

## Playing Computer Games in the Family Context

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*This article deals with how gaming on PC is domesticated in families. Basic to the domestication research perspective is the idea that technologies must be 'tamed' in order to be accepted in a given setting. One setting for ICT use is the family – which is a particular and central context in Western sociality in that it is considered by most as existentially crucial and hence highly moral. This morality is formed by romantic ideology.*

*Gaming on PC is potentially problematic in that the platform is considered – much in opposition to the TV – to be individual, and when used for gaming its problematic status is enhanced because many parents consider such use to contradict core family values. However, the attitudes of actual families vary considerably.*

*In this article we suggest a way to understand and explain the width of adaptations that can be found. Moreover, we believe that the perspective we present reveals the complexity and subtlety of the dynamics and mechanisms that together constitute processes of domestication.*

*In short, our argument is the following: in families where parents do not take part in their children's PC-based gaming practices there is little or no recognition of the social aspects of such gaming – and hence potentially positive contribution to familism is not acknowledged. On the other hand, in families where at least one parent takes part in the children's gaming activities the idea of PC-based gaming as a potential threat to 'good family life' is not dominant. The main reason for this is that in such families the gaming not only constitutes a real socialising practice but is also acknowledged as such.*

*However, this acknowledgement often goes together with a strong feeling of ambivalence and also intra-familial conflicts. The reason for this is, first, that the domestic sphere is a feminine arena. As the parent taking part in the gaming activity most often is the father this means that such sociality not only often excludes the mother but it also challenges the hegemonic idea of the domestic as feminine, and hence also conventional power-relations within the home. Secondly, these hegemonic values and attitudes are not solely a concern for each family but are exposed and evaluated in interfamilial settings (neighbourhoods, extended families, networks of friends, etc.). Thus, to the extent that such practices are made subject to attention they represent forms of sanctions – they are evaluated against more or less unformulated ideas about normality.*

*Keywords: action, computer games, domestication, families, gender issues, morality*

The empirical theme of this article is how gaming on PC is domesticated in families. Our main argument is that on the one hand we consider the domestication research framework to be invaluable in that it points our attention to the importance of context in understanding the ways ICTs are used, and the significance of the home as one such important context. On the other hand, we argue that we stand in danger of reproducing fruitless stereotypes if we do not go beyond this general framework when we analyse actual uses of ICTs in actual homes. Our aim is to suggest a way to understand and explain the width of adaptations that can be found within homes when it comes to attitudes, practices and dynamics of gaming on PCs in homes with dependent children. We believe that our proposed perspective reveals the complex and subtle dynamics and mechanisms that together constitute processes of domestication.

An important aspect of these dynamics, and one we want to focus on, is gender. Although we have substantial knowledge of the gendered patterns of people's self-reported ICT practices and about the discourses that surround the ICT use of females of various ages (e.g. Corneliussen 2003; Faulkner 2001; Haldar & Frønes 1998; Kaare et al 2007; Slette-meås 2007) we know much less about the influence of context on these

discourses and the actual practices of ICTs (Dunkels 2005). The importance of a turn away from the exclusive concern with texts and meanings to the terrain of how people live and experience the changed world around them has been argued by several researchers (Bjerrum Nielsen & Rudberg 1995; Goodwin 2006). Whereas some studies have been undertaken on ICT use in schools and workplaces, our knowledge of how the actual uses of ICTs take place and are given meanings in homes and private/leisure contexts and relations is dramatically scarce considering how much time and money people seem to report spending on such activities. As not only men's and women's relations and practices with ICTs are ever changing, but also the concepts of masculinity and femininity, there is a need for continuous gender and ICT studies (Lie 2003).

