Characterising Gaming Group Experiences

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Abstract

When people play digital games together, their experiences are often influenced by the group. While prior research has focused on the individual player experience, we argue that a deeper understanding of group dynamics is required for designing digital games that effectively support complex social interactions. In this paper, we characterise the lived group experiences of fifteen long-term players, using qualitative content analysis of semi-structured interviews examining group lifecycles, their impact on play, and how games and platforms support or constrain them. Our findings show that gaming groups are diverse, often shifting between people- and task-orientation based on needs and motivations. They influence how games are experienced, establishing shared practices that persist across contexts. Yet, while games and tools support group play, they often lack flexibility to accommodate such evolving and nuanced social dynamics. We provide insight into how group-based play unfolds and examples of how games can better support it.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in HCI**; **Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing**; • **Applied computing** → **Computer games**.

Keywords

HCI, Qualitative Analysis, Social Play, Group Play, Gaming Group

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1 Introduction

Many players choose to experience digital games as part of a group, whether with friends, online communities, or others they meet through play. These groups serve not only practical in-game purposes, but also respond to players' broader social motivations: forming and maintaining bonds through play can support needs related to belonging, trust, and shared accomplishment [5, 7, 19, 39, 64]. Groups also impact the moment-to-moment experience of play itself, for example affecting motivation, coordination, and the ways players interpret success and failure [18, 19, 28, 87]. Despite how common and consequential these group-based experiences are, we still know little about these social structures or how to best design to support them.

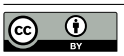
Existing work has examined group formation in social life [5, 7, 64], the social affordances of games [17, 18, 28], and the diverse motivations and preferences that drive players [4, 48, 72, 87]. Gaming has also been shown to contribute to relationship maintenance [16–18, 34, 56], through processes like trust formation [19], social connection [18, 35], and positive behavioural outcomes [17, 30, 33].

However, most prior work addresses these dimensions in isolation, either by focusing on individual player characteristics (e.g., motivations [48, 87]) or by examining specific dyadic outcomes (e.g., trust [19], toxicity [6, 41, 79]). We argue that understanding player experience in multiplayer contexts requires closer attention to the group structures through which gameplay is organised, and how players make sense of their membership in these groups over time. In light of this, this work aims to be a first step in this direction, asking the following research questions:

- **RQ1**: What kinds of gaming groups do players form, and how do they evolve over time?
- **RQ2**: How do gaming groups impact play?
- **RQ3**: How do games and tools support or hinder gaming groups and the relationships within?

We conducted semi-structured interviews with fifteen long-term players who had previous experience with digital gaming groups, and analysed transcripts using qualitative content analysis [90]. The interview script followed the research questions, covering topics on relationship maintenance [56], social gaming [17, 32, 81], and player characteristics [87].

Our findings show that players form diverse groups, ranging from large, fluid communities like guilds to smaller, core groups of friends or family. These core gaming groups, which are the focus of this work, are relatively stable but evolve in size, focus, and composition as members' needs and circumstances change. As they play together, groups develop shared expectations and practices that shape both gameplay (e.g., game challenge) and relationships (e.g., conflict, cohesion), creating distinct group cultures that persist across games and contexts. However, current games and tools often lack the flexibility to fully support these nuanced and evolving dynamics, offering only limited features for coordination and cohesion (e.g., temporary chats), which often forces players to rely on external platforms such as Discord – with their own limitations as well.



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This work contributes an in-depth account of how players form, maintain, and adapt gaming groups, and how these groups impact both play and relationships. These insights suggest a shift in perspective: gaming groups are not merely context, but dynamic social systems with their own needs, trajectories, and identities. From this, we point toward opportunities for future research and design, including modelling group characteristics and dynamics, building typologies, refining methods for studying them, and designing systems to support group aspects like stability, coordination, and role negotiation. Ultimately, this work aims to contribute to a growing body of research on the positive social dimensions and benefits of gaming, by seeking to better understand gaming groups and how to design to support them.

2 Related Work

In this section, we give an overview of existing research that informs our understanding of digital gaming group experiences: 1) foundational theories of social connection and group dynamics; 2) gaming as a context for social interaction and relationships; 3) theories and frameworks describing player profiles; and 4) outcomes of social play, including cooperation, closeness, conflict, and toxicity.

2.1 Social Connection and Group Dynamics

Humans exhibit a fundamental social nature, with a basic need to form and maintain meaningful relationships. This social motivation is not merely a preference, but a core human drive, extensively discussed in Baumeister and Leary's seminal work on the "need to belong" [5]. Their theory proposes that social connection is a universal prerequisite for individual well-being, arguing that the desire for interpersonal attachments shapes human behaviour and is essential for both physical and psychological health. This is consistent with Bowlby's [7] Attachment Theory, which highlights the importance of secure, stable attachments for development, and the impact of loss. Furthermore, Basic Psychological Needs Theory [64, 76], part of Self-Determination Theory [64, 76], emphasises relatedness – the feeling of connection and belonging – as a fundamental psychological need alongside autonomy and competence, contributing to intrinsic motivation, social development, and overall well-being.

Building on the understanding of these fundamental social needs, research has investigated the formation, evolution, and characteristics of social groups. Groups are not simply random collections of individuals, but rather structured entities characterised by varying degrees of entitativity (i.e., the perceived coherence and unity of a group) [43]. Group formation is often influenced by homophily (i.e., the principle that individuals tend to associate with similar others), fostering relationships based on mutuality and reciprocity [47]. Proximity also plays a role in the development of strong network connections [63]. While traditional frameworks emphasised physical co-presence for establishing common ground [51], modern re-evaluations suggest that digital proximity, sustained through frequent interaction and shared objectives, can effectively bridge this gap, allowing remote groups to establish the common ground and belonging previously almost exclusively attributed to physical proximity [29].

Social groups are dynamic entities, undergoing processes of formation, evolution, and potential disbandment [26, 58]. While some groups exhibit strong interdependence, others may operate as "loosely coupled systems" [53, 60, 84], where components are relatively independent yet interconnected. Maintaining social bonds requires active effort, with studies examining friendship maintenance behaviours at both individual and dyadic levels, highlighting the importance of positive and supportive interactions [55, 56]. Regarding the quality of interactions within groups, positive interactions can enhance cohesion and well-being, while negative interactions and social undermining can negatively impact group stability and social outcomes [5, 80].

2.2 Social Dynamics in Gaming Contexts

Research consistently indicates the social nature of gaming, demonstrating its function in initiating, maintaining, and strengthening relationships across different age demographics [16, 32, 40, 42, 50, 52, 54]. Social exchange serves as a key motivation for game engagement, and multiplayer gaming has been associated with positive outcomes such as improved relationship quality, social support, and enhanced psychosocial well-being [28, 32, 74, 82, 89]. Gaming facilitates the formation of communities, ranging from smaller groups to large-scale online communities [73], extending social interactions beyond virtual environments into real-world contexts [28, 37, 81, 83].

Expanding the understanding of social gameplay, Isbister [36] proposes that social gaming encompasses a wider range of interactions than just simultaneous multiplayer experiences, including activities such as observational play, turn-based play, and asynchronous play. These varied forms of interaction can unfold across both online and offline contexts, supporting hybrid relationships that blend digital and face-to-face communication. Such relationships have been associated with greater emotional closeness, well-being, and perceived similarity [85]. Moreover, gaming environments can act as "third places" [23, 49, 68], providing spaces for shared interests, social interaction, and relationship development. Pearce [59] further validates the durability of these bonds, demonstrating how "communities of play" develop shared cultures and identities that can persist even after the original game ceases to exist.

Research into eSports shows how gaming groups navigate the intersection of social cohesion and performance-oriented goals. Unlike casual play, eSports team dynamics often require a hybridisation of online and offline strategies to build trust and coordination [27]. While the primary objective in these contexts is often focused on winning and skill execution, successful teams rely heavily on social norms and habits [27]. As such, teams use "trial" periods not just to assess competency, but to evaluate personality compatibility and shared values [27]. This intertwining of professional and personal relationships suggests that in high-stakes environments, instrumental support (e.g., in-game coordination) often serves as a gateway to deeper emotional and esteem support, which can bleed into offline contexts [28]. Furthermore, as Tang [70] notes, the structure of these groups mirrors traditional sports teams, where cohesion in both task and social dimensions is very important for handling competitive pressure.

