Playing House

An exploratory study of how long-distanced families navigate family practices through the use of online casual games

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ABSTRACT

This thesis was set to explore and reconceptualize the meaning of online casual games as a tool for long-distanced social maintenance. This thesis, therefore, explored the role online casual games played in the family life of those belonging to long-distanced families- that is, families who are described as those affected by mobility. Long-distanced families have long relied on ICT tools, typically telecommunications, in order to maintain social connections across borders. There has been a lack of coverage in the family-migration field studying alternative tools for social maintenance practices. Accordingly, the argument throughout this thesis is that telecommunications alone do not do justice in capturing the sense of familyhood. Here, familyhood can be achieved through other means than talking about each other's lives, such as playing together. Although the academic field of family gaming is still new and growing, attention has gone to the ways playing (video)games together can facilitate family education and family bonding. However, it is important for the holistic understanding of long-distanced familyhood to explore how long-distanced families navigate family practices through playing online casual games together while apart.

On the basis of this research gap, the question guiding this thesis is 'How are online casual games used and experienced as a form of doing family for long-distanced families?'. The theoretical framework of this thesis combines scholarship from the academic fields of family-migration studies and game studies. In answering the research question, this thesis followed the ways of qualitative experiments and the raw data analysed through a thematic analysis. The approach consisted of an intervention, in which respondents were asked to play one or multiple online casual games with their families, and follow-up in-depth interviews of their account and reflection. On the basis of the thematic analysis, it became clear that the elements of play, casualness, and collaborative participation that was afforded by online casual games, played a pivotal part in heightening a sense of familyhood among long-distanced families. These findings highlighted an important aspect of long-distanced familyhood which is that not everyone in the family wants or can communicate through basic telecommunication channels due to certain social pressures or degrees of repetitiveness. However, the novel aspect of games in incorporating social cues for mutual and equal participation highlights the importance of creative media and game technologies in facilitating a space for non-verbal, casual and yet meaningful interactions. This thesis, therefore, extends the discourse on family gaming by offering a reconceptualization of online/long-distance family practices and the role casual games play in this family practice.

KEYWORDS: *casual games, social maintenance, transnational families, qualitative experiment, ludology*

Foreword

This master thesis is dedicated to those enduring the hardships of being geographically separated from families and loved ones, especially during these current turbulent times of COVID-19. Throughout this thesis process, I think of my own family and applaud them for their strengths and persistent efforts in making sure that we are and always will be there for each other no matter the distance.

In reflection of my master thesis journey, this thesis could not have been completed or reach any near this standard had it not been for the endless guidance, support, and patience of both my supervisor, Teresa de la Hera, and my incredible partner, Thomas. To these two people, I express my greatest gratitude for pushing me across the finish line.

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1. Introduction

With advancing communication technologies, this modern world offers more opportunities to be connected with one another than ever before. These opportunities play a pivotal role in the global movement and dispersion of people and collective groups. The globalization theorist Arjun Appadurai (1996) would note that developments of global cultural flows, such as of people (referred to as ethnoscapes) and technology (referred to as technoscapes), are always interdependent on one another. Accordingly, it can be said that the development of global migration patterns has much to do with the development of accessible information communication technology (ICT), as they represent opportunities for social maintenance across distances (Appadurai, 1996; Baldassar et al., 2014). In light of this, this thesis delves into the relationship of geographically dispersed families (referred to as long-distance families) and their experiences and uses of technology in maintaining a sense of familyhood across a distance. The specific form of technology under investigation in this thesis is that of online casual social games. Hereon, the conceptualization of online games is explored and studied as a form of creative and playful ICT-based communication tool for long-distance families.

1.1 Long-Distance Families and Family Communication

The structure of long-distance families (LDF) is best described by Baldassar et al., (2014) as "families affected by mobility" (p. 156). This mobility often finds its expression in the geographic dispersion of individual family members. Consequently, the possibilities of LDF to practice family activities such as mealtimes and family roles, such as parenting and circulating care (Baldassar et al., 2014) are challenged. According to Baldassar et al. (2014), separated families have always been part of our society, however, they are often excluded in the social imagination of 'the conventional family'. Before the convenience of e-mailing, instant messaging or wireless mobile telecommunication, opportunities to communicate with families across geographical borders were limited and costly. Fast forward to the 21st century, friends and families, and even strangers can interact with one another across a distance through many creative forms with the help of convenient ICT channels.

LDF have long relied on various (versions of) ICT tools such as voice/video calling apps for maintaining social connections across borders (Abel et al., 2020). And often with long-distance social practices, typical concerns of long-distance communication revolve

around how ICT channels can help replicate the sense of 'being there'. Concerns of media asymmetry that disturbs the flow of conversations and intimacy, in this case, are commonplace. It is important to recognize however that social practices, especially that of families, are not always verbal or through conversations. The typical images of familyhood for instance may have family members engaging with one another or all together during a family activity such as dinner or watching television. In these instances, the *presence* itself of family members simply signalling that they are *around* even if they are not directly engaging with another, can be pivotal to achieving the sense of collective family belonging. And as communication technologies continue to improve, new opportunities and methods for non-verbal socialization across spatial distances arise. There is therefore particular attention to the affordances of ICT in (re)creating a space for practising this sense of familyhood across borders. For this purpose, it is worth investigating the uses and experiences of online social games as a form of LDF communication channel.

1.2 Online Social Games as a Communication Channel

Digital or online games are conventionally perceived more as an entertainment media technology rather than a communication channel. This is because games are designed to be attractive for the *voluntary* engagement of players (Vorderer et al., 2006) rather than designed for basic needs such as telecommunications. However, scholarship around game studies have long emphasized the social benefits of games for playful communication and strengthening relationships. This can be for instance through the navigation of rules between players. Additionally, when referring to online social games, the design and affordances of these games such as players' avatars, shared virtual map, or interactive mechanics play an important role in creating a social and interactive virtual environment (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2008). In these shared virtual spaces, communication is exercised through playful interactions, albeit not always verbal (Boudreau & Consalvo, 2016; Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2008; Juul, 2010). The social experience that is enabled from remote online gaming is in many ways uniquely different from the social experience of telecommunicating. Considering that family communication consists of practices beyond verbal communication, it is interesting to discover how LDF demonstrate and experience familyhood through other digital platforms besides the conventional communication platforms like video/instant chatting and social media.

During the time of writing, the social-distancing regulations of the COVID-19

pandemic have been ongoing since March 2020. In many parts of the world, social gatherings and overseas and cross-border travelling were strictly regulated. These regulations left separated families and friends, especially those separated through transnational borders, further challenged with mobility. These social challenges consequently brought forth a substantial global increase in the reliance and usage of ICT mediums and one that is especially noticeable to the gaming industry. During the first three months of 2020, which was when COVID-19 regulations tightened on a global scale, the mobile gaming market for instance has seen "the largest quarter for mobile game downloads ever" (Chapple, May 2020, para. 2). As usual, the most popular games that were downloaded belong to the hypercasual genre, following lifestyle, and simulation genres (Chapple, May 2020; Entertainment Software Association 2020; Limelight Networks, 2020). Analysts and economic journalists have speculated that the substantial growth in the gaming industry during the pandemic can be explained by more people being "stuck at home, looking for entertainment and ways to connect with others" (Chapple, August 2020, para. 20). Though this may be, the creative counteractions for temporary social isolation using digital games and ICT tools have brought my attention to families who have been and will continue to be challenged by mobility before and after the pandemic.

1.3 Research Question

In bringing together the discussed social context of casual social games, long-distanced familyhood, and family communication, this thesis aim to contribute to the fields of family migration studies and game studies with new insights into how games can be used for long-distance family practices. The research question guiding this thesis is therefore the following: *'How are online casual games used and experienced as a form of doing family for long-distanced families?'*

1.4 Academic Relevance

When applying the social values of games to the context of family gaming, research has primarily found positive social benefits of digital games to the family life as well as to the individual. Here, family gaming was found to be beneficial to strengthening family ties, (De La Hera et al., 2017; Juul, 2010; Osmanovic & Pecchioni, 2016), reduce social anxiety and create opportunities for social education, (De La Hera et al., 2017; Osmanovic & Pecchioni, 2017). As noted by De La Hera et al. (2017) in their literature review of intergenerational

gaming, the uses and experiences of commercial console games such as those from Wii or games designed for scientific purposes were frequently investigated. For Jesper Juul (2010), the popularity of the Wii as a medium for family gaming has illuminated the important elements of casual games in bringing together an inclusive group of 'gamers' and/or 'non-gamers'. The concern with these consoles however is that they either require players to be co-located or if to be played separately, it requires each player to own such hardware. The studying of commercial console games with intergenerational families excludes families who do not or cannot afford to own a console, and families who cannot be physically co-located, such as LDF. As such, it is more relevant for this research topic on family gaming with LDF to focus more on non-console and mutually accessible casual games for remote gaming.

The exploration of social casual games in family gaming has been relatively understudied in the field of (intergenerational) game studies (Boudreau & Consalvo, 2016; De La Hera et al., 2017). Rather, the more recent studies on casual games and online videogaming concerns primarily on its effects on mental health (Pine et al., 2020), gender and identity (Cote, 2020), and productivity (Kapp et al., 2020) rather than on player interactions, social connection or family gaming. To my knowledge, only a small number of scientific research studied the implications of commercial online social casual games on family communication across a distance. Notable examples are Boudreau and Consalvo's 2016 study of asynchronous mechanics of casual Facebook games in the communication practices among families, and Osmanovic and Pecchioni's 2016 and 2017 studies of social interactions between intergenerational gaming. The notable inquiries of these three studies were the shifting family dynamics between intergenerational family members during gameplay, the process of family maintenance and bonding, and the significance of asynchronous mechanics in family socialization. Similar to the reviewed studies of intergenerational gaming by De La Hera et al. (2017), the empirical findings in Osmanovic and Pecchinoni's studies (2016; 2017) were mostly regarding grandparents and grandchildren relationships. As such, the gaming experiences between immediate separated family members such as siblings, or parents with adult children were relatively understudied. In the specific context of LDF, Osmanovic and Pecchioni's (2016; 2017) and Boudreau and Consalvo's (2016) inquiries into the affordances of videogames for family socialization can be particularly relevant to the field of family-migration studies, where

mediated family interactions via ICT is a primary focus (Abel et al., 2020; Baldassar et al., 2014; Cabalquinto, 2018; Shaker, 2018; Madianou & Miller, 2013).

Whilst LDF are relatively understudied in the developing academic field of family gaming, attention to family gaming in family-migration studies is also lacking. The latter is surprising considering the extensive coverage in the field studying the use and experiences of various ICT tools for mediated family socialization among various family dynamics across the world. With this thesis, much can be discovered about the role of digital casual games for LDF maintenance and practices through combining the frameworks of the two academic fields.

1.5 Societal Relevance

The societal relevance of studying online casual game use and experiences among LDF has much to do with the importance of addressing the social needs for collective belonging from afar. Moreover, as this thesis concerns the innovative uses of technology between a globally relevant interest group, there is a societal relevance for an *updated* understanding of LDF's digital ecology and trending ICT mediums. As reported by Chapple (May 2020), there is a 'surge' in the mobile gaming industry in 2020 from the speculated effects of mass temporary social isolation from the COVID-19 pandemic. Exploring the affordances of casual games through the globally relevant interest group of LDF who have and will always be challenged by temporary social isolation, can therefore enrich future developments of ICT and games purposed to enhance meaningful socialization from afar.

The digital games that have surfaced to the mainstream in 2020 included (in order from the most searched on Google) *Among Us*, *Fall Guys: Ultimate Knockout*, and *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Craddock, December 2020). These three games fall under the casual genre and were nominated for The Game Awards 2020's Multiplayer Game of the Year award in which *Among Us* won the title (Fairfax, December 2020). Juul (2010) described the 'revolution' of casual games to be drawn from its sense of inclusivity- that is, having games that are designed to be played for all types of players. Here, he identifies five important elements of casual games in enabling this sense of inclusivity which can be summarized to the importance of accessibility. The nominated casual games demonstrate Juul's (2010) description of a successful inclusive casual game. However *Among Us'* popularity can be explained by not only its high degree of accessibility but also, its opportunities for exercising playfully complex social skills such as deceit and persuasion.

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The mainstream recognition of *Among Us* is one example of how casual social games can be of value for socialization and to a wide range of gamers, or 'non-gamers'. The success of *Among Us* during the peak of the pandemic highlights the potential of mobile casual social games as a means to mimic social presence among those separated from another. When considering the multifaceted dynamisms of families within LDF units, it is worth investigating the *value* of online casual games to their LDF practices and familyhood and also understands better what their current and future digital ecology would look like. As previously mentioned, these are types of families that have and will always continue to exist. Studying their practices and relationship with ICT can open new ways for improving long-distance communication, quality of improving LDF life, and possibly even reducing homesickness.

1.7 Chapter outline

The layout for this thesis will be sectioned into five chapters with the introduction chapter being the first. Throughout the thesis, each chapter serves to answer the research question: "*How are online casual games used and experienced as a form of doing family for long-distanced families?*".

The second chapter to this thesis is the **theoretical framework**. This chapter will act as a foundation for the research topic and will be consistently referred to in the upcoming chapters of the thesis. This chapter consists of the critical reviewing of relevant academic research on the researched topics belonging to fields family-migration studies and game studies. In chapter 3, this thesis' **methodology** is outlined, which details all the methodological steps of the chosen research design with clear argumentation. Following this is the **results** chapter which provides a descriptive and rich report of the findings from the data analysis. Here, the results are sectioned into the developed themes from the thematic analysis of the data. Lastly, the thesis will come to a full circle in the **discussion and conclusion** chapter. This chapter serves to brings an answer to the research question and details a reflection of the research. Doing so will offer possible directions for future research.

2. Theoretical Framework

To provide an understanding to this thesis' research inquiry concerning casual games in the context of long-distanced family practices, this thesis' theoretical framework combines the theoretical lenses from game studies and family-migration studies. For this theoretical framework, it is important that this chapter is reviewing not only notable scholarship in the respective fields, but also compared with the most recent scholarship. This is because this thesis revolves around phenomena (digital gaming, family migration and communication practices) that are interdependent on technology, which naturally is continuously evolving.

Since the phenomena of long-distanced family gaming is still new and understudied, this chapter is purposely structured to provide an understanding to the value and uses of casual games to the long-distance family social context. Accordingly, this chapter is divided into two main parts. The first part of this chapter reviews the theoretical frameworks in the field of family-migration studies, which brings forward the cultural and sociological relation between LDF and technology use. Here, the definitions describing the long-distanced family structure is discussed as well as the unique challenges and livelihood these types of families face in their everyday. As such, the concepts of familyhood, family (communication) practices, and affordances of media communication are explored in-depth. The purpose of this is to provide a framework for which this thesis can effectively build on.