Our aim is to provide a detailed understanding of the processes and dynamics of gendered ICT by applying a practice perspective that is context-sensitive. We claim that this perspective also provides a more open and fruitful way of approaching gender. We propose a view which takes seriously the post-structuralist argument about fluid and open gender categories (Butler 1990) but at the same time we anchor the diversity of gender content in practice, not simply discourse (Burkitt 1999; Zerilli 2005). We do this by arguing that since different language-games frame different meaning contexts, it means that persons – since they by practical necessity engage in many different language-games – change perspectives and hence also (gendered) identities regularly. What we aim to show by way of contrasting cases is that gendered identities/positions change at least partly as a result of different relationships and different situations – i.e. different language-games – within the family. Moreover, we claim that this fluidity or variation takes place against a backdrop of a Western prototypical idea of the home as a feminine arena.

The bulk of our arguments are backed up by two cases – two different families with different practices regarding PC use. The cases are gathered from the authors' close networks. They are chosen as cases because they provide a nice contrast in terms of how gender is expressed in relation to gaming, and because the families are closely known. And – to phrase it in a more academic language – the data is therefore of an ethnographic kind; a wide range of methods have been applied over a long period of time, mainly variants of observation and reflexive and dialogic interviews,

so that the knowledge we possess is of a solid, qualitative kind. However, the analytical points of view we use the cases for are of course not only based on these two families but on a wide range of data on PC use in different Norwegian families. In all, we have conducted various forms of dialogical interviews on this theme with more than 50 Norwegian households. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that our use of data and cases are not meant to serve as ‘proof’ for our analytical arguments. Quantitative research often provides a false sense of factuality, which is highly problematic in research which focuses on understanding people’s actions and conceptualisations but more important, however, is that we do not see our research as conclusive and factual, but as work along the logic of what Jon Elster (1989) calls ‘social mechanisms’.

In contrast to a causal law which claims a context-insensitive applicability, social mechanisms are tendential relationships that tend to generate certain effects. Thus, it is a weaker statement than a law would contain, but it is at the same time more attuned to the social sciences both because there is always an element of unpredictability (linked to the fact that sociality always contains an element of subjectivity and reflexivity) and also because searching for mechanisms helps us capture “the dynamic aspect of scientific explanation: the urge to produce explanations of ever finer grain” (Elster 1989, 7). For instance, that women in our culture tend to feel responsible for the running of the daily chores of the home is a social mechanism. But since there are other mechanisms and idiosyncrasies at play, this does not rule out exceptions. Thus, what we aim at here is to use our cases to point to relevant mechanisms that help us understand, and hence also explain, certain events and patterns in relation to computer gaming in family contexts.

### **Analytical Framework**

In their ground-breaking work *Consuming Technologies* (Silverstone & Hirsch 1992) editors Roger Silverstone and Eric Hirsch set a firm focus on how the home – as a phenomenological reality – affects the way people relate to and use ICTs. A basic argument is that in order to understand the various “hows” and “whys” of ICT use it is necessary to assume not a simple subject-object relationship but to include a significant third factor, namely the social setting in which the subject relates to the object.

This emphasis on the need to *contextualise* social practices has been a consistent concern throughout the work of these scholars.

For these reasons the four terms ‘home’, ‘family’, ‘the moral economy of the household’ and ‘domestication’ are central. The main task is defined as providing “an integrative frame for the consideration of household practices and relations and the consumption and use of information and communication technologies” (Silverstone, Hirsch & Morley 1992, 16). The home is posed as a contrast to the public sphere in the sense that it constitutes a different social and cultural context – i.e. containing specific values and perspectives – than what surrounds it, i.e. the public sphere; hence the centrality of the terms ‘home’, ‘family’ and ‘the moral economy of the household’. Therefore, technologies that are potentially ‘useful’ to the household are produced in, and associated with, the public sphere, and the acquisition of such commodities requires a ‘translation’; they need to undergo a transformation that implies that they are given a meaningful place in the home and become morally acceptable.

*This engagement involves the appropriation of these commodities into domestic culture – they are domesticated – and through that appropriation they are incorporated and redefined in different terms, in accordance with the household’s own values and interests. (Silverstone, Hirsch & Morley 1992, 16)*

According to the authors, this process of domestication involves four phases, or aspects. First, the *appropriation* of an ICT refers to the actual purchase of the object. *Objectification* points to the actual usage and physical positioning of the object within the household, while *incorporation* denotes the ways the ICT is given a place in the cultural framework of the home. *Conversion* points to the ways the ICT is displayed vis-à-vis the world (Silverstone, Hirsch & Morley 1992, 20ff).

