

An exploration of what secondary school age girls who play video games think about the relationship between their video gaming and related activities and their wellbeing:

An IPA study

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## Summary

This thesis comprises three chapters: a literature review, an empirical paper and a reflective account of the research process.

The first chapter explores the broad literature around gaming and gaming culture, including existing research into the impact of gaming in areas such as cognition and social development. It also explores the literature related to wellbeing and gaming and wellbeing. The literature review looks in more detail at the wellbeing of girls, including those who game. This chapter is concluded with identification of the opportunities for further research in this area.

The second chapter consists of an interpretative phenomenological analysis study based on the lived experiences of six secondary school age girls who game and engage in related activities. This research explores what the participants think of the relationship between gaming, related activities and their wellbeing and identifies superordinate and subordinate themes. It also identifies how this research links to educational psychology.

The third chapter presents a critically reflective and reflexive account of the research journey. It considers the researcher's position and reflections on the decisions made at each stage, from the pre-empirical stage to thoughts about future dissemination. It also considers wider implications for future practice.

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## Introduction

A recent report from Office of Communications (OFCOM, 2022) states that 75% of 12–17-year-olds play online games. Children and young people (CYP) were found to be using a range of devices for this, not limited to games consoles. 54% of children gamed on a mobile phone (more common in those aged 8 and above), with two-thirds of younger children using a tablet to do so (OFCOM, 2022). These figures demonstrate that not only is gaming a part of the majority of CYP's lives, but that there are an increasing range of ways that this can be done. In particular, hand-held gaming increases (for example, mobile phone gaming), suggests that gaming is more accessible in more locations across the age ranges. Furthermore, Internet matters (n.d.) found that over half of the children in their survey watched online video guides and game reviews, with a third talking to other gamers through streaming services.

The Children's Commissioner (2019) states that gaming 'tends to be spoken about by adults, whether they be policymakers or parents, as if it were an alien landscape' (p.1). This is a concept related to technology more broadly, which has positioned children as 'digital natives', and a perception that adults are unable to 'keep up' with these changes (Hattie & Yates, 2014).

It is within these contexts that concerns about gaming are situated. Not only are CYP gaming more, across a variety of (often mobile) platforms, but adults do not feel they have a full understanding of the 'gaming world'. Educational psychologists (EPs) working with CYP and the adults around them are required to navigate the many contexts in which children function (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to gain a holistic understanding of their strengths and needs. Given the information outlined above, there is a rationale for EPs to further understand CYP's gaming, beyond the numbers. This is not a new concern for EPs, as highlighted in an article by Griffiths (2010), providing advice around gaming specifically for EPs. However, this article was the most recently published (in a journal related solely to EP practice), and since this date, much has changed in the gaming landscape. This includes an increase in the number of girls gaming, narrowing the gap between the number of boys and girls who game (OFCOM, 2021a). Furthermore, Dahl et al. (2018) identify that adolescents specifically tend to be early adopters of new technology and point to the

rapid changes in this context in recent years. Therefore, new research which explores this is required. This literature review begins by outlining and defining some of the contexts and terms associated with the literature in this area. It explores modern gaming and gaming culture, including information about how CYP access gaming and associated aspects of gaming (for example, streaming). The literature around understanding CYP's gaming is then explored, including why CYP engage in gaming. Social identity theory and self-determination theory are utilised to give further context to this area.

Following this, is a focus on the impact of gaming and gaming culture. This includes literature examining the positive and negative associations that have been drawn in areas such as cognitive and social skills and adolescent adjustment. The literature around addiction and disorder concerns is also located within this section.

The research into gaming, gaming culture and wellbeing is then examined. This includes definitions of wellbeing, an examination of the types of wellbeing measures used, as well as findings from a range of studies related to gaming.

Subsequent sections explore girls in more detail. This includes their participation in gaming and gaming culture and the potentially unique experiences they face as females within this context, such as gamer identity and representation. Girls' wellbeing during adolescence is then explored in more detail, using recent research. This area is developed further to explore gaming, gaming culture and wellbeing in girls.

The review briefly explores the link to the educational psychologist's (EP) role, before concluding with a summary of the gaps within the current literature, and what is hoped to be gained by the current study.

The literature review presented here is narrative in nature and has a thematic structure. This aims to give organisation to a broad topic, with themes drawn from the literature reviewed. As the topic is wide-ranging, a narrative review allows for sufficient breadth. This is a point made by Byrne (2016), in contrast to the use of systematic review.

### **Literature search process**

The following databases were searched when reviewing the literature:

- The Elton B. Stephens Company (EBSCO) database, accessed through the University of East Anglia library
- PsychArticles

Google Scholar was also used.

In addition, the Educational Psychology in Practice Journal website was searched, as an appropriate source of information linked to the area of research. References from articles searched were used if appropriate.

Office of Communications (OFCOM) reports, Public Health England and other governmental documents were sourced using the Google search engine.

The following search terms were used:

1. "Video gaming" or "computer games" or "gaming" or "online games" or "internet games" or "gaming" or "online gaming"
2. "Video gaming" and "wellbeing"
3. "Video gaming" and "gender"
4. "Video gaming" and "girls" or "women" or "females"
5. "Girls" and "adolescents" and wellbeing

Gaming and gaming culture change rapidly, so therefore, the initial searches focused on the last ten years. However, some articles before this time are included for historical context. Some psychological theories, such as social identity, self-determination theory and positive psychology, are included as frameworks to further understand gaming and wellbeing more generally, despite being older than ten years.

Studies conducted within the UK context which explore video gaming by children and young people are limited. Therefore, relevant studies have been included from other countries to allow for a fuller exploration of the literature in this area. Furthermore, due to the limited studies including children and young people, studies which have an adult population are included.

### **Gaming and gaming culture**

This section explores the definitions that underpin the later sections of the literature review. It is important to understand the context of the modern gaming

landscape, including gaming culture, particularly as technology changes can be rapid. It is apparent that gaming is now wide-ranging, in terms of both genre and gaming platforms. Furthermore, classification of games can be difficult, with overlap between genres and fluidity in how games can be classified.

### **Modern gaming**

Zacharriason and Wilson (2016) define a video game as a 'specific kind of digital entertainment in which the gamer interacts with a digital interface and is faced with challenges of various kinds, depending on the plot of the game' (p.5). This broad definition appears to encompass the wide-ranging nature of modern gaming, which changes with technology. There are a wide range of genres within modern gaming, that have developed over time. Faisal and Peltoniemi (2018) aimed to categorise games into genres and found 31 genres between 1979 and 2010. They also found that genre structure has remained stable since 1990. A more updated exploration of genre can be found in Li and Zhang (2020) who sought to use tags on Steam (a platform for video game distribution) as an alternative method of classification. Their findings proposed a more interconnected and complex web of genres. The five most applied tags were action, adventure, indie, single player and casual. They also found that games could be broadly categorised into four genres – strategy and simulation, puzzle and arcade, role playing (RPG) and shooter. This demonstrates the complexity of classifying video game genres and the wide range and overlap in categories, as well as the sheer number of different types of game available. As noted by Hartanto et al. (2021), within one individual game, there are now often several modes of play (multiplayer, individual). This adds another layer to classification of gaming, particularly in modern titles, which can be a hybrid of genres and player modes.

In addition to the wide range of games available, there are now increasing ways in which games are played, for example, games consoles, computers and smartphones. OFCOM (2021a) identified that children aged between 5 and 15 years old used a range of technology at home, including tablets, laptops, mobile phones and games consoles, and that a range of devices were used for gaming, both online and offline. As identified by Mavoa et al. (2017), one game, for example, Minecraft can be played across a wide range of devices.

## **Gaming culture**

As noted in the previous section, there is now a wide range of games and platforms on which games can be played and obtained. DeGrove et al. (2015) and Thorens et al. (2016) and suggest that gaming has now moved into mainstream culture, having previously been identified as belonging to a subculture. Some argue that this is so much the case that many people do not recognise themselves as someone who has ever played a game, despite the regularity of them doing so (Van Deventer & Golding, 2016). This demonstrates the ubiquity of gaming, and perhaps provides some context for the numbers of CYP who play video games.

Dymek (2016), however, argues that expansion of the gaming industry is not synonymous with it becoming mainstream. Instead, he argues that gaming remains subcultural. Within this subculture, gamers are seen as a community, communicating with one another via blogs and forums, for example. Furthermore, he suggests that it is the nuances within specific games which the mainstream simply do not understand on the same level as those who play them regularly and are invested in them.

Within the context of modern gaming, live streaming of gaming has now become another way for gamers to meet and communicate. This includes platforms such as YouTube and Twitch. A study by Mavoa et al. (2017) found that children as young as six watched videos related to Minecraft when playing Minecraft was a regular hobby. OFCOM (2021a) found that in 2020-2021, 47% of content watched on video sharing platforms (VSPs) was related to gaming, including walk-throughs of games or watching others play games. This was the third most watched content on VSPs in the 5–15-year-old age group. Furthermore, up to a fifth of 5-15-year-olds had shared content using livestreaming. This was more likely in older children, using YouTube, but 7% also used Twitch to stream. The study did not specify that all these children were streaming content related to gaming, but it does demonstrate children's involvement in streaming generally, including gaming content.

## ***Gamer identity***

Another element of gaming culture is gamer identity. This is a term which is debated heavily in the modern gaming literature.

Van Deventer and Golding (2016) suggest that the gamer identity is about more than playing games; rather it is about gaming lifestyles. This suggests that participating in gaming culture is an important part of the identity. However, others suggest that it is also about playing specific types of game and having an in-depth knowledge of such games (DeGrove et al., 2015). DeGrove et al.'s (2015) study found that gamer identity was strongly associated with frequency of play, play within certain genres and game-talk with friends, demonstrating that all three of these factors are important for one to identify as a gamer.

Within gamer identity, a further label of consideration is that of 'hardcore gamer'. Ip and Jacobs (2004) used 15 variables and factor analysis to understand gamer behaviour. Their findings were that gamers could be separated into two categories – hardcore or casual gamer. This distinction is based on gaming knowledge, attitudes, playing and buying habits. However, over time, 'hardcore gamer' has been used as a proxy for gaming identity more generally – as someone who invests time into playing games and engages in gaming culture. This could be due to the large growth in gaming – a gamer may use 'hardcore gamer' to mark themselves out as part of the subculture and not within the mainstream, who are seen as 'casual gamers'. Therefore, 'hardcore gamer' has at times become a problematic term, and synonymous with 'real gamer', the inference being that a casual gamer is not a gamer at all (Van Deventer & Golding, 2016).

Stereotyping of the gamer identity has been another aspect recognised within the literature. As Shaw (2012) states, gamers are often thought of as white males. Grooten and Kowert (2015) discuss the negative stereotypes often attributed to the gamer identity, including that they are seen as social outcasts, unattractive and, again, mainly male. However, as they assert, this tends to be a societal perception of gamers, from an outsider perspective, rather than within those who consider themselves a gamer. Shaw (2011) found that these types of negative stereotyping have, at times, led to a stigma around identifying as a gamer. In her study, some participants did not publicly identify as gamers due to these negative societal perceptions.



## **Understanding why children and young people game**

Previous literature has sought to explore the reasons why children and young people (CYP) game, which is explored further in this section. This research perhaps does not fully capture the motivations of CYP, owing to the mainly adult populations that are studied in this regard. However, it does give some indications.

### **Gaming motivation and gratification**

Previous research has explored motivations for gaming, including how different genres, motivations and gratifications are linked.

Scharkow et al. (2015) developed a Gaming Gratification Short Scale (GGS) which identified three broad gratification areas – individual gratifications, social gratifications and content gratifications. They found that individual and content gratifications were the most sought gratifications when gaming. For gamers who showed preference for social gratifications, it was unimportant whether they played co-operatively or competitively – it was the social aspect that was more important. Their model was also predictive of the types of genre that the different gratifications linked to, for example, team play within social gratification was linked to games which best facilitated this. However, as noted by the researchers themselves, their model did not fully explain the variance in types of genres selected by gamers. This study also looked at gamers across the age ranges, not just CYP, and therefore, it is important to note that this demonstrates gratifications beyond the focus age range.

Possler et al. (2020), expanded this research further to look at appreciation of games, as well as enjoyment. They found that the gratifications previously studied were also related to appreciation of a game, as well as to the enjoyment of it. This research appears to have some limitations, for example, it looked at a group of players of a specific game rather than a range of genres and had an 80% male participant group. It is possible that this is due to the game that was selected, as Lopez-Fernandez et al. (2019) found that females tend to want different things than males within a video game. Furthermore, this study included players across the age range of 14–61-year-olds, with a mean age of 25, and, therefore, may not be as representative of children's gaming motivations and gratifications.

Neys et al. (2014) also found that enjoyment of games related to persistence. The authors propose that this finding may, in part, account for why gamers tend to persist despite challenges.

### **Social identity theory**

Social identity theory proposes that an individuals' self-concept is linked to belonging within a specific social group (Tajfel, 1979). This is pertinent to the present study, particularly in relation to gamer identity.

There have been studies which have looked explicitly at social identity theory in relation to video gaming. Kaye et al. (2019) made distinctions between various possible groups within gaming, such as online and offline gamers within their study of two football games – one perceived as a more social game than the other. Their findings were that social identity theory was applicable to gaming, across both social and non-social games and within the virtual world. However, limitations of this study included a small sample size, with a majority male population. Therefore, it is difficult to generalise from this study to other groups.

Neys et al. (2014) aimed to compare groups based on gamer identity strength (GIS) to discover the role of this, alongside self-determination theory (SDT), in gamer persistence. They found that there was an association between gamer identity and intrinsic motivation to play, with 'hardcore gamers' experiencing the greatest motivation. It was the experience of intrinsic motivation which encouraged their persistence in gaming. Limitations of this study include the mainly male sample (95%) and mean age (20.55), although the range was between 10 and 69 years old and the sample large. Another interesting point from this study is the self-identification of participants into hardcore, heavy and casual gamer. As the authors themselves state, there is no exact definition of these terms, and, furthermore, as previously noted in this review, gamer identity can be subjective to gamers themselves for several reasons.

### **What is the impact of video gaming?**

Video gaming has, in the past, been associated with negative outcomes. However, more recent research has begun to explore some of the benefits of gaming. Tensions between positive and negative views are still evident within the

literature, particularly as gaming disorder was recently recognised in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) (World Health Organisation, WHO, 2019). Markey and Ferguson (2017) describe the 'moral panic' around video gaming, in particular violent video games, with reference to an increase in articles on this subject matter, post the mass shooting at Columbine high school in the late 1990s. This demonstrates how context drives research around gaming, and perhaps offers a suggestion as to why recent studies have centred around gaming disorders and addictions, linked to the WHO classification of gaming disorder.

### **Definitions and understanding of terminology in concerns about gaming**

There is ongoing debate about the terminology that should or could be used to define concerns about gaming. This section will briefly give some context to the definitions which are used within the literature in this area.

The DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) lists a diagnosis of Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD) as a condition of further study, meaning that it requires further research in this area to decide on future inclusion as a disorder. There are ten items within the diagnostic criteria, which include repetitive use, preoccupation, withdrawal, tolerance and loss of interest in other activities outside of gaming. This is similar to the definition of gaming disorder included in the ICD-11 (WHO, 2019). It is classified here as 'a pattern of gaming behaviour ("digital gaming" or "video gaming") characterised by impaired control over gaming, increasing priority given to gaming over other activities to the extent that gaming precedence over other interests and daily activities, and continuation or escalation of gaming despite the occurrence of negative consequences' (para. 2).

Griffiths et al. (2015) identify that terminology such as gaming addiction and problematic gaming lack clear definitions, and the terms are often used interchangeably within the literature as result. However, there have been some attempts to separate the two. Porter et al. (2010) describe problematic gaming as excessive use of games, a loss of control over play and negative psychological or physical consequences. Namely, the difference between this and addiction, is the absence of features such as tolerance and withdrawal symptoms (Griffiths, 2005). Put simply, problematic gaming suggests that problems have arisen from excessive gaming, whereas gaming addiction relates more to features of addiction such as

withdrawal. Excessive gaming (or extended gaming time) is not problematic or an addiction of itself, but rather, when this is accompanied by further difficulties, it becomes problematic or an addiction.

As already stated, the terms 'gaming disorder', 'problematic gaming' and 'gaming addiction' are generally used interchangeably within the literature, depending on the study's author's understanding or conceptualisation of the terminology. This is important to keep in mind in the following section which discusses the literature in this area.

### **Concerns about gaming disorders and addictions**

As noted by Griffiths (2010) there is often concern about CYP becoming addicted to video or online games. However, as he argues, excessive game-playing is not equal to addiction, with addiction having several components beyond time spent gaming. Furthermore, he suggests that whilst a small number of CYP may become addicted, the majority do not. This research is now a decade old, but it is relevant as the only study published in specific educational psychology journals related to gaming, and as a context which demonstrates the historical nature of concerns around gaming.

Király et al's. (2017) research into problematic gaming had a similar finding to that stated by Griffiths (2010). They found that gaming time was not correlated with problematic use in terms of gaming disorder. However, they found that psychiatric symptoms had a moderate positive effect on problematic use, and that escape was moderately to strongly associated with problematic use. Whilst this was a large study, most participants were male, with a mean age of 22.2, and therefore, this may not represent younger or female populations of gamers. A more recent review of the literature by Rosendo-Rios et al. (2022) had a similar finding, that drivers of addiction included escapism. Furthermore, they stated that social interaction was a second driver and that lack of parental monitoring contributed to addiction. Outcomes of addiction included anxiety and impulsivity. An older study by Turner et al. (2012) surveyed 12-19-year-olds, finding that 9.4% of those in their study may be experiencing problematic video gaming, with the most reported indicator being that they played again to better a score. Problematic gamers were also more likely to

report doing less homework, having poorer grades at school and not getting along with their parents.

Further research by Coyne et al. (2020) studied pathological video game symptoms in their longitudinal study of adolescents. Their findings indicated that there were three trajectories for this – increasing, where pathological gaming symptoms started moderately and increased, moderate, where symptoms started moderately and did not change, and nonpathological, where there were relatively low symptoms across the six years studied. Interestingly, the largest group were the nonpathological group, with the increasing group being the smallest. However, this was a small study and included older adolescents into adulthood.

### **Positives and negatives of gaming**

Aside from concerns around problematic gaming, the literature has explored other negatives and some positive aspects of gaming. Much of the positive literature appears to have been in response to the negative associations with gaming, and a few studies have sought to provide a balanced argument of the positive and negative elements. Many of the studies are cross-sectional and survey based. Whilst most studies focus on adults, some have explored adolescents who game, usually within the topic of adolescent adjustment.

### ***Cognitive skills***

Some studies have identified associations between video games and cognitive skills. Indeed, Dale et al. (2020) outline the history of several studies that have explored this area. A detailed exploration is beyond the scope of this literature review, but some more recent examples are given in this section.

Granic et al. (2014) summarised research studies which found benefits to video gaming. Cognitive skills for example, attentional and visual processing abilities, were linked to action games, and creativity was linked to gaming generally. Problem-solving skills were found to be linked to the puzzles often presented in games. Some of the studies cited explored the link to such cognition outside of gaming, comparing gamers with non-gamers and finding the benefits in this area extended beyond the video game application itself.

Dale et al. (2020), note that many games linked to cognitive benefits are action games. They have extended the research in this area, finding that games other than action games were beneficial to attentional control and visuospatial attention. As they note, many games from other genres now include action elements, and this could account for the findings to some extent. This suggests that an action component in any genre could link to benefits for attention. However, the study was cross-sectional, so it cannot imply causality.

Extending this further, Kelly and Leung (2021) completed a meta-review of Esports gaming. They found that video gamers from this genre (again, separate from the action genre) outperformed non-gamers in terms of cognitive measures. However, there was no link between gaming and reasoning skills. They identified that further studies are required in this area.

In summary, this area has been well studied and found beneficial associations between gaming and cognitive measures, across different genres, within correlational studies.

### ***Social skills and development***

Another area studied to a greater extent within the literature is positive links between gaming and social skills. Most of the studies have not generalised social skills beyond gaming at this stage, but more recent studies have. This area is briefly explored in this section.

Griffiths et al. (2004) and Cole and Griffiths (2007) are studies within this area. Both focused on massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). Findings were that the games studied had social elements and that these were some of the most identified reasons for playing the games. However, the studies focused mainly on adults, potentially because the types of games studied are more popular with or aimed at an adult population. Therefore, it is difficult to generalise fully to a younger population. In addition, MMORPGs by their very nature lend to more social interactions, so it may not be surprising that these are seen as beneficial in social domains. However, it does provide an opposing view to the displacement hypothesis that argues that time spent gaming takes away from real-life social interactions and is, therefore, negative (as described by Kowert et al. 2015).

Granic et al. (2014) found that there were associations between gaming and social skills, linking this to the fact that games are now generally played online with others. The benefits found included prosocial skills, such as helpfulness, and in this case, the studies have been linked to out-of-game behaviours and benefits.

### ***Adolescent adjustment***

Within previous literature, adolescent adjustment is captured by a number of measures, linked to social competencies and relationships, academic achievement, and, occasionally wellbeing (Lobel et al., 2017; Przybylski & Mishkin, 2016; Verheijen et al., 2020). In the literature, adjustment in childhood and adolescence refers to CYP having the skills they need to function within environments such as home and school, including regulation of emotions, achievement and response to the demands of the environment (Piqueras et al., 2019). Almost all studies capture gaming through time spent gaming as a measure with which to compare adolescent adjustment. However, across the range of studies, it is beginning to be recognised that other aspects of gaming, such as preferred genre, may give a broader picture of gaming.

Findings from across the studies indicate a mixed picture, depending on measures of gaming used and aspects of adjustment studied. In Lobel et al.'s (2017) study, gaming frequency predicted an increase in internalising problems when measured by the Dutch Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). However, Verheijen et al. (2020) found no association between frequency of game play and adolescent adjustment. The two studies measured similar areas of adjustment and had a Dutch population, but used different measures of adolescent adjustment, which may account for the differences.

In other areas of adjustment, no associations were found between gaming frequency and externalising problems, peer problems, prosocial or hyperactivity (Lobel et al., 2017). However, Przyvylski and Mishkin (2016) found that those who engaged in low levels of gaming compared to those who did not game, had lower levels of hyperactivity and conduct issues, with the opposite being true for those who gamed for over 3 hours per day. They also found that those who tended to play mainly single-player games had lower levels of hyperactivity and conduct problems, fewer peer and emotional difficulties and higher levels of active academic

engagement. This demonstrates the subtleties between the various aspects of gaming that can be measured, and that gaming frequency alone is not always an effective measure. However, caution is required in these results due to the small sample size. Nevertheless, it demonstrates that understanding the impact of gaming (both positives and negatives) in this regard, is more complex than frequency of game play alone.

Verheijen et al. (2020) also studied various aspects of gaming, such as genre and motivation for playing, finding that there were significant associations for social context, genre and motivation with regards to adolescent adjustment. In terms of motivation, playing games for catharsis or due to boredom were associated with poorer adjustment, but being motivated to play for fun had more positive outcomes. Those that played video games socially reported less loneliness. This study had a higher percentage of male participants, but due to the sampling strategy (all children in a school were surveyed, and those who did not play games were removed from the study), this may just indicate that the sample included less females who gamed. As this focused on one school population, it may not be representative of the wider population, but does demonstrate some possible positive and negative associations for an adolescent population.

## **Gaming, gaming culture and wellbeing**

### **Definitions of wellbeing**

Wellbeing can be difficult to define. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) argued for a positive psychology, in which wellbeing and flourishing were understood as opposed to a sole focus on healing and pathology. Linked to this, Seligman (2011) outlined a framework for flourishing (commonly known as the PERMA model) with five components. These were positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment.

Furthermore, Simons and Baldwin (2021) identify the tensions between wellbeing as a positive noun and the way it is often measured in relation to pathology, for example, measuring wellbeing as the absence of anxiety. The authors also discuss the importance of social and cultural definitions of wellbeing, arguing that many western definitions cannot be considered inclusive. Instead, they offer the following definition of wellbeing: 'Wellbeing is the state of positive feelings and



meeting full potential in the world. It can be measured subjectively and objectively using a salutogenic approach' (p. 990). Keyes (2014) identifies two areas of salutogenic research – positive feelings and positive functioning, arguing that mental health can be considered as 'presence and absence of positive feelings towards one's life and the presence and absence of positive functioning in various facets of functioning in life' (p. 181).

Pertinent to the current study is Ross et al.'s (2020) conceptual framework of adolescent wellbeing. The authors identify the following definition of wellbeing: 'Adolescents have the support, confidence, and resources to thrive in contexts of secure and healthy relationships, realising their full potential and rights' (p.473). They also propose a model with five domains, including good health, connectedness and a supportive environment, learning and skills, agency and resilience. This perhaps also demonstrates a more positive psychology approach to wellbeing in adolescence, and suggests a multifaceted understanding of what this might encompass.

### **Current understanding of wellbeing within gaming**

Previous research has found a mixed picture in terms of the influence of gaming on wellbeing. Many studies which explore wellbeing in relation to gaming use measures of anxiety, depression, problematic video gaming (including addiction) and psychopathology. Correlations between video gaming and these types of measures have been identified (Kelly & Leung, 2021; Lopez-Fernandez et al., 2019; Romer et al., 2013; Turner et al., 2012). As many studies tend to be correlational, it is not possible to gauge causation. Some studies have attempted to explore the link in more depth and from different angles. Romer et al. (2013) suggest that heavy use of video games may be a symptom of mental health problems, rather than a cause. A further longitudinal study by Kowert et al. (2015) also suggests that those with lower wellbeing tend to be drawn to online gaming rather than developing poor wellbeing because of gaming.

As already discussed in the previous section, studies traditionally used time spent gaming as the video gaming measure, hypothesising that the longer the time spent gaming, the lower the wellbeing outcome (or higher levels of anxiety or depression, depending on the measure used). As described by Kowert et al. (2015), this can be hypothesised through the displacement hypothesis – that videogaming

displaces time spent in other activities which would be more conducive to higher wellbeing. However, over time, it has been shown that time spent gaming as a measure does not fully capture the relationship between positive or negative wellbeing. Király et al. (2017) and Verheijen et al. (2020) for example, found no significant associations between time spent gaming and poor mental health, concluding that this measure alone did not offer a full picture of the impact of video gaming. Therefore, other studies have sought to use different measures of gaming, such as genre. Kelly and Leung's (2021) metareview focused on Esports, finding some limited evidence for positive psychological impacts, particularly enjoyment and self-efficacy. Verheijen et al.'s (2020) study included the finding that a social gaming context was negatively associated with loneliness and that self-esteem was negatively associated with the competition genre. They also found that boredom as a motivation for game playing was negatively associated with self-esteem, but that having fun as a motivation was positively associated with self-esteem. Furthermore, Hartanto et al. (2021) proposed that contextual factors, such as who a CYP games with, when they game, why they game and how much, were generally overlooked in most studies exploring links between gaming and wellbeing. Their review provides a detailed critique of the overall picture, considering a range of studies, which they argue demonstrate a moderating role in the gaming/wellbeing relationship. Studies such as this aim to present a more nuanced understanding of gaming and wellbeing.

