A Hybrid Revolution: The Appeal of Hybrid Gaming on the Nintendo Switch

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Abstract

The Nintendo Switch is the best-selling current generation console, and the second-best selling console in Nintendo history. The iconic feature of the Switch is its affordance different gaming modes, enabling players to play in a wider variety of environments. This 'hybridity' distinguishes the Switch from other gaming devices, but how players engage with this hybridity has not previously been examined. In this paper we present the results of a study (n=13) into how players engage with the Switch's hybridity, and the role of this hybridity in the console's appeal. We argue that the Switch's hybridity breaks down previously established boundaries between hardcore and casual play, console gaming and portable gaming, and flexible and inflexible play.

Keywords: Nintendo Switch, Hybridity, Play, Casual Gaming, Hardcore Gaming, Nintendo.

1. Introduction

The Nintendo Switch was released in March 2017 and has since sold over 125 million units, making it the third best selling game console of all time. The iconic feature of the Switch is its hybridity, that is, its affordance of transformable gaming modes. The Switch is essentially a portable tablet computer (like an iPad) which can be plugged into a TV ('TV Mode') and played similar to an Xbox or PlayStation on a larger screen or used as a portable device ('Handheld Mode') similar to a GameBoy or smartphone. The Switch also has a built-in stand that allows it to be placed on a table ('Tabletop mode'), a hybrid mobile/console like experience made possible by the unique design of the Nintendo 'Joy-Con' controllers.

In this paper we present the results of an in-depth qualitative study that that investigated how the Switch is played, and why players choose to play it. This study's methods included semi-structured interviews (n=13), observations of play, participant-diaries, and an analysis of official Nintendo Switch advertising. Following a review of the related work that informs our analysis and findings, we present our methods in further

detail before overviewing and discussing how our participants negotiated the Switch's hybridity.

Despite the critical acclaim of its hybridity, and the console's astounding commercial success, we are not aware of any research that has specifically investigated the hybridity of the Nintendo Switch. This is a critical gap because, as we'll show, the Switch's hybridity complicates how gaming devices can be classified and understood, providing new knowledge for understanding how and why games and played within contemporary gaming environments, and supporting what we refer to as the *hybrid revolution*, which calls attention to the breaking down of boundaries in gaming culture between hardcore and casual, console gaming and portable gaming, and flexible and inflexible play.

2. Background and Context

While there is no games research that we are aware of into the Switch's hybridity, a small number of nascent projects have investigated the console. Both Lin et al. (2022) and Nan et al. (2022) have studied players' intentions to use the Nintendo Switch via a Technology Acceptance Model, with both studies affirming the ease of use for the Switch as being a core positive feature. Similarly, in a study of disabled players' gaming choices, Baltzar et al. (2023) found that the Switch is the most popular console for disabled players because of its increased accessibility, which is in part due to its hybridity.

More broadly, our research is situated in and extends the body of work studying the 2006 Nintendo Wii console, which similarly offered a radically different product to competitors, with great success. The unique, TV remote-like Wii controller enabled motion-based play, which is similarly found in the Switch's joy-cons, ushering in a reinvention of domestic play (Jones & Thiruvathukal, 2012) that contributed significantly to what Jesper Juul coined the 'Casual Revolution' (2009) of the 2000's. In broad terms, this impact (in tandem with the rise of the smartphone) saw a rapid expansion of the videogame market to include what the industry termed 'casual' players. The Wii's commercial success has been attributed to its "Blue Ocean Strategies"

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(Hollensen, 2013; O'Gorman, 2008), where it targeted this new markets (e.g. casual players) rather than directly competing with existing competitors (e.g. Xbox or PlayStation). Similar parallels have been drawn to the Switch's success (Zhang, 2022), although in this article we suggest its success is because it hybridizes these 'casual' and 'hardcore' markets.

In response to the attention given to this emerging casual game market, the term 'casual' is often used in a derogatory way by 'hardcore gamers' (Consalvo, 2009; Shaw, 2012), intonating an inferior gaming experience. In this paper, we utilize the term as it was used by our participants: to demarcate between *different* kinds of gaming experiences that are appealing, without suggesting that they are diminished or simplified ones. Kuittinen et al. (2007) summarized the feature of casual games as having "generally appealing content, simple controls, easy-to-learn gameplay, fast rewards, or support for short play sessions" (p. 107). Compared to 'hardcore games' - which are understood in gaming lexicon to create more immersive gaming experiences - casual games were more flexible and can be best understood as requiring a balance of "co-attentiveness" that acknowledges their co-presence in the game and the real-worlds (Keogh, 2016, p. 36). As our results demonstrate, the hybridization of these qualities are key to understanding how the Nintendo Switch's hybrid features are engaged with and, and why the console has been so successful.

