

## Coming out of the Gaming Closet:

### *Engaged Cultural Analysis and the Life-Line as Interview Method and Consciousness-Raiser*

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#### Abstract

*This article accounts for and problematizes the process and development with the research tool and method, “the Life-Line”, which we used in our project Gaming Moms. Juggling Time, Play and Everyday Life (Enevold & Hagström 2008a) to involve our informants in the production, outcome and consumption of research beyond merely being respondents to interview-questions. We propose to call the collaborative ethnography which resulted from this work “engaged cultural analysis”. The Life-Line was one out of several methods employed in the study, conducted between 2008 and 2012. It combined Feminist Cultural Analysis with Scandinavian Ethnology and Game Studies to study how gaming restructured human lives and roles, and how roles and lives were restructured according to gaming, in everyday family life. We show here, how we used the Life-Line to reconstruct the “gaming lives” of a selection of informants, to illustrate the interweaving of gaming mothers’ everyday work, play, and family life. We focused on the everyday digital playing practices of adult female gamers, because digital gaming is traditionally a highly-gendered leisure practice, dominated by male-identified gamers. By studying non-traditional gamers, “gaming moms”, the project aimed to nuance the common stereotype of the young male gamer in his bedroom and the stereotyped (non-gaming, often policing) mother, and take a measure of gender equality as regards play, work and time, in everyday life. This article, however, focuses on one of the methods used – the Life-Line. While we discuss the difficulties encountered and the remedial modifications made to our method, we also explain how this process was integral to the female players, who came out of the gaming closet to collaborate with us, realizing that they too are gamers. This newfound awareness was a significant goal of the project, and essential for the research to be engaged, an engaged cultural analysis; it enabled us to participate in creating a more equal game-cultural landscape accessible to players of all ages and genders.*

*Keywords:* Engaged cultural analysis, Life-Line, interviews, game studies, ethnology, collaborative ethnography, mothers, gaming moms

#### Introduction

This article is based on interviews performed in the project *Gaming Moms. Juggling Time, Play and Everyday Life* (Enevold & Hagström 2008a), in which we combined our disciplinary backgrounds in Feminist Cultural Studies and Scandinavian Ethnology to deal with Game Studies. The project was conducted as a

cultural analysis focused on adult women's everyday playing practices, specifically digital games. It aimed at nuancing the stereotype of the gamer, traditionally a male adolescent, and take a measure of gender equality in terms of who gets to spend time on what in families (Enevold & Hagström 2008b, 2009, Enevold 2014, Hagström 2013). Since women and girls traditionally have been viewed, and view themselves, as non-gamers, a stated research goal was consciousness-raising and empowerment of adult female gamers. This article describes in detail how we developed the research tool the Life-Line method, which was collected from Sociologist Karen Davie's studies of the inter-dependence of women, time and work life (1990; 1996). We have capitalized Life-Line to specify that we have developed this method further. We wanted to use the Life-Line in order to understand the interrelations of time, play, and women's everyday lives, and to get a visual overview of our informants' gaming lives. Our methodological development became both a new research tool *and* a research result. It led both researchers and informants to new discoveries about gamer identities; most importantly, it led to a realization among the informants that they too were gamers.

In this article, we have coined the term "engaged cultural analysis" to emphasize that ours is not yet another cultural analytical investigation *of* a phenomenon, but an engagement *with* one. We add this qualification to our feminist focus, because in our view, naming a study "feminist" does not automatically mean it is "engaged", that is, it does not necessarily contribute to, or reach the participants during or after the project. Nor does a feminist study always require collaboration from its informants in any other way than their answering of questions. We return to the concept of "engaged" below where we situate our study as related to feminist action research and again towards the end of the article, engaged and public anthropology.

### **Equality, Gender and Gaming**

The research project combined ethnology (ethnographic methods and the everyday perspective) with game studies (concepts and content from game-specific research) and feminist cultural studies (impetus to reveal and remove inequality, language and representation). It was guided by a cultural analytical perspective, focusing on practices and power relations, as we investigated the everyday gaming of mothers particularly in relation to time and leisure management in family life. As mentioned, looking at the gendered practices of gameplay, the ultimate aim of the research project was to take measure of gender equality in everyday life and if possible, highlight inequalities and nuance gamer stereotypes. We wanted to study how gaming restructured human lives and roles, and how roles and lives were restructured according to gaming, in everyday family life.

The project, which was initiated in 2008 and concluded in 2012, included roughly 80 informants who were all gaming mothers. An explicit goal was to investigate an aspect of the considerably gendered practice of *gaming*, a phenomenon with major economic and socio-cultural impact. An important aim was to look beyond gamer stereotypes, at non-traditional gamers. Back when we first started, little research had been done on female gamers or families and gaming; most concerned girls (Cassell

& Jenkins 1998; Schott & Horrell 2000, Jenson & de Castell 2008) or women under 25 (Kerr 2003). Since then, new research has emerged (e.g. Thornham 2011, Eklund 2012, Quandt & Kröger 2014, Boudreau & Consalvo 2014, Shaw 2014), but research on adult women was at the time very sparse (see e.g. Royse et al. 2007; Thornham 2008,) and there was none centering on mothers. We chose to focus on mothers because they were culturally, socially and symbolically situated as “traditional” figures and, in popular culture, perceived as *non-gamers* (Enevold & Hagström 2008b).

Nevertheless, there were indications when the project was launched that the player demographic was considerably more diverse in age and gender than was evident in the media. For example, a study made by the *Pew Internet & American Life Project* showed that 99% of boys and 94% of girls play video games (Lenhart et al. 2008). *Svenskarna och internet 2008* (Findahl 2008), a yearly report produced by World Internet Institute in collaboration with .SE [foundation for internet infrastructure], reported that 30% of the Swedish population play online games; 40% were men and 34% were women. However, in the player segment aged 45 and over women outnumbered men (Findahl 2008, 35-36). These numbers did not seem to be reflected in media where the young male player still dominated the scene as the “normal” gamer. Other gamers tended to either disappear from public discourse, appear as anomalies (Enevold & Hagström 2008b, 2009), or present as averse to gaming in general.