Despite this move to a more nuanced view of gaming, it appears that most studies still rely on the absence of pathology to understand the relationship between video gaming and wellbeing. This could be due to the types of correlational, survey data collected, which rely on traditional measures, for example, of anxiety, depression and video game addiction. It could also be, as suggested by Hartanto et al. (2021), that research into this area is built on assumptions of video gaming. Jones et al. (2014), too, suggest that publication bias and emphasis on laboratory measures may have a role to play in this regard.

In contrast to pathological measures, one study by Jones et al. (2014) has reviewed the existing literature on gaming in the context of the PERMA framework. Their aim was to consider video gaming in relation to flourishing, focusing on the more positive relationships in this area. They concluded that moderate game play (but not excessive) was linked to the five areas in PERMA. However, one area which

they felt needed further exploration was gender as a moderator to understand these associations more fully.

Recent research has explored many aspects of life in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic and gaming is no exception. Studies during this time appear to have made use of measures which may be considered as part of positive psychology or wellbeing frameworks, including connection, emotional coping and entertainment (Ellis et al., 2020; OFCOM, 2020).

### **Self-determination theory and gaming**

A further wellbeing related theory explored within the gaming literature is self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000). This theory explains wellbeing and motivation through the satisfaction of three psychological needs – competence, autonomy and relatedness (Ryan and Deci, 2000). The gaming literature explores the links between SDT in terms of need fulfilment and a range of areas in gaming, which is briefly presented here.

Mills and Allen (2020) studied the links between SDT, self-control and internet gaming disorder (IGD) in a small sample of 487 18–40-year-olds. They found that self-control and IGD were associated, as were daily need frustrations and severity of IGD. Whilst the age range of this study was adults, 50% were female. This may offer some insight into female gaming and links between gaming and wellbeing, particularly related to IGD.

Neys et al. (2014), combined social identity theory and SDT to explore persistence in gaming. They found that there was an interplay between gamer identity and SDT, with all three basic needs (autonomy, relatedness and competence) satisfied to the greatest extent in those who self-identified as a hardcore gamer. Autonomy and competence were also related to game enjoyment.

Finally, Fernandez de Henestrosa et al. (2022) studied a more recent gaming genre – battle royale (BR). They identify that other gaming genres have been found to fulfil different needs, and hoped to understand this new genre more fully. Their findings were that frequent interaction with and personal preference for BR games were linked with satisfaction of players basic needs. Interestingly, and in contrast to

the authors' predictions, BR gamers' relatedness was of more importance than the other two needs. Again, this study had a mainly male and adult population.

In summary, it appears that the wellbeing research linked to gaming is an area which could be further explored. Correlational studies demonstrate a mixed picture, and there is an over reliance on time gaming and pathology as measures. As noted by Simons and Baldwin (2021), there is a tension between wellbeing as a noun and measures of absence of pathology to explore wellbeing. Furthermore, literature has identified that different gaming genres may have different associations with wellbeing. There is a lack of literature that considers girls, gaming and wellbeing, and which considers gaming culture and wellbeing.

### **Girls, gaming and gaming culture**

#### **Current understanding of female gaming**

Once seen as a mainly male pursuit, with gamer identity stereotypically male (as discussed earlier), more females are now gaming, as identified by the latest OFCOM (2021a) children, parents and media study statistics. The findings from this showed that whilst girls still game less, the gap between numbers of girls and boys gaming is narrowing, with gaming now the third most favourite hobby in girls. Previous studies also demonstrate similar findings (see Fisher & Jenson, 2017; Leonhardt & Overá, 2021; Lopez-Fernandez et al., 2019). However, most studies have focused on the male gaming population, perhaps due to female gaming only recently increasing, with research not keeping pace with this change. Some more recent studies have aimed to redress this balance by exploring females who game in more depth (Fisher & Jenson, 2017; Lopez-Fernandez et al., 2019). Several such studies have attempted to compare the effects of gaming in females and males (Leonhardt & Overá, 2021; Lobel et al., 2017; Turner et al., 2012; Willoughby, 2008). There is variability in how well this has been achieved, for example, ensuring an equal number of male and female participants to enable the views of both to be reflected. This could be due to lower numbers of female gamers overall but as previously stated, this number is now growing (OFCOM, 2021a).

The main comparisons that appear in the research exploring differences between males and females who game, centre around problematic gaming or differences in patterns of gaming and social media use. The conclusions from

problematic gaming studies tend towards males showing more problematic gaming than females (Andreassen et al., 2016; Coyne et al., 2020; Donati et al. 2021; Turner et al., 2012). Indeed, McLean and Griffiths (2013) found that female gamers in their study tended to have control over their gaming. Studies which compare social media use between males and females, find that females are more likely to use social media and show signs of social media addiction (Andreassen et al., 2016), with boys finding gaming more socially significant than girls (Leonhardt & Overá, 2021). However, in Leonhardt and Overá's (2021) study, the participants acknowledged that girls felt less encouraged to game than boys and there was a greater social acceptance of boys gaming than girls. This is not a unique finding and is discussed in a review of the literature by Lopez-Fernandez et al. (2019), with the result being that girls stopped gaming earlier than boys, due to gender expectations. Donati et al. (2021) also found that girls were more monitored in their gaming than boys, which may demonstrate difference in gender expectations around gaming. However, as found by Lopez-Fernandez et al. (2019), females do experience more online harassment through gaming, which could be why parents monitor them more vigilantly than boys. Indeed, a study by McLean and Griffiths (2013) found that girls who game saw harassment as an inevitable part of their experience. However, this did not put them off gaming. This perhaps suggests that girls who do play video games commonly experience this negative aspect, but game nevertheless. Whilst not fully explored in the literature to date, this could be one area that may lead to more negative effects on wellbeing for girls.

In summary, there is a gap in the literature when exploring female gaming. The available literature suggests that there may be differences between males and females regarding problematic gaming. However, no further exploration has been conducted to explain this difference, or to define what happens for females in gaming instead. The fact that girls expect harassment as part of their gaming also demonstrates a unique aspect of gaming for this population.

### **Gamer identity and gaming culture**

Shaw (2011) found that males were more likely than females, transgender and genderqueer players to identify as gamers. In a further study, Shaw (2012) explores how previous movements have been instrumental in carving out a separate identity

for girls, through their marketing of specific types of games for girls. Moreover, she explores elements of gatekeeping and who is allowed to identify as a gamer. The history of this outlook in gaming is also described by Van Deventer and Golding (2016).

As Shaw (2011; 2012) asserts, both gender and gamer identity are socially constructed. The intersection of these constructions can be seen in previously discussed research regarding gaming being less socially acceptable for girls/females in general. Van Deventer and Golding (2016) also point to the term 'girl gamer' and how this is seen as something different to the 'normal' (i.e. cisgender male) gamer identity. This, in part, is a reason for girls to regard themselves less as a gamer, even though they often spend as much time invested in gaming (Shaw, 2011).

Vermeulen et al. (2017) studied female and gamer identities in more detail. They found that categorising oneself as a woman did not relate to identifying as a gamer. Instead, women who had stronger connections to other women were less likely to identify themselves as a gamer. Vermeulen et al. (2017) however, found that threat perception (including stigma and game performance evaluation) was not linked to whether a female identified as a gamer. It was found to be the case that, in contradiction to this finding, females who were aware of stigmatisation from males did reject the gamer identity. In a study by McLean and Griffiths (2013) in which thematic analysis was conducted on female gaming forum posts, gamer identity was found to be important and valued by gamers. There were mixed opinions about the term 'female/girl gamer', with some valuing this, and some feeling that it was unnecessary. Fisher and Jenson (2017) found that all-female spaces for game development appeared to lead to girls developing less stereotypical games than within mixed gender environments. The authors suggested this could be due to not needing to maintain female group belonging.

Female-only gaming spaces are also outlined by Tomkinson and Harper (2015), with females often setting up forums and communities just for them to be able to participate within the culture. In Leonhardt and Overá's (2021) study, girls interviewed stated that they found it difficult to find other girls who were interested in games that they could talk with. This could indicate why use of female-only forums is

important for this group and was also a finding from McLean and Griffiths' (2013) study.

Van Deventer and Golding (2016) provide a history of female achievements within game design, which is argued to be one aspect of gaming culture. However, as they and others (for example, Fisher & Jenson, 2017) note, females are generally still positioned outside gaming culture, often having their achievements within gaming diminished and their interests narrowed to so-called girl-games. Lopez-Fernandez et al. (2019) found that there is a general belief that females are less competent as gamers and with technology more broadly. This includes female self-perceptions as well as that of males. Furthermore, Fisher and Jenson (2017) outline how females are openly excluded from many aspects of gaming culture, such as professional tournaments and through stereotypical images within gaming. McLean and Griffiths' (2013) research found that female gamers often felt the need to hide their female identity due to experiencing negativity online, including abuse.

When considering girls who engage in videogaming and gaming culture more widely, it is, therefore, possibly unhelpful to only study girls who consider themselves a gamer. Furthermore, the intersection between female and gamer identity is important to consider. It appears that this is both a barrier and facilitator to participation in gaming culture and may depend on the context.

### **Girls and wellbeing**

The age range in this study (11–16-year-olds) is associated with the life stage of early to middle adolescence (Salmela-Aro, 2011). Within this time frame, there are several changes that occur in brain development, mainly associated with 'self-control, judgement, emotions, and organisation' (Salmela-Aro, 2011, p.362). Furthermore, Dahl et al. (2018) state that adolescence is a time whereby an emerging identity is developed, through relation to the world and oneself. Another important finding about adolescence is that this period appears to be associated with increased mental health needs (Deighton et al., 2020; Salmelo-Aro, 2011). Whilst this appears across both boys and girls, research suggests that mental health needs are more prevalent in girls at this stage. Public Health England (2017) found that between the ages of 11 and 15, the gap between boys and girls widened in terms of wellbeing factors such as life satisfaction, energy levels and feelings of loneliness.

Deighton et al. (2020) explored areas of mental health and subjective wellbeing in adolescent boys and girls, with their findings similar in terms of the widening gap.

Studies have also sought to identify protective factors for wellbeing. Public Health England (2017) found aspects such as positive relationships, belonging, Fsupportive environments and self-care were protective. These areas link to both the PERMA and adolescent wellbeing frameworks discussed earlier. A further study by Bear et al. (2021), found that during adolescence, perceived social support and wellbeing were related. For girls, by year nine, peer support was reported more than by boys. Stapley et al. (2020) identified that children (aged 9-12) who had multiple forms of support were better able to manage areas such as peer conflict and difficulties with their emotional wellbeing. Interestingly, one coping strategy used by the children in the study was playing video games.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has been the context and focus for further mental health and wellbeing research. Newlove-Delgado et al. (2021) report that previous patterns in mental health continued through the pandemic, including that girls were more likely than boys to meet criteria for having a mental health condition.

The most up-to-date governmental report into children and young people's wellbeing was published by Department for Education (DfE) in 2023. This report found that anxiousness had increased across primary and secondary age pupils. In line with previous reports of this nature, secondary age girls reported lower wellbeing than that of their male peers. Whilst the study is unable to offer information about causes, it does highlight issues such as online bullying being more highly reported among girls. The report also discusses the importance of a supportive school environment and strong social relationships, among other things, for wellbeing.

A recent qualitative literature review by Stentiford et al. (2021) aimed to understand some of the more causal elements of girls' mental health difficulties, in particular, academic pressure. Whilst they identify that there are likely to be a number of contributing factors, they conclude that in relation to academic pressures, fear for the future (and therefore, working hard to obtain academic achievement) as well as gender norms that girls are good students, had a role to play in the link between girls and mental health needs or lower wellbeing. Their study led to the proposal of a see-saw model, emphasising the multiple factors involved, and how



extreme feelings of pressure could tip the balance of girls' mental health related to schooling. They also proposed that seeing this balance as a preventative tool, whereby changes could be made to schooling environments and attitudes as an alternative to putting interventions in place once wellbeing became low (or mental health difficulties became apparent). This is an interesting concept in the wellbeing literature and one which may support further investigation into the balance of risk and protective factors in the wellbeing of girls, who seem to experience higher levels of mental ill-health, according to the literature described in this section.

### **Girls, gaming and wellbeing**

As previously discussed, much of the research related to gaming and wellbeing has traditionally had a mainly male population. However, there are some areas of gaming which may have specific relevance to female wellbeing.

One such area is representation within games. This includes stereotypical female characters and images considered 'for the male gaze'. Fisher and Jenson (2017) explain that this goes beyond in-game representation and that women are often objectified at gaming conventions and launches, for example.

Shaw (2011) explores representation in her research. Low representation of women in games is partly due to marketability, she argues, for example, 'groups are only representable insofar as they are marketable' (p.33). However, she also argues that this view of representation often leads to further marginalisation and oversimplification of identity.

It has been argued that the lack of or stereotypical representation of women in gaming has led to women feeling unable to participate as equals within gaming and gaming culture (Fisher & Jenson, 2017). Furthermore, Lopez-Fernandez et al. (2019) identify literature which supports the idea that stereotypical female avatar representation could lead to decreased self-esteem, depression and other negative impacts on wellbeing. As found by McLean and Griffiths (2013), females often played with a male identity to escape the negatives of their female gaming identity. They also found that females who gamed identified with game characters, and argue that this demonstrates the importance of gaming as part of their identity.

Furthermore, a recent study sought to include a broader measure of female gaming related to wellbeing. The study by Skripkauskaite et al. (2022) considered adaptative and maladaptive gaming profiles, finding that maladaptive phone gamers were mostly female. Phone gaming was significantly negatively correlated with wellbeing. This small group, the study concludes, is at potential risk of poorer functioning, including anxiety. This was a large study, with participants aged between 12 and 18 years old in England, and therefore particularly relevant to the current research study. It is also one of the few studies which highlights differences in the type of platform girls may use for gaming, including mobile phones.

In summary, girls' wellbeing within gaming appears to be a complex area, which has not yet been fully explored. This includes within gaming culture more widely. There are nuances that accompany being a female in what is largely seen as a male dominated interest, especially at a time of increased female gaming, and when previous literature has suggested differences between genders in problematic gaming. Therefore, it seems that there are a wide range of factors to consider when exploring the related wellbeing of girls who game that have not been combined in the literature to date.

### **Links to the educational psychologist (EP) role**

The experiences of girls who play video games have several links to the practice of EPs, which will be explored in this section.

#### **The unique contribution**

Ashton and Roberts (2006) conducted a small-scale research study to identify what Special educational needs and disability co-ordinators (SENDCos) and EPs value about the EP role. They found that SENDCos most valued the advice-giving role of the EP and individual work with children. EPs valued, changing people's perspectives, which included helping staff to view things differently and bringing a new perspective to children's 'problems'. They also placed a high value on pupils' views. This offers some insight into the unique position of the EP within schools.

As identified by Griffiths (2010), concerns often arise about CYP's gaming habits. He provided practical advice for parents, based on his own extensive gaming

research. Griffiths (2010) also provides a balanced view of the benefits and potential drawbacks of gaming.

EPs are often positioned in an advice-giving role, as demonstrated within this section. Furthermore, EPs have been found to value being able to bring new perspectives to understanding of perceived problems in CYP's lives. Understanding the role of video games in the lives of secondary school age girls would support them in being able to give a balanced view, similar to Griffiths' (2010) account. It should be noted that this was the only article concerning gaming in educational psychology specific journals, and, given the rapid changes in technology, it appears that more up-to-date information would be helpful for EPs. Furthermore, as identified in this literature review, the numbers of girls gaming have increased, and research in this area has not kept pace, either with this age range or gender.

### **Understanding CYP's problems and protective factors**

Johnstone and Dallos (2014) identify formulation as '*hypothesis about a person's difficulties, which draws from psychological theory*' (p. 5). They further explore that formulation draws on a range of areas within a person's life, including biological and cultural factors. It is a key component of making sense of and planning for support, and is one of the roles of a psychologist (Johnstone & Dallos, 2014).

This is a process which includes gathering the viewpoints of key stakeholders, including the CYP themselves. Ingram (2013) argues that CYP's theories about their problems should be sought. Lundy (2007) draws on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (article 12), which clarifies the right of CYP to have their views given due weight. Roffey (2015) argues that information on protective factors should be sought from CYP, such as where they feel belonging and what helps to bolster their wellbeing. Moreover, gathering the viewpoints of CYP involves the building of rapport (as discussed by Beaver, 2011). Beaver (2011) identifies that rapport building involves recognising and respecting the other person's model of the world. Without such rapport, it is unlikely that a CYP will want to become involved particularly as they are not often the problem holder (Beaver, 2011).

Part of formulation involves the interpretation of views and the link to relevant research and theory. At present, the literature about the role of gaming as a risk or protective factor is mainly drawn from research involving adolescent or adult males.

Other research which has taken a comparative approach between males and females has found that females tend to experience problematic gaming less often than males, as identified previously in this literature review. More recent research suggests a nuanced approach to gaming studies, with less polarised views about the positives and negatives. Therefore, it is important that EPs understand more fully this aspect of girls' lives, when attempting to formulate about their wellbeing, in a nuanced way. This may be particularly pertinent given the findings presented in this literature review that adolescent girls tend to have lower wellbeing and more mental health concerns. Furthermore, a study by Vardill and Calvert (2000), found that, in one local authority, more girls than boys were referred for emotional needs, despite referrals generally being higher for boys in most categories of need. Rapport building can also benefit from understanding the gaming of girls, so that EPs can recognise and respect their model of the world. This relational aspect of EP work cannot be overlooked, as it enables CYP to build trust and engage in individual work at various levels. Demonstration of interest in and understanding of a girls' gaming interest might enable this.

### **Conclusion**

The history of video gaming and gaming culture has been accompanied by a sense of moral panic at times (Markey & Ferguson, 2017), which has led to gaming research focusing on negative associations. This is not uncommon in new media. However, new technology innovations have meant that gaming has now become what some would consider as mainstream (DeGrove et al., 2015; Thorens et al., 2016) due to the ubiquity of gaming across platforms and range of genres. Over the years, multiple studies have demonstrated that children and young people spend free time engaged in gaming, and activities related to gaming, such as streaming or viewing streams. This has led to a wealth of research into gaming addiction, which has long been a concern of parents and school staff (Griffiths, 2010). However, alongside this, further research has begun to explore the benefits of gaming, as well as the negatives, in areas as wide-ranging as cognition and learning, adolescent adjustment and wellbeing.

Of note, the gaming literature has often drawn on the stereotypical male gamer, of late adolescence into early adulthood. This may have been due to the larger

number of male gamers within the gaming community. However, as figures now show (OFCOM 2021a), an increased number of girls count gaming as one of their hobbies. They are largely missing from the literature. Furthermore, the limited literature available points to differences in male and female gaming, for example, that girls face different challenges online and are less likely to reach threshold for video gaming addiction or problematic gaming. These aspects of the possibly unique experiences of girls who play video games demonstrate avenues which may not have been explored in relation to video gaming, girls and their wellbeing.

Many of the studies into gaming and wellbeing are of a quantitative nature. This appears to have led to a focus on wellbeing as an absence of pathology, such as depression or anxiety, due to their correlational nature. It can be argued through the wider literature on wellbeing, such as that which takes a positive psychology standpoint (Simons & Baldwin, 2021) that this does not fully capture the holistic nature of wellbeing. Therefore, there are possibly aspects of wellbeing related to gaming that are unexplored generally, and in relation to girls who game.

It appears timely that, due to the increase in girls who play video games (and possibly participate more widely in gaming culture; another unknown within the current literature) research seeks to understand gaming in this under researched population. Furthermore, literature into the position of girls who game suggests that more can be done to understand their wellbeing related to their gaming. Wellbeing in adolescent girls has been shown, in studies over time, to be lower than that of their male counterparts. Therefore, any protective factors, as well as risk factors, should be explored further in this population to understand their wellbeing. As already stated, the voice of these girls is missing in the largely quantitative body of research in this area. Consequently, qualitative studies, which allow a more holistic understanding of wellbeing to be explored in this area, would be a next step in developing this research.

In relation to educational psychology practice, it is hoped that adding to this literature will aid understanding of girls' gaming and how this relates to their wellbeing. This is an important development for helping EPs to formulate about girls' wellbeing more holistically, given the increase in girls' gaming, and the noted gender differences within gaming. Furthermore, it will support wider discussions about girls

who game and their wellbeing during consultation and advisory activities with parents and school staff, as well as understanding the context for girls who game. It is hoped that the study will also give an insight into related gaming activities, or gaming culture, whether girls engage in this and if this is perceived by them to impact their wellbeing in any way. This is another element which is missing from current studies which may be important to understand, given the rise of online gaming and wider gaming communities.

## Abstract

Video gaming is popular among children and young people. Once seen as a mainly male hobby, there has been an increase in female gaming, including in the secondary school age population. Much of the literature which explores gaming is male-focused and there has been a tendency to situate gaming within the context of addiction. However, research has shown that girls who game may face different situations to boys which might suggest differences in their wellbeing. Furthermore, there are current concerns about the wellbeing of adolescent girls more broadly. The aim of the current study is to add to the literature in this area by exploring what girls who play video games think about the relationship between their gaming, related activities (for example, watching YouTube videos) and their wellbeing. Six girls were interviewed about their gaming, related activities, and wellbeing, using semi-structured interviews and a visual method. Transcripts were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Four superordinate themes (gaming as a way to connect, levelling up: improvement and achievement, what gaming brings to my life, and making sense of identities in the gaming world) along with nine related subordinate themes were identified. These were linked to wellbeing as a spectrum within domains of Ross et al.'s (2020) framework for adolescent wellbeing. It is hoped that the findings of this study can support those working with secondary school age girls who play video games (and engage in related activities) to gain a more holistic understanding of their wellbeing, and to enable more nuanced understandings and conversations around gaming.

## Introduction

Video gaming is a popular hobby among children and young people (CYP) with three quarters of 5- to 15-year-olds playing online games in 2020 (OFCOM, 2021b). Furthermore, children have access to technology, on which they can game and be online from increasingly earlier ages, with 77% of 5-year-olds accessing a tablet computer, and children aged between 10 and 15 accessing laptops, mobile phones, tablets and gaming consoles (OFCOM, 2021a). 47% of 5–15-year-olds use YouTube to watch gamers and gaming tutorials (OFCOM, 2021a). Gaming and consumption of related content is a part of many CYP's lives, as demonstrated by these figures. Therefore, it is important for those working with CYP that their gaming is understood.

Previous contexts which have driven research around gaming have included a sense of 'moral panic' (Markey & Ferguson, 2017), leading to school and parental concerns about gaming addiction and problematic behaviours (Griffiths, 2010). However, over the years, and particularly more recently, research has appeared to focus on a more nuanced understanding of video gaming among children and young people, including its impact. This has included a move away from using only time spent gaming as a complete measure, and an exploration of gaming contexts and genres (Przyvylski and Mishkin, 2016; Verheijen et al., 2020).

Gaming research has mainly focused on adolescent or adult males, which links to the general stereotype of gamers as white males (Shaw, 2012). However, recent statistics demonstrate that more females are now gaming (OFCOM, 2021a). Whilst more boys than girls game, the gap is narrowing, and gaming is now the third most favourite hobby for girls, according to OFCOM (2021a). Given that the research in this area is mainly male focused, there appears to be a need to understand the gaming of girls, now that there is an increase in their number.

The research that does exist into girls and gaming has some interesting findings. It suggests that girls are less likely to experience problematic gaming (Andreassen et al., 2016; Coyne et al., 2020; Donati et al., 2021; Turner et al., 2012), experience more online harassment (Lopez-Fernandez et al., 2019; McLean & Griffiths, 2013); and tend to be positioned outside of gaming cultures and identities (Fisher & Jensen, 2017; McLean & Griffiths, 2013). This suggests a unique perspective for girls within gaming, with elements connected to wellbeing, which may



have positive or negative effects. However, many of the studies (with a few exceptions) tend to compare the gaming of boys and girls, rather than focusing on the unique context for girls in this area, as outlined. Furthermore, wellbeing as a concept within gaming is often explored through correlational studies, using measures of pathology, such as anxiety and depression to draw conclusions. Therefore, there is little within the existing literature that aims to understand the lived experiences of girls who game. McLean and Griffiths (2013) is a notable exception. Their thematic analysis drew on forum posts made by females who game. They noted in their study that their data was secondary and suggested that further research in this area should aim to collect primary data.

The topic of wellbeing is complex and can be difficult to define. Simons and Baldwin (2021) identify the tensions between wellbeing as a positive noun, and the way it is often measured in relation to pathology. Indeed, such measures of wellbeing might not fully capture its extent, given that those who advocate for positive psychology would study flourishing rather than only the absence of pathology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Furthermore, adolescent wellbeing is explored in more detail by Ross et al. (2020) in relation to the United Nations 2030 agenda for sustainable development. They argue that adolescence is a critical period in which factors contributing to lifelong wellbeing are often acquired or consolidated. They developed a framework which encompasses subjective and objective ideas about wellbeing. Subjective elements can be identified as those which include individual and personal fulfilment, whilst objective areas would include quality of life indicators (Ross et al., 2020). They proposed a framework of five interconnected domains:

1. Good health and optimal nutrition
2. Connectedness, positive values, and contribution to society
3. Safety and a supportive environment
4. Learning, competence, education, skills and employability
5. Agency and resilience

This demonstrates the multi-faceted nature of wellbeing and how it can be thought of more broadly than the absence of pathology.

In the context of adolescent wellbeing, Public Health England (2017) found that between the ages of 11 and 15, the gap between girls' and boys' wellbeing widens. Girls are more likely to meet the criteria of having a mental health condition (Newlove-Delgado et al., 2021). The most recent governmental report into CYP's wellbeing (Department for Education; DFE, 2023) found in line with previous studies that secondary age girls reported lower wellbeing than male peers. A recent qualitative literature review by Stentiford et al. (2021) aimed to understand some of the causes of girls' mental health needs in the light of such concerns. They found that academic pressures, including gender norms about girls being good students and extreme feelings of pressure, had a role to play. Again, this suggests some unique factors and contexts for the wellbeing of adolescent girls.

The vast majority of studies into gaming and wellbeing tend towards correlational data, with a view to representing wellbeing as the absence of anxiety and/or depression thereby focusing on more negative associations. One exception is a review of the literature by Jones et al. (2014) who used the PERMA framework (Seligman, 2011) to understand gaming and wellbeing. They drew conclusions that moderate game play (but not excessive) was linked to the five areas in PERMA (positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment). However, they felt that gender as a factor for understanding these associations further could be explored more fully.

Due to the rapid development in technology and gaming, and increase in girls' gaming, there is now an opportunity for further research into the experiences of girls who game. Given the unique experiences of girls within the more stereotypically male gaming world, there are possibilities to understand the impact of gaming and related activities on girls' wellbeing. This is particularly important given the concerns around the wellbeing of adolescent girls more generally. From a psychological perspective, it is important to understand the risk and protective factors which contribute to wellbeing, which have not always been fully explored within a deficit or pathology model.

Throughout this research, the labels 'girl gamer' and 'gamer girl' will not be used. This is because there are mixed feelings related to such labels. Whilst McLean and Griffiths (2013) found that some female gamers identified themselves with this

label, others found it less helpful. Van Deventer and Golding (2016) felt that this can be a term that is 'othering' and therefore unhelpful.