Collectively, these findings emphasise that gaming offers a substantial context for fulfilling social and relational needs and forming meaningful group experiences, making it a relevant domain

for studying group dynamics, and highlighting the importance of considering diverse game genres, collaborative mechanics, and contextual and motivational factors that influence the social gaming experience [15, 17, 36]. For example, Devasia et al. [20] show how long-distance romantic partners adapt digital games to express shared meaning and support relationship maintenance, highlighting the potential for games to meaningfully scaffold social interaction. However, while prior work outlines how and why social ties form in gaming, beyond intimate or dyadic relationships, less attention has been paid to how players themselves interpret and manage their group experiences over time. Our study builds on this foundation by qualitatively exploring how players with varying relationship levels make sense of group dynamics, including how they navigate change, conflict, and cohesion.

2.3 Individual Player Experience, Profile, and Characteristics

Gaming groups are composed of individuals that have different characteristics, including skill levels [13, 14], time availability [57, 78], and personal preferences regarding play styles, themes, and platforms [4, 44, 67, 87]. Researchers have consistently recognised this player heterogeneity and have developed various frameworks and typologies to characterise player attributes (e.g., individual motivations [4, 48, 72, 87, 88]).

This intrinsic player diversity has a direct impact on the player experience, especially within multiplayer gaming scenarios. Player experience can be understood as the subjective and holistic perception of game interaction, encompassing emotional, cognitive, and behavioural responses [1]. Research indicates that game patterns and mechanics significantly affect player experience and social interaction in multiplayer contexts [25]. Interdependent mechanics, for instance, directly affect enjoyment and engagement within group play [25]. More broadly, the affordances of different multiplayer games (e.g., competitive shooters, cooperative survival scenarios, puzzle-solving experiences) shape the experience in distinct ways [25]. To capture these impacts on the player experience, validated scales like the Player Experience Inventory (PXI) [1] assess both functional and psychological aspects of the individual player experience across various contexts.

These perspectives show that a comprehensive understanding of gaming group experiences requires considering both the individual characteristics players bring and the resulting player experiences that emerge from their interactions within the game and with each other [32]. Yet, most existing typologies and frameworks treat individual traits and group experiences separately. Our work addresses this gap by examining how diverse player characteristics affect, and are affected by, the group experiences players reflect on.

2.4 Outcomes of Social Play in Groups

The dynamics and structures of gaming groups, influenced by the diverse characteristics of individual players, result in a range of social outcomes. Social play in gaming can generate positive interpersonal effects. Research indicates that multiplayer games can foster social closeness and interdependence among players [18] and enhance trust among participants [19]. Prosocial video games have been associated with increases in prosocial behaviours [30]. Gaming can also be a vehicle for social support, both online and offline, reinforcing social bonds [74]. Furthermore, positive social experiences in games can contribute to in-game social capital, friendship development, and psychological well-being [16, 17], potentially offering benefits for specific populations such as older adults [16].

However, social interactions within gaming groups are not exclusively positive. Variations in player characteristics and profiles can also lead to negative social outcomes. Toxicity is an extreme example of one such negative outcome, and research has examined the prevalence and characteristics of toxic behaviours in online gaming environments [6, 41, 79]. Studies have investigated the normalisation of toxicity within gaming communities [6] and explored instances of toxic behaviours in team-based games [41].

While these studies have provided relevant insights into specific interpersonal dynamics – especially in relation to toxic behaviour – there remains a notable gap in understanding the broader group-level experiences that extend beyond isolated incidents or behaviours. In particular, less is known about how players make sense of their ongoing involvement in gaming groups, how positive and negative experiences co-exist, and how such experiences evolve over time. Our work contributes to filling this gap by exploring how players form, maintain, and adapt gaming groups in response to evolving social and logistical requirements, and the diverse social outcomes they encounter, thus expanding the conversation to encompass a broader range of group experiences.

3 Methodology

To explore how players experience and make sense of gaming group dynamics over time, we conducted a qualitative study focused on how groups form, evolve, impact play, and are supported or constrained by games and related tools. In this section, we describe how the interview script was constructed, our participant sample and recruitment approach, the procedure, and the data analysis methods.

3.1 Interviews

We conducted semi-structured interviews. The interview script was ordered based on the research questions, with each informed by related work on relationship maintenance [55, 56], social gaming and group play [17–19, 32, 73, 81], and player characteristics [67, 72, 87]. The interview was structured into three main areas: (1) Group Composition and Evolution, (2) Group Dynamics and Gameplay Impact, and (3) Game and Tool Affordances. Across these areas, the protocol focused on the group as a holistic unit; therefore, specific sub-structures or pre-existing dyadic relationships (e.g., couples or siblings) were not isolated as distinct factors.

Building on this structure, participants were first asked to map out the gaming groups they have been part of — past or present. We focused on three stages: how these **groups formed** (e.g., "*Why have you formed or joined a gaming group?*"), how they **evolved** (e.g., "*Did the groups change over time (e.g., did people leave or join)?*"), and, in some cases, how they **disbanded** (e.g., "*What made the group break up, if applicable?*").

Second, the interviews examined group dynamics and characteristics. This included **organisation** (e.g., "*How was the group's*

Table 1: Participant details, interviewed either remotely (R) or in-person (P), including gender, age, country, occupation, playing frequency (PF), solo vs. multiplayer (S/M), and typical play groups (TPG).

ID	Gender	Age	Country	Occupation	PF	S/M	TPG
P1 (P)	M	28	Portugal	Student	Daily	Mostly with others	Mixed (friends, family and others)
P2 (P)	M	27	Portugal	Student	1-2 times a week	Mostly with others	Friends and Family
P3 (R)	M	25	Portugal	Full-time employment	Daily	Equal balance of both	Mixed (friends, family and others)
P4 (P)	M	31	Portugal	Student	3-4 times a week	Mostly alone	Mixed (friends, family and others)
P5 (R)	M	29	Portugal	Full-time employment	Daily	Mostly with others	Friends
P6 (P)	M	25	Portugal	Student	Daily	Mostly alone	Online Communities
P7 (P)	M	24	Portugal	Student	3-4 times a week	Equal balance of both	Friends
P8 (R)	M	31	Portugal	Full-time employment	1-2 times a week	Mostly alone	Mixed (friends, family and others)
P9 (R)	M	20	Portugal	Student	Daily	Mostly with others	Friends
P10 (R)	F	24	Portugal	Student	3-4 times a week	Equal balance of both	Mixed (friends, family and others)
P11 (R)	F	34	Portugal	Student, Full-time employment	1-2 times a week	Equal balance of both	Mixed (friends, family and others)
P12 (R)	F	32	England	Full-time employment	3-4 times a week	Equal balance of both	Mixed (friends, family and others)
P13 (R)	M	38	Germany	Full-time employment	Less than once a week	Mostly with others	Family
P14 (R)	M	25	Portugal	Student	Daily	Mostly with others	Mixed (friends, family and others)
P15 (R)	M	25	Portugal	Full-time employment (Gaming Industry)	Daily	Mostly with others	Friends

organisation?"), **conflict resolution** (e.g., "*How did the group handle conflict or disagreements?*"), and **internal relationships** (e.g., "*Do you believe you strengthened or weakened your relationships with the other members of the group?*"). Participants were also asked how these dynamics **impacted play** (e.g., "*How did the relationships within the group affect the group's experiences and decision-making?*").

Finally, we investigated how the **groups affected** and **were affected by** the broader gaming ecosystem. This covered the **games played**, the **platforms used**, and the **communication or coordination tools employed** (e.g., "*Did your group use any shared resources?*"). The full interview guide is included in the supplementary material[1].

3.2 Participants

We interviewed 15 participants — deemed sufficient to capture rich, in-depth accounts of gaming group experiences through our methodology (see Section 3.4 for further discussion) — aged 20-38 (M=27.87, SD=4.66), of whom 3 self-identified as female and 12 as male (Table 1). The majority resided in Portugal (n=13), with one each from England and Germany. We aimed to recruit across different demographics, and, as such, included students (n = 8), full-time employees (n = 6), and one combining both roles, which we expected could provide different perspectives on gaming groups across time. One participant worked in the gaming industry (P15). Participants were recruited through participation calls on forums, our own social networks, and through snowball sampling. Participation was voluntary and eligible participants were required to have experience with digital games, be or have been part of at least one digital gaming group, and be over 18 years old. We did not define group size during recruitment to allow for participant interpretation; if asked, we clarified that any unit with more than one person was eligible.