Likewise, the second part of this chapter will review the theoretical frameworks in the field of game studies, bringing forward the characteristics of digital (casual) games and its relation to family life. In accordance to the scope of this thesis, I firstly review and compare pioneering social theories regarding games and play. Afterwards, I explore in depth the mechanics of digital games, with a particular focus on the genre of casual games and family gaming. Here, I review literature on how various game mechanics allow for particular meaningful interactions between players and their family dynamics. The selection of literature in these sections will help me identify important concepts that will be useful for the upcoming chapters.

2.1. Family-Migration Framework

2.1.1. Defining Long-Distanced Families

This thesis studies the phenomena revolving around a family structure that is dispersed

across a geographical space and one that is becoming increasingly common in this age of globalization (Baldasar et al., 2014; Kilkey & Palenga-Mollenbeck, 2014). Accordingly, academic research in the family-migration field is therefore evolving. Depending on the various theoretical lens scholars use, there are now multiple different scientific conceptualizations to describe geographically dispersed families. It is therefore important to firstly evaluate which framework to apply the LDF perspective to.

For an inclusive conceptualization of geographically dispersed family, the concept 'transnational family' is most commonly referred to in family-migration studies. 'Transnational families' here refers specifically to families dispersed across transnational borders, no matter the cultural or socio-political background of the family characteristics (Baldassar et al., 2014; Kilkey & Palenga-Mollenbeck, 2014). With this conceptualization, the transnational family is further categorized as those who migrated from the original family home-country, referred to as 'migrant family members', and those who stayed in the original home-country, referred to as 'left-behind family members' (Baldassar et al., 2014; Madianou & Miller, 2013). The relevance of Baldassar et al.'s (2014) conceptualization of this family group to this thesis is that they take into consideration the cross-cultural differences of familyhood and family practices, the importance of virtual and online space, and how families manage family practices across borders. Academic research on transnational families is therefore ultimately concerned on "how families are affected by mobility" (Baldassar et al., 2014, p. 156). Due to the concept's sense of cultural inclusivity and attention to the technoscape, the 'transnational family' framework provides a strong background to this thesis.

Although the concept of transnational families can simply be defined as 'families affected by mobility' (Baldassar et al., 2014, p. 156), its only limitation is that it does not include families dispersed *within* national borders, whereby physical reunions are still hindered by mobility. This is especially in consideration of large countries such as Canada, Australia, or Indonesia whereby efforts to visit are still dependent on time and money.

A concept referring to family members dispersed across the country is coined by Michaela Schier (2016) as 'multi-local families'. With this concept, Schier (2016) is inclusive of contemporary family structures such as families of divorce, whereby one or more members have multiple living arrangements scattered across the country. In this case, 'multi-local families' are used by Schier (2016) as well as Kilkey and Palenga-Mollenbeck

(2016) (who uses multi-local families as an umbrella term for geographically-dispersed families) to acknowledge more importantly "the different rhythms of movement" that affect familyhood. As such, one of the notable differences between 'transnational families' and 'multi-local families' are the degrees of frequency of short-term reunions. This is relevant for my thesis as accessibility of visits (due to degrees of freedom of movement) and sharing of national environment which includes policies, postal service, and telephone rates for instance reflects differences on how families manage familyhood from afar.

Among the three concepts that were covered, the one most relevant to the scope of this thesis is the 'transnational family'. However, since the intersection of game studies and family-migration studies is relatively new, it is important to avoid using a concept that is restrictive to a certain population of geographically dispersed families. This is to allow for the discovery of unforeseen factors of long-distanced family gaming. Accordingly, I want to incorporate a global lens to this thesis and use an inclusive umbrella term that acknowledges the varying experiences of families defined by being 'affected by mobility' (Baldassar et al., 2014, p.156). Therefore, throughout my research, the term I use to refer to this family structure is 'long-distanced families' (LDF). This term is developed with respect to the theoretical frameworks of 'transnational families' and 'multilocal families'.

2.1.2. Familyhood in the Long-Distanced Family

Understanding how long-distanced families practice familyhood from afar is central to the theoretical framework of this thesis. Rather, according to Baldassar, Baldock, and Wilding (2007), how "families retain their sense of collectivity and kinship in spite of being spread across multiple nations" (p.13) is the very essence behind the study and concept of 'transnational families'. As such, bodies of scholarship in the field of family-migration studies explore this phenomenon most commonly through a 'care-giving' and/or 'mobility' theoretical lens (Baldasar et al., 2007; Baldassar et al., 2014; Madianou & Miller, 2013, Cabalquinto, 2018; Shaker, 2018). As explained by Baldassar et al., (2007), the relevance for the care-giving lens is "because the exchange of care is one of the central processes (practices and performances) that maintains and sustains family relationships" (p. 158). This stem from Finch and Mason's (1993, as cited by Baldassar et al., 2014) five dimensions of family care: 1. Financial and material support, 2. practical support, 3. emotional and moral support, 4. personal care, and 5. accommodation such as shelter and security. The

importance of care circulation in LDF practices is shown through the notable case studies of LDF (Abel et al., 2020 Baldassar et al., 2014; Bacigalupe & Brauninger, 2017; Cabalquinto, 2018; Shaker, 2018; Madianou & Miller, 2013) whereby LDFs would go through the expense of third party actors such as neighbours, ICT and, remittance networks to help demonstrate care and family duties. These empirical studies thereby highlight the relevance of the mobility lens, which conceptualizes the practicalities around the social practices across space and time (Urry, 2007; as cited by Cabalquinto, 2018).

The care-giving lens however brings forth an understanding to familyhood; one that explores the role of care in doing family. Here, the material and immaterial gains from this care exchange can be seen as a form of delivering *expectations* of familyhood. For instance, it is expected for parents to fulfil parental expectations such as providing financial and material support to their younger children. In a way, the care-giving lens therefore represents a set of pre-existing norms and values of what familyhood should entail. Perhaps for adult family members, such understandings of familyhood can be reciprocated in their efforts to retain family ties (Cabalquinto, 2018; Shaker, 2018). This cannot be said to be similar for younger children for instance who may not be able to comprehend the complexities of caregiving across virtual space compared to caregiving in a physical space. This was shown in Share, Williams and Kerrin's (2018) study where grandchildren in their formative years were more resistant to entertaining or communicating with their transnational grandparents through audiovisual ICT such as Skype. This highlights the importance of the role of kinkeepers, who according to Rosenthal (1983, as cited by Abel et al. 2020), are family members who initiate activities that connect the family unit together. In Abel et al.'s systematic review of literature within the scope of social media use and LDF, the role of the kinkeeper was an understudied phenomenon in the field. In the context of LDF whereby the family unit is separated into two groups; the left behind members, and the migrated members, it is relevant in this thesis to also compare the characteristics and experiences of members from these two groups through understanding further the role and methods of the kinkeeper. Doing so would illuminate how family practices and sense of familyhood are constructed among LDF.

2.1.3. Doing Family Through ICT

For LDF, opportunities to doing family are most often found through the affordances of ICT. As we have already discussed, doing family in this sense involves the doing of family practices that is intended to create a sense of familyhood and family belonging (Baldassar et al., 2014). Due to the hindrances of their mobility for physical interactions, the uses and meanings of ICT in shaping family communication patterns, relationships, and family identity are heavily embedded in the LDF life (Abel et al., 2020).

Scholarship on long-distance family communication often begin from exploring the perspective and experiences of the migrant family member (Cabalquinto, 2018; Shaker, 2018; Madianou & Miller, 2013). From these studies, feelings of homesickness, sense of family-belonging, and/or sense of family solidarity are pivotal starting points for exploring familyhood in LDF. Cabalquinto's study (2018) however shows how taking part in family festivities can help in combating these issues. These family events can be seen as pivotal moments for the development of familyhood and family identity as it involves the act of being together as a complete family unit. For migrant members to be a part of this shared space synchronously while physically distanced however would require immense effort, organization and technological competence due to the effects of mobility. Cabalquinto's (2018) study however shows that as LDF explore the affordances of ICT to perform their expression of family intimacy, it is in these moments in which new and creative communication practices unfold. A case in Cabalquinto's (2018) study that demonstrated this was when a migrant family member organized a collaborative effort between himself and his also migrant siblings to create a digital photo collage for their left-behind mother's birthday. From this, it can be said that *expressions of intimacy* are driving forces for the creative exploration of the affordances of media and technologies for kinkeeping. This supports Baldassar et al.'s (2014) argument that LDF are more likely to be the first adapters to innovative ICT. This is relevant to the exploration of digital games, as a form of creative and alternative ICT. As was found in Madianou and Miller's (2013) and Cabalquinto's (2018) study, the emergence of advancing ICT represents opportunities for migrant family members to retain a sense of family belonging to their left-behind families.

An additional complication in the relationship between practicing family and ICT technologies is that although the development of ICT is constant, access to these developments are not always equally distributed. Such inequal distribution of ICT access

leads to media and intimacy asymmetry in communication and family practices. Underlying factors that can explain degrees of media asymmetry are many. Age differences for instance is a common factor and can further be explained by generational gaps related to digital literacy (Baldassar et al., 2014; Shaker, 2018). For this, media asymmetry can be easily solved with the help of other actors such as neighbours or extended relatives. However, other factors cannot be solved as easily. For instance, Cabalquinto's (2018) and Shaker's (2018) study both found that poor rates of internet freedom and connectivity from the left-behind families' countries- in the example of Iran and the Philippines- deeply affected feelings of emotional connectedness thereby challenging the opportunities of practicing familyhood. With this, Shaker's (2018) and Cabalquinto's (2018) studies have shown that ICT asymmetries based on geographic factors are worth considering in the ways LDF navigate through ICT to practice familyhood from afar. Additionally, these studies show that particular access and usability to available ICT channels also play a role in shaping individual family practices, identity, and sense of familyhood. As such, to understand how LDF navigate familyhood from afar requires an investigation to how LDF navigate through ICT channels along with its unique affordances and limitations.

Maintaining family engagement through the limits of ICT can be strenuous to members as it requires their consistent efforts of communication engagement and adaptability to new digital patterns as to prevent existing ones becoming repetitive and meaningless (Abel, et al., 2020). When LDF interactions are limited to asynchronous and synchronous verbal communication, it is reasonable for common telecommunication channels to be a challenge for families where non-verbal gestures are seen as more meaningful forms of family engagement (Barakij et al., 2016). It is thus interesting to see how some LDF attempt to combat these challenges by practicing (ambient) co-presence calling whereby callers mimic a sense of shared space (Abel et al., 2020). Understanding how and why LDF achieve this shared space through the limits of ICT is of interesting as it illuminates the construction of mediatized space among a group where mobility is challenged. Moreover, these demonstrations of co-presence and non-verbal communication through conventionally verbal communication channels is also relevant to my thesis as it brought forth a mediatization of family practices. The relationship of ICT and LDF introduces the concepts of mediatized social interactions and mediatized spatial presence. These concepts are commonplace in the field of videogame studies (Egenfeldt-

Nielsen et al., 2008; Tamborini & Skalski, 2006). For this reason, the next sections in this chapter will bridge the theoretical gap between family-migration studies and game studies.

2.2. Game Studies Framework

2.2.1. The Social Value of Games

Part of the goals of this thesis it to understand the uses and meanings of digital games in the LDF context. After a comprehensive review of the background literature on the culture, (ICT) practices, and context of LDF, this chapter now delves into the scholarship around games and familyhood. When compared to the breadth of ICT families use for co-presence (among other purposes of family communication), the affordances of digital games in creating an enriching shared virtual space on the other hand are worth exploring for LDF family communication. This is especially considering digital games, whether played at a distance or together in person, are notably recognized for its ability to enhance sociality for all ages (De la Hera et al., 2017; Juul, 2010; Osmanovic & Pecchioni, 2016; Mäyrä, 2008; Vorderer et al., 2006).

The pioneers in the field of game studies such as Dutch anthropologist, Johan Huizinga (1938, as cited by Mäyrä, 2008, and Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2008) and psychologists such as Eric Berne (1964) would argue that 'playing' is an inherent aspect of human nature. Moreover, it is the design of games with its enforcement of *rules* that help develop a dynamic of playful transactions between the players and the environmental context of the game. The moment in which players submit themselves to the rules of the game and participate through playful transactions is when Huizinga's (1938/2008) concept of the 'magic circle' would occur. The conceptualization of games as opportunities for a 'magic circle' can be argued as the foundation to the study of games and its players. This is especially the case when exploring game(play)s through an ethnographic lens, whereby the social interactions during the magic circle, and the meanings they carry can be illuminated in relation to the social positioning of such interactions in societal context. Considering that if the 'magic circle' separates itself from the outside world, what happens during the magic circle can sometimes be referred to as the 'opposite world'. This is where what is usually considered as ill-mannered or taboo in the real world (everyday society), is accepted or played-along in the magic circle.

In Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith and Tosca's introduction to *Understanding Video Games*

(2008), the notable frameworks used to study (video)games have varied and evolved from Huizinga's 'magic circle'. This is partly due to the evolution of games being perceived as exclusively cultural-specific rituals (Huizinga, 1938/2008) to one that is rather domesticated and integrated into everyday situations (Berne, 1964; Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2008; Mäyrä, 2008). Games in this sense can refer to a broader sense of social games that may not be explicitly or conventionally referred to as 'games', because the rules are perhaps not so explicit either. In the family setting, these social games are also prevalent and are found to be pivotal in child-rearing and the development of family ties (Berne, 1964). Social games and play in this anthropological, psychological, and pedagogical sense have been shown over time to have a significant social value to all forms of human culture. In light of this thesis's interests on the media ecology of LDF communication practices, it is also relevant to expand this humanist framework of social games and playful transactions to contemporary mediums of social games, such as mobile casual games. As Mäyrä (2008) notes, "games are the most successful example of information and communication technologies becoming *domesticated* […] [the] study of games and our near-universal fascination with them can also teach about the human nature and about our attraction to *interactivity*." (p.6).

When concerning the empirical research on family games, the general findings from De La Hera et al.'s (2017) literature review of research covering intergenerational gaming are that playing videogames together in a family setting have positive impact on family relationships, social education, and reducing anxiety. The studies of family gameplay however are often focused on the interactions between young and old players. When studying intergenerational family interactions, the concepts of family roles, expectations, and power dynamics are also embedded. As also shown in Osmanovic and Pecchioni's studies in 2016 and 2017 exploring playful interactions between family members during family videogaming, videogames allow for these family roles and power dynamics to be positively distributed, if only for a temporary time. Here, Osmanovic and Peccioni's (2017) notion of 'power dynamics' derives from French and Raven's social power theory, which identifies six sources of interpersonal power relationships that "determines the potential of an individual to exert influence over the other person" (p.3). As different sources of power are assigned to different family members based on their roles, Osmanovic and Peccioni (2017) found that these distribution of power were shifted during intergenerational gaming

primarily due to the novelty nature of videogaming. Consequently, this distribution of power was pivotal to the positive social experiences between younger or older family members and to their own self-perception. Osmanovic and Peccioni's 2016 study have also stressed the importance of collaborative and competitive games in bringing forward familiar family practices such as helping each other, and being around each other. This gaming experience was found to be particularly significant for families who were playing across distances, due to feelings of homesickness (2016). The findings and gaps from these empirical studies on family gaming are relevant for my thesis to build on. As noted by De La Hera et al. (2017), these studies are often focused on the generational gaps between players. Although this focus illuminates the relevance of family roles and power dynamics in assessing playful family interactions, there is not a lot of focus on LDF specifically. In these LDF contexts, children, parents, and grandparents are not the only ones separated from another, but also sibling relationships, which have been completely overlooked. As such, my thesis aims to build on these framework by providing a more extensive exploration of the social interactions between LDF with videogames.