3. Methodology

Our exploratory study sought to develop an initial understanding about how the Switch is played, and why it is played by its participants. Consequently, we conducted 13 semi-structured interviews with 13 (7 men, 6 women), ranging in duration from 30 minutes to 1 hour. Participants – all of whom already owned a Switch - were recruited through posting advertisements in a game studies unit and on social media, inviting participants from a campus gaming club, and via a snowball method. Participants were asked to depict their daily gaming scenarios and were asked specifically about each different Switch modes. Participants were recruited between August 2019 and February 2020, and thus the data precludes the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to interviews, supportive data was also collected via observation and participant-diaries. Observations were made at 8 'Switch gatherings', held by a gaming-focused university club, where the Switch (and other devices) were played. In these situations, the researcher adopted a non-participant role (Busetto et al., 2020) in order to not impact the dynamics and interactions between players. In this project, the observational data played a supportive role, enhancing the understanding of interview data and verifying participant's descriptions from their interviews.

Furthermore, participant-diary reports were also used as supportive data, with the expectation that they would help the research team obtain data that was "more immediate and contextualized than with other, more retrospective research methods such as interviews" (Hyers, 2018, p. 30). Participants were asked to take a participant-diary for two weeks, noting down information about their Switch play including game choices, gaming time, gaming partner and a short description of their play. While the data collected through this method was limited in contribution due to an inconsistency in diary entries between each participant, it provided an additional triangulating view into each participant's play of the Switch, and a novel view into the more domestic side of gaming which was not immediately uncovered by the interviews.

In addition to this empirical work, this study also involved an analysis of Nintendo's official advertising content regarding the Switch, which becomes particularly relevant in the context of tabletop mode. Articles from Nintendo's official websites and Switch trailers from different regions' YouTube channels were collected and analyzed, with reference to how they depict the Switch's hybridity being engaged with. Interview data was analyzed following Straussian Grounded Theory's three-stage coding process of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The observations and participant-diaries principally helped develop relationships between different codes in the axial coding phase.

4. Results

Our study overwhelmingly found that the Switch's hybridity – its affordance of transformable gaming modes – is core to its appeal to participants, and a source of enormous complexity in understanding how it is played. Here, we present our results on each of the three primary modes - TV mode, handheld mode, and tabletop mode – and discuss each in turn.

4.1. Television Mode: Results

TV mode refers to 'docking' the Switch with a TV screen (or equivalent appliance like a PC monitor) to turn the Switch into a home console, similar to how an Xbox or PlayStation is engaged with. Participants indicated a distinction between motion-sensing play, which was more social and that they connected to the Nintendo Wii, and 'traditional' console play, which they connected to Xbox and PlayStation console play.

4.1.1. Motion Sensing Play. Multiple participants shared their experiences of playing motion-sensing games on the Switch. For instance, participant 7 stated that "1-2 Switch, yeah. Just Dance, I used to play with Just Dance … I like to try all of them, some of them bring fun for me, like the Tennis." Similarly, participant 11 also played the Switch in this way when he played with his girlfriend. He stated,

> And when I was playing with her, I usually played a lot more party games like Monopoly or Just Dance because I had a bunch of friends over as well. So we were like, Oh, let's play Just Dance and stuff.

Adding to this, participant 13 stated "I always play the Switch at home. Most time I played it at home because I like play some Just Dance and Fitness Boxing, so I always play it at home." She also explained the attraction of these games by saying,

> I can play it for a long time. I can keep doing it. If I play other games, I can play for one hour alone. The maximum time is one hour. But for the Just Dance or Fitness Boxing, or maybe the Ring Fit. I can do it for a long time.

The similarity between all these games mentioned above is that they involve monition-sensing control, meaning that players can play games by using their body movement instead of just pressing buttons on the controller. What is significant about these findings is that it demonstrates how the Nintendo Switch still supports the social, casual movement-based play that characterized the successful Nintendo Wii console two generations earlier.