Prior to the interview, participants completed a form collecting standard demographic information (age, gender, country of residence, and occupation), as well as data on participants' gaming profiles, including years of experience, frequency and duration of play, self-assessed competitiveness, preferred game types, primary gaming platforms, and typical social configurations (e.g., solo or multiplayer tendencies, common play groups, and communication tools used). These responses informed our sampling overview and provided additional context for interpreting participants' accounts during analysis.

All but one participant had over 10 years of gaming experience; the single exception reported between 4 and 7 years. Most played daily (n = 7), while others played 3 to 4 times a week (n = 4), 1 to 2 times a week (n = 3), or less than once a week (n=1). Participants differed in their current social gaming tendencies, with seven

[1]The supplementary material can be accessed at https://osf.io/jrnv8/?view_only=254e9a4d71dd4228bc3bb2ecc520f953

playing primarily with others, three playing mainly alone, and five balancing solo and multiplayer experiences. Typical play groups included friends, family, and online communities.

The duration of the play sessions was reported to typically range from 2 to 4 hours. Most participants identified as between casual and hardcore players (n=10), followed by casual players (n=4) and hardcore players (n=1). Perceived competitiveness levels were captured on a Likert scale of 1 (non-competitive) to 5 (competitive) (M=3.07, SD=1.03).

Preferred game types included singleplayer (n=10), cooperative (PvE) (n=11), competitive (PvP) (n=10), and mixed cooperative-competitive (PvEvP) (n=13), with many engaging in multiple types. Discord was reported being used by all but one participant, followed by in-game chat, voice chat, platform-specific chats (e.g., Steam, PlayStation), and social media groups (e.g., Facebook, WhatsApp).

3.3 Procedure

Participants were briefed on the topic of the study and procedure before providing informed consent, including consent for audio recording and pseudonymised data use. Upon scheduling, they completed the aforementioned demographic and gaming-related information form. All interviews were carried out by the first author, with an additional researcher assisting in two of the interviews. The interviews averaged 53.66 minutes and were conducted either remotely (n=10, using Zoom or Discord) or in-person (n=5) at our university. The study protocol was approved by the ethics committee of our university.

3.4 Data Analysis

We used qualitative content analysis (QCA) by Zhang and Wildemuth [90]. We selected this variant of QCA as an interpretative one that allows the coding of data into predefined categories rather than using a fully open-ended approach. This provides a structured way to be guided by theory, enabling a deductive coding process while retaining the flexibility to evolve the categories based on data. As an interpretative approach focused on understanding meaning rather than producing statistically validated coding, it does not require multiple coders or inter-coder reliability scores. All interviews were transcribed using Whisper.AI, and then reviewed by the first author. The codebook initially started with 9 categories deducted from the research questions. The first author then coded the first 3 transcripts, iteratively refining the codebook by inductively generating new categories (e.g., *Conflict in Gaming Groups*) and subcategories, as well as merging some (e.g., *Games and Tools Promoting Gaming Group Play* and *Games and Tools Hindering Gaming Group Play* merged into *Games and Tools Influencing Gaming Group Play*) and adjusting others (e.g., *Engagement, Autonomy, and Meaning* becoming *Player Experience in Gaming Groups*) based on our evolving interpretation of the findings, resulting in 10 categories. This was followed by discussion with the research team and consequent revision of the category scheme, where some categories were removed as they strayed from the scope of the work (e.g., *Spillover of Gaming Groups into Non-Gaming Contexts*) or were already being captured in other categories (e.g., *Games and Tools' Impact on Relationships*). The same author then coded the rest of the transcripts, continuing to refine the codebook throughout the process in consultation with the research team. This resulted in a codebook with 7 categories (see Table 2) outlined and described in the Results section.

We approached qualitative content analysis with the understanding that meaning is not inherently present in the data, but is instead constructed through the researchers' interpretation, shaped by both context and theory [8]. This interpretive stance assumes that knowledge is produced through analysis rather than simply found in the data [8]. In this view, the idea of reaching full data saturation is not applicable, as new insights are always possible [45]. Therefore, we made an interpretative decision [8] to end data collection based on the richness and depth of the interviews already conducted, and the insights emerging in early analysis.

4 Results

This section presents our findings, structured around the research questions. First, we explore the types of gaming groups players reported forming and how these groups evolve over time. We then examine the impact of gaming groups on play, including expectations, individual-group dynamics, conflict, and overall player experience. Finally, we discuss how games and tools facilitate or hinder gaming group interactions and relationships. Each section concludes with a summary that directly answers the corresponding research question.

4.1 RQ1: What kinds of gaming groups do players form, and how do they evolve over time?

4.1.1 Typologies of Gaming Groups. Our results suggest that players form different groups in gaming, existing within a nested structure comprising three main levels identified by participants: large-scale communities, more focused subsets within them, and core groups, referred to throughout this work as **gaming groups** (Figure 1). These levels differ primarily in terms of size, membership stability, interaction frequency, and the perceived importance or closeness of relationships between members. A community is perceived as a large group of players with the same interests and goals. It is usually a somewhat organised group with defined hierarchy and roles, focused on a specific game or activity, such as in-game guilds, streamer communities, or game communities. This type of group is perceived as being very fluid in terms of membership, with low levels of interaction, and relatively low levels of importance and similarity between members, "*[...] I think the guild, in general, is meant to be a group of players who play for the same purpose. Or, not necessarily with the same purpose, but who want to be in a community that is minimally close to people who are having their experience.*" (P15).

Players have higher levels of interaction and similarity with certain subsets of people within these communities. These subsets are perceived as more important while still maintaining a modest level of fluidity in terms of membership. For example, within a large guild or Discord server, players may form a recognisable pool of acquaintances they can call upon to fill a raid spot, join a match, or play when opportunities arise. These subsets foster closer ties than the broader community, while not carrying the stability or regular interaction of a core group, "*[...] I think one of the big differences was that the subgroup I actually knew. So there was a difference in trust,*

Table 2: Overview of our codebook including seven categories, created deductively (d) or inductively (i), aligned with our three research questions.

Category
(RQ1) C1: Typologies of Gaming Groups (d)
Definition: Perceptions of what constitutes a gaming group. Nature, depth, and types of relationships that exist or develop among members within a gaming group. ***Examples:*** *"One is more specific in that you have your friends, and you're playing to be with your friends and that, and the other is more, you like the game, and you want to be with other people who also like the game [...]" (P8)*
(RQ1) C2: Lifecycle of Gaming Groups (d)
Definition: Stages and processes that a gaming group undergoes from its formation to its potential disbandment. Factors that lead to the formation of a gaming group. Ways in which a gaming group changes over time. Factors that lead to the disbandment of a gaming group. ***Examples:*** *"So I didn't form a gaming group, I formed an activity around my group [...]" (P2); "I called this person and this person [...], this person called that person, that person... And it was more like a tree of connections than a box where everyone was part of that box." (P1)*
(RQ2) C3: Group Expectations and Social Contract of Play (d)
Definition: Shared or individual assumptions and norms about how play should occur within the gaming group. Implicit or explicit agreements and rules that govern behaviour, interaction, and responsibilities within the gaming group during play. Physical, virtual, or conceptual spaces where gaming groups engage in play or related activities. ***Examples:*** *"[...] as we've been playing for so long, we already know more or less what our strengths and weaknesses are." (P2); "But if you're going to say you'll be there, don't vanish at the last minute." (P7)*
(RQ2) C4: Interplay Between the Individual and the Group (d)
Definition: Interplay between individual needs, preferences, and actions, and the collective dynamics of a gaming group. Factors contributing to an individual's ability to participate in gaming group activities. Processes through which a gaming group takes up and retains a new activity/game. Processes through which a gaming group adapts to individual needs. ***Examples:*** *"[...] the relationships that I have now outside [of gaming], for example, work relationships, relationships with groups of friends who are now older, all have a basis in groups of friends that I was with on Discord or Skype, or Messenger, when I was playing." (P15); "[...] each person has their own tastes and obviously in a group of friends, [...] we'll try to find a compromise." (P15)*
(RQ2) C5: Conflict in Gaming Groups (i)
Definition: Instances of disagreement, tension, or discord that arise within gaming groups. Behaviours, attitudes, or dynamics within gaming groups that create a harmful or negative environment for members. Processes, strategies, or approaches used by gaming group members to address and resolve conflicts, whether explicitly or implicitly. ***Examples:*** *"[...] for example [playing CS:GO], and someone heard that you weren't a boy, that was it. [Giggles] It was: 'go to the kitchen [...]', so, ya." (P12); "But when it's a serious conflict, there's probably one of two things: either you need a third party to mediate or you have to be grown up [...]" (P15)*
(RQ2) C6: Player Experience in Gaming Groups (d)
Definition: Psychosocial and functional aspects of gaming group experiences. ***Examples:*** *"I loved playing with my friends, I loved creating, living the game and almost creating a story within the game." (P5)*
(RQ3) C7: Games and Tools Influencing Gaming Group Play (d)
Definition: Games and tools promoting or hindering gaming group play. Game patterns, mechanics, and features promoting or hindering gaming group play. Communication tools promoting or hindering gaming group play. ***Examples:*** *"We literally have channels [...] dedicated to each boss, dedicated to, for example, what they do, what to watch out for, possible techniques, things like that." (P15)*

let's say, between that subgroup and the community group itself." (P3).