At the beginning of the project in 2008, and during the gradual mainstreaming of gaming over the next few years (Enevold 2014), the advent of Wii consoles, the Nintendo DS, several musical games (to name a few important game developments), appeared to change the cultural landscape of gaming and make it more heterogeneous, in terms of age and gender. But the media image of the male gamer as norm still seemed to prevail. In 2011, three years into the project, a striking example of the representation of the mother as a non-player averse to gaming, was found in the promotional campaign launching *Dead Space 2*, a game characterized as a science fiction survival horror video game (Electronic Arts 2011a). Short videos of middle-aged women horrified by scenes from the game were published on YouTube and Electronic Arts’ website and with the words “Critics love it but your mom will hate *Dead Space 2*. See real moms’ reactions to watching clips to the upcoming game” (Electronic Arts 2011b).

Another three years down the road and the gaming landscape still appeared in need of role models and rights for female players to be represented and to be active agents in game culture. The outrage in 2014 against Anita Sarkeesian, a feminist media critic and blogger, and her Kickstarter project to fund a series of videos about female stereotypes and misogyny in videogames (Kickstarter 2012), demonstrated that much remained to be done in order to make game culture a more equally accessible domain. If that was not enough, the ensuing #gamergate and renewed harassment campaign, including rape and death threats, against Sarkeesian and other females in the game industry (Rawlinson & Kelion 2014, Frank 2014) was convincing evidence that more gender equality was, and still is, needed. In light of the invisibility of women, on the one hand, and the chastising of women in game cultures, on the other, we have always felt that it was imperative that our project be an *engaged* cultural analysis into game

culture, to serve the greater goal of creating a more equal gaming landscape in practice and in contemporary popular culture. Our study was also marked as feminist, because of its focus; it was necessary to do more research on the relation specifically between games and gender. Moreover, as Dána-Ain Davis and Christa Craven assert, it is critical that feminist ethnographers “in the wake of neoliberalism, where human rights and social justice have increasingly been subordinated to proliferating ‘consumer choices’ and ideals of market justice, reassert the central feminist connections among theory, method and practice” (Davis & Craven, 2011, 190).

### **Feminist Methodology, Game Studies and the Life-Line**

As a project with a declared feminist focus, contributing to equality work, the choices of method needed to reflect this intention. A feminist methodology, as Colleen Reid points out, commonly “include focusing on gender and inequality and using qualitative methods to analyze women’s experience” (Reid 2004, 4). Referring to Francesca Cancian (1992), Reid also comments on how “few studies [however] adopt the more radical methods of including an action component” (Reid 2004, 4). Action research is a “family of related approaches that integrate theory and action with a goal of addressing important organizational, community, and social issues together with those who experience them” (Reid & Gilberg, 2014). We incorporated an element of action research in our project as we translated this as increasing in practice the engagement among, and raising the consciousness of, our informants. To address this goal methodologically, we decided to organize so called “Pizza parties”, that is, focus groups inspired by Sherry Turkle’s research into digital cultures (1995), to create a forum for exchange between female gamers.

The project mixed several different methods and, as Jennifer Greene states, this can be done to allow for the “mind-set” of several research traditions to enrich the approach and interpretations (2007). Method development was also declared a central tenet in the initial project plan. The project’s ambition to use a “multi-method approach and the significance of self-reflexive ethnography are described further in the article, “Mothers, Play and Everyday Life. Ethnology Meets Game Studies” (Enevold & Hagström, 2009). Methods listed were interviews; blog feedback; participant observation in two forms: a) observation during play and b) playing together with informants, in game-studies terms called “a gaming interview” (Schott and Horrell 2000); self-documentation in the form of a written or filmed diary; discourse analysis of on-line forums, news media and game magazines. In addition, the need for so called playing research (Aarseth 2003) was emphasized for us to be able to more closely know the games the informants played and talked about, the different genres and hardware requirements. In the end, some of the above-listed methods were excluded while others were added, for example an online questionnaire. We also developed the “Life-Line interview method”, which proved to be significant to fulfill the goal of consciousness-raising and including an element of action research. In what follows, we discuss the introduction, development and modification of this method.

Before we go on, we want to contextualize our choice of a multi-method approach

briefly and offer a short explanation of the situatedness of game studies in relation to methods. Whereas qualitative work is taken for granted in ethnology, folklore studies and anthropology, it has been more of a novelty in the young field of game studies. Games as a research topic is challenging, as its field is inherently multidisciplinary (in the sense that many disciplines take on games) and interdisciplinary, as researchers often combine strands from various disciplines, such as computer science and media studies, in order to understand games. The field is also continuously changing and growing. As a developing area similar to internet studies, it is always in need of, and should call for, theoretical and methodological self-reflection and revision (see e.g. Williams 2005; Markham & Baym 2009). Digital ethnography, for example, becomes a particularly relevant method as socio-cultural worlds and interactions become increasingly digitalized (Hine 2000, Markham 2013, Pink 2015). The past decade's increased focus on players in game studies and online worlds has nevertheless brought ethnography to the heart of its expanding research field (Boellstorff 2006; Taylor 2006, 2012; Lammes 2007; Thornham 2011; Stenberg 2011; Eklund 2012; Hjorth and Richardson 2014, Shaw 2014), but only recently have methods been made a prioritized topic of its workshops, special journal editions, and books (Copier & Taylor 2008; De Paoli & Teli 2011; Boellstorff et al. 2012; Lankoski & Björk 2015). To contribute to the methodological development of the field, we firmly anchored the study to a variety of methods and research practices based in ethnology and ethnography. A significant method in our strategy for collecting empirical data was interviewing. Among ourselves we have worked a lot with interviews, in our own as well as other researchers' projects – from designing schemes for semi-directive interviews, carrying them out, to transcribing, and analyzing them. In ethnology, folklore studies and anthropology, life-historical studies have a long tradition (see e.g. Marander-Eklund & Östman 2011; Tigerstedt 1992; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1989; Crapanzano 1984). But, as far as we know, such studies are seldom or never combined with a Life-Line tool. By adding our Life-Line method to life-historical interviewing, the interactive component was enhanced, as it required active cognitive and physical participation of the interviewed participant.