4.1.2. 'Traditional' Home Console. Participants also described TV-mode play which they connected to the types of play they could find from a PlayStation or Xbox game console, particularly in the context of their gameplay with *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*. This game was also the reason that 5 participants had purchased their Switch, and 8 had played the game a lot. For instance, participant 10 reported that The Legend of Zelda provided an immersive gaming experience,

> Because it, a lot of the times when I play games nowadays, it's like I play it and it's fun, and I put it down and just do something else. But with Zelda: Breath of the Wild it was a really immersive experience. It was just a game, it basically like, I don't know how to put it but it was ... There was like a lot of exploration, there

was a lot of freedom, the art style, the music, all that stuff.

Similar to participant 10, participant 9 also claimed that he did not want to be interrupted by other games when he played Zelda. He stated, "If I start a Zelda playthrough again, I essentially want to complete that playthrough before I go to another game. There is no mix and match between like playing behaviour in terms of times when I play it." In addition, participant 6 described how she and her partner played Zelda in TV mode. She stated,

> When it's in the projector, we don't use the Joy-Cons. We use the remote. I don't know because I just like- the Pro controller, because I just like how it feels a lot better than the two Joy-Cons, and if we are using the Joy-Cons, when you click them on the little dog-looking thing, the ones that click together and you hold it like a grip.

We argue that these examples show how the Switch can be played in a hybrid way regarding gaming style, not just based on the configuration of the hardware. Participants can use the motion-sensing Joy-Cons to replicate the casual Wii-like gaming style, but they are also afforded a way to play it like a traditional console with the pro-controller, which is similar to an Xbox or PlayStation controller. That is, the Switch combines the affordances of Wii-like gameplay with the affordances of traditional console gameplay.

4.2. Television Mode: Discussion

These findings demonstrate how the Switch complicates and deconstructs the traditional categorizations of consoles as either catering to 'casual' play (like the Wii), or 'hardcore' play (like the Xbox or PlayStation), which characterizes much of the literature on the Nintendo Wii.

On the one hand, the Switch was considered by participants as a contemporary upgrade version of the Wii series. For instance, participant 4 used to play the Wii U a lot, and she stated, "It's mostly with my little sisters and then we'll play like Just Dance, Smash, Mario Party, Mario Kart." This type of play is directly reproduced on the Switch as she stated that she would play "Smash or Jackbox Games. Just a bunch of mini-games. Oh, and Mario Party" with her friends during a gathering to play the Switch. In this case, the appeal of the Switch is the same as the appeal of the Wii/Wii U, which, as Bart Simon notes, "the appeal of the console is therefore not in what the players see, but what they can do and how that makes them feel" (2009, p. 4). The Switch allows participants to reproduce the Wii's casual

and social experience but make players feel better because of the technological upgrade. This is why participant 11 stated that "the Switch is the better console and I prefer playing any games on the Switch as opposed to playing it on a Wii or something like that." From this perspective, the appeal of the Switch is that it enables participants to perceive a clear connection between the console and the successful Wii and convinces them the Switch can offer a better experience based on the Wii.

On the other hand, TV mode also affords an immersive experience that is often missing in the discussion of the Wii's appeal. As noted in the review of related work, Jesper Juul defined the meaning of casual in the context of the Wii. He proposed five different design components to measure the casualness of a game, which were "fiction, usability, interruptibility, difficulty and punishment, and juiciness" (2009, p. 50). Following these components, those representative motion-sensing games like Wii sports are casual because they are depicted in a pleasant fiction, are easy to use, can be interrupted, have lower difficulty and have positive feedback. Even though in the later section, Juul clarified that Wii was not more causal but more flexible (2009, p. 129), the success of these games still strengthened the impression that the Wii primarily supported 'casual' play.

However, based on these five components, the *Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* is not casual. The game is depicted as unpleasant fiction (most of the friends the protagonist Link knows are dead, and he has to save the world alone), is not easy to use (players have to remember different commands to control Link), is not easy to be interrupted (compared to games like Just Dance), is quite difficult (compared to Just Dance) and has limited positive feedback (the game character will not be invincible even after finishing all goals). Participants' responses above also demonstrate that this game was played in a way that would traditionally be described as 'hardcore'. For instance, participants switched to the Pro controller to seek better control of the character and did not want to be interrupted by other games while playing Zelda.