Within these subsets, players form **core gaming groups** that play regularly. These groups are the focus of this work and are perceived to have great levels of interaction, importance, and similarity, with relatively low fluidity in terms of membership. However, these may have different levels of relationship, focus, and motivation. They may include friends, family, neighbours, school and workmates, or simply online acquaintances, "*[...] it could be acquaintances, it could even be people I meet in the game itself, either online or by going somewhere to play.*" (P5). These different relationships within the group lead to different group dynamics and

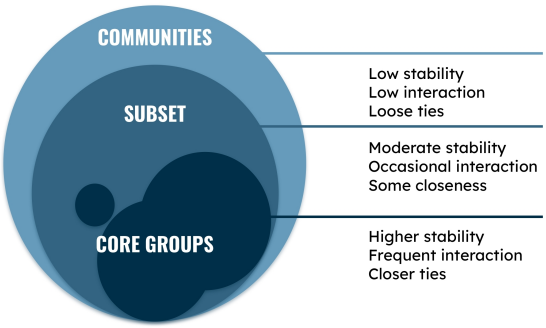

Figure 1: Three levels of gaming social structures: large communities, smaller subsets, and core gaming groups, differing in size, stability, interaction, and closeness.

requirements. For example, due to the potential comfort of pre-existing bonds, similar interests, established communication habits, or being co-located, it is easier to coordinate the closer the relationship, "*Because if it wasn't for that [someone organising and keeping the gathering consistent] I don't think it'd survive. [...] I think it's really necessary for me to have that feeling: 'okay, this week there's going to be [a gathering] some day [...], then we'll get together to play'.*" (P2, discussing playing with coworkers).

In the typology presented by Lickel et al. [43], groups can fall under four clusters, of which two are relevant in the case of gaming groups: intimacy groups (e.g., groups of family, friends, fraternities) and task groups (e.g., members of a jury, co-workers, student study groups). Gaming groups can align with both, "*One is more specific in that you have your friends, and you're playing to be with your friends and that, and the other is more, you like the game, and you want to be with other people who also like the game and take part in activities [...]*" (P8). In this way, more task-oriented groups have relative difficulty in transitioning between games, "*[...] you usually switch things up a bit when you change games or go to another niche game*" (P14), while more people-oriented groups have relative ease or make the effort to play different games together, "*So the group is always active because the people who are there are playing other things to... [...] It's not so fixed. It's not so rigid.*" (P15). At the same time, groups are rarely purely people- or task-oriented. For example, people-oriented groups may still exhibit task-oriented tendencies based on members' individual gaming motivations, "*[...] with this Diablo group it was mostly cooperative games. With the group I played Risk with and so on, it was competitive games [...]*" (P4). Likewise, task-oriented groups may show people-oriented flexibility when strong interpersonal bonds encourage adaptation to others' interests, "*Well, in my case it's really because I've always loved my family, and it's a way for me to be with my family.*" (P2). Throughout a group's lifecycle, it will naturally fluctuate in this spectrum, leading to situations where a group previously created for a specific game will transcend beyond it, or a group of friends will begin by wanting to play many different games but later specialise in engaging with a single game.

4.1.2 Lifecycle of Gaming Groups. Players develop different group belonging histories through their experiences. Some participants reported a history of nomad-like gaming groups, joining and leaving groups depending on their needs or interests, often staying only for a short time: "*[...] I think there were always a lot of people, like, passing by, and sometimes they were part of a group, and then they left for a while, then they came back.*" (P3). Others followed more stable patterns, either sequentially moving from one group to another over time, parallelising multiple groups at once, or having a main group that took priority, with temporary groups sometimes influencing what happened in it: "*So my sporadic groups, I think they sometimes made me find games to then play with my main gaming group.*" (P2). These interactions create a network where different gaming groups can share experiences, dynamics, and even potentially merge, "*And then we don't create a gaming group, but we join a gaming group because it makes more sense.*" (P15).

At the origin of a gaming group typically lies a shared common interest in gaming or a specific game/genre, "*[...] I started by playing games and ended up meeting people, and then more of a friendship developed [...]*" (P12). While others happen opportunistically, "*Yeah, because it was a good bonding experience, and it was easy for me to bond through co-located video games.*" (P13). This is aligned with related work on the creation of social groups, that indicates that group homophily (i.e., the level of similarity in important attributes with other members) is a predictor of group creation and maintenance [26, 47, 63].

In some cases, pre-existing groups (e.g., friends, family, colleagues) take up gaming as an additional activity, "*So I didn't form a gaming group, I formed an activity around my group, which was already pretty well-formed, let's say.*" (P2). In other cases, players with similar motivations or limitations, such as high competitiveness – in the case of an eSports aspirant –, or limited availability – in the case of a recent parent –, will flock to communities that cater to these aspects and form new gaming groups within, "*Well, they advertised specifically for people who didn't have much time. I have a two-year-old son [...] In that sense, it made sense for me to join a community that wasn't so hardcore.*" (P8).

Over time, as group members' requirements change, so do the groups evolve in terms of size, structure, and focus, with new people joining and others leaving. As a way to maintain the group, members deal with these shifting factors accordingly. For example, when groups become a larger subset within a community, the need for the introduction of structure becomes more apparent, "*[...] when he started putting all these people on the server, I said: 'look, why don't we create, like [...], things for each game, for the group, so it's not such a mess [...]*" (P1). Additionally, the group may become more task-oriented and narrow their focus to one or two games, or they may become more people-oriented and make the effort to ensure regular interaction through scheduling.

The disbandment of a gaming group is often a gradual process, rather than a clearly defined event, and is naturally influenced by the depth of the interpersonal relationships within the group, "*[...] separating, I don't think it happens, at least it didn't happen to me from one moment to the next, it just happens over time, when one [person] can't [participate], another can, and that's it.*" (P6). Putnam [62] introduced the concept of social capital to describe the resources embedded in social ties, distinguishing between strong ties that

provide bonding and support (e.g., family, long-term friends) and weak ties that enable bridging across groups and access to diverse information (e.g., online acquaintances). Aligned with prior work applying this concept to gaming contexts [74], our findings suggest that groups linked mainly through bridging ties are more prone to disbanding than those composed of bonding ties. Gaming groups may end up disbanding due to evolving needs, unresolved conflicts, or the removal of the group's reason for existence (e.g., a group surrounding a specific live service game may disband if that game is no longer supported). On an individual level, changes in life, such as maturing, changing schools, and changes in play behaviours (e.g. playing only ranked games), potentially lead to the player departing, "*I think I've also been leaving these gaming groups because I've never been one to think that if I'm going to play I need to win.*" (P3). In other cases, groups may grow so much that it becomes more chaotic if the group does not adapt, "*[...] then people started to drift further apart because there was so much confusion, and they wanted to be connected and do their own thing [...]*" (P1). Unresolved conflicts such as fundamental disagreements, breaches of trust, or perceived injustices in power dynamics, can lead to individual separation, the formation of subgroups, or even the group's disbandment, "*If people start to change enough that you don't want to get along with them any more, you'll start to break up there too.*" (P8). Furthermore, when groups are anchored (i.e., their existence is defined by a specific factor or element) to their space or game, if this anchor is removed, the group typically ceases to exist as well, "*When I end up letting go of the game linked to the gaming group, I end up letting go.*" (P8).