A rewarding way of using the domestication concept is to understand it as the various ways in which people make media into integral parts of the language-games they engage in (Helle-Valle forthcoming). The “term ‘language-*game*’ brings into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life” (Wittgenstein 1968, §23). As language-games are formed by forms of life (practice), and people per-

form their practices in different settings, they also necessarily move in and out of language-games. In this way of thinking, different practical situations affect meanings in ways that make meanings resemble each other without sharing an essential core. But as some situations are more alike than others, we find that meanings overlap more in some cases than in others. It is such similar situations Wittgenstein terms language-games and forms of life. The perspective implies that the study of meaning requires the study of language-use within a form of life. Types of practices encompass types of meanings. We therefore must link meaning to types of activities and be more concerned with identifying language games that reflect 'forms of life' rather than social groups. As people perform their practices in different places they must, by necessity, move in and out of different language-games and communicative contexts. Thus, people might not only act and argue differently, but also think differently, in different language-games (Helle-Valle forthcoming).

Although the domestication perspective focuses on the home as the context for media consumption, Silverstone and his colleagues do not dwell much on the ideological content of the home. However, Silverstone in one of his latest publications argues that more attention should be given to morality and the values inherent in homes (Silverstone 2006). Though it is important not to essentialise homes it is reasonable to start with the view that 'home' is the central 'significant other' of the public sphere, hence it should be possible to identify a set of values that constitute the prototypical home. In short, in contrast to the public sphere, being dominated by the mentality of bureaucracy and market economy, the home is that which harbours the family, and the ideology that the family is built on: (the idea of) romantic love (Helle-Valle & Sletteameås 2008). Love, in the wide sense of the word, celebrates the intimate and emotional – that which is said to concern our selves and essential qualities as individuals (Borchgrevink & Holter 1995; Giddens 1992; Luhmann 1986; Shorter 1975). The family – as the prototypical framework for, and result of, intimate feelings – stands forth as every action's *reason*; it is what gives, at least discursively, life meaning (Sørhaug 1996). In popular conceptions the home – representing trust and security – is the haven in which the individual can find refuge from the cold hostility and mercilessness of the public arena.

ICTs as objects and media bring public life into the domestic sphere and hence threaten to break down the moral borders that surround, and thus help to define, the family. This makes them ‘dangerous things’ (Douglas 1966). On the other hand, ICTs can promote family sociality by functioning as objects/media that gather the family. If the media content is ‘good’, or at least acceptable, media use can be instrumental in generating family sociality of the right kind by giving its members time together and providing them with a focus, hence building the family as a unit. However, the daily experience of parents is more often one of concern and worry – that family members use ICTs too much and/or that they use them on their own constitute a threat to the ideal of spending ‘quality time’ together. Likewise, media content might be of the wrong type, mediating or promoting attitudes, mores or information of types that fit badly with what is considered appropriate within the family context (Frønes 2002; Papert 1996). The potentials for both ‘good’ family sociality, entertainment and rest, as well as family fragmentation, over-use and immoral media content illustrate the ambivalence that is commonly found among parents who are interviewed on the issue.

But merely focusing on the ‘familism’ – as romantic love’s manifestation in the home – shows us only one side of the coin. Another strong ideological force associated with Western modernity is individualism – an ideology that developed together with modernity and capitalism and which emphasises not only the right to be unique and special but in fact demands that we all have to search for the uniqueness in ourselves. It provides a moral room for being on one’s own, pursuing self-realisation and personal goals (Giddens 1991; Hall 1992; Williams 2000). Although this is not an ideology that is specifically tied to the home and family, its pervasiveness means that it stands in a potential conflict with familism; the demand for thinking and acting as a collective contrasts with the idea inherent in individualism about concentrating on oneself and realizing one’s goals. However, from another point of view we might also see them as complementary; it is with the advent of individualism – with its focus on the right and obligation to create a meaningful life-trajectory, combined with the perennial meaninglessness of the modern public sphere – that the family stands forth ideologically as a major setting for a meaningful life. Be that as it may, we contend that familism and individualism

are two strong ideological forces that affect the uses of media in Norwegian homes. This constitutes the analytical framework from which we will argue.