This immersive experience challenges the conclusion made in prior work that "Nintendo has remained faithful to innovation and experience instead of hardcore gaming" (Wei, 2018, p. 5). Unlike the Wii, which is characterized as having 'abandoned' hardcore gaming experiences to focus on the 'Blue Ocean' market of casual play (O'Gorman, 2008), the Switch shows the "lateral thinking of withered technology, which espouses the use of older technological components in new, creative articulations" (Reynolds, 2016, para. 10). The older technological components from the Wii are inherited to the Switch and are

transformed into a platform that could affords *both* 'casual' and 'hardcore' gaming experiences.

As noted earlier, existing scholarship on the Nintendo Switch (primarily from a marketing / business viewpoint) has described Nintendo as attempting to "cleverly exploit a space at the convergence of two historical market segments, that of home consoles and that of portable consoles" (Aurègan & Tellier, 2019; see also Wagner, 2019). In addition to this, we argue that the Switch is exploiting a space at the convergence of the 'casual' and 'hardcore' home-console markets. As our study shows, these are not fixed player categories. Sometimes our participants wanted to 'casual' intermittent, social, motion-based play, and other times they sought immersive 'hardcore' experiences. The appeal of the Switch is in its capacity to afford both these experiences, as demanded by the player.

4.3. Handheld Mode: Results

Handheld mode means playing the Switch on the tablet screen, with the Joy-Con's attached to the side. Handheld mode provides a small-screen mobile gaming experience compared to TV mode. Based on participants' responses, it is also an important component of the Switch's appeal that constitutes the Switch's hybrid revolution.

4.3.1. Handheld at Home. In the domestic context, participants reported handheld mode enabled them to extend their gameplay. As participant 4 stated, "Sometimes before bed, I'll play a little bit extra, but it doesn't last too long." Likewise, participant 10 believed that the mobility of handheld mode could help him relieve the tiredness caused by TV mode. He stated,

> Sometimes it just gets really tiring. You're just sitting in the same place, playing the same games. Especially if I start feeling tired because I will play like Mario Odyssey on my desk and I'm having fun, but then I'm like, I've been sitting in the same position for a while and really tired and just lie in bed instead and play it like that.

These examples show that handheld mode is not always used as a separate mode; it relates to TV mode usage.

Furthermore, participants also reported that they could have a more accessible gaming experience playing handheld mode. For instance, participant 11 presented a detailed description regarding the different gaming experiences between TV mode and handheld mode. He stated,

> I usually play handheld mode, because I feel like it's so much... Like I said, if it's hooked up on the

TV, I feel a lot more, like okay, it's set up, I play now. It's time to play. Whereas with the Switch, I can be doing whatever, just pick up the Switch, play a bit, put it back down, it's over.

This argument was supported by participant 1, who states,

> there is something about I just don't like (TV mode). I don't know if it is the effort. I don't know if it is the… like I think I like I can just pick the Switch up, turn it on. I have got a game cartridge there and just play it. And I don't have to do anything else.

These examples indicate that participants could be more flexible with their gameplay in handheld mode.

4.3.2. Handheld Outside. Participants shared their experiences of playing outdoors. For instance, participant 2 used the handheld in a park to play Pokémon Let's Go to synergize with her Pokémon Go gameplay. She stated,

> Pokémon Let's go. You know that there are some interactions between Pokémon Let's go and Pokémon go right. Like the one on your phone. So like if you use your Pokémon go to catch some Pokémon at the park, cause you need to go out to catch new Pokémon. And you need to transfer it to your Nintendo Switch account on the Let's go.

Similarly, participant 4 shared her experiences of playing the handheld in her campus during the class break. She stated, "if I have an hour break, I'll just whip out my Switch… So there's no Wi-Fi. And I tried accessing the Switch to the uni Wi-Fi. I just have to play offline games and that's Fire Emblem." These examples show that – like with other handheld consoles - the mobility the Switch allows participants to expand the spaces in which they can play.

However, not all participants were satisfied with the mobility of the Switch or willing to play outdoors. For instance, participant 4 discussed the difference between the Switch and the 3DS, which was Nintendo's previous handheld system. She stated,

> The Switch's screen is way bigger. Though they don't have the bottom screen of the 3DS…I'm feeling some pain in my wrist too because I have to hold it, that heavy one, for a long time. And I'm not travelling that far to play a console for a long time, so whenever I take it out from my bag, I have to put it inside again after five to ten minutes.