As groups disband, as long as their members retain interest in multiplayer gaming, they will naturally flock to other groups. When this happens, and inline with related work on the dynamics of social groups [26, 58], the longer they interact with these new groups, the more priority is given to them, resulting in the older groups eventually losing focus entirely, "*But when I have my family, I end up prioritising that gaming group, which has remained there, consistently, always.*" (P2). And so begins a new gaming group lifecycle.

4.1.3 Summary and Answer to RQ1. In light of **RQ1**, "*What kinds of gaming groups do players form, and how do they evolve over time?*", our findings indicate that players form various types of groups (see Section 4.1.1), often situated within a nested social structure. At the broadest level are large, fluid communities (e.g., guilds, game forums) based on shared interests but with lower interaction and stability. Within these, players form closer subsets with increased interaction and trust. The core gaming groups emerge from these subsets, characterised by high interaction, importance, similarity, and relatively stable membership. These groups include diverse relationships (friends, family, online acquaintances) and operate on a spectrum between being primarily people-oriented (focused on relationships, flexible across activities) and task-oriented (focused on specific games/goals, less flexible), a focus which can fluctuate over the group's lifespan. Groups evolve (see Section 4.1.2) in size, structure, and focus as members' needs, motivations, and external life factors change, requiring adaptation (e.g., adopting structure, shifting game focus) for maintenance. Disbandment is typically a gradual process, with members often transitioning to new groups, perpetuating a fluid and cyclical pattern of group engagement over their gaming history.

4.2 RQ2: How do gaming groups impact play?

4.2.1 Group Expectations and Social Contract of Play. Different groups will have different focuses and motivations, such as gaming for competition, challenge, relaxation, or socialisation. These different motivations, studied in related work [4, 48, 87], reflect the high similarity of individual motivations within a given gaming group. As such, groups expect play to occur in certain ways according to their focus, individual motivations, and established norms. These include expectations regarding, for example, experience, interaction, engagement, and organisation.

With repeated play, these expectations become reinforced and increasingly internalised. For example, groups will develop expectations of their performance, "*[...] as we've been playing for so long, we already know more or less what our strengths and weaknesses are.*" (P2). Often, this may result in a higher tolerance for mistakes according to the depth of relationships and lifetime of the group, "*Because with friends you have a capacity to accept mistakes that you don't have with strangers.*" (P1). Simultaneously, high performant players are expected to lead, "*And then when I'm studying dungeons and tiers and everything, I do it because I like it [...] I don't mind helping them at all, teaching them.*" (P15). In certain contexts, this discrepancy creates barriers towards shared play, "*But nowadays, it would be bad of me to ask him to play with me, because he'd be trying to win the game, and I'd be messing up his game, let's say, and vice versa, because I'd be asking him to play worse than he normally does in order to be able to play with me.*" (P3).

Over time, shared expectations may solidify into explicit rules and unwritten norms – a group's social contract – that emerge naturally and guide group interactions, decision-making, and conflict resolution. For example, explicit hierarchies support enforcement and organisation, while unwritten expectations influence behaviours like punctuality or appropriate behaviour, "*[...] there were always rules that weren't written down, like, don't leave the game halfway through, try not to tilt, [...]*" (P3). Social etiquette and group responsibilities also become part of this contract, "*[...] we want to go and play with him [...] We get a bit upset when we see that he doesn't feel the same way.*" (P2). Generous acts like gifting games, in-game items, or other forms of support, can enable broader group participation. However, they may also create tension, particularly across weaker ties [74], where relational boundaries are less clear, "*That part, when it involved money and so on, was something I didn't like so much [...] I didn't know [them] that well.*" (P4).

How a group handles rule-breaking depends on the closeness of its relationships. Close-knit groups like friends or family often overlook minor issues and have unstated rules, while larger communities tend to be stricter, "*[...] because the bigger the community, the more explicit you have to be in these rules [...]*" (P8). However, overly rigid enforcement may have a negative impact on the group, "*When they start to get too forceful, I'm not a super fan.*" (P8).

With prolonged engagement, groups will form habits, one example being group spaces. These are physical, digital, or in-game environments that may be established or acquired over time as groups consistently gather there to engage in play. For example, groups composed of school friends might favour in-person gathering spots, while groups with geographically dispersed members might more easily gather through in-game locations (e.g., in front of

guild halls) or online platforms (e.g., Discord, Skype, game-specific chat rooms).

What ties all of these expectations together is the notion that groups will make the effort to evolve and adapt, both locally in time (e.g., during a specific play session) and as a whole, to the particularities and arising situations of the members and the group. Conflict may then surge when these expectations are not met.

4.2.2 Interplay Between the Individual and the Group. Gaming groups impact their members' social and behavioural development, notably by broadening individuals' social networks, "*I feel that at the beginning I was a bit more shy and as I got to know people, I felt much more at ease.*" (P10), and facilitating skill development such as communication.

These group dynamics often give rise to informal roles, as participants described behaviours that influenced how members were perceived and helped the group navigate challenges, stay active, or simply get along better. Based on these descriptions, we interpreted and propose a non-exhaustive set of role types. For example, some participants described the role of **promoters**, "*I was the guy who brought new experiences, I was the guy who introduced new games, that was undoubtedly my job.*" (P1), while others described **recruitment** roles, "*I always think that I was bringing people from previous groups into the new ones.*" (P3). These members contribute to avoiding group stagnation, ensuring there is always something new to play or enough people online to start a session. A subset of participants characterised **enforcers** as those who maintain group rules and structures, "*Especially as I'm older and try to enforce order.*" (P11). This role serves as a guardrail for the group, stepping in to settle disputes or remind others of boundaries before arguments escalate. **Leadership** roles were described as dependent on context: in larger communities, they may oversee decision-making and group cohesion, whereas in smaller groups, they may correspond to the more experienced members at a given game, "*And with, yeah, with my son it's kind of, like, [...] the silent leader. Where I'm just kind of leading in the background without him really noticing.*" (P13). In the later case, the leader is meant to smooth the gameplay experience by guiding less skilled players while attempting to avoid making them feel micromanaged. Additional roles described include **jokers**, who contribute to the social atmosphere, "*[...] but I always tried to be there to cheer up the group with jokes or whatever, even in-game, to make other jokes or plays or crazy things that needed to be done, that was me.*" (P5). This role aims to lighten the mood and defuse tension, preventing frustration (e.g., losing a match) from turning into real-world anger. Finally, **supporters** provide logistical or material resources to sustain play, "*Whatever [role] nobody wanted, I didn't mind doing that, as long as we were all playing, it was fine with me, I was still going to play, and I was still going to have fun.*" (P5). These members often prioritise the group's ability to play over their own personal preference, filling necessary gaps (e.g., in-game roles, making digital games available, providing a group space for play).

These roles were reported as not mutually exclusive and can shift depending on the situation. Despite these different hats, members who participate minimally also contribute by ensuring a stable core of group presence. The presence and interchangeability of these roles and individual dynamics shows that cohesion and conflict within the group may actually be the result of individuals constantly adjusting their behaviour to keep the group functional, having an impact on the overall dynamics and experience of the group. These findings resonate with prior work identifying ephemeral audience roles in multiplayer settings, such as spectators, documenters, supporters, and orchestrators, which similarly show how group participation is fluid, with situationally emergent behaviours [22].

However, individual constraints, such as limited availability, shape how members engage with the group. Participants often reflected on the transition from school days (characterised by more free time) to a life stage dominated by higher education, careers, and personal commitments (e.g., relationships, childcare), "*[...] most people are either working or studying at a high level, right? So it's always complicated [to find time]. Much more complicated than when we were at school and had breaks and always had time.*" (P3). Furthermore, specific game mechanics, such as daily quests, can exacerbate these availability issues, "*They started putting in daily quests and that was a bit bad [...] they gave very big rewards that made a difference. So I was able to play every day, [...] But a lot of people weren't.*" (P10). Consequently, members with limited free time (e.g., full-time employees) are forced to "filter" their engagement, participating only in high-value interactions in accordance with their individual motivations, "*[...] in competitive games, [...] others that don't [enjoy it], [...] it becomes an impediment to playing with these people.*" (P3).

