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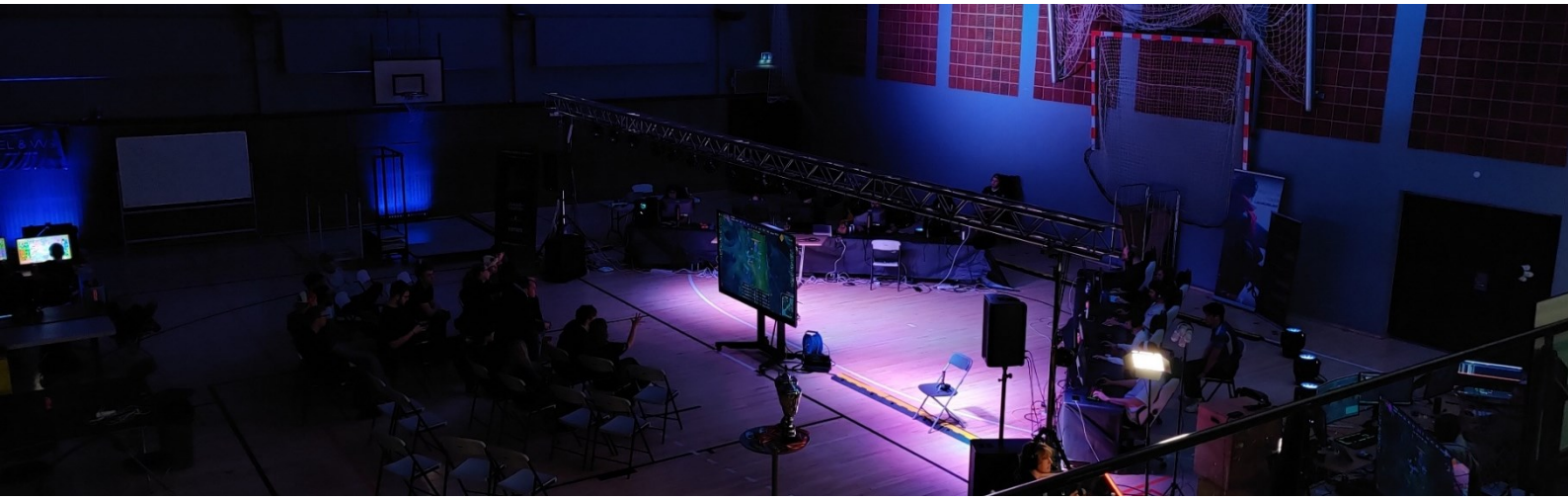

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Holger Pötzsch and Kristine Jørgensen

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Editorial
Critical

HOLGER PÖTZSCH AND KRISTINE JØRGENSEN

Do you have enough love in your heart
To get your hands dirty?

'Dirty' by grandson (2020)

***Critical* appears to be a timely word.** Timely because we live in critical times with major turning points ahead that require difficult decisions. Ranging from climate change and species extinction to soaring inequalities, wars, genocides, raging poverty, and fading democracies, it is critical that we act, that we do this decisively, immediately and collectively, and without pretending we can somehow reconcile endless growth with a greening of societies or magically shape a system that allows for both the accumulation of insane wealth at the top and for improved living standards for everyone else (Hickel, 2021). We cannot have our cakes and eat them. Someone will have to be held accountable for profiting from the mess created and who this will be is the source of much current and future conflict and strife.

Such times—and this is the second reason for the timeliness of the term serving as a header for this editorial—requires criticality in thinking and acting from everyone including game scholars, game designers, and players. As Hammar, Jong, and Despland-Lichtert (2023) have asserted in the previous issue of *Eludamos*, it is crucial that our field understands and critically reflects upon its own implication in the situation and dares to act accordingly. In the current situation, signing a petition online or including an eco-aware message into a power-hungry commercial game might no longer be enough and prove equally insufficient as travels across the globe to give 20-minutes presentations on the Anthropocene at some major conference (Thierry et al., 2023).

Instead, we need to question and change our own fundamental practices and launch actual challenges against a destructive status quo and its received power relations and ways of doing things. As we asserted in the editorial of the 2023 issue of *Eludamos* with reference to Brecht's (1939) renowned poem *To Posteriority*, we can still play and have conversations about games (Pötzsch and Jørgensen, 2023, p. 2). However, we do not any longer have the luxury of disregarding the significant part videogames play in the destruction of the planet's ecosphere and in exploitative practices for the sake of generating even higher profits for the already hyper-rich.

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Digital technologies, including videogames are neither clean nor green but require rapidly increasing amounts of natural resources, energy, area, and water (Crawford, 2021, Abraham, 2020). The extraction, manufacturing, distribution, use, and disposal of digital games and the physical devices they are played on lay waste to ecosystems, exploit and endanger workers, and undermine societies while at the same time ensuring massive profits for the few (Hammer, Jong, and Despland-Lichter, 2023). In this context, neither designers, players, nor the discipline of game studies can withhold from the responsibility to do things differently both in terms of the products and practices we criticize or commend and our own conduct as scientists and citizens.

The demand, and indeed the urgent need, to think and act critically also extends into the practice of academic publishing. *Eludamos* is a diamond open access journal. This means that all articles published with us can be read, used, and further distributed free of charge by anyone provided the original author is duly acknowledged. At the same time, we do not claim article processing charges (APCs) by neither individual authors, nor academic institutions. We do this because we firmly believe that publicly funded research that is peer-reviewed and editorially processed for free should not be the source of private profits for anyone but should be freely accessible to all. This, however, carries the danger of (self-)exploitation. Therefore, the editorial board of *Eludamos* continuously looks for funding to at least be able to pay copyeditors their due share. Because DOA publishing matters as an academic but also as a political practice. As Pooley (2024: 1) writes, open access publishing is a utopian practice and an important component of a politics attempting to build a better future in academia and beyond: "Whether or not another (scholarly publishing) world is possible, it is important to act *as if it is*" (emphasis in original).

Thinking and acting critically means leaving comfort zones, looking out beyond one's own immediate surrounds (both digital and otherwise), and acting upon what we see. This is often a profound challenge: it is demanding, sometimes scary, and often comes with backlashes created when one addresses established power-structures, hegemonies, and privileges in a critical manner. This is why we can only do these things together. As isolated individuals forced into relentless competition with everyone and everything, we stand no chance against the combined forces of economic and political special interests and their exploitative and reactionary agendas. As the US-Canadian artist grandson formulates it in the quote opening this editorial, *do we have enough love in our hearts to get our hands dirty* as scholars, practitioners, and citizens when faced with the apocalyptic triple-bind of ongoing ecocides, genocides, and sustained attempts to dismantle our freedoms and democracies?

Even against such a backdrop of urgency, however, life—scholarly as well as other—goes on and so do the activities of *Eludamos*, its authors, reviewers, and editors. The issue currently in your virtual hands contains nine peer-reviewed scholarly articles distributed across an open section and a special section on esports. In addition to

this peer-reviewed content, we offer four book reviews, a special section introduction, and one commentary. Together, these contributions critically explore a variety of aspects of games, play, game culture, and development from different theoretical and methodological vantage points.

Open section

In the article 'Distinguishing the Players of the Digital Field: A Multiple Correspondence Analysis of the Socialization Practice Among Swedish Gamers', Tim Bergström employs Bourdieu's three types of capital to explore socialization processes in Swedish gaming culture. Reported results indicate a clear division along axes of age and gender, but showing only minor variations in terms of social class, ethnicity, or upbringing.

The contribution '(Re)producing Orientalism: Industry Logic of Chinese Mobile Game Re-Skins in the Global App Empire' by Yizhou Xu examines reskinning as an element in the production of mobile copycat games in China. Based on insights from ethnographic fieldwork in the industry, the author argues for both a theoretical and technical dimension of the practice of re-skinning that points beyond industrial mimicry in standardized game production and can also entail a "subversion against seemingly totalizing control of the US-dominated app economy".

In their article 'Parties as Playful Experiences: Why Game Studies Should Study Partying', Leland Masek and Jaakko Stenros argue that party studies should constitute a subfield of game studies. Based on analyses of 33 semi-structured interviews highlighting playful party experiences they show similarities between partying and game play and propose a new conceptualization of partying as a form of playfulness. Expanding the field of game studies into new areas, the contribution offers an empirically motivated rethinking of basic concepts that enables new research questions and insights important for the further development of the discipline.

Adopting a game analytical perspective, David Matencio's contribution 'Playing Rogues: Picaresque Experiences in Videogames' traces how mechanical and narrative design choices in games featuring rogue characters are predisposed by genre conventions of Picaresque literature. Drawing upon insights from analyses of three role-playing games featuring picaresque elements, the author investigates how games offer "picaresque experiences" and explains how these limit player choices and spread across medial frames.

Finally, Mark Maletska conducts a literature review to assess the state of the art in queer games studies. The article 'Queer Gender Identities and Videogames: Literature Review' shows that there is an overreliance of research on received categories

and argues that there is a palpable lack of attention to queer temporalities and spatialities in the field. He concludes that the identified gap should be addressed in future research.

Special section: Sustaining equitable competitive gaming

The present issue of *Eludamos* also contains a special section on competitive gaming (esports) guest edited by Nick Taylor. In his introduction titled 'Who Cares About Esports? Introduction to the Special Section on Sustaining Equitable Competitive Gaming', Taylor offers a brief overview and critique of the field of esports studies before introducing the four contributions composing the section:

1. 'Deconstructing Esports: Why We Need to Acknowledge Bodies in a Move Toward More Equitable Esports Practices' by Tom Legierse and Maria Ruotsalainen.

2. '"I Want to Play a Normal Game. I Don't Need All This.": Exploring Gender Diversity in Portuguese Esports" written by Carina Assuncao, Michael Scott and Rory Summerley.

3. 'Changing the Game but Keeping to the Rules: Ambivalences between Social Activism and Content Creation in the Brazilian Esports Scene' by Beatriz Blanco.

4. 'Infrastructuralized Moderation on a Gaming Adjacent Platform: The Platformization of a Youth Center' by Fredrik Rusk, Matilda Ståhl and Isac Nyman.

Book reviews

Following the special section, we offer four book reviews of recent titles that, each in a specific manner, open new perspectives on the relationship between videogames, play, and the world.

Firstly, Lykke Guanio-Uluru presents a reading and critique of the 28-chapter anthology *EcoGames: Playful Perspectives on the Climate Crisis*, edited by Laura op de Beke, Joost Raessens, Stefan Werning and Gerald Farca. While being broad in scope and theoretically diverse, Guanio-Uluru finds that the book underemphasizes material aspects of the relation between games, play, and the climate crisis. Still, she welcomes it as a crucial contribution to the field offering a plethora of new insights.

In a second review, Emil Lundedal Hammar provides an overview of Marijam Did's *Everything to Play For: How Videogames are Changing the World*. He argues that Did's work attempts a profoundly critical perspectivization and makes "a convincing case

for why games should be taken seriously … as they … are symptomatic of the exploitation and immiseration within capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy".

Hans-Joachim Backe reviews Alex Mitchell and Jasper van Vught's volume *Videogame Formalism. On Form, Aesthetic Experience and Methodology*. According to the reviewer, the book constitutes a thorough "demonstration of videogame formalism that is rather peerless in its scope and ambition", offering an applicable framework for game analysis.

Lastly, Philip Hammond presents his view on Curtis D. Carbonell's monograph *World War Two Simulated: Digital Games and Reconfigurations of the Past,* a book that, he finds, asks important questions about the relation between games, war, and history yet often fails to offer convincing answers to the problems it raises.

Commentary

Finally, in this issue's commentary titled 'Transgender Emergence in Video Games: Intersections, Discourses, Directions', Robin Longobardi Zingarelli explores transgender themes in video games, play, and game culture. The author argues for the capacity of videogames to offer meaningful experiences by presenting a widening array of transgender characters and employing new procedural elements such as character customization to allow for an alignment of play with non-normative identities and life worlds. At the same time, however Longobardi Zingarelli also alerts readers to the still persisting danger of using games to "perpetuate transphobia and exploit transgender experiences" for economic and other purposes.

Final remarks

To end this editorial, we once again take up some internal issues at *Eludamos*. We start with good news for our tenure-track authors: thanks to a continued cooperation with Septentrio Academic Publishing our journal is now indexed in Scopus, ERIH PLUS, and DOAJ while an application to Web of Science is under development. Otherwise, the editorial team has adopted an AI policy for *Eludamos* detailing how authors should relate to the opportunities and challenges posed by large language models and other generative technologies. Sad news is that our copyeditor Aurora Eide has left us to take up a teaching position at UiT The Arctic University of Norway. Good luck, Aurora, and thanks for smooth, efficient cooperation and your many reliable contributions.

Lastly, as always, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to the authors, reviewers, and editors who made this current issue of *Eludamos* possible. Without you, it would be impossible to keep the critical conversation on games, play, and game

production taking place on the pages of our journal going. Thank you so much for your relentless efforts and all the time and energy you dedicate to this endeavor!

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Distinguishing the Players of the Digital Field

A Multiple Correspondence Analysis of the Socialisation Practice within Swedish Gaming

Tim Bergström

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Distinguishing the Players of the Digital Field

A Multiple Correspondence Analysis of the Socialisation Practice within Swedish Gaming

TIM BERGSTRÖM

Abstract

This article explores the field of contemporary gaming practices and preferences among players of various social backgrounds. From a Bourdieusian perspective based on the notion of different capital forms (economic, social, and cultural), the socialisation process of Swedish players of digital games (*n*=1019) is investigated through a multiple correspondence analysis on questionnaire data. The findings show that the contemporary Swedish gaming culture is clearly divided by gender and age, but not as visibly by social class, birthplace, or upbringing. The article concludes that the contemporary gaming culture restricts present dispositions and future trajectories among the agents of the gaming field.

Keywords

Bourdieu; gaming culture; socialisation; multiple correspondence analysis; Sweden; gender; player typologies; esports

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Within game studies, the body of research on the players of digital games currently constitutes a plethora of perspectives, ranging from preferences and playstyles in-game through discourses and disorders out-of-game. The hitherto accumulated knowledge of digital players mainly consists of typologies based on preferences and motivations for play as a way of distinguishing players (Bartle, 1996; Juul, 2010; Kallio et al., 2011; Klevjer & Hovden, 2017; Manero et al., 2016; Muriel & Crawford, 2018; Yee, 2006). Other ways of typifying digital players include differentiation between gender and socioeconomic status (Vilasís-Pamos & Pires, 2022), differentiation between gender and sexual or racial identity (Shaw, 2012), differentiation between age groups (Brown, 2016), differentiation by means of ludic habitus,

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i.e., previous play experiences (Jaćević, 2022), or differentiation by means of psychiatric definitions of Internet Gaming Disorder (Bowman & Chang, 2023; Monley et al., 2023; Rehbein & Baier, 2013) or through the discursive constructions of a female gamer identity (Kivijärvi & Katila, 2022; Shaw, 2013). However, an apparent dearth within the bulk of ludologic literature concerns the socialisation of players into the gaming cultures. As T. L. Taylor (2008) notes, "paths into game culture are vital" and understanding how people start engaging with games "is deeply informed by their social networks" (pp. 53–54). Yet, despite the smorgasbord of player typologies and identity formations, there is a gap within previous game studies regarding the socialisation processes active in leading the players into the practice of gaming. This is primarily seen in the fact that the established typologies of players do not yet account for the ways in which these players became the players they became.

Few attempts have been made to grasp the sociology of the wider gaming field, hinting that game studies constitute a discipline of necessary interdisciplinarity. Moreover, previous studies have mainly focused on understanding the sociology of one particular game, presenting it as a case study (Rimington et al., 2016; Välisalo & Ruotsalainen, 2022), or on comparing the same phenomenon within two different games (Reer & Krämer, 2014). Another crucial aspect pertaining to the gaming field in this regard is the rise of esports, which demands a regulation of the competitive gaming scene. Furthermore, this transformation of the gaming field spawns questions regarding the backgrounds and habits of the esports athletes, their socialisation into the subfield of esports, and indeed their distinction from the non-competitive players of the gaming cultures.