As this thesis is more interested in the meaning-making of and between LDF members in relation to their gaming experience with each other, further analysis of game studies in relation to the LDF context might best fit the ludology perspective. This is because the 'ludosis' perspective according to Mäyrä (2008), is "a specific emphasis on *meaning-making through playful action*" (p. 19). As such, this perspective will highlight the ways in which players' experiences transcend beyond the 'magic circle' of the game world and into the everyday family dynamics. In this regard, the different mechanics of the game(play), which can be distinguished in their rules or interface designs, each carry a social meaning to it. Understanding the social values of (digital) games in relation to the LDF's mediatized sense of familyhood is also relevant because it brought forth the significance of playful transactions that are also pivotal in family practices. Furthermore, understanding the mechanics of videogames that enable these family practices across distances is also relevant as to provide a full-circle comprehension of games, family maintenance, and LDF.

2.2.2. Online Gaming: Virtual Presence

Considering the LDF's dependency with ICT tools for maintaining familyhood, it is now

important to go into further details of the mechanics of online social games, and understand their significance for practicing familyhood from afar. As such, of particular relevance to the goals of this thesis is in how digital games foster opportunities to enhance the sense of *presence* for players. When comparing the affordances of available ICT for long-distance communication, Tamborini and Skalski's (2006) exploration to the three dimensions of presence (spatial, social and self) brought by videogames highlights the values of videogames to the LDF context. Here, presence is explained to be "a psychological state in which the person's subjective experience is created by some form of media technology with little awareness of the manner in which technology shapes this perception" (Tamborini & Skalski, 2006, p. 226). Referring back to how LDF navigate through synchronous ICT to create this sense of copresence (Abel et al., 2020), the unique features inherent of videogames can stimulate enhanced dimensions of (co)presence (Mäyrä, 2008; Tamborini & Skalski, 2006). Here, Tamborini and Skalski (2006) applies the concept of 'vividness' to describe the immersive and interactive elements of videogames that fosters a multisensory experience to the players, or otherwise known as the 'spatial presence'. The social presence can be further enhanced by combining the affordances of available synchronous communication features, such as voice chatting (Ledbetter & Kuznekoff, 2011; Tamborini & Skalski, 2006).

The interactive features of videogames is arguably pivotal to this experience as it allows players to practice forms of agency to influence the game environment as well as gaining consequential responses (Eichner, 2014). Furthermore, The game experience can become more intimate in a multiplayer setting whereby the spatial presence is shared with other players (Tamborini & Skalski, 2006). As such, the consequences of a player's actions is now intertwined with the gameplay experiences of other players, who each demonstrate the same degrees of agency. The affordances of online multiplayer videogames to mimic physical interactions is reflective of Edward Castronova's (2008) concept of videogames being a synthetic world, whereby the consequences within the game world can seep to the 'outside world'. For instance, when the experiencing of social presence during gameplay is strong, relationships with other players may develop beyond the game world (Castronova, 2008). Alternatively, the time and relationships invested within the game world could bring negative result to the existing relationships within the outside world due to for instance, neglect (Castronova, 2008). With the case of LDF however, it would be interesting to see

how Castronova's (2008) concept of a synthetic world applies in LDF gaming whereby everyday LDF practices already takes place in a virtual setting most of the time.

The reviewed game theories have brought a wider understanding of games and playful interactions in relation to sociality. When exploring the technological features of games in enhancing a multidimensional presence, it should be noted that not all games can achieve a high degree of social and spatial presence. Additionally, not all players are capable of accessing games that achieve high degrees of dimensional presence either. Here, sociodemographic characteristics of players are worth considering when investigating degrees of accessibility to certain (genre of) games. As previously explored in this chapter, the group dynamic of LDF is multifaceted. Not only are there intergenerational differences in the group, but also geographical location differences, which may atone for media asymmetries in synchronous group communication. These are for instance internet connectivity and hardware demands, which can also be costly. The genre of social casual games are therefore relevant for the LDF context because of its common characteristics being accessible, convenient, and high degrees of usability (Juul, 2010).

2.2.3. Online Gaming: Casual Games

Although mobile casual games play a significant role in the (mobile) gaming industries, casual games is a relatively understudied phenomena amongst scientific research of game studies. Juul's (2010) insights to the significance of casual games to the everyday life however have brought forth interesting concepts towards the sociology of digital casual games, ranging from the ethnography of the *players* of casual games to the *design* of casual games. Here, Juul (2010) identifies the five elements that are pivotal to the goals of casual games in relation to its players; 1. *Fiction*, measured by emotional valence towards the game narrative 2. *Usability*, measured by time needed to learn how to play the game, 3. *Interruptibility*, measured by degrees of convenience for accessing and playing the game, 4. *Difficulty*, measured by challenges and rules, and 5. *Juiciness*, measured by the game's interaction and communication with the players. From these elements, the overarching consensus over casual game designs is that they should enable a familiar, rewarding, and positive experience. Doing so would also "lower the barriers of entry by requiring little knowledge of game conventions and small time investments" (Juul, 2010, p. 72), and thereby providing gaming opportunities to a more inclusive group when compared to

hardcore games. As such, the relevance of this particular genre of games for LDF is that it is generally family-friendly, suitable for all ages, and relatively easy to navigate its interface.

When concerning the available options for playing *multiplayer* games across various distances however, there is only a limited number of games that are suitable for the family context. For example, massively multiplayer open-world games, which have shown numerous benefits for long-distance social maintenance and relationship development (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, 2008; Jia et al., 2015; Vorderer et al., 2006), is not so suitable for the varying needs and capabilities of an intergenerational family group (Juul, 2010). One of the more successful multiplayer videogames for family gaming were those from Nintendo's Wii, which developed games specifically for the casual and social settings (Juul, 2010). The obvious drawback of Wii for the LDF context, is that it requires its players to be physically present altogether. Additionally, as the Wii can only be played through a specific hardware, it cancels the element of mutual accessibility, which were emphasized by scholars of family and migration to be vital in LDF's digital ecology. As such, Juul's (2010) concept of *downloadable games* is more relevant as it describes the subgenre of casual games which are distributed in platforms that have multipurpose use, such as mobile phones or computers. In these instances, players from various locations can have mutual access to the games.

2.2.4. Digital Gaming: (a)synchrony

Between the subgenres multiplayer mimetic games and downloadable games, Juul (2010) also notes that their differences also stems from their degrees of '*interruptibility*' (p.37). This refers to the degrees in which a player can be interrupted in their game experience. As such, 'interruptibility' can refer to the extent of which the games are dependent on synchronous characteristics and players are thereby dependent on a singular time and space and potentially on other players too. When referring back to Tamborini and Skalski's (2006) notions of virtual presence, synchronous features can elevate the sense of familyhood and social experience. However, since asynchronous features are also relatively common with downloadable casual games, it is also relevant to explore families' experiences and uses of asynchronous features to socialize.

Examples of these asynchronous gaming are for instance some Facebook games like *Farmville* and *Animal Crossing* where the game map is shared between players, but

synchronous interactions are not applicable. Instead, the players become notified of each other's game interactions in each separate turn of logging in. Compared to synchronous affordances, the social interactive mechanics in asynchronous games are quite limited, however unlike synchronous games, the social interactions are not bounded by a shared time space. Boudreau and Consalvo's (2016) findings in this case are highly valuable to this thesis. Here, the waiting period that is afforded by asynchronous features, referred to as *deadtime*, is a time for players to interact with another about the game *outside* the virtual game map. This is for instance, talking about their individual experiences with the game with each other in their everyday social setting such as phone calls. Boudreau and Consalvo (2016) concludes that the popularity of asynchronous casual games, especially during the peak of Facebook's social networking games like *Farmville*, can be used as a facilitator for family bonding, as the games act as a common interest.

3. Methodology

After identifying and reviewing the relevant theoretical concepts for this thesis in the previous chapter, this chapter presents the methodological steps necessary for answering the thesis's main inquiry: *'How are online casual games used and experienced as a form of doing family for long-distanced families?'*. The goal of this chapter is therefore to create a clear bridge between the theory and the research findings. Furthermore, presenting a thorough layout of this thesis' methodological decisions is important for further research to potentially replicate, manipulate, and improve certain methodological steps.

This thesis' methodology is structured into six sections. In the following order, this thesis will present the chosen research design, the sampling method and collected sample, the operationalization of the theory, the data collection, the data analysis, and finally, the reliability and validity of the overall methodological procedure.

3.1. Research Design

This research is set to study the uses and experiences of online casual games as a way to practice familyhood for long-distance families (LDF). The reviewed literature in the previous chapter has shown that this is an underexplored phenomenon in the fields of family-migration and game studies. As such, there is a need for a holistic understanding of the *subjective experiences* of individuals with playing online games with their LDF members, and the (*re)construction of their meanings* towards online casual games. It is therefore important for this research design to be thoroughly reflective of the qualitative approach. Key principles guiding the study are openness, flexibility, and the attempt at understanding latent meanings through interpretation and iteration until saturation (Boeije, 2010; Brennan, 2017; Flick, 2007). When compared to the principles of quantitative methods, whereby only the connotated data is measured and recorded (Babbie, 2012; Brennan, 2017), the holistic affordances from the qualitative approach is better fitted with the goals and scope of this thesis inquiry.

3.1.1. Qualitative Experiment

To achieve the goals of this thesis, the chosen research design was that of the qualitative experiment whereby the methodological technique of in-depth interviewing is merged with an intervening element. The intervening element in this thesis was the playing of online casual games between respondents' and their separated family members.

Qualitative experiments have been described by Robinson and Mendelson (2012) as a hybrid of two methods *within one study* which allows researchers to take advantage of using a consistently qualitative methodology throughout the entirety of the research design. Through this, the design uncovers a complete understanding of the processes of meaning (re)construction, and thus enables a "holistic reading of social reality" (Robinson & Mendelson, 2012, p.2.). It was for these reasons that this design, albeit unconventional for media studies, was selected for carrying this thesis' research inquiry.

The intervention element of LDF gaming allows this research an in-depth exploration of the crevices of how specific characteristics of online casual games are used and experienced by LDF. Additionally, the two-phased design allows respondents to be *reflective* of their LDF context and practices (Robinson & Mendelson, 2012). The embeddedness of these two phases into one, therefore, help capture the complete process of which meanings towards games, LDF practices, familyhood are constructed or reconstructed.

Furthermore, when compared to the rigidness of quantitative experiments, the qualitative logic in this intervention element fits with the exploratory purpose of this thesis. Here, the intervention instructions, seen in Appendix A with a suggested list of online casual games, were relaxed and flexible to allow room for respondents to choose for themselves how they would like to engage with the online casual games. Moreover, the environment in which respondents were exposed to the stimuli with their separated family members was crafted, through the limited rules in my instructions, to a natural environment. Respondents' participation in the intervention took place in their own homes, during their own time, without my presence, and with an acknowledgement that there was no compensation for their participation. The design, therefore, offers rich qualitative information that fits best with this thesis' holistic inquiry of online casual games in the LDF context and vice versa. Due to my absence during respondents' interactions with the stimuli, the descriptiveness of their interactions was only uncovered in the interviewing phase along with their subjective experiences with the interactions between family members and the games.

As this thesis revolves around the usage and experience of online casual games by LDF, this thesis' application of qualitative experiments is in many ways reflective of the common qualitative methodology of media studies to which my thesis belongs. When

considering the three common approaches to media as outlined by Brennan (2017); 'as a product, as a cultural practice, or as a commentary' (p. 18), the qualitative experiment allows this thesis to investigate the uses and experiences of online casual games through the combination of the approaches. Additionally, through the holistic reading of LDF's social reality through the intervened gaming practice, this thesis' goals are reflective of the common purpose of media ethnographic research, an attempt at analysing the context surrounding media usage and the practical reality of how people engage with media (Brennan, 2017).

3.1.2. Intervention Instructions

In the intervention instructions for LDF gaming (appendix A), respondents were given a curated detailed list of casual games suggestions and a brief overview of what their participation entails. Here, the selection of games was carefully thought out and was primarily guided by the five important elements of casual games as identified by Juul's (2010). These were usability, interruptability, difficulty, fiction, and juiciness (Juul, 2010). Desk research on popular, accessible and effective commercial casual games for remote online multiplayer gaming was also considered for this selection. Additionally, the only strict instruction that respondents must follow was that respondents must engage with the stimuli *with* their *immediate LDF members*. Otherwise, other contextual factors for the intervention environment concerning frequency or duration of the gameplay and who or how many members were involved were up to respondents. Rather, it was more important that my intervention had as minimal influence as possible on respondents' choices concerning how they engage with the games. This allows us to uncover a more authentic depiction of how respondents actually use and experience the phenomena.

From the moment in which respondents made the first contact with their family members regarding the playing of the game they chose, an interview between myself and the respondent was arranged more or less 10 days after. This period was to allow opportunities for game-related social interactions between family members to marinate. Due to the singularity of the intervention and interviewing phase, respondents' experiences with family gaming during that period, from the moment they initiated the first contact were automatically pertinent data to this thesis. Their experiences, as previously mentioned, were then subjected and collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews.

3.1.3. In-Depth Interviews

The decision for conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews for this thesis was an obvious one. Compared to questionnaires or textual content analysis, in-depth interviews centralize around the real-time *interaction* between the respondents and the researcher. Interviews are crafted for the gathering of purposeful and relevant information (Brennan, 2017). Moreover, Brennan (2017) explains that the qualitative nature of semi-structured interviews enables a multifaceted reading of the collected data which is manifested through multiple forms beyond textual information. This can include non-verbal communication, voice tones, and a sense of rapport between respondents and the interviewee (Brennan, 2017). Furthermore, interviews allow respondents to describe their unique experiences *in their own way* (Brennan, 2017). As such, more than a tool for data collection, the degrees of flexibility for both the interviewer and interviewee afforded in semi-structured interviews serve as an advantage for understanding the investigated phenomena more holistically (Brennan, 2017). Lastly, the investigated phenomena of LDF gaming is very context-dependent. There are various differences between respondents in the games they chose to play, who they played them with, and their LDF culture and practices. Accordingly, the semi-structured interviews allow room for personalization in the questions that fit better with such different contexts. Otherwise, this thesis risks the qualitative integrity for a truly exploratory investigation.