### **Two Families**

We now present two families. In the first – A – the parents do not play games on the PC, while in the second family – B – one parent takes active part in his children's gaming activity.

Family A has broadband connection and has altogether four PCs in the home. Three of the four children (between 9 and 18 years old) are regularly engaged in various games played on PCs as well as a Playstation connected to a TV. The parents are only sporadically involved in such gaming – most often in connection with the youngest child's playing. And although the gaming activity among the children might be said to be on a manageable level, it is still viewed as a potential problem by the parents. They have therefore made restrictions as to how much the children are allowed to play. But these restrictions are not very clear and measurable. The main reason for this is that the children are home alone for several hours before the parents come home from work, and therefore the parents have no practical means for scrutinizing the children's actual playing. Instead, the parents react if they feel that one or more of the children spend too much time playing on the PC and demand that they should do other things. The parents have few conflicts between them on this issue; they rarely disagree when one of them tells the children to stop playing. And they are also in a tacit agreement as to why it is necessary to place restrictions on the children's playing: it is not 'good' for them and they feel that too much playing makes them aggressive. Most of the children's playing is individual and therefore considered to be asocial, and the skills developed by such playing are not seen to have transferable values.

In family B, the father is an enthusiastic player of PC games. Together with his two sons he spends, on average, several hours two to three evenings a week playing. There is disagreement between the parents on the value of spending so much time gaming, and there have been discussions and negotiations between the parents as to when and how much the children should be allowed to play. While the father's point of view is that



the playing they do together is a valuable kind of bonding between him and his sons, the mother's view is that too much time is spent on gaming and that it affects the possibility for the family to do other things together. But she does acknowledge that the gaming activities are building good relationships between the sons and their father. Due to this difference in opinions between the spouses the family has agreed to a rather detailed set of rules for when and how much playing that is allowed. The rules are written down, and are introduced with the sentence: "This is what mommy wishes:" and among the rules listed are the following:

- *It is ok to play on Saturdays after the organised sports activities*
- *It is ok on Sundays*
- *It is ok on one weekday AFTER homework is done and other activities are completed*
- *Not before eight in the morning and after seven in the evening*
- *Never more than three hours at a time*
- *Remember to take breaks; eat, go to the toilet and rest*
- *If friends ask you to play outside don't say no because you rather want to play on the PC*

These rules hang on their kitchen wall as a constant reminder of the mother's request to restrict gaming activities in the family, but they are not always followed. The dad and his sons are gaming more when the mother is not present than when she is present.

### **Interpretation and Analysis**

What we see from our examples is that the family of the first type – in which the parents do not take part in the gaming activity – differs in significant ways from the family of the second type. The most obvious contrast is that in the first type family there is far less disagreement between the parents than in the second type family. In the latter, the fact that one parent is personally engaged in PC gaming will naturally affect his point of view and differ from the one who only has a detached, indirect relationship to the activity. In the first type family, the common relationship to gaming means that the chance of having a more or less similar point of

view is much higher. Thus, a striking difference is that, first, the parents' overall attitude to the gaming is more negative in the first type, family A. Secondly, this implies that while the line of conflict regarding PC use in family A is between generations – between parents and children – the line of conflict in family B is as much one across generations, between those who are engaged in the playing and those who are not.