As a point of departure, this article assumes a Bourdieusian understanding of gaming as a field. Consequently, the article adds to the body of research pursuing an understanding of the gaming culture as a Bourdieusian field (cf. Berry et al., 2014; Crawford, 2011; Jaćević, 2022; Kirkpatrick, 2012; Klevjer & Hovden, 2017; Rimington, 2016; Vilasís-Pamos & Pérez-Latorre, 2022) by exploring the distinguishing features of Swedish digital players. Specifically, this article seeks to fill the current gap concerning the ways in which players of digital games become specific players of digital games by zooming in on the Swedish field of digital gaming and the ways in which contemporary players are socialised into the practice of gaming. This is done by taking into consideration both the sociodemographic backgrounds of the players and their game preferences, gaming habits, and their opinions about gamer identity and the wider gaming cultures. The choice to concentrate on the Swedish context is threefold. First, even though it is tempting to think that online cultures transcend national ones, it should be stressed that national contexts differ, as online gaming practices will differ depending on the offline context—for instance, cybercafés (e.g., López-Bonilla et al., 2016) are prominent features in Latin America, but are not as widespread in the Nordic countries. This fact is in alignment with Bourdieu's own statement that his monumental work, *Distinction*, might certainly appear 'French' to readers from outside of France (1984, p. xi). Second, Sweden, per se, forms an interesting national context for studying the digital gaming field, as the country has dug

deep into the digitalisation of society. Sweden stands out from its Nordic neighbours in that it has had a "relatively smooth" transition into the digital age, due to extensive coverage of fibre-optic cables, and the country is referred to as the Northern (Silicon) Valley, due to being "home to several globally successful digital services", and the Swedish state has "promoted a view on digital communication as a public good" (Lai & Flensburg, 2023, pp. 184–185). Third, Sweden is a nation wherein more than half of the population engages in playing digital social games, and among citizens born in the 2000s, nine out of ten play games online (Internetstiftelsen, 2023). Furthermore, Sweden has recently seen a groundbreaking change in the gaming scene, as per May 28, 2023, the Swedish Sports Confederation has officially recognised esports as a sport, thus awakening the issues of formalisation and professionalisation of a thitherto autonomous field of leisure in the country. Thus, the gaming field in contemporary Sweden, specifically, makes for a contentious and interesting field to study.

The purpose of this study is thus to describe, analyse, and understand the socialisation processes of the Swedish gaming world. These processes are explored through a digital survey directed towards Swedish computer, console, mobile, and virtual reality players from the age of fifteen. In this study, the gaming world is understood as a semi-autonomous field in the Bourdieusian sense. The study does not detail how individuals position themselves in the field. Rather, it focuses on the combinations of different forms of capital in relation to habitus, which is related to the demographic background of the players, their gaming habits, their opinions about the gaming culture, their parental situation, and their attitudes towards esports. Thus, the research problem inquires what distinctions are relevant in this field, and the main objective of this study is to map the distinctions of the digital gaming field. The following research question is posed: What distinctions define the Swedish field of gaming as a practice?

Previous research on the digital gaming culture

This section presents the results of previous investigations of the gaming field and their relevance to understand the socialisation practices of the gaming culture. Essentially, three different ways of understanding the digital gaming culture can be deduced from previous game research, namely gaming culture as a typified practice, a gendered practice, and a class-divided practice.

A typified practice

Previous research on the gaming culture has been mainly occupied with generating typologies for different sorts of players, combining preferences and motivations for play. Ever since Bartle (1996) introduced his four-type taxonomy of MUD players to aid game designers in their work, research in game studies has seen a boom in attempts to create new categories of players. This tradition was continued by Juul (2010), who studied the emergence of so-called casual gamers. Similarly, Kallio et al.

(2011) identified nine player mentalities, yet they concluded that most digital gaming is a balance of 'casual' relaxation and 'committed' entertainment—not a total immersion, which is thought of as the norm. In reality, the authors argued, gaming is marked by fluid mentalities, and the most serious problem in the contemporary discussions on players is that the gamer identities become impossible for real players to identify with. Despite this notion, player or gamer typologies have continued since, with Muriel & Crawford (2018) identifying five player identities in contemporary gaming culture.

Player typologies are not without criticism, however. Hamari & Tuunanen (2014), in their meta-synthesis of different player types, criticise player typologies as simplistic abstractions, calling for unified measurement scales to properly distinguish preferences over different game genres. Another criticism towards the typologies of digital players can be deduced from the notion that the typologies of players seem to be age dependent. For instance, Vilasís-Pamos & Pires (2022) identify two gamer categories based on gaming practices and three gamer categories based on cultural imaginaries. Manero et al. (2016) classify secondary school students into four gamer types, whereas Klevjer & Hovden (2017) study videogame preference among university students. At the other end of the age scale, Brown (2016) demonstrates that older players (age 60 to 77) and middle-aged players (age 43 to 59) show different game preferences, and that the relatively younger players cannot be assumed to grow into the same types of players as today's older players.

Despite the ever-broadening body of knowledge on player types, these typologies only focus on the games played and preferred by different players—not on how these players became interested in certain game genres due to their sociodemographic dispositions. This means that the different player types are taken as is or as existing a priori, without considering the ways in which these players became inclined to submit to one of the types. Dealing with gaming as an educational issue—i.e., the processes in which human beings are formed in different social, cultural, or historical contexts—this study aims to shed light on the ways in which players of digital games *become* players of digital games.

A gendered practice

From a socialisation perspective, it is important to keep in mind that the field of gaming has historically been viewed as a masculine field on account of its technological nature (Baxter-Webb, 2016). Furthermore, domestic and family-centred investigations of gameplay should also be taken into account when studying gaming culture (cf. Enevold, 2014; Jiow et al., 2018).

The gendered aspect of the gaming world remains a given perspective within academia, with notions of hegemonic masculinity influencing the gamer identity and toxicity permeating the masculine-coded gaming world (Gelūnas, 2022), acts of symbolic violence being targeted against female players online (Gray et al., 2017), and oppression experienced by women of colour failing to conform to the white male

norm in online gaming communities (Gray, 2011). Despite the dominating masculinity ascribed to the wider gaming culture, at least 48% of American gamers identify as female (Entertainment Software Association, 2022) and among Europeans, 48% of the players are women (Interactive Software Federation of Europe, 2022). According to Kirkpatrick (2012), the formation of the male-gendered gaming culture was framed in British gaming magazines from the 1980s and 1990s. In these magazines, the prototypical gamer was constructed as a boy. Kowert (2020), however, offers the telling aphorism that the contemporary understanding of gamers is that "all gamers are players, but not all players are gamers" (p. 1), suggesting a male-coded discourse dominating a unisex practice. Paaßen et al. (2017) conclude that the male gamer stereotype is only partially accurate in representing the wider gaming culture, as it is more common among men to identify as gamers and to perform their gamer identities visibly, whereas women are thought of as either a female or a gamer, which reinforces the idea that womanhood and gaming are essentially incompatible. De Grove et al. (2015) conclude that few players identify as gamers, as the socially constructed gamer identity is associated with stereotypical behaviours originating from a consumption logic. Furthermore, it is more common among younger male players who frequently play hardcore games (first-person shooters and roleplaying games) to self-identify as gamers. Stone (2019) notes that the traditional gamer stereotype—a white, heterosexual, socially inept and physically awkward cis-male who is deemed a 'gamer' due to his frequency of playing video games—is evolving among university students in the United States, as the leisure time practice of gaming is becoming more mainstream.

Although the common stereotypical characteristics of gamers persist among self-identified gamers and non-gamers alike, new and positive characteristics (such as perseverance, cognitive skills, and technical prowess) are also ascribed to the gamer stereotype. Yet, the heteronormative aspects of the gaming culture are visible in discussion forums, where hierarchies between "real" players (interested in gameplay mechanics) and "fans" (who are more interested in narrative aspects of the game world, which is not seen as valuable) relate to notions of gender-codes, as the appreciation of game mechanics is considered more masculine, and thus also deemed more important (Välisalo & Ruotsalainen, 2022). The wider gaming culture also continues to marginalise women and people of colour, as well as queer players or "gaymers" (Gray, 2017). Finally, in terms of conducting research on and with gamers, Jenson & de Castell (2008) stress that gender and gaming scholars have repeatedly rediscovered female marginalisation within gaming culture, instead of relaying disrupting and affirming examples of gender equality among players. Moreover, Taylor (2018) has noted that possessing a technomasculine subjectivity—that is, a privileged position to gaming, or acting as a "gamerbro," which coincides with being straight, white, and male—can enable easier access to the field of study, but can also contribute to the patterns of exclusion and marginalisation already prevalent within gaming.

A class-divided practice

A third way of approaching the digital gaming culture has been done by studying gameplay sociologically. For instance, console gaming is more common among the working class, whereas computer gaming is more common among the middle-class (Andrews 2008; Livingstone 2002). Vilasís-Pamos & Pérez-Latorre (2022) note how social class affects videoludic practices, identifying a videoludic divide in teenagers' gaming practices due to gender and social class. On that note, Berry et al. (2014) conclude that female players of *World of Warcraft* are more likely to favour cooperation than opposition, which suggests a gendered division between caring females and competitive males. The games themselves also seem to recruit masculine subjects to support neoliberal projects of "political, economic, and environmental subjugation" (Taylor & Voorhees, 2018, p. 4), actively priming the straight, white, masculine subject to participate in the projects of patriarchy, imperialism, and capitalism. This hints that the games industry has contributed to sustaining the notion that masculinity is best expressed through various forms of domination. This also affects "who is assumed to play and participate in gaming", rendering women and people of colour as anomalies (Richard & Gray, 2018, p. 128).

A self-reproducing practice?

As is evident, previous research on gaming has been primarily concerned with how elements from the gaming world enter the real world of the individual, rather than how the real-world individual enters the gaming world. In Bourdieu's words, "cultural needs are the product of upbringing and education", and tastes in the arts are primarily linked to educational level and secondarily to social origin (1984, p. 1). As the player of digital games does not exist as a priori category, but rather as a role into which one is fostered or socialised—in Shaw's (2013) borrowed Beauvoirian words: "one is not born a gamer, one becomes one"—it is surprising to note how little effort previous research has put into understanding how gamers become gamers. Although some studies exist on the topic—for instance, T. L. Taylor (2006) exploring women being introduced to MMOs by family members; Rambusch et al. (2007), concentrating on how new players are socialised into *Counter-Strike* as an act of situated learning; and Kirschner & Williams (2013), focusing on gameplay socialisation and symbolic interaction in *World of Warcraft*—there is a scarcity or lack of focus on gaming socialisation within game studies research. This could be interpreted as if the entrance into the gaming cultures is thought of as a naturally occurring process—some people become digital players, whereas others become gamers, whereas others do not become either of the two, and so what of it? Given its status as a leisure time activity enjoyed by almost half of the population, its sparked interest among investors and educators, and the many worries it evokes among psychologists, the digital gaming culture ought to be scrutinised from exactly this standpoint: How do gamers become gamers? The focus of this paper, then, is the structural socialisation processes of the Swedish gaming culture.

Theoretical frame: Operationalising Bourdieu's forms of capital

In this study, Bourdieu's (1984) theory of practice is applied to understand the socialisation processes within Swedish gaming. Thus, gaming is understood as a social practice taking place within a relatively autonomous field (a social microcosm) governed by its own rules and logics. The field, in turn, is made up of the actions of different actors and their relational positions towards one another in said field. The relational positions of the agents and the hierarchy of the social field is explained by the notion of habitus, and the struggle over legitimacy in the field is understood through the accumulation of different forms of field-specific capital (economic, social, and cultural), which in turn can be exchanged through a process of social alchemy into symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1990, p. 129). As Bourdieu (2007) states, "to understand is first to understand the field with which and against which one has been formed" (p. 4). Thus, this study sets out to study the objective mechanisms of the Swedish gaming field to understand the structure of the field prior to exploring the different habitus of the Swedish players entering the field of Swedish gaming. Bourdieusian ways of studying the digital gaming culture have been conducted previously, but these studies have either been concentrated on one single game (Berry et al., 2013), or on sociocultural contexts different in than the Swedish one (Klevjer & Hovden, 2017; Vilasís-Pamos & Pérez-Latorre, 2022).

The field-specific concept of "gaming capital" (consisting of game-related knowledge and social relations in games) has been proposed by Mia Consalvo (2009). Crawford (2011), on the other hand, claims that the original forms of capital proposed by Bourdieu are sufficient to understand contemporary gaming culture, as the interplay of capital across different fields becomes impossible if new field-specific forms of capital are constantly developed. For this study, the original Bourdieusian (1986) capital forms (economic, social, and cultural) were thus used, and they were operationalised to fit the field-specific world of gaming—with the ambition not to postulate certain aspects as 'highbrow' or 'lowbrow' culture. Thus, a general understanding of things constituting 'cultural', 'social', and 'economic' capital was followed (see Table 1). The three forms of capital were operationalised as follows prior to the distribution of the questionnaire (see Table 1).

Cultural capital was concretised by inquiring about the possession of elementary gaming gear (gaming computers, business computers, consoles, or VR headsets), the importance of aesthetics in-game, along with questions relating to creative output or language learning through gaming, and whether the respondents have studied esports or not. Furthermore, questions relating to the physical body—such as engaging in physical sports or hitting the gym—were coded as expressions of cultural capital.

Capital	Classification	Definition	Operationalisation
Cultural	Embodied	Internalised tastes and manners	Artistic or aesthetic aspects important for gaming
	Objectified	Material assets	Possession of elementary gaming gear
	Institutionalised	Educational qualifications	Possession of an esports education
Social	Material	Membership in a group	Possession of relations to other digital players
	Instituted	A common name of a tribe	Social aspects important for gaming
Economic	Immediate	Directly convertible to money	Participation in esports; possession of luxury gaming gear
	Institutionalised	Property rights	Competitive elements important for gaming

Table 1. Operationalisation of the forms of capital (cf. Bourdieu, 1986).

Social capital, on the other hand, was concretised by inquiring about the possession and importance of friends offline and online, along with questions relating to the importance of parents, siblings, friends, and guilds or groups in games, as well as membership in gaming associations.

Finally, economic capital was concretised by inquiring about desires to compete in esports, as well as posing questions regarding betting on or making money through games, the importance of the price of a game, and the possession of certain luxury gaming gear. For instance, the variables gaming mouse, gaming keyboard, gaming chair, and gaming headset were coded as belonging to economic capital, as these assets do not function as portals into the gaming world, but rather as luxury objects which improve gameplay, and which can thus be seen as enhancing the experience of an esports athlete.

Attributes found outside of the gaming field, such as monthly income before tax, social class during childhood, and the highest educational degree, were regarded as supplementary variables which do not constitute the activity of gaming, and thus not as expressions of economic, social, and cultural capital within the gaming field, respectively. Income, specifically, was not regarded as a measurable form of economic capital within the gaming field, as many teenagers do not possess an income, but are reliant on their parents to financially support their leisure activities. Instead, possession of pricy gaming gear was regarded as better indications of economic capital. Moreover, unlike Bourdieu's (1984) analysis of the social space of taste based

on classification of certain films, songs, and paintings as bearers of low or high cultural value, the different game genres played by the Swedish players were regarded as supplementary variables rather than expressions of high or low cultural capital.

Method and data

Data set and coding

The questionnaire was open between March 20, 2023, and August 29 the same year, generating legitimate cases from 1019 respondents. The data were collected through the questionnaire software Survey & Report (www.artologik.com). The choice of a web-distributed questionnaire was motivated by the convenience of reaching out to a digital culture.

The design of the questionnaire was originally inspired by the questionnaire utilised by Bourdieu (1984) to study the judgement of taste among the French people of the 1970s and reported in *Distinction*. Some adjustments were done to fit the questionnaire to the Swedish field of gaming in the 2020s. For instance, the questionnaire was divided into six interrogative areas: background variables, gaming habits, gaming culture questions, parental questions, and esports questions. The survey was directed at Swedish players of digital games from the age of fifteen, and it was estimated that fifteen minutes were required by the individual respondent to complete the questionnaire.

Sample

Since no official register of Swedish players—in any digital game genre—exists, no random sampling could be drawn. Moreover, given the philosophy of geometric data analysis (which stipulates that descriptive analysis of data should always be conducted prior to any testing of probability), mainstream regards to sampling issues were not taken into consideration (cf. Le Roux & Rouanet, 2004, p. 10).