3.2. Sampling

To have a collection of data that is both feasible and representative of the goals of this research, the data is drawn from a purposive sample of 10 individuals. Out of the several types of purposive sampling outlined by Flick (2007), the 'convenient' cases were best suited for this thesis. Not only is "the selection of cases that are the easiest to access" (Flick, 2007, p. 4), but this technique also prevents the narrowing of cases to fit a definitive notion of a LDF group. With an openness to a global lens, convenient sampling represent an inclusive population of families identifying as being geographically dispersed from one another.

For the data collection and analysis to be reflective of the goals of this thesis, the sampling had to meet two strict criteria. Firstly, the individuals must identify as belonging to a LDF. The degree of this distance/separation was flexible. Secondly, the individuals must be separated from their family members during the period of the intervention. From this

criterion, respondents can begin the intervention whereby they would play an online casual game with their separated family members remotely.

The sample recruitment took place between the 25th March 2021 to 23rd May 2021. The recruitment messages were distributed online within my personal network and on globally popular virtual platforms such as Discord servers and Facebook groups that focus on topics of long-distance familyhood, and/or gaming. The benefits of recruiting respondents from these concentrated platforms are that it narrows the sample to those who might already be familiar with using games as a form of communication with long-distance relationships. In the end, I received up to 20 responses, in which only 7 respondents ended up participating in the intervention with their separated family members. From this, 3 additional respondents, who were family members of respondents that were initially recruited, were recruited through snowball sampling. The sample network is visualized in figure 3.1. In the end, the sample is also representative of 7 different LDF groups. This sample network contributes to a deeper understanding of LDF culture and LDF gaming through studying and comparing variances between family members within one family, and thereby comparing variances between 7 LDF.
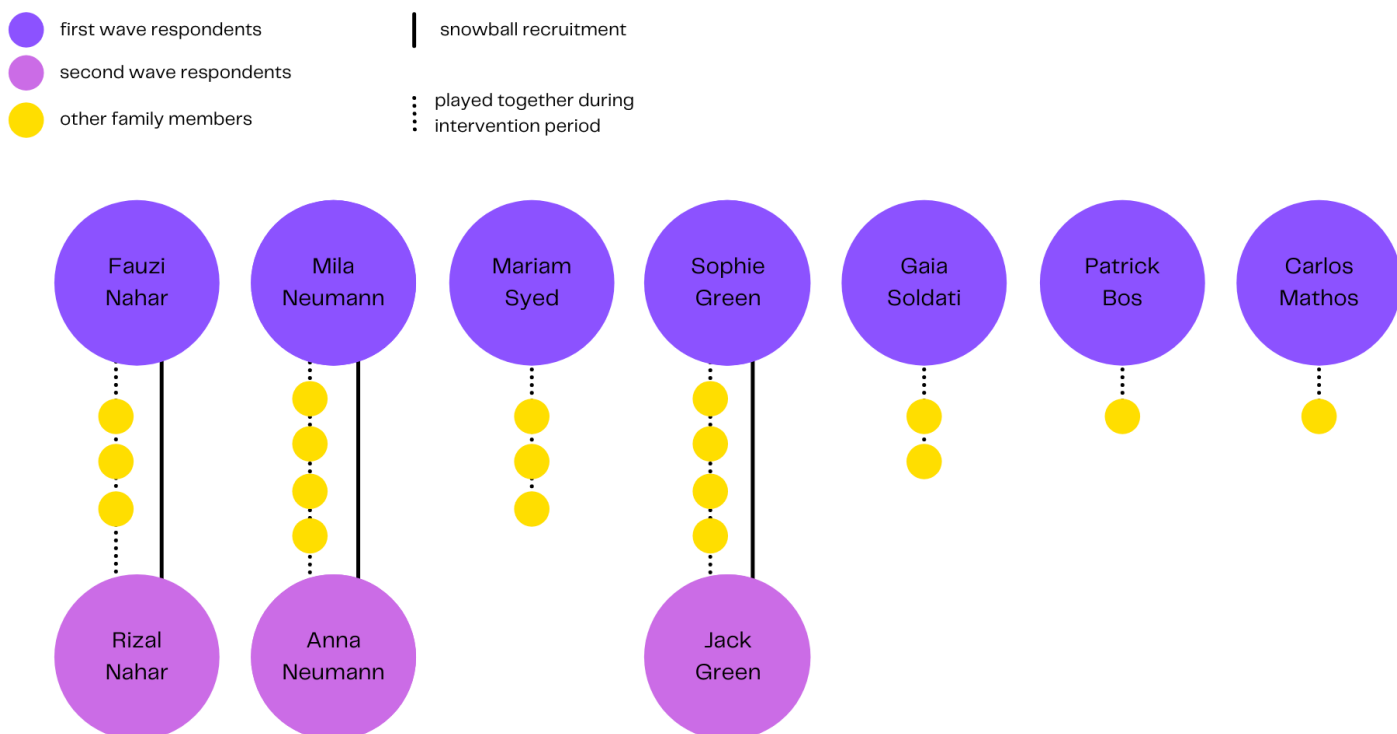

Figure 3.1. Sample Network

3.2.1. Sample Description

Complimenting the sample network is an overview of the sample description presented in table 3.1. below. In this table, only the relevant descriptors are presented, such as their position in the family, geographic distance between LDF, and the games they played together separately.

Family	Distance	Respondent	Age	Position in family	Games Played with Family
Neumann	Netherlands – Germany**	Mila	27	Eldest sister of 4	*Among Us* (with the complete family unit - 6 people)
		Anna	52	Mum of 4 daughters	
Nahar	Malaysia – Indonesia – Qatar** -- Netherlands	Fauzi	30	Eldest brother/sibling of 5. Father of two daughters.	*Among Us* and *Wordfeud* (with complete sibling unit – 5 people), *Genshin Impact** (between Fauzi and his youngest brother only), **Impromptu WhatsApp Emoji Game*** (complete family unit – 7 people)
		Rizal	29	2nd eldest brother/sibling of 5. Newly father of one daughter	
Syed	UK – Malaysia** -- Qatar	Mariam	26	Eldest sister/sibling of 4	*Among Us* (with complete sibling unit – 4 people), *Wordfeud* (with sister only), *Friday the 13th** (with brothers only – 3 people)
Green	Greece – Nepal**	Sophie	25	Eldest sister/sibling of 3	*Jackbox Party Games* (with complete family unit, including Sophie's boyfriend – 6 people), *Geography Quiz** (between Sophie and her Dad)
		Jack	17	2nd eldest sibling of 3	
Soldati	Milan (Italy)– Udine** (Italy)	Gaia	27	Only child. Parents separated	*Skribbl* and *UNO* (with complete family unit, including Gaia's boyfriend – 4 people)
Bos	Netherlands** - Belgium	Patrick	27	Youngest sibling of 3	*Wordfeud* (with Mum only), **Online Pub Quiz*** (with complete family unit and partners – 8 people)
Mathos	Netherlands – Peru**	Carlos	27	Only child. Parents separated	*Wordfeud* (with Mum only)

Table 3.1. Description of respondents and the games they played with their families together while apart.
*Games respondents reported playing remotely with their separated family prior to the intervention
**Locations of the family majority

The sample is a diverse representation of LDF structures in the world. Here, there are families which are relatively close in proximity (Neumann, Soldati, and Bos) and families that are (multi) transnationally separated (Mathos, Nahar, Syed, and Green). Using Baldassar et al.'s (2014) transnational terminology to describe different groups within LDF, all the respondents except for Anna and Jack are considered as the 'migratory' family member. As such, this would leave Jack and Anna as the 'left-behind' family members. This variance between the 'types' of LDF members may not be equally distributed in this sample. However, it is more important to therefore truly grasp and compare the experiences of Anna and Jack as the 'left-behind' family with the experiences of the 'migratory family members'.

3.3. Operationalization

To answer this thesis' research question, "*How are online casual games used and experienced as a form of doing family for long-distanced families?",* the theoretical concepts from the previous chapter were operationalized into interview questions and topics (see Appendix B) which guided the data collection process. The process of operationalization in this qualitative research design refers to the sensitizing of the theoretical concepts to guide the interview to relevant and purposive data whilst also allowing room for unforeseeable valuable concepts (Boeije, 2010).

From the previous chapter, the reviewed concepts from academic fields of family-migration and game studies were operationalized here with the *flow* of the interview in mind. As Brennan (2017) notes, having a smooth and casual interview flow is advantageous for obtaining fruitful information. Accordingly, the interview begins with icebreaker questions, whereby the purpose is to understand more of the respondents' contextual background (Brennan, 2017). The icebreaker questions here refer to the theoretical concepts concerning LDF familyhood, LDF maintenance practices, and respondent's engagement with ICT mediums. These concepts are good to explore in the beginning as they sensitize the following responses and questions concerning respondents' experiences with the exposed stimuli (LDF gaming). The following questions after the icebreakers refer to theoretical concepts that addressed more explicitly this research inquiry. These concepts were organized into three topics. Here, the topics concerned concepts of playful family socialization, mechanics of online casual games for socialization such as (a)synchronous

features, LDF dynamics during and after gameplay, and forms of family communication.

The first topic refers to the background context of the environment in which these games were played. Although the responses were merely descriptive, patterns can unfold when exploring in-depth respondents' motivations with and for the games they played and discussing their motivations and experiences with the family gaming environment. Moreover, their account of how the gameplay went can highlight concepts of family practices and the exercising of family roles. The second topic refers to respondents' experiences and affordances of online casual game mechanics. The questions in this topic becomes slightly personalized for each respondent based on the game they played as each game have different affordances and mechanics. Here, two sets of questions are prepared for both synchronous and asynchronous games. The important concepts that separated the two refers to the respondents' experiences with virtual presence from synchronous games, and deadtime of turn-based asynchronous games (Bourdreau & Consalvo, 2016). Separating these questions into these subtopics were handy for respondents who have played both types of games. Finally, the third topic refers to playful socialization between LDF members. This topic brings a full circle to the interview guide as respondents are asked to recall and reflect about their interactions with their family members during their gameplay and if there is anything new discovered about their family. From their accounts of the family dynamics and interactions, Huizinga's (1938/2008) notions of the magic circle, and Berne's (1964) notions of family education through play are sensitized throughout this topic.

3.4. Data Collection

As mentioned, the data collection process was executed once for each respondent through semi-structured interviews, totalling to 10 separate interviews. The collected data consisted of respondents' descriptive account of their engagement with the intervention, and their experiences, opinions, and motivations around the exposed stimuli (online casual games and LDF gaming). The execution of these 10 interviews and respondents' intervention periods were simultaneous to the recruitment of respondents, which took place between 25th March 2021 to 23rd May 2021. It is important to note the notable events that took place during this period that might influence respondents' response towards LDF familyhood and practices. These events were the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic that permitted overseas travelling, Easter, Ramadan, and Eid. Conducting this research

during this specific period was purely coincidental, however, these factors are important to consider for the credibility of the collected data.

For a rich and fruitful data collection, each interview lasted between 45-60 minutes and most was conducted online through Zoom videocalls. Only the three respondents that resided in the Netherlands were interviewed in person. This was more concerned with respondent's preference for in-person interviews and convenience. During each interview, memos were optimized for highlighting important aspects for me to refer back to during the interview and the data analysis stage. With granted consent from the interviewees, their interview was audio recorded for transcription purposes to which the memos were complimentary. Here, the interviews were executed in English and transcribed verbatim by me. Hereon, the transcriptions were extracted to Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software for the data analysis.

3.5. Data Analysis

The method used to analyse the data in this research was through a thematic analysis. The analysis process here followed the six steps of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2008). This process consists of familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, generating potential themes, evaluating and defining overarching themes, and producing the report. Rather than a linear procedure, Braun and Clarke (2008) emphasize the recursive aspect of this method until saturation is met. Gradual progression and frequent adjustments are therefore embedded in the procedure.

Thematic analysis is a common analytical method for qualitative research and is useful for identifying and understanding underlying patterns prevalent in the researched phenomena (Braun & Clarke, 2008). Identifying such patterns allow for a better understanding of the social reality of the phenomena (Braun & Clarke, 2008). This thesis applied a combination of inductive and deductive sensitivities to the analysis. The formation of codes and themes during the analysis process was both theory-driven and data-driven. It was partly theory-driven as the research combines the theoretical lens of family studies with game studies, which provided a general overview of topics to explore. Nevertheless, within the interviews and the analysis unforeseen patterns were explored to allow for emerging insights (Braun & Clarke, 2008). The primary reason for this inductive approach is that the research relationship between game use and the LDF context is relatively new. Therefore, it is important to explore nuances and intricacies as much terrain

is unknown. In total, three major themes were developed from a total of 152 initial codes that were identified through Atlas.ti. These themes, subthemes, and example initial codes with quotations are visualized in the coding tree in Appendix C.

3.6. Validity and Reliability

As this thesis is a qualitative one, it should be mentioned that the traditional and quantitative concerns for validity and reliability in scientific research were not of primary concern (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For research concerned with the in-depth study of a concentrated and relatively small sample, Creswell and Poth (2018) propose alternative measurements for the validation of qualitative research. The attention here is focused on concerns of authenticity, trustworthiness, and credibility. They present nine validation strategies that researchers can follow that fall within three dimensions: the Researcher's lens, the Participant's lens and the Reader's lens (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Following the advice of Creswell and Poth (2018) to combine multiple strategies, this thesis implements four of the nine strategies: 1) *engaging in reflexivity*, 2) *the generation of rich and thick descriptions*, 3) *engaging with disconfirming evidence* and 4) *peer-reviewing*.

Firstly, *reflexivity* was ensured through transparency with my past experiences and biases towards both participants and readers (Brennan, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Here, it is important to note that my interest in this research topic was inspired by my personal experiences belonging to an LDF for the majority of my life. Having a close connection to the studied interest group was advantageous in understanding respondents' experiences with LDF and their meaning-making process. My reflexivity for this research can therefore be seen as a virtue. Nevertheless, remaining critical of my own experiences was necessary to identifying unforeseeable insights beyond my expectations of LDF culture (Brennan, 2017).

The *generation of a thick description* was ensured through the detailed reporting of this thesis' methodological choices and through the relevant details of the respondents' in the study. This was done to create the conditions necessary for a judgement of transferability of the study outcomes (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Disconfirming evidence was also purposefully explored during the data analysis through consistent reflection with the theory and initial expectations. Such evidence was coded and brought under consideration in the results. These anomalies to the general patterns point us towards the conditions under which such patterns might not hold, thus

generating a more nuanced understanding of the reach and validation of general and theorized patterns.

Furthermore, validation of the research process was ensured through frequent *peer review* from this thesis' supervisor, who is a trained specialist in the field of media studies and game studies. Additionally, reliability of the data and collection method is ensured by using a high-quality recording device and post-interview communication with the respondents when concerning the need for clarification during the analysis and transcribing phase.