### ***Research aims and rationale***

The aim of this study was to explore the gaming and related experiences (for example, streaming, watching YouTube videos) of girls, with a specific focus on their wellbeing. The rationale for this was the gap in the literature that exists around the gaming of girls, in the context of the unique experiences of girls within what is perceived to be (and perhaps traditionally was) a mainly male-dominated hobby. The present study also sought to understand this from a perspective other than, or additionally to, the pathological lens of wellbeing (such as the absence of anxiety or depression). The rationale for this was that a wider understanding of wellbeing in this area would build on previous research and help to explore the views of girls themselves, which is missing from correlational studies. It would present as an open-minded exploration, which could include anxiety and depression, but not be the sole focus.

It was also hoped that this will inform the work of educational psychologists (EP) who work with children and young people around their wellbeing. At present, concerns about gaming addiction dominate, and it may be formulated as a risk factor for children's wellbeing. A more nuanced understanding of girls' gaming may provide a wider set of factors related to wellbeing, which could be protective or risk factors. Given the current concerns about girls' mental health and wellbeing during adolescence, it seems timely to understand more about this by taking a holistic view of their lives, including this growing hobby.

### ***Research questions***

This study explored the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What do secondary school age girls who play video games think about the relationship between video gaming experiences and their wellbeing?

RQ2: What do secondary school age girls think about the relationship between gaming-related activities and their wellbeing?

## **Methodology**

### **Design**

#### ***Ontology, epistemology and methodology***

Ontology is identified as an assumption about reality, for example, whether it is separate from the individual (realism) or constructed by the individual through interaction with the world (relativism) (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Cohen et al., 2018). As identified by Scotland (2012), ontological positioning is the belief of 'how things really are' (p.9).

Following from this, epistemology makes assumptions about the nature of knowledge and how this can be acquired (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). If one adopts an objective (or realist) ontology, then absolute knowledge can be obtained, and the researcher takes a position detached from the truth to be discovered (Scotland, 2012). In contrast, if one adopts a subjective (or relativist) ontology, then there is no objective truth to be discovered. Instead, meaning is created with others and can change over time (Scotland, 2012).

Methodology is chosen based on the ontological and epistemological positions that one takes. A realist position, for example, seeks to objectively measure, and would therefore align with a quantitative methodology. In contrast, if the researcher takes a relativist position, then a qualitative methodology is appropriate to uncover the subjective (Cohen et al., 2018).

#### ***The current study***

The current research aligns with a critical realist ontological and epistemological position. As described by Stutchbury (2022), critical realism seeks explanations and suggests that, whilst there is an objective reality (in line with a realist ontology) individuals experience and make meaning from this in different ways (in line with relativist epistemology). Thus, it is seen to borrow from both relativist and realist ontological and epistemological assumptions. Booker (2021) presented a strong argument for critical realism as an appropriate ontology and epistemology within educational psychology. He drew on the work of Bhaskar to explain that education exists within a social structure but is also related to the psychology of the individual within this system. Bhaskar recognised objects (and later, social

structures) as ‘the real things and structures, mechanisms and processes, events and possibilities in the world...’(Bhaskar, 1998, cited in Booker, 2021, p. 245). It is ‘the real’ that has causal power. As stated by Robson and McCartan (2017), the critical realist view is concerned with seeking explanations, whereby mechanisms acting in contexts create the outcomes of actions. Booker (2021) argued that such considerations could be applied to educational psychology in that ‘individual, social and cultural entities are jointly activated in the production of events in education, in particular schools and colleges’ (p.240). He also stated that constructs within educational psychology should be considered as real (in a causal sense, in line with a critical realist position).

The critical realist position of the current research considers that constructs within educational psychology (and psychology more broadly) are considered real and therefore causal. Furthermore, the researcher recognises the interplay between individual and social entities. The research aims to seek explanations about gaming and wellbeing of secondary school age girls.

In keeping with the researcher’s position, a qualitative methodology was chosen. Specifically, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyse the data. IPA was selected due to the focus it has on giving voice and interpretation of experience and meaning making (Larkin et al., 2006). At present, the voices of girls who play video games is largely missing within the research, and IPA allows for their views to be represented.

### ***IPA’s theoretical underpinnings***

There are three areas which underpin IPA. This will briefly be explored in this section, along with how they relate to the current study.

**Phenomenology.** Phenomenology, as described by Willig (2013), aims to understand a participant’s experience, considering that an event can be experienced in any number of ways, depending on the individual viewpoint. Larkin et al. (2006) discuss Heidegger’s (1985) work and the argument that humans are always part of a meaningful world, and, therefore, can only be understood within the context of this. The current study considers that for girls who are engaged in video gaming, this is a part of their world and context. It is within this context that wellbeing will be explored for this specific group of participants.

**Hermeneutics.** Smith et al. (2009) state that hermeneutics is ‘the theory of interpretation’ (p.21). They also make links between phenomenology and hermeneutics in that, within IPA, the researcher interprets how participants make meaning from their activities. The current study aims to offer interpretation of participants’ meaning making around their wellbeing, whilst engaged in video gaming and related activities.

**Idiography.** IPA focuses on ‘the particular’ (Smith et al., 2009). Participants are selected as they give a perspective from a specific context of which they have lived experience. In the current study, there is a focus on secondary-school aged girls who play video games and it is interested in their specific lived experiences and context.

**Double hermeneutic.** IPA positions the researcher as involved in the double hermeneutic. This means that the researcher is making sense of the participant’s sense making (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher only has access to the participant’s lived experience through their words, but imposes their own meaning, through the framework of the IPA study. In the present study, the researcher has access to the lived experience of the participants through interviews and visual methods (described below). As a researcher in educational psychology, and through the lens of wellbeing, these are the ways the lived experience might be made sense of by the author of this study.

### ***Visual methods***

The decision to use a visual method alongside interview was made as the researcher understood that video gaming is a visual media. As acknowledged by Reavey (2021), individuals experience the world through more than the spoken word, including visual forms of communication. For the participants in the present study, this involved the visual experiences of video gaming and related activities.

Fawns (2021) suggests that use of visual in interviews allows agency to the participant in terms of what they would like to discuss. Given that IPA is interested in giving voice and focuses on participants’ lived experience, this appeared to be a complementary method. Recent research has used visual methods alongside IPA, finding that this creates a deeper understanding of lived experience (Bartoli, 2020; Boden et al., 2019). In the present study, participants were asked to create or find an image that would tell something of their gaming experience. To preserve

confidentiality, participants were instructed to use images that did not include anything that might identify them. Other than this, participants were free to take an image or search for an image online of their choosing.

In the present study, the pictures were not analysed separately. Instead, they were used within the interview to help the participants tell their story and focus on something related to gaming that was important to them.

## **Participants**

IPA studies focus on detailed account of lived experiences, and therefore, smaller numbers of participants are preferable (Smith et al., 2009). Due to the nature of IPA and this study, purposive sampling was used to recruit female participants who play video games. The literature has made clear that females do not always identify themselves a gamer, despite their involvement with gaming often being on a par with male counterparts. This is because they are often positioned outside of gaming culture (Fisher & Jenson, 2017; Shaw, 2011; Vermeulen et al., 2017). Therefore, it was important to recruit participants who played any type of game across any platform to ensure that a true picture of female gaming could be explored with no preconceptions about what this may involve. Girls did not have to identify as a gamer to take part in the study, again, to provide as wide as possible exploration of female adolescent gaming.

Smith et al. (2009) state that homogeneity of participants is important. The following inclusion criteria were applied for this reason:

1. Female aged between 11 and 16 years old
2. Attends a mainstream secondary school
3. Can communicate verbally
4. Engages in some form of gaming – on any device/platform, for any length of time and within any genre
5. Does not need to self-identify as a 'gamer' or be a 'heavy/hardcore' gamer
6. May or may not engage in related activities or gaming culture

The participants in this study were six girls aged between 12 and 16 years old (see table 1). One participant was recruited through a school in the researcher's placement local authority, and five from social media posts on Facebook and Twitter, which were shared on through the researcher's contacts on the social media sites.

The six participants attended six different schools within different local authorities across England.

IPA values the idiographic and therefore, smaller numbers of participants are preferable. For a first study, up to six participants is suggested, and for doctoral research, between four and ten participants are proposed (Smith et al., 2009).

**Table 1**

*Participants and ages*

Pseudonym	Age
Amy	13
Kim	13
Lena	13
Megan	12
Corrinne	16
Jade	13

**Data collection**

In keeping with IPA, (Smith et al., 2009) semi-structured interviews of up to one hour were conducted with each participant, online via Microsoft Teams. A visual method was also used. Participants were asked to bring to interview a photograph or picture which captured something of their gaming experience. The reasoning for this was two-fold. Firstly, it was used to build rapport with the participant. Secondly, the image was used as a starting point for discussion as a means of eliciting data.

The semi-structured interviews aimed to capture some of the questions arising from current literature, which would enable the research question to be answered. In



addition to this, some flexibility was required to enable each participant to talk about what mattered to them, in line with the idiographic nature of IPA. A copy of the semi-structured interview schedule can be found in appendix A.

Following the interview, transcripts were typed by the researcher. Some participants expressed they would like to review transcripts as part of the initial consent form completed. These were sent to the participant via email as requested.

## **Ethics**

Ethical approval was given to the study by University of East Anglia (see appendix B). An amendment to this was obtained, to enable wider data collection (from social media, as well as from schools).

All participants and their parents were given an information and consent form. No interviews were conducted until signed forms were returned. A copy of the information and consent forms can be found in appendix C. Participants were able to choose if they had a parent/carer present during the interview, but part of the condition of the interview included having a parent/carer in the house, who could be present in case of any safeguarding concerns and for debrief information. Debrief information was sent to all participants' parents/carers following the interview, even when no concerns were raised, in case required for future reference (see appendix D).

## **Data analysis**

In line with IPA analysis (Smith et al., 2009) table 2 demonstrates how the researcher analysed the data at each stage. Further detail and examples of the stages can be found in appendix E.

**Table 2***Data analysis in-line with IPA structure*

Description of stage	Process of analysis	Link to page number in appendix E
Process for each individual transcript		
Step 1: Reading and rereading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This stage involved the researcher reading and rereading each transcript, becoming fully immersed in what each participant was saying. This was an important stage of familiarisation, and for understanding the essence of what each participant brought to the interview.</li> <li>• Each transcript was read until the researcher felt she had become fully immersed in the participant's story and had a clear picture of the interview, including general and more detailed aspects.</li> </ul>	N/A
Step 2: Initial noting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Starting at the beginning of each transcript, and working through to the end, the researcher noted line-by-line initial explorations of the data.</li> <li>• This included descriptive comments (in red), linguistic comments (in blue) and conceptual comments (in green) in the right-hand margin of the transcript.</li> <li>• Descriptive comments identified key words or phrases, accepting and using the participants meanings and words.</li> <li>• Linguistic comments identified how language was used, including metaphor, and, in this case, language related specifically to elements of gaming/gaming culture.</li> </ul>	142

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conceptual comments allowed for the researcher to engage at a more interpretative level.</li> <li>• This involved an analytic process of engaging with what the participant was saying, questioning the meaning for the researcher and the participant.</li> </ul>	
Step 3: Developing emergent themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Following line-by-line notation, emergent themes were noted in the left-hand margin of each transcript. These represented a statement, summary and researcher interpretation of the notes collected in the right-hand margin.</li> <li>• Again, each transcript was analysed from beginning to end in detail.</li> </ul>	142
Step 4: Searching for connections across emergent themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Each emergent theme was written on a post-it note. An emergent theme that appeared more than once was written on individual post-it notes (e.g. if achievement was mentioned twice, two post-it notes were used).</li> <li>• Post-it notes were placed on a large sheet of paper, with themes that were similar placed together. This allowed for the researcher to move and rearrange themes as much as necessary until she was happy with the 'fit'.</li> <li>• Following this, themes were typed into a table for each participant. This allowed for final checks and movement of emergent themes into clusters. Abstraction (identifying patterns), subsumption (an emergent theme becomes the superordinate theme) and numeration (frequency of emergent themes) were used to</li> </ul>	145
		146

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	develop superordinate themes for each individual.	
Step 5: Moving to the next case	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Steps 1-4 were repeated for each individual participant.</li> </ul>	N/A
Process for full group of participants		
Step 6: Looking for patterns across cases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A table was used to identify group superordinate and subordinate themes. This process clustered together individual superordinate themes from each participant. Abstraction, subsumption and numeration were employed to identify group superordinate and subordinate themes. Polarisation (identifying opposites) was also employed at this stage to enable divergence to be noted within themes.</li> <li>At this stage, themes that were not related to wellbeing, and, therefore, did not answer the research questions, were discarded and not developed further into group superordinate or subordinate themes.</li> <li>To check the themes, the researcher identified and typed a list of extracts which demonstrated each theme for each participant. This helped the researcher to reflect further on and make sense of the themes developed, particularly the superordinate theme, what gaming brings to my life.</li> <li>These extracts were then selected for the final write-up, based on telling the story of each superordinate and subordinate theme, including similarities and divergence.</li> </ul>	148
		150

Smith et al. (2009) suggest that Yardley's (2000) four principles for quality in qualitative research are relevant to IPA studies. Table 3 demonstrates how the researcher addressed these principles within the present IPA study.

**Table 3**

*How the researcher addressed Yardley's principles*

Yardley's principles	How this was achieved/addressed
Sensitivity to context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A thorough literature review was conducted, which highlighted a research opportunity for understanding the gaming of secondary-school age girls, whilst capturing their voices related to the subject.</li> <li>• Sensitivity to the context of girls potentially interacting with others online, and within perceived male-dominated environment was considered from an ethical standpoint, and clear safeguarding protocols were put in place and followed (including having an adult in the home during the interview and debrief information).</li> <li>• Findings linked to a relevant framework of adolescent wellbeing in the discussion, along with other key literature in the area.</li> </ul>
Commitment and rigour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The researcher attended additional online learning lectures about qualitative research, IPA and analysis and engaged widely with reading on the subject, including that of Watts (2014) regarding closeness and distance from the data.</li> <li>• Homogeneity of participants through age range and school experience.</li> <li>• Participants were purposively sampled, so that their experiences of gaming and related activities could be drawn upon to answer the identified research questions.</li> <li>• Attentiveness to participants was achieved using a visual method, which allowed for each individual to bring something of importance to them to the interview. Attending to this as a first question enabled exploration from their starting point. Use of semi-structured interviews, based partially on previous literature, allowed for wide-ranging and individual discussions about the topic.</li> </ul>

- Application of idiographic principles of IPA ensured that each participant's data was considered on an individual level prior to combined themes. Theories were applied afterwards at the discussion level to ensure this.
- The researcher kept a reflective diary whereby she aimed to 'bracket' preconceptions prior to and after each interview, so that she could attend to what each individual brought to the interview process.

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Transparency  
and  
coherence

- The stages of the research are described within the write-up. Table 2 demonstrates the stages of analysis that were undertaken by the researcher, accompanied by additional materials in appendix E.
- A coherent argument followed from the identification of literature in this area, through to developing an interview schedule, analysis of data to answer the research questions and finally discussion regarding how the findings related to the wider literature.
- Extracts were identified for each participant for each theme and then judiciously selected to highlight concurrence and divergence within themes, in line with recommendations from Smith et al. (2009).

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Impact and  
importance

- The study has importance for educational psychologists and other education professionals in several areas, namely rapport building, formulation and insight into gaming from girls' perspectives.
  - The study addresses a gap in the current literature, and is unique regarding the gender and age range of participants when exploring gaming and related activities. It is one of the few qualitative studies in this area.
  - A commitment to dissemination of this work is included in the reflective chapter.
-

## Analysis

Table 4 is an overview of the superordinate and subordinate themes identified within this study.

**Table 4**

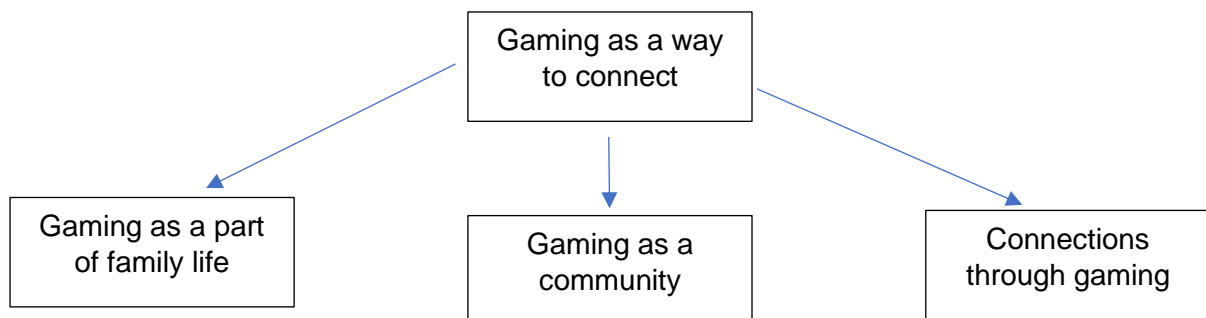
*Master table of superordinate and subordinate themes*

Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes
Gaming as a way to connect	Gaming as part of family life Gaming as a community Connections through gaming
Levelling up: Improvement and achievement	Effort and improvement Sense of achievement
What gaming brings to my life	Gaming as a balanced part of my life Gaming for a purpose
Making sense of identities in the gaming world	Female identity Gaming identities

### Gaming as a way to connect

Figure 1 shows the subordinate themes for this superordinate them.

**Figure 1 – Gaming as a way to connect superordinate and subordinate themes**



This superordinate theme captured the many ways in which gaming led to and facilitated connections with others, as well as how these connections were part of gaming itself. There was also discussion of the gaming community, including how participants did or did not see themselves as part of this. However, not all connections were positive, and this was also explored by some of the girls. This superordinate theme was present across all six participants.

### ***Gaming as a part of family life***

For all six girls, gaming was in some way linked to family and family life. It was family members in all cases that had a part in them beginning their interest in gaming, with four of the girls citing their dad as the main person who had started them gaming. Siblings and cousins were also mentioned.

**Jade:** I feel like it might have, because I started gaming, well, I started gaming really because, well, it's something I enjoy. And my dad really likes playing video games, so it's kind of a common thing we have in common. So does my brother and sometimes my sister does, (191-195)

Jade reflects on how she began gaming. For her, it is something she has in common with other family members. As she enjoys gaming, it has become a shared interest within the family.

There was also a sense that gaming as part of family life was long term and evolving, as demonstrated by the following extract.

**Lena:** Hmm...Probably my dad cuz he likes games a lot. He has a ton of consoles, and when I was younger, I had this like Leapfrog thing it was a little bit like a PS Vita or something, and you could like play games on it and stuff, and I found that really fun. Uh, and then, yeah, my dad, I used to play on his Wii U all the time. We played Mario Party and um Super Mario 3D World and Mario Kart and I had Splatoon as well. (301-308)

Lena reflects on her gaming from early childhood with a Leapfrog toy, which she compares with a PS Vita. She seems to suggest that her dad having a lot of consoles led to her having this game and then later others. As her interest



developed, with her finding gaming 'really fun', she played different games with her dad that they both enjoyed.

Similarly, Amy talks about the use of gaming to connect with family members, in this case, her brother.

**Amy:** because I, I don't, I don't have very long concentration periods, so you will find me constantly switching between different games because I just don't have a long enough attention span. Because my brother is only into one game, when I buy a copy of that one game, which is Terraria, I think I've mentioned it, when I buy that one copy of that game, it means that I can play with him and it's just a nice way to sibling bond (384-391).

For Amy, her gaming is wide ranging, switching between several games due to her short attention span. She contrasts this with her brother, who appears to enjoy playing one specific game, Terraria. She invests in the game (through buying a copy) as a way of spending time with him. Amy's use of 'sibling bond' seems to imply that it is more about just playing the game together, it is a way to connect and build their relationship through this shared interest, even though the two of them perhaps enjoy different games.

### ***Gaming as a community***

Four of the participants referenced a gaming community. There were nuances in what this community meant to them, whether it was one they felt welcomed in or positioned themselves within.

For Corrinne, the community aspect of gaming is 'one of the most important parts' (452).

**Corrinne:** Um, I think like one of the most important things is just being like being able to be part of the community, even if you don't really want to interact with people, you can still like look at stuff online without talking to anybody. You can still play the games, and like see what other people are doing, even if, yeah, and you can just, it feels like more of a connection, cuz if you're just doing something on your own, like, you're like, 'oh, was that good? I don't really know' like, I want to see like how other people are doing with it, and what they've done. (440-449).

Being part of the community is what is important to Corrinne, but this does not necessarily mean interaction with others. It is the gaming and watching of related content that makes you one of the community. Within the gaming community, comparison of her progress in the game to that of fellow gamers, is seen as a positive way to connect, rather than interaction through discussion. There is a sense that doing gaming on your own, without this comparison lacks connection. She wants to see what others are doing, despite being a girl who tends to play single-player games. On the surface, the playing of single-player games may seem to lack connection, but as this extract shows, going beyond the game itself and watching related content creates the sense of community and connection for Corrinne.

There was a similar sense of gaming without interaction meaning you are part of the community from Jade (I would say so, because I play video games. That kind of means you're part of it 373-374). Amy also referenced interaction through watching videos but without discussion (I'm what you would refer to as a lurker, so I don't do anything, I just watch them 172-173).

Jade acknowledged the mixture of people that were part of the gaming community. This was in reference to a player of Minecraft who had been 'a little bit too proud of when they win' (347)

**Jade:** they want to win all the time and I think, it's the gaming community's just a nice place but sometimes you get people that ruin it a bit, and it's just, people game for lots of different reasons, but it's just not nice to game and be horrible to other people. (355-359)

Jade refers to the community as a nice place. In a later extract, she refers to it as a 'place that I can kind of sometimes feel welcome' (382). There is a sense in both extracts that the gaming community is generally nice, or a place that is sometimes welcoming, but that that it is not always the case. There are people who ruin it a bit through being horrible to others. She recognises that there is an incompatibility in reasons for gaming. There are different reasons why people game, for some people it is winning that is the most important thing, but for her, this is not the case. Whilst she acknowledges and accepts this difference, others in the gaming community do not always, and this can create a less welcoming atmosphere.

### ***Connections through gaming***

All six participants referred to connections through gaming in their interviews. Sometimes these were connections made through their gaming, and other times it was a way to connect with others they knew in their lives, such as school friends. There was a level of apprehension from some participants about creating connections online.

Kim describes the way that she uses games to connect with friends from school.

**Kim:** Yeah, sometimes I talk to them in the game, like, I'll facetime them, and call them, and we'll just, like, play the game from there. And stuff like that. It...Um, most of the time we'll probably talk about something else, but some of the time we will talk about the game and that. (445-447, 450-452)

Kim's use of the game is part of her socialisation with friends. She facetimes them to play the game together, which suggests a sense of companionship through the act of gaming. Whilst they might talk about the game, this is not the main purpose of their discussions. Most of the time they are talking about something else as they game. The focus is on the connection with each other, and the game is a medium through which to socialise and facilitate this connection.

Similarly, Lena plays with friends she knows.

**Lena:** I guess...you know, again, it depends what game it is, but like if you're playing with your friends, it makes it more fun, especially because if there's like a chat feature or something you can like have like a conversation with them and like talk about the game and...as well, like outside of the game, if you have a friend that also plays the same thing as you, you can both like, obsess over the game together instead of just being like with yourself and the internet... Just like, really liking it, you know, like talking about it a lot and the different characters and like what you got up to in the game and stuff like that. (353-361, 364-366).

The importance of relationships with friends and how this is built into Lena's gaming life is evident. Her use of 'it depends on the game' suggests that some games, for her, are about this social element, whereas others are not. The fun in the

gaming when playing with friends is being able to connect through conversation. Conversation serves to share ideas, news and opinions, and these extend both within and outside of the game. Gaming is a shared interest between her and 'real life' friends and allows them to bond. Their conversation is about sharing their news about the game, it's associated characters and events, both during and afterwards. This is contrasted with 'being with yourself and the internet', which might also reflect some of Lena's chosen gaming ('it depends what game it is'). There are games which Lena identifies as being for socialising and connection and ones that are not, but playing with friends is identified as 'more fun'. This perhaps suggests the importance of being able to have games which allow for this conversation and connection.

In contrast to the connections made through gaming, Amy appeared to have some reservations.

**Amy:** It's a way for me to feel safe. But also, certain games, like I will want to play Splatoon, but because Splatoon is a very team-based game, it's sometimes nice to be talking, because it's a team of four, as well, you need quite a few friends, to be able to fully play, I mean, obviously, sometimes you need, but um, sometimes I get this, I want to be, I want to be on a call, I want to be talking to my Splatoon friends as we play or whatever, but I just, I'm just so wary of the internet, that I can't face trying to make those friends, and having enough level of trust to be able to do that. (500-510).

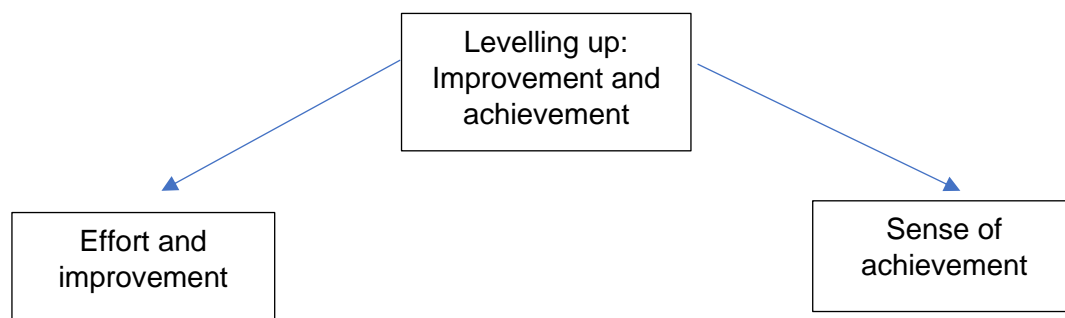
Amy suggests that there is a tension between feeling safe and making connections. The idea of Splatoon being a team-based game implies working together towards a shared goal. There is a separation between friends and 'Splatoon friends' and needing enough players to be able to play the game properly. Amy's concerns about staying safe online highlight the importance of a feeling of trust within friendships. She feels this trust with people she knows, but not with those on the internet, who she knows less well. Playing with 'Splatoon friends' does not involve conversation, which seems to be an element that Amy is identifying as part of friendship and trust. She wants to be on a call with them talking...but she can't face trying to make those friends. The fact that she cannot face it suggests the level of concern that she has about her own online safety and how to navigate connections

with others in a way she can feel comfortable with. There is an element of connection through the team work of playing Splatoon, but not full friendship, as she does not trust them enough to join a call, to engage in conversation with them.

### **Levelling up: Improvement and achievement**

Figure 2 shows the subordinate themes for this superordinate theme.

**Figure 2 – Levelling up: Improvement and achievement superordinate and subordinate themes**



This superordinate theme captured the elements of improvement and achievement within gaming. The two subordinate themes were separate, but also interconnected. All participants talked about the effort and process of improvement within gaming, to achieve. The element of challenge and overcoming challenge as an integral part of effort (and in turn, achievement) was also evident. Some participants referenced the use of learning through watching related content online.

### ***Effort and improvement***

All six girls described a process of effort and improvement as an integral part of their gaming. Corrinne and Jade in the following extracts talk about effort leading to achievement, and the process of improvement and challenges within gaming.