Of the 1019 respondents, 74% identified as male, 23% as female, and 3% as non-binary. Young adults between 20 and 30 years old constituted the predominant age group at 54%, followed by adults (aged 31–49) at 29%. A secondary school degree was the most common formal education completed (48%), followed by possession of a bachelor's degree (24%). Regular physical activity was fairly equally distributed among the respondents, with 40% going to the gym regularly and 34% practicing physical sports frequently. The majority of the respondents grew up in towns (32%) or hamlets (21%) and most of them identified as middle class during their childhood (45%). Most of the respondents were students (47%) or white-collar workers (30%) and the majority had a monthly income below 10 000 SEK before tax (29%) or an income between 11 and 15 000 SEK before tax (20%). No vetting was conducted prior to sending out the link, as the aim of the study was not to concentrate only on recruiting professional players, but, instead, to reach out to a varied player base of

professionals and novices, hardcore gamers and casual gamers alike. This was done in awarenessthat the default mode of conducting player studies solely with professional players has been criticised (e.g., Kirschner & Williams, 2013), and that previous studies have already been part and parcel in maintaining the definitions of 'real' games and 'real' gamers (e.g., Consalvo & Paul, 2019). Of the 1019 respondents, 61% answered that they self-identified as 'gamers', meaning that the final sample consisted of players playing digital games in varying ways—either in the form of active identity work or as a less reflected leisure activity. Some of the reasons respondents chose not to label themselves as 'gamers' were specified in their open text answers. Some did not wish to identify with toxic male stereotypes or racist and sexist gatekeeping, others did not regard themselves as gamers as a 'gamer' is thought to engage in the more competitive or social forms of gaming. Some questioned the utility of the English word 'gamer' to describe a Swedish player of digital games by comparing the word to cinema enthusiasts not labelling themselves "moviers" (both words, furthermore, do not blend in easily with the morphology of the Swedish language). Finally, as the open text answers hint, the English word 'gaming' itself might have excluded some respondents from even feeling targeted by the survey.

Distribution

In an attempt at reaching out to as many and to as different players as possible—in order to map the contemporary Swedish gaming culture—and given the lack of a national register of all active players of digital games in Sweden, a link to an open, self-administered digital questionnaire was spread in a myriad of fields. As the aim of the study was to analyse the gaming phenomenon, rather than to simply quantify it, purposeful sampling, in combination with snowball sampling, was used when spreading the questionnaire among diverse player groups. Initially, the link to the questionnaire was sent out to all the administrators at all universities in Sweden, with the hopes that the link would be spread among faculty members as well as students, to ensure a geographical spreading. The link to the questionnaire was also sent to teachers at all upper secondary schools in Sweden with an esports profile at the time, as well as to employees at some of the leading retail companies dealing in gaming gear, in order to reach out to respondents outside of academia. Moreover, the link was spread to some Swedish game design studios to gather voices from the professional gaming scene in Sweden. Finally, the link was spread among the Swedish Esports Confederation and the Swedish gaming association Sverok, as well as at different Swedish Internet forums dedicated to digital gaming. In total, the questionnaire was initiated by 1401 individuals, of which 1022 individuals completed the survey and sent in their answers.

Data cleansing and missing values

Of the 1022 responses, one informant expressed null interest in gaming, and was thus removed from the final sample. Additionally, responses to all questions presented on the six pages of the questionnaire were initially required for the respondents to progress in the questionnaire. However, some respondents were somehow

capable of skipping certain questions. Thus, a few missing values appeared in the harvested data. In two cases, these were irreparably large, and thus these two respondents were excluded from the final sample (*n*=1019). In the other few cases of missing values, these instances were interpreted as negative replies to the specific questions asked. After completed data cleansing, the response rate reached 72%.

Questions with response alternatives on the five-point Likert scale were re-coded into three alternatives instead. Questions regarding game genres played (Table 4) or occupations of the respondents and their parents (Table 5) were clustered into new categories based on genre similarities and colours of different collars, respectively. As social status is felt rather than registered, the respondents were asked to specify their social status during their childhood. Of these, 25 (2,5%) were unsure of their social status. These cases were placed in their respective class categories depending on the collars of their parents (white–white=upper middle class; white–blue=middle class; white–pink=middle class; blue–blue=working class; pink–pink=working class; blue–pink=working class). If the parents were unemployed, they were coded as working class.

Smartphone or tablet users were likewise few at only 25 respondents (2,5%). These were clustered with business computer or business laptop users to form the category business device, given that smartphones and tablets constitute business necessities rather than private luxuries in contemporary Sweden.

Correspondence analysis

Multiple correspondence analysis (MCA) was chosen as the methodological vehicle to analyse the data, given the attested exploratory power of the method to discern patterns in large amounts of data of a vast and varied character (cf. Le Roux & Rouanet, 2004, p. 14).

Following Bourdieu (1984), a relational approach to the gaming field was followed. In MCA, the scattered points plotted out in the graph are not fixed coordinates. Rather, their position is dependent on the position of the other variables. The MCA was carried out in Coheris Analytics SPAD 9.2 (www.chapsvision.com).

The questions used in the construction of the space were structured to have about an equal number of variables and modalities, to avoid a disproportionate magnitude of some questions (Le Roux & Rouanet, 2004, p. 214). The modalities were further grouped into three batteries based on Bourdieu's (1986) notions of cultural, social, and economic forms of capital (see Tables 1 & 2).

The response modalities were checked for infrequency (response rates less than 5%; Le Roux & Rouanet, 2004, p. 216) and modalities with less than 5% response rates were clustered with similar modalities to reduce outliers. The supplementary variables chosen as structuring factors of the cloud of individuals (Le Roux & Rouanet, 2004, p. 237) were based on typical socioeconomic background variables, such as

gender, age, income, birthplace, childhood class, occupation, parents' occupation, and game genres played (see Table 3). Finally, concentration ellipses (Le Roux & Rouanet, 2004, pp. 237–241) were drawn around the variables gender, game genre, and esports education in order to summarise the subclouds (see figures 7 & 8 in the appendix). For information about the variances of the axes and the contributions of the categories, see tables 8–13 in the appendix.

Analysis

Primary analysis

In the primary analysis of the data, responses from all 1019 respondents were taken into account when constructing the gaming field (Fig. 1 & 2) and the cloud of individuals inhabiting it (Fig. 3). The analysis incorporated 47 active variables and 96 categories. When interpreting the position of the variables in Fig. 1, the first axis appears to oppose the possession of luxury gaming gear and the importance of social aspects with a total lack and disinterest in said aspects. The second axis seems to oppose parental interest in one's gaming activities and the importance of cultural aspects in one's gaming activities with a complete disinterest in the same.

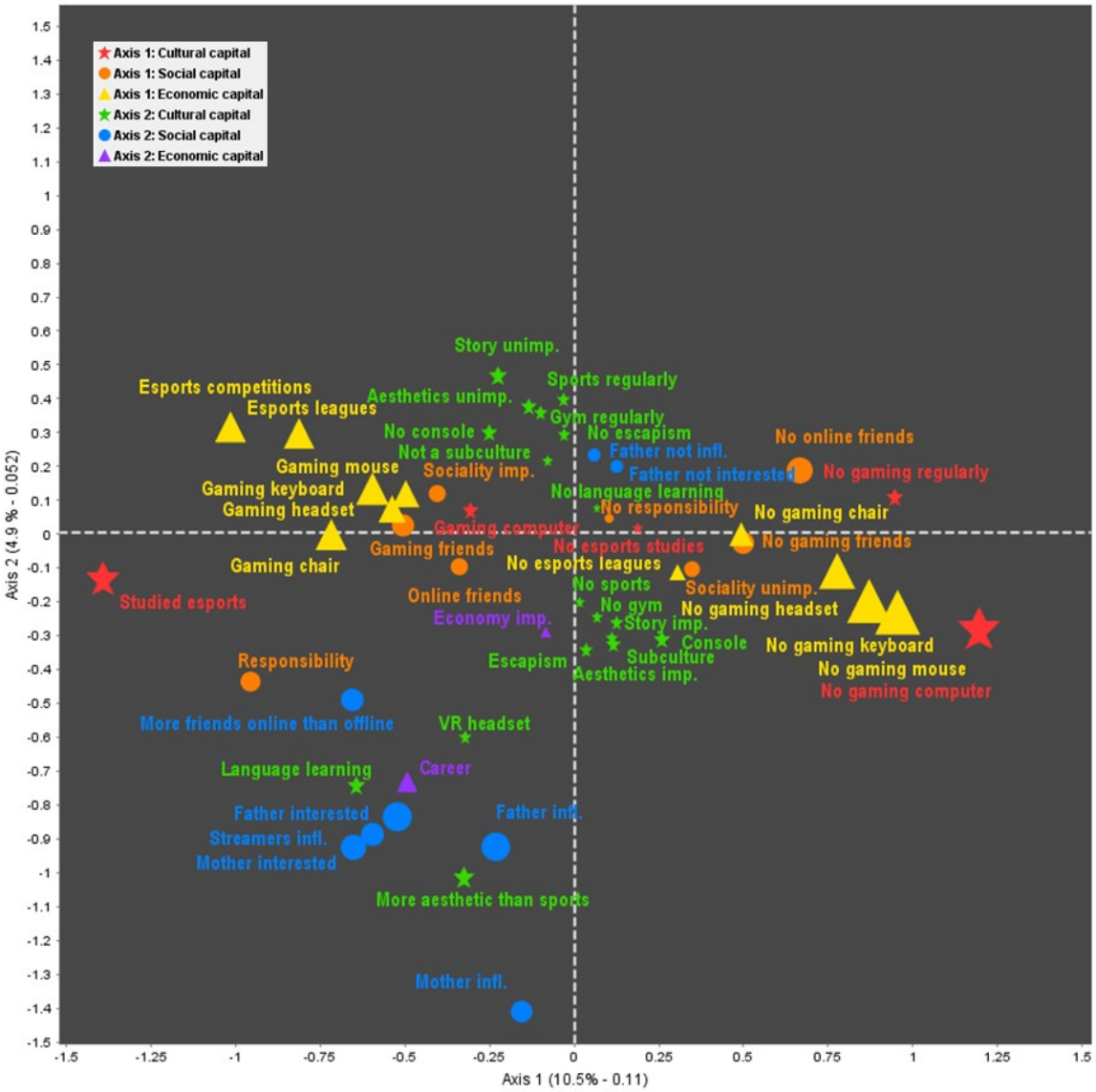

Figure 1. The Swedish gaming field. Cloud of categories in plane 1 & 2. Categories contributing above average to axis 1 and 2. Size of markers is proportional to their contribution.

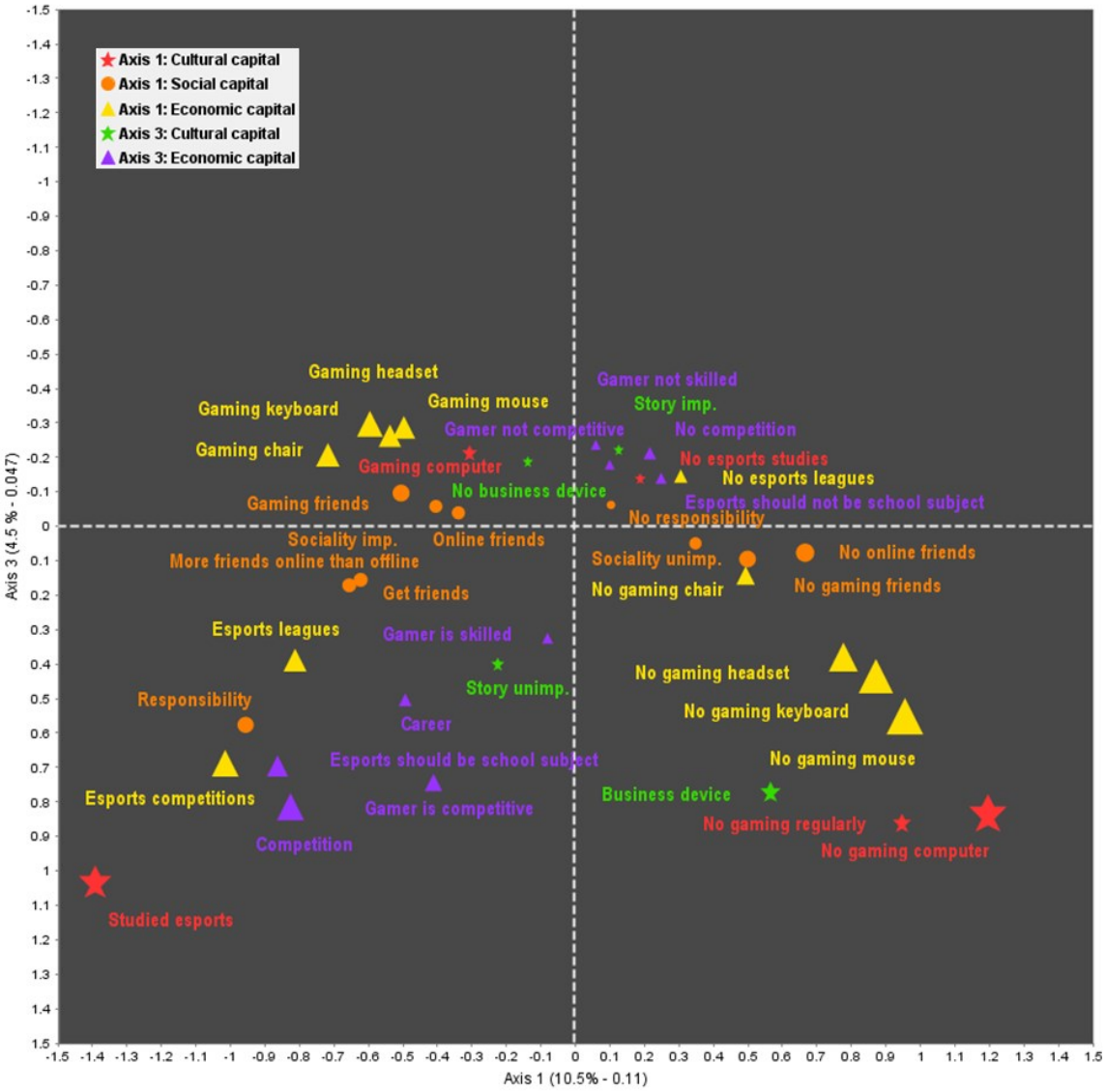

Figure 2. The Swedish gaming field. Cloud of categories in plane 1 & 3. Categories contributing over average to axis 1 and 3. Size of markers is proportional to their contribution.

As the distinctions identified in the primary analysis were mostly related to age differences and thus generational shifts in taste and socialisation practices (see Fig. 3), a continued analysis was carried out, in which the case of younger players was taken into consideration.

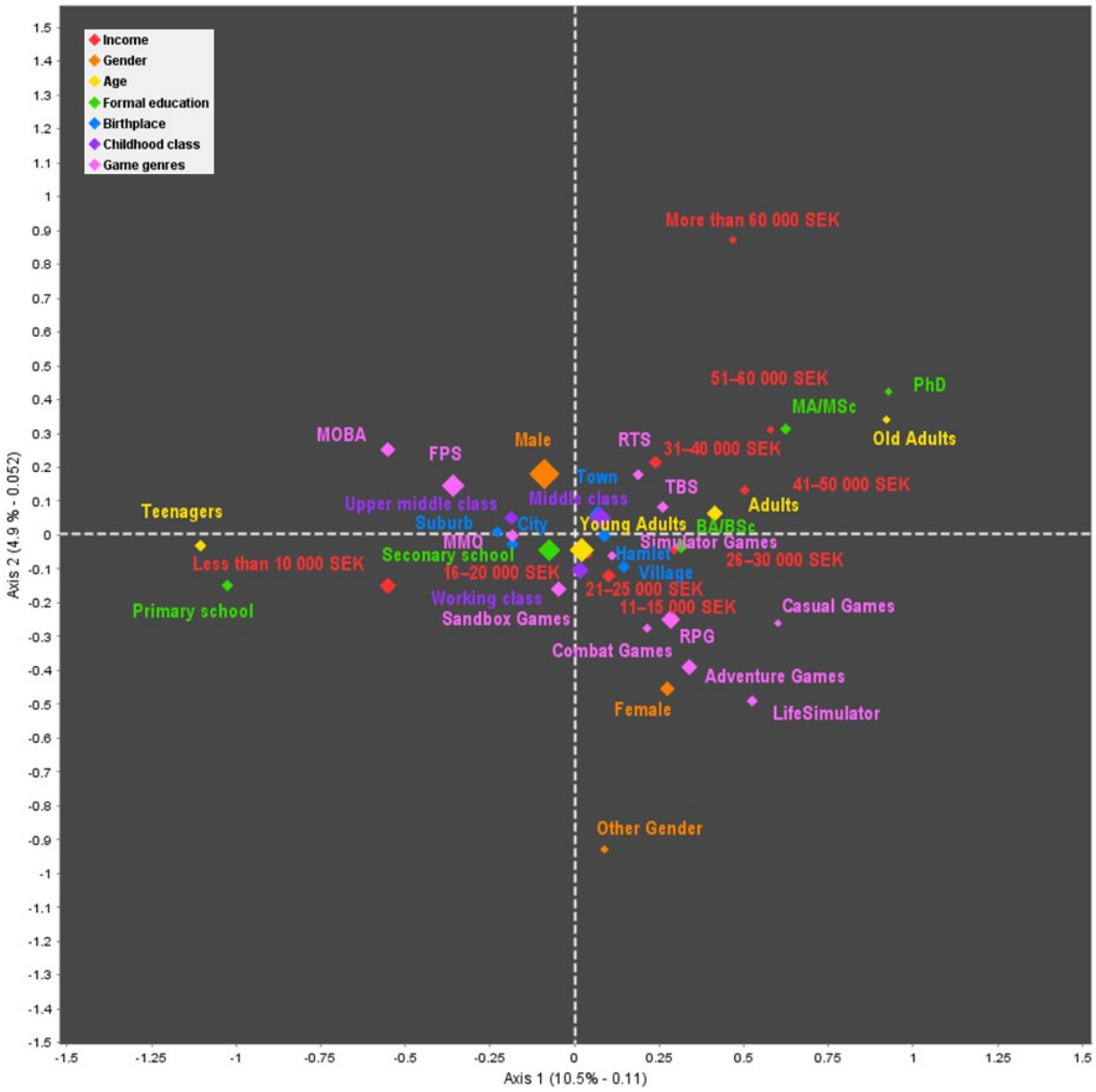

Figure 3. Cloud of categories (plane 1 & 2). Supplementary variables.