### **Modifying the Life-Line Method**

The Life-Line method that we added and which we modified according to the needs of our own study, was originally collected from Swedish<sup>1</sup> sociologist Karen Davies' studies. The life-line (as described by Davies and thus not capitalized here), is a feminist approach, a method to “adequately capture women's lives” (1996, 579). Together with Johanna Esseveld, Davies used the life-line in studies of women's unemployment to find, visualize, and explain how work and family practices were tied together over time (Davies & Esseveld, 1989). In everyday family life, time management and use are essential. At best, the life-line method visualizes the inter-connectedness of the juggling of everyday activities with women's social positions and the different phases in their life cycle. Davies and Esseveld showed that the reason why many women are less successful on the labor market or work half-time is gendered; it is conditioned by their role as primary caregivers. Other social research shows the life-line used

as a tool to describe and analyze women's lives as complex interlinking processes (Bjerén & Elgqvist-Saltzman 1994; Nilsen 1992). The life-line approach does not only occur in sociological research, but it also builds on a long tradition of working with biographical trajectories. It appears in a variety of disciplines under different names (Bjerén 1994), for example the ethnological and folkloristic fields—mainly as life-histories. Similar terms for showing processual and interlinking patterns include “the time-space trajectory” (Hägerstrand 1963), “the life history calendar” (Freedman et al. 1988), “life course” (Porter 1991; Brannen & Nilsen 2011), or “life-story,” which Patrick Hiller (2011) uses in combination with “multi-layered chronologies.” Other ways of extracting life-stories are that of Johanna Uotinen (2010), who uses herself and autoethnography to study technology-related gendered everyday practices, and Felicity Henwood, Helen Kennedy and Nod Miller (2001), who collected women's autobiographical accounts of their everyday encounters with technology to show how these intersected with for example gender, class, ethnicity and generation.

We decided to try out the life-line method as practiced by Davies and Esseveld (Davies 1990; 1996, Davies & Esseveld 1985; 1989) to be able to contextualize computer-game playing mothers' life-long experience in terms of teasing out and constructing what we call their *gaming lives*, as Davies and Esseveld employed a similar emphasis on gender and time use in their studies. It seemed adequate for charting the interweaving of women's gaming habits, choice of games and everyday life situations.

Studying gaming entails problematizing not only space but also time because *gaming takes time* and competes with other daily activities (Enevold 2014, Hagström 2013). Balancing work, play, and family life involves managing time. People and activities compete over time. Davies (1996) concluded that women tend to work in gender-specific ways that involve multi-tasking and responsibilities that are not always measurable. The Life-Line is a tool intended for visualizing this interweaving of activities. As Davies wanted to show, typical women's “duties,” such as nurturing and caregiving, do not start and stop at certain times; they overlap with other activities. This pattern of multi-tasking was found in everyday life both on a daily basis and over an extended period of time (Davies 1996). As researchers, it is important not to assume that differences in experiencing and using time always are gendered; however, our research (and that of Davies and Esseveld) showed that it was necessary to think of the juggling of everyday activities in terms of gender-specific time management, in order to understand the mechanics and interdependence of time and gender practices in everyday family life (Enevold 2014; Hagström 2013).

In the *Gaming Mom* project (2008), as we indicated before, we studied gaming mothers' everyday lives, and we were particularly interested in domestic environmental factors defining the gaming mother and her playing practices. We chose to do semi-structured face-to-face interviews in the informant's home. We completed 16 face-to-face interviews and 12 email interviews with mothers aged 22-59, who gamed on a regular basis, in households of varying composition. To begin with, a set of questions was designed to obtain the most basic information: *Who are they? What do they play? Where, when, and how do they play? When do they find time; how much do they play?*

*What, if any, conflicts arise, and how are they solved?* In addition to capturing a long-term perspective, the aim was to illuminate how different significant events in the informants' lives were intertwined. We were interested in how technology influenced the choice of playing habits, how changes in the organization of domestic life, for example childbirths and marriage, and in work situations influenced leisure practices and labor division in the family.

The interviews were meant to capture how time was managed in the family in relation to the women's game-playing practices, both here and now and throughout their life, in other words, reconstructing their gaming lives. We imagined that the informants' stories of specific events would provide enough information for us to be able to construct a Life-Line with relative ease if supplemented with clarifying questions from the interviewer about when they took place; for instance, when they acquired their first computer, or which games they played after having children. We envisioned the family constellation and situation appearing clearly and in detail from this process. But this proved much more complicated than anticipated.

### **Cecilia's Life-Line**

The first game playing mother, whose Life-Line was to be drawn up, was Cecilia. She was a 46-year-old mother of two who told us that she used to be an avid player "but no longer played as much". Hers was one of three interviews that were carried out as a pilot study several months before we received funding for the *Gaming Moms* research project. This meant there was neither time nor resources enough to transcribe the interviews or chart life-lines based on the interviews right after they were performed. Sitting down with the transcriptions after more than a year, it was obvious that constructing a Life-Line based only on the text was not possible. Nor did it seem appropriate to revisit Cecilia who had not been prepared for our returning to her for follow-up questions or complementary information, the way later informants were. To go back after a long time-period is not without complications; a life-history interview involves elaborate preparation, execution, and processing, and for practical as well as emotional reasons it cannot be extended indefinitely over time. Since we had not prepared her for it, to go back and ask Cecilia to account for when she bought her Nintendo 64 and specify which year she and her husband were divorced and to reflect on when exactly she used to visit video-game expos did not seem right. However, these were the kinds of facts that were missing in the transcribed interview that made it impossible to create a complete life-line. Then, why were so many vital parts missing?

Naturally, we were aware that an informant in an interview situation does not arrange her story chronologically. Informants often forget and get facts mixed up and even avoid certain questions. Looking back, we understand how unrealistic it was to expect to obtain a complete overview of a life-history in one interview. To realize the gaps and make *ad-hoc* adjustments, that is, immediately asking the correct complementary questions that would yield the missing information seems, in retrospect, impossible. Cecilia had moved back and forth over time, a movement

which the reading of the transcript made obvious that the interviewer did not catch. On some occasions, no question had been asked regarding the point of time in history something had occurred. For instance, there was no follow-up question regarding the exact time our informant was “on a holiday in Cyprus with a friend and spent all her money playing Pacman.” Later in the same interview the question “so, this was before the kids?” *was* asked, but it was too vague and left inadequate information.