Furthermore, another interesting difference between these families is the parents' differing rhetorical grounding of their attitudes. In Family A the parents can without serious contestation claim that PC gaming is a type of activity that does not fit well with the type of sociality that they consider to be proper in a home. Although little of the gaming activity involves violent games – most of the playing is FIFA football games and simple games found on the internet – the arguments against excessive gaming are highly moral. The parents complain at times that the children play 'too much' and claim that they become passive and physically inactive, that the games are violent and promote aggression, that it makes the children stupid, etc. Thus, implicit in this line of argument is the unformulated ideals of familism: as parents, they feel obliged to guide the children in their activities and orientation. It implies the belief that the gaming threatens the ideal face-to-face interaction guided by intimacy and emotions that should characterise family sociality. Moreover, in line with typical middle-class Norwegian values, physical activity is highly regarded, and an ideal activity for the passing of time should be of a type that develops the children's abilities in one way or another.

Whereas the mother in family B argues similarly to the parents in family A, the father who plays sees it differently. He and his sons have for a relatively long time played *World of Warcraft* (2005). And although 'outsiders' – including the mother in the family – will characterise the play as 'violent', having played for hours he (and his sons) no longer see the graphic first-impression. He instead emphasises the challenges and the intricacy of the game, how it develops skills in the children that are in a general sense positive: strategic thinking, literacy, etc. Moreover, the father argues that he and his children are having fun – and that doing things together that are fun is an important form of bonding. The father feels that the mother's negativity stems from not having tried seriously to engage in the games.

In our opinion, these contrasting cases cannot be understood without reference to gender. Prototypical nuclear families – like these two families – are in various ways always gendered. However, this does not mean that gender is equally important or relevant in all events taking place in families, nor that it is expressed in the same way in all instances. In family B the line of conflict both in gaming practices and ways of grounding attitudes is gendered. The mother characterises the gaming of her husband and children as ‘a boy’s thing’, and although we do not have similar statements from the husband, our impression is that he also sees this as a gendered issue.<sup>1</sup> Thus, in family B, gender is an *expressed* aspect of the situation. In family A, on the other hand, the issue is not formulated in gendered terms. The obvious reason is that since the parents in family A more or less agree on gaming activities the conflict line is first of all between generations; it is the adult man and woman who negotiate with their sons and daughters. Thus, in the specific confrontations between the generations it is simply not relevant to bring in gender as a relevant issue.

However, we claim that gender nevertheless is an issue that indirectly plays a part in the various actors’ understanding of the situation, and which therefore can be brought in as an issue if the framework for the negotiation changes. In Western (late) modern sociality the home is in a general sense considered to be a feminine context (Døving 2001; Morley 1986; Morley 2000). Thus, it is reasonable to interpret the situation of (the alleged) male bonding in family B as a challenge to female control of the domestic setting. Thus, we suggest that the conflicts that arise between the spouses in family B concern a great deal more than the hours spent on gaming. What is at stake here is of course not a fight explicitly about who should control the home. It is more fruitful to see their disagreement about gaming as a specific theme that is intertwined with other issues that – often unacknowledged by the actors involved – are of fundamental concern because they deal with basic, existential matters with respect to gender identity.

In this light we see that also in family A, a slight change in positions and views can quickly bring gender in as a relevant aspect of the conflict. If, for instance, the father in family A would express a less strict attitude towards the gaming practices of his children, as a result of e.g. convin-

cing arguments from his children, gender might well emerge as relevant. Whether gender becomes an explicit issue or not is an open question, but it is reasonable to assume that if the woman comes in the position where she sees herself as the sole guardian of a strict gaming policy, her identity as a woman (wife and mother) will play a part in her practices.

We thus suggest that an understanding of the disagreements in opinions towards gaming in light of the various language-games includes meanings related to gendered practices. In other words, to see it as a question of how situations form conceptions of how to be a woman and how to be a man in appropriate ways. Within the context of a family with kids, this is in general about how a good mother and a good father should act and lead children into gendered and generational language-games. In Western language-games of 'the good mother', "mothers are totally responsible for the outcomes of their mothering, even if their behavior is (...) shaped by male-dominant society" (Chodorow & Contratto 1980, 55). Mother can thus be blamed on the one hand and should expose maternal perfectibility with respect to balancing care of others and self-sacrifice on the other (Ibid, 55). In family B, the conflict line between the spouses may thus be understood in light of how the situation, the recurrent gaming activities of the children and their father, form ways of her thinking of herself that oppose this Western language-game of the 'good mother' (and not with respect to the language-game of 'the good father', as good fathers engage in activities with children).