Continued analysis

For the second analysis, young Swedish players aged 15–30 years old (*n*=699) were selected from the total number of responses to the survey (*n*=1019). The analysis was based on the same 47 active variables and 96 categories as earlier, based on an operationalisation of the concepts cultural, social, and economic capital (see Table 1). When interpreting the cloud of categories, the first principal axis seems to oppose devotion–competition and casualness–indifference, whereas the second axis seems to oppose family influence and physical activity (see Fig. 4). The third axis (Fig. 5) seems to oppose professionality and hobbyism.

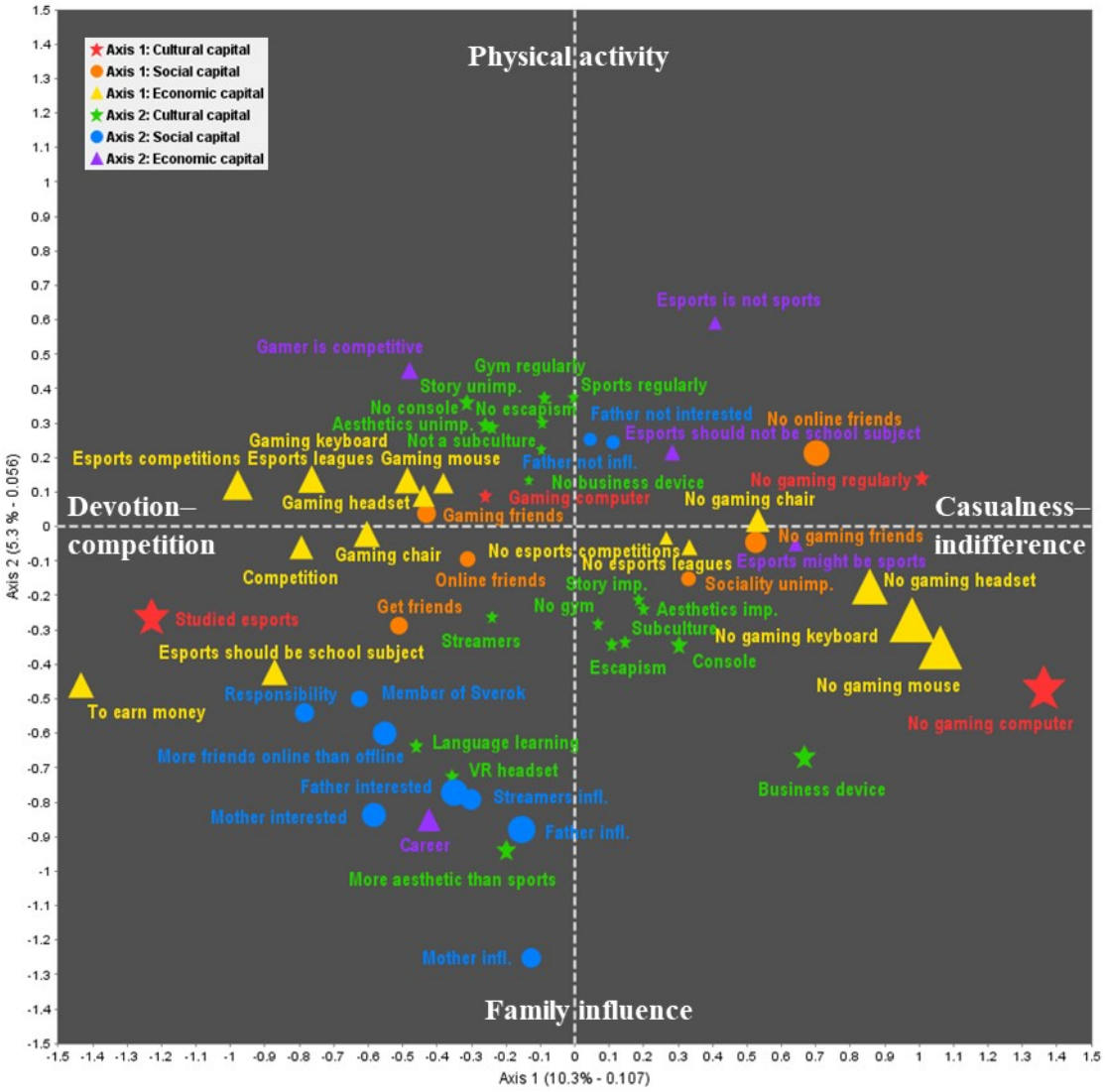

Figure 4. The Swedish gaming field. Cloud of categories in plane 1 & 2. Categories contributing over average to axis 1 and 2. Size of markers is proportional to their contribution.

Axis 1: Devotion-competition vs casualness-indifference

The categories contributing above the mean to the formation of the first axis revolve around the opposition between being aligned with the esports part of the gaming field (having studied esports, playing to earn money, valuing competition, following esports leagues) and not being aligned with said part. Moreover, having luxury gaming equipment (gaming chairs, gaming keyboards, gaming computers, gaming mice) is opposed to not requiring such equipment to carry out one's gaming activities. Interestingly, the axis also opposes having friends online and pursuing gaming in order to get friends with not having online friends. The axis can thus be interpreted as distinguishing high economic and social capital on the left side and overall low economic and social capital on the right. This distinction between the devoted form of gaming as entertainment and the more casual form of gaming as relaxation reflects the depiction provided by previous research (cf. Kallio et al., 2011).

Axis 2: Family influence vs physical activity

The categories contributing above the mean to the formation of the second axis revolve around the opposition of family influence and physical activity. The lower pole of the axis shows notions of family influence and various forms of social capital (responsibility for one's gaming friends, membership in Sverok or other gaming associations, and having more friends online than offline) and cultural capital (aesthetics of the game and the pursuit of learning languages being important in one's reason for gaming). At the higher pole of the axis, a lack of family interest in one's gaming activities is seen, along with an emphasis on physical sports and gym visits in between one's gaming sessions. The second axis, thus, can be said to distinguish between high social and cultural capital in the lower pole, and low social and cultural capital (but high bodily capital) in the higher pole. In terms of typology, the analysis reveals a distinction between cultural family players and sporty solo players.

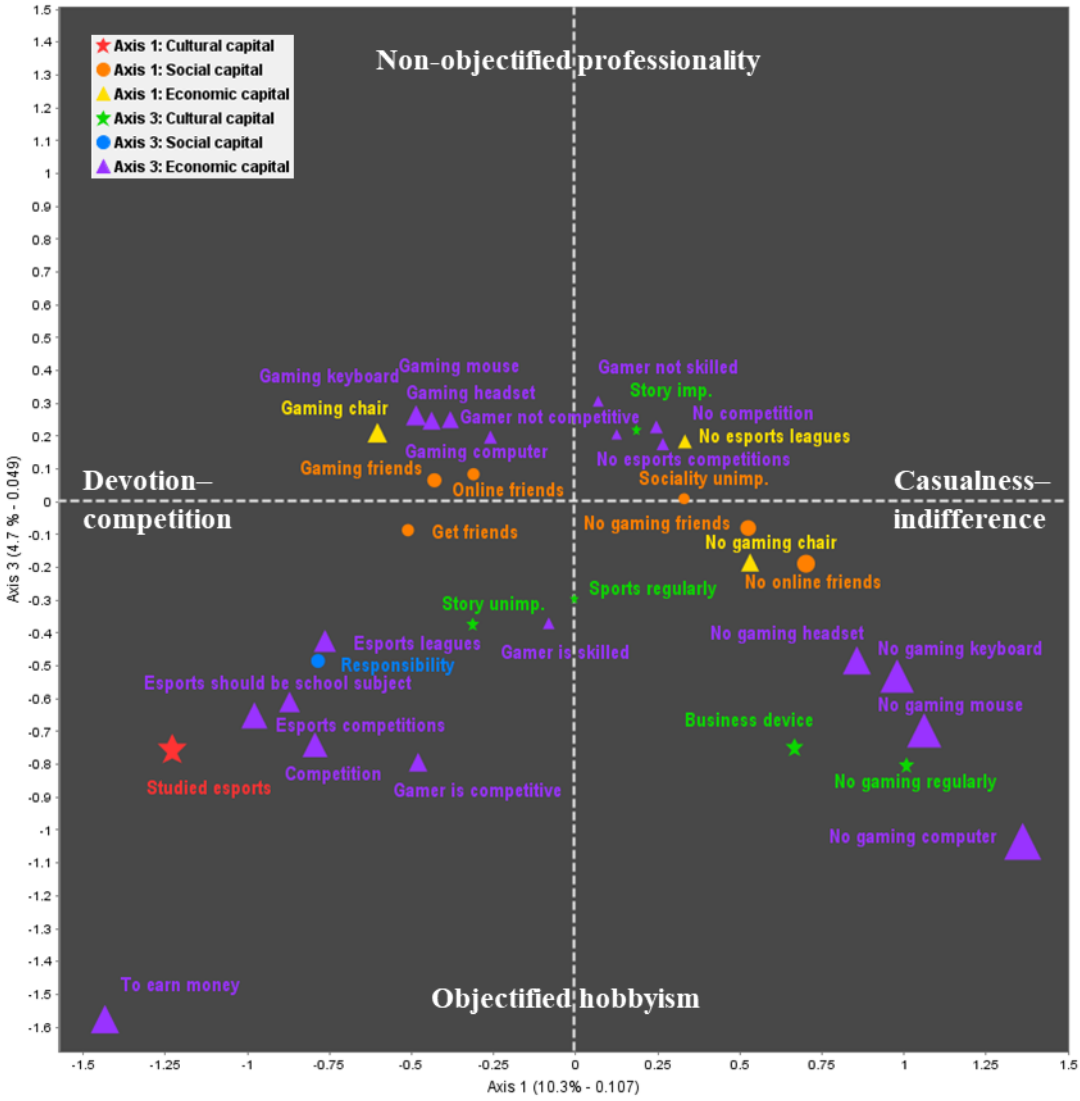

Figure 5. The Swedish gaming field. Cloud of categories in plane 1 & 2. Categories contributing over average to axis 1 and 2. Size of markers is proportional to their contribution.

Axis 3: Non-objectified professionality vs objectified hobbyism

The categories contributing above the mean to the formation of the third axis are similar to the ones structuring the first and second axes, but distinguishes non-objectified professionality from objectified hobbyism, in the sense that economic capital (luxury gaming gear) and ideas of the gamer not being competitive are opposed to a lack of luxury gaming gear and yet, at the same time, a highly competitive idea of the gamer identity. This indicates that players may indeed possess the gear needed to indulge in gaming without regarding the gaming activity as an intrinsically competitive one. This coincides with the findings put forth by Rambusch et al. (2007) in their study on professional competitive Counter-Strike players, who "don't put too much faith into the connection between equipment and performance", stressing instead that being a professional player "is to be able to perform well with any (combination of) equipment" (p. 160).

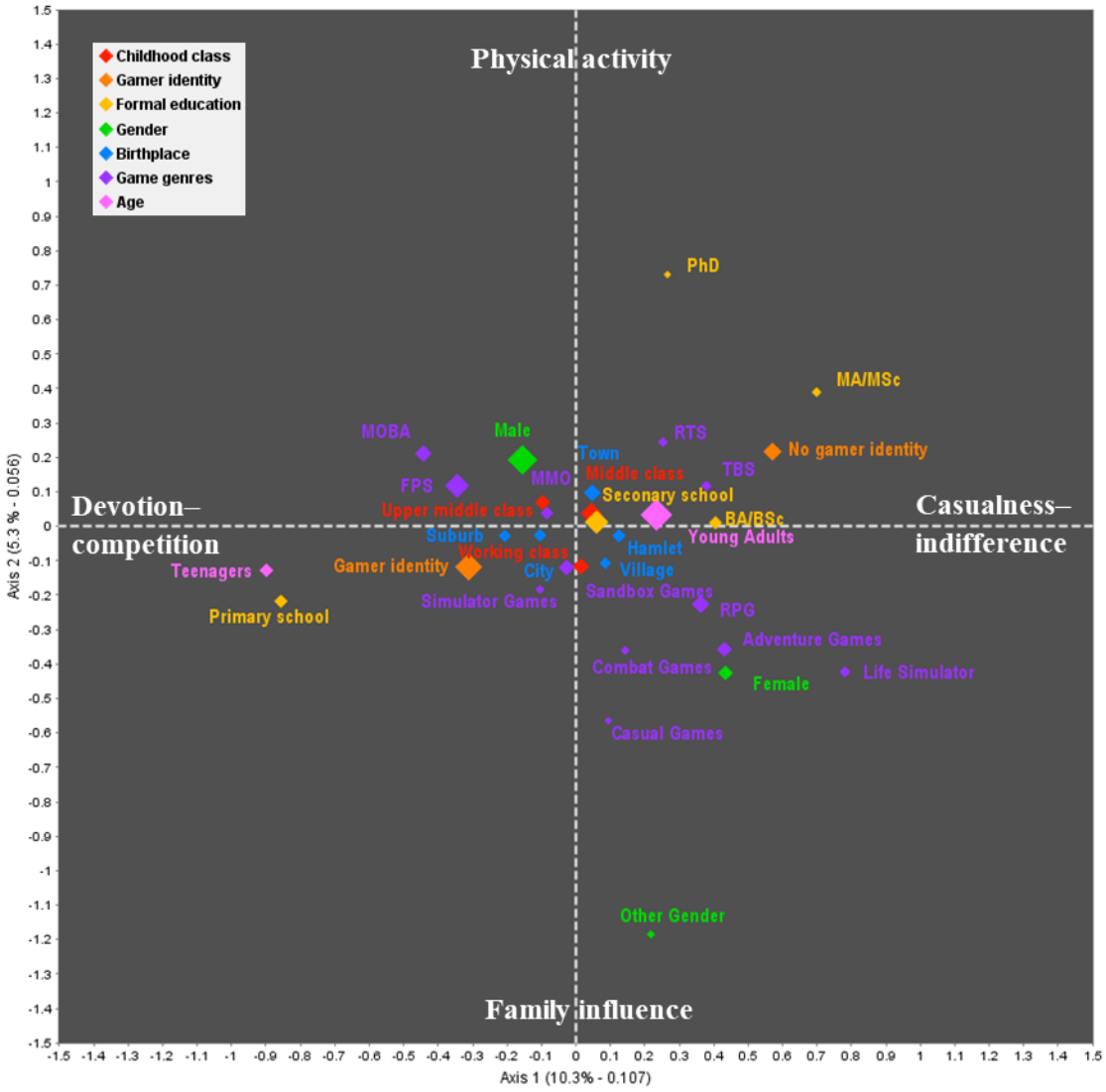

Figure 6. Cloud of categories (plane 1 & 2). Supplementary variables.

Adding the supplementary variables to the Euclidean space

When adding the supplementary variables to the gaming field (Fig. 6), the following becomes apparent: there is a difference between, on the one hand, the gaming habits of male players, and on the other, the gaming habits of female players and non-binary players, which indicates a gender-distinguished practice. For instance, in terms of socialisation, the entrance into and the sustainment inside the gaming culture is free from family influence for male players, whereas female and non-binary players report a feeling of interest in their gaming activities shown by their parents—and in terms of esports education, it is clearly a male-exclusive area. Male players also exhibit playstyles which generate a high social capital in that they have many friends to play with and they choose to play multiplayer online games, whereas female players and non-binary players exhibit playing styles which lean more towards singleplayer games. This closeted gaming identity among female and non-binary players is cognate with Taylor's notion that these players often do not even know that their friends play (cf. Taylor, 2008).