Other participants also suggested that normally they would not take the Switch out of their homes. For instance, participant 1 stated that the Switch was cognitively more expensive than the 3DS, which hindered him from taking the console out. He said, "Something about the Switch, it feels more expensive than the 3ds. It feels like a thing that if I take it out of the house, I will be really worried that it would get broken." This type of worrying also occurred to participant 6, who stated, "I feel really uncomfortable taking that Switch outside because it's like a $300 system, and with the DS, it was made to go outside, but with the Switch, I just feel uncomfortable." These examples show that the mobility of the Switch is not the same as the mobility of other handheld gaming consoles (such as the Nintendo DS) or mobile smartphone play. Rather, the Switch provides a new type of mobile play.

4.4. Handheld Mode: Discussion

That Switch's handheld mode attracts players in three different ways: **flexibility**, **accessibility** and **mobility**.

4.4.1. Flexibility. Firstly, participants are attracted by the flexibility of the handheld mode, meaning seamlessly switching between TV and handheld modes. The finding suggests that participants use the handheld mode to extend their gameplay of TV mode, indicating that the action of switching between modes is appealing. Therefore, the attraction of the Switch handheld mode should be considered from the hybrid perspective, meaning that the appeal of TV mode also constructs part of the attraction of handheld mode.

Many scholars explored the appeal of handheld systems, namely the predecessors of the Switch, which related to understanding the appeal of the Switch's handheld mode. Reynolds suggested that the appeal of the Game Boy, which was an influential Nintendo handheld system, was because "Nintendo eschewed its established character-driven branding and opted for a more toy-like game as the flagship title for its handheld" (2016, para. 35). The toy-like game referred to Tetris, which Reynolds believed "anticipants the casual revolution in video games that arrived decades later, driven by simple games on desktops and mobile devices" (2016, para. 46). This point echoed Klopfer's argument that one of Game Boy's innovations was to include Tetris, as he argued "They didn't include a Mario game that would likely only appeal to kids, but rather an addictive puzzle game that was played by young and old alike" (2008, p. 38). These arguments imply that handheld play is constructed as a trivial play from the Game Boy era: a form of play that is not as

exciting or arousing as playing hardcore games on home consoles. In a way, the appeal of the previous Nintendo handheld systems is similar to the Wii, which abandons hardcore elements to reach more audiences.

However, the flexibility of switching between modes enables the Switch to challenge the idea of handheld gaming being trivial or casual and home console gaming being intense or hardcore, which contributes to form the unique appeal of the Switch. Compared to the Game Boy, Switch's handheld mode does not exist independently. Instead, it co-constructs the hybrid experiences with TV mode, enabling players to extend their immersive home console gaming to handheld gaming and vice versa. Borrowing Raney's et al. argument that explored the appeal of video games, the flexibility of handheld mode offered the appeal of interactivity. They suggested that players were attracted to video games because "not only do players get to select what game to play from the myriad titles available, but they also select when to play, in what setting, for how long, and with whom (if anyone)" (2006, pp. 196–197). The flexibility of Switch's handheld mode doubles this interactivity, forming the unique appeal of the Switch.

4.4.2. Accessibility. Secondly, participants are attracted by the accessibility of handheld mode. Accessibility refers to the ability that allows participants to start gameplay easily without making commitments to their play. Based on the finding, participant 11 described that setting up TV mode gave him a sense of play. For participant 1, setting up the cable and connecting the Switch to the TV was extra work for playing. These discussions do not suggest that handheld play is necessarily more convenient than playing on a TV. For instance, some participants would always connect the cable to the TV (participant 10) and, therefore, no need to do the extra work. Thus, these feelings are not about inconvenient but about being committed to their play (Keogh, 2014; Keogh & Richardson, 2018).

Brendan Keogh uses the word commitment to suggest the threshold of playing games and argued that "a hardcore game is too inflexible to be played with a casual time commitment" (2014, p. 270). In the case of the Switch, commitment is not only about time but also about psychological construction. To play on the big screen means that participants need to be ready to play in a devoted and immersive way. Connecting cables, turning on the TV and occupying space construct a ritual that reminds participants to devote themselves to the game or embrace what Chesher called the "stickiness" of the game, "that holds players' eyes to the screen" (2004, p. 101). Even though they may not end up playing in a hardcore and immersive way (playing Wii-like games), playing the TV means that participants are engaging in a ritual that signals that they are ready to commit to the stickiness and the high level of immersion.