Eventually, we had to admit that it was not possible to construct a useful Life-Line on the basis of the interview text. In other words, we could not see exactly how and when gaming practices and life-events were interconnected in significant ways. The methodological procedure and purpose had to be revised. How to modify the method? Was it even practical to use the Life-Line in this context? Would it assist us in answering our research question? Would it help us with our goal to understand the interviewed mothers’ gaming-lives? After some thinking, we were still convinced the Life-Line would help us, and decided to try anew. This time, we changed things around; the Life-Line was made the departure-point of the interview. Consequently, the informant was from the very beginning informed that the purpose of her interview would be to draw a life-line. The interview was not recorded and no elaborate interview scheme was followed, but the basic research questions listed above were included. The person participating in this methodological experiment was a woman named Alice, a 44-year-old mother of two. To this interview, we brought Cecilia’s incomplete Life-Line as an example for our next informant (See Figure 1, p. 28).

### **Alice’s Life-Line**

The interview was started by drawing a line on a piece of paper: on the left side the year of Alice’s birth was written and, on the right, the current year. Alice and the interviewer then decided which events should be placed on the time line and where. These were of two kinds: 1) significant events in her life, including when she dropped out of high school, the years her children were born and various employment periods; 2) game related activities. She identified which games she played and when, how and when she got her first computer and her broadband connection.

The discussion oscillated between “now” and “then,” and the paper was soon filled with years and facts on games, jobs and educations. Some of these were easy for Alice to remember, whereas others were more inaccessible and she had to think long and hard about it. It is not easy to remember whether a temporary job ended in 1989 or 1990, or recalling the titles of the games you played twenty-five years ago. Despite the detailed discussion and focused effort to order everything chronologically it soon became evident that this was not enough; it was too challenging to follow the jumps and leaps of human memory. As Alice talked about a certain game she would suddenly associate it with a certain game console, which, in turn, made her remember a certain workplace. Cecilia’s Life-Line “in-the-making” triggered even more memories; dates had continuously to be adjusted and the corrections and question marks flooded the paper (See Figure 2, p. 30).

Drafting the Life-Line together with Alice took about an hour. At this stage in the





process we concluded that the result was far from satisfactory. The Life-Line was still incomplete with too many missing facts, but we settled for a preliminary version and decided to modify the method even further by adding another session. This worked well since Alice was very keen on continuing to unfold her life as a gamer.

One week passed, during which we transformed the messy scribbles into a clearly legible chart, and Alice obtained additional information on various events from formal documents like diplomas and certificates. While making the chart legible, additional questions arose and misunderstandings were discovered, and, if possible, rectified. Alice also continued to remember more significant events and games than during the initial interview. We then met anew and filled in as many cracks as we possibly could and discussed remaining gaps. Alice then brought her Life-Line home for a final adjustment and her partner also helped out.

When everyone agreed the Life-Line was now as complete as it could get, a digital version was produced (See Figure 3, p. 31). We met one last time to perform an interview that was recorded. The Life-Line was placed on the table between us and worked as illustration and inspiration to clarify and exemplify questions as well as answers. This interview followed the same pattern as the other semi-structured interviews performed in the study with the difference being that there was now a Life-Line to relate to. The interview was subsequently transcribed and added to the project database.

Several unforeseen problems were thus encountered during the interview process; problems which may even be called failures. But, dealing with these “failures” improved our method considerably. As Karen Nairn, Anne Smith & Jenny Munro (2005) have illustrated, “failures” or mistakes made along the way are useful to discuss, as are “challenges” (Shah 2006) and other “negative features of the research process and outcomes” (Fallon & Brown 2002). After the vital modifications brought about by the first two interviews, a third Life-Line was constructed for Susanne (See Figure 4, p. 32), a 42-year-old mother of two, which proved that the approach worked well. As we had begun to notice, it turned out to produce some unforeseen but welcome consequences.

### **Obstacles and Unforeseen Consequences**

To return to the intentions of our research project—to study how gaming restructured human lives and roles, and how roles and lives were restructured according to gaming, in everyday family life—we went ahead with our plan and carried out interviews but, as it turned out, with an insufficiently clear idea of what drawing life-lines entailed, and, as described, the execution phase did not deliver what we had envisioned. For example, merely introducing visual aids neither resulted in a crystal-clear life story, nor did it force the obstacle of the unorganized recounting of human memories. It was obvious that the Life-Line worked better as an interview-tool that assists in organizing and filling in the gaps than a way to analyze the outcome of the interview or efficiently presenting the result. As Davies puts it:

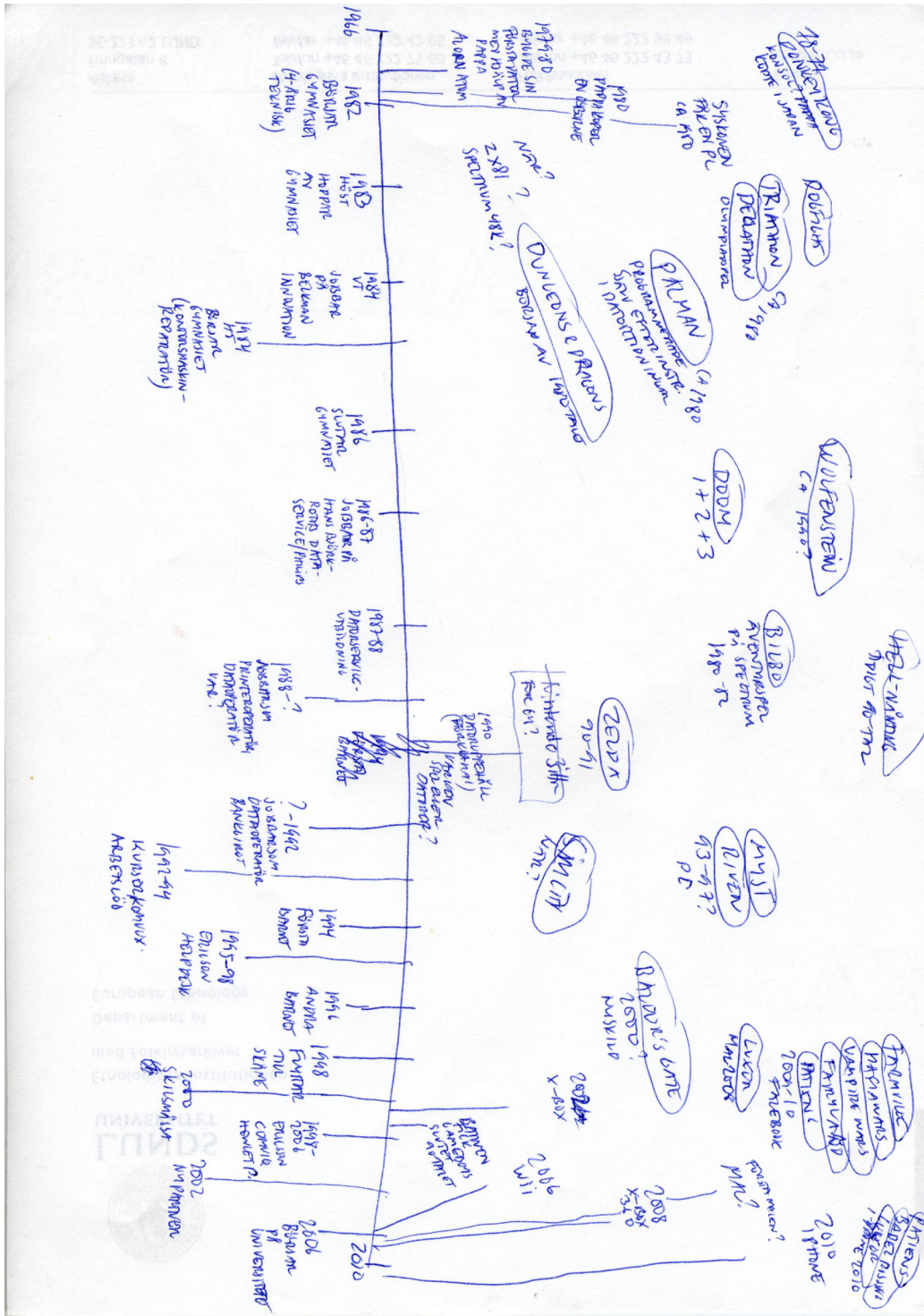


Figure 2. Alice's Life-Line Draft

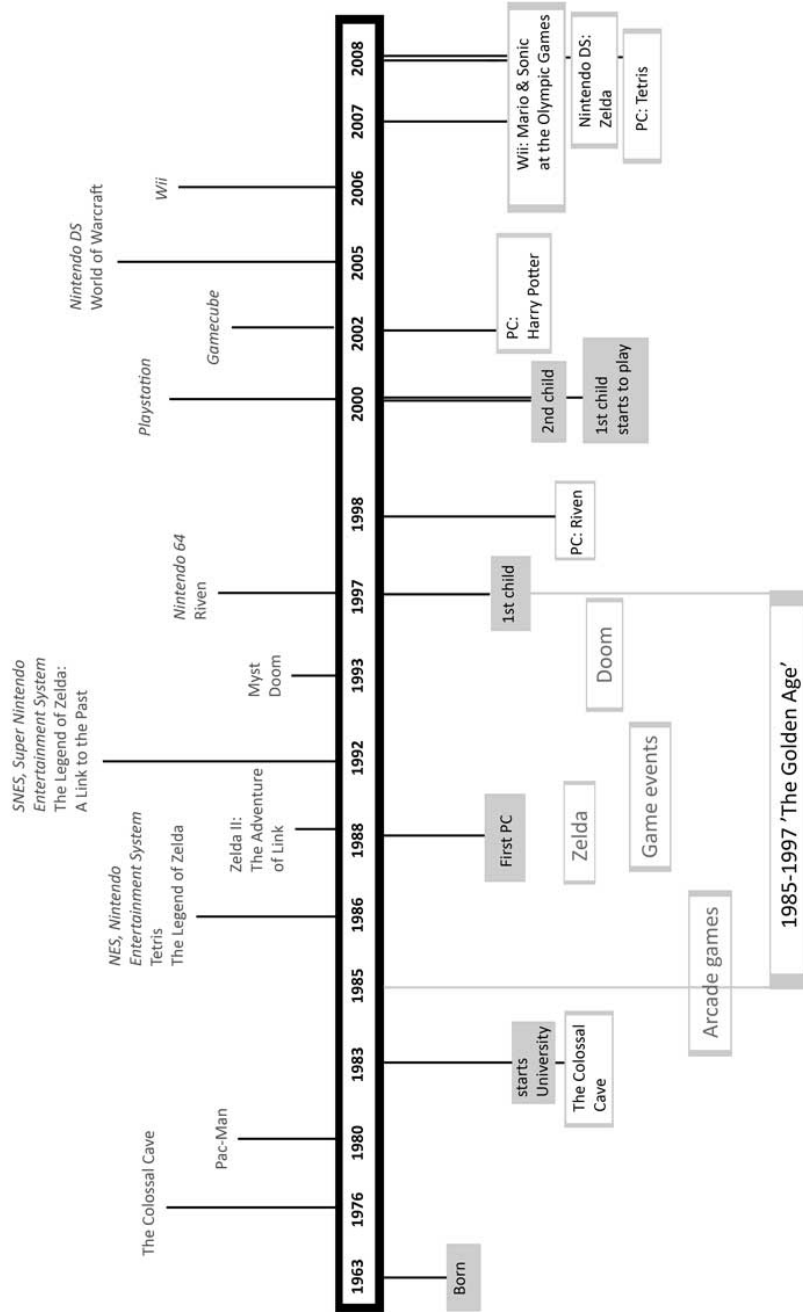


Figure 3. Alice's Digitalized Life-Line

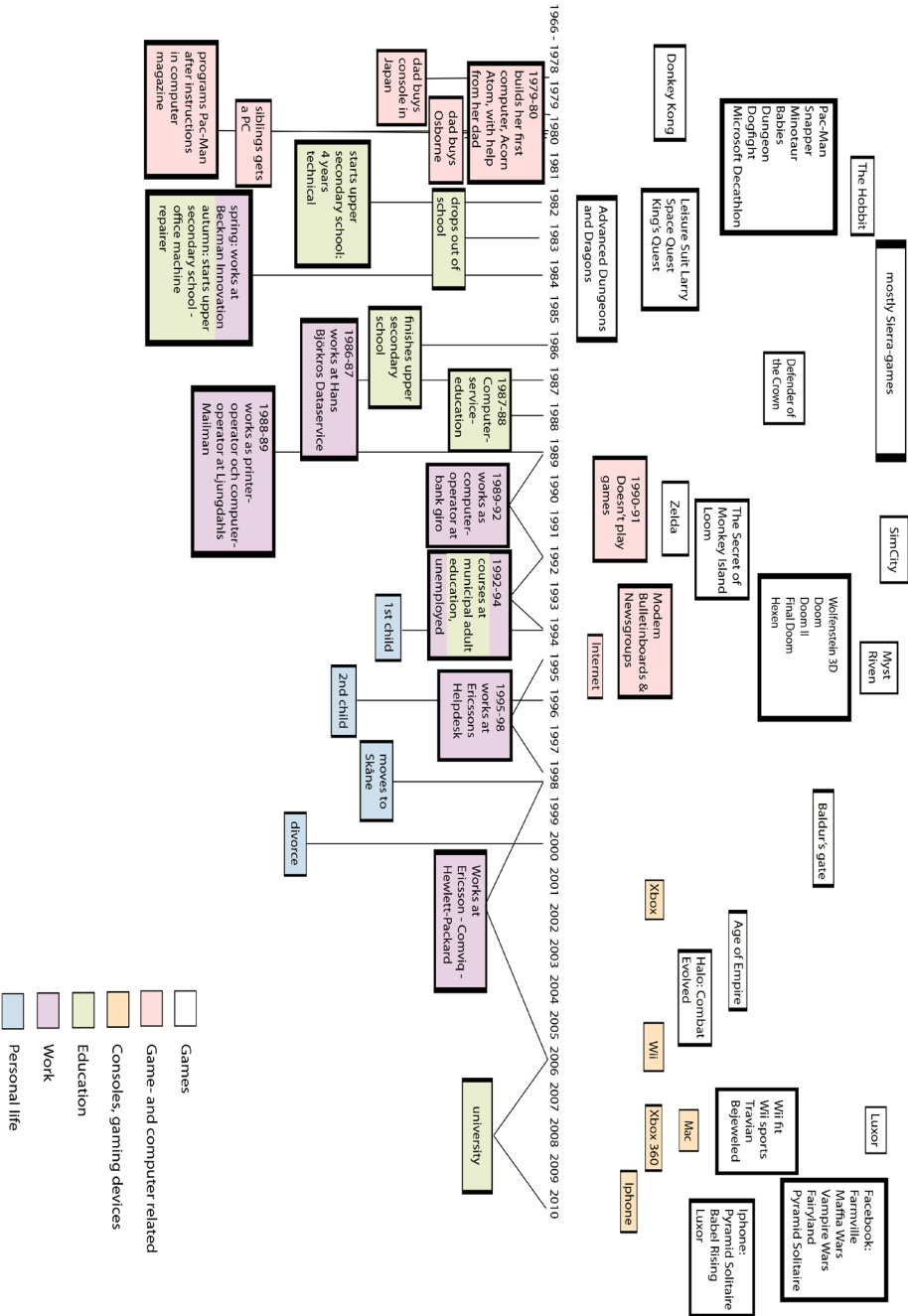


Figure 4. Susanne's Life-Line

The life-line provides the analytical possibility of moving between the individual and the larger societal structure and of showing certain connections, but the complex relations or the embeddedness in social relations that provide an understanding of complex interconnections are not captured. . . . By using the life-line we are freezing processes at different points in time and thereby applying a static analysis. There is the risk of overemphasizing events without getting at the deep structures or processes that lie behind. It cannot explain the unintended outcomes of intended actions or explain subjective meanings. (Davies 1996, 586)

This static analysis is neither helped by the human propensity to interpret events on a historical axis “in terms of causality . . . [which] is highly problematic within a hermeneutic framework” (Davies, 1996, 586). We thus conclude that life-lines cannot stand alone. Davies used the Life-Line method in a qualitative study of women and unemployment together with Esseveld in the 1980s (see e.g. Davies & Esseveld, 1985; 1989). As Davies points out, the analysis work was carried out in “parallel with and following data collection” and “life-lines were constructed for each of the 40 women,” but the women were never shown the Life-Line, nor were they asked to fill it in (1996, 580).

In Gunilla Bjerén and Inga Elgqvist-Saltzman’s examination of gender and education in Scandinavia (1994), the informants filled out and commented on their life-lines. Although Julia Brannen and Ann Nilsen’s comparative study of working parents’ relationship to parenthood in seven countries states that the research teams “completed life-lines for each informant” (2011, 609), we cannot conclude whether their participants collaborated in the construction of their own life-lines. However, we lean towards the interpretation that they were not present when the researchers drew them up, which means that our studies differ on this point. In our study, it became evident that the Life-Line had to be created *together* with the informant.