Additionally, in terms of accumulated economic capital, male players are distinguished in the sense that they are keener to invest in luxury gaming gear, whereas female players and non-binary players seem content in playing more casually on business devices. Moreover, in relation to the gender distinction, there is a difference between game genres played, with the genres MOBA and Life Simulator being the farthest away from each other—suggesting a gender-distinguished preference for competitive games among male players and construction-and-caring games among female players and non-binary players (cf. Berry et al., 2014; Kowert et al., 2017). In addition, the distinction between the online and multiplayer nature of male-preferred genres and the offline and singleplayer nature of female-preferred and non-binary-preferred ones suggests a field logic wherein social aspects seem more important among male players than among female players and non-binary players. Male players also exhibit a preference for physical sports and going to the gym—that is, a high bodily capital—whereas female players and non-binary players are positioned in proximity to the ludic importance of aesthetics (a high cultural capital). Taken altogether, this hints that, in the typology suggested by Muriel & Crawford (2018), Swedish male players position themselves as hardcore subcultural gamers whereas Swedish female players and Swedish non-binary players position themselves as ludic foodie-connoisseurs or casual gamers. Similarly to the distinctions of Norwegian players expressed in Klevjer & Hovden (2017), Swedish male players play games because of an interest in action and sport, whereas Swedish female players and Swedish non-binary players play games from an artistic or cultural interest. Put differently, male players engage in "militainment"—enjoying FPS, MOBA, and MMO (cf. Taylor & Voorhees, 2018)—whereas female players and non-binary players engage in "edutainment" (Life Simulator, RPG, Sandbox Games). The reification of the distinction between "boy games" and "girl games" and "non-binary games", thus, is visible in the analysis (cf. Taylor, 2008).

Interestingly, however, birthplace and class identity during childhood are all found around the origin of the axes, hinting that the Swedish gaming culture would transcend class barriers. This is arguable from the point that the overall volume of accumulated gaming-related capital does not follow social class or monthly income (see Fig. 3). In contrast, if contemporary gaming culture is regarded as a 'middle-brow' form of art in the Bourdieusian sense (1985), this apparent lack of class distinctions within the Swedish gaming field could be explained by the need for game designers to reach out to a wide public, thereby inhibiting a production and consumption logic determined and limited by social class. Regardless, contrary to previous research (cf. Andrews, 2008; Livingstone, 2002; Vilasís-Pamos & Pérez-Latorre, 2022), clear class distinctions are not seen in the gaming habits of Swedish players, as the present analysis does not capture any field mechanisms based on social class distinctions dictating the selection of agents entering the field.

Furthermore, there are apparent age distinctions, in the sense that teenagers are more devoted to their gaming activities than older players, and that younger people are keener to label themselves as 'gamers'. This is also an expression of the gendered division of the gamer identity: male players more often identify as gamers than female players and non-binary players do (cf. Paaßen et al., 2017). This means, then, that the self-identifying gamers—associated with stereotypical behaviours originating from the gender-distinguished consumption logic—are males who can more easily, naturally, or effortlessly enter the field of gaming (cf. De Grove et al., 2015). Moreover, as the analysis shows, young males who frequently play first-person shooters and massive multiplayer online roleplaying games are the ones among Swedish players who more often self-identify as gamers, which suggests that the traditional male gamer stereotype exists as more than a mere stereotype (cf. Stone, 2019). This implies a gender-distinguished and an age-related gap in gaming practices, which restricts present dispositions and future trajectories among the agents of the gaming field, in that entrance to the field remains gender-gated and age-gated, and that securing a higher position (by means of accumulating field-specific capital) becomes an unequal project, as new male players already start out in a privileged position given the logics of the gaming field.

Conclusions

The point of departure for this study was to identify the distinctions which define the Swedish field of gaming as a practice. As the multiple correspondence analyses have shown, the Swedish gaming practice is distinguished primarily by an absolute devotion to the gaming pastime alongside a conviction of the importance of competition within gaming, which is contrasted to a more casual or indifferent way of gaming. Moreover, the gaming activity is distinguished by parental influence and social values versus more individualistic forms of gaming (which incidentally includes a higher focus on physical activity outside of gaming).

The analysis has furthermore led to three major results regarding the players themselves. First, the contemporary field of Swedish gaming is still a gender-distinguished practice, where players of different gender identities prefer different games and play them with different amounts of ambition and devotion. More specifically, male players are predominantly positioned close to the esports genres of MOBA and FPS, as well as the community-driven genre MMO. In contrast, female players and non-binary players are positioned closer to the single-player genres of RPG, adventure games, and life simulators. Secondly, class habitus does not seem to dictate one's gaming preferences, hinting that the digital gaming culture transcends class habitus, or, to put it differently, that one's online habitus is not necessarily dependent on one's offline habitus. This is seen in how all three felt classes during childhood are found at the origin of the cloud of supplementary categories. Birthplaces are likewise scattered alongside the origin. Thirdly, gamer identity is something which pertains to the youngest players—teenagers proudly declaring that they describe themselves as gamers, whereas young-adult players refrain from applying the epithet.

In conclusion, some light on the peculiarities of the inner workings of the digital gaming field has been shed—and we now know that primary socialisation does direct practices in certain ways—but, as Kirschner & Williams (2013) note, focusing "on players who have already been socialised into a game … is to miss pivotal moments in the socialisation process" (p. 16). Thus, the search for the answer to the question of *how gamers become the gamers they become* continues.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. For instance, the sample was not drawn from a randomised portion of the population, which could lead to a sampling bias. However, no registered population of digital players or gamers exists in Sweden, which renders such a criterion impossible to satisfy. Moreover, as the number of internal non-responses (382) was quite high, the response rate is relatively low (72%). This likewise risks contributing to a skewed sample, as some respondents might have felt excluded by the focus of certain questions (such as the themes stressing social interaction in gaming), or the language employed (specifically the words 'gamer' and 'gaming' themselves). Furthermore, no measures of statistical significance have been carried out, and thus the results cannot be generalised to the larger population. However, correspondence analysis does not deal with the statistical concept of significance and representativity. Rather, it is to be thought of as a qualitative method, in the sense that it shows patterns and identifies themes. Moreover, the results of this study cannot be tested without a theory, i.e., a priori, but must be tested a posteriori.

Now that patterns have been identified, hypotheses can be made about the Swedish digital players and gamers. One way of continuing the work based on these findings would be to utilise unbound random samples on all the registered students in digital

game design or pupils enrolled in esports training programmes. Another way to continue the analysis would be to concentrate on interpreting the third axis by adding the supplementary variables into it.

Defending the methodology employed in this study by pointing out that Bourdieu himself did the same thing is certainly tempting, but an altogether too fervent belief in past masters would be akin to cargo cult science.

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Appendix

Table 2

47 active variables and 96 categories with absolute (*n*) and relative (%) frequencies (*n*=1019).

CULTURAL CAPITAL			SOCIAL CAPITAL			ECONOMIC CAPITAL		
Variables/Categories	***n***	**%**	**Variables/Categories**	***n***	**%**	**Variables/Categories**	***n***	**%**
1. Esports education			18. Getting friends			34. Compete esports		
Esports studies-yes	121	11,9	Get friends-yes	223	21,9	Compete-yes	186	18,3
Esports studies-no	898	88,1	Get friends-no	796	78,1	Compete-no	833	81,7
2. Physical sports			19. Spouse or child			35. Esports subject		
Physical sports-yes	341	33,5	Family infl-yes	32	3,1	Esports subject-yes	161	15,8
Physical sports-no	678	66,5	Family infl-no	987	96,9	Esports subject-no	672	65,9
						Esports subject-may	186	18,3
3. Gym visits			20. Online friends			36. Esports is sports		
Gym visits-yes	412	40,4	Online friends-yes	675	66,2	Esports sports-yes	718	70,5
Gym visits-no	607	59,6	Online friends-no	344	33,8	Esports sports-no	128	12,6
						Esports sports-may	173	17,0
4. Gaming regularly			21. More than offline			37. Gamer is skilled		
Gaming-yes	923	90,6	More offline-yes	198	19,4	Skilled-yes	430	42,2
Gaming-no	96	9,4	More offline-no	821	80,6	Skilled-no	589	57,8
5. Follows streamers			22. Sverok member			38. Is competitive		
Streamers-yes	414	40,6	Sverok-yes	147	14,4	Competitive-yes	198	19,4
Streamers-no	605	59,4	Sverok-no	872	85,6	Competitive-no	821	80,6
6. Gamer is erudite			23. Team spirit imp.			39. Competition imp.		
Erudite-yes	279	27,4	Team spirit-yes	303	29,7	Competition-yes	211	20,7
Erudite-no	740	72,6	Team spirit-no	716	70,3	Competition-no	808	79,3
7. Creativity imp.			24. Mother infl.			40. Moneymaking		
Creativity-yes	589	57,8	Mother infl-yes	62	6,1	Money imp-yes	59	5,8
Creativity-no	430	42,2	Mother infl-no	957	93,9	Money imp-no	960	94,2
8. Learn languages			25. Father infl.			41. Price imp.		
Language-yes	96	9,4	Father infl-yes	206	20,2	Price imp-yes	327	32,1
Language-no	923	90,3	Father infl-no	813	79,8	Price imp-no	692	67,9
9. Graphics imp.			26. Siblings infl.			42. Gamer is career		
Graphics-yes	548	53,8	Siblings infl-yes	325	31,9	Career-yes	154	15,1
Graphics-no	471	46,2	Siblings infl-no	694	68,1	Career-no	865	84,9
10. Story imp.			27. Friends infl.			43. Follows esports		
Story-yes	655	64,3	Friends infl-yes	678	66,5	Esports leagues-yes	278	27,3
Story-no	364	35,7	Friends infl-no	341	33,5	Esports leagues-no	741	72,7
11. Is a subculture			28. Streamers infl.			44. Gaming chair**		
Subculture-yes	423	41,5	Streamers infl-yes	119	11,7	Chair-yes	415	40,7
Subculture-no	596	58,5	Streamers infl-no	900	88,3	Chair-no	604	59,3
12. Game computer			29. Father interest			45. Game mouse**		
Gaming comp-yes	811	79,6	Father interest-yes	197	19,3	Mouse-yes	670	65,8
Gaming comp-no	208	20,4	Father interest-no	822	80,7	Mouse-no	349	34,2
13. Business laptop*			30. Mother interest			46. Game keyboard**		
Business comp-yes	200	19,6	Mother interest-yes	122	12,0	Keyboard-yes	605	59,4
Business comp-no	819	80,4	Mother interest-no	897	88,0	Keyboard-no	414	40,6
14. Game console			31. Friends imp.			47. Game headset**		
Console-yes	502	49,3	Friends imp-yes	506	49,7	Headset-yes	602	59,1
Console-no	517	50,7	Friends imp-no	513	50,3	Headset-no	417	40,9
15. VR headset			32. Responsibility					
VR-yes	105	10,3	Responsibility-yes	99	9,7			
VR-no	914	89,7	Responsibility-no	920	90,3			
16. Is more aesthetic			33. Sociality imp.					
Aesthetic-yes	109	10,7	Sociality imp-yes	471	46,2			
Aesthetic-no	910	89,3	Sociality imp-no	548	53,8			
17. Escapism imp.								
Escapism-yes	472	46,3						
Escapism-no	547	53,7						

* The variable business laptop contains business laptops, business computers, digital tablets, and smartphones, that is, digital devices primarily associated with workplace settings rather than informal settings.

** The variables gaming mouse, gaming keyboard, gaming chair, and gaming headset were coded as belonging to economic capital, as these assets do not function as portals into the gaming world, but rather as luxury objects which improve gameplay, and which can thus be seen as enhancing the experience of an esports athlete.

Table 3

Demographic data of the gamers, divided into perceived social standing during childhood. 1,019 respondents. Percent in parentheses.

	Working class ***n* 332 (32,6)**	**Middle class** ***n* 469 (46,0)**	**Upper middle class** ***n* 218 (21,4)**	**Total** ***n* 1019 (100)**
Gender				
Male	235 70,8)	364 (77,6)	153 (70,2)	752 (73,8)
Female	84 (25,3)	92 (19,6)	60 (27,5)	236 (23,2)
Other	13 (39)	13 (2,8)	5 (2,3)	31 (3,0)
Gamer identity				
Identifies as gamer	210 (63,3)	272 (58,9)	139 (63,8)	621 (60,9)
No gamer identity	122 (36,7)	197 (42,0)	79 (36,2)	398 (39,1)
Age group				
Teenagers (15–19 yrs)	34 (10,2)	70 (14,9)	40 (18,3)	144 (14,1)
Young Adults (20–30 yrs)	172 (51,8)	248 (52,9)	135 (61,9)	555 (54,5)
Adults (31–49 yrs)	114 (34,3)	137 (29,2)	39 (17,9)	290 (28,5)
Old Adults (50–65 yrs)	12 (3,6)	14 (3,0)	4 (1,8)	30 (2,9)
Formal education				
Primary school	36 (10,8)	67 (14,3)	36 (16,5)	139 (13,6)
Secondary school	156 (47,0)	217 (46,3)	111 (50,9)	484 (47,5)
BA/BSc	93 (28,0)	112 (23,9)	40 (18,3)	245 (24,0)
MA/MSc	38 (11,4)	60 (12,8)	27 (12,4)	125 (12,3)
PhD	9 (2,7)	13 (2,8)	4 (1,8)	26 (2,6)
Income before tax				
< 10 000 SEK	85 (25,6)	132 (28,1)	78 (35,8)	295 (28,9)

11–15 000 SEK	63 (19,0)	101 (21,5)	44 (20,2)	208 (20,4)
16–20 000 SEK	17 (5,1)	23 (4,9)	11 (5,0)	51 (5,0)
21–25 000 SEK	17 (5,1)	24 (5,1)	13 (6,0)	54 (5,3)
26–30 000 SEK	34 (10,2)	45 (9,6)	12 (5,5)	188 (8,9)
31–40 000 SEK	70 (21,1)	83 (17,7)	35 (16,1)	82 (18,4)
41–50 000 SEK	31 (9,3)	34 (7,2)	17 (7,8)	30 (8,0)
51–60 000 SEK	11 (3,3)	15 (3,2)	4 (1,8)	30 (2,9)
> 60 000 SEK	4 (1,2)	12 (2,6)	4 (1,8)	20 (2,0)
Birthplace				
Hamlet	93 (28,0)	93 (19,8)	24 (11,0)	210 (20,6)
Village	62 (18,7)	81 (17,3)	26 (11,9)	169 (16,6)
Town	95 (28,6)	152 (32,4)	74 (33,9)	321 (31,5)
Suburb	35 (10,5)	64 (13,6)	41 (18,8)	140 (13,7)
City	47 (14,2)	79 (16,8)	53 (24,3)	179 (17,6)
Occupation				
White-collar	115 (34,6)	130 (27,7)	58 (26,6)	303 (29,7)
Blue-collar	26 (7,8)	28 (6,0)	6 (2,8)	60 (5,9)
Pink-collar	49 (14,8)	70 (14,9)	24 (11,0)	143 (14,0)
Student/no job	142 (42,8)	241 (51,4)	130 (59,6)	41 (4,0)
Works within gaming				
Gaming work	11 (3,3)	18 (3,8)	13 (6,0)	42 (4,1)
Non-gaming work	321 (96,7)	451 (96,2)	205 (94,0)	977 (95,9)
Father's occupation				
White-collar	56 (16,9)	200 (42,6)	161 (73,9)	417 (40,9))
Blue-collar	191 (57,5)	141 (30,1)	26 (11,9)	358 (35,1)
Pink-collar	31 (9,3)	87 (18,6)	25 (11,5)	143 (14,0)
No job/not present	54 (16,3)	41 (8,7)	6 (2,8)	101 (9,9)

Mother's occupation				
White-collar	48 (14,5)	149 (31,8)	113 (51,8)	310 (30,4)
Blue-collar	41 (12,3)	21 (4,5)	2 (0,9)	64 (6,3)
Pink-collar	197 (59,3)	250 (53,3)	91 (41,7)	538 (52,8)
No job/not present	46 (13,9)	49 (10,4)	12 (5,5)	107 (10,5)
Three main game genres*				
MOBA	78 (23,5)	107 (22,8)	65 (29,8)	250 (24,5)
MMO	69 (20,8)	87 (18,6)	25 (11,5)	181 (17,8)
FPS	150 (45,2)	241 (51,4)	111 (50,9)	502 (49,3)
RTS	34 (10,2)	57 (12,2)	30 (13,8)	121 (11,9)
TBS	37 (11,1)	72 (15,4)	27 (12,4)	136 (13,3)
RPG	133 (40,1)	162 (34,5)	80 (36,7)	375 (36,8)
Sandbox	79 (23,8)	141 (30,1)	46 (21,1)	266 (26,1)
Life Simulator	44 (13,3)	49 (10,4)	27 (12,4)	120 (11,8)
Combat	28 (8,4)	25 (5,3)	8 (3,7)	61 (6,0)
Adventure	95 (28,6)	122 (26,0)	157 (72,0)	278 (27,3)
Casual	2 (0,6)	7 (1,5)	5 (2,3)	14 (1,4)
Simulator	22 (6,6)	38 (8,1)	5 (2,3)	65 (6,4)

* Negative responses omitted.