In addition to the validation strategies pointed out by Creswell and Poth (2018), some remarks concerning validity should be made respective of the specific method chosen. In this case, conducting experiments in qualitative research is uncommon as experiments risk the degree of naturalism and sense of social reality (Bryman, 2012). Due to this research's intervention conditions: it taking place relatively undisturbed in respondents' natural environment and without the researchers' presence, Bryman (2012) would note that this thesis' findings "are still compelling because [the interventions] are not artificial interventions in social life" (p.56), making the ecological validity of the findings strong. To elaborate, the intervening altercations of casual games are arguably natural to the social life and communication practices of LDF as participants are given the ability to make use of the games as they see fit. These instructions were crafted about studies' findings on LDF's reliance on ICT tools for family maintenance (Abel et al., 2020). Studies of remote family gaming (Boudreau & Consalvo, 2016; Osmanovic & Pecchioni 2017) are also evidence for how social casual games are situated organically in the LDF context. These studies support my argument on how this intervention approach involves minimal inorganic manipulation to the research investigation thereby maintaining true to the social reality of LDF and family gaming.

3.6.1. *Ethical considerations*

As this research revolves around the participation of respondents, ethical considerations towards their participation are of the utmost importance. Accordingly, respondents were emphasized of their voluntary participation. During the interview, respondents were also given options to skip questions they may felt uncomfortable about. Additionally, I was careful to avoid instilling any form of harm or discomfort during the interviews and

intervention to the respondents and between their families. Furthermore, respondents were given full transparency regarding the purpose and details of the study before their participation and were asked for their oral and written consent for the data in the interview to be recorded and analysed. Lastly, the identity and privacy of the respondents were respected throughout the thesis by the use of pseudonyms.

4. Results

In answering this thesis' research question: '*How are online casual games used and experienced as a form of doing family for long-distanced families?*', this chapter presents the findings from the analysis of the in-depth interviews of ten separate individuals belonging to a total of seven different LDF. These findings not only represent the experiences and uses of games by individual family members but also representing the role digital games play in seven LDF structures.

These findings are structured into three themes beginning with the first theme, **Online Family Games (4.1)**. This theme gives an introduction to the main findings by exploring *families' general perception of casual games* while discussing in-depth their experiences with the mechanics and characteristics of the games they've played together. From the first theme, this chapter discusses the role of digital games in the respondents' LDF life through the next two themes. Here, the second theme, **Online Family Activity (4.2)**, covers the role of digital casual games in *facilitating family activities across distances* and going in-depth with what this family activity consists of. Lastly, the third theme, **Online Family Communication (4.3)**, covers how games are used and experienced as *a tool for LDF communication*. The development of these themes is visually demonstrated in the form of a coding tree (as seen in Appendix C).

Theme 4.1: Online Family Games

This theme concerns respondents' evaluation of LDF gaming as a medium for future LDF maintenance practice. The findings in this theme, therefore, offer explanations as to 1. why certain games were selected for LDF gaming and 2. how their experiences with the games develop their perception of games as an ICT medium for LDF maintenance. Accordingly, this theme is structured into three subthemes whereby the first two subthemes, **Social Presence**, and **Games We Used To Play**, focuses on respondent's meaningful experiences with the features and mechanics of the games they played, and the third subtheme, **Play Again or Quit?,** focuses on the construction of respondents' motivations (or lack thereof) to continue playing these games with their families from afar.

Before further discussion of respondents' experiences and uses of casual games as a form of long-distance family practice, it is first important to acknowledge the games

respondents mentioned playing with their families. An overview of respondents descriptors and the games they remotely played with their families are reminded in Table 3.1. from the previous chapter. Of the list of games (Appendix A) that were presented to respondents before their gameplay, *Among Us*, *Wordfeud*, *UNO*, *Skribbl*, and *Jackbox* were played. Brief descriptors of these games are also reminded in Appendix A. Additional to these games, respondents mentioned playing remotely other games outside of the research intervention period. In total, 10 online games were mentioned to have been played together remotely. Although not all respondents have experience playing both asynchronous and synchronous games with their families, synchronous and co-op games were the most popular type of games to be played among the seven families. The games outside of the list that belonged to this type were *Genshin Impact*, a free multiplayer online role-playing (co-operative) game, *Friday the 13th*, a paid multiplayer computer/console cooperative game, and a music pub quiz, which rather than a commercial videogame, is an online version of a live pub quiz whereby players remotely work in teams through videoconferences to discuss answers to the questions asked in a live-stream.

The online pub quiz played by Patrick' family does not necessarily fit within the scope of digital casual games because it is not a game that can be played at any chosen time. Another anomaly among the 10 games is a text-message emoji game (shown in Figure 4.1.) played by Fauzi and Rizal's family whereby players create and share in the group chat a list of movies using the emoji keyboard for others in the chat to answer asynchronously. Like the pub quiz, this game is an anomaly because it does not necessarily fit with the category of commercial casual games given that they are not commercially

Figure 4.1. Example of an Emoji Quiz Game – Guess The Movie

available/distributed. However, these games are relevant to the findings of this research because they both exemplify and highlight a form of family practice that is centered around play, which is a form of family practice commonplace with other respondents' experiences with family gaming.

4.1.1. Social Presence

Thanks to synchronous game features like shared game maps, game avatars, and voice-chatting, respondents have expressed high degrees of social presence during their family gameplay. However, this was more apparent in respondents' experiences with synchronous games rather than asynchronous games. For Patrick, Mariam, and Fauzi, who played both an asynchronous game (*Wordfeud*) and a synchronous game (*Among Us* or the pub quiz), preferred the synchronous affordances of synchronous games because they are "a closer substitute to the real thing" (Patrick). A closer inspection of Patrick' notion of 'the real thing' highlighted a sense of *perceived distance* between the separated family during their synchronous and asynchronous gameplay. Here, synchronous gameplay allowed LDFs to share a singular sense of space (game map) *and time*. This was exemplified in Mariam's description of their experiences playing the *Wordfeud* and *Among Us* with their separated family members:

> I guess it's just the chatting and the fact that you can just talk to each other in real-time was important for this activity. Rather than word- ugh I'm still annoyed by *Wordfeud*. In *Wordfeud* you have to *wait* for the other person. And here, you can just get their *immediate* reaction. You know, I think that's really important. Because obviously, you want to feel like you're *there with them*. Rather than wait for a few days or hours for their move. With *Among Us*, sometimes I feel like we're all in a room, with our phones, playing it together.

The importance of synchronous interactions has therefore much to do with its ability to *manipulate* the perception of distance and separation between family. As so much that the disruption of social synchrony *pronounced* such feelings of separation. This is especially when players are feeling competitive, which have been described as feeling 'in the moment' by Mariam or a sense of 'spark and enthusiasm' by Rizal, only to have it

interrupted by an undesirably lengthy deadtime. This is not to say however that asynchronous games are not suitable for LDF gaming or that asynchronous games fail to elevate a sense of familyhood for LDF. Rather, all the respondents who have played asynchronous games, except for Mariam, enjoyed the game for reasons other than social presence. In these instances, social presence is not a priority due to time and space conflicts. This was mentioned by Carlos for instance who reported that the 8 hour time difference between him and his mother would make the coordination for synchronous gaming difficult and inconvenient.

The notions of presence and connectedness that were described by respondents playing synchronous games were reflective of Tamborini and Skalski's (2006) notions of vividness among virtual presence. This is where players become immersed with other players of the game *inside* the game world through multiple senses. As expressed by Mila, the avatars and interactive actions in *Among Us* allowed her to "*see* how big [her] family is and *how* they are" reflective of their real-life dynamism. In turn, this has brought her feeling more "connected" to her separated family. The ability of games here to reflect and resemble respondents' real-life dynamism is somewhat reflective of Castranova's (2008) notions of games as a synthetic world, whereby the lines between real-life and virtual life is blurred. Here, players' virtual interactions with each other have direct consequences to their real-life interactions with each other (Castranova, 2008). But different from Castranova's pessimistic view of games, the games LDF plays are seen more as a means of a 'solution' to combat temporary social separation rather than a means of 'escape'. To Mariam, who played *Among Us* with her siblings, her gameplay experience was reported as reflective of her real-life experiences hanging out with her siblings.

Castranova's (2008) notions of a 'synthetic world' however are more apparent in the experiences of those playing role-playing games like *Among Us* rather than those playing other synchronous games like *Jackbox* and *Skribbl* where game maps and avatars are not so relevant. Nevertheless, other respondents reported that talking to each other in real-time about and within the game was still "fundamental" to the family gaming experience and feeling connected with the family. As Gaia, who played *Skribbl* and *UNO* with her LDF expressed:

"In case we couldn't talk to each other, it would feel very far away. *Pale* in a way. You know, *flat*."

Not only does the distance feel more pronounced when playing without voice calls, but it also removes the 'juiciness' element of the game which according to Juuls (2010), centre around rewarding players with "an immediate, pleasurable experience" (p. 45). However, juiciness is also pivotal to players' gaming experience as it inspires them to continue playing.

4.1.2. The Games We Used To Play

Part of the '*juiciness'* that respondents experienced during their gameplay was based on their sense of familiarity with the games' objectives, mechanics, and reputation. Except for Carlos, all the games that were played by respondents were either games *they have played before* playing online with their families, or were *similar* to the "games [they] used to play as a kid". For instance, *Among Us* was compared to the card game *Werewolf*, *Skribbl* to *Pictionary*, *Wordfeud* to *Scrabble*, and some *Jackbox* games with *Cards Against Humanity* and trivia. Respondents have also reported having previously played offline version of these online games together with their family in physical settings. This played a big role in their decisions to play and introduce the online versions of the games to/with their LDF. Accordingly, respondents' shared their general expectations of their family members also enjoying it and not taking too long to understand the rules and mechanics of the game. In Gaia's experiences with online *UNO*, she explains that because "[her parents] remember the game, [Gaia] didn't have to explain the rules as [she] did for *Skribbl*. So the preparation was shorter".

It was not uncommon however that other family members, particularly the parents, had to be taught how to play the game by those more familiar with playing digital games. This was notably the case for Carlos's, Mariam's, Gaia's and Mila and Anna's experience. Except for Anna's case who had her other daughters to teach her the game physically, Carlos, Mariam and Gaia had to teach their LDF from afar via telephone. Carlos found this experience frustrating because 'it's hard to coordinate when you can't *show* the person what you're doing or what you need to do' and reported that his mother "was ready to throw in the towel quite soon". Although Carlos and his mother reported to thoroughly

enjoy playing *Wordfeud* after they both understood the game, Carlos was still hesitant to introduce other games to play with his mother, worried that she wouldn't enjoy the experience if the game is difficult to navigate alone. As such, the sense of familiarity in the online games played a big role in respondents' decision to introduce the game to the family and also their family's willingness to try it. This is also reflective of the *usability* element of casual games, whereby for games to be enjoyed by non-gamers, they must not take too long to understand (Juul, 2010).

4.1.3. Play Again or Quit?

Besides Fauzi and Mariam, playing online games with family members across distances was a new experience. To play games *with a complete family unit* while separated however was a new experience for all. Mariam for instance reported that she previously played *Friday the 13th*, a multiplayer semi-open world game, remotely with her brothers. This game was less suitable for Mariam's sister, who "doesn't really like playing videogames". However, since her sister now joins the fun in playing *Among Us*, Mariam views the game more as an opportunity to "spend time together", which was compared to real-life activities with her complete sibling unit such as "getting together for movies and dinners". Compared to her experiences with *Friday the 13th*, Mariam's perception towards online gaming, in particular to the game *Among Us*, has changed from playing for fun to playing for family bonding. This is especially now that she is playing with the complete sibling unit for the first time. As such, this new perception towards online games has encouraged her to continue playing the game with her siblings and finding alternative ways to involve her parents too.

Mariam's experiences with online gaming with her sibling unit were very similar to Fauzi and Rizal's experiences. Fauzi (age 30) have also reported playing online with his youngest brother (age 14) before playing with all his siblings on *Wordfeud* and *Among Us*. Due to having a shared interest in games with his youngest sibling, Fauzi initially took this as an opportunity for family bonding, especially considering that his youngest brother "*doesn't really* want to connect over video call or WhatsApp". Rizal also reported that Fauzi has been the one suggesting other online games to be played with the family such as Monopoly. Compared to their experiences playing *Wordfeud* and *Among Us*, Monopoly, despite being a well-known game, was not as successful. This was primarily because

Monopoly was expected to not have the same degree of 'interruptibility' and 'juiciness' as *Wordfeud* and *Among Us*:

> You have to pay to play. And yeah I just didn't feel like I wanted to spend my money on that when there are other games out there for free. Monopoly is also a *long* game. It's not half an hour or one hour game. So it's going to take a lot of our time. Otherwise, I think Monopoly is better played face to face […] And I guess online- it's just a click of a button and you just press go, go go, and go. It just takes a lot of the fun.

> \- Rizal, on playing Monopoly online

Additionally, Carlos and Rizal were keen to continue playing *Wordfeud* because the game offered other personal benefits such as developing language skills and being a "mental arithmetic". Certain games, therefore, have a higher likelihood of being played in the future with the family if the games were already familiar, has multiple uses and, is mutually accessible and rewarding. As expressed by many respondents, finding games that fit all these requirements is already very hard. For Rizal's family, keeping the game alive, was also challenging. Here, the success of playing *Wordfeud* and *Among Us* was "short-lived" and Rizal did not expect them to play it again in the future, explaining that its "trend has died out" and that his family tend to "get bored of the same game". Nevertheless, he reports that he would be open to playing a different game. From this, it could be said that novelty plays a relevant role in continuing online family gaming. The sense of repetitiveness in games that falls short in the Nahar family is no different to the everyday ICT mediums that LDF's commonly find repetitive (Abel et al., 2020).

Gaia also shares that the sense of novelty in her online family gaming experience made the game more enjoyable. However, the difficulties she and her parents experienced during the game preparation stage has discouraged them from playing online together in the future. For Gaia, who has more opportunities to reunite with her separated family members than those transnationally separated, games are not seen as a "necessary" medium for family maintenance. Carlos, who regularly contacts his mother also does not prefer games as a medium for this explaining that "because we are living in turbulent times, I would just like to know how she's doing and what are her needs". On the other

hand, for families who are further apart *and* are in less frequent contact with one another, games brought a lot of excitement to their LDF dynamic:

> I was *super* impressed! It was really really fun. And all of us after was like 'we have to do this again!' 'cause we have never done this. It's like I've lived abroad since I was 18 and I'm nearly 26. And we've never played online games together before. So it was actually really cool. We were planning to do it again at some point.
>
> - Sophie, recalling her experience playing *Jackbox* for the first time with her family abroad.