**Corrinne:** Yeah, cuz like when I first try something, I'm like, 'oh I'm not very good at this'. But then I'll put a few, like, I'll play it like for a week or something, oh, I'm getting, you can see yourself getting better at it and like, I mean, you can do things you couldn't do before, and then you can try harder challenges and things like that...Um, it feels like, um, I don't know how to describe it. You know, like, like, feeling, oh yeah, I can do it, like it feels like

nice to be really good at something because you've put in the time for it. Um, and then it's like better to like compare with like people online, cuz you've like you've put in the experience, like because, like people, people are saying like 'ooh, it, that took me ages'. (147-152; 154-160)

Corrinne talks about the process of effort and challenge in gaming. There is sense here of a cycle of not being very good, putting in effort (and time), seeing an improvement (or change) in her own performance and then trying a harder challenge. The 'nice' feeling she gets as a result is linked to the effort she has put in that has led to the reward of achieving her goal, rather than the achievement itself. It is the appreciation of the effort that is reflected back to her when she shares her experiences with fellow gamers, making it better to compare when you have gone through the experience of overcoming a challenge through your own efforts, rather than easily winning a game. This sense of effort is acknowledged and appreciated by herself and others in the gaming community.

**Jade:** I guess it is. I like being good at it, but I also like a challenge, but when the challenge is too hard, that's not as fun, but when it's something for me I feel that I could do, but I've got to try, push myself to do it, I quite like that. (212-215)

Jade considers the balance between being good at a game and still finding a level of challenge. She suggests that part of the fun of gaming is within the challenge, rather than just being good at the game. However, there is a fine line between a level of challenge and a level that is perceived as too difficult. The fun and enjoyment is about an *achievable* challenge, one which Jade has to push herself (put effort into) to do, but in the end leads to an overcoming of the challenge she has set herself.

Both extracts demonstrate the element of self-chosen challenge as part of the enjoyment of gaming. The challenges are ones the girls have set themselves in relation to their gaming hobby and are therefore motivated to put effort into for the reward of overcoming their challenges. The achievement that they get from this is not necessarily about winning, but rather achieving a goal. Jade herself says 'winning isn't always what I go for' (220) and Corrinne references progressions

several times 'yeah, like progression' (144), 'Yeah, I think I do like to see that bit of progression with it' (401).

In the process of improvement and challenge, Megan and Amy suggest that there is an element of learning involved in this cycle, as evidenced in the following extracts.

**Megan:** ....Um....I watch like challenges within the games and um it's just really fun to watch because then you can like complete them yourself cuz then they show you like little tricks and tips that you necessarily, you might not necessarily know so that helps me build up my like, my confidence within the game and build up my how good I am in it. (158-164)

Megan talks about the use of YouTube videos to give her tricks and tips related to the games she plays. They are a learning experience, almost a self-teaching tool to build up how good she is. It seems that there is an acknowledgement that it is ok not to know everything (the tricks and tips are things you *might not necessarily know*, perhaps something you might learn from a more experienced peer), and that this learning and improvement in the game is what builds her confidence.

**Amy:** Ummm...so...Splatoon is...because Splatoon is an online game, there's also a very much competitive scene around it, like, there are tournaments held often with teams and stuff so I like to watch replays of the tournaments and stuff, basically to pick up on how I could improve through other people (167-172)

Amy references the online nature of Splatoon (one of her favourite games) as what makes it very competitive. The sense is that the competitive scene around it is not necessarily about winning for her, more that it provides her with a way to learn from other gamers through watching replays on YouTube and Twitch. Amy uses these to teach herself about what might help her. Amy does not reference the watching of replays to get her to a point where she can win or achieve anything other than *improve her own* performance. It appears that her goal is in relation to her own performance from a starting point, rather than in relation to the performance of others.

### ***Sense of achievement***

Linked to effort and improvement, all six girls talked about a sense of achievement that they experienced through different elements of their gaming. This sometimes included winning, but also included completing and overcoming challenges.

**Kim:** sometimes it like affects me and makes me a bit more frustrated because I couldn't like complete something. But it makes me feel like really happy because I've actually achieved something. Like sometimes if I've completed like a really hard obbie or finished like a tycoon. Or a simulator. That's sort of what makes me like really happy and that. (313-316, 320-322).

Kim acknowledges the mixed feelings associated with trying to complete different elements of Roblox. The sense of frustration or happiness she expresses is linked to being able to complete a particular element of the game. It is this completion that leads her to feel like she has *actually* achieved something. However, Kim also links this sense of achievement to the challenges of the game. The sense of challenge is not only implicit in her frustration about not being able to complete it, but also in the feeling of overcoming really hard obbies (obstacle courses within the Roblox game). There is a clear difference between the 'bit more frustration' she feels and the 'really happy', which demonstrates the size of feeling linked with completion of a particular challenge. This demonstrates the link between challenge and achievement, and a sense that it is not always smooth, but that in the end, it leads to happy feelings.

The following extract from Megan also gives an account of challenge and achievement, along with the feelings associated with this, but this time in the context of winning a game of Fortnite. Megan had chosen a picture of her winning a Fortnite game as the visual to share with me.

**Megan:** Um because when I win it means like a lot to me because its really its quite hard for me to win. um...like when there's like three people left its quite um tense cuz there's shooting everywhere you look but um then when you win its like a good relief like I feel really proud when I win. (25-26, 29-32).



Megan sets her winning into a clear context. She does not always win, it is quite hard for her to win and that there is an element of challenge to this game for her. Therefore, it is this challenge, this striving to win, that gives her a sense of achievement (it means 'a lot' to her, *when* she wins). Megan's feelings of tension and relief show the clear contrast between the challenge, struggle and chaos of being in the final three, and then winning the game. Again, it suggests that it is the element of overcoming challenge that makes her proud of her win, especially as this is not something that happens every time she plays.

However, it was clear that for some of the participants, winning was not always what gave them the sense of achievement. Lena chose to share a picture of a Splatoon game as her visual, in which she was not winning, and did not end up winning the game. We talked about if winning was important as demonstrated in the two following linked extracts.

**Lena:** ...not massively...I mean, if I have fun in the match, then like it's good still. It depends what game though obviously, so... (43-45)

**Lena:** But it also depends on the game, cuz if like if the only way of getting rewards is winning then winning is pretty important. (48-50)

For Lena, winning is not massively important, generally. It is only sometimes important. It depends on what the outcome is of winning, and therefore, depends on what the game is. If there is no tangible reward (in the game) to her, then she does not view winning as an important outcome (of that game), and this implies that the opposite would also be the case. In this sense, winning is linked to achievement, but only if the achievement is a particular reward, and it is not necessarily the winning itself that is the achievement.

## What gaming brings to my life

Figure 3 shows the subordinate themes for this superordinate theme.

**Figure 3 – What gaming brings to my life superordinate and subordinate themes**



This superordinate theme captured the ways that the participants felt gaming fitted with their lives. Whilst gaming was seen as a separate world, it was also an integrated part of their lives. There was a sense of balance in how they viewed gaming, including how it was an enjoyable hobby. Gaming was also used for various purposes, to manage feelings of stress and for enjoyment.

### ***Gaming as a balanced part of my life***

This subordinate theme captures the balance that the participants strike between their gaming and other parts of their life. It includes their control over gaming time, as well as reflections on the stereotypes of gamers. There was also emphasis on the enjoyment of gaming, and how they viewed gaming as ‘just another hobby’, despite controversies they were aware of around gaming.

**Jade:** ...I don't game for more than two hours, usually I game for about an hour. And sometimes I'll just game for a little bit more. But I don't really game over two hours, an hour and a half or so. I find it doesn't do too much to my schoolwork. I usually get my school work done, my homework, and then I game, if I feel like it. I don't always feel, as I've said, I don't always feel like it, yeah. (332-338)

Jade suggests that she manages her gaming through the amount of time she games (between one and two hours). She is clear that there is a maximum of two

hours. However, this maximum time is not a daily amount for her. There is a caveat of 'if she feels like' but she does not always feel like it. This suggests that for her, gaming is a balanced part of her life. There are other things to do, other hobbies (which she referenced earlier in the interview 'sometimes I do other things', 67-68) or schoolwork. Gaming is part of her life, but not all consuming. She also explains that homework comes before gaming, suggesting that she places a hierarchy on gaming and homework, with homework coming first. As a result of managing her gaming and fitting it around homework, she finds that it 'doesn't do too much to her schoolwork.'

Amy also talked about this balance. She linked it to the stereotypes of gamers.

**Amy:** ... Because everyone expects you, if you say, 'I was gaming yesterday' they would have expected you to have done it the entire day whereas, you've done it for twenty minutes. Uh, um, so I think the controversy, the fact that it's not something, obviously you get, you could do it for ages, but you can do most things for up to days at a time. (678-684)

Amy refers to the 'controversy' of gaming, being the expectation from 'everyone' that gaming is only done for long periods (the entire day). She puts this into perspective with the comment that you can do most things for excessive periods of time, not just gaming. However, the focus seems to be on gaming, as there is a stereotype surrounding the amount of time that young people spend gaming. There are not similar stereotypes for other activities they might engage in. She suggests that there is often a balance, that other people do not realise exists, for example, she might only play for twenty minutes within a day.

Despite these controversies around gaming time, the girls suggested that to them, gaming was a hobby and something they did for fun.

**Lena:** Yeah. I guess it's like any other hobby, it's just something you do because you enjoy doing it (113-114)

Lena's use of the phrase 'like any other hobby' marks it out as just a part of her life. It is something she enjoys, and that's why she does it. It fits within her life, it is a part of it, but it is not all of it. The choice to game is one she makes based on this enjoyment.

Linked to this, Amy discusses enjoyment of watching gaming content online as another part of her hobby.

**Amy:** Oh, that's, that's um...when I first started watching, it was a, another low level hobby. Now it's like THE thing for me to do. Like, like, I would most of the time, if I'm not gaming, or painting or doing something else, I will have, I will be watching something, because I like watching movies and things in general, but most of the time, it ends up being gaming, because it combines two of my favourite things to do, so it kind of gives me double the enjoyment. (462-469)

Amy suggests that watching gaming content is equivalent to watching movies. In fact, it is more enjoyable to watch gaming videos because they combine two of her hobbies. This is put into the context of other hobbies she has, including watching other movies, painting or 'something else'. Gaming and related content is talked about as another hobby. Whilst these have a great deal of importance in her life (THE thing to do), they are placed into a category of things she enjoys doing. The gaming and videos are a balanced part of her life, things she enjoys doing, among others. However, the videos give her 'double the enjoyment' because of the focus on two hobbies at once.

Corrinne talked about moderation in gaming, and how it might be thought of in terms of the fun elements of gaming.

**Corrinne:** ... think obviously everything's in moderation. So I think if you start seeing yourself not having fun with it anymore that's the time to step back, and trying to like find something you enjoy with it again. Instead of um, just trying to like say, 'oh, I need to get this, like, why aren't I getting it?' or something like that. Just, like, no, I need to just like have fun with it, that's the main thing. (420-428).

Corrinne seems to suggest that taking gaming beyond moderation is incompatible with having fun. Not having fun with gaming might look like extremes in trying to overcome something within the game. Usually, Corrinne refers to challenges within gaming as being part of the fun. However, in this extract she suggests that focusing too much on this can mean it is no longer 'in moderation' and therefore no longer fun. As the main thing is to have fun, if fun is no longer part of the

gaming, it is time to take a break (step back). Stepping back appears to be about taking a break and keeping gaming within moderation. There is also an element of finding the fun again that is involved in the stepping back.

### ***Gaming for a purpose***

This subordinate theme encapsulated the different motivations participants had for gaming. The motivations included a sense of escape from everyday pressures and stresses. Much of this was linked to schoolwork and expectations around school. There was a sense of using gaming for a purpose, perhaps to process and manage feelings.

**Kim:** Umm...sometimes I feel happy cuz, like, I like, get distracted by the game and it makes me stop thinking about everything else outside of the world, like school and stuff like that. (52-55)

yeah, so like, sometimes when I've just gone back from school with a bunch of like test results and that and I'm really worried if I'll fail and stuff like that, that just sort of gets me like gets me like off thinking about that (379-382)

The two connected extracts above suggest that Kim views her gaming world as a different and separate world. The act of being in this world means that she does not think about what is going on outside it. She particularly mentions school in the first extract. School is a large part of her life, given her age. She spends most of her day in school and completes homework outside of school. In the second extract, more is revealed about the nature of her school worries. Kim talks about a bunch of test results, suggesting a large number. It is not clear whether she knows she has done less well than she would like, or if this is a more general concern to her, but there is a very real worry of failure, represented within this 'bunch of test results'. As she explains, her gaming world is something that takes her mind off these results, and perhaps her worries about failing.

Corrinne also referenced gaming as separate and an escape, as demonstrated by the following extract.

**Corrinne:** ...I think it's more...it's like an escape, kind of, cuz I don't have to worry about other stuff...

Um...just like, erm, homework and school and all that stuff. I can just, it's kind of separate to that and I can just focus on it, instead of everything being intertwined together, it can just be like this is separate, and I've got my own goals and stuff to do with this. So it just kind of feels like I can focus on that and not have to worry about everything else. (113-115, 121-127).

Corrinne talks about her gaming being a separate part of her life to school. School is grouped by 'homework and school and all that stuff', demonstrating the range of school-related activities she thinks of as 'school'. She feels that the fact that gaming and school are not connected or linked (intertwined) in any way, allows her to focus solely on gaming as an escape from school worries. However, this is not a passive escape. Corrinne suggests that part of the escape from school into her gaming world involves working towards goals. These goals are her own goals. They are self-chosen goals. It is possible that the self-chosen goals in her gaming world are in contrast to the types of goals imposed by schooling activities. Again, this suggests a separation from school-related activities.

Participants were also clear about the purpose of gaming related to their moods and emotions. They made specific choices about what they might do in the game or what game they might play, related to these motivations.

**Jade:** ...But otherwise I find it a really relaxing game and it really relaxes my brain a bit, if it's a bit busy... Sometimes, yeah. Life is just really busy, especially since I've got school all the time pretty much. It's a good game to play to relax. (52-58)

I think the games...so a game...the Kill it with Fire game. That's quite good for letting out some anger I might have. Because it's just hitting things and just getting out all that anger, and I think that's quite a good thing to have in a game. Um...I quite like Stardew Valley because it gets me to focus on things and I do struggle to focus sometimes. But it gets me to get stuff done, clean up and help, and I just find it quite a nice game. (136-143)

In the above linked extracts, Jade discusses what different games give to her in terms of managing her emotions. There are times when Jade wants to relax from the busyness that school contributes to her life. But at other times, she might want to let out her anger or spend time focusing. Jade is aware that she struggles to focus but

finds that focus can be channelled through a specific game. Therefore, she chooses this game, and not others, for the purpose of focus. She explains the features of the games in terms of how they support her wellbeing by managing emotions. Hitting things in one game is important for managing anger, doing tasks in another helps her to feel motivated and focused. This suggests that Jade recognises her various feelings and how different games might help her to manage these.

Corrinne also referenced the feelings linked to watching YouTube content related to gaming.

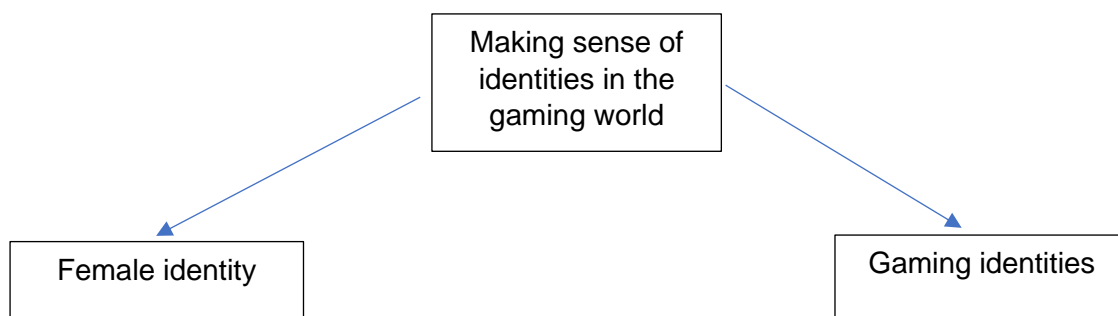
**Corrinne:** Um...it's definitely like a release, kind of, like, after like um a long day at school or something like that, I can just sit down and be like, 'ooh, so and so's posted a new video on this game, I can't wait to watch that.' Or like I might rewatch a Let's Play or something. It's just nice (231-235)

Corrinne talks about the long day at school. Watching YouTube videos related to gaming is a release from this long day, a way to unwind and relax. She suggests that the content does not have to be new, she might rewatch something she has seen before. This watching of content related to her gaming hobby is perhaps comparable to watching television programmes around one's interests. It is a way to engage with her interests in a more passive way than playing a game.

### **Making sense of identities in the gaming world**

Figure 4 shows the subordinate themes for this superordinate theme.

**Figure 4 – Making sense of identities in the gaming world superordinate and subordinate themes**



This superordinate theme considers how the participants made sense of their female and gaming identities. For some, they did not consider themselves a gamer, whereas others identified as a gamer to some extent. There was also a mixture of views about whether their female identity had any impact within the gaming world, or if they felt it was unimportant.

### ***Female identity***

This subordinate theme captured a range of feelings and views about being a female in what can still be considered by some as a male-dominated gaming world.

**Lena:** Uh, I mean, I don't...I don't think my gender really affects it. Yeah, I just...I like what I like...and...yeah, that's it. No one's ever made fun of me for playing games I think. Unless it was in primary school, but I don't remember that. (359-364)

...my gender doesn't really affect the things I like, so um...I would say I am *someone* who plays video games instead of a girl who plays video games. (395-398)

The two above linked extracts demonstrate Lena's feelings about her female gender as having no impact on her gaming. She does not connect the things she likes to her, or let her gender dictate her interests. Lena likes what she likes. She perhaps does not necessarily see gaming as gendered. Instead, she is *someone* who plays video games. Lena suggests that her female gender in respect of gaming has been unproblematic for her, in that she has not been made fun of for playing games.

Whilst Lena identifies that her gender has been unproblematic for her in gaming, that was not the case for all participants.

**Kim:** It's normal like because there's obviously a bunch of girls on there that play it, like my friends and that. But sometimes we do get a bit of hate or like people, because we're a girl and we're playing that sort of game where it's for boys not for girls. Umm but normally that doesn't happen that much. (271-276)



Um it sort of makes me frustrated a bit because I know what I'm doing in that game and I know how to play it. So normally I just like, beat them, in that game just to prove them, or I'll leave the game. (280-282)

Yeah. Umm, because if I was a boy, they wouldn't really get that hate and that. (291-292)

Kim identifies Roblox as a game that is more for boys than girls, although she acknowledges that it is normal among her female friends to play it. In this sense, Kim seems to be suggesting that games can be aimed at different genders. Despite the normality of female Roblox players, it is not unproblematic. In these extracts she talks about the difference for girls and boys playing this game, with girls getting a bit of hate, whereas boys would not get hate for playing. It appears that there is a form of discrimination against girls playing Roblox that boys are less likely to experience. She does qualify this with the fact that it doesn't happen much, but it is a source of frustration for her. She feels that her skill in the game is doubted or thought of differently in some way because of her gender. There is a sense that Kim feels the need to prove herself to male players, by beating them at the game. Either this or she leaves the game, perhaps as a strategy to deal with the frustration or hate.

Amy also talked about how female genders were viewed in gaming.

**Amy:** obviously there's so many more males in the community, the minute you're a female, it's like you have a target on your back, it's like you're carrying this big red sticker that says 'hey, I'm a girl, and I play video games'...and it's just it's not, it just worries me a lot, because, even though I'm meeting with people I know, people I trust, it gives me that worry, being the only one that's female. (556-562)

Amy views the gaming community as male dominated. As a girl in this community, she feels she is marked out as different (having a big red sticker). She also identifies girls as having a target on their back. Having a target on one's back suggests a sense of vulnerability to attack or negative attention. Being the *only* girl is part of this being marked out as different. She needs to know and trust the other people, which suggests that she is vigilant to who in the gaming community she spends time with, due to her female identity. Keeping herself safe as a female online is a concern to Amy and causes her worry. There is a sense that she feels this is not

the case for male gamers, and indeed she later says, 'males, I think, have to go through that [worry] a lot less' (582-583).

There was also a feeling across some participants that the acceptability of females in gaming had changed over time.

**Corrinne:** Um, I definitely think it's more accepted now, especially cuz I play a lot more single player games, it's not like I'm getting judged because I'm a girl or something like that like an online player. Um, but I definitely feel like I can still like interact with the community without being judged for that as it might have been a few years ago (349-354).

Corrinne presents a balanced view of female identity in gaming, acknowledging that the fact she does not get judged might be because she mainly plays single player games. However, she is not judged when interacting with others in the community, which suggests to her that she isn't discriminated against because of her gender. Corrinne feels this has changed over time, even as recently as 'a few years ago'. This perhaps suggests that Corrinne herself has seen that change and that is why she feels girls gaming is more accepted now.

### ***Gaming identities***

There were diverse ideas from the participants as to whether or not they considered themselves gamers. Furthermore, this was qualified by what a gamer identity might entail. Beyond this, there was a sense of how character and representation was part of their identity.

**Megan:** I don't know cuz I don't play that, I don't play often enough as much as YouTubers to consider myself a gamer cuz I consider them as a gamer but cuz I play like once a week, maybe a little bit more or less, um and yea I don't necessarily consider myself a gamer (185-189)

Megan's view of a gamer is someone who plays more than she does. She plays around once a week, and, therefore, to her, she does not relate herself to this identity.

However, for some participants, time spent gaming was not relevant to their gamer identity.

**Jade:** I'd say I'm a gamer, because I play video games. I guess that gamer is not really a label, but it's part of who I am I guess. (309-311)

For Jade, being a gamer is beyond a label. It is part of who she is. This suggests that for Jade, playing video games is part of her identity. It is less about the label and more about how she identifies within herself.

Kim did not identify as a gamer, but part of her online identity was about her Roblox avatar, which was the visual she shared with me at the beginning of the interview.

**Kim:** ...it's quite important because it represents me and who I am and how I look...and that (338-339)

...But sometimes like for them, it's just a character, but for me, it's more than that. Like, um, for an example, if I see another character, I would immediately think like that's maybe how they look or their personality. Like if it's really dark, like maybe they like rock music or stuff like that. However, if it's rainbows and that, like, they're really nice. And that sort of thing. (361-368)

The importance of Kim's avatar is that it goes beyond character for her. In some ways, her avatar is her online self, her online identity. The avatar is beyond how she looks, it demonstrates something of her personality. This idea of online identity is also something she uses to understand others in the game. Avatars that Kim sees are not merely characters, they tell her something about the identity of other players in the game. Again, this is not just about how someone looks. It is the look of their avatar which suggests something of them as a person, something of their identity. An avatar who is 'really dark' might enjoy rock music, someone who is associated with rainbows might be 'really nice'. It is perhaps because Kim puts this level of identity and thought into her character that she feels others do the same.

## **Discussion**

This research aimed to explore how secondary school age girls who play video games think about their wellbeing related to their gaming and related activities. Four superordinate themes were identified, with nine subordinate themes. The following section aims to discuss the findings considering relevant literature to further make

sense of how the superordinate and subordinate themes identified answer the research questions.

To aid understanding of how girls who play video games think about their wellbeing in this context, the themes will be discussed related to a conceptual framework of adolescent wellbeing (Ross et al., 2020). This particular framework was developed in response to the United Nations 2030 agenda for sustainable development, specifically, sustainable development goal 3, which relates to wellbeing for all ages (United Nations, 2015). Their framework drew on the literature in the health and wellbeing domain but did not detail this literature in the paper when relating it to each domain. Therefore, in this discussion section, additional literature will be explored alongside the framework to further make sense of the themes. This also allows for a more detailed exploration of the themes that emerged during the present study in keeping with the inductive approach of IPA. Figure 5 demonstrates how the superordinate and subordinate themes from the present study fit within Ross et al.'s (2020) framework.

The framework was chosen after the initial data analysis was completed (in line with the inductive nature of IPA, Smith et al., 2009) to help explain how the findings from the current study fit within the wider literature related to adolescent wellbeing. This is also important when considering application of Yardley's (2000) criteria for quality (as cited in Smith et al., 2009). It is particularly relevant as it links specifically to adolescent subjective and objective wellbeing, as well as all the superordinate and subordinate themes identified within the present study, which is why this framework was selected. As explained above, the framework is useful in understanding where the superordinate and subordinate themes might fit within concepts of adolescent wellbeing, but requires additional literature to explore how and why, as this is not included in the framework itself.