Table 4

Clustering of game genres.

1	MOBA
2	MMO
3	FPS
4	RTS
5	TBS
6	Life Simulation (including city-building)
7	RPG (including ARPG and Roguelikes)
8	Sandbox
9	Combat (combining fighting games, platformers, and brawlers)

10	Adventure
11	Simulator (combining racing, sports games, rhythm games, and flying simulators)
12	Casual (including puzzle games)

Table 5

Clustering of occupations.

1	Healthcare/care	Pink-collar
2	Culture/media/design	White-collar
3	IT/engineering	White-collar
4	Student	Student
5	Unemployed	Unemployed
6	Academia	White-collar
7	Retail	Pink-collar
8	Manual labour	Blue-collar
9	Social work/religious work	Pink-collar
10	Formal education	Pink-collar
11	Administration/economy	White-collar
12	Transport/distribution	Blue-collar
13	Military/police	Blue-collar
14	Restaurants/hotels	Pink-collar
15	Construction/HVAC/electricity	Blue-collar
16	Self-employed	White-collar
17	Natural sciences	White-collar
18	Service	Blue-collar
19	Gaming	White-collar
20	Physical sports	Pink-collar
22	Medicine	White-collar
23	*Parent not present*	*Parent not present*

Table 6

Eigenvalues, percentages, and cumulated percentages for Axes 1–12 in the primary analysis.

Axis	Variance of the axis (eigenvalue)	Percentages of explained variance	Cumulated percentages	Benzécri's modified rates
1	0,107	10,3	10,3	77,2
2	0,056	5.3	15,6	11,7
3	0,049	4,7	20,3	7,6
4	0,040	3,8	24,1	3,4
5	0,034	3,3	27,4	1,6
6	0,033	3,2	20,5	1,3
7	0,029	2,8	33,3	0,6
8	0,029	2,8	36,1	0,5
9	0,027	2,6	38,7	0,4
10	0,026	2,5	41,2	0,3
11	0,026	2,5	43,7	0,2
12	0,025	2,4	46,1	0,1

Table 7

Eigenvalues, percentages, and cumulated percentages for Axes 1–12 in the continued analysis.

Axis	Variance of the axis (eigenvalue)	Percentages of explained variance	Cumulated percentages	Benzécri's modified rates
1	0,110	10,5	10,5	77,7
2	0,052	4,9	15,5	9,0
3	0,047	4,5	20,0	6,7
4	0,037	3,5	23,6	2,4
5	0,033	3,2	26,7	1,4
6	0,032	3,0	29,8	1,1
7	0,028	2,7	32,5	0,5
8	0,028	2,6	35,1	0,4
9	0,027	2,6	37,7	0,3

10	0,026	2,4	40,1	0,2
11	0,025	2,4	42,5	0,1
12	0,024	2,3	44,8	0,1

Table 8

Coordinates of the variables contributing above average (10.53%) to the formation of Axis 1 in the primary analysis.

Category	Weight	Coordinate	Contribution
To earn money	59,000	-1,511	2,6
Studied esports	121,000	-1,392	4,5
Esports competitions	186,000	-1,016	3,6
Responsibility	99,000	-0,956	1,7
Esports should be school subject	161,000	-0,864	2,3
Competition	211,000	-0,826	2,7
Esports leagues	278,000	-0,813	3,5
Gaming chair	415,000	-0,718	4,1
More friends online than offline	198,000	-0,656	1,6
Get friends	223,000	-0,623	1,6
Gaming keyboard	605,000	-0,596	4,1
Gaming headset	602,000	-0,538	3,3
Gaming friends	506,000	-0,506	2,5
Gaming mouse	670,000	-0,498	3,2
Sociality imp.	471,000	-0,405	1,5
Online friends	675,000	-0,339	1,5
Gaming computer	811,000	-0,307	1,5
No esports leagues	741,000	0,305	1,3
Sociality unimp.	548,000	0,348	1,3
No gaming chair	604,000	0,493	2,8
No gaming friends	513,000	0,499	2,4
Business device	200,000	0,565	1,2
No online friends	344,000	0,666	2,9
No gaming headset	417,000	0,777	4,8
No gaming keyboard	414,000	0,871	6,0

No gaming regularly	96,000	0,947	1,6
No gaming mouse	349,000	0,955	6,1
TOTAL			81,7

Table 9

Coordinates of the variables contributing above average (4.94%) to the formation of Axis 2 in the primary analysis.

Category	Weight	Coordinate	Contribution
Mother infl.	62,000	-1,410	5,0
More aesthetic than sports	109,000	-1,012	4,5
Mother interested	122,000	-0,925	4,2
Father infl.	206,000	-0,923	7,1
Streamers infl.	119,000	-0,886	3,8
Father interested	197,000	-0,835	5,6
Language learning	96,000	-0,741	2,1
Career	154,000	-0,730	3,3
VR headset	105,000	-0,599	1,5
More friends online than offline	198,000	-0,489	1,9
Esports might be school subject	186,000	-0,397	1,2
Business device	200,000	-0,389	1,2
Escapism	472,000	-0,341	2,2
Aesthetics imp.	548,000	-0,325	2,3
Console	502,000	-0,310	2,0
Subculture	423,000	-0,306	1,6
Economy imp.	327,000	-0,289	1,1
Story imp.	655,000	-0,261	1,8
No gym	607,000	-0,244	1,5
No sports	678,000	-0,200	1,1
Father not interested	822,000	0,200	1,3
Not a subculture	596,000	0,217	1,1
Father not infl.	813,000	0,234	1,8
Gamer is skilled	430,000	0,275	1,3
No escapism	547,000	0,295	1,9

No console	517,000	0,301	1,9
Gym regularly	412,000	0,360	2,2
Aesthetics unimp.	471,000	0,378	2,7
Sports regularly	341,000	0,398	2,2
Story unimp.	364,000	0,469	3,2
Esports is not sports	128,000	0,531	1,5
Gamer is competitive	198,000	0,614	3,0
TOTAL			79,4

Table 10

Coordinates of the variables contributing above average (4.54%) to the formation of Axis 3 in the primary analysis.

Category	Weight	Coordinate	Contribution
Gaming keyboard	605,000	-0,298	2,4
Gaming mouse	670,000	-0,287	2,4
Gaming headset	602,000	-0,263	1,8
Gamer not skilled	589,000	-0,237	1,5
Story imp.	655,000	-0,222	1,4
Gaming computer	811,000	-0,213	1,6
No competition	808,000	-0,213	1,6
No business device	819,000	-0,188	1,3
Gamer not competitive	821,000	-0,179	1,2
Gamer is skilled	430,000	0,325	2,0
No gaming headset	417,000	0,379	2,6
Esports leagues	278,000	0,388	1,8
Story unimp.	364,000	0,400	2,6
No gaming keyboard	414,000	0,435	3,5
Career	154,000	0,503	1,7
No gaming mouse	349,000	0,551	4,7
Responsibility	99,000	0,576	1,4
Esports competitions	186,000	0,687	3,9
Esports should be school subject	161,000	0,696	3,4
Gamer is competitive	198,000	0,743	4,8

Business device	200,000	0,770	5,2
Competition	211,000	0,814	6,2
No gaming computer	208,000	0,832	6,3
No gaming regularly	96,000	0,860	3,1
Studied esports	121,000	1,031	5,7
To earn money	59,000	1,828	8,7
TOTAL			82,9

Table 11

Coordinates of the variables contributing above average (10.25%) to the formation of Axis 1 in the continued analysis.

Category	Weight	Coordinate	Contribution
To earn money	51,000	-1,434	3,0
Studied esports	117,000	-1,229	5,0
Esports competitions	149,000	-0,979	4,1
Esports should be school subject	128,000	-0,872	2,8
Competition	165,000	-0,794	3,0
Responsibility	81,000	-0,785	1,4
Esports leagues	212,000	-0,764	3,5
Gaming chair	327,000	-0,604	3,4
More friends online than offline	153,000	-0,552	1,3
Get friends	186,000	-0,511	1,4
Gaming keyboard	467,000	-0,486	3,1
Gaming headset	462,000	-0,439	2,5
Gaming friends	384,000	-0,431	2,0
Gaming mouse	514,000	-0,382	2,1
Online friends	484,000	-0,312	1,3
Gaming computer	587,000	-0,260	1,1
No esports competitions	550,000	0,265	1,1
Sociality unimp.	343,000	0,330	1,1
No esports leagues	487,000	0,333	1,5
No gaming friends	315,000	0,525	2,5
No gaming chair	372,000	0,531	3,0

Esports might be sports	111,000	0,641	1,3
Business device	117,000	0,666	1,5
No online friends	215,000	0,701	3,0
No gaming headset	237,000	0,856	4,9
No gaming keyboard	232,000	0,979	6,3
No gaming regularly	54,000	1,008	1,6
No gaming mouse	185,000	1,061	5,9
No gaming computer	112,000	1,362	5,9
TOTAL			80,9

Table 12

Coordinates of the variables contributing above average (5.34 %) to the formation of Axis 2 in the continued analysis.

Category	Weight	Coordinate	Contribution
Mother infl.	48,000	-1,252	4,1
More aesthetic than sports	90,000	-0,938	4,3
Father infl.	156,000	-0,879	6,6
Career	112,000	-0,851	4,4
Mother interested	100,000	-0,837	3,8
Streamers infl.	115,000	-0,792	3,9
Father interested	168,000	-0,772	5,5
VR headset	73,000	-0,725	2,1
Business device	117,000	-0,667	2,8
Language learning	77,000	-0,636	1,7
More friends online than offline	153,000	-0,600	3,0
Responsibility	81,000	-0,540	1,3
Member of Sverok	90,000	-0,500	1,2
No gaming computer	112,000	-0,466	1,3
Esports should be school subject	128,000	-0,422	1,2
No gaming mouse	185,000	-0,351	1,2
Console	323,000	-0,343	2,1
Escapism	328,000	-0,342	2,1
Subculture	280,000	-0,335	1,7

No gym	398,000	-0,282	1,7
Streamers	287,000	-0,262	1,1
Aesthetics imp.	382,000	-0,239	1,2
Story imp.	440,000	-0,212	1,1
Esports should not be school subject	450,000	0,216	1,1
Not a subculture	419,000	0,224	1,1
Father not interested	531,000	0,244	1,7
Father not infl.	543,000	0,253	1,9
Aesthetics unimp.	317,000	0,288	1,4
No console	376,000	0,295	1,8
No escapism	371,000	0,302	1,9
Story unimp.	259,000	0,360	1,8
Gym regularly	301,000	0,373	2,3
Sports regularly	237,000	0,374	1,8
Gamer is competitive	144,000	0,453	1,6
Esports is not sports	78,000	0,592	1,5
TOTAL			79,7

Table 13

Coordinates of the variables contributing above average (4.7 %) to the formation of Axis 3 in the continued analysis.

Category	Weight	Coordinate	Contribution
To earn money	51,000	-1,576	7,9
No gaming computer	112,000	-1,034	7,4
No gaming regularly	54,000	-0,802	2,2
Gamer is competitive	144,000	-0,793	5,6
Studied esports	117,000	-0,752	4,1
Business device	117,000	-0,747	4,1
Competition	165,000	-0,739	5,6
No gaming mouse	185,000	-0,696	5,6
Esports competitions	149,000	-0,651	3,9
Esports should be school subject	128,000	-0,609	3,0
No gaming keyboard	232,000	-0,531	4,1

Responsibility	81,000	-0,485	1,2
No gaming headset	237,000	-0,483	3,4
Esports leagues	212,000	-0,423	2,4
Story unimp.	259,000	-0,372	2,2
Gamer is skilled	317,000	-0,370	2,7
Sports regularly	237,000	-0,295	1,3
No esports competitions	550,000	0,176	1,1
Gaming computer	587,000	0,197	1,4
Gamer not competitive	555,000	0,206	1,5
Story imp.	440,000	0,219	1,3
No competition	534,000	0,228	1,7
Gaming headset	462,000	0,248	1,8
Gaming mouse	514,000	0,250	2,0
Gaming keyboard	467,000	0,264	2,0
Gamer not skilled	382,000	0,307	2,2
TOTAL			81,5

Figure 7

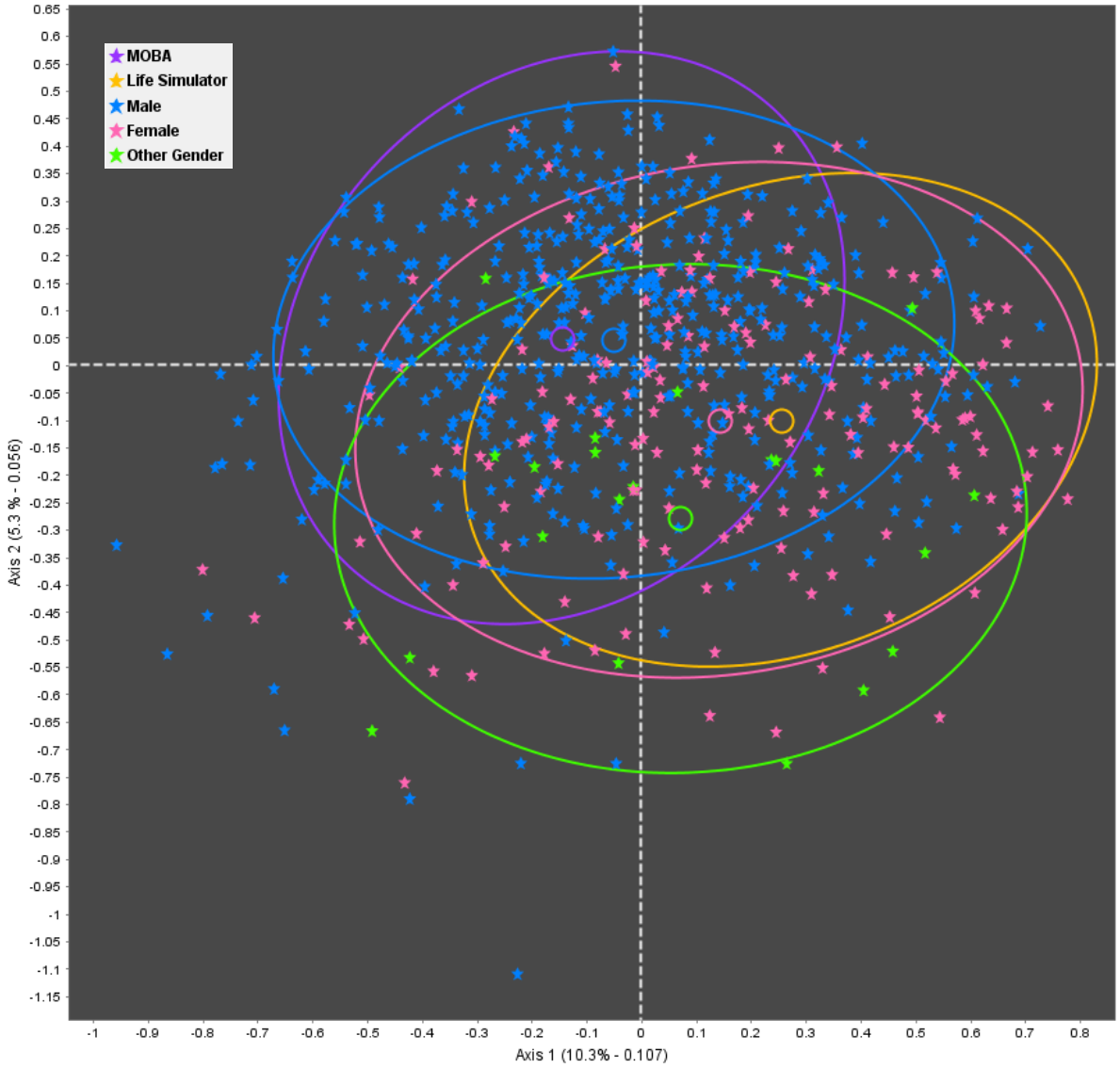

Figure 7. Concentration ellipses of the variables MOBA and Life Simulator along the variable gender in the cloud of individuals.