Like Sophie, other respondents' recollection of their family gameplay experience was also met with enthusiasm and surprise. When reflecting on alternative practices like gaming and online presence for LDF maintenance, Rizal and Fauzi share that many alternative ICT platforms like games are helpful for "getting close to someone that's far apart….but we *don't* know of them because they are not in our *ether*". Respondents however have reported a newly broadened perspective on (alternative forms of) ICT and online presence for long-distance social maintenance since the travel and social restrictions from the COVID-19 pandemic. This was particularly since these restrictions reported to furthered their challenges with mobility. This is somewhat supportive of Baldassar et al's (2014) argument that LDF are more likely to be early adapters to alternative ICT due to their challenges with social separation. However, the openness to new and alternative ICT for LDF maintenance is perhaps more applicable to families like the Neumann and Bos family who are not used to being separated for a long time compared to families like Carlos's, the Greens, and Nahars, where lengthy separation and migration is normalized in their family structure.

Theme 4.2: Online Family Activity

In the previous theme, the notion of social presence in games in facilitating and mimicking online forms of family activities was briefly touched upon. I expand on this topic further in this theme by focusing on identifying the forms of *family practices* that are facilitated by online casual games in this particular form of family activity. Accordingly, the identified family practices are organized into 3 respective subthemes. The first one, **Kinkeepers**, refer to the exercising of kinkeeping during the game preparation stage of the online activity.

The second subtheme, **Family Playing**, refers to how games reintroduced the family practice of playing to LDF. And the final subtheme, **Shifting Family Dynamics**, refers to the ways in which family boundaries and expectations are blurred.

4.2.1. *Kinkeepers*

As with any other group activity, be it online or in real life, the preparation stage is also a pivotal part of the group activity. From the interviews, all respondents have reported that not everyone was equally involved in the preparation for family gaming. Additionally, not everyone in the group was equally motivated in taking part either. I argue that this group dynamic described during their preparation stage is very typical of real-life family activities. Therefore, online family gaming can be considered as a form of LDF family activity. This also comes with the opportunities to exercise family roles and feel a sense of collective family belonging. One that is of particular relevance to this research is the role of the kinkeeper- the ones who initiate and organize family togetherness and bonding.

It is important to note that due to this research being a qualitative experiment research whereby the intervened stimuli was the LDF gaming, the first wave respondents who received the instructions for LDF gaming would be considered the kinkeepers. The presented findings do not attempt to explain kinkeepers' motivations for initiating such LDF activities, but more about *how* they navigated around their kinkeeping role of selecting the game and organizing the game setting.

As mentioned previously, the game selection consisted of heavy deliberation. To find a game that was mutually accessible and engaging for all members, kinkeepers reported being "weary" of each of their family members' interests and capabilities. As kinkeepers take the time and effort in searching for suitable games and teaching their family members how to play them and enjoy themselves, they were thereby performing intimate care practices towards their family. Gaia for instance was very mindful that the games she selected were not only *familiar* but high in *usability* for her parents. Here, she selected computer-friendly games rather than mobile games because "the screen is smaller and they would have to wear glasses to properly see". Moreover, the kinkeepers were more hesitant in playing (further) with their parents precisely for their lack of digital skills. This is not to say that kinkeepers do not desire to play with their parents or teach them. Rather, it was more undesirable if the games kinkeepers selected were found to inflict an

unpleasant and uncomfortable experience for their parents. As Patrick explains when introducing his parents to *Among Us* once: "I think it will be very hard for them to enjoy it. They're very insecure about the ability to play it. So I think that plays an important role for what kinds of games you could play". As such, kinkeepers exercise a care practice whereby personal interests are compromised for the sake of protecting other's feelings and degrees of comfort.

This care practice is also reflective in the way kinkeepers take the effort to prepare the game setting and teach each other how to play. Here, only Gaia and Carlos reported difficulties in the game preparation. Unlike other families where the game was already familiar to them, or that other kinkeepers were present with the majority group, Gaia and Carlos had to teach and organize the game preparation alone and remotely. Nevertheless, these online family gaming experiences offer an opportunity for which care practices can be exercised from afar. Moreover, where care practices are conventionally performed from old to young family members, online games allow a space in which these roles are reversed. In the instances in which kinkeeping roles were distributed among other members, such as the case with the Neumann and Syed family, they show how the act of kinkeeping *together* is perhaps another element of family activity.

When concerning the family members who were more resistant in participating in the family games, respondents share that this is primarily due to different interest and different preference for game genres. However, it is interesting to note that despite those differences, the members that were initially resistant were committed to participating with the rest. This shows that members are willing to step out of their comfort zone to participate in an LDF family activity.

4.2.2. Family Playing

Despite some respondents experiencing difficulties and discouraging results from the game preparation, all the respondents report positively overwhelming experiences from playing games with their families apart. One of the notable findings that were reported from all the respondents' was that their family ties *stayed the same* after playing online games together. It should be mentioned however that all respondents have shared that their bond with their family members, even across distances, were quite strong to begin with. In this sense, their motivations to play online games with another was less about improving their

relationships, but more about emulating a sense of familyhood across distances *in a different way* from their everyday LDF practices such as telecommunications. As Gaia explains, the games were used "for another purpose, because it was not like the routine daily communication. It was like a step further- to have fun together. Because normally when you talk to each other, it's just communicating some stuff that happened". Accordingly, online gaming is described to add a new layer to the everyday sense of LDF familyhood- one that is centred around *play* and *novelty* rather than 'daily communication'. Similarly, Mila describes this as "feeling more connected" than Zoom calls because she also gets to see her family members in their natural state in the house when they are playing *Among Us* on their separate phones together:

> We play the game and we have Skype on. They see me, but I don't see everyone because if you have five people on the screen, then they have to sit so close together. So I see normally my mom, my sister or my stepdad or whoever is sitting on the sofa. And everybody else is around the room, laying on the floor. So from that, I feel more connected with them. But of course, I am the only one not in the room. But I don't have a problem with it. I feel happy when I can feel more connected and play the game with them.

When compared to everyday forms of LDF practices, Mila appreciates that online family gaming allows for a more casual family dynamic, and perhaps one that is more reflective of the everyday offline dynamic which she doesn't usually get to see. Additionally, Mila's mother Anna prefers the family gaming activity from the family Zoom call as a form of LDF activity because "you are doing something (all) together" and everybody is equally focused on the game instead of with other distractions. Anna and Mila's reasons for disliking family videoconferences is reflective of Cabaquinto's (2018), Shaker (2018), and Madianou and Miller's (2013) notions of intimacy asymmetry from the lack of *collective engagement* from all actors in the videoconference. This is again showing how the mechanics of synchronous social games like *Among Us* and *Jackbox*, are considered successful for socialization (and thereby achieving the sense of familyhood) because of how they enable *cues* for collective engagement.

It was interesting to note the differences in the environmental context the games were played in among the seven families. I argue that this variance had much to do with who the games were played with and what the activity of family gaming meant for different families. For the Nahar and Syed family, who played games with their siblings only, played the games in a "spontaneous" and casual setting which is "where everyone's free and have nothing to do" (Mariam). In contrast, the Soldati, Neumann, Green, and Bos family, who all played synchronous games with their whole family, had a specially planned evening to play the game. By planning an evening for LDF gaming, there is a weight placed on the online games that are suggestive of their purposive role in facilitating a conventional family activity where "everybody is together" in a singular space and time. Moreover, this given weight towards online games can be factored by how the games were played with the complete family unit which, unlike sibling units, involved intergenerational interactions and thereby, the full family dynamic. Additionally, the nostalgia of family gaming in the past could also atone to respondents' approach to the LDF gaming experience. This was particularly the case with the Green family who identifies themselves as a family of "gamers" who use a variety of (video)games to bond with each other in person. For these reasons, certain families placed a purposive association for online games as a way for playful family socialization.

The families who played only as a sibling unit highlighted the importance of games for offering mechanics to exercise playful sibling practices. Their reports have exemplified the prominence of play in sibling dynamics that is different to the dynamics of a complete family unit with parents. For Rizal and Fauzi, this dynamic had much to do with nostalgic memories of "playing games in the house" together with siblings and friends. All three of the respondents who played exclusively with their siblings expressed their enjoyment in exercising sibling rivalry through their game interactions. These are demonstrated in "shit-talking", "pettiness", "competitive spirit" and "annoying each other". An example of how online games enable players to exercise sibling rivalry practices is when Mariam and her siblings (mis)used the game actions in *Among Us* to exercise playful "pettiness":

Sometimes we *knew* who the imposter was but sometimes we were like 'oh my god you're so annoying today. Let's *boot* him out!' or something like that [laughs]. So

sometimes we would just like boot each other out, out of annoyance really! So in this case we are not always playing the game like it should be.

In these cases, the immediate consequences of interactive games actions allow LDF members to add a new layer to sibling rivalry, and thereby an extra layer to siblinghood. Mariam's experience exemplifies another interesting finding of online familyhood with how ICT mechanics are more likely to be misused amongst families rather than with friends. Mila for instance shares how in *Among Us*, her family continues to chat during the silent part of the game, thereby not playing the game as it is supposed to. This is not per se "cheating", however, it is demonstrating an alternative navigation of the game rules that is special and accepted in the family context. When it comes to family gaming, many respondents have shared that cheating and special "interpretations of the rules" (Gaia) are pivotal in their usual family gaming activities. As such, the lack of flexibility in the online games to allow this was considered to be a limitation to the 'juiciness' of family gaming. The game of *Among Us* is therefore interesting in this sense because the juiciness of cheating is embedded in the game given that social deduction and deception are the objectives.

4.2.3. *Shifting Family Dynamics*

In addition to online games facilitating a playful family activity, the social boundaries within the family dynamic are temporarily shifted during the gameplay. How these social boundaries are shifted is reflected in Huizinga's (1938/2008) notion of the magic circle, whereby social rules that apply in everyday context is relaxed during playtime. Examples of how boundaries were shifted among the seven families were often found from playful interactions and from performing unexpected expert roles. Shifted boundaries were more evident among respondents who described their family of having a certain degree of rigid family rules. However, such family rules might be more prevalent between family members with a large generational gap than between those who are closer in age, or who are 'all adults'. Amongst the seven families, only three had teenage players. Among these three families, the Nahar and the Green family exemplified boundary shifts during gameplay.

Within the Nahar family, the family norms are reportedly reflective of their culture where 'hierarchy based on age' is commonplace. As such, younger family members 'would

get in trouble if they talked back'. In another example of family boundaries, Jack shares that playing certain social games with his parents can be tricky because his humour does not match with that of his parents. This made Jack less inclined to play those games in the family setting. Alternatively, during a game of *Quiplash*, whereby players must submit a funny answer to the presented sentence (shown in Figure 4.2.), Jack was 'shocked' by the prompts submitted by his younger sibling (age 15) and their sister's boyfriend, who they met virtually for the first time:

> Sophie's boyfriend and Sam were throwing some really weird curveballs. No one really cares about swearing in the family but if it was the first time for me being on call with my girlfriend's family, I wouldn't put like, 'fucking asshole' in my prompts or whatever. I was kind of shocked to see that from Sam as well like the youngest in the family to write a bunch of sexual stuff in there. It was a bit odd but it's not that big of a deal. I thought it was more funny than anything else.

This scenario shows that the game cues in the social games that Jack and his family played made it acceptable for members to "say the most ridiculous stuff" and thereby testing the

Figure 4.2. Example of two players' 'prompts' to the missing blank in the sentence. The names on top of the left prompt displays other players' votes/preference for that prompt.

family boundaries. Additionally, these are also moments of opportunity to discover what other family members are capable of, thereby giving opportunities to learn more about another. The Nahar family's experience with playing *Among Us*, a social deduction game,

was also a good example of this. Here, both Fauzi and Rizal were rather positively surprised by how deceptive their youngest brother was when playing the 'imposter'. Due to their youngest brothers' interest in games, it was expected that he will "excel" better in the games than other members. Fauzi also adds that these skill-specific games are "a good medium to demonstrate and showcase your strengths as well as your creativity". Furthermore, by playing together, the youngest brother is given opportunities to *perform* and "showcase" unexpected roles such as leading the group and giving advice on how to perform better in the games. The act of playing together, therefore, allows family members to exercise different family roles.

Theme 4.3. Online Family Conversations

When concerning family maintenance practices, family (verbal) communication plays a fundamental role. Outside of online games, respondents all agree that telecommunication ICT are the most relied on and most used mediums for family maintenance as so much that routines develop for LDF communication. These routines are important because they help maintain connections and a sense of family belonging from afar. With respects to the importance of (tele)communications routines for LDF, this theme is dedicated to how games stimulate conversations with separated family members. This theme is therefore divided into two subthemes, based on the two important elements of online conversations: 1. **The topics of conversations**, and 2. **The means for conversation.** Through these two subthemes, games are shown to have two different uses. In the first subtheme, games are used as a topic for conversation. For the second subtheme, games are used as a medium for conversation. This theme, therefore, concludes one of the main uses of games, which is a tool for family communication.

4.3.1. Games as a topic for conversation

As mentioned, verbal communication is fundamental for maintaining long-distance ties. For many, telecommunications and social media were the most frequent means for maintenance practice. Here, the topics of conversations consist of mundane conversations, catching up, and forms of emotional and practical support. When referring back to Baldassar et al.'s (2014) family care practices, the topics conversed through telecommunications are important for facilitating these family care practices. What is

shown through games, however, is that games bring forth *new* topics of conversation. Carlos has expressed that since playing *Wordfeud* with his mother, there is now a common interest between them that they can talk about:

> Games bring an extra aspect to talk about. Because we just talk about each other's lives since we don't really consume the same content. She listens to one genre of music, I listen to another genre. She watches one types of TV shows, I watch a completely different type of TV show. So we have really no middle ground to follow up on besides politics. So it's nice to have an actual third thing to talk about.

