Svanevik and Koljonen (2019) briefly discuss this exclusion, along with such pitfalls as uneven participation in preplay, but the article does not offer solutions to these problems. One option might be to increase the possibilities for support of initiation that highlight the physical and mental accessibility of games.

In the context of larps, this could mean offering costumes, as well as offer-

ing more larps that do not require much preparation. Although shorter larps are part of the Nordic larp scene, it seems that weekend-long, laborious experiences are the norm. Kannasvuo, Kevätkoski, and Leppä (2021) talk about the “slow larp,” which is subtle in its style of play, its setting, and its design. They recommend settings be robust and mundane and activities emergent and offering opportunities for immersion and pondering. Because they also recommended a long, continuous playing time (or a preplay and workshops if time is short), theirs is not a perfect solution to this problem, but it might work for some.

Digital analog play could also be one possible solution, again at least for some players. Remote larps became more common during the pandemic, and the online magazine *Nordic Larp* published several articles about designing and playing online larps (Nordic Larp, n.d.). In *Valha11a*, an online science fiction-themed larp played via Zoom, the technical issues with the remote connections were integrated successfully as part of the game world (Rose Villarreal, Poynton, and Martineau 2021). While migrating the games to the digital world can offer accessibility in the form of available coplayers and automated features both in larps and tabletop role-playing games, the solution is not perfect for everyone. Stable internet connection, hardware, and software are the minimum requirements, and not everybody can afford them. In addition, players can have digital fatigue due to remote work (Meriläinen 2022). Many people in my survey mentioned that they just did not want to sit in front of their computer in their leisure time after work, and this was even before the pandemic. Digital analog games can widen the possibilities available for players, but they are not right for all of the players who feel larps to be too demanding for them.

The two examples I have discussed show how the player service model can be used as a tool for thinking about game design from the point of view of mitigating the demands on players. But it is worth noting that the player services have continued to develop since the model was first introduced and that an update on the model would be beneficial.

## Conclusions

I posed two research questions at the beginning of this article: What reasons lead players to abandon or reduce their game play? And what kind of thresholds these reasons reveal when looked at through the lens of the demands made by games and play? I offered six categories of reasons players abandon or reduce their

gaming: immaterial resources, material resources, well-being, social aspects, responsibilities, and appeal. When looking at the categories through the lens of demands of game and play, I established that the effort and the dedication the games demanded from players can form unsurmountable thresholds for players who have plenty of responsibilities and not enough time or resources to invest in their play. In addition, an emphasis on meritocracy and hegemony of play can drive away some players. By examining the services games offer in the light of the thresholds, we can identify possibilities for lowering the thresholds. Using a player service model as a tool together with the expanded game-experience model can help designers address the needs of lapsed players. As long as the structural barriers are left for the individual player to overcome, games are not accessible enough to everyone. Playing as a regular pastime is prone to disruptions caused by everyday responsibilities and other activities, but the pull of the games remains strong. The fluctuations in the amount of play and play types of the respondents suggest that if barriers are removed and thresholds lowered, lapsed players might still come back to their hobby, in one way or another. As the data shows, the players who quit or reduced their playing had been very active players who played many types of games. They are women, men, nonbinary individuals, parents, and adults with demanding jobs and studies. Keeping these players away from games by game design that prioritizes young men with plenty of time on their hands will eventually lead to the impoverishment of game culture. This must change.

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