Figure 8

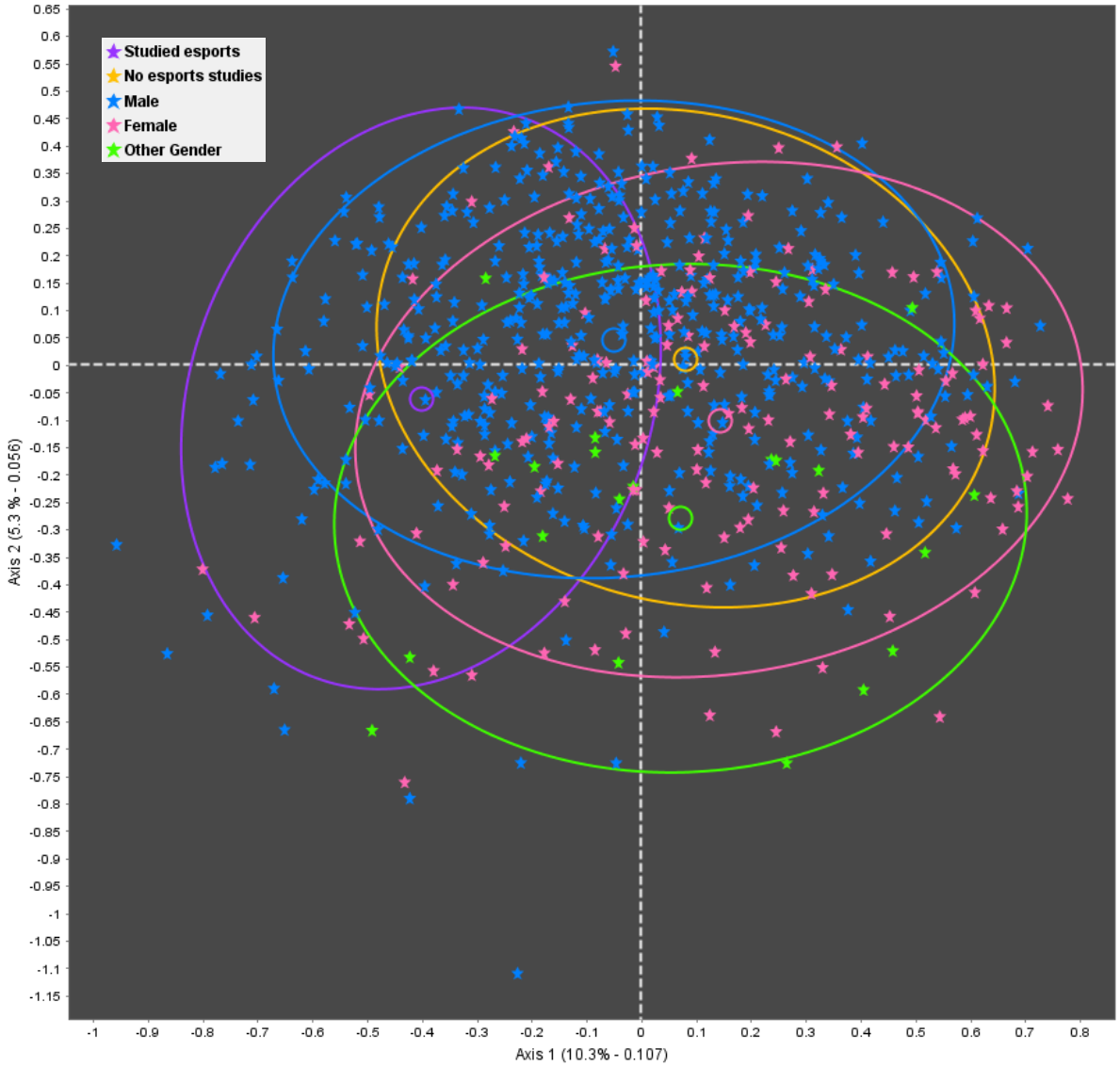

Figure 8. Concentration ellipses of the categories Studied esports and No esports studies along the variable gender in the cloud of individuals.

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(Re)producing Orientalism:
Industry Logic of Chinese Mobile Game Reskins in the Global App Empire

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(Re)producing Orientalism
Industry Logic of Chinese Mobile Game Reskins in the Global App Empire

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Abstract

Through the case study of the mobile title *Game of Sultans*, this article examines the proliferation of iterative and copycat games through the practice of reskins in the mobile game industry. Based on year-long autoethnographic fieldwork working in a Chinese mobile game company, I provide an on-the-ground perspective of how Orientalist representations in reskinned games are instrumentalized through the roles of "cultural brokers" and the work of localization for Western markets. By taking a theoretical and technological understanding of reskins, I argue that reskinned games, as a form of industrial mimicry, while an important aspect of standardized game production, can also serve as means of subversion against seemingly totalizing control of the US-dominated app economy. This article addresses the dearth of studies in theorizing the industry practice of game reskins beyond just a monetization tool but also its extractive labor process within the global app empire.

Keywords

Game reskins; Orientalism; app economy; mobile game industry; localization; cultural imperialism

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A simple search for "palace games" on the Google Play or Apple App Store will result in dozens of similar-looking games set in different eras, such as ancient China, medieval Europe, and feudal Japan. Palace games can be loosely classified as empire-building simulation games where the player takes on the role as an emperor or king to defeat enemies, court maidens, and conquer new lands. The proliferation of palace games reflects the widespread industry practices of reskinning, whereby near-identical games are made using the same general mechanics with only thematic differences. Unlike in-game skins, which are assets sold and exchanged within the game, reskinned games involve the cosmetic overhaul of entire games incorporating different visuals, settings, and storylines while maintaining the same core mechanics. Beyond palace games, there are countless other imitation games on the

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app stores, spanning multitudes of genres and categories, many of which are reskins of other games. Game reskins are widely adopted within the global mobile game industry as low-risk and cost-effective means of game development, particularly among smaller game studios lacking resources to produce standalone games (Chong, 2018). Many of these games are inexpensive adaptations of popular titles from China, featuring new aesthetics and themes to better suit global markets. Unsurprisingly, nearly all palace games are created by Chinese developers.

Palace games, also known as *gongdou* (palace struggle) games in Chinese, refer to stories of court intrigue, backstabbing, and romances popularized across Chinese literature, film, and television. Among the multitudes of palace games, *Game of Sultans* (2018), published by Mechanist Games in China, stands out as one of the most notable examples. According to game analytics firm Niko Partners, *Game of Sultans* ranked among the top ten most profitable Chinese mobile games in markets such as Russia and Indonesia (Niko Partners, 2019). Such successes are just one of the many examples in a mobile game landscape increasingly dominated by Chinese companies, where, in 2023, 39 out of the 100 highest-grossing mobile game publishers were from China (Astle, 2023). In recent years, Chinese tech companies have invested heavily in "going abroad" due to regulatory crackdowns, release quotas, and domestic censorship (Huang, 2023), with popular titles such as *Genshin Impact* (2020) and *Honor of Kings* (2015) being among the most profitable mobile games globally.

Yet, existing literature on mobile gaming in China tends to focus on top-down perspectives such as regulatory policy (Fung, 2017; Tai & Hu, 2017), gaming addiction (Szablewicz, 2020), piracy/copycatting (Liao, 2016), player reception/resistance (Davies, 2022; Huang & Liu, 2022), and nationalism/representation (Liboriussen & Martin, 2020; Li & Li, 2023). Comparatively few scholarly works address the actual labor and everyday production practices within the industry in China. Nieborg (2021), for instance, called for more research regarding the "meteoric rise of Chinese game developers on the app store". This article, therefore, offers an insider account into the production logic of a typical mobile game from a grounded perspective behind the corporate veil. Here, my own working experiences and autoethnographic inquiries provide much-needed empirical perspectives of the mobile game industry to fully unravel its often-opaque production processes. I advocate for the need to decenter the focus on gameplay and instead turn to the underlying labor, operational logics, and platform infrastructures in governing what is accessible to gamers worldwide.

Set during the Ottoman Empire, *Game of Sultans* is an illustrative example of a reskinned game where the original Chinese setting is swapped for other cultures. Such strategies are frequently employed by Chinese game companies to adapt local titles by replacing existing art assets to quickly sell to different overseas markets. The Google Play Store page for *Game of Sultans* offers this vivid game description (Figure 1):

Game of Sultans is an exciting new empire simulation RPG game in which you get to experience the life of a Sultan – a king of Europe and the Middle East! Every detail has been attended to so that players can immerse themselves in brutal wars, military strategy, flirtatious romance, empire management, political intrigue, and more! This exciting RPG and build game is developed by Mechanistgames and has enlarged its market from Arabic countries to worldwide countries.

Key Features:

– Become a Sultan – Experience an empire at your command!
– Assemble your harem – Romance beautiful and influential queens!
– Recruit warlords – Rally a fiersome council of historical viziers!
– Raise a family – Lovingly raise your children from childbirth to young adults!
– Join PvP – Marshal your armies against other players worldwide!
– Forge alliances – Make friends and enemies, join the good fight!
– Turkish Coffee – Drink, chat, then listen as the fortuneteller interprets each cup!

Figure 1. Google Play Store description of *Game of Sultans*. © Google Play Store

These myriads of Oriental tropes divulge the curious decision made by Chinese game developers to reimagine palace games in the Middle East. However, as this paper will demonstrate, game reskins are not simply a form of localization to be more marketable to Western audiences;[1] they also underscore the extractive industry logic of the global game production process.

Drawing from my own experiences working in the Chinese mobile game industry, I examine the contentious production of Chinese mobile games and their Orientalist depictions of the Middle East—made for Western audiences but produced in China. In doing so, I approach the understanding of game reskins through both theoretical

[1] I use the term Western audiences based on the target market of the game company I worked for, which includes North America, Europe, and Middle East.

and technological frameworks. I use the case study of *Game of Sultans* to advance two intersecting interventions. First, I unravel how the localization of palace games complicates notions of Orientalism where the tropes of palace intrigue, erotic harem, and Eastern mystique are (re)produced through the Chinese production of game reskins for international markets. Second, I explore how the production of reskins is instrumentalized through the exploitation of Global South laborers, manifesting in the tensions between prevailing Western platform dominance and a rising Chinese game industry. Here, I argue that while reskins—as a form of industrial mimicry—are an important aspect of standardized game production, they can also be potential forms of subversion against the seemingly totalizing control of the US-dominated app economy. This article addresses the dearth of studies theorizing the industry practice of game reskins beyond just a monetization tool, but also as part of the exploitative labor process within the transnational app production. The success of palace games demonstrates the complex entanglement of representation, labor, and technology, all caught up within the imperial circuits of digital commodity exchange that are part of the global app empire.

This article is based on 13 months IRB-approved ethnographic fieldwork from August 2019 to September 2020, working as a localizer at a small Chinese mobile game company in the city of Guangzhou, China. As a full-time employee of the company, I was responsible for determining whether elements of a game (textual, technical, and artistic) were appropriate or inappropriate for Western audiences. I was directly involved in reskinning several palace games in various settings for the US and European markets. While this article is primarily autoethnographic, I conducted semi-structured interviews with seven members of my localization team outside of the workplace or during breaks.[2] Because of the nebulous nature of corporate institutions, I had to sign a non-disclosure agreement ensuring the anonymity of the company, its employees, and its intellectual property (IP). I was, however, free to observe and document everyday office interactions and game production processes. This NDA is also written in conjunction with the IRB approval process to protect my interlocutors and ensure they cannot be traced back to the parent company. Additionally, my employment within the company also addresses some of the ethical concerns associated with an outside academic, but rather, as a colleague working within and alongside my informants.

By combining autoethnographic and ethnographic approaches, I also channel what corporate ethnographers consider as the need to move away from participant observation to observant participation (Moeran, 2009). Becoming a worker, therefore,

[2] My sampling size is composed of the entire localization team at the company, consisting of seven individuals. The gender composition is three women and four men, hailing from China, Russia, US, Spain, France, and the UK. Their names are anonymized to protect their identity.

provides the immersion needed to dissect the symbolic interplay between structures of power and individual agency in the game industry. Although working in the industry brings about its own sets of power dynamics via my background as an academic, being a full-time employee allowed me to gain the trust from my interlocutors as a colleague as opposed to an outside researcher. Developing strong working relationships with my interlocutors also meant that personal ties evolved and strengthened over time, which often elicited more candid and personal responses that helped in levelling some of the asymmetry associated with my positionality as a worker/researcher. As such, I not only gained intimate insights into the innerworkings of how games are reskinned, but also experienced working realities within the game industry, especially during a time of increasing precarity, austerity, and layoffs within the game industry.

Here, my methodology is manifested in a rather roundabout way. Due to the existing NDA, I cannot disclose the actual game I worked on, but it is a palace game set in medieval Europe that shared the same target market as *Game of Sultans*. Since *Game of Sultans* shares a similar production process with nearly all other palace games, it presents a representative case study for examining how different types of palace games are reskinned. In other words, my own experiences making reskins can offer insights into how other palace games are made. My methodology is, therefore, reflexive of my wider argument that the proliferation of reskins is predicated on subversive use of mimicry as a standardized practice within mobile game companies in China. This, in turn, allows me to make broader claims about how game reskins are produced (and reproduced) on the industry level as imitations games. Moreover, the labor of mobile game production is often a complex and layered process involving multitudes of intervening interests and actors. Chinese developers and gamers alike are often at the mercy of the intersecting oppression of platform limitations, corporate control, and state policy. My work channels what Consalvo (2016) considers as the roles of "cultural brokers" negotiating the contentious cultural schisms in an increasingly globalized and cosmopolitan production process. For Consalvo, what makes games culturally unique lies not within national origins but in the interaction between the industry, market, and the specific social context in which the games are created. Likewise, my dual identity as a Chinese American positions me to negotiate the often conflicting and contradictory process of adapting games from Chinese contexts to different national contexts.

Labor, cultural translation, and the imperial logic of game reskins

Existing scholarship on game skins mainly focus on its role as cosmetic microtransactions (Reza et al., 2022) or their relationship to gambling and loot box mechanics (Macey & Hamari, 2019; Perks, 2020). While in-game skins are a highly visible form of monetization that are largely self-contained within a given game, reskins, as the main focus of this article, represent an industry practice that remains largely hidden.

Unsurprisingly, little work has been done theorizing game skins as an industrial practice beyond in-game assets but how entire games are reproduced through thematic and cosmetic overhauls. The use of game reskins is nothing new; their origins can be traced back to early game imitation and clones when hits such as Atari's *Pong* (1972) and Namco's *Pac-Man* (1980) were quickly copied by other companies to capitalize on the booming game market at the time (Larson, 2022). The Coca-Cola company even went as far as producing a *Space Invader* (1978) clone called *Pepsi Invaders* (1983) as a marketing ploy against its rival, PepsiCo (Wills, 2019). Scholars even attribute this mass production of cheap and poor-quality games as one of the contributing factors leading up to the video game crash of 1983 (Wolf, 2012).

More importantly, in the global context, reskins are a valuable tool for localization, as they allow games to be adapted quickly or *reskinned* with alternate content for different markets. For example, the Japanese game *Super Puyo Puyo* (1993) was localized as *Kirby Avalanche* (1995), featuring different sets of characters, while the Western release *Super Mario Bros. 2* (1988) was adapted from the game *Yume Kōjō: Doki Doki Panic* (1987) because the original was considered too difficult for American gamers (Ryan, 2012, p. 88). Kong (2024) also notes that reskins contributed greatly to the localization of early game imports into China as a low-cost strategy during a nascent industry in the 1980s. Localization in this regard is not merely about textual translation but also the adaptation of cultures in ways players can understand. Reskins, as a type of localization, also obscures their national origins in what Iwabuchi (2002) considers "culturally odorless" (p. 27), where aspects of the original game are replaced with elements deemed suitable for Western audiences. The need to mask the source of production due to the long-standing stigma against Chinese products labeled as low-quality, fake, and inferior in the global market (Yang, 2015). The strategy of hiding local signifiers is especially salient during a time when Chinese tech companies' global influence is under increasing scrutiny over issues of privacy and national security. Chinese developers, for instance, have increasingly relied on the distribution of parallel apps as the means of not just localization but the distancing of ties to China itself, with apps such as TikTok being an alternate version of the original Chinese app Douyin.

Here, the prevalence of reskins in mobile games requires theorizations that extend beyond industry practices to encompass their symbolic and cultural implications. I utilize the term *skin* in the same way Tu (2021) posits: as both "material and metaphor" (p. 8). Skin can serve as a marker of identity and a container by which one is "sealed into thingness" (Fanon, 1952, p. 170)—a site of objectification where skin becomes fetishized and commodified. This echoes how Ahmed (2013) considers skin not only in terms of intimate encounters through the "economies of touch" (p. 155) but also a "border that feels, functions as a mechanism for social differentiation" (p. 45). From a technical standpoint, reskins also act as an interface that can be "reprogrammed" through cosmetics and augmentations (Flanagan & Booth, 2009). At the same time, reskins are not merely gamic objects but what Sterne (2006) describes as a "cultural artifact". Just like file formats, reskins embody both technological and

social systems of power. In other words, *skin* in the context of reskinned games is not simply a cosmetic digital commodity, but it is also deeply woven into the contending depictions of race, gender, and sexuality. Game reskins are thus simultaneously products of representation and objects of desire, materialized through extractive labor, where reskinned games are often created by racialized workers in Asia as part of the asymmetrical flow of global software exchange.