This method required a lot of input, not only from the informant but also her family and friends; this will obviously not work in situations or projects where time is scarce for informant and / or interviewer. In these cases, it becomes difficult to answer the research question, which concerns *how the informant’s gaming life interplays with her family and life situation at various points in time*. In sum, the Life-Line helped create “order and understanding in what may appear to be chaos” (Davies, 1996, 586) and, similar to Davies, we found that it worked well, perhaps best, as a tool for remembering. However, we discovered that it also did something else.

### **The Life-Line as Consciousness-Raiser**

The difficulties encountered in composing Alice’s Life-Line paved the way for a close scrutiny of the method and for revising the properties that we unconsciously had ascribed to it. What the Life-Line as a tool of remembering and inspiration thus did well, was help us achieve other goals, which in the research plan was projected to be accomplished by way of another method: focus groups. The idea behind our focus group interviews was to use the common interest among informants in gaming to allow for a joint interest to gather round (Jowett & O’Toole 2006) and thereby create a

safer space for participants to speak their mind (Kitzinger 1994). Taking the cue from Sherry Turkle's equivalent of focus-groups, the "pizza-party" (1995), a light-hearted and comfortable environment was to be created for the participants in the gaming lab that we had set up at our department. It was furnished as a living room with a couch and a coffee table and it had a Wii and a PlayStation gaming console with two big flat-screen TVs.