When this availability is severely restricted, certain games may become unplayable due to their reliance on full-group participation (e.g., dungeons with group number requirements, shared progress). Regardless of the focus of groups, specialised in just one game or not, if a game ceases to provide the expected level of enjoyment or becomes incompatible with the group's mixed schedules, groups may cease to exist or shift their focus to alternative games, thereby generating a trail of shared gaming experiences, "*We already know that this is always going to happen at some point. And we're in a cycle of several games.*" (P9). Groups may occasionally revisit previously played games to recapture positive past experiences, "*For example, Minecraft, since it's a game that everyone's grown up with, people don't mind playing a bit of it every now and then. It's usually a calm week or two.*" (P14).

The variety of individual needs and preferences within a group requires ongoing adaptation, especially in the case of larger groups. Moreover, beyond gameplay, emotional dynamics can also contribute to this. Frustrations can arise from external factors, such as personal issues or external stressors, "*Me, for example, I let them talk, and they unload and stuff, and that's it. Sometimes I have to unload a bit myself.*" (P11). In these cases, and depending on the relationship levels within the groups, these may adapt by offering emotional support, understanding that the group serves not only as a space for play but also as a social support system [74].

4.2.3 Conflict in Gaming Groups. Conflict in gaming groups often emerges when one member tries to guide another in ways that feel overbearing or intrusive. For example, attempts to coach others can be perceived as undermining their autonomy: "*[...] it often happened, like, that people got upset because someone said: 'why are you doing this, I don't know, man, do that [...]'.*" (P1). In family settings, such as when a parent guides a child, this dynamic involves a trade-off

between ensuring an efficient gameplay experience and preserving the child's agency, "*[...] you have to make these trade-offs of, like, 'okay let him explore, let him play, but also, like, he'll be unhappy if he doesn't get to progress through the game [...]'.*" (P13). Conflicts can also arise from clashing views on how the game should be played, such as when one player expects a serious approach and others just want to have fun, "*[...] they like to play more seriously and others are just there to have a bit of fun, not so much for the game itself.*" (P9).

The ways in which members communicate and interact with each other further add to this. Trash talk, which may serve as camaraderie in some contexts, "*A bit in the sense that, if I call you a name, it means that I already have this trust with you, and it means that I already know that you know that I'm joking with you [...]*" (P3), can be perceived as insulting in others, "*And there can be an exchange of words, when people aren't familiar with each other, they can take it more personally or not, and then there's always a bit of turmoil.*" (P5), especially in intergroup competition in team-based gameplay. In some cases, scapegoating or persistent blame for in-game mistakes may considerably hinder the experience, "*[...] the first mistake they see, they cling to that mistake and that person from that moment on is... the person who brought the team down.*" (P1).

Establishing clear social contracts regarding session conduct and communication management may mitigate some of the issues associated with differing engagement and time investment levels. Despite this, the process of setting and enforcing such agreements can itself be contentious as conflicts may also arise due to organisational and structural issues, such as disagreements over leadership roles, decision-making authority, and rule enforcement. An example of this is disagreements on who has the power to ban or expel members, "*[...] the policies and who deserves to be banned, why and the divisions and so on. It's always a bit… [saying it's a difficult and controversial process]*" (P12).

In group settings, toxicity manifests differently than in individual interactions, often escalating from persistent conflicts. While toxicity frequently arises in competitive gaming, as highlighted in prior work [6, 41, 79], the lack of anonymity can affect its expression, "*If they're people you interact with on a daily basis, you don't have that much leeway for that*" (P12). However, since not all players are necessarily part of the group (e.g., when playing against another team), behaviours like flaming, trash talk, and even gender-based harassment can still persist, "*At the time too, if I was playing an online game, CS:GO, for example, and someone heard that you weren't a boy, that was it. It was: 'go to the kitchen and I don't know what', so, ya*" (P12). These toxic actions not only harm individual players but also degrade the experience of the entire group.

Groups resolve conflict based on its severity and the relationships between members: minor issues often resolve naturally, serious ones involve direct negotiation or mediation, and if all else fails, groups may resort to separation, "*He got upset with a few people who were in that community, and it split into two parts.*" (P4). Long-term friends are more likely to invest in negotiation or mediation, and groups of strangers more prone to separation, "*[...] if things get really bad, it's much more difficult to resolve a problem between friends than a problem between strangers.*" (P15).

4.2.4 Player Experience in Gaming Groups. Drawing from the Player Experience Inventory [1], as a means of reflecting on player experience in gaming groups, we note that it may also encompass both a functional and a psychosocial level. While the functional level concerns the immediate consequences of play (e.g., **Goals**, **Rules**, and **Challenge**), the psychosocial level captures the resulting emotional experiences (e.g., **Mastery**, **Autonomy**, and **Meaning**) as a second-order response [1].

A reported example of these functional consequences is **Challenge**, both in cooperative and competitive scenarios. Competitive play was especially highlighted as enjoyable, as groups perceive that their synergy is being pitied against other gaming groups, "*Because I liked having a team, but I also liked that adrenaline rush of competing for something, against another team that also had ties with each other and also trained.*" (P10). When experienced as a group, the functional **Challenge** shifts from trying to overcome the game itself to overcoming other gaming groups. The resulting "*adrenaline rush*" (P10) suggests that overcoming this joint challenge amplifies the psychosocial sense of **Mastery**, as the group's coordinated competence is tested against a peer group.

The functional aspects of the player experience also differ in terms of game affordances. Digital games, with their capacity for continuous impact over time, allow events such as faction splits within guilds to leave a lasting mark on the game's history and the group's experience. This was exemplified in a participant's story from ArcheAge [38]: "*[...] I feel that there are experiences with digital games that nothing replaces, because they are things that, well, aren't possible in real life [comparing it to board games]. Me betraying an entire faction and having loads of people hate me, and only having five friends who agreed with me [...]. And that was really imprinted on the game, because it dictated the rest of the game.*" (P10). By breaking away from the main faction, the subgroup exercised **Autonomy** to define their own objectives. This action creates **Meaning** by allowing the group to leave a lasting mark on the shared game world, rather than simply following a pre-determined path. These game affordances and the lasting impact of player actions allow groups to reinterpret functional **Goals** and **Rules**.

Gaming groups also have an impact on the player's experience on a psychosocial level by contributing to relationship formation and maintenance, personal growth, and, in some cases, emotional well-being. Players share experiences that create a shared history that reinforces group cohesion, "*I loved playing with my friends, [...] living the game and almost creating a story within the game.*" (P5). Here, the psychosocial experience of **Meaning** is developed together. While the game provides the context, the group constructs the "*story*" (P5), making the experience personally relevant through social connection. As such, in various contexts, including family or long-standing friendships, gaming serves as both a bonding activity and an introduction to new experiences, "*With my son, [...] Especially most recently with Zelda and also with Super Mario it was, yeah, exciting for him and I to, like, explore these worlds together. And I really enjoyed seeing how excited he would get about accomplishing different things and stuff [...]*" (P13). In this dynamic, **Curiosity** becomes a shared activity of exploring the game world. Furthermore, the psychosocial reward is interconnected, as the parent derives **Meaning** through observing the child's developing sense of **Mastery**.

4.2.5 Summary and Answer to RQ2. Regarding **RQ2**, "*How do gaming groups impact play?*", our findings show that gaming groups impact play by establishing group expectations and social contracts (see Section 4.2.1). These emerge from shared motivations and repeated interaction, defining anticipated play experiences (e.g., competitive vs. casual), performance standards (including tolerance for errors and skill sharing/balancing), interaction norms (communication style, engagement levels, commitment), and organisational habits like group spaces. These expectations solidify into a social contract – a mix of explicit rules and implicit norms – governing conduct and conflict resolution strategies (see Section 4.2.3), with formality varying by group size and relationship depth. Furthermore, groups influence members' skill development and social networks (often with lasting impacts beyond gaming), while individual factors require ongoing adaptation in logistics, game selection, and even emotional support (see Section 4.2.2). These dynamics directly contribute to both functional aspects of the player experience (see Section 4.2.4), such as managing challenges, and psychosocial outcomes like relationship building and shared memory creation. Additionally, they also enable conflict and toxicity (see Section 4.2.3) when expectations are not met or norms are violated.