In contrast, handheld mode allows participants to adjust their commitment level. It allows players to commit to playing in an intensive TV mode way or in a simple, less-intensive and no-stressed way. That is, the perceived threshold of starting handheld gaming is lower than playing on a TV. This explains why participant 3 stated "I can just play handheld usually, because I found that more easier to do",

4.4.3. Mobility. Mobility refers to play without being constrained by physical locations. However, this mobility differs from other devices. Compared to previous Nintendo handhelds and mobile phones, the flexibility of switching between modes and the ability to provide games like Zelda made participants question whether the Switch is made to go outside (participant 6). This confusion suggests that the perception of the Switch's mobility is changeable depending on different gaming locations.

In the domestic space, the mobility of Switch resembles the Nintendo DS. Samuel Tobin suggested that the DS separated itself from home consoles in domestic space because it "remakes and poaches on any and all locations in the home" (2013, p. 71), which we see here is similar to the Switch.

In contrast, in the public space, the mobility of the Switch is perceived inferior than other mobile devices, namely mobile phones. Many scholars argued the close relationship between mobile gaming and everyday life (Hjorth & Richardson, 2014; Martínez, 2019). Hjorth and Richardson argued that mobile gaming is "ambient," meaning a type of play that is integrated in daily life (2014, pp. 69–70). Grüter et al., in a similar manner, argued that "[t]he everyday life is permeating mobile game play and vice versa these tiny games affect our daily life " (2014, p. 445). This close relationship between mobile gaming and everyday life turns mobile gaming into a spontaneous and subconscious activity.

However, our participants described a 'planned mobility' to the Switch. Playing the Switch outdoors is not spontaneous or every day, but needs participants to plan beforehand. In participant 2's case, she planned to connect her Switch play with her mobile phone play and took the Switch outdoors. Similarly, participant 4 realised the hour break between her lecture and decided to bring the Switch. More importantly, participant 12 presents a detailed description suggesting the difference

Figure 1 & 2: Nintendo Switch 'Tabletop mode', as depicted in the 'First Look at Nintendo Switch' trailer, from Nintendo of America.

between the mobility of the Switch and mobile phones. He stated,

> if it's a 40-minute one-way trip. And then I'm thinking about this (playing the Switch). So it depends because playing games, is definitely not my first choice, to be honest. So if it's 20 minutes train, I'll definitely prefer to play with my cell phone and then watch some news or other social media stuff on that.

This description can also be interpreted from the previous discussion of commitment (Keogh, 2014). Playing the Switch outdoors requires participants to commit more than playing smartphones. Where TV mode can be understood to hybridize 'casual' and 'hardcore' domestic play, we see here how handheld mode on the Switch hybridizes the domestic ritual of high-commitment console play with mobile gaming.

4.5. Tabletop Mode: Results

Tabletop mode uses the Switch tablet to replace the function of a TV, and uses the detached Joy-Con to play games. In comparison to the other two modes, which all players had used, only 5 had used tabletop mode themselves, and none preferred it.

4.3.1. Mobile TV Mode. Tabletop mode was principally used as a replacement for TV mode, when TV mode wasn't available. Participant 9 described his experiences of using the tabletop mode on his balcony. He stated,

> There were two experiences when we used tabletop because we were smoking outside in the balcony and playing Switch as well. So then we spent hours there until like the Switch ran out of juice.

In addition, participant 5 reported playing tabletop mode to replace handheld mode in a cafeteria. She stated, "Well, with tabletop mode, of course, I played Mario only. I just sat on the sofa in the cafeteria, and I just sat like this very comfortably." She further stated that playing tabletop reminded her of "playing very well-made mobile games," which made her less engaged with games but paid more attention to the surroundings. These examples show that tabletop mode is often used to replace part of the functions of the other two modes. Rather than a hybrid of TV and handheld, it is viewed as a temporary transition. Participants used tabletop mode when the other two modes were restricted. This is attractive because it enables players to expand their gaming spaces and convert emergencies into gaming occasions.

4.3.1. Tabletop Limitations. Tabletop mode was no participant's preferred mode. For instance, participant 6 only used tabletop mode once, because they forgot to bring the cable used to connect the Switch to the TV, stating,

> The four of us were playing... We were playing Nine Parchments together, and it was really hard because it's like this tiny little... smaller in this paper, and we're all squished together with these tiny little remotes, and we're trying not to die.