Figure 5 – Conceptual framework of adolescent wellbeing and related themes

**Adolescent wellbeing framework**  
Ross et al, 2020

Domain	Subdomains	Type of wellbeing	Link to themes
Good health and optimal nutrition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Physical health and capacities</li> <li>-Mental health and capacities</li> <li>-Optimal nutritional status and diet</li> </ul> <i>Requirements – care and support, including for self-care</i>	Physical Nutritional Emotional Sociocultural	Gaming for a purpose (subordinate)
Connectedness, positive values, and contribution to society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Connectedness: part of positive social and cultural networks, has positive, meaningful relationships with other, including family, peers, teachers, employers</li> <li>-Valued, respected by others and accepted as part of the community</li> <li>-Attitudes: responsible, caring, respect for others, sense of ethics, integrity and morality</li> <li>-Interpersonal skills: empathy, friendship skills and sensitivity</li> <li>-Activity: Socially, culturally and civically active</li> <li>-Change and development: Equipped to contribute to change and development in their own lives and/or community</li> </ul>	Emotional Sociocultural	Gaming as a way to connect (superordinate)
Safety and a supportive environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Safety: Emotional and physical</li> <li>-Material conditions in physical environment met</li> <li>-Equity: Treated fairly and have equal chance in life</li> <li>-Equality; Equal distribution of power, resources, rights and opportunities for all</li> <li>-Non-discrimination</li> <li>-Privacy</li> <li>-Responsive: enriching opportunities available to adolescent</li> </ul>	Physical Emotional Sociocultural	Making sense of identities in the gaming world (superordinate)

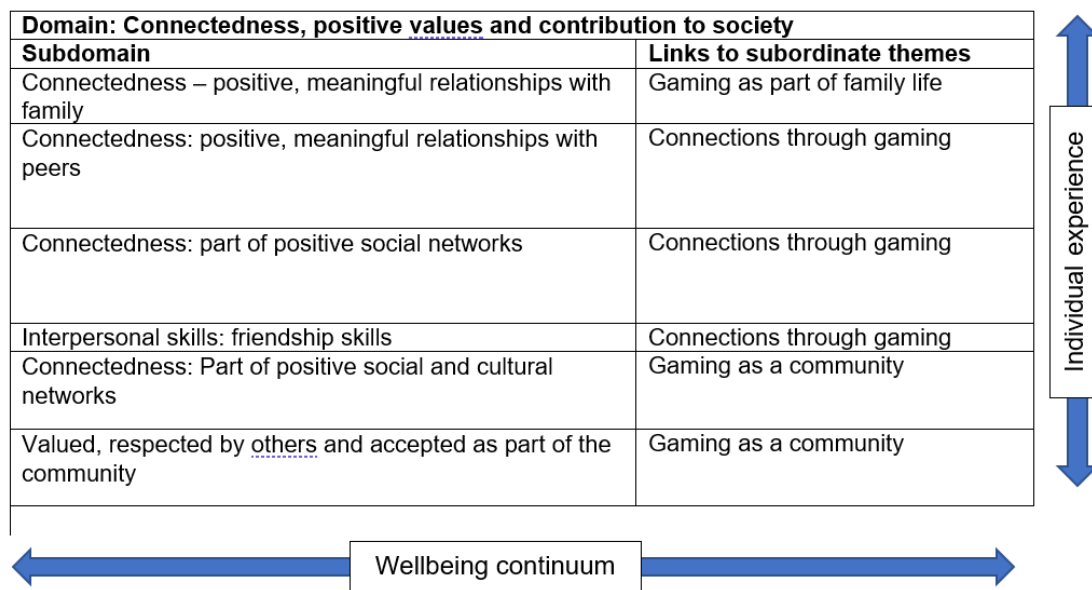
Learning, competence, education, skills and employability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Learning: commitment to and motivation for continual learning</li> <li>-Education</li> <li>-Resources, life skills and competencies: has the necessary cognitive, social, creative and emotional resources, skills (life/decision-making) and competencies to thrive, including knowing rights and how to claim them, and how to plan and make choices</li> <li>-Skills: Acquisition of technical, vocational, business and creative skills to be able to take advantage of current or future economic, cultural and social opportunities</li> <li>-Employability</li> <li>-Confidence that they can do things well</li> </ul>	Emotional Cognitive	<p>Levelling up: Improvement and achievement (Superordinate)</p>
Agency and resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Agency: Has self-esteem, a sense of agency and of being empowered to make meaningful choices and to influence their social, political and material environment and has the capacity for self-expression and self-direction appropriate to their evolving capacities and stage of development</li> <li>-Identity: Feels comfortable in their own self and with their identity(s) including their physical, cultural, social, sexual and gender identity</li> <li>-Purpose: Has a sense of purpose, desire to succeed, optimism about the future</li> <li>Resilience: Equipped to handle adversities both now and in future, in a way appropriate to their evolving capacities and stage of development</li> <li>-Fulfillment: Feels they are fulfilling their potential now and will be able to do so in the future</li> </ul>	Emotional Cognitive	<p>What gaming brings to my life (superordinate)</p> <p>Making sense of identities in the gaming world (superordinate)</p> <p>Levelling up: Improvement and achievement (Superordinate)</p>

The researcher considers wellbeing as conceptualised as a continuum, in relation to this framework, which helps to make sense of the findings from this study. Individual experience in any one of the superordinate or subordinate themes might have an impact on where on this wellbeing continuum one sits, in relation to each domain or subdomain of the adolescent wellbeing framework. Therefore, when discussing these areas in this section, a figure will be used to demonstrate this continuum and present a nuanced understanding of how wellbeing is being made sense of by the participants and researcher throughout.

### **Gaming as a way to connect**

This superordinate theme had three subordinate themes of gaming as part of family life, gaming as a community and connections through gaming. Gaming as a way to connect related to the domain of connectedness, positive values and contribution to society from Ross et al.'s (2020) model. The subordinate themes linked to different subdomains of the model, as demonstrated in figure 6.

**Figure 6 – Gaming as a way to connect**



### **Gaming as part of family life**

All participants discussed how they had been introduced to gaming by other family members. This included dads, siblings and cousins, with four of the six participants identifying gaming beginning through their dad. Beyond this initial interest

in gaming, it was part of family life, with girls' often gaming with family members as part of their hobby. One participant also talked about watching gaming-related YouTube videos with her brother. This relates to the subdomain of connectedness, specifically positive and meaningful relationships with family (Ross et al., 2020). Family relationships were viewed as important in a qualitative study that sought to understand the lived experiences of teenage girls (Einberg et al. 2015). In interest of gaming, which links to previous findings from Vella et al. (2019). They identified that playing Pokémon GO allowed for family bonding through their shared interest.

Focusing more on the general importance of family relationships, a study of 14-year olds' and the social context of adolescent mental health and wellbeing by Hartas (2021) found that emotional closeness to mothers and fathers had a strong association. 14-year-olds who did not have such emotional closeness were twice as likely to express negative emotions than those who did. Whilst the present study did not draw associations between measures of emotional closeness and gaming, it is possible that through shared gaming, the girls felt a sense of closeness to parents, in particular fathers. This father-child relationship is explored by Videon (2005). Videon (2005) found that adolescents who had high levels of satisfaction with their relationship with their father had lower levels of depressive symptoms. Video gaming might be one way that fathers can strengthen this relationship with daughters through a shared interest.

### ***Connections through gaming***

Gaming was also used to facilitate and maintain friendships, with connections made online and offline. There was overlap and interconnection between the online and offline connections, with friendships and conversations across the two spaces. Connections online facilitated connections offline and vice versa. This links to the subdomains of connectedness related to having positive social networks and relationships with peers, and interpersonal skills (Ross et al., 2020). Given the ages of the girls in the study, this is perhaps not a surprising finding, as previous research has found that perceived peer support and peer relationships are particularly important for girls in adolescence (Bear et al., 2021; Public Health England, 2017). However, Pea et al. (2012) in their study of 8–12-year-old girls, suggest that face-to-face communication was strongly associated with positive social wellbeing, but that

media that enabled social communication (for example, online communication) was negatively associated with social wellbeing. This did not appear to be the case in the present study, but this could be because of the links between online and offline communication, linked by the shared interest of gaming.

A notable divergence within this theme was the feeling of being wary of making connections online. This was anxiety-provoking and was therefore avoided by one participant, despite her wanting to make connections with other gamers. Previous research highlights the importance of staying safe online, with this being very much a real risk to CYP (Livingstone et al., 2014). Additionally, a previous study by Macaulay et al. (2020), found that although CYP had subjective knowledge (good awareness of online dangers), they found it difficult to articulate what the dangers were and how to avoid them, demonstrating a level of complacency. The current research identified that at least one CYP could articulate these dangers well and did not appear complacent about ensuring she kept safe online. However, not all participants mentioned this, which could suggest a level of complacency and lack of thought about online safety, or fewer concerns related to this.

Related to Ross et al.'s (2020) framework, this demonstrates that a sense of connectedness within social networks in the context of gaming and related activities depends on the experiences of the participant. For some participants, their sense of connectedness was positive, for instance, some girls' interest allowed for online and offline interactions, which were often interconnected. However, for others, there was wariness about making connections through gaming, and this led to them seeking less interactions. In this case, it could be suggested that, when thinking about this specific element of wellbeing, the impact was more negative for those participants.

### ***Gaming as a community***

Gaming as a community was a broader reference to connection within gaming. For some, this community was an important part of gaming. Interestingly, it did not necessarily involve full interaction or participation beyond the actual shared interest of gaming. Playing video games was viewed as being at the heart of this sense of community. This subordinate theme links most closely with being accepted as part of the community and connectedness to social and cultural networks (Ross et al. 2020). The view of the community as connected via gaming interests links to a recent



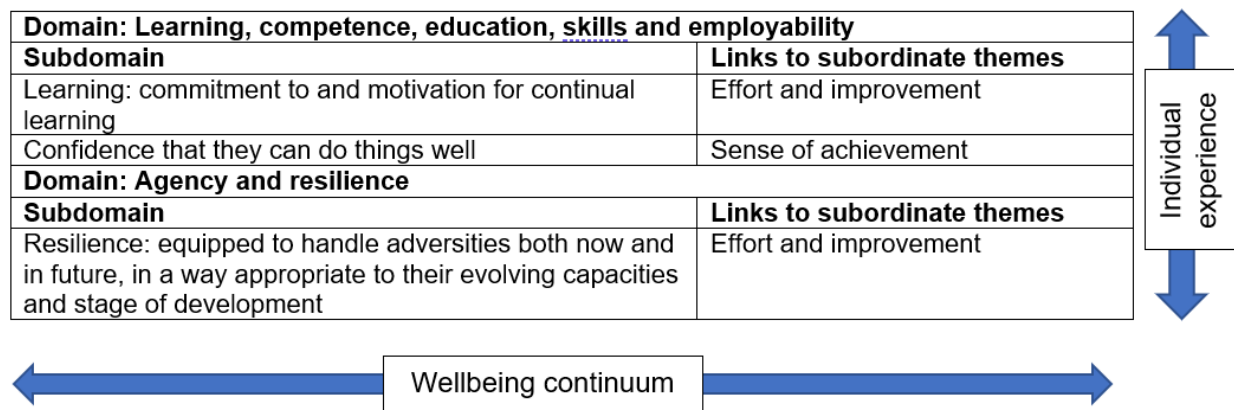
review by Bowman et al. (2022). They stated that streaming of games provides opportunities for social connections and provides an opportunity for less skilled gamers to participate within the culture. O'Connor et al. (2015) studied the sense of community present among gamers of World of Warcraft (a massively multiplayer online game, which is a game played by thousands or millions). They found that players of this game developed a sense of community through their shared interest of the game. Given the type of game, it might not be surprising that this was the case. However, in the current study, a wide range of game genres were played, and this sense of community seemed to be linked to games that would not necessarily be thought of as social or multiplayer, for example, single-player games. Therefore, it provides a further insight into this sense of belonging to a gaming community, beyond what might be assumed by those who do not game as a hobby.

This suggests that in relation to being accepted as part of the community (Ross et al. 2020), the gaming community specifically might be thought of more broadly, or perhaps differently, than one might originally consider. When thinking about the wellbeing continuum with regard to this, a perceived sense of belonging to the gaming community might be one of the ways that wellbeing for these girls in this study was thought of positively.

### **Levelling up: Improvement and achievement**

This superordinate theme had two subordinate themes, effort and improvement and a sense of achievement. Whilst separate, there was an interconnection between the themes, with a sense that achievement was somewhat based on effort and improvement. Overcoming self-chosen challenges within video games allowed for improvement and a sense of achievement. This superordinate theme also had an element of learning, as girls watched YouTube and Twitch streams to improve their gaming. There was a link to Ross et al.'s (2020) framework in the domains of learning, competence, education, skills and employability, and agency and resilience, although some subdomains are more relevant than others (see figure 7).

**Figure 7: Levelling up: Improvement and achievement**



### ***Effort and improvement***

The subordinate theme of effort and improvement linked to the subdomain of learning (Ross et al., 2020). The girls in the current study recognised that there was a level of continual learning as part of improvement within their gaming. Part of this learning involved the use of related activities (for example, watching streams of tournaments and online challenges) to improve their own gaming. This type of learning links to social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) in which an active observer learns behaviour through watching both the actions and consequences of the actions of another. Taking this further, Garrison et al. (2000) argued that there is a Community of Inquiry within educational experiences, through which learning occurs. Gandolfi (2021) drew on both these theories in relation to learning within the context of video gaming. The findings from this study highlighted similar points to the present research in that social media was actively used for learning, within a community setting, where there was learning from one another. In addition, it was noted the learning was goal driven, which was similar in focus to the learning mentioned in the present study (the goals from the girls in this research being improvement and strategy, rather than winning).

There was also a focus within the theme of effort and improvement around challenge and overcoming self-chosen challenges as part of the fun of gaming. Interestingly, the challenges chosen required effort, but were seen as obtainable. This linked to a different domain of Ross et al.'s (2020) framework, agency and resilience. As defined by Goldstein and Brooks (2012), resilience enables

overcoming adversity, bouncing back and developing realistic goals, among other skills. They also identified that there are risks involved within digital technologies. Therefore, development of resilience within the online world is an important part of resilience within modern childhood. Participants identifying and overcoming their own challenges within their gaming suggests a link to resilience, especially when thinking about goal setting and bouncing back (for example, having to keep trying when working through a challenge).

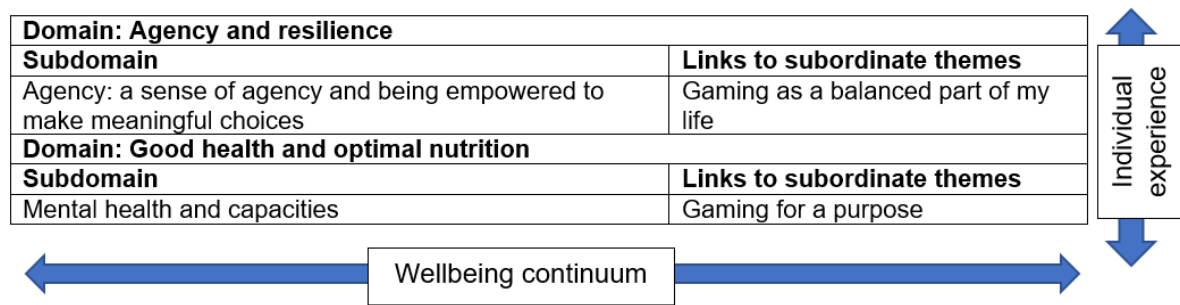
### ***Sense of achievement***

This subordinate theme linked to the previous one. The effort, improvement and overcoming of challenge were instrumental in the sense of achievement the girls felt. This sometimes linked to winning, but also to other elements of gaming. This subordinate theme linked most closely to the domain learning, competence, education, skills and employability, particularly the subdomain of confidence they can do things well, from Ross et al.'s (2020) model. The subdomain of confidence links with the competence aspect of self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Uysal and Yildirim (2016) have linked SDT with gaming, suggesting that competency needs are met through optimal levels of challenge within gaming. This could account for why the girls in this study demonstrated confidence in their ability through the achievement of overcoming self-chosen challenges.

### **What gaming brings to my life**

This superordinate theme captured the ways that the girls felt gaming fitted within their lives. Interestingly, they struck a balance between time spent in the gaming world and other activities. Gaming was seen as a hobby, and some participants highlighted how they viewed gaming differently to the stereotype of gamers having little control over their gaming habits. This part of the theme linked to the domain of agency and resilience in Ross et al.'s (2020) model. The second part of this theme explored how the girls used gaming for different purposes, including enjoyment, having fun and managing feelings of stress. This area linked to the domain of good health and optimal nutrition from Ross et al.'s (2020) model (see figure 8).

**Figure 8: What gaming brings to my life**



### ***Gaming as a balanced part of my life***

The girls in this study all talked about striking a balance between gaming and other aspects of their life. There was a sense that they had control over their gaming, choosing to put limits in place for themselves and enjoying their gaming as part of a hobby. This relates to the subdomain of agency (Ross et al. 2020). The participants made meaningful choices about their gaming, how much they gamed and how they balanced this important part of their lives.

This was an interesting finding when related to gaming literature around problematic gaming, whereby those who experience problematic gaming may have lost this sense of agency and control. Previous studies have found that problematic gaming tends to be seen more within male populations (Andreassen et al., 2016; Coyne et al. 2020; Donati et al., 2021; Turner et al., 2012). McLean and Griffiths (2013) found that female gamers tended to have control over their gaming, which also appears to be the case in the present study. The girls in the present research were aware of gamer stereotypes and concerns over problematic gaming. It might be that this awareness has supported them in achieving balance. They also had a strong sense of the importance of other areas of their life, such as their education. Many of them talked about taking time away from gaming to complete schoolwork or gaming after homework. Again, this demonstrates a sense of agency and purpose in their lives. This contrasts with a review by Lopez-Fernandez et al. (2019) which found that girls played less often due to gender expectations and frustrations about the types of game available to them. It may also link to previous research into academic pressure experienced by girls (Stentiford et al., 2021), whereby girls worked hard to obtain academic achievements due to fear of what the opposite of

achievement might bring for their future lives. This is discussed further in relation to the next subordinate theme.

The fact the girls emphasised that their gaming was a hobby (often among other hobbies) might also explain why girls' gaming tends not to be problematic. Their gaming was neither excessive nor all-encompassing. Indicators of problematic gaming, as identified by Turner et al. (2012) included preoccupation with gaming, loss of control, family and school disruption. None of these elements appeared to be identified by the participants of the current study, despite their awareness of gamer stereotypes and problematic gaming more generally.

### ***Gaming for a purpose***

The participants in the study made conscious choices about the games they played for different purposes. This included managing feelings such as stress, to relax, as a form of entertainment and enjoyment and to escape from school pressures. This links to Ross et al.'s (2020) subdomain of mental health and capacities, in that the participants were aware of their wellbeing and how they were managing it, in this case, sometimes through gaming and related activities.

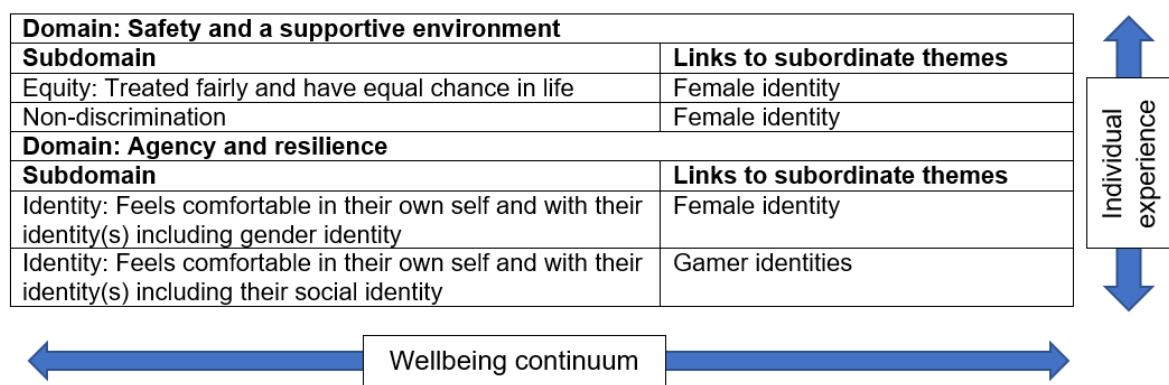
One of the main findings within this subordinate theme was the escape from schoolwork and related pressures. This links to previous research by Stentiford et al. (2021) which found that academic pressure was something that specifically impacted the mental health of girls. At a time when girls' mental health and wellbeing is of concern (Deighton et al., 2020; Newglove-Delgado et al., 2021; Public Health England, 2017), it is important to understand the unique experiences of girls. Previous research which looked at gaming motivations have found that escapism can be related to problematic or addictive gaming (Király et al., 2017; Rosendo-Rios et al., 2022). Therefore, the finding in the current study might suggest that care needs to be taken if girls are using gaming for increasing escapism. However, within the context of balanced gaming, it did not appear that it was problematic for these participants at this stage. It might be that the balance they had struck allowed them to use gaming as a coping mechanism, but a coping mechanism among others. In contrast, Griffiths (2010) suggested that gaming can be therapeutic and allow gamers to deal with daily stressors and that this was not necessarily an unhealthy

way to do so. This might also demonstrate why gaming was not problematic for these girls when used in this way.

### **Making sense of identities in the gaming world**

This subordinate theme captured how participants made sense of both female and gaming identities. There was variation in how participants felt about their gender within the gaming world, and whether they identified as a gamer (and why). This most closely links to Ross et al.'s (2020) model in the domains of safety and a supportive environment and agency and resilience. Again, whilst the two subordinate themes were separate, there was some overlap and links between the two identities. This is likely because identity is seen as constructed and intersecting (Shaw, 2011; 2012). Figure 9 gives an overview of this theme and related links.

**Figure 9: Making sense of identities in the gaming world**



### ***Female identity***

Female identities within the (often male dominated) gaming world were thought of differently by individual participants. This ranged from them feeling their identity was not problematic, to others who talked about it as being 'a target', suggesting a sense of vulnerability. There was discussion of different games being for different genders, and that this had an impact on how girls were perceived within this space. A further reflection was that gaming acceptability for girls has changed over time, with it now being more acceptable than previously. This subordinate theme linked to the subdomain of identity (feeling comfortable with one's own gender identity) within agency and resilience from Ross et al.'s (2020) model, along with the subdomains of equity and non-discrimination from the domain of safety and a supportive

environment. This could be seen on a continuum in both regards, as to whether the girls felt comfortable with their gender in this space or not, and whether they experienced discrimination because of their gender or not.

The present study did find that some girls felt that negative perceptions and to some extent, experiences, was to be expected as females within the gaming world. This is in keeping with previous research by McLean and Griffiths (2013) and Lopez-Fernandez et al. (2019). However, there was a feeling by at least one participant that this was now less so the case, and that times were changing in this regard. This is in line with macrosystemic (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) changes regarding gender equality more generally. One example is the United Nations sustainability development goal on gender equality (United Nations, 2015). This aims to develop policy and legislation to target inequality for women and girls, including enhancing access to enabling technology, among other rights. It may be the case that times are changing for women and girls across spaces and systems more generally, with this being seen within the gaming world too.

Previous research by McLean and Griffiths (2013) suggested that female gamers hid their gender when gaming. This was not in keeping with the present study, in which the girls tended to be open about being female within their gaming, no matter the outcome. There appeared to be some questioning of their gaming ability by male gamers, which relates to previous findings from Lopez-Fernandez et al. (2019). However, Lopez-Fernandez et al. (2019) found that females shared this view. This was not the case in the present study, with participants feeling confident in their abilities, even in the face of negative comments from male gamers. This perhaps represents a shift in how girls who game view themselves and may also relate to gaming identities.

### ***Gaming identities***

Gaming identity was mixed among the participants. This often related to what they felt qualified them to have a gamer identity (such as time spent gaming). There was also an interesting finding that identity related to characters and online representation for some of the girls. This subordinate theme links most closely to the domain of agency and resilience, with a focus on the subdomain of identity (Ross et al., 2020).

One interesting finding within this subordinate theme related to gaming identities not being related to specific games. Previous research has found that gaming identities are often related to types of game which are most linked to the 'hardcore gamer' genres (Ip & Jacobs, 2004; Neys et al., 2014; Van Deventer & Golding, 2016). Instead, gaming identities were linked to playing video games generally, spending a long time playing games, or streaming games.

Another finding from the present study was that some of the participants felt that character identification was an important part of gaming for them. This might be relating to specific characters or using character to identify themselves online. Whilst this was not necessarily linked to gaming identities by the girls in this study, it perhaps demonstrates another strand of identities within gaming, and how one chooses to identify within the online gaming world. This links to previous research by McLean and Griffiths (2013) who found that females who gamed identified with game characters. The authors of that study suggested that this demonstrated the importance of gaming as part of their identity. Therefore, gaming identities could perhaps be best understood as part of a continuum of identities.

### **Implications**

The findings from the current study in relation to the field of educational psychology are discussed in this section.

When working with girls who game, the findings suggest that wellbeing should be considered in a broader context other than gaming as problematic. This relates to previous advice from Griffiths (2010). He argued that addiction within gaming was more than time spent gaming, and that from his own research, there were benefits as well as negatives from gaming. For the girls in this study, their gaming demonstrated links to many areas of wellbeing, which could be thought of on a continuum. When considering the factors that promote or harm wellbeing in adolescent girls who game, taking a more holistic view of this could open up wider discussions between educational psychologists, parents and teachers. It demonstrates the importance of EPs being curious about girls who game, and what their experiences might mean for their wellbeing across all domains.

Another implication is that the interest of gaming can be used to build rapport with girls who have this interest. Hattie and Yates (2014) identify that the positive



impact of good teacher-student relationships, included building trust which is required for learning. This is because learning by its very nature involves risk, as it requires the learner to engage in new activities, which they might find challenging, and, therefore, impact their self-esteem. Furthermore, they suggest that building such relationships involves acknowledging students as individuals. Understanding that girls may have an interest in gaming, and the wide-ranging nature of what they might benefit from this, could be one way that teachers build such rapport. Building rapport is also crucial for educational psychologists working with children and young people, as identified by Beaver (2011). This is to enable CYP to feel able to engage in the change process and feel comfortable in working together towards shared aims, which is an important aspect of the EP's role.

Whilst this study does not generalise capabilities beyond gaming, it might still be pertinent to consider how some of the strands of wellbeing could be transferred from gaming to the classroom. Findings from this study suggest that girls often set their own goals within gaming and were resilient in overcoming challenge. These are often skills that are aimed to be developed to support children and young people in their education (Gillham et al., 2013). Therefore, if such skills can be harnessed beyond gaming and into education, this would benefit classroom learning. A further consideration is gamification in learning. This was described by Dichev and Dicheva (2017) as inclusion of elements of game design into education with the aim being to increase motivation and engagement. With an indication that gamification is becoming part of everyday classroom life (for example, times tables rock stars is used by 'thousands of schools, families and tutors', [trockstars.com](http://trockstars.com), n.d), some of the findings from the current study might be applied specifically to this element of learning.

Finally, a significant finding from this study was that the participants all used gaming as a form of escape from the stresses of school life. Previous research found that girls in particular are prone to academic pressure and that this can be hindering to wellbeing, if not countered (Stentiford et al., 2021). The fact these girls had a way to counter the stresses of daily school life might be suggestive of a particular positive benefit for girls in using gaming as a form of escape. It could inform wider discussions around how girls can be supported in this area in particular, given that wellbeing within adolescent girls is an ongoing concern.

## **Limitations and further research**

This study took a critical realist position and used IPA as a method for analysing data. Whilst not a limitation in itself, it does only represent the views of this small group of 12-16 year old girls. In order to gain a broader understanding of girls' gaming, it might be helpful to include the views of others within their lives, such as parents and teachers. They might provide differing or similar viewpoints to the girls themselves about the impact of gaming on wellbeing. However, this study aimed to give voice to girls who play videogames, and therefore this was not within the scope of this research. It might be a limitation and perhaps a topic for further research.

The results of this study are not generalisable to a wider population due to their qualitative nature. Therefore, a wider quantitative study would be required to achieve this. However, the insights this study has provided could be used as part of discussion to broaden the narrative (from the limited problematic) around video gaming.

Further research might like to focus on other areas which were not the focus of this study, but which the girls brought into discussion during interview. One such area was gaming as story, narrative and a form of creativity. In education, literature can be seen as multi-modal and be presented in digital forms, such as short films. A further exploration of how video games fit into this could be beneficial within literacy education.

## **Conclusion**

This study aimed to explore the experiences of secondary school age girls who play video games with a view to understanding how they thought about the relationship between their gaming and their wellbeing (RQ1). It also aimed to explore their experiences of wider gaming culture through their gaming-related activities (again related to wellbeing), as this is largely unexplored in previous literature (RQ2).

In doing so, four superordinate themes were identified, which answered both research questions. These were: gaming as a way to connect, levelling up: improvement and achievement, what gaming brings to my life and making sense of identities in the gaming world. Using IPA, a more nuanced understanding of girls' wellbeing in relation to gaming and related activities emerged both at individual and

group levels across the themes. The findings related to the adolescent wellbeing framework proposed by Ross et al. (2020) across all five domains, which suggests that for the girls in this study, gaming and related activities have a role to play in understanding their wellbeing. This exploration of girls' gaming and other gaming activities suggest that wellbeing can be related both positively and negatively in answer to both research questions. It also adds to the literature in this area by providing a positive psychology view when considering gaming and wellbeing. Furthermore, it captures the voices of adolescent girls who game, which have been absent in the previous gaming literature. Whilst the findings from this study cannot be generalised, it is hoped that they will provide insight into this area and promote further discussion outside of usual narratives of problematic gaming.