4.3 RQ3: How do games and tools support or hinder gaming groups and the relationships within?

4.3.1 Games and Tools Influencing Gaming Group Play. The games a gaming group engages in impacts the group in various ways, including its constitution, space, management, session dynamics, and overall experience. Participants reported engaging with a myriad of game genres. Some examples include: i) party games, which provide enjoyable group experiences within self-contained sessions, where the focus is primarily on the unique cooperative and competitive interactions that can happen rather than ongoing progression; ii) sandbox games, which offer expansive environments that allow for a lot of both individual and group expression, "*The open world aspect, doing everything you can do [in GTA].*" (P5); iii) fighting games, which are easy to pick up for quick, short sessions, offering a competitive outlet for excitement and brief distraction, "*Basically if somebody had some time between homework they would shout out that they're going to play Smash Brothers [...] usually those sessions were quite short because the game allows it [...]*" (P13); iv) team-based competitive games like Multiplayer Online Battle Arenas (MOBA), First-Person Shooters (FPS), and Battle Royale games, which allow groups to practice trust, coordination, cooperation, and mastery in a competitive environment, often featuring both intense gameplay and social interaction, "*Sometimes League of Legends was something that was played, or MOBAs, but they always tried to be cooperative, in other words, trying to have teams and play against other teams.*" (P4); v) Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) games, which require significant time and sometimes financial investment, but they allow for the formation of large groups through guilds, often generating over time a sense of community around the game, "*They play more MMOs, because, well, community, there are a lot more people, usually they even end up with 8, 4, 12 people playing at the same time [...]*" (P4); vi) finally, Tabletop Role-Playing Games (TTRPGs) and narrative singleplayer games can also be experienced as a group through shared play, such as passing the controller around the members, offering a collective storytelling experience, "*Like, 10 played. Throughout the whole night. But the people enjoyed it, like, it was like a hangout, and you were watching like an interactive movie, I guess.*" (P7).

Certain design patterns impact a group's constitution. Games that require or encourage team play — through features like matchmaking, guilds, or chat systems — often lead players to shape their social structures around these mechanics, "*[...] the game is always more fun with all of us together than one guy out there on his own.*" (P3).

Dedicated servers can create persistent spaces that encourage long-term engagement and can lead to the creation of whole communities around them, "*[...] we had a cool group, we all played together in our server, that sense of cohesion kept us all playing [...]*" (P2). To add to this, games that allow for player-controlled persistent world-building offer groups a shared space where they can express themselves and contribute at their own pace, leading to a sense of contribution and ownership over their play space, "*Because Minecraft has that thing, [...] That you're contributing to the world and then, even after a few years, you can revisit the world and see what you've done.*" (P2).

Memorable shared moments can arise directly from gameplay, sparked by unexpected glitches, humorous situations, or critical "clutch" plays, "*Like, in real time, you do something stupid, and I see the stupid thing and we both laugh.*" (P3). Furthermore, in line with related work [18, 25], high interdependence in games, both in cooperative and competitive scenarios, can strengthen bonds by requiring, for example, precise coordination, strategic decision-making, and trust among players, "*Well, that was super cool, [...], I feel that those dungeons were what united us, because [...] If one of us did something wrong, everyone would die, so it took [...] extraordinary coordination.*" (P10).

Games that support player mastery (e.g., ranking systems) or customisation (e.g., role-playing, modding, map creation) can enhance the group experience, "*[...] we even created maps with which we played against each other, which was very stimulating.*" (P4). Similarly, games shaped by player-driven systems (e.g., economies or governance) can also positively affect group dynamics, "*[...] ArcheAge is a game that is controlled by the players [...] the market, the guilds, the state, the dynamism of the game [...] everything is controlled by the players.*" (P10).

Gaming groups utilise various tools, often transitioning from initial in-game chat interactions to external platforms (e.g., Discord, WhatsApp) for better coordination. These external tools facilitate synchronous/asynchronous communication, help manage member availability, overcome game limitations, and frequently become the group's primary online space for gathering and play, "*It was like, basically, if you were online [...], you'd go there.*" (P3).

Here, tools like Discord enable easy communication but can also introduce friction, particularly when group members share a channel but are playing different games. This situation creates overlapping conversations and management burdens, as players must juggle audio levels or try to follow unrelated discussions, "*People playing different games, so there was always the juggling act of [...] controlling the volume of each person individually.*" (P1). Adding to this, the visibility of moving between voice channels can

make players feel obligated to stay, "*And I know that it happened, [...] people coming up and saying: 'So, you're here apart from us, why don't we go over there?' I know there was this tension.*" (P1).

When acting as group spaces, some communication tools afford certain capabilities which are considered important for the natural functioning of the group. One such feature is the ability to share the screen or application of one of the members. This is particularly helpful in situations where members are coaching or sharing knowledge and experiences in real time, "*So at higher levels, I'd say, we started to have a coach who actually watched our games and [...] then we'd all get together, and he'd share the screen, and we'd work out what strategies we could have done better [...]*" (P10). In larger groups, assigning roles and organising channels can improve coordination and group experience, "*However, it's different when it comes to guilds, because it's more serious, and we have the positions of officers and guildmasters, who have more permissions even to organise...*" (P15), though, participants noted that too much structure can limit participation.

4.3.2 Summary and Answer to RQ3. Concerning **RQ3**, "*How do games and tools support or hinder gaming groups and the relationships within?*", the findings highlight how games and associated tools form an ecosystem influencing gaming groups and the relationships within (see Section 4.3.1). Games themselves shape group constitution (e.g., through required team play), provide persistent shared spaces (dedicated servers, player-built worlds), offer management features (especially for larger groups), and lead to shared experiences through mechanics fostering interdependence, self-expression, mastery, and customisation. Different game genres cater to varied group needs and interaction styles. Communication tools, predominantly Discord, serve as important infrastructure, enabling communication (synchronous/asynchronous) and coordination, overcoming in-game limitations, managing availability, and acting as persistent online group spaces beyond individual games. However, both games and tools present drawbacks. Games can hinder groups through lack of social features, poor management support (requiring external workarounds), restrictive player limits, or lack of crossplay. Tools can hinder through creating noise and notification fatigue, coordination complexity (time zones, channel management), and introducing social friction due to visibility affordances.

5 Discussion

In our work, we explored the experiences of fifteen long-term players with gaming groups. Here, we build on the answers to our research questions in Sections 4.1.3, 4.2.5, and 4.3.2, to discuss key findings. On this basis, we highlight the limitations of individual-focused player experience research, and argue for a shift toward studying and designing for gaming groups as evolving social systems with their own dynamics, needs, and trajectories.

5.1 Understanding Coupling Dynamics in Gaming Groups

In computer-supported cooperative work, coupling refers to the degree of interdependence between components or members of a team [53, 60, 84]. Tight coupling denotes a high level of coordination and interdependence, where changes in one component directly affect others, while loose coupling allows for more autonomy and flexibility among members, with weaker interconnections [53, 60, 84]. Our exploration reveals how **gaming groups are often opportunistic, dynamic, and transitory in response to the evolving restrictions, needs, and motivations of its members** (see Sections 4.1.1 and 4.1.2). The transient behaviour of gaming groups aligns with the concept of loose coupling, meaning that while members may come together for specific gaming sessions or shared objectives, they retain the flexibility to disengage or reconfigure as circumstances change. However, loosely coupled gaming groups can also develop bonding ties through repeated interactions, shared expectations, mutual support, and collective experiences. **Groups that prioritise specific tasks or objectives tend to be more loosely coupled, whereas those emphasising social relationships and community-building exhibit tighter coupling**.

The **coupling characteristics of gaming groups are shaped by the individual traits and motivations of their members**. Factors such as a player's reason for engaging in a game, their preferred way to play, and their specific needs influence the group's overall dynamics (see Section 4.2.2). These individual-level attributes collectively inform the structure and evolution of the group over time (see Section 4.1.2). Within this evolving dynamic, players assume various roles (see Section 4.2.2), such as recruiting new members, leading in-game activities, or supporting lower-performing players. Despite their impact on the gaming experience (see Section 4.2.4), these **group dynamics and characteristics are often not explicitly considered in game design**. As a result, games and gaming platforms typically lack insight into the specific types of groups that engage with them, limiting their ability to take into account, cater, and adapt to diverse group structures and behaviours.