As such, games bring opportunities for diversifying topics for LDF communication whilst also allowing families a break from talking about their personal lives. Carlos also shows the importance of having shared interests in maintaining ties and keeping the routined conversations more interesting. The importance of shared interests is exemplified with Sophie's communication practice with her sibling of sending each other memes over their shared interest in the show *RuPaul's Drag Race*. What is shown valuable here is when Sophie reports having learnt more of her sibling's intimate challenges with similar topics explored in the show. Although Sophie's experience was not to do with games, it does exemplify Mäyrä's (2008) argument about the potential of games as a cultural text and thereby bringing opportunities for deeper conversations with another. Perhaps due to the nature of online casual games being more about quick games, there is not much room for discussing underlying messages of the game. Interestingly though, *Among Us*'s mainstream recognition have inspired popular user-generated content (UGC) such as streaming content allows creators to create a cutural narrative over the game. As shown in figure 4.2. of a screenshot of an *Among Us* UGC, these UGC demonstrates how the game has been turned into a cultural text where meaning is created from the players as characters and their gameplay as the narrative. Using this example, Mariam shares how "sending each other videos of YouTubers playing the game and talk about [makes] it more fun" for them while they discuss the content of the videos and learn new strategies. Mariam's example shows again that games bring forward something new to the everydayness of family communication. As so much that Mariam reported extending her siblings conversations about *Among Us* to the family group chat with her parents by posting there a recording of their game session with each other.
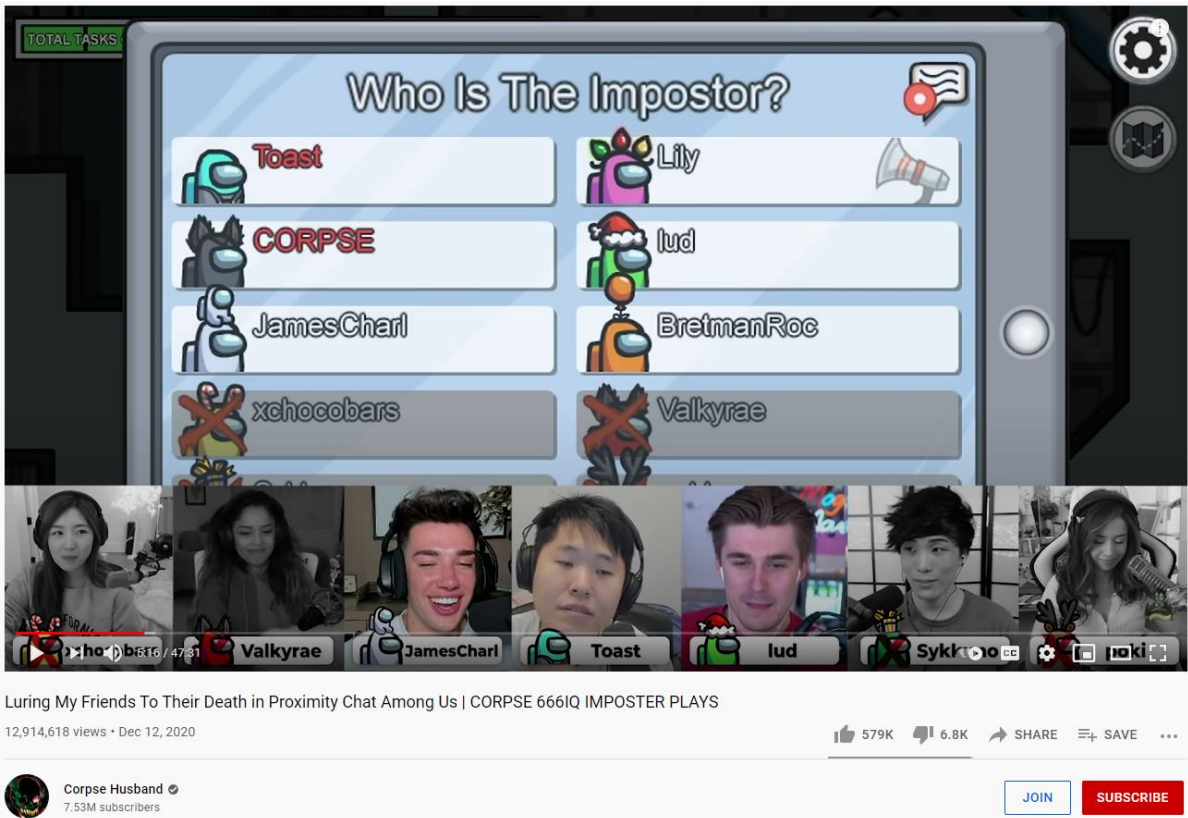
Figure 4.3. Example of popular Among Us streamers demonstrating their strategies during their gameplays

4.3.2. Games as a means for conversation

Online games can be seen as a highly valuable means for communication among families such as the Nahar and Green family who reports infrequent communication with their separated members. This is especially when not everyone in the family is comfortable with online telecommunications or talking about personal lives through the phone. In continuation from the previous subtheme, the elements of playfulness and casualness in the topic of games compared to personal lives are perhaps important elements for making online communication easier for those finding it more difficult.

When considering that online communication is considered one of the only means for family maintenance for LDF, being off-the-grid so to say can become problematic. This was evident in Sophie's experience of not having a smartphone during her first years living abroad, and her parents being "frustrated because they couldn't get a hold of [her]". Since having a smartphone, however, Sophie shares that their communication habits were easier and that she can call her mother more often for a sense of parental support. Despite having a smartphone, family members, especially those of the 'left-behind family', find it "hard to

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connect and talk about sensitive subjects over online". For Sophie's younger brother Jack, this was because he finds it "hard to read and understand people" online. Other respondents have shared similar stories of how not everyone in their left-behind family can or wants to connect over phonecalls. When playing videogames, however, respondents shared how the family, especially those less active online, became more expressive with laughter, banter, and competitive spirit. For many respondents, the games brought out an expressive side to their family members that they don't get to see so often. As shared by Jack:

> I really hope we play *Jackbox* more often. I think it's a fun game and I want to see Sophie and her boyfriend bringing this light into the parents as well because they do I think they add smiles to their faces whether that's just in their jokes or when they see them on camera.

As such, games are valuable for LDF for bringing opportunities for a more casual atmosphere with the whole family. Moreover, from this casual atmosphere, games enable those less comfortable expressing themselves through phonecalls to be more expressive during the gameplay. This was also shown in Fauzi's gameplay conversations with his younger brother, who "doesn't really want to connect over videocall or Whatsapp". Here, Fauzi expresses that playing together through videogames was a more effective medium to "connect with him and just discuss his day to day life".

However, it is important to note that as is the case with most respondents, it was rather uncommon for family members to "connect over new emotional or personal stuff" (Jack) during the gameplay. As mentioned in the previous subtheme, these topics were more appropriate for everyday phonecalls rather than during the gameplay. Respondents were rather insistent that the conversations during the gameplay were more or less about the gameplay itself. These conversations usually consist of either teaching each other about the game rules and "taking the piss out of each other". I would argue however that even if family members did not "connect over new emotional or personal stuff", their banter about each other is still a reference to each other's personal life. For instance, when asking Mila if their banters ever get out of hand, she explains that these banters are playful and harmless "because [they] know each other so well" and "know what to say and what

not to say". Through banters, families can strengthen relationships and demonstrate their knowledge of the other person which is facilitated through games. This is again reflective of Huizinga's (1938/2008) notions of the magic circle whereby the playing of social boundaries is still referencing real-life boundaries. As such, family members learn more about each other's boundaries and experiences that will carry on after the gameplay.

Another interesting way that games were used as a medium for family conversations was through the deadtime period between turns for asynchronous games like *Wordfeud*. Unlike synchronous games, the gameplay for asynchronous games occurs even outside of the game map, whilst waiting for the opponents to make the next move. In this instance, the conversations around the game during the deadtime period is still part of the gameplay. As expressed by Carlos, Mariam, Rizal, and Fauzi, these conversations during the gameplay were mostly about either reminding their family member to react or making playful comments about their actions such as the unusual word they've applied. Therefore, as reflected in Boudreau and Consalvo's (2016) study, the social consequences of the asynchronous mechanics of *Wordfeud* are effective for starting conversations as the deadtime period acts as a break time from playing. An example of the sort of socialization that occurs during the deadtime is through Rizal's interactions with his siblings around the game through "shit-talking". Rizal, who primarily does the "shit-talking", do so with the motivations to "make [his family members] more competitive…so that they can reach [his] scores, so it's more of an even game". Additionally, despite playing a two-player game, Rizal and his siblings' communication around the game is shared in the family group chat. Rizal refers to this as a form of playful "public shaming". However, it can be argued that by sharing this exclusive experience, Rizal is extending the gameplay communication experience to the rest of the family via the family group chat. This is interesting given that Rizal has been adamant in initiating family calls- arguing that it is "awkward" for him since he is usually never the one to initiate them. From this, Rizal, Fauzi's brother, and Jack and his dad, who have all been described as resistant to initiating or participating in online communication, demonstrates how the playful and casual nature of online casual games allow non-active members to participate in family conversations and even initiate one too. This supports the notion that play in some ways, is like a universal language that can be accessed by those challenged by "generational gaps", "language barriers", or simply, online communication.

One of the most telling examples of this is when Rizal recalls a game their family played on their group chat (figure 4.1.) whereby his father this time was also partaking:

> It made me happy and proud that he can guess those movies correctly. It feels like he was having fun. Yeah I think it's personally hard for us to communicate with them because of the generation gap and because of the language barriers. And with this being emojis, which isn't technically a language that you speak every day but can understand, that he was also involved. I know for a fact that he loves his children and he wants them to talk to him pretty much and just be involved. He's always into family and togetherness. So I'm happy to see him happy with that.

This example concludes the importance and potential of games to be used as a tool for LDF maintenance. It concludes furthermore the value of play in a family setting, especially in settings where online communication and thereby, LDF maintenance, is a struggle.

5. Conclusion

This thesis was set out to understand the alternative methods of maintaining familyhood for long-distanced families through the affordances of mutually accessible digital/online games. Accordingly, the research question guiding this thesis was: *"How are online casual games used and experienced as a form of doing family for long-distanced families?"*. This final chapter serves to bring this thesis to a full circle by concluding its main findings and addressing the theoretical and societal implications that arise from it. This chapter then ends with recommendations for future research that are based on a critical reflection of this thesis' research process.

The three themes extracted from the thematic analysis have brought forth a comprehensive answer to how LDFs used and experienced online casual games as a form of doing family. Through the unique characteristics and mechanics of online casual games and in how they facilitate playful interactions between players, LDFs were able to capture the sense of familyhood across distances at a new height during their gaming experience. From the two themes, Online Family Activity (4.2) and Online Family Communication (4.3), the uses of online casual games for LDF maintenance were demonstrated by how games facilitated LDFs a shared virtual space for playful competition, collective participation, and conversations. From investigating the suitability of casual games for LDF practices in the first theme (4.1), it was found that the elements of play, nostalgia, collective social presence, and casualness were most meaningful in heightening this sense of familyhood for LDF. This does not necessarily mean however that LDF gaming strengthened family relationships. Rather, online casual games represented opportunities for alternative modes of LDF maintenance that were different and novel from their conventional use of telecommunications. Although LDF gaming was not so important for families who were less challenged by mobility, it meant a whole difference for families who saw and communicate with their separated family members a lot less. The value placed towards online casual games for LDF maintenance by some families highlighted an important finding about LDF which is that not everyone in the LDF has the same capabilities to connect over online telecommunications. However, what LDF gaming highlight is that there exist other methods of exercising family togetherness and affection across distances such as playing games together. With this answer to the research question, the goals of this master thesis in uncovering a holistic understanding of the role of online casual games in the long-distance

maintenance practices for familyhood have now been met. It is now important to discuss further the theoretical and societal implications of this thesis' findings.

5.1. Theoretical Implications

On the basis of the exploratory nature of the thesis, new insights have been gained through which the relationship between long-distance familyhood and casual games can be understood. Below, a reflection is presented in which the findings of this study are related to the theoretical frameworks that were used. In doing so, the ways in which the findings validate, extend, and challenge the used theoretical frameworks is discussed.

Central in the findings was the way in which online casual games facilitated the practice of *family play* across a distance. The theoretical conceptualization of LDF playing as an LDF practice is this thesis' first out of three theoretical implication. In the findings, play was considered a novel LDF practice, yet it proved to be important for many reasons relating to (long-distanced) family socialization. For instance, playing allowed family boundaries to be blurred and tested which brought new discoveries of family members' individual capabilities. Accordingly, Berne's (1964) and Huizinga's (1938/2008) theories behind the social benefits of games and playing as a way for family socialization and strengthening relationships were validated through my findings. Whereby scholarship of LDF practices and familyhood are mostly concerned with how LDFs circulate care practices across distances, further research in the field can do well with incorporating the notions of LDF playing. With this, more can be discovered about how LDFs socialize with separated family across distances and what meanings can be made about LDF playing through other LDF mediums.

From family playing, new insights concerning siblinghood and sibling practices such as sibling rivalry and nagging were uncovered in the findings. In the theoretical framework, there were not many scholarships exploring sibling dynamics. The few that did however studied sibling dynamics through the practice of kinkeeping across distances whereby responsibilities were distributed among separated siblings in order to execute properly a collective LDF practice (Cabalquinto, 2018; Shaker, 2018). The distribution of kinkeeping responsibilities was evident in the findings. However, academic fields concerning kinkeeping, LDF familyhood, and/or family gaming can be extended by studying more extensively the dynamics and practices between siblings. Highlighted in the findings was the distinction in the dynamics between siblings compared to the dynamics between

parent and child(ren) during gameplay. A factor to consider here is that sibling groups usually belong to the same cohort thereby sharing similar interests and technological capabilities compared to their parents. For instance, some respondents report playing non-casual videogames with their siblings while apart before and found their experiences also meaningful.

Lastly, scholarships related to creative technology and casual games can be extended by combing frameworks of academic fields that were initially isolated from one another. In this thesis, the investigation of recent online casual games combined the insights from Juul's (2010) and Boudreau and Consalvo's (2016) characteristics of casual games, Taborini and Skalski's (2006) notions of virtual presence, and Castronova's (2008) notions of games as synthetic worlds. The latter two however were more concerned with non-casual games, yet were very applicable to describe LDF's experiences with family socialization through LDF gaming with casual games. Additionally, when reflecting the aforementioned studies of digital games with studies exploring LDF's needs and challenges, this thesis offers new theoretical insights into casual games and what they represent as a tool for long-distanced social maintenance. For instance, casual online games afforded LDFs a way to be collectively engaged simultaneously as if a virtual family activity. The sense of casualness was also meaningful to LDFs in a different way from the intent of casual games to pass time. As such, these theoretical implications also remind future researchers that there is still much to be discovered when concerning alternative uses of technology from those separated from another.

5.2. Societal Implications

The findings of this thesis concerned the many ways in which online casual games can be used and experienced as a way to maintain family connections across distances. Moreover, the findings exemplify that there is a need for mutually accessible ICT that instigates other modes of long-distanced socialization that is not just limited to telecommunications. The societal implications of this thesis are therefore relevant to not only LDFs but other intimate forms of relationships affected by mobility, such as separated partners and separated friends.

As mentioned before, the elements of play, casualness, and collective participation were pivotal in achieving a heightened sense of familyhood for LDF. The sense of collective participation from and for games by LDF exemplified how games facilitate a virtual family

activity whereby everyone has, quite literally, a role to play. This highlights the importance of the interactive cues inherent in all games for family dynamics and also how playing with players of different level of game comprehensions instigate cooperative interactions. Additionally, the sense of casualness in online casual games is beneficial for LDF for when LDFs prefer a change of pace or scenario from their everyday LDF setting of online telecommunications. Casual games proved especially advantageous for LDF that have family members finding connecting over online telecommunications difficult. In light of this, there are many opportunities in the field of communicative and creative technologies for implementing features catering to the specific needs of those affected by mobility. I would therefore advice developers to apply Castranova's (2008) notions of the synthetic world with LDF's navigation of ICT to develop interactive features that serve as a solution for those affected by mobility.

5.3. Limitations and Future Research

The main limitations of this research are twofold. The first concerns the issue of sampling, and the second concerns the intervention period.

