Indirect Escapism and the Parent as an "Indirect Player": A Family-Level Perspective on Games

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Parents often turn to children's digital gameplay not only as entertainment for the child, but also as a way to manage their own needs. This position paper explores how children's engagement with games can function as a form of indirect escapism for parents, offering moments of quiet, uninterrupted time to recover from stress, complete household tasks, or decompress emotionally. When used intentionally and with clear boundaries, this practice may support family well-being by providing short breaks without compromising the child's safety or engagement. However, over-reliance on games to regulate household stress can create new challenges, particularly when it leads to negative emotion or changes patterns in parenting. Reflecting upon our previous work that explored how children's engagement with games is mediated by parents and drawing from research on escapism, we suggest viewing this dynamic as part of a broader, family-level coping system. We call for further exploration of how parents manage children's engagement with games, and how game design might better support both children's and parental well-being.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in HCI**; • **Applied computing** → **Computer games**.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: Escapism, Indirect escapism, Indirect play, Children playing, Parents

1 Introduction and Background

Parents turn to children's digital play as a way to carve out moments of rest or manage daily responsibilities by allowing children to engage in digital play as parents carry out chores or simply relax, which they often described as a short respite from responsibility, bringing relief from stress and even a feeling of calm [1]. Similar patterns appear in studies describing media as a "distractor" or "babysitter" during meals, bedtime, or moments when parents need time for themselves [4, 8, 9]. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, there are accounts of parents turning to games to occupy their children to secure time and emotional space for themselves [11]. This suggests that children's gameplay serves not only as entertainment for the child but also as a form of **indirect escapism** for parents, who use it to carve out moments of rest or relief from daily responsibilities. Therefore, in this position paper, **we argue that escapism in games should be considered not only from the perspective of the individual player, but also within the wider family context, where parental reliance on children's digital play becomes part of a shared coping system**.

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Previously, the study of escapism in gaming has largely been framed from a player-centric perspective, with prior work noting that it has "predominantly been examined from the player's perspective" while continuing to explore individual players by linking specific game aspects to coping strategies during difficult times [7]. Other research in this area has explored escapism by drawing on large-scale data such as Steam reviews to examine how players describe games as tools for recovery [12]. Other studies have approached the topic through diary accounts and laddering interviews, focusing on how players themselves articulate strategies for using games after work [6]. Similarly, the topic has been approached through survey studies, empirically testing a dualistic model of escapism that showed some forms of engagement are associated with positive affect and well-being, whereas others are linked to avoidance and problematic use [14]. Within this body of work, players are positioned as active agents who deliberately select games to achieve recovery outcomes such as detachment and relaxation [6]. However, actors beyond players are not yet considered when discussing escapism.

2   The Double-Edged Sword: Games as a Parental Coping Tool and Examples of Indirect Escapism

The phenomenon of **indirect escapism** is evident in how parents employ digital games as a practical tool to manage their children. Here, we report anecdotal evidence from our previous work that addressed how children and parents structure children's disengagement from games through a qualitative study with N=13 child and N=12 parent participants [1]. In this work, we observed multiple instances in which parents employed games to occupy their children, allowing them to remove themselves from hands-on parenting activities.

For example, one parent described, *"Her playtime is usually during my nap after school! So I can rest assured that she's not alone doing things that might hurt her and that she doesn't bother me"* (P5). Another parent expressed a similar sentiment, noting, *"I probably sometimes feel calmer because they're occupied, and I can get on with stuff myself"* (P7). These accounts illustrate how games provided parents not only with practical relief but also with a sense of reassurance.

However, relief is not always reliable. When a game is used to meet a parental need rather than aligning with the child's genuine interest, it may fail to provide the intended calm [11]. In our earlier study [1], we found that parents also describe guilt or unease, particularly when children end play in a negative mood [1]. As one parent explained, *"Using games was a necessity, not my preferred choice. I really need it sometimes, but I dislike how my children feel after playing, often in a bad mood"* (P1). Another parent noted, *"So, when I am busy! I am happy that he is busy playing, but if it takes a long time, I feel guilty"* (P4), which illustrates how the relief parents gain from these moments is often intertwined with feelings of guilt. Furthermore, transitions away from gameplay often become flashpoints for conflict: meltdowns and arguments are common when parents attempt to end sessions [1, 13]. In our work [1], parents emphasized how the very strategy that offered them relief could also become a source of strain, a tension that aligns with studies showing how momentary breaks gained through media use may increase overall parenting stress [3, 15]. One parent noted, *"Most likely, she's deeply engaged in playing, and when I ask her to study for school, or it's bedtime... she might cry and ask to play more"* (P6). Another reflected, *"The feeling that I am forcing her to finish consumes my energy a lot"* (P3). Together, these accounts highlight the double-edged nature of **indirect escapism**, where moments of rest for parents can quickly give way to stress. Research confirms that high levels of screen use are associated with increased parent–child conflict [2], and that abrupt interruptions escalate stress across the family system [1, 13].

This framing connects directly to the broader distinction between healthy and problematic escapism. Prior work has shown that escapism can support restoration when practiced intentionally, but risks becoming problematic when driven by avoidance or over-reliance [5]. Extending this perspective to indirect escapism, we propose that while parents may

seek short-term relief by relying on children's gameplay, over-reliance on this strategy risks generating parent–child conflict alongside guilt, strain, and stress for parents.

3 Position and Argument: A Call for a New Perspective

The traditional definition of a "player," understood as an individual who actively interacts with a game [10], is insufficient for understanding gaming in family contexts. While our earlier work [1] did not explicitly describe parents as players, our interpretation of the findings suggests that parents' reliance on games for quiet time, along with their emotional responses to children's gameplay and disengagement, position them as distant, **indirect players** in their children's play experiences, a role distinctly different from that of a more involved spectator. Parents described feelings of calm when games occupied their children, but also spoke about unease, guilt, and conflict when sessions stretched too long or ended in distress [1]. Recognizing the **indirect player** offers an opportunity to better understand parental perspectives on children's engagement with games. It prompts us to ask why parents turn to games in the first place: whether as moments of family fun or as a means of relief. Understanding this use as a form of **indirect escapism** helps to destigmatize parental needs and opens the door to more intentional use. Seen from this angle, conflicts around children's gaming stem less from screen time itself than from the clash between children's immersion and parents' search for relief and quiet time, suggesting that games need to be structured in a way that works for both parties. Thus, **we call on researchers and practitioners to study escapism in games beyond the individual, to include parent–child dynamics and the indirect player**. Designing for this broader reality requires recognizing that escapism can be both healthy and problematic, and that supporting the needs of direct and indirect players must be considered in game design and in the study of player experience.

4 Author Biographies

Meshaiel M. Alsheail is a PhD student in Computer Science at Karlsruhe Institute of Technology, Germany (website: https://hci.iar.kit.edu/21_60.php), specializing in Human–Computer Interaction and Game Design. Her research focuses on children's experiences with digital games, particularly disengagement, parent-child dynamics, and deceptive patterns.

Kathrin Gerling is a Professor of Human-Computer Interaction and Accessibility at Karlsruhe Institute of Technology, Germany (website: https://hci.iar.kit.edu). Central her research is the question of how interactive technology can be designed to support human self-determination, and how games can be designed in a way that they are accessible and enriching for broad groups of players. Recently, her team has focused on designing for disengagement from games, exploring how players plan for and experience the exit from a play session, and the role of game design in this process.

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