In summary, EPs should be curious about girls' gaming. They should consider the nuances in the functions of gaming for the individual and seek to understand this further. This includes the place that gaming and related activities have in girls' lives, which might otherwise be overlooked. They should also consider the different ways that gaming feeds into girls' subjective and objective wellbeing, both positively and negatively, across a range of areas, within formulation and consultation.

## **Reflective chapter**

### **Introduction**

This chapter focuses on my reflections as a researcher. I aim to consider the research process as a whole, beginning from the pre-empirical stage, and ending with thoughts for the future. As identified by Willig (2013), reflection as a qualitative researcher takes on a reflexive nature. Ng et al. (2019) defined critical reflection as examining assumptions and how these inform practice, and critical reflexivity as recognising our position within the social world. This is important within qualitative practice as it acknowledges an element of subjectivity, which is informed by many of our own assumptions, and therefore may in turn have an impact on how we conduct research and interpret qualitative data (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Within this critically reflective chapter, I aim to bring reflexivity to consider my role as a researcher within the process.

The chapter begins with the research journey that I embarked on. It will consider how I identified a research topic, including my personal reasons for this. As an IPA study, Smith et al. (2009) suggest that identification of what has led to your study is an important part of the process. It also provides transparency, which is part of ethical considerations for research (British Educational Research Association; BERA, 2018). Following on from this, the process of the literature review and how this informed subsequent thinking is explored. I then consider recruitment of participants, including the challenges of this, and the related ethics of how this was approached. The research journey section concludes with reflections upon the interviews and analysis involved in my study. This includes the decision to use IPA, as well as how I experienced the interviews and analysis of the findings.

Having considered my research journey to date, the subsequent sections will focus on the future directions for this research. Firstly, I consider the implications of my research. This includes for educational psychologists, as well as how it might be relevant to others in education. Wider issues arising from my research are also considered. After this, dissemination is explored, including how and why this is important.

## The research journey

### Identifying a research topic

In my previous role as an early years teacher, the idea of children spending increasing amounts of time using technology was often discussed. There appeared to be conflicting views about technology, and this has continued to be the case. Technology, for example, has a place within the national curriculum (Department for Education, 2013) and was part of the early years foundation stage development matters (Department for Education, 2012), although this was removed in the 2021 update (Faulder, 2021). However, in conflict with this is the idea of limiting screen time, which is identified as a complex issue (see Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, 2019), and does not yet have set guidelines in the United Kingdom. Faulder (2021) makes a distinction between active use of technology for a purpose, as opposed to passive consumption of screen time. This was the crux of the debate when I was teaching in the early years. At the time, the theory of digital natives (as described in Hattie & Yates, 2014) was a discussion point for me and my colleagues. Children are now growing up in a digital world from birth, and there is still discussion around how this can be supported but managed. This initial interest in children and technology, and the debates surrounding it, led me to complete my masters research into young children's screen time and social development, which was, at the time, a regular point of discussion between myself and other educator colleagues.

As a trainee educational psychologist (TEP), part of my role is to hear the voice of and advocate for children. During my many meetings with children and young people (CYP), and subsequently parents and teachers, the topic of video games was a recurrent theme. Again, my interest was sparked by the general narrative around video games, and how there was a tendency towards the negative, in particular a focus on addiction. This is noted to be the case in the only article I identified as published in the educational psychology in practice journal (Griffiths, 2010). At the time, I was unable to find any articles on the subject in other relevant United Kingdom EP journals. It appeared that discussion of video games was generally moved away from and just listed as an interest when working with CYP. I began to wonder if the CYP might have different views on this, particularly as video gaming has been a pastime of mine since childhood in some format. Furthermore, I felt there

was a tension between the views of CYP gaming at home as a hobby (often negatively perceived and dismissed) and gamification within the classroom, whereby elements of video games are used as a motivational tool in education (and therefore seen as positive).

A further interest of mine came from a feminist perspective. As identified by Kitzinger (1999), there has long been a bias in research to centre on boys and men. I knew that I was keen to research girls in some way, as I personally feel they are underrepresented more broadly within research topics. Furthermore, they are often underrepresented in educational psychology referrals (Bradley, 2017, identified in her work in the ratio of 20:1). Therefore, I was unsurprised to find in my initial reading around video gaming that girls and women in gaming were not well studied. This led to me considering this as an area of further research, and this is where my research journey began.

Considering my position as a researcher, it is important to note that some of the reasons I came to consider this topic were because they resonated with me personally. I am female which perhaps led me to consider females in research more broadly. I also play video games (although I do not identify as a gamer, nor do I participate in gaming culture more widely), which may have influenced me to see this topic in a more nuanced way than someone who does not game. I have been a part of the teaching profession in which debates about gaming and screen time have arisen for some time (as described above) and therefore might be more aware of some of the arguments and issues in this area.

### **Further reflections from the literature review**

My literature review illuminated further topics of interest within gender and gaming more broadly. I believe that this process enabled me to gain a wider perspective about CYP, girls, gaming and related activities (including gaming culture), which shaped the future direction of my research. Without this process, it might have been more challenging to understand some of the potential areas and issues within this area. It also enabled me to further understand how wellbeing might be a specific area of interest in my study, which is explored further in this section.

One point which recurred in the literature was how differences in gender (male vs female specifically) were associated with problematic gaming. There seemed to

be a relationship between being male and experiencing problematic gaming (Andreassen et al., 2016; Coyne et al., 2020; Donati et al., 2021; Turner et al., 2012). This appeared to demonstrate a possibly unique experience that girls might have related to their wellbeing and helped to build the rationale for finding out more about girls' wellbeing related to gaming. I wanted to keep my study as open-ended as possible and did not specifically ask about problematic gaming for this reason. I aimed for the study to explore both positives and negatives of gaming, and for data to be drawn from the participants directly. I wondered whether the fact that girls displayed less problematic gaming might be found in my qualitative study, and whether there would be any reasons that the girls might give for this. Indeed, it was something that participants explored within my research, usually in relation to gamer stereotypes, and how they kept a balance between gaming and other important areas of their lives, which they felt gaming stereotypes did not account for.

Wellbeing further came to the fore when considering the positioning of girls who play video games within a more male-dominated culture. There were several issues that were raised, and one particular study by McLean and Griffiths (2013) was useful for understanding the more unique experiences of females in this space. This included issues of identity, characters (including stereotypical female and male representation) and social interactions, all of which seemed to me could link to wellbeing. My considerations of wellbeing in secondary school age girls specifically, were informed by several studies and reports that demonstrated lower wellbeing in this population (Department for Education, 2023; Newlove-Delgado et al, 2021; Public Health England, 2017). This led me to wonder how the gaming space might be part of holistic psychological formulation when working with girls of this age around their wellbeing, given the unique issues (both positive and negative) that were emerging from my literature review reading. I also reflected that this might be a way to move towards more nuanced understanding and discussion of gaming when working with CYP, their families and teachers, in line with the previous article from Griffiths (2010) for educational psychologists.

### **Identifying aims and research questions**

From the literature review process, I identified aims and an initial research question for my study. The research aim was to explore the gaming and related

experiences (for example, streaming, watching YouTube videos) of girls, with a specific focus on their wellbeing. This came from recognising a gap in the literature that exists around the gaming of girls, in the context of the unique experiences of girls within a mainly male-dominated hobby. My initial research question was as follows:

*How do teenage girls make sense of their experiences of video gaming and gaming culture in relation to their wellbeing?*

Through discussion at supervision, I refined the question further. This was for two reasons. Firstly, I decided to change the age of participants from 13–18-year-olds to 11- to 16-year-olds. The reason for this was the consideration that, by age 18, the participants would legally be regarded as adults. As such, this might change their gaming by way of adult supervision. By this stage, I had identified interpretative phenomenological awareness as an appropriate method to answer my research question, and therefore, a homogenous group was required. I felt that the age range of 11–16-year-olds (and thus secondary school age) would meet this criterion more fully. Furthermore, it was likely that girls of this age range would have generally similar lived experiences in terms of their daily lives (for example, going to secondary school, homework, working towards GCSEs). The second change came when I considered the sense-making in relation to experiences. As stated by Korstjens and Moser (2017), qualitative research often evolves through response to participants, and, therefore, changing or adding research questions may be necessary. I found during interviews that the participants were sharing more about their thoughts around wellbeing, which, whilst related to sense-making, felt to me a subtle shift in what my study was achieving. In response to this, I fine-tuned the research question further to the following:

*How do secondary school age girls who play video games think about their wellbeing in relation to their gaming and related activities?*

In discussion with my supervisor, and taking into account the work of Robson and McCartan (2017), a ‘what’ question seemed more appropriate for the exploratory nature of my study. I also noted that the participants were, overall, accessing gaming-related activities and content. This had not originally been a separate question, as it was unknown at the beginning whether this would be the case, and as



a result, the initial research question was necessarily broad. Therefore, I further developed my research question and added a second. My final research questions became:

*What do secondary school age girls who play video games think about the relationship between video gaming experiences and their wellbeing?*

*What do secondary school age girls think about the relationship between gaming-related activities and their wellbeing?*

### **Making choices about methodology**

From my literature review, research aim and question, I recognised that qualitative methodology would be required for this study. This aligned with my ontological and epistemological position of critical realism. A critical realist approach identifies that researchers are part of making sense of the realities of participants' lived experiences, through the theories that they use to analyse data (Stutchbury, 2022). I drew on the literature around qualitative methodology to inform my choices in this area and chose to use interpretative phenomenological analysis. This is outlined further in this section. I also researched the appropriateness of my research question for an IPA study and decided that this would be a good fit (Robson & McCartan, 2017; Smith et al., 2009).

### ***Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)***

As identified by Oxley (2016), within the double hermeneutic of IPA, critical realism can align well to such a study. I also understood that IPA allows for the prioritisation of the lived experiences and voices of participants (Larkin et al., 2006) which would help to answer my research question, and enable the voices of girls who game to be the focus. I also felt that this would enable a nuanced exploration of how participants viewed their wellbeing, given the previous polarising positions on gaming. Again, this is something that IPA makes possible (Smith et al., 2009).

A session at university which featured participatory research also informed my thinking regarding methods. This led me to consider the use of photographs as part of my interview. Visual methods alongside IPA have been used successfully in past studies to create a deeper understanding of lived experience (Bartoli, 2020; Boden et al., 2019). I feel this was a strength of my study, as it enabled conversation about a

topic of specific interest to the participants, that they were actively bringing to interview. I hoped this empowered them to discuss what they felt was important to them. However, a limitation, and possibly something I might change if I were to undertake this study again, was the fact that the photos themselves were not analysed. As suggested by Silver (2013) the visual itself can become a source of data, and therefore offer a different perspective. In my study, the discussion around the photograph was analysed, and therefore, still only allowed for the spoken word to be included in analysis. It may have been a broader approach to analyse the photographs in their own right. On balance, I feel it did allow for further elicitation of lived experience than not using a visual method, and enabled the participants to bring their own points for discussion to the interview.

As an alternative to IPA, I considered using reflexive thematic analysis (TA). Reflexive TA has a similar inductive approach to IPA, but the focus is more on identifying themes across data, rather than having a more idiographic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021). I felt that given the nuanced nature of gaming and, indeed wellbeing within gaming, that IPA remained the best method to allow for this to be captured. However, reflexive TA has been identified as more able to provide implications for practice (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Upon reflection, this could have been more helpful for focusing on the links to educational psychology. This could be a limitation of the use of IPA in this study.

### **Recruitment and associated ethics**

There were several decisions to make around the recruitment process for participants in my study.

My original idea was to recruit participants from secondary schools within my placement local authority. The reason for this came mainly from a safeguarding perspective. I was aware that talking to CYP who game might mean they spend time interacting with others online, of which the risks are well documented (Paat & Markham, 2021). Furthermore, as reading from my literature review had identified, there might be specific risks to girls playing video games because of their gender (Van Deventer & Golding, 2016). Therefore, I wanted to ensure a clear safeguarding route and felt that accessing participants through schools would provide this. Another reason was that it enabled CYP themselves to take control of their participation in

the research, in that they needed to take information home to parents to be involved. However, it soon became clear that many schools did not wish to take part in the research, and so I had to change my recruitment. I was able to recognise that my ethical commitment here was to respect the decision of the schools, related to the British Psychological Society (BPS) code of human research ethics (2021). Specifically, this related to respecting their rights to not be involved in helping to recruit participants. I wondered if their reluctance was around the subject matter, or due to them not having a professional relationship with me. From a safeguarding perspective, it may have been that the schools did not wish to engage with me as someone they did not know.

I gained further ethical approval to change my recruitment strategy and had more success through online advertising on Facebook and Twitter. There were ethical issues involved in this which I identified. The people sharing my research study information were adults, and I wanted to be sure that CYP were taking part in my study because they wanted to. Moreover, as identified by Fileborn (2016), the nature of social media post sharing means that control over the information is lost to an extent. It may have been beneficial for my recruitment to have posted on gaming forums more specifically. However, as I was not a participant in any of these, it felt that joining for this purpose might present ethical issues, such as a disingenuous use of such a space (Fileborn, 2016). This might be particularly pertinent given that female-only forums can be set up as somewhat demarcated spaces in which girls and women seek company of those of the same gender in what can be a male-dominated environment (McLean & Griffiths, 2013). As stated by the BPS (2021) privacy of individuals, groups and communities must be respected. I felt that posting on forums of which I was not a part, would potentially be in contradiction to this ethical commitment.

A further issue I reflected on was the difficulty in recruiting participants to my study, despite initial interest. When advertising, I was careful not to include reference to gamer identity or any particular type of gaming platform. This was due to my reading around girls who game and identities, which suggested that even though girls might spend as much time as boys gaming, this did not necessarily mean that gaming was part of their identity. Shaw (2011) found in her study that male interviewees were more likely to identify as gamers than others (including female or

transgender participants). Interestingly, she suggested that, due to identity being important for specific situations, when invited to participate in a study about gaming, people felt they were being asked as a 'gamer', despite her study focusing purely on players of video games, rather than gamers. Upon reflection, this might be one reason that girls did not participate in my study despite initial interest. This is an interesting reflection more generally, when considering why girls and women have less representation in this area of research. It could be that they are assuming they need to hold a gamer identity, which is more complex than just playing video games, to participate. A further reason, and linked to gaming identities, is the ubiquity of video gaming. Van Deventer and Golding (2016) suggest that most people will have played a video game at some point, but still say they have not, as it is now part of wider culture. This was commented upon by some participants in my study. Perhaps it is the gamer identity which marks one out as separate from this mainstream view of gaming, and therefore, has led to fewer people coming forward for the study, despite the wording of my initial advert. My study was not about gamer identity as such but about wellbeing more widely, and I felt that due to the lack of representation for girls in the gaming literature, having a broad range of gaming participants was more important at this stage. For this reason, I believe that this was the best recruitment strategy at this time. However, having reflected on the issue of identities in the social sphere more widely, I can see that regardless of the advertising wording, possible participants would have been likely to interpret what they saw through a specific identity lens. In any future research, this might be a consideration, but not one that can necessarily be overcome by myself or other researchers.

Another issue which I needed to consider in my study was that of gender. A recent definition of gender identity is 'an individual's inner experience of gender' (Strang et al., 2023, p.2). Gender discussions have included broader definitions of identity, including nonbinary and trans gender identities (see Strang et al., 2023). Hyde et al. (2019) described changes in the way that the gender binary has been viewed over time. They acknowledged the complexity of terminology around this area. Various research and discussions are presented by the authors, including the differences in biological sex and gender identity. One definition relevant to my study was that sex related to biological sex, which is the basis for sex assignment at birth, whereas gender refers to 'sociocultural systems that include norms and expectations

for males and females' (Hyde et al., 2019, p.172). The decisions I needed to make were in some ways about how I viewed gender within my study, and therefore, who should be included, whether this should relate to biological sex or gender identity more broadly. To make this decision, I consulted the literature on gaming and gender identities, as it was within this context that I was considering gender identity specifically. Upon doing so, it appeared that there were still many debates in this area when it came to gaming, which I needed to reflect on. Yao et al. (2022) developed a female gamer stereotype scale, which was based on female gender identification. They found that male and female gamers, and non-gamers, held stereotypical views of female gamers that tended to be negative. Their conclusions were that there was gender-based stereotyping within gaming. In their study, gender identity was upon personal identification of the participants, and therefore could have included transgender as well as cisgender gamers and non-gamers. Richard (2017), argued that there have been developments in how gender identities (including transgender identities) are perceived in certain gaming communities, and has led to more acceptance based on gender (as opposed to what might be termed biological sex). She also acknowledged that this is of note within what is generally claimed as a male space. Richard (2017) concluded that transgender gamers were likely to face different challenges to cisgender gamers. This perhaps contrasts in some ways to Yao et al.'s (2022) study which considered male and female identities depending on personal gender identification, and therefore perhaps does not capture something of the nuances of the situations that might be unique to transgender gamers. However, for my own study, I chose to explore female gaming. Therefore, whilst I acknowledged that there might be differences specific to transgender females in gaming, this was not the focus for me at this time, rather, the focus was on female gamers and wellbeing. This might be a future topic for gaming research, given the complexity of this area.

Based on the literature, I decided that my inclusion criteria would allow for cisgender female participants, as well as those identifying as female. The inclusion criteria would allow for the sociocultural elements of gender identity referred to by Hyde et al. (2019). Females who were identifying as male would be excluded, as well as non-binary participants. This was due to the focus on female gender identity within gaming, rather than male gender or nonbinary identity.

## **Interviews and analysis**

### ***Reflections from interviews***

As identified in previous sections, IPA involves the double hermeneutic of the researcher making sense of the participant making sense of their experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Part of this sense-making suggests that it is difficult for the researcher to be fully separated from the participants. Indeed, Smith et al. (2009) discuss seeing things from the participant's perspective, but also from a questioning perspective. An important part of interviewing when conducting IPA research is an acknowledgement of this, but also a bracketing of one's preconceptions (Smith et al. 2009). This was something which I felt I needed to reflect on following each interview, particularly as interviewing in this way was new to me as a researcher. At the beginning of the interview process, I found it challenging to bracket preconceptions from the literature I had read prior to the process of data collection. This had the effect of me moving on too quickly through topics and not giving enough time for ideas to be fully developed or explored. As I progressed through the interviews, I found that I was more able to take an active listening stance, focusing on the points being made by the participants and allowing them to take shape in a more organic way.

Another element of challenge was the interview structure itself. I am very much used to interacting with CYP of this age during my TEP placement work. Empathy, reflecting back and summarising are all tools I would use during this work. However, within interviews in my researcher role, this was slightly different. As noted by Smith et al. (2009) it is important to ask open questions, and not lead the participant. This took some practice, but I think over time I was able to develop this stance more easily. It perhaps demonstrates the complexity of the dual practitioner/researcher role, and how switching between these can be difficult when engaged in both roles at around the same time (albeit in different environments and contexts).

### ***Analysis considerations***

When analysing my interviews following an IPA framework, I was conscious of the balance to be struck between the idiographic accounts, the emergent themes across cases (including similarities and divergence) and answering my research question. I began my initial analysis of interviews by looking at each interview in depth, and making sense of what each individual wanted to say. I used an inductive

approach to identify a range of possible themes, not all of which related to my research question. This was partly due to the richness of the data I obtained through semi-structured interviews. It was when I began to bring themes together and note similarities and differences across cases, that I focused more on my research question. Some interesting topics (such as gaming as literature and story) did not relate to my research question and were therefore discarded at this stage. This perhaps demonstrates the broad range of questions and topics that could be explored within girls and gaming research.

As suggested by Watts (2014), there are two perspectives to analysing qualitative data, and IPA falls within this category. The researcher must, he argued, understand from the viewpoint of the participant, but also from the researcher's informed perspective, in the light of other literature and theory. I used this process within my own analysis of the data. I was conscious of Watts' (2014) advice that one should not psychologise what the participant is saying, but rather unpack, make explicit and amplify their voice. This was a challenging experience, and again involved the bracketing out of preconceptions (Smith et al. 2009). I found that a process of re-engaging several times with an extract to try to fully understand the viewpoint of the participant was helpful. If I were to complete this study again, I might take a more participatory approach, and aim to analyse the data with those involved in the study.

I chose to separate the analysis and discussion sections. This is recommended for a first IPA study (Smith et al., 2009) and Watts (2014) also makes the point that the two sections provide different focal points for the research. I decided to relate the findings to the adolescent wellbeing framework (Ross et al., 2020). This appeared to be an open conceptual framework, which enabled discussion around a range of previous findings and topic areas. Other theories, such as self-determination theory, were interwoven with this, but did not appear to fully explain all the findings from my study. The use of a broad framework clarified how the findings answered my research question in a way that a more narrow or specific theory might not have done. It was as I wrote my discussion and particularly as I began to reflect on subordinate themes that involved discrimination, that I appreciated the link between experience and wellbeing more fully. This is where the use of an open framework became more useful in understanding that wellbeing related to gaming was likely on

a continuum, and that a girl's specific experiences might relate to where on this continuum she might be at any given time. I realised that even at this stage of the process, I was still making sense of the participant's experiences and deciding how best to represent these. It demonstrated to me the iterative nature of this research, and how IPA is not a linear process. At this time, I acknowledged within myself that I wanted to do justice to how different factors played a role and how these could be best conceptualised.

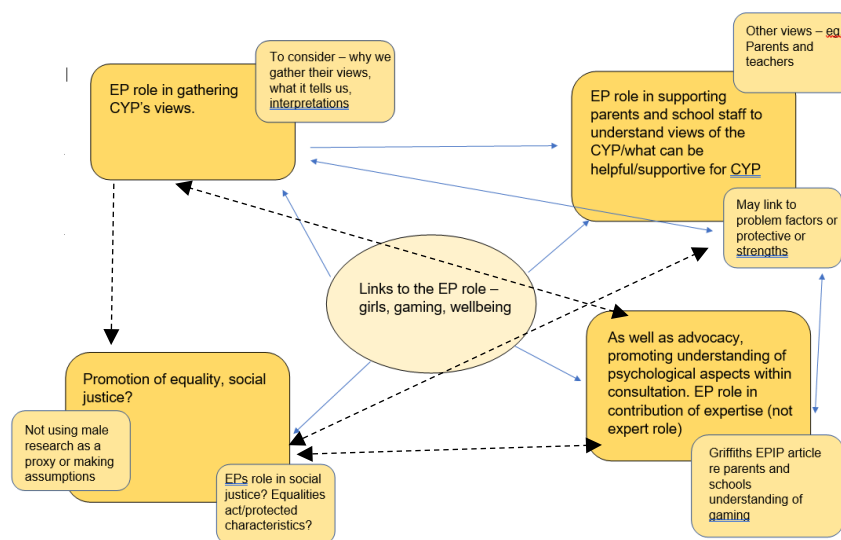
One finding stood out to me above others as relating specifically to the experiences of girls' wellbeing in the gaming context. This was the finding that girls were using gaming as a form of escape from academic stressors and pressures. I think this finding was so powerful to me as it captured something of the gender expectations of girls more generally, in terms of academic pressure and assumptions of being a 'good student', which was written about by Stentiford et al. (2021). It was also something I hadn't expected to find but demonstrated to me the importance of understanding more about this topic as an educational psychologist, adding to my rationale for this study.

### **Implications for future practice**

Throughout my research journey, I considered the overall relevance of this topic to educational psychology. My initial thoughts about this are captured in figure 10. These thoughts are explored further in this section, using the main points from the figure, along with reflections on the implications for EP practice that developed through my research journey. There is overlap and links between areas, as identified by the arrows linking areas in figure 10, whereby blue arrows demonstrate initial thoughts and black, dashed arrows show new connections that emerged through my research journey.



**Figure 10 – initial thoughts about the relevance of my research topic to educational psychology**



### EP role in gathering CYP's views

The role of EPs as advocates for CYP is well documented in the literature (for example, Ingram, 2013; Roffey, 2015). A large part of this involves gathering their views. As noted by Smillie and Newton (2020), EP's understand this to be a beneficial practice for the CYP. They also note that interpretation of such views is a complex issue, with arguments for and against interpretation. This is also discussed by Ingram (2013) in terms of EPs using theories and research to inform their understanding of CYP's views. This reading informed an interesting reflection that I had prior to beginning my research, when thinking about how CYP's views about gaming are received and interpreted by EPs (and other adults working with them). My experience was that gaming was often seen as a negative (perhaps informed by prior research, or by general narratives in this area) and whilst noted as a CYP's interest, was perhaps not explored beyond this. Griffiths (2010) article suggests that addiction is a concern of parents and school staff, and this made me consider that this tends to be the 'go-to' explanation or interpretation of gaming, likely because of this view. My reflections were wondering if other interpretations could be applied, and if it was useful to explore the views of CYP in this area further than is currently usual.

My research findings suggest that there are other explanations, interpretations and narratives to be understood from adolescent girls' gaming and related activities. Gathering their individual views in these areas would allow for EPs to understand such narratives and, therefore, be able to advocate for girls. It also enables EPs to link such views to the wellbeing literature, to interpret their views if this is the reason for gathering views. Again, this links to the area of equality, in that most of the previous research has mainly male participants, with my study seeking to understand gaming for girls. This provides some research base for EPs to think about girls' gaming and what it might mean for them.

Furthermore, it enables rapport building with girls, which is important for building trust to gather their views (Beaver, 2011). This might not otherwise be considered because it is assumed that gaming is not common for girls of this age, or that it is mainly negative or serves little function in their lives, so is avoided as a topic of conversation. Discussion of gaming (when working with girls who have an interest in this area) should be valued by EPs as a way to connect with them, which contrasts with my previous experience of such conversations being less valued. This is particularly relevant given that girls themselves use and see gaming as a way to connect with others in a range of ways.

### **EP role in supporting parents and school staff to understand CYP**

EPs support others to understand CYP as part of their role (Ashton & Roberts, 2006). This involves hypothesising and formulation around a CYP's needs, strengths and protective factors. At the beginning of my journey, I thought that this might be one key implication for EP practice when formulating about wellbeing, particularly given the well-documented concerns about the wellbeing of adolescent girls specifically (for example, DfE, 2023; Public Health England, 2017). As my research developed, I noticed the link with social justice and equality, as it adds the views of adolescent girls to the literature in this area, to allow EPs to think about how theories about gaming might be different when considering the wellbeing of girls.

My research suggests that EPs should be encouraged to think about gaming connected with wellbeing when working with girls who game and supports EPs to formulate holistically about wellbeing in this regard, which might not ordinarily be thought of in this way. It considers, for example, how girls may experience wellbeing

on a continuum depending on their experiences and in relation to areas such as connectedness, learning, competence and agency (as linked to the adolescent wellbeing framework developed by Ross et al. 2020). EPs are encouraged to consider the place of gaming in the lives of adolescent girls, as well as what the function of gaming might be. When thinking about a sense of belonging, for example, a girl might have a strong sense of belonging to an online community, which might otherwise have gone unnoticed if not explicitly explored. Furthermore, it takes into account the individual nature of the girls' experiences and suggests that EPs should be curious about how *individuals* conceptualise their wellbeing in this regard, as it will not be the same for all girls, (for example, for some girls it is a core part of their identity, but for others it is not). This links to the EP role of gathering CYP's views and demonstrates the importance of listening to and including CYP views in formulation.