Acting to reduce this interpretation, the mother in this family expresses ambivalence to the computer gaming of the other family members. In contrast, the gaming activities of the children in family A are less in conflict with such language-games. If computer gaming is given meaning within a language-game where it is judged as being a potentially "bad" activity for children, as the parents in family A and the mother in family B do, restricting such activities derives meaning in the language-game of the 'good mother'. In computer gaming that is given meaning within a language-game where it is judged as being a "good" activity, restrictions seems less important. Thus, what we see here are social mechanisms that shed light on the various positions of the parents in the two families, although they do not constitute a type of explanation that can predict practice in future situations.

According to the domestication research framework, what we have discussed so far is the *incorporation* aspect of the domestication process (cf. above). It is about how the uses of the ICTs are fitted – or perhaps more precisely: tried to be fitted – into the cultural framework of the home. This brief analysis suggests that although the home as a context points the way that the researcher should look (towards a set of social mechanisms) when s/he interprets and analyses the unfolding practices, it is obvious that actual analysis of concrete situations involving uses of ICTs requires sensitivity towards the specific positions and views of each member that is involved both in the actual playing and in the rhetorical practices that by necessity surround the gaming.

However, there is an additional element that we consider highly relevant for a proper understanding of a family's gaming practices. The need for justifying gaming (and any other relationship to any ICT) is not only an intra-household issue. As Silverstone and colleagues have pointed out, one important aspect of domestication processes is what they call *conversion* – the term that points to the ways ICTs are displayed vis-à-vis the world (Silverstone, Hirsch and Morley 1992). And again, the gender issue is relevant.

A concern for mothers in families of type B is, according to the argument above on gendered language-games, how the home is displayed to the significant others – kin, neighbours and friends. A fear for the “keepers of the household” is that others will see the family as not only engaging in negative forms of leisure but that they might in fact think that it is out of control. And as family life is seen as basically the mother's responsibility, ‘excessive’ gaming among the male family members is a direct threat to her quality not only as a mother, but as a person. Thus, part of the mother's concern is others' evaluation of her and her family.

One example of how this is handled by a woman in a ‘gaming family’ of type B is a Christmas letter that she sent to her network. In Norway there is an emerging tradition of sending letters – by e-mail or snail-mail – to friends and kin that summarise the previous year's events in the family. In this case, she opens the letter with the following (our translation):

*Dear family and friends.*

*Normally Christmas peace should have sunk in. Instead I hear pounding noises through the house: Kaboom!! Krrrr! Katash!!!, 'They're attacking!, TaTaTaTa...!!' NN [the husband] has been inspired by his 25 year old colleague and bought his first X-box 360. With surround sound and a flat screen the effects become dominating and enticing – also for the teenager in the house. In front of this box two generations of men in the family meet while mother sits with cotton in her ears in the other end of the living room and tries to read a book. The husband doesn't even come to bed – he stays up late into the night and plays with his colleague on the internet. [...] The mother reads in her bed and goes to sleep alone [...].*

Apart from the content of descriptions, the genre she chooses is interesting. She deals with a situation which is potentially tricky and challenging, in a playful and partly ironic way. In an outside world, the situation she describes might be judged in a gendered language-game as a situation she is not, or should not, be happy with. But by presenting the gaming activities of her family in a happy and playful tone in a Christmas letter, she signals her way of balancing the ambivalence the gaming activities in her family confront her with. By pointing to her loss of control over family sociality she accentuates that she is aware that she should not like it (it threatens familism). By underlining that she lets the men/boys play and instead finds time to do things on her own, she grounds arguments that explain why (allows for individualism). In this way, she tells her network that she knows this type of gaming activity is considered unfit for a family but that she is a liberal woman who lets – has to let? – the men do their male things for the sake of giving room to their, and her own, individuality. The letter thus points to an expressed ambivalent attitude of acceptance and distantiation; she tells the outside world that this it is not of her choice but that she can or must accept this male playfulness for the sake of a greater familial peace.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Thus, to round it up: we believe that the domestication research perspective gives valuable directions for what to look for and how to approach