The intention with the focus groups was twofold: a) to open the floor for opinions, experiences and views that interviews might not produce and b) to bring women together to create potential networks, which is a long-standing empowering strategy for equality work and consciousness-raising. Due to time constraints, we never organized any focus groups, but the significant goal of consciousness raising was nevertheless reached. The Life-Line method allowed Alice to catch a glimpse of Cecilia's gaming life and reminded Alice that she was part of a bigger context and not the only gaming mother in the world. The same happened for Susanne; she got the opportunity to look at two life-lines, which enhanced her awareness of her own gaming history and its role as a very significant practice in her everyday life.

Over the course of our project, an underlying sense of being an "odd" mother *and* gamer had repeatedly come up in interviews. Readers' responses to articles on the project in, for example the Swedish newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet* (Rehnberg 2009) and the union journal *Kommunalarbetaren* (Alstermark 2010), confirmed what we perceived as women's view of themselves as being alone with their interest. Their responses conveyed that our study, *Gaming Moms. Juggling Time, Play and Everyday Life*, gave voice to their experience and served as inspiration for them to "come out of the gaming closet" (Enevold, Hagström, and Aarseth 2008), even volunteer to participate in the project. This was exactly what we had hoped to accomplish since to nuance the gamer stereotype and empower women were significant goals of the project. The Life-Line interview process seemed to do just that.

Another aspect of consciousness-raising that the Life-Line was involved in creating was the realization of the interviewee that she had been using computers and played games for a much longer time than she had previously recognized. Joanna Sheridan, Kerry Chamberlain & Ann Dupuis (2011) use timelines in a similar way as we used the Life-Line to provide a visual memory aid to stimulate conversation with their interviewees. They write:

The systematic agglomeration of data onto the timeline allows participants to contemplate the life (re)presented, to gain insights into their experiences, to explore dimensions of continuity and change in their lives and often to see things from new perspectives. In so doing, participants can effectively become researchers of their own lives. (Sheridan, Chamberlain & Dupuis 2011, 565-566)

Tracing their gaming history back in time, they suddenly understood the extent of their interest, and became conscious of the fact that they were, indeed, "gamers." The tendency *not* to identify as gamer is a common characteristic of both young and adult

women (Enevold 2014; Enevold & Hagström 2008b; Jenson & de Castell 2008, Winn & Heeter 2009) and something our project has sought to shed light on and contribute to changing, in an effort to level out the playing field, making it accessible to all players.

### **Engaged Cultural Analysis**

In cultural analytical research, whether based in anthropology, ethnology or cultural studies, it is a truism that the researcher influences the informants, particularly in interviews. Ethnologist Markus Idvall calls the ethnographic interview a “cultural laboratory practice” (Idvall 2005) in which the questions posed and how, when, and where the interview takes place shape the situation and relation between researcher and participants, as well as the research analysis. This mutual influence is widely recognized. In our “laboratory work” with gaming mothers, we also needed to recognize the significance of the *co-laboratory* part, in order to reach our goal of consciousness-raising. Explicitly feminist research, as distinct to general gender research, works to link theory to practice, and emphasizes bilateral social engagement. Let us hasten to add that the research topic naturally delimits the possibilities of such engagement, and as many methodological discussions will reveal, a researcher’s engagement is not always recommended and does not always happen. But, as Gary Ferraro and Susan Andreatta phrase it: “there is little or no attempt in feminist anthropology to assume a value-neutral position: it is aimed at consciousness-raising and empowerment of women” (2009, 84).

Since the 1960s and 1970s, questions of self-reflexivity and engagement have been important issues and an engaged anthropology is emerging (Wolf, 1996; Low & Engle Merry 2010). Then what is engagement? Anthropologists and ethnologist alike speak of engagement in terms of extending the use of ethnography to a public beyond the research community, engaging informants in, for example, “collaborative ethnography” (Lassiter 2005) and “multi-targeted ethnography” (O’Dell & Willim 2015), and as “participatory audiences” (Pink 2011). In *Engaged Anthropology: Views from Scandinavia*, the editors Tone Bringa and Synnøve Bendixsen (2016) survey the terms of “engaged” and “public anthropology” and find that they are defined in many ways. These range from insights from anthropology being taken outside of academia, collaborative or participatory research, “sharing and supporting” while doing field work (Low & Engle Merry 2010), to advocacy and activism. Moreover, the editors state, the term “development anthropology”, which often is used interchangeably with “applied anthropology”, has a strong position in Scandinavian anthropology (Bringa & Bendixsen 2016).

In Scandinavian ethnology and folklore studies, gender, labor division and social organization are, as a rule, taken into consideration, and the addition in Sweden of applied cultural analysis to the curriculum of the Ethnology Department at Lund University in 2008 has certainly increased the export of cultural analysis beyond the University into organizations and industry (Master Programme in Applied Cultural Analysis, 2017). Still, we want to stress that more engagement is needed. Similar to proponents of engaged and applied anthropology, we find it imperative that feminist



cultural analytical research, whether based in anthropology, ethnology, or cultural studies, be aware of, and actively select, issues of important social relevance and also dare to operate with an explicit feminist *engaged* perspective to actively involving and affecting informants and/or lay-persons.

## Conclusion

As accounted for above, the article on our research project in the newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet* (Rehnberg 2009) attracted mothers out of their gaming closets, generating awareness of not being alone; blogging mothers, both in Sweden and abroad, embedded in other networks, of mothers and gamers, contacted us, thus connecting even more women, and helped spread both the call for informants and the results of the study. This, in addition to the Life-Line interviews, which produced many “aha-moments,” have made it clear that some of our most significant research results exist in these particular moments and in realizations among the women who are our main informants. We observe that our engagement with the informants and the informants’ increased engagement and awareness, make up our most concrete, and possibly our most valuable, research results.

We have called our approach *engaged cultural analysis*, drawing upon, on the one hand, engaged anthropology and feminist research traditions relying on ethnographic fieldwork, and on the other, collaborative ethnography, adding to it an action component. Our analysis included problematizing and developing the Life-Line method, used in our research project to reconstruct adult female players’ *gaming lives*. Fine-tuning the method, researchers and informants were led to new discoveries about gamer identities, which also met a significant goal of the research project: to raise the consciousness among the interviewed female players that they too *are* gamers – a vital recognition in the struggle for access to, and visibility in, contemporary gaming culture.