When reflecting on the notable scholarship of long-distanced families, much of their insights concerning how LDFs navigate familyhood through LDF practices and ICT were dependent on various sociodemographic factors. Namely, income, educational level, locations of the LDFs, culture, and gender were for instance relevant in understanding motivations behind families' LDF practices (Abel et al., Baldasar et al., 2014; Barakij et al., 2016; Cabalquinto, 2018; Madianou & Miller, 2013; Shaker, 2018). In this thesis, the sampling was gathered through a convenient sampling method. As such, highly-educated individuals, families with adult children and migrated family members were overrepresented in the sample. This sample therefore, cannot be reflective of a 'typical' or majority case of LFDs. When reflecting on the pedagogical standpoint of family play as a method for child-rearing (Berne, 1964), perhaps the meaning of LDF gaming might be different to LDFs with younger children in their formative years. Accordingly, the selection for online casual games and how they are used might be different too. Previous research on intergenerational gaming however has been criticized for focusing too much on old and young players (De Le Hera, 2017). Nevertheless, it could be interesting to see for future research how online casual games are used and experienced by young children and their separated older relatives (ie. grandparents or parents).

The other limitation in this study concerns the intervention period. Due to the absence of the researcher during the intervention period, the interactions between the respondents with the exposed stimuli and the environment were only revealed through personal reflective accounts. Though this method also had its advantages such as understanding better respondents' perspective and ensuring a natural environment, a first-hand observation of these interactions could allow researchers to identify important details to the thesis that would have been missed by respondents. Doing so would thereby expand the exploratory reach of LDF practices and familyhood through casual games, ICT, and/or creative media. Without compromising the degrees of natural environment, future research could either be present during the gameplay or collect secondary materials for data analysis such as respondents' diary logs or chats regarding their game engagements.

Lastly, based on how some respondents expressed their interests in playing games with their LDF again in the future, there was a limitation in this research that concerned the *duration* of the intervention period. There is therefore a relevance for future research to conduct a longer intervention period or a longitudinal study of respondents' interactions with LDF gaming beginning from their first experience. Doing so would unravel the ways LDFs navigate through possibly other forms of creative media for social maintenance and family bonding.

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7. Appendices
Appendix A. Intervention Instructions and List of Online Casual Games

Hi there!

Thank you for reaching out to me and showing interest to taking part to my study regarding long-distance family gaming. To give some clarity, your participation includes two things: **1. an oral interview** with me that is recorded (for study purposes only) and would last around 45 to 60 minutes, and **2. playing mobile casual games with your family** for 10 days (between the date you received this letter and until our interview date).

The interview

As mentioned, the interview will take place online via a zoom call. The interview will be recorded strictly for study purposes and not for other reasons. Your personal information with be respected with care and will not be shared with anyone else.

In the interview, we will only discuss about your experiences with being part of a long-distance family and your experiences and insights about the family gaming. It is important to stress that you are not required to answer all of the questions, and that your participation is voluntary and you are free to stop your participation at any moment.

The mobile games

In this document you will also find a list of casual mobile games that you can play with your family. Some are available on desktop as well as mobile such as Skribbl and Among Us. Some are also available in other languages. I would also suggest that for games that are real-time like Among Us, a voice chat feature is also encouraged if you want. Here, you can play the game while also be on a voice call to communicate. Most of the games I've listed are fairly straight forward, but there are more information on the games in YouTube or on the app stores if you are interested.

These games I've listed are merely suggestions and if you find that there are other games that you want to play that are not in this list, please let me know beforehand so I can keep a note of that. You are encouraged to play different games and experiment with the gameplay however you like! As such, it is not required for you to play the games a certain amount of times or for however long.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me on WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, or e-mail: valienska.m@hotmail.com

Otherwise, happy gaming!

Best,
Valienska Magfira

Game	Number of Players per game	Turn-based or real-time	Cost	Notes
Boardgames				
Wordfeud	2	Turn base	Free	Maximum waiting time until player gets resigned automatically is 72 hours. They have 10 different language settings including Dutch, Spanish, Norweigian, Portuguese, and German
Words with Friends	1v1 or 2v2	Real time	Free	Possibility to play in teams
Monopoly	4	Real time	Paid – 4.99	
Skribbl	9	Real time	Free	Pictionary game. Originally a website game, and is more conveniently played on website instead of mobile. Became popular during the quarantine.
Trivia Crack	2	Real time	Free to 2.19	There are a variety of trivia games from this developer. However, the common complaint from reviews is that there are too many ads.
Strategy Games				
Lichess (Chess)	2	Both	Free (no ads)	Have the option to adjust settings with regards to turn time and chess variant
Domino	2	Both	Free	Have the option to adjust turn settings
UNU	2 to 4	Real time	Free	Quick games
Rummikub	4	Real time	Free	Quick games
The Battle of Polytopia		Turn base	Paid – 1euro for multiplayer	Strategic civilization game. To play with friends, each player must pay 1euro to purchase an avatar to play with each other in the same world. Players can adjust how long the turn time is. Can be 30 minutes to 7 days.
Social games				
Among Us	4 to 10	Real time	Free on mobile	Social deduction game like Werewolf or Mafia. Players must converse with each other and also do various tasks in the game.
Jackbox Games	2 to 8	Real time	8.19 – 24.99	All games from *Jackbox* are short casual social games. To play remotely, players need to connect through a video call in which the owner of the game must share their screen for other players to respond to the game. https://www.*Jackbox*games.com/how-to-play/
Tile Games Matches and Single player				
Candy Crush	2	Real time	Free	Allows players to help each other by giving them 'lives' but also to challenge each other in quick game matches
Brain Battle	2	Real time	Free	Quick and simple challenges and supposedly to be effective brain teasers

Appendix B. Interview Guide

Research Question: *How are casual games used and experienced as a form of doing family for long-distanced families?*

1. Opening Questions
- May I ask you to introduce yourself?
- How old are you?
- Where have you lived, and where are you currently living?
- Where nationality do you identify with?

2. Long-Distance Family context

- Can you describe to me your family geographic situation?
- How long have you been separated?
- How often do you see your family?

2.1. Family communication practices

- What are the things you do together when you are apart?
  - What means do you do these things with? Eg. E-mail, calling, packages
  - How often do you do these family things apart?
  - How are these experiences on average? Do you enjoy them?
  - Are there any differences to when there are special moments for the family? Eg. Big news, birthdays, holidays
    - Who in the family initiates them? Why do you think that is?
- Do you, or your family in general, face any challenges with being apart? If so, like what? Why do you think that is?

3. Family gaming
- How were your experiences playing the mobile games with your family?
- Which games did you try? And why those games?
- How frequent did you play them?
- Who did you play with? And why them and not others?
- What was the general reaction from your family when you introduced them to these games?
- Can you describe to me how the games were played between you and your family member(s)?

3.1. Affordances of casual games

- Can you describe to me the context* of when these games are played?
  - *Your individual context (eg. What were you doing when you play these games?)
  - *your family member's context (e.g. what do you think your family member is doing when they are playing these games?)
  - *your shared context (e.g. what were the motivations for you to play these games together? Celebrations? Boredom?)

- Can you describe to me what aspects of the game you find important for this family experience?
- Can you describe to me what aspects of the game you find challenging for this family experience?
- Have you played other digital games before this? With who? And what did you play? How were your experiences?

3.1.1. If interviewees mention (family games with) synchronous characteristics:

- How long does it take to play these games from start to finish?
- How many rounds do you play?
- When you play these games, do you also use a voice chat to communicate?
- What do you talk about during the game play with these (voice) chatting features?
- When you play these games, do you feel a sense of distance between you and your family?
- Can you describe to me the actions you or your family were able to do to each other?
- Why did they/you do these actions? What do you think of them?
- Can you describe to me an action that you or your family did during the game that you thought were special or meaningful?
- Why did you think they were special?
- Can this action be compared to other forms of LDF communication you used before?

3.1.2. If interviewees mention (family games with) asynchronous characteristics e.g dead time:

- How long does it take to play these games from start to finish?
- What do you do when you receive a notification that your family have made an action? Do you respond straight away?
- What goes through your head when your family member have made a move?
- Do you prefer that these games give you time to respond?
- Do you also communicate with the players during the game and during the waiting time of the game?
- What do you talk about during these moments?
- When you play these games, do you feel a sense of distance between you and your family?
- Can you describe to me the actions you or your family were able to do to each other?
- Why did they/you do these actions? And what do you think of them?
- Can you describe to me an action that you or your family did during the game that you thought were special or meaningful?
- Why did you think they were special?
- Can this action be compared to other forms of LDF communication you used before?

3.2. Playful Communication

- Did you have a strategy when you were playing these games with your family?
  - Were you competitive? Did you feel that your family were competitive?
  - What was the motivations behind your strategy?
- What were the conversations you had with your family relating to the game outside of the game? What topics were being discussed?

- How would you compare your experiences* with your family during game play compared to the other forms of communication** you used with your family?
  - o   *Experiences are communication practices, interactions
  - o   **Refer back to the interview by referring specifically to the forms of LDF communications they said they commonly use.
- How have these games affected your family dynamics or family communication?
  - o   Do you think you would be able to have these changes without these games?
- What did you gain from the gaming experience?
- Did you feel like you learnt something new about your family when you played these games?

4. **Closing questions**

- Do you see yourself continuing playing these games with your family?
- What are the type of games you are now curious or interested to try? Would you continue to do these with your family or other social context like friends or strangers?

- Thank you for your time

- [Provide transparency about the goals of the research]
- Are there any aspects or topics about long-distance family relationships or about family gaming that you felt that we didn't discuss or should have discussed more?
- Do you have any feedback for me?

Probing techniques:

- Bring in personal experiences with long-distance family, family gaming, gaming expertise.
- Asking interviewees to give more detail to certain aspects that are relevant such as "can you describe to me more about…."
- Staying silent and give room for interviewees own description and recollection
- Integrate informal conversations to build rapport and honesty

Appendix C. Coding Tree

Theme	Sub-Theme	Example Initial Codes	Example Quotes
Online Casual Games	Social Presence	Perceived Distance	I think the distance was being filled through the game right? You don't feel like you're distant anymore. You feel like you're actually just next door to them or they are in the other room. And it's pretty much just like OK. They're not that distance apart from you since you're already on calls with them and then you already playing with them as well.
		Social Presence	And before the game we had a little time to talk to each other. And for some body they had a little break. Somebody had to get something to drink and something like that. So we had a little bit of talk and so it did feel like we were together. Yeah sure.
		Spatial Presence	you can *see* every other person. It is not like there is only one team and another team. But you see how big your family is
	Games We Used to Play	Nostalgia	its nostalgic and you feel like you are a kid again and you're just playing the same old games that you used to in a party game. So that's why it's quite efficient to play it with your siblings and your family.
		Familiar Games	I guess when it was first introduced everyone was like 'Oh yeah, I know what that is. I know that game sure let's play'
	Play again or quit?	Convenience and Accessibility	I think with this one, there's no like any flying animals or like something okay, It's not a crazy concept is very accessible, I think, yeah, for at least her generation.
		Games as ICT medium for LDF	it's a really fun way to communicate and to spend time. Rather than like you know, sitting there and talking to them you know in front of the screen. So instead of. And you know, it's a fun way to interact with each other really.
		References to Mobility	Yeah unnecessary that was the word I was looking at. But this is just me because I come back home pretty often. Yeah, I think that probably for people not getting home not so often, maybe it's helpful in a way -- 'cause we have never done this. Its like I've lived abroad for… since I was 18 and I'm nearly 26. And we've never played online games together before

Online Family Activity	Kinkeeper	Kinkeeper: Organizer	I decided that among the list of games you share with me, I tried to find games that were already familiar for them. Because in particular, they are absolutely not willing to download any app. Because they need to subscribe. It takes time. And they get scared easily before I tried something that was online and not on an app. That's why I chose the two.
		Kinkeerper: Teacher	At first it was just about the game because that's when my sister and it was more like *teaching* her how to play it
		Obligation to play	But it was not easy for me. No. But ok. But the children already knew it because they played it one year ago. Especially Kala, she played it really often. And she knows it very good and how to deal with it. And Max, the friend from Mila, um he played one time with us. He's also a really good player. And the different niveau are not so equal I guess. It's a little big difficult.
	Family Playing	Banter	We love to take the piss out of each other. And I bet my siblings got it from my parents like they- I'm always the butt of the jokes like I swear! But I don't really mind them because I love it.
		Siblinghood	my brothers always know which buttons to push. And always testing my limits! [laughter]. Even when they're miles away, they still manage to do that.
		Bending rules/Cheating	last time my boyfriend played *Among Us* with us and for him, he was surprised by how much we talked so much in this game [laughs]. Because when he plays with his friends they don't speak while they are playing, they speak only before it and afterwards but not in the game.
		Collaborative participation	I think it is important. That you come together with everybody not just with one person or two person, but all together.
		Non-verbal interactions	its not such a bad thing that I don't do it very good because it was funny to realize that everybody has this special issue with the game or with the family, how to deal
	Shifting Boundaries	Testing the boundaries	Em was throwing some really weird curveballs. And also Sarahs boyfriend. kinda sounds weird but no one really cares about swearing in the family but like if it was the first time me being on call with like my girlfriend's family, I wouldn't put I wouldn't put like, fucking asshole in my prompts or whatever I was, I was kind of shocking to see that as well also seen from Em as like the youngest in the family do like a bunch of sexual stuff in there is as well as like okay, a bit odd but its not that big of a deal.

		Rigid social norms	Im mostly used to playing that game, and sort of treating it like cards against humanity where it's like I would say just the raunchiest stuff because nobody knows who put it in. So, playing with my parents probably be like, I would have to tone it down a bit, right, I don't really want to compromise like my sense of humour, just to like my parents or my family doesn't get uncomfortable.
		The Young Expert	my level was rather low and his level was quite high, so he's giving me advice on how to level up and all that. And he's also giving me like 'hey I watched this video, and this is the best way to level up'. But most of it is from his own though. I don't think its all from the video. It's from his own advice from his own experience playing the game, since he's, you know, already a higher level from me
Online Family Communication	Games as a topic for conversation	Talking about games	I like it. I mean it definitely with my mom it adds like a new aspect to talk about. Especially since the game so new, we're talking about like the tiles. And I really like it because my mom is the one that like eased me into learning Spanish so I feel like this is also like an extra step of like bettering my vocabulary. I mostly communicate with her Spanish so that's how I like keep being fluent, I think.
		Skill sharing	And sometimes we send each other videos of youtubers playing the game and talk about it and make it more fun for us.
	Games as a means for conversation	deadtime	I'd have to *wait* for my sister for her turn and yeah so and then I'd text her and say 'heyy what are you doing?' 'can you do it? Because I've been waiting for two days now...'
		Anti-phonecalls	I guess with online games was able to connect with him and just discuss with him on his day to day life in a way right? What he's doing right now. What is he doing in school and stuff like that. 'cause he's the kind of person who *doesn't really* want to connect over video call or WhatsApp right? So if he's more comfortable in playing games and communicate, then yeah, I'm all for it