such data. It emphasises the relevance of the institutionalised context of the home – with its strong moral concerns. It is what they call a phenomenological reality – i.e. it is a reality formed by the subject's own conceptions of what the context should be; it is a lived evaluation or an evaluative practice (Silverstone 1994, 24ff). However, the idea of the home as a specific context is itself fuzzy (Bourdieu 1977, 163) and only points to general, tendential attitudes and practices. Firstly, there are many differentiating forces that affect the content of actual homes: class and ethnicity are only two factors that generate differences in lived practice. Secondly, and more important in the context of this article, we believe that we have demonstrated the complexity and subtle dynamics of actual uses, and hence the need for a keen eye for the processes and mechanisms that together constitute acts of domestication.

We have argued that a rewarding way of using the domestication concept is to understand it as the various ways people make media integral parts of the language-games they engage in; that a given meaning is related to the activity of which it is part. Thus, it would be a mistake to settle for the home as one type of communicative context – as if referring to the home would in itself explain the context of the text. What we find is that the prototypical home is an institutionalised setting – and hence also a communicative framework – that guide people's minds and actions in certain directions; for instance that it is widely held to be the domain of the feminine. Thus, we find that there are certain mechanisms and processes that tend to be in operation in this institutionalised place (e.g. Harvey 1993; Rodman 1992). However, as the contrastive cases reveal, there are numerous language-games unfolding within families, made and unmade as different situations and constellations appear and disappear. This implies that perspectives, positions, values and hence actions change according to the changing circumstances, and these changes must be handled by the members of the families. Their ability to handle them in ways that are satisfactory to both themselves and significant others constitute being competent members of households. And as homes are widely considered to be a highly gendered (a feminine) sphere it follows that gender is always – at least potentially – an issue. But to what extent, in which ways, and whether it is turned into a topic at all, depends on the specific language-games family members engage in. Such variations were

exemplified by describing how computer gaming was reflected on, and articulated, in different ways as integral parts of different language-games.

In our case it was crucial whether the family had a gaming parent or not. In the family with a gaming parent, meanings were explicitly attached to gendered practices. In the family where both parents were non-gamers, the meaning of gaming activities did not challenge gendered language-games and less meaning was attached to gender than in the former. This implies that, instead of speaking of gaming as linked to the gender of a person or a family belonging to a particular social group, i.e. an activity typical to men, we should seek to link expressed attitudes to activities, such as computer gaming, to the situationally based language-games and activities they are part of. Moreover, as the cases also revealed, the women's handling of gaming within the home is fraught with ambivalence. Their ambiguous discourses on the issue reflect not only the fact that they need to relate to many and changing language-games that are all considered relevant parts of a home – and which requires different attitudes to the same topic – but also that the home is not only the hearth of familism but also of individualism; two ideologies that are akin but nevertheless in part contradictory in their practical consequences.

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## Notes

1. Such biases reflect a marked difference in males' and females' gaming activity: results from a national census in 2006 show that while 11 % of males between 25 and 44 years of age played TV or PC games on an average day, while only 5 % of the women in the same age category play, and a similar gendered difference can be found among those between the ages of 9 and 15 (59 % and 33 % respectively) (Vaage 2007, 72). Walkerdine has argued that an exploration of the relationalities that make up game playing has to take into consideration that, although not all video and computer games are masculine, many such games "are one site for the production of contemporary masculinity" (2007, 46), and that "[t]he ambivalent position of mothers on whom boys are dependent but on whom they can look down, helps produce a positioning in which masculinity is understood through its difference from the feminine" (Ibid, 34). Walkerdine also found that the parental regulation of game playing was strongly gendered (Ibid, 5, 135, 210) consisting of "a complex organization of regulative strategies in which oppositions between femininity, masculinity, educational merit and non educational play, loom large" (Ibid, 211).

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