Similarly, many participants pointed out that tabletop mode's hardware limitations deterred them from playing in this mode regularly. For instance, participant 10 stated that "the screen, I can never fully ... Like, it's too small, and the controls, especially sideways controller is too small for me to hold so I can never actually play the game properly." Participant 4 also mentioned her concerns relating to the stability of the mode. She stated,

> Well, the Switch, it just looks unstable, and if you're on a plane or even if you're on a long train

ride, it just looks like it's going to fall off. And the Switches are very... It's like a smartphone, basically. They're touch screens, and they're very... I feel like it's just going to break.

4.6. Tabletop Mode: Discussion

In contrast to TV and Handheld mode, tabletop mode was not a preferred mode of play, and did not constitute part of the daily play of the Nintendo Switch for our participants. However, we argue in this section that tabletop mode contributes to how we can understand the construction of 'proper' gaming on the Switch, and that it ultimately contributes to the appeal of the Nintendo Switch because it contributes to Nintendo's innovative identity.

4.6.1. 'Proper' Play. Mia Consalvo (2007, pp. 88–92) discusses proper gaming through the lens of cheating. She argues that the negotiation of cheating is based on players' understanding of "proper gameplay" in single player game. If players tried hard and cannot pass the game, then they received the "license to cheat." Although using tabletop mode is not cheating, it is similar to the process of accepting cheating. If players try hard and cannot access to the other two modes, then they have the license to use tabletop mode. But why is tabletop mode not considered 'proper' by players?

Nash et al.'s (2018) scholarship of the Nintendo Wii mentions how the proper way of playing the Wii was constructed in the case of family gaming via advertisements, even though the 'proper' way of playing the Wii in family gaming often led to game failure. In their words, "Idealised family togetherness is accessed through collective, 'proper' Wii gaming but is ultimately unsustainable" (Nash et al., 2018, p. 2005). In the case of the Wii, the standard of proper gaming was established based on advertisements. They identified that parents were more willing to accept the advertisement representation as proper because it "reflects and reinforces family togetherness and contemporary parenting ideologies," but children overlooked the advertisement because "they are simply having fun together" (Nash et al., 2018, pp. 2012–2016). These findings highlight how advertisements around the Switch console are important for establishing the sense of what is 'proper' and not.

In the 'First Look at Nintendo Switch' trailer released by Nintendo of America, 52 seconds (1:04-1:15, 1:33-2:05, 2:29-2:38) were used to demonstrate contents regarding tabletop mode, which almost took one-fourth of the trailer's total length (3:37 minutes in total, demonstrating four different functions, average time for each function was 54.25 seconds). Multiple scenarios were depicted in the trailer regarding tabletop mode, including playing individually on an airplane, in a car with friends, at a table beside a basketball court, and on a rooftop during a friend's party (see Figure 1 & 2). That is, the advertisements for the Switch hold tabletop mode up as a legitimate way to play the Switch, and our participants were very aware of this.

Even though some of the scenarios were recreated by participants, ultimately each participant felt that tabletop mode wasn't the 'proper' way to play because it was inferior to the other modes. As presented in the findings, tabletop mode functions as a backup mode for participants, rather than creating a new successful hybrid form of each.

4.6.2 Innovation Gaming Concepts. Although tabletop mode seems unattractive to participants, it is an important mode that has the potential (as depicted in the advertisements) to provide unique gaming experiences that TV mode and handheld mode do not offer. Even though tabletop mode was rarely adopted in daily-basis play, and participants were critical of it, they liked the *idea* of having tabletop mode. As participant 1 suggested, "I always have a vision that I would do that if I took the Switch on a plane. I always think that is what I would do."

We argue then that the 'failure' of tabletop mode is, in a way, similar to the 'failure' of the Nintendo Virtual Boy. The Virtual Boy was released in the 1990s as a console "sported 3-D graphics in a unique tripod-mounted unit that required gamers to immerse themselves in the dual-screen display" (Boyer, 2009, p. 23). The similarity between Switch's tabletop mode and the Virtual Boy is that their ideas are innovative and ahead of their own time, and, at the same time, have negative market responses. However, as Steven Boyer points out that sales numbers or market responses cannot be applied as the only measurement to determine whether the console was successful. Although the Virtual Boy failed economically, it "provides far more fertile ground for evaluating cultural shift" (Boyer, 2009, p. 24). The Virtual Boy was "a bold statement of Nintendo's dedication to innovative gaming concepts" (Boyer, 2009, p. 25), which paved the path for future success. We note here that none of our participants had utilized Nintendo Labo, a line of cardboard-based augments that could turn – for instance – the Switch into a fishing rod, but all participants were aware of it, with a similar impact on their perception of Nintendo as dedicated to innovative ways of playing (for more on Labo, see Spiel & Gerling, 2019; Thibault, 2018).