### **Promotion of equality and social justice**

Schulze et al. (2019) suggest that social justice is 'an emphasis on equality, nondiscrimination, and freedom' (p.377), although they state that social justice can be difficult to define. Their research into English EPs' interest in social justice revealed that participants felt it was important to EP practice and many were committed to it. The principles of social justice and equality can also be seen within the Equality Act 2010 (legislation.gov.uk, 2010), particularly in the public sector equality duty. This requires public authorities to '...have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation...advance equality of opportunity...(para. 1). The links here to my research are demonstrated by Clarke and Braun (2009), who argue that mainstream psychology has long focused on male participant's viewpoints and fails to research topics of importance to women's lives. The research identified in my literature review revealed not only a lack of female participants and perspectives in gaming, but discrimination in gaming spheres and a lack of depth of exploration into differences (for example, gaming being less problematic for girls is often stated, but not explored further). This led to my reflection that this could be an implication from my study findings, in advancement of equality in this area. As my research journey continued, I noticed that it also linked to the other areas identified in figure 10.

One specific finding from my research that links to this area was that girls were using gaming to escape academic pressures, and that they were keenly aware of expectations around schoolwork. The stereotypes that surround gender within the school environment related to previous research (Stentiford et al., 2021). Given that there are concerns about girls' wellbeing more generally, (perhaps another link to equality) it appears that there needs to be a wider shift in policy or practice to support girls in the specific area of academic pressure. This might have a wider implication than the gaming aspect of the research. A wider perspective on this would be how these norms could be challenged, rather than taken for granted, and how the school system might further enable changes to be made in this regard.

The EP might also be informed by findings that some girls do experience an element of discrimination in gaming and related activities, which could affect wellbeing. This would have implications for formulation and perhaps safeguarding. However, as with all findings in this study, it is a nuanced area, and EPs are encouraged to explore this further with individuals within their work.

### **EP role in contribution of expertise in this area**

Upon reflecting on the EP role, and researching the literature around this (for example, Ashton & Roberts, 2006), I recognised that EPs are often positioned in an advice-giving role. Specific to gaming, Griffiths' (2010) article suggests there is a need for EPs to understand this area, as part of the advice that might be sought by school staff or parents. Whilst his article provides a balanced view of gaming, that is underpinned by his own research, I recognised that gaming is constantly evolving, and, therefore, updated research might be needed to continue to support EPs in this advice-giving role. This also links closely with the previous section related to equality and social justice, in that most research in this area is conducted with male participants.

From my research, I concluded that the findings could be used by EPs when asked for advice in this area. Whilst the research is not generalisable, it does allow EPs to have an insight into the gaming world, and how girls might experience it. This is something that EPs might not necessarily have experience of, or know themselves, and therefore, gives a perspective that can be used in consultation with schools and parents when EPs are positioned in an advice-giving role. Given the

increasing popularity of gaming, this is a topic that remains relevant. Indeed, it was a recent discussion between me and an EP colleague, whereby she was asked to give advice to a parent who was concerned about a child's gaming. Furthermore, the Young Minds website has a section for parents about gaming concerns, which demonstrates the presence of this topic more widely. My research demonstrates that it is important this advice-giving around gaming for girls is nuanced, and should not be seen as wholly negative or positive, rather, it depends on the experiences of the individual.

### **Dissemination**

BERA (2018), in their ethical guidelines for educational research, stated that there is a responsibility for researchers to make their research public for the benefit of interested parties. Therefore, it is important to consider how best to disseminate such research, and who the interested parties might be. Whilst this is a qualitative study and is not generalisable as such, my hope is that it will enable the opening of discussion around the more nuanced understanding of girls' wellbeing related to gaming (and other linked activities). To achieve this, I have reflected upon various avenues for dissemination.

As also identified by BERA (2018), there is a tendency for published research to be available only when paid for. This necessarily restricts who may access it, and as a result its reach. My intention, therefore, is to publish in journals which tend to be more freely accessible to educational psychologists, such as *Educational Psychology in Practice*. It is my intention that this will bring these ideas to a range of educational psychologists, as well as those that may specifically be seeking literature in this area. As stated elsewhere in this chapter and others, it appears that there is a lack of literature specifically for educational psychologists related to CYP's gaming, which seems at odds with the numbers of CYP who game (see OFCOM, 2020; OFCOM, 2021a; OFCOM, 2021b).

Again, to broaden reach, I aim to present my research findings at relevant conferences. This might include the Division of Educational and Child Psychology (DECP) TEP conference. It is hoped that by presenting in such a forum, it will enable a wider audience, bringing these ideas into further discussions within the profession as a result.

By targeting dissemination to educational psychologists, it is anticipated that they can be the catalyst for discussions with other professionals and parents as the topic arises. I aim for my research to inform such discussions as part of a wider and more holistic view of this topic area. Whilst the more negative aspects of gaming, including problematic gaming must not be ignored, my intention is that other aspects are considered alongside this. It might be that in the future, there is scope to widen the reach of the findings of this study to include parent groups. I note that the Young Minds website has a section for parents related to gaming, and this could be one area for dissemination for parents and CYP themselves.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the research journey considered here, has encompassed several stages. This has included pre-empirical, empirical and post-empirical stages.

Prior to my research taking place, I identified a topic area through initial reading and related to my own research interests. My ideas were broadened by the literature review, which enabled me to consider further important aspects of this study.

During my research, I considered recruitment and the related ethics of this. I also reflected on my interviews, methodology and analysis.

The findings of my study were considered using a future-focused approach. This included the implications for practice for educational psychologists, as well as for school staff. I explored dissemination to interested parties, including my plans for this.

I look forward to continuing my research journey as I embark upon my career as an educational psychologist. I will continue to reflect upon the issues highlighted by this research, namely, a more nuanced view of the effects of gaming, and the lack of research centring on females more broadly. In all, I have found the research process stimulating and interesting and it will continue to inform my ongoing practice.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Semi-structured interview schedule

Main question	Possible prompts
1. Can you tell me about the picture/photograph you have brought with you today?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why did you choose this image?</li> <li>• What does it mean to you?</li> <li>• Can you tell me about this experience?</li> <li>• How were you feeling/thinking?</li> <li>• What are your thoughts about your wellbeing during this experience?</li> </ul>
2. Can you tell me about the video games you like to play?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• genres, titles, online, offline, how often, on what platform?</li> <li>• Do you consider yourself a gamer?</li> <li>• How did you get into it?</li> <li>• What first interested you?</li> <li>• How do you feel when playing these games?</li> <li>• What do you think makes you feel that way?</li> <li>• Do you ever feel differently?</li> <li>• What makes the difference?</li> </ul> <p><b>Thoughts/feelings/wellbeing</b></p>
3. Can you describe any other activities you do that relate to playing video games? (they may or may not, a no is fine)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do you do?</li> <li>• How did you get into it?</li> <li>• How do you feel when (engaged in this activity?) What do you think makes you feel that way?</li> <li>• Do you ever feel differently? What makes the difference?</li> </ul>

	<b>Thoughts/feelings/wellbeing</b>
4. What place does playing video games (and related activities) have in your life?	
5. Can you tell me about what it is like to be a girl who plays video games and... (enter other activities they do within gaming culture)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are your experiences?</li> </ul> <b>Thoughts/feelings/wellbeing</b>
6. Do you feel that gaming influences your wellbeing in any way, that we have not yet discussed?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How? Why do you think this?</li> </ul>
<b>General prompts throughout:</b> Why? How? Can you tell me more about that? Tell me what you were thinking when... How did you feel?	



## Appendix B: Ethical approval



University of East Anglia  
Norwich Research Park  
Norwich. NR4 7TJ

Email: [ethicsapproval@uea.ac.uk](mailto:ethicsapproval@uea.ac.uk)  
Web: [www.uea.ac.uk](http://www.uea.ac.uk)

**Study title:** An exploration of how secondary school age girls make sense of their experiences of video gaming and gaming culture in relation to their wellbeing: An IPA study

**Application ID:** ETH2122-1227

Dear Naomi,

Your application was considered on 16th May 2022 by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee).

The decision is: **approved**.

You are therefore able to start your project subject to any other necessary approvals being given.

This approval will expire on **31st July 2023**.

Please note that your project is granted ethics approval only for the length of time identified above. Any extension to a project must obtain ethics approval by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) before continuing.

It is a requirement of this ethics approval that you should report any adverse events which occur during your project to the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) as soon as possible. An adverse event is one which was not anticipated in the research design, and which could potentially cause risk or harm to the participants or the researcher, or which reveals potential risks in the treatment under evaluation. For research involving animals, it may be the unintended death of an animal after trapping or carrying out a procedure.

Any amendments to your submitted project in terms of design, sample, data collection, focus etc. should be notified to the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) in advance to ensure ethical compliance. If the amendments are substantial a new application may be required.

Approval by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) should not be taken as evidence that your study is compliant with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018. If you need guidance on how to make your study UK GDPR compliant, please contact the UEA Data Protection Officer ([dataprotection@uea.ac.uk](mailto:dataprotection@uea.ac.uk)).

I would like to wish you every success with your project.

On behalf of the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee)

Yours sincerely,

David Jones



University of East Anglia  
Norwich Research Park  
Norwich, NR4 7TJ

Email: [ethicsapproval@uea.ac.uk](mailto:ethicsapproval@uea.ac.uk)  
Web: [www.uea.ac.uk](http://www.uea.ac.uk)

**Study title:** An exploration of how secondary school age girls make sense of their experiences of video gaming and gaming culture in relation to their wellbeing: An IPA study

**Application ID:** ETH2223-0314 (significant amendments)

Dear Naomi,

Your application was considered on 17th October 2022 by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee).

The decision is: **approved**.

You are therefore able to start your project subject to any other necessary approvals being given.

This approval will expire on **31st July 2023**.

Please note that your project is granted ethics approval only for the length of time identified above. Any extension to a project must obtain ethics approval by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) before continuing.

It is a requirement of this ethics approval that you should report any adverse events which occur during your project to the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) as soon as possible. An adverse event is one which was not anticipated in the research design, and which could potentially cause risk or harm to the participants or the researcher, or which reveals potential risks in the treatment under evaluation. For research involving animals, it may be the unintended death of an animal after trapping or carrying out a procedure.

Any amendments to your submitted project in terms of design, sample, data collection, focus etc. should be notified to the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) in advance to ensure ethical compliance. If the amendments are substantial a new application may be required.

Approval by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) should not be taken as evidence that your study is compliant with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018. If you need guidance on how to make your study UK GDPR compliant, please contact the UEA Data Protection Officer ([dataprotection@uea.ac.uk](mailto:dataprotection@uea.ac.uk)).

I would like to wish you every success with your project.

On behalf of the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee)

Yours sincerely,

Lee Beaumont

## Appendix C: Information and consent forms

Naomi Cumberland

Trainee Educational Psychologist

06/05/2022

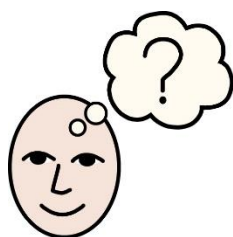
**Faculty of Social  
Sciences**

School of Education and  
Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia  
Norwich Research Park  
Norwich NR4 7TJ  
United Kingdom

An exploration of how secondary school age girls make sense of their experiences of video gaming and gaming culture in relation to their wellbeing

**Study Information Sheet:** An exploration of how secondary school age girls make sense of their experiences of video gaming and gaming culture in relation to their wellbeing



Hello. My name is Naomi Cumberland

I am doing a research project to find out more about the experiences of girls who play video games and may take part in activities related to gaming (e.g. watching streaming of games, walk throughs of games, posting on forums). I am interested in experiences of girls who play games and their ideas about how this relates to their wellbeing.

I am asking you to be in my study because you:

- *Are aged between 11 and 16 years old*
- *Are female*
- *Play video games (in any format, on any platform)*

You can decide if you want to take part in the study or not. You don't have to - it's up to you.

This sheet tells you what I will ask you to do if you decide to take part in the study. Please read it carefully so that you can make up your mind about whether you want to take part.

If you decide you want to be in the study and then you change your mind later, that's ok. All you need to do is tell me that you don't want to be in the study anymore. You or your family or someone who looks after you can email me (n.cumberland@uea.ac.uk)

If you have any questions you can speak to me or your family or someone else who looks after you. If you want to, you can contact me on [n.cumberland@uea.ac.uk](mailto:n.cumberland@uea.ac.uk).

### **What will happen if I say that I want to be in the study?**

If you decide that you want to be in my study, I will ask you to do these things:

- Take a photograph or find a picture which you think says something about your experiences of gaming/gaming activities, that you would be happy to share with me. This photograph/picture **MUST NOT** include pictures of anyone including yourself, but other than that, can be whatever you feel most captures something of your experiences. You will need to do this before the interview, so that you can bring it with you.
- Meet me on a Microsoft Teams meeting, where I will ask you to talk to me about your picture, and then ask you some questions about gaming. The interview will take no longer than an hour

You are welcome to have a parent or legal guardian with you in the room when you have your interview. If you do not want them to be in the room, they will need to be in the house. Your parent or guardian will need to be in the room at the beginning of the interview to make sure there is an adult in the house. They will need to come back on at the end, where I will give you and them information about organisations and people that can help you if you feel you need it.

When I ask you questions, you can choose which ones you want to answer. If you don't want to talk about something, that's ok. You can stop talking to me at any time if you don't want to talk to me anymore.

If you say it's ok, I will record our interview on Microsoft Teams (this will include the video and audio).

### **Will anyone else know what I say in the study?**



I won't tell anyone else what you say to me, except if you talk about someone hurting you or about you hurting yourself or someone else or doing something you should not be doing. Then I might need to tell someone to keep you and other people safe.

All of the information that I have about you from the study will be stored in a safe place and I will look after it very carefully. I will write a report about the study and show it to other people, but I won't put your name in the report and no one will know that you're in the study.

### **How long will the study take?**



Taking a photograph/finding a picture – I will ask you to spend no more than 30 minutes on this, but you can spend less time if you like

Interview – No longer than 1 hour

### Are there any good things about being in the study?



You won't get anything for being in the study, but you will be helping me do my research. The information you tell me might help other adults to understand girls who play video games better.

### Are there any bad things about being in the study?



This study will take up some of your time, but I don't think it will be bad for you or cost you anything. You might choose to talk about some negative things about gaming, which might be difficult for you, but you do not have to do this. It will be up to you what you would like to share. I will give you some information about people who can help you if you need it.

### Will you tell me what you learned in the study at the end?

Yes, I will if you want me to. There is a question on the next page that asks you if you want me to tell you what I learned in the study. If you circle Yes, when I finish the study I will tell you what I learned. This will be through an email sent to you via your parent/guardian.

### What if I am not happy with the study or the people doing the study?



If you are not happy with how I am doing the study or how I treat you, then you **or the person who looks after you** can:

- Write an **email** to me on [n.cumberland@uea.ac.uk](mailto:n.cumberland@uea.ac.uk)
- Contact my supervisor Imogen Gorman on [I.Gorman@uea.ac.uk](mailto:I.Gorman@uea.ac.uk) or

01603 593011

- Write an **email** to the Head of School Yann Lebeau on [Y.Lebeau@uea.ac.uk](mailto:Y.Lebeau@uea.ac.uk)

*This sheet is for you to keep.*

### Consent Form 1

If you are happy to be in the study, please

- **write** your **name** in the space below
- **Fill in the section about which parts of the study you are happy with**
- **sign** your **name** at the bottom of the next page
- put the **date** at the bottom of the next page.

You should only say 'yes' to being in the study if you know what it is about and you want to be in it. If you don't want to be in the study, don't sign the form.

I, .....[PRINT NAME], am happy to be in this research study.

In saying yes to being in the study, I am saying that:

- ✓ I know what the study is about.
- ✓ I know what I will be asked to do.
- ✓ Someone has talked to me about the study.
- ✓ My questions have been answered.
- ✓ I know that I don't have to be in the study if I don't want to.
- ✓ I know that I can pull out of the study at any time if I don't want to do it anymore.
- ✓ I know that I don't have to answer any questions that I don't want to answer.
- ✓ I know that the researchers won't tell anyone what I say when I talk to each other, unless I talk about being hurt by someone or hurting myself or someone else.

**Please circle yes or no to tell me if you are happy with these parts of the study:**

Are you happy to take part in the study by being interviewed by me? **Yes** **No**

Are you happy for me to make videos of you by recording on Microsoft Teams? **Yes** **No**

Are you happy for me to audio record your voice by recording on Microsoft Teams? **Yes** **No**

If you have answered **No** the questions 2 and 3, are you happy for me to audio record your voice using a Dictaphone? **Yes** **No**

Do you want me to tell you what I learned in the study? **Yes** **No**

Do you want to look at a written version of our interview afterwards to check what you said has been recorded by me? **Yes** **No**

.....  
.....

**Signature**

**Date**

Naomi Cumberland  
Trainee Educational Psychologist

**Faculty of Social Sciences**  
School of Education and Lifelong  
Learning

21/10/2022

University of East Anglia  
Norwich Research Park  
Norwich NR4 7TJ  
United Kingdom

An exploration of how secondary school age girls make sense of their experiences of video gaming and gaming culture in relation to their wellbeing

## **PARENTAL/GUARDIAN INFORMATION STATEMENT**

### **(1) What is this study about?**

Your child is invited to take part in a research study about secondary school age girls' experiences of gaming, gaming culture and their ideas about how their experiences impact their wellbeing. For the purposes of this study, gaming culture may include watching streams of someone playing games, watching walk-throughs of games, reading and posting on gaming forums. Your child has been invited to participate in this study because she is a girl aged between 11-16 years old who plays video games and attends a mainstream school.

This Participant Information Statement tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to let your child take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

- ✓ Understand what you have read.
- ✓ Agree for your child to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- ✓ Agree to the use of your child's personal information as described.
- ✓ You have received a copy of this Participant Information Statement to keep.

### **(2) Who is running the study?**

The study is being carried out by the following researcher(s): Naomi Cumberland, School of Education and Lifelong Learning at University of East Anglia

This study will take place under the supervision of Imogen Gorman (email: [I.Gorman@uea.ac.uk](mailto:I.Gorman@uea.ac.uk); Telephone: 01603 593011)



I am also a Trainee Educational Psychologist who is on placement in a local authority in England. This means that your child may have met me if I have worked with them in the past. However, this is not related to this study, and there is no pressure for your child to take part whether or not they have met me before.

### **(3) What will the study involve for my child?**

Your child will be asked to take a photograph or find a picture related to their experiences of gaming/gaming culture to share with me at the interview. This photograph or picture should not include images which identify anyone including your child, so that they cannot be identified as someone taking part in the study. They will then be asked to attend an interview with me via Microsoft Teams at a mutually convenient time. During the interview, we will talk about the picture they have chosen and their experiences of gaming. They will be asked general questions and only asked to share what they feel comfortable with.

The interview will take place at home and require you to be at home during the time of the interview. It will be up to your child if they would like you to be in the room during the interview, but I will ask you to appear briefly on camera at the beginning to confirm that you are in the house and at the end for debrief information.

With your and your child's permission, I will record the Microsoft Teams interview so that I can transcribe the interview later.

### **(4) How much of my child's time will the study take?**

Your child will be asked to spend no more than 30 minutes finding or taking a picture prior to the interview.

The interview will take no longer than 1 hour.

In total, the study should take your child no longer than 1 hour, 30 minutes.

### **(5) Does my child have to be in the study? Can my child withdraw from the study once they have started?**

Being in this study is completely voluntary and your child does not have to take part. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the researcher or anyone else at the University of East Anglia.

If you decide to let your child take part in the study and then change your mind later (or they no longer wish to take part), they are free to withdraw from the study up to the point that their data is fully anonymised. You can do this by emailing me at [n.cumberland@uea.ac.uk](mailto:n.cumberland@uea.ac.uk) and asking to withdraw from the study.

### **(6) What are the consequences if my child withdraws from the study?**

Your child is free to stop the interview at any time. Unless you say that you want us to keep them, any recordings will be erased and the information your child has provided will not be included in the study results. Your child may also refuse to answer any questions that they do not wish to answer during the interview. If you decide at a later time to withdraw your child from the study their information will be removed from our records and will not be included in any results, up to the point I have fully anonymised their data.

**(7) Are there any risks or costs associated with my child being in the study?**

Aside from giving up their time, we do not expect that there will be any risks or costs associated with taking part in this study for your child. However, they may talk about negative experiences related to gaming that could be upsetting for them. They will not be asked specific questions about negative experiences, but whilst talking about their experiences they may choose to talk about such experiences. At the end of the interview, your child will be given details of organisations of support and a written copy of these will be emailed for future reference in case required.

**(8) Are there any benefits associated with my child being in the study?**

The results of this study will help Educational Psychologists to understand girls who play video games better, as this group is currently not well represented in research.

**(9) What will happen to information provided by my child and data collected during the study?**

Your child's personal data and information will only be used as outlined in this Participant Information Statement, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA 2018) and UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), and the University of East Anglia's [Research Data Management Policy](#).

Your child's information will be stored securely on a password protected laptop and their identity will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings may be published, but your child will not be identified in these publications if you and your child decide to participate in this study.

**(10) What if we would like further information about the study?**

When you have read this information, Naomi Cumberland ([n.cumberland@uea.ac.uk](mailto:n.cumberland@uea.ac.uk)) will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have about the study.

**(11) Will my child be told the results of the study?**

You and your child have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study.

You can tell us that you wish to receive feedback by ticking the box on the consent form attached to this information sheet.

This feedback will be in the form of an email.

This feedback will be available after the research project has been marked by my assessor.

**(12) What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?**

If there is a problem please let me know. You can contact me via the University at the following address:

Naomi Cumberland

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia

NORWICH NR4 7TJ

*n.cumberland@uea.ac.uk*

If you would like to speak to someone else, you can contact my supervisor:

Imogen Gorman ([I.Gorman@uea.ac.uk](mailto:I.Gorman@uea.ac.uk); 01603 593011)

If you or your child are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact the Head of the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, Yann Lebeau on [Y.Lebeau@uea.ac.uk](mailto:Y.Lebeau@uea.ac.uk)

### **(13) How do we know that this study has been approved to take place?**

To protect your safety, rights, wellbeing and dignity, all research in the University of East Anglia is reviewed by a Research Ethics Body. This research was approved by the School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Committee.

### **(14) What is the general data protection information my child needs to be informed about?**

According to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis for processing your data as listed in Article 6(1) of the UK GDPR is because this allows us to process personal data when it is necessary to perform our public tasks as a University.

In addition to the specific information provided above about why your child's personal data is required and how it will be used, there is also some general information which needs to be provided for you:

- The data controller is the University of East Anglia.
- For further information, you can contact the University's Data Protection Officer at [dataprotection@uea.ac.uk](mailto:dataprotection@uea.ac.uk)
- You can also find out more about your child's data protection rights at the [Information Commissioner's Office \(ICO\)](#).
- If you are unhappy with how your child's personal data has been used, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer at [dataprotection@uea.ac.uk](mailto:dataprotection@uea.ac.uk) in the first instance.

### **(15) OK, I am happy for my child to take part – what do I do next?**

You need to fill in one copy of the consent form and email it to me at [n.cumberland@uea.ac.uk](mailto:n.cumberland@uea.ac.uk). Please keep the letter, information sheet and **the second** copy of the consent form for your information.

### **(16) Further information**

This information was last updated on 21<sup>st</sup> October 2022.

If there are changes to the information provided, you will be notified by email.

**This information sheet is for you to keep**

## PARENTAL/GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM (First Copy to Researcher)

I, .....[PRINT PARENT'S/GUARDIAN'S NAME], consent to my child ..... [PRINT CHILD'S NAME] participating in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- I understand the purpose of the study, what my child will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- I have read the Parental/Guardian Information Sheet and have been able to discuss my child's involvement in the study with the researcher if I wished to do so.
- The researcher has answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
- I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and my child does not have to take part. My decision whether to let them take part in the study will not affect our relationship with the researcher or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.
- I understand that my child can withdraw from the study at any time, up until the results are anonymised.
- I understand that my child may stop the interview at any time if they do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study results. I also understand that my child may refuse to answer any questions they don't wish to answer.
- I understand that my child may stop the research activity at any time if they do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any materials (e.g. images, recordings, text) will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study results. I also understand that my child may refuse to take part in any of the activities that they wish.
- I understand that personal information about my child that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about my child will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.
- I understand that the results of this study will be used for a thesis assessment and may be published but that the thesis and any publications will not contain my child's name or any identifiable information about my child.

I consent to:

Audio-recording of my child

via Microsoft Teams

YES  NO

Video-recording of my child  
via Microsoft Teams YES  NO

If no to the above questions,  
audio-recoding of my child with  
a Dictaphone YES  NO

My child reviewing transcripts YES  NO

Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?  
YES  NO

If you answered **YES**, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

Postal: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

.....  
**Signature**

.....  
**PRINT name**

.....  
**Date**

## Appendix D: Debrief information

### Support if you are feeling upset or worried

Thank you for talking to me today about your gaming experiences.

If you are feeling upset or worried about anything and would like to talk to someone, these are some places that might be able to help:

- You can talk to a trusted adult, like a parent, pastoral support at school or form tutor at school
- You can visit <https://www.youngminds.org.uk> website, which has lots of advice for young people
- You can visit <https://www.kooth.com/> website which has articles that can help and you can live chat with their team
- You can contact Childline at <https://www.childline.org.uk/> or 0800 1111 if you are worried about anything, including something that has happened online/when you are gaming, such as bullying
- You can visit <https://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/> for information and advice if something has happened to you online

## Appendix E: Stages of IPA analysis

Example transcripts with initial notes and emerging themes. Each transcript was analysed using the same process, systematically, from the beginning to the end of the transcript.