Following Dourish [21], we avoid reducing our findings to rigid "implications for design", which risks oversimplifying the complex nature and experiences of gaming groups. Instead, we recognise that these insights present opportunities for both game research and design. Investigating frameworks for group characteristics and dynamics, developing typologies based on these attributes, and establishing methods for data collection, analysis, and interpretation on these could provide valuable insights into gaming groups. Such information could inform the design of games, tools, and experiences that account for group-specific characteristics. For example, understanding whether a gaming group is loosely or tightly coupled or if there are any gaming group nomads among the group, could guide the development of game mechanics and systems tailored to these characteristics. Some existing games already provide partial scaffolding for this: Destiny 2's [9] Guided Games feature allows solo players to temporarily join existing clans for cooperative missions, supporting looser forms of affiliation. Similarly, Monster Hunter: Wilds [10] accommodates variable coupling by enabling players to launch an SOS flare mid-mission, inviting others to join ad hoc without prior coordination. Furthermore, mapping group dynamics to game features could facilitate the creation of tagging and filtering systems within gaming platforms, enabling groups to find games that align with their specific typology or intended experience.

5.2 Mutual Influence of Players and Groups

Our work highlights the reciprocal relationship between individual players and their gaming groups (see Section 4.2.2). Rather than being formed passively as task-oriented structures, gaming groups operate as active social systems. They exert influence on members through mechanisms such as socialisation, joint skill development, the establishment of behavioural norms, and identity formation. At the same time, individual players contribute to shaping the group's culture through their personal characteristics and behaviours. This reciprocal relationship echoes findings in research on sports teams and workplace groups, where collective identity, peer socialisation, and shared performance goals also mediate the interplay between individual members and the larger team structure (e.g., [11, 69, 71, 75]).

An important nuance we contribute is that **players' behaviours shift across different group contexts** (see Sections 4.2.1 and 4.2.2), meaning that their individual profiles adapt in response to the group's composition and dynamics. In essence, this means that the individual player profile will shape itself and change according to the profile of the group it is engaging with. This is reflected in individual characteristics such as wanting to play more casually or more competitively, wanting to play specific games with certain groups, or the level of mistake tolerance a player will have towards other members of the group. These shifts lead to evolving group profiles (see Section 4.1.2) as players join or leave, requiring constant adjustment. The dynamic nature of this relationship often generates conflict (see Section 4.2.3) when expectations are not aligned, directly impacting group experience and maintenance. In essence, **players and groups are not static instances, but fluctuate considerably over time** (e.g., often within a single day), since players change because of group practices, and groups change because of individual practices. Yet, no game dynamically tailors the experience informed by group compositions, using most often only group size and ranking systems to determine difficulty, matchmaking, and content available.

The mutual influence of the groups and its members and their constant evolution opens various opportunities for game research and design. From a research perspective, it draws attention to the need to better understand how group participation reshapes the individual. For example, a player who adopts a leadership role in one group may prefer a supportive or exploratory role in another, depending on group composition and norms. From a design perspective, games could better support this ongoing co-evolution. Consider features that allow group roles to shift over time, such as systems that rotate leadership or celebrate emerging contributions (e.g., a previously silent member becoming a key strategist). Games might also visualise participation trends, communication patterns, or shared achievements, helping players reflect on how their group is evolving. Applying these tailored perspectives could enhance experiences and boost group and player retention.

5.3 Capturing Gaming Group-Level Phenomena

Multiplayer gaming introduces social dimensions that extend beyond individual players [18, 79]. In particular, our work shows that gaming groups influence and are influenced by players in multiple ways, from shaping expectations and interaction norms that impact how games are played (see Sections 4.2.1 and 4.2.2), to supporting social bonds and shared histories that persist across different games and over time (see Section 4.2.4), and requiring adaptation as group composition and individual needs evolve (see Sections 4.1.2 and 4.2.3). Interestingly, **current approaches to the assessment of player experience strongly emphasise individual experiences** (e.g., through questionnaires [1, 46, 61, 65]). Our findings suggest that this perspective offers an incomplete picture: gaming groups frequently operate as complex social systems possessing unique histories, characteristics, and dynamics (see Sections 4.1.1 and 4.1.2). Conceptualising the **group primarily as context for individual action and experience may overlook its role as a distinct entity with its own impact**.

Consequently, established individual-focused frameworks, while valuable for understanding specific aspects of the individual player experience (e.g., PXI [1]) or motivations (e.g., [4, 48, 87]), have limitations when addressing these group-level realities. This concerns two interrelated but distinct gaps: first, a **lack of instruments for capturing collective player experience as an emergent, shared state** (e.g., group-level enjoyment or "shared flow" during a raid, a collective sense of accomplishment after a hard boss fight); and second, a **lack of metrics for the social dynamics that shape that experience over time**, such as how cohesion strengthens or weakens, how leadership or roles rotate, how newcomers are integrated, or how conflicts are resolved within the group. While social aspects of play are captured in many existing scales (e.g., through the lens of how related an individual feels to the game, game characters, or other players [2, 3, 12, 65, 77]), such frameworks are generally less equipped to encompass phenomena arising directly from group experiences, such as collective sensemaking, the negotiation of group culture, or the reciprocal shaping processes between individuals and the group.

This observation points to a gap in current games research regarding the availability of dedicated group-level analytical tools and design strategies. Addressing this could involve adapting established group-level constructs from the social sciences [66, 75], such as cohesion, coordination, or collective efficacy, to develop tools and methods for assessing how groups experience games together over time. For example, understanding how trust or shared mental models evolve within a team [18, 19] could inform how designers shape group challenges or support collaboration. On the design side, while many games feature guilds [24, 73], team voice chat, or friend-based matchmaking, they rarely adapt in meaningful ways to the social composition of the group. A mixed-skill group might benefit from tailoring challenges to different players, such as assigning tougher enemies to high-skill players while providing lower-skill players with additional guidance or low-pressure mechanics. Games could also adapt to emerging group dynamics [31, 86], for example, introducing collaborative goals to support trust-building, or rotating leadership roles to balance influence in groups showing signs of conflict or stagnation. These possibilities highlight the value of treating the group not just as a configuration of players, but as a unit with its own identity, needs, and developmental arc.

5.4 Limitations

We adopted a qualitative approach as it is best suited for the exploration of lived experience data, helping us understand the multifaceted phenomenon of gaming groups. We clarify that our study primarily focuses on group-level experiences. While the interviews address interactions between the group and its individual members, they were not designed to analyse the specific effects of individual characteristics (e.g., age, gender) on these dynamics. While we aimed to provide a safe space for a balanced discussion on gaming groups, sensitive subjects (e.g., potential toxicity, gender discrimination) might have been under-represented, as they can be uncomfortable to discuss/re-live by some participants. Our sample also suffered from gender imbalance (12 of 15 participants identified as male), which may have shaped how group dynamics were described, especially in relation to aspects such as inclusivity, conflict, or identity negotiation. Furthermore, participants had to reflect, at times on years of engagement, with different groups. This may have led to a stronger emphasis on the most memorable groups and experiences, while other frequent or more mundane interactions may not have been captured. It is also unclear whether the patterns of instability or transition in gaming groups that participants described are more characteristic of younger life stages (e.g., adolescence or early adulthood), or whether similar dynamics also occur at later stages, such as ages 40-70 (e.g., retirement). Our findings are not meant to support age- or gender-based generalisations, as this remains an open area for future work. Our sample included only one participant with experience in eSports teams. As such, highly competitive (at times professional) gaming groups may exhibit additional characteristics not captured by this study. We note that our work was carried out in Western Europe, and different cultures and countries have different approaches to gaming groups, for example, reflecting the implications of individualist (i.e., prioritising the individual over the group) or collectivist (i.e., prioritising the group over the individual) cultures. Future work can build on this by examining gaming group experiences across cultures.

6 Conclusion

In this work, we investigated player experiences with gaming groups. Our work contributes an expanded perspective on multiplayer gaming by treating the group not just as context, but as a dynamic social system with its own needs, tensions, and developmental trajectories. Our findings point to several directions for future research and design, such as frameworks for analysing group typologies and coupling dynamics, methods to systematically capture gaming group characteristics and dynamics, and tailored systems that support evolving group roles, preferences, and identities. We aim to extend growing work on the positive social dimensions of gaming by deepening our understanding of how gaming groups function and how design can support positive group experiences. As such, we argue for a shift in how player experience is conceptualised and measured: one that accounts for the emergent, collective dimensions of gaming groups over time.

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