## Notes

- 1 Karen Davies (1958-2006) was born in the UK, but most of her academic life was lived in Sweden. Her research mainly concerned women’s studies, specifically women’s relationships to work, unemployment and time. She helped found the *Swedish Journal of Women’s Studies* and contributed to the first gender study center in Sweden.

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## Response

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### Defining the Female Gamer

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When it comes to both designing and playing video and electronic games, women and girls have long suffered a dual disadvantage. In the first place, girls are often told from a young age that electronic games are simply not something in which they should be interested. The toy industry in general is still permeated with a large gender divide, with so-called pink and blue aisles a staple for many retailers, despite a recent push toward inclusivity. Unless directly geared toward girls, as in the case of franchises like *Cooking Mama* and *Animal Crossing*, video games nearly always wind up on the blue side of the chasm, mainly due to intense marketing campaigns that specifically target boys and young men. This marketing is so pervasive that girls often feel challenged just for existing in a gaming space. The second disadvantage facing women comes in the acquisitions of the skills needed to break into the gaming industry, especially as designers and coders, which are gained with a STEM-related educational background that remains unwelcoming to female students. It comes as no surprise, then, that when a third barrier is added, that of motherhood, the difficulties of considering oneself a gamer—or as part of gaming culture as a whole—become even steeper.

These barriers to entering the gaming industry, both as players and designers,

should not be so steep, especially since women have long played central roles in the development of both computer electronics and gaming. I have had the pleasure of heavily researching the history of women in technology for The Strong's Women in Games Initiative, which consists of collecting, exhibiting, and interpreting a comprehensive collection of artifacts and archival materials chronicling female contributions to the industry. One can look back as far as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Ada Lovelace became the first computer programmer through her work with Charles Babbage on his Analytical Engine. The 1950s saw Admiral Grace Hopper create the first computer language compiler, the A-0 system, and assist in the development of the early high-level programming language COBOL. From the 1950s to the 1980s, Katherine Johnson, known as the "Human Computer," played key roles in NASA's early installation of digital electronic computers, and her calculations were essential to the success of the first space flights, including those of John Glenn and the Apollo 11. On the gaming side, Carol Shaw's work at Atari and Activision in the 1970s and 1980s led her to become the first woman to design and program games for a major publishing company, including the best-selling shooter *River Raid*. Roberta Williams co-founded Sierra On-Line in 1979 and launched the graphical adventure genre with groundbreaking games such as *Mystery House* and *King's Quest*. Women exercised particular influence over the development of educational computer games, including Mabel Addis and her 1965 *Sumerian Game* (possibly the first use of a computer game in a classroom setting), and Ann McCormick and

Leslie Grimm, co-founders of The Learning Company in 1980, whose games like *Rocky's Boots* and *Reader Rabbit* launched the educational computer sector of the industry.

Despite these and many other contributions to technology and gaming fields, women and girls are still regulated to the sidelines when it comes to video gaming. According to the Entertainment Software Association, 45% of gamers in the United States identify as female (ESA, 2018), yet the International Game Developers Association reports that a mere 21% of game designers are women (IGDA, 2018). The latter number may be explained by a lack of women majoring in STEM fields, and of those that do, an estimated 48% will either switch majors or drop out before graduating (Hepler 2017, 55). Women who do find themselves successful in the gaming industry are too often subjected to harassment and scorn, occasionally leading to explosions such as Gamergate, when developers like Zoë Quinn and Brianna Wu received rape and death threats after being accused of having unethical relationships with game journalists and pointing out the sexist representations of women so prominent in the gaming industry (Quinn, 2017). Even being a female player has its risks, as men will often deride them through voice and video chat, demanding they prove their so-called "geek cred." And in their article, Jessica Enevold and Charlotte Hagström bring yet another difficulty to the gaming table by focusing on a very specific subset of gaming women: Mothers.

Throughout history, mothers have found themselves held to impossible standards. They have been idolized as the givers of life and the perfection of the fe-

male form, overflowing with selfless love for their children. But when a woman fails to meet this idealized vision, she is scorned and ridiculed. Even now, mothers are judged for the smallest of details relating to their children. Are you a working mom or a stay-at-home mom? Do you send your child to daycare or leave them with family? Will you feed using bottle or breast? While out, do you use a stroller or carry your baby in a wrap? The questions are relentless, and any deviation from this mythical, idealized version of femininity is attacked. What, then, happens to mothers who not only long for the ever-elusive gift of "free time," but also dare to do so in the perceived male-dominated sphere of gaming?

According to the ESA, 67% of parents play video games with their children on a weekly basis (ESA, 2018). This statistic does not account for how many of those parents are male or female, but marketing certainly skews in favor of the father or male figure being dominant in electronic play. It should come as no surprise, then, that Enevold and Hagström so often discovered during their research that many of the women they interviewed did not even identify themselves as gamers. The question of what defines a gamer has nearly as many answers as what defines a mother, but it is all too common for that definition to be far more restrictive than it should. Self-identified "hard-core gamers" often focus on first-person shooters or massively-multiplayer online role-playing games, dedicating hours upon hours to their games every week. Social and app-based games, which traditionally appeal to women, are viewed as "not real games." But what about the mother who finds herself with a spare 10 minutes and



simply wants to relax with a match three game like *Bejeweled*, or a puzzle game like *Worlds With Friends*? Is she any less of a gamer than the mother who spends a free night playing *Call of Duty* or *World of Warcraft* after her kids are in bed? The answer is obviously no, though society and marketing may try to say otherwise. Surely the definition of “gamer” has room for both styles of play.

In the conclusion of “Coming out of the Gaming Closet,” Enevold and Hagström noted that their study successfully increased awareness amongst gaming mothers that they were not alone in their interests, and that, no matter how and what games they played, they *were* gamers, and they deserved to be identified as such. Despite gendered marketing of games, stereotypes of what a “real gamer” should be, and societal pressure for women to prioritize motherhood above all else, women can and should find a life balance that includes all the facets they wish, including a career, a family, and a video game hobby. Even seeing one woman embrace the title of gamer could positively impact the future of a young girl who wants to join the gaming industry but fears rejection and isolation. Thus, by being true to herself, a gaming mother may not only improve her own life, but those of the women around her.

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