From this perspective, although tabletop mode has not been widely adopted, participants' affirmative attitude towards the tabletop idea reflects the ongoing importance of 'innovation' to Nintendo's brand identity.

5. Conclusion: A Hybrid Revolution

In his 2009 book, *A Casual Revolution*, Jesper Juul identifies a "breakthrough moment in the history of videogames" where videogames – in particular, casual games – became increasingly *normal*. Juul places this revolution in two trends that radically shifted who played games, and where games could be played, in the late 2000's: mimetic interfaces like motion sensing play in the Nintendo Wii, and downloadable mobile games that did not require background knowledge to play. The consequence of the casual revolution was "a reinvention of both games and players" (2009, p. 63) that broke down preconceived notions of how games should be played, and who should be playing them, radically expanding the global audience for games.

We argue that the Nintendo Switch has triggered a similar *hybrid revolution,* that also breaks down previously established boundaries. The Switch's TV mode fuses casual and hardcore experiences, demonstrating that such categorizations are not static audience identities but simply different modes of engagement, appealing to players at different times. Handheld mode offers players greater flexibility and accessibility with when and where they play, and affords a new kind of 'planned mobility' that does not replace the mobile play that characterizes the smartphone, but hybridizes with the domestic ritual of TV-mode. In summary then, the hybrid revolution led by the Nintendo Switch is about affording players a greater choice in how and where they might play videogames. The Switch is more play, more often, and on player's own terms.

The Nintendo Switch leads this revolution – over 125 million units sold since 2017 – but it is not the only example. We can also point to Valve's Steam Deck, a handheld gaming computer visually similar to the Switch but without removable Joy-Con's for social play like tabletop mode, "built for extended play sessions" (*Steam Deck*, 2021). Valve operates Steam, the most popular digital store for PC games, and the Steam Deck operating system enables users to play nearly all their PC games on the handheld device, as well as stream other games via cloud gaming services like Microsoft's Xbox Games Pass. In doing so, it reflects the same hybridization of mobile play and committed domestic play as seen with the Switch, but with a greater focus on the existing PC 'gamer' market.

Another example of this hybridization beyond the Switch is the growth of 'mobile controllers' to support first-person shooter games like *Fortnite* (Moore & Carter, 2021). With over 150 million mobile downloads, *Fortnite*'s mobile play has been a significant part of the game's enormous success, but playing on the smartphone screen is often criticized because the on-screen controller (and thus, users' fingers) can obscure part of the gameworld, a critical issue in a competitive shooter game. Mobile controllers range from console-like controllers that can connect to the phone via Bluetooth, some with a built in holder for the phone, and devices like the Razer Kishi, which clip to the sides of the phone turning it into Switch-like portable gaming console.

While these devices replicate the hardware of the Switch, as our final note we must emphasize the significance of the Nintendo brand in understanding the hybrid revolution. While devices like the Steam Deck enable mobile-PC play, participants in this study used 'Nintendo' as an adjective to distinguish their Nintendo games, consoles and experiences from other competitors. Participant 6, for instance, stated,

> I know with Nintendo, they're like Disney. It's like a game for everyone to enjoy, children and adults. So, you don't have to be an amazing StarCraft world champion player to play Nintendo games.

While delving into this finding in full detail is beyond the scope of this paper, we saw how the Nintendo brand shapes the 'vibe' of the Switch as a nostalgic experience that encourages casual and fun play. Participants were more ready to hybridize their 'hardcore' play because of their attitudes towards Nintendo as having a "more casual air to it" (Participant 11), and they felt more comfortable bringing the Switch into existing social spaces because of it. Other participants described Nintendo games as being 'fun' rather than 'cool', since they do not compete with Xbox or PlayStation on a technological level. For participant 7, it was that Nintendo games are "not very fancy, but it has some magic to attract you to play". Our point here is that the Switch leads the hybrid revolution not just because they were the first to release a console in that physical format, with specific hardware affordances, but because the Nintendo brand impacts player expectations and behavior in a way that makes them more open to hybridizing their play.

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