Key:

Red – Descriptive

Blue – Linguistic

Green – Conceptual

<p>Gaining as a community part of the group</p>	<p>94 I: Oh, ok, tell me a bit more about that.  95 P: Um, so you know Tik Tok? Like, there's a lot of stuff  96 about like the edits, or like something like, oh, if you've  97 played this, you'll know about this, um, and it's kind of like  98 bringing people together yeah... I like that. And there's like  99 edits of different things, I think there was like if something  100 really like devastating happens in the game, people will  101 make it, and then in the comments, it's like, 'Oh my god, I  102 was so sad when that happened.'  103 I: Yeah...so you like compare your experiences kind of  104 thing  105 P: Yeah, because sometimes I see people doing  106 something, and like, oh, how did you do that? And I like go  107 and try and do it myself in the game.  108 I: mmm hmm...so its kind of, you kind of learn from them  109 as well and what they do?  110 P: Yeah  111 I: mm hmm, ok, cool. Um, what's your kind of wellbeing like  112 when you're playing a game like that?  113 P: Um, it's definitely like a good like... I think it's  114 more... it's like an escape, kind of, like cuz I don't have to  115 worry about other stuff, and some, I don't really like get as  116 frustrated with that as I might do other things, like if I do, I  117 can just like, play something else, and then come back to  118 it, and like, it feels nice to have a bit of a challenge with it.  119 I: mmm hmm. So, what kind of things would you say it's an  120 escape from?  121 P: Um... just like, erm, like homework and school and all  122 that stuff. I can just, it's just kind of separate to that and I  123 can just focus on it, instead of everything being intertwined  124 together, it can just be like this is separate, and I've got my  125 own like goals and stuff to do with this. So it just kind of</p>	<p>Sense of community - if you've play this, you'll know about this part of the group? In-jokes?</p> <p>Using others' experiences to help play the game  A sense that comparison is about learning from (rather than competition with).</p> <p>It's like an escape.  Don't get frustrated.  Nice to have a challenge.</p> <p>Homework + school - separate.</p> <p>Own goals - A sense that these 'own goals' related to gaming are important and different to school goals / other-imposed goals.</p>
<p>Comparison and learning experience learning from others'</p>		
<p>Gaining as an escape</p>		
<p>Nice to have a challenge</p>		
<p>Separating as separate to school work</p>		
<p>My goals in gaming.</p>		

347 I: And...um...what's it like being a girl who plays video  
 348 games?  
 349 P: Um, I definitely think it's more accepted now, especially  
 350 cuz I play a lot more single player games, it's not like I'm  
 351 getting judged because I'm a girl or something like that like  
 352 an online player. Um, but I definitely feel like I can still like  
 353 interact with the community without being like judged for  
 354 that as it might have been a few years ago.  
 355 I: mmm hmm, so do you think you've seen that change  
 356 over time?  
 357 P: Yeah, yeah, um, I feel like it's not really a thing like if a  
 358 girls says like 'oh, I was this, I want this gaming console for  
 359 Christmas' then parents are less likely to go, 'Oh no, that's  
 360 a boys thing', cuz it's like, there's like a wide variety of  
 361 games for everyone nowadays, whether you're more, even  
 362 if you're like a very, like even if you're a girly girl, there's  
 363 still gonna be games there for you that you might like.  
 364 I: mm hmm, yeah, yeah. So to you it's kind of like it's  
 365 changed over time and now it's not really seen as any  
 366 different you'd, in your opinion kind of thing.  
 367 P: No, because there's such, there's like a wide variety, it's  
 368 not really like, it can't really be condensed into like, this is  
 369 for this specific type of person.  
 370 I: mm hmm, yeah, I get you. And let me just check where  
 371 I'm up to, check if there are any more questions... Do you  
 372 have any thoughts on...so I think we have kind of covered  
 373 gaming and wellbeing, as a whole, but well, as we have  
 374 gone along. Is there anything else you want to add about  
 375 that, how gaming does or doesn't impact wellbeing for  
 376 you?  
 377 P: ummm, how it impacts like wellbeing...um...I think some  
 378 people get like frustrated but you can just, it's easy to like

Female  
gaming  
changes over  
time.  
Not being  
judged  
Acceptance in  
gaming  
community  
Gaming as  
for everyone  
Gaming beyond  
gender norms

more accepted now - suggests  
not always the case and a  
change over time.  
→ Not getting judged - single player  
is the suggestion so you will be  
judged if not a single player  
game?  
→ However, not judged  
as female because of community

games for everyone gaming is for  
everyone? It's normalised?  
→ even if you are a girly girl  
- suggests this might  
be either an excep-  
tion or a  
stereotype of male  
dominated gaming?

stereotyping



21 P: I think I was just... um... well... I was losing the match  
 22 I: Oh, ok (both laugh)  
 23 P: But I just, I just, I was just realised that the character made that expression and I thought it was really cool so I took a screenshot  
 24 I: Yeah, that's cool... And so you don't, did you end up winning this game or not in the end?  
 25 P: I don't think so  
 26 (Both laugh)  
 27 I: Is that, is it, is winning important to you when you're gaming  
 28 P: err... not massively... I mean, if I have fun in the match when like it's good still. It depends what game though obviously, so...  
 29 I: Yeah... so, so its kind of more about having fun in the game that winning or yeah  
 30 P: But it also depends on the game, cuz if like if the only way of getting rewards is winning then winning is pretty important  
 31 I: Yeah, so it depends on the game. Yeah. What other games do you like to play other than this other than Splatoon?  
 32 P: um... well I play this game called Genshin Impact on my laptop and its like er open world RPG. It's a bit like Zelda Windwaker, its like a, it's a Chinese game but I have it in English. Its pretty, its pretty popular. Its very fun. Um and I also play this um rhythm game on my phone... its called Bandori... its like you click it and I don't know how to explain it.  
 33 I: What's that... what do you have to do in that one?  
 34 P: Uh you listen to the song and then you like you tap the notes in time to the song.

interest in gaming character

winning as important fun as important

Rewards Accomplishment achievement

laugh as in, not too worried about it? Just thought was really cool-character expression. Interest in the character as important?

How Having fun as more important than winning. But depends on game sometimes winning is important?

Expans on depends on game (repetition from previous response) getting rewards tied to (achievement) getting rewards may improve reward + learning both a form of accomplishment?

Gaming generally.

Very fun pretty popular. popular with who?

Switch laptop phone Multiple platforms of play refer to on game?

96 I: uh huh  
 97 P: So not as many people as some other games  
 98 I: um yeah. And in those worlds, have people created those worlds in the game or?  
 99 P: No, its, I mean, sort of, not really, it's like um... I don't know if you've played any games but its like um... the map is already set out, it's to do with how much of the map they have unlocked.  
 100 I: Uh huh, oh right, ok, yeah  
 101 P: How much of the storyline they've played and stuff.  
 102 I: Ok yeah, so, that makes sense  
 103 I: And um we've kind of talked about who who you might play with. How are you feeling when you're playing these games?  
 104 P: Uh, I mean, it depends on like what's happening but I... I don't know. I just, usually, I, it's like happy because it's fun.  
 105 I: mm hmmm  
 106 P: Yeah. I guess its like any other hobby, it's just something you do because you enjoy doing it.  
 107 I: yeah, yeah.  
 108 Are there any kind of negatives to it or anything, any times you feel differently to when its kind of like happy and fun?  
 109 P: ... I guess if I'm... I don't know.  
 110 I: no, that's ok.  
 111 Um... so when you're kind of gaming, what's like a typical experience, talk me through like, a recent experience of gaming.  
 112 P: Ok... er...  
 113 I: what you might do, or what might happen?  
 114 P: Well, I was just playing um Splatoon three cuz there's like an event going on um so I would like log into the game, not really logging in but opening it on my er Switch. And

Making progress together

Just like any other hobby enjoyment motivation

not as many people.

Trying to think of best way to explain? Gaming lang/throw/understanding unlocking map-making progress through the game.

Happy because it's fun. Thinking about feelings. like any other hobby -> not distinct or different in terms of what you get from it. something you do because you enjoy

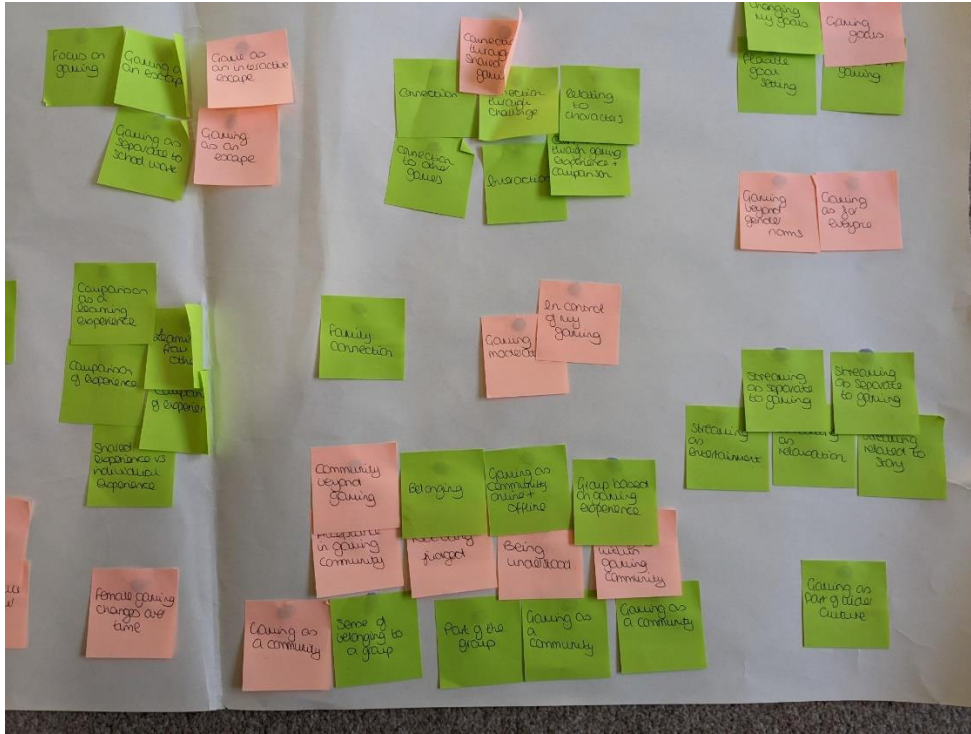
maybe unsure if wants to share?

An event going on. Engagement with events - another way to play. Is this a different way to play?

# Emergent themes

For each participant, emergent themes were clustered together.

## Example:



## Identifying superordinate and subordinate themes

Superordinate and subordinate themes were identified for each participant through a process of abstraction, subsumption and numeration. These were recorded into tables.

<b>Superordinate themes</b>	<b>Subordinate themes</b>
Pride in achievement	Sharing achievements with others Achievement x2 Pride in achievement
Your choices matter	Gaming to fulfil different needs Your choices matter Choice as an influence over the game Choices in game as fulfilling different needs Choices in gaming Making choices Gaming to suit different moods
Investment in gaming	Gaming over time Investment in gaming
Challenges in gaming	Challenges in gaming Overcoming challenge x2 Nice to have challenge Gaming as a challenge Tackling challenges
Putting in effort gets rewards	Progression x2 Persevering x2 Improvement Putting in effort gets rewards
Having fun in gaming	Having fun as important Being addicted not compatible with fun
Gamer identity	Gamer identity Uncomfortable with gamer label

Gaming as an escape	<p>Focus on gaming</p> <p>Gaming as an escape x2</p> <p>Gaming as an interactive escape</p> <p>Gaming as separate to school work</p>
Comparison as a learning experience	<p>Comparison as a learning experience</p> <p>Comparison of experience x2</p> <p>Learning from others</p> <p>Shared experience vs individual experience</p>
Female gaming changes	Female gaming changes over time
Connection through gaming experiences	<p>Connections through shared gaming</p> <p>Connection</p> <p>Connection to other gamers</p> <p>Connection through challenge</p> <p>Interaction</p> <p>Relating to characters</p> <p>Connection through gaming experience and comparison</p>
Being in control of my gaming	<p>In control of my gaming</p> <p>Gaming in moderation</p>
Family connection	Family connection
Belonging within the gaming community	<p>Community beyond gaming</p> <p>Belonging</p> <p>Gaming as community online and offline</p> <p>Group based on gaming experience</p> <p>Acceptance in gaming community</p> <p>Not being judged</p> <p>Being understood</p> <p>Belonging within gaming community</p> <p>Gaming as a community x3</p> <p>Sense of belonging to a group</p> <p>Part of the group</p>
Setting my own goals	Changing my goals

	Gaming goals Flexible goal setting My goals in gaming
Gaming beyond gender norms	Gaming beyond gender norms Gaming is for everyone
Streaming as separate to gaming	Streaming as separate to gaming x2 Streaming as entertainment Streaming as relaxation Streaming related to story
Gaming as part of wider culture	Gaming as part of wider culture

Once this process was complete for all participants, themes were analysed across cases to identify similarities and divergences between the themes. Again, a process of subsumption, abstraction and numeration took place to identify the final superordinate and subordinate themes. Some were discarded because they were in addition to elements of wellbeing, and therefore did not answer the research question on this occasion.

<b>Megan</b>	<b>Lena</b>	<b>Kim</b>	<b>Amy</b>	<b>Corrinne</b>	<b>Jade</b>	<b>Subordinate</b>	<b>Superordinate</b>
Gaming as part of family life	Gaming as part of family life	Gaming as part of family life	Gaming as part of family life	Family connection	Gaming as part of family life	Gaming as part of family life	Gaming as a way to connect
Belonging within the gaming community	Sense of belonging and connection		Gaming as a community	Belonging within the gaming community	Belonging within the gaming community	Gaming as a community	
Connecting with others		Connection through gaming	Keeping safe vs making connections	Connection through gaming experiences	Social element of gaming	Connections through gaming	
Improvement	Strategy and working together	Completing challenges?	Winning and losing	Putting in effort gets rewards	Getting better at gaming	Effort and improvement	Levelling up: Improvement and achievement
Sense of achievement	Achievement as part of gaming	Sense of achievement		Pride in achievement		Sense of achievement	

Gaming as an escape	Gaming as separate from work	Gaming as an escape	Gaming as an escape	Gaming as an escape	Gaming as a distraction	Gaming for a purpose	What gaming brings to my life
		Managing my feelings through gaming?	Managing my feelings through gaming	Managing my feelings through gaming	Managing my feelings through gaming		
Gaming as part of my life		Gaming fits into my life	Gaming as part of my life	Being in control of my gaming	Control over my gaming	Gaming as a balanced part of my life	
Gaming for enjoyment	Gaming is enjoyable	Gaming for fun	Gaming is enjoyable	Having fun in gaming	Gaming for enjoyment		
Gaming beyond my gender	Gaming beyond gender	Gender differences in gaming	Girls as different in the gaming world	Gaming beyond gender norms	Female identity in gaming	Female identity	Making sense of identities in the gaming world
Not a gamer	Gaming as part of who I am	Not a gamer	Gamer identity	Gamer identity	Gaming as part of who I am	Gaming identities	
	Competition as positive			Comparison as a learning experience			
	Commitment to gaming		Gaming over time	Investment in gaming			
	Characters important to gaming		Character as important to gaming				
		My online self					
		Gaming as a separate world					
		Staying safe	Worries and concerns				
			Happy feelings in gaming				
			Different perspectives				

			es on gaming				
			Streaming as story	Streaming as separate to gaming	Gaming as story		
			Negative gamer stereotypes				
			Going beyond the game				
				Challenges in gaming	Challenges as part of gaming		
				Female gaming changes			
				Setting my own goals			
				Gaming as part of wider culture			

For each superordinate and subordinate theme, tables of extracts were made. These were then selected for the final paper based on telling the story of each superordinate and subordinate theme, including similarities and divergence.

### Example:

<b>Gaming as a part of family life</b>	<p><b>Megan</b> 79 I don't know I think because I think because I seen it on 80 like different like I seen it on YouTube when I was a bit 81 younger and I think it looked interesting so I decided to try 82 it out. And also cuz quite a few of my friends play it as well 83 so they got me interested in it and my brother</p> <p>169 Um I tend to watch them by myself or with my brother 170 cuz sometimes we do challenges together and we copy it 171 off of YouTube videos...and stuff</p> <p>180 Um we're in like different rooms then we can speak to 181 each other through a head set of shout through doors or 182 something</p> <p><b>Lena</b> 301 Hmm...Probably my dad cuz he likes games a lot. He 302 has a ton of consoles, and when I was younger, I had this 303 like Leapfrog thing it was a little bit like a PS Vita or 304 something, and you could like play games on it and stuff,</p>
--	--

305 and I found that really fun. Uh, and then, yeah, my dad, I  
306 used to play on his Wii U all the time. We played Mario  
307 Party and um Super Mario 3D World and Mario Kart and I  
308 had Splatoon as well.

310 Yeah, it was probably my dad but a few other things as  
311 well. Also the internet maybe cuz liking games is quite  
312 mainstream and stuff.  
314 But probably mostly cuz of my dad.

**Kim**

81 Yeah, so sometimes I play with my cousins (cousins  
82 names).

106 Um...it started off with me and my sister (sister's name)  
107 when she was like 12. I think I was like 7 or something.  
109 And we first got our laptops, like our first laptop, from  
110 our mum. And we found Roblox on it. And we started  
111 playing. And everyday. And that. And that sort of thing  
112 helped us get more into gaming, and find new games

**Amy**

92 so that is the image that you could you could choose from  
93 that one or one other one that my brother uses, because I  
94 can't really use the same one as him because we both use  
95 the same Switch so it would get too complicated.

212 Um...there's a couple of Steam games I play, I play  
213 Slime Rancher, which is a Steam game, and Terraria,  
214 which is another Steam game, but I mostly play on that one  
215 so I can hang out with my brother, because he really likes  
216 that game

362 up...well I guess, I guess originally got into gaming in  
363 general from my dad. He's a very big video gamer. He has  
364 a massive Steam library and things like that. And he was  
365 the one who originally bought the Switch, which is my main  
366 source of gaming. But, I kind of, kind of like made it my  
367 own, if that makes sense, so I was the first one that got into  
368 Pokémon and Splatoon, so in that way I have my own  
369 interests, just the original whole aspect of the interest of  
370 gaming, originally came from people around me, but I've  
371 just kind of chosen what I like about gaming, and how I like  
372 to do gaming, other than, but they've shown that I like  
373 gaming, if that makes sense, they've kind of showed me  
374 that I enjoy it.

381 Yeah, so, my brother is also a very big gamer, but  
382 obviously...he plays one video game, all of the time,  
383 whereas I will constantly be switching between games  
384 because I, I don't, I don't have very long concentration  
385 periods, so you will find me constantly switching between  
386 different games because I just don't have a long enough  
387 attention span. Because my brother is only into one game,  
388 when I buy a copy of that one game, which is Terraria, I  
389 think I've mentioned it, when I buy that one copy of that  
390 game, it means that I can play with him and it's just a nice  
391 way to sibling bond

**Corrinne**

293 Um, I don't know, it's from when I was pretty young, I  
294 think like I had an Xbox 360 or something that used to be  
295 my dad's, cuz he played like Fifa on it or something. And I  
296 think I had Minecraft on there. And I just played around the  
297 creative worlds, just like making some stuff, and that kind

**Jade**

191 I feel like it might have, because I started gaming, well, I  
192 started gaming really because, well, it's something I enjoy.  
193 And my dad really likes playing video games, so it's kind of  
194 a common thing we have in common. So does my brother  
195 and sometimes my sister does, but I started because we  
196 bought a Nintendo Switch and I just didn't really have a lot  
197 else to do.

293 Well sometimes we play Mario. So if we're on a car



	<p>294 journey and we haven't got a lot to do, we bring the  295 Nintendo Switch with us and me and my brother usually  296 play Mario Kart, and sometimes at the weekend, we  297 have an afternoon, we don't know what to do, we do  298 usually play Mario Kart because it's a game that we can all  299 play together. Uh, that's really the only thing, apart from  300 when I play with my brother sometimes, and we play the  301 same game together to just get stuff done in the game and  302 help each other out.</p>
<p><b>Gaming as a community</b></p>	<p><b>Megan</b>  200 And...like sometimes...I just...whenever I'm playing with  201 people they just get along with it they don't like judge me or  202 anything. And it's just like really enjoyable because while  203 like some of my other friends like mainly doing...other  204 things...while I'm like gaming and its something I really  205 enjoy doing</p> <p>225 And they like don't judge me they're like...they're just  226 like...we just ask each other questions about ourselves  227 maybe and just get to know each other a bit while we're  228 also playing the game.</p> <p>245 It's not really affected my wellbeing negatively because  246 like people accept me like within the game...and they don't  247 judge me...sometimes they're maybe like 'oh are they gonna  248 be good or are they gonna be bad?' but that I don't really  249 mind when they do that.</p> <p><b>Amy</b>  555 ...the male, because  556 obviously there's so many more males in the community</p> <p>635 Video gaming is one of those things, you either like it or  636 you hate it, again, and if you like it you will be hated on by  637 the other group, and if you don't like it, most of the time,  638 the, actual gamers won't care if you like it or not,</p> <p><b>Corrinne</b>  89 And there's a big community for like loads of different  90 games and stuff as well, so you can like watch something  91 that's not even like related to the actual gameplay.  95 Um, so you know Tik Tok? Like, there's a lot of stuff  96 about like the edits, or like something like, oh, if you've  97 played this, you'll know about this, um, and it's kind of like  98 bringing people together yeah...I like that. And there's like  99 edits of different things, I think there was like if something  100 really like devastating happens in the game, people will  101 make it, and then in the comments, it's like, 'Oh my god, I  102 was so sad when that happened.'</p> <p>160 like 'ooh, it, that took me ages' and it feels like nice to be  161 part of that group that have done it. Like that have been  162 able to do that.</p> <p>252 um, even with like watching people online, like if they have  253 a pretty big like community, you can still talk about it with  254 people like at school and stuff, like, oh have you seen, do  255 you watch so and so? And like, oh yeah, have you seen  256 this video, oh like that was really funny.</p> <p>352 an online player. Um, but I definitely feel like I can still like  353 interact with the community without being like judged for  354 that as it might have been a few years ago.  440 Um, I think like one of the most important things is just  441 being like being able to be part of the community, even if  442 you don't really want to interact with people, you can still  443 like look at stuff online without talking to anybody. You can  444 still play the games, and like see what other people are  445 doing, even if, yeah, and you can just, it feels like more of a  446 connection, cuz if you're just doing something on your own,  447 like, you're like, 'oh, was that good? I don't really know'  448 like, I want to see like how other people are doing with it,  449 and what they've done.</p>

	<p>450 I: Mmm hmm, so that community sort of thing is a big part 451 of it for you? 452 P: Yeah, yeah, I think that's one of the most important parts</p> <p><b>Jade</b> 355 they want to win all the time and I think, it's the gaming 356 community's just a nice place but sometimes you get 357 people that ruin it a bit, and it's just, people game for lots of 358 different reasons, but it's just not nice to game and be 359 horrible to other people.</p> <p>371 I: And, and do you see yourself as part of that gaming 372 community? 373 P: I would say I do, because I play video games. That kind 374 of means you're part of it, so I'd say, yeah, I do.</p> <p>382 place that I can kind of sometimes feel welcome</p>
<p><b>Connections through gaming</b></p>	<p><b>Megan</b> 99 makes me really happy because you like it's something I 100 really enjoy doing and like I meet new people on there as 101 well like when I sometimes play as a group and then like I 102 carry on playing with them and like we get better together 103 and like we level up, complete challenges together its like 104 really nice to meet new people on there</p> <p><b>Lena</b> 353 P: I guess...you know, again, it depends what game it is, 354 but like if you're playing with your friends, it makes it more 355 fun, especially because if there's like a chat feature or 356 something you can like have like a conversation with them 357 and like talk about the game and...as well, like outside of 358 the game, if you have a friend that also plays the same 359 thing as you, you can both like, obsess over the game 360 together instead of just being like with yourself and the 361 internet. 362 I: mmm...so when you say like, you can obsess about it 363 together, what, what do you mean by that? 364 P: Just like, really liking it, you know, like talking about it a 365 lot and the different characters and like what you got up to 366 in the game and stuff like that.</p> <p><b>Kim</b> 409 there's so many that you can choose from. And to play with 410 your friends and that and make new friends.</p> <p>437 Sometimes, I'll talk to it like with my friends and that, 438 like, ask them what they play and stuff like that. Or like if 439 this certain game was really hard and if we should play it</p> <p>445 P: Yeah, sometimes I talk to them in the game, like, I'll 446 facetime them, and call them, and we'll just, like, play the 447 game from there. And stuff like that. 448 I: And are you talking about the game while you are playing 449 it, or are you just like talking about something else? 450 P: Um, most of the time we'll probably talk about 451 something else, but some of the time we will talk about the 452 game and that.</p> <p><b>Amy</b> 477 Discord...which is obviously a very 'ooh you can find 478 groups here' type thing, but being a girl, especially a young 479 girl, I very...like people say, 'oh do you want to do this?' 480 and I'm just like, like, it, there are certain groups, that I was 481 in, in as a lurker, that, um, that, you know, finding friends, 482 finding groups kind of thing, but I'm always, I'm always so 483 wary, being a young, more, it's more about it being a, the</p> <p>500 It's a way for me to feel safe. But also, certain games, 501 like I will want to play Splatoon, but because Splatoon is a 502 very team-based game, it's sometimes nice to be talking, 503 because it's a team of four, as well, you need quite a few 504 friends, to be able to fully play, I mean, obviously, 505 sometimes you need, but um, sometimes I get this, I want 506 to be, I want to be on a call, I want to be talking to my</p>

507 Splatoon friends as we play or whatever, but I just, I'm just  
508 so wary of the internet, that I can't face trying to make  
509 those friends, and having enough level of trust to be able to  
510 do that.

**Corrinne**

193 and stuff as well. Um, um, and then like sometimes other  
194 friends, they like stream it and we watch them play the  
195 game and stuff like that. And that's quite fun as well,  
196 because it's like, 'oh I've got to that part as well, and it's  
197 really tricky and stuff like that.

217 ...And then like in  
218 the comments and stuff as well, like, you can connect with  
219 people there.

223 I don't usually comment myself, I usually just read them  
224 and then like, like them or something, like, 'oh, I relate to  
225 that'. (Laughs)

457 I think yeah, um, I don't know, it just feels like you're  
458 connected type thing. Um, like you can, like, even if you  
459 don't know anything else about these people you can still  
460 like have something in common. Um and it just feels...I  
461 don't know how I'd say I feel about it, but it does like feel  
462 nice to have other people, like some people don't feel like  
463 people get them or something like that, but even online and  
464 everything, with gaming, you can still you can still find  
465 something that people like.

**Jade**

278 Um, yeah. They're mainly school friends, I have one  
279 friend that went to my primary school, but they moved  
280 when they were young be we still play video games  
281 together, and I think it's a nice way to connect when we  
282 can. So, considering we don't see each other a lot because  
283 they moved quite far away.

288 just a part of my personality and I find I do quite like talking  
289 about it with my friends, and they like talking about it as  
290 well, so it's a nice conversation.

## Glossary

### Abbreviations

BERA:	British Educational Research Association
BPS:	British Psychological Society
CYP:	Children and Young People
DfE:	Department for Education
EP(s):	Educational Psychologists
EYFS:	Early Years Foundation Stage
IPA:	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
OFCOM:	Office of Communications
SDT	Self-determination theory
TA	Thematic analysis
TEP(s):	Trainee Educational Psychologists
UK:	United Kingdom

### Gaming terms and related abbreviations

<b>Avatar:</b>	A personalised illustration that represents the person playing the game, within the game world.
<b>Battle Royale (BR):</b>	An online multiplayer game with last man standing gameplay, along with survival, exploration and scavenging. Different games have different numbers of players, but this can involve hundreds of players. Players can be in squads or individuals, depending on the game. Many games now include a Battle Royale element. Fortnite is a popular BR game.
<b>Let's play:</b>	A type of video, usually on YouTube, involving walk-throughs of game play, or the mechanics of a specific game, with commentary from the gamer.

<b>Level-up/Levelling up:</b>	A type of progression in gaming, which can mean different things depending on the game. It can involve experience points (quantification of experience through game play). It includes unlocking new skills, game-play items, areas of the game or features.
<b>Lurker:</b>	Member of an online community who observes but does not participate through, for example, commenting, posting, streaming.
<b>Massively multiplayer online (role-playing) games (MMORPG/MMOG):</b>	Usually a role-playing game, whereby the player takes on a character role (often fantasy/sci-fi based). They are played by hundreds or thousands, sometimes millions of players (hence massively multiplayer). The game world usually evolves over time, and players characters develop. The games usually involve working together in 'guilds' or 'clans' and players usually have a specific role within them, promoting teamwork.
<b>Role-playing game (RPG):</b>	Similar to above, but usually in smaller numbers. Many originate from table-top role-playing games.
<b>Video sharing platform (VSP):</b>	Site where users can upload, store and watch video content online. Twitch and YouTube are examples.