This articulation of game reskins demonstrates how technology, labor, and race are integral to the "Games of Empire", where the game industry is enabled through the hegemonic dominance of US-led global capital and the exploitation of Global South workers (Dyer-Witheford & De Peuter, 2009). Similarly, scholarship related to cultural imperialism explicates the totalizing control of Western media institutions, technological standards, and intellectual property that work to govern global media flows and to create a system of dependency that further enfeebles local media (Mirrlees, 2013). Additionally, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) note the "absorption of China into the apparatus of empire" through extractive outsourcing and profiteering from Chinese "gold farmers" (p. 182). Likewise, Patterson (2020) highlights the decidedly "Asiatic" dimensions of games that are inevitably connected to its "transpacific imperial contexts" (p. 37). At the same time, the labor of the global game production is deliberately rendered opaque and invisible through "ghost work" and offshoring (Gray & Suri, 2019). This conforms to what Roh et al. (2015) consider as techno-Orientalism that frames "Asians as the cogs of hyperproduction … [that] maintains a prevailing sense of the inhumanity of Asian labor" (p. 5). Game reskins follow a similar production logic by which signifiers for Asianness are repackaged, or *reskinned*, for consumption in the West.

While China has long been exploited in global ICT manufacturing, the explosive growth of Chinese game companies in recent years has also challenged the perceived power asymmetry relative to the West. Liao (2016) alludes to how China's own strict regulatory control over its domestic game industry, such as the decade-long console ban and game import quotas, has created the condition for the proliferation of clones and copycats, which in turn have indirectly contributed to the development of its domestic game industry. Bhabha (1994), for instance, points out that "mimicry does not merely destroy narcissistic authority through the repetitious slippage of difference and desire … [it] raises the question of the authorization of colonial representations", which in turn subvert the oppressive systems of control (p. 90). Likewise, Kim (2021) argues that the process of mimicry of dominant culture can disrupt the distinction between original (dominant) and copy (subordinate). In the case of China, scholars have long noted how China's *shanzhai* culture of copycats can often upend the notions of authorship and authenticity associated Western intellectual property laws (Austin & Sloan, 2022; Pang, 2012). Copycats and *shanzhai* instead work to redefine what constitutes innovation based on China's own definition of the original (Bosker, 2013).

Palace games are just one of the many genres popularized through reskins, where games are replicated using the same UI/UX, mechanics, and monetization models to fit different market demands. In this context, the process of imitation through reskins has become increasingly standardized in the mobile app ecosystems, designed as a one-stop shop for the production, distribution, and consumption of mobile games. While app stores provide developers with ease of access to consumers on a singular platform, they also limit creativity in catering to small-scale, casual titles designed with monetization in mind. At the same time, mobile games present an interesting vantage point for examining global media flows dominated by the Google/Apple duopoly, where both producers and consumers become wholly dependent on digital platforms. Thus, it is critical to analyze game reskins not merely as monetization tools, but also in terms of how the consumption of Otherness is entangled within the imperial logic of the global app production. Building on the concept of Games of Empire, the platformization of the app economy ushered in a new form of hypercapitalism that intensifies the mechanism of control and accumulation in constituting what Nieborg (2021) consider as the "Apps of Empire". Here, mobile games as an integral part of the app economy also reflect a critical departure in the ways digital software is distributed, where apps generally require constant connection, facilitating persistent control and surveillance of user data. Game reskins therefore crystalize sets of connections between platform infrastructures and extractive labor processes where both the production and consumption of mobile games are intermediated through US-dominated platforms.

Orientalism, erotics, and the reproduction of empire(s)

Palace games such as *Game of Sultans* are essentially remediations of existing titles based on themes set in dynastic China. Notable examples of palace games include *Be the King: Judge Destiny* (2018) and *Call Me Emperor* (2019), both featuring settings focused on the Ming and Qing Dynasties (AD 1368–1911) in Chinese history. Reskins of palace games offer a myriad of locales, such as *The Royal Affairs* (2019) set in medieval Europe and *Golden Empire* (2020), set during the Roman Empire, as well as the focus of this paper, *Game of Sultans* set in the Ottoman Empire. Despite the vast differences in settings, palace games all share many common features, gameplay, and mechanics. Upon entering any palace game, players are greeted with an interface showing a sprawling palace complex with different areas such as the feast hall, king's council, tower gate, and training grounds. The main objectives of these games are to collect resources, build up armies, and recruit heroes so that the player can gain more land, prestige, and power in expanding their empire. Many of these features borrow heavily from *gacha* mechanics where players must accrue virtual resources (either through payment or grinding) to obtain in-game items through randomized loot boxes and other forms of gambling (Woods, 2022). Indeed, as Mukherjee (2019) notes, the game mechanics of resource extraction and control are rooted in the imperial logics, which affect how colonial histories are remediated.

Figure 2. Side-by-side comparison of the *Game of Sultans* and *Be the King*, a local Chinese palace game. © Chuang Cool Entertainment

On the surface, a reskinned version of a game simply replaces the Chinese Forbidden City with the Ottoman imperial serail, the court advisor with the royal vizier, and the concubine with the consort (Figure 2). This ease of adaptability of palace games highlights how tales of courtly romance and heroic quests are already endemic parts of popular culture writ large. Much of the art, dialogue, and storylines in palace games are intentionally borrowed from popular palace dramas that dominate the Chinese media landscape. Palace dramas function as a form of prestige television, incorporating huge casts, massive set pieces, and elaborate costumes. Zhu (2008) argues that the proliferation of these dynastic palace dramas represents a sort of "authoritarian nostalgia" leveraged by the Chinese government in promoting Confucian Neo-conservatism as an alternative to Marxism and Western liberalism (p. 32). The Chinese state actively employs revisionist histories to bolster its political legitimacy by harkening back to glories of former empire. Similar dynamics apply to reskinned palace games that take place outside of the Chinese cultural context. One

of the Russian localizers at my company, Julia[3]—who previously worked on *Game of Sultans*—confided to me that many of the game elements, such as characters and storylines, are carefully siphoned from the popular Turkish period drama *The Magnificent Century (Muhteşem Yüzyıl),* which depicts the life of the Ottoman Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent.

Palace games are, therefore, sites of contending historicities, or what Dirlik (1996) considers as a form of "self-Orientalism", in which images of China's past become distorted, conflated, and romanticized. This transmedia adaptation of palace dramas to palace games is often executed with little to no deference to any authentic historicity and instead relies on sets of images, characters, and stereotypes. For instance, *Game of Sultans* incorporates a mix of historical and semi-historical figures that players can obtain as either "viziers" or "consorts" in the game. While some of these figures are based on real Ottoman individuals, such the 15th-century corsair/explorer Dragut and Piri Reis, most of the characters in the game are amalgamations of different historical archetypes and legends of Turkish heroes. The co-optation of the Oriental palace, the courtly intrigue, and the exotic stories resonate with Said's (1979) notion of Orientalism, whereby discourses of Asia are imagined in ways that justify further Western domination over the East. Orientalism portrays the East as a timeless monolith enabled through the erasure of history and denial of agency to Asian people, who are framed as passive objects of desire. As such, palace games, as empire-building simulation games, seemingly conforms to this reproduction of Western fantasies about the Orient, perpetuating the uneven power relations between the East and the West.

Central to all palace games, however, is the imperial harem, where players can court consorts to sire children and perpetuate the royal line. Women, or consorts in the game, serve the primary purpose of producing offspring (Figure 3). In fact, the palace in palace games refers specifically to the harem (*hougong*), and it is a defining feature of the palace struggle (*gongdou*) genre across TV, film, and games. The harem theme in palace games also resonates with many *gacha* games, where virtual odalisques are depicted in highly sexualized manners as rewards and in-game commodities that can be collected. Indeed, the harem, as a veiled site of forbidden desires, has long served as the source for Orientalist imaginations. Lewis (2004), for instance, points to how the "the harem and the veil set the terms for their interventions into Western discourse, providing their unique selling point of exoticized difference" (p.168). The intersecting discourses of the erotic and exotic reflect the wider fetishization of the Orient under the subjugation of the West gaze. The harem, like the process of veiling, not only masks but also justifies the subjugation of the feminine Orient. Game reskins are, in many ways, also processes of veiling, where cosmetic or surface layer changes are used to signify Otherness and objectification. Just as

[3] The names of the interlocutors are pseudonyms used to protect their identity.

the harem reflects a site of fecundity and sensuality, palace games are a form of media reproduction predicated on the replication of Oriental desires and sexuality.

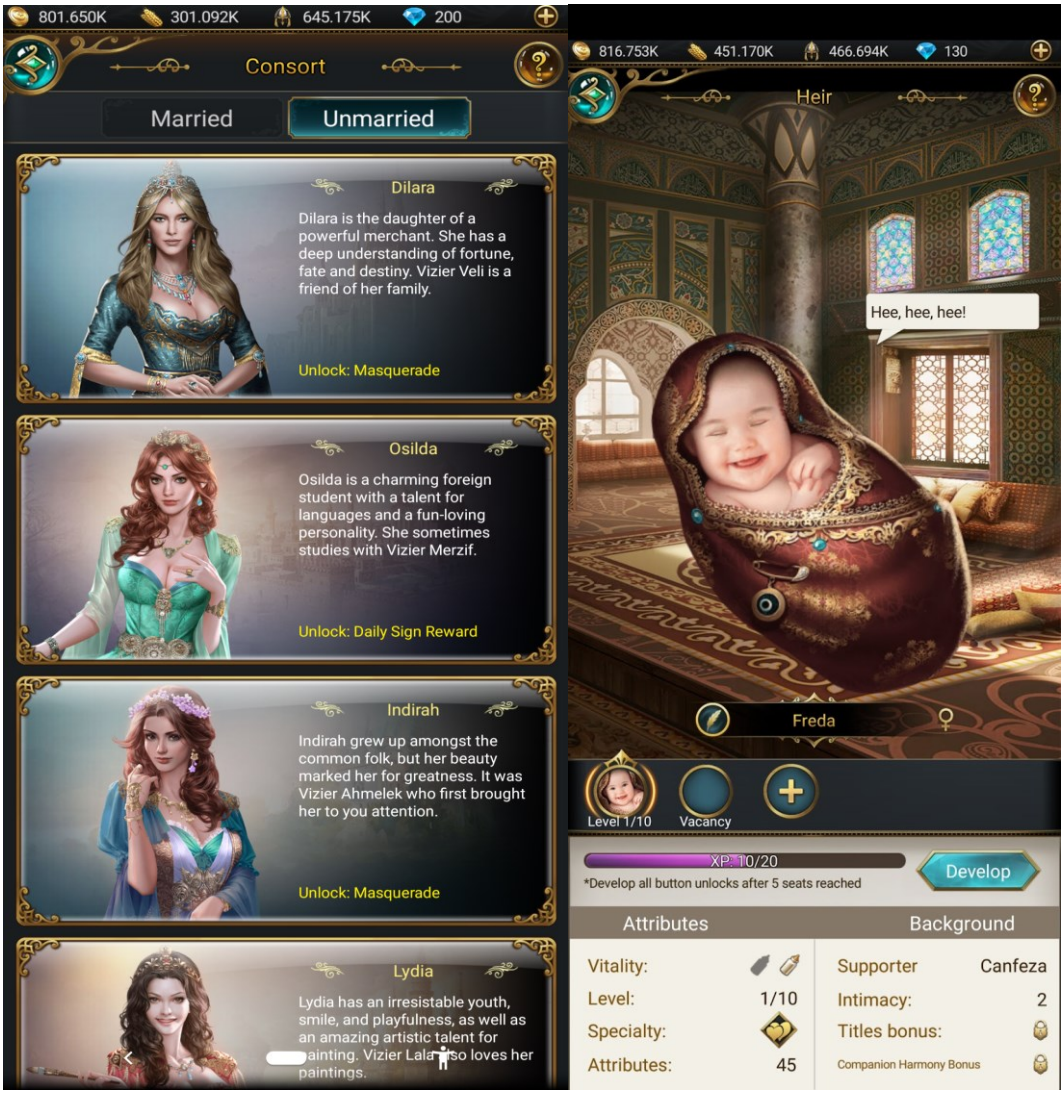

Figure 3. *Game of Sultans*' harem system where players can court different consorts to produce offspring. © Mechanist Games

However, critics of Said have problematized the East/West dichotomies that fail to account for the economic ascension of China, which complicates Western hegemony over the East (Vukovich, 2010). Game reskins challenge the pre-existing conceptions of Orientalism as a European project, when a significant portion of global game labor is outsourced to Asia. The development of *Game of Sultans* does not simply reflect an East/West binary but rather a ternary relationship among the West, Middle East, and Far East. Specifically, the circuits of global game production predicated on the Orientalist depictions of the Middle East made in China but marketed to the West. Reskins of Chinese palace games such as *Game of Sultans* highlight the adaptation of a distinctively Chinese genre of games that conveniently resonates with histories of the Ottoman Empire. The reskinning of palace games by Chinese game

developers, therefore, is not a process of cultural differentiation but rather the reorientation of Chinese cultural production in ways that are receptive to Western gamers.

At the same time, the reskinning of existing Chinese games to a Middle Eastern setting through self-Orientalism also perpetuates the oppositional binaries of the self/othering process (Feighery, 2012). The problematic representations of Eastern eroticism made for the pleasure of the Western player is only compounded by China's long-standing issues of islamophobia and ongoing suppressions of its Turkic-speaking Uyghurs in the country (Stroup, 2021). Yet many casual gamers in the West would hardly notice that *Game of Sultans* is a Chinese production as a reskin that substitutes Chineseness with Middle Eastern elements. Game reskins, therefore, not only conceal the origins of game production but also obfuscate the labor process that is subsumed by the apps of empire. Despite being produced in China, the success of palace games remains largely dependent on US-dominated app stores that control and regulate global software distribution. In other words, these empire-building palace games are predicated on Oriental imaginaries that not only reinforce hegemonic readings of the Other but also reproduce the power asymmetries between the East and the West. In this case, the authority over the interpretations of the Orient is not exclusive to a singular empire but rather multiple empire(s)—an inevitable contention between US-dominated media systems and a rising Chinese game industry. Indeed, as the following ethnographic and autoethographic accounts will reveal, game reskins are not simply an imposition of dominant culture but a deeply negotiated process within the actual production process.

Producing, contesting, and localizing game reskins

Having described the look and function of game reskins, it is also crucial to look at how they are produced within the industry. As mentioned, global game production is an intensely negotiated process where contending interests and cultural affinities collide. *Game of Sultans* itself is a joint production by Chinese companies based in the city of Xiamen, China: ClickTouch Co., responsible for the technical development of the game; and Mechanist Games, the publisher responsible for the localization and marketing of the game. ClickTouch Co. for instance already developed several successful Chinese-themed palaces games such as *Call Me Emperor* for the local market but needed a partner to reach global audiences. The publisher, Mechanist Games, was founded by a developer from New Zealand and is composed of a mix of Chinese and foreign employees (Sohu, 2018). Consalvo (2016) considers this a form of "corporate cosmopolitanism" that requires diverse personnel to recognize and resolve cultural fissures within the production process (p. 150).

The mobile game company I worked for also made deliberate efforts to present itself as an internationally minded company. In fact, I was hired alongside a seven-person team of localizers hailing from countries such as Spain, Russia, the UK, and France.

The localization team worked directly with the development and marketing department to reskin games for different local/regional cultures, all the while navigating the technical limits of conforming to the original palace game upon which they were based. Having a global and hybridized workforce resonates with Consalvo's (2016) notion of cultural brokers, who must "appropriate or create symbols that will travel across differences and render these as implementable practices" (p. 142). The work of localization seeks to negate certain differences to placate the Western market, while simultaneously reinforcing hegemonic readings of the Orient. This conforms to Hardt and Negri's (2001) description of how "empire manages hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchanges through modulating networks of command" (p. xiii). Yet, the increasingly cosmopolitan disposition of the mobile tech workforce did not liberate workers from the hegemonic order but merely diffused the loci of control in ways that maintained capitalist dominance. This sentiment is echoed by Sharma and Sharma's (2003) articulation of how contemporary Orientalism is now "inscribed in cosmopolitan culture", where the promotion of multiculturalism paradoxically sustains Western fetishization of the Orient.

Game reskins as a form of localization operates on not just the textual level (story, gameplay, graphics, etc.), but also in the logic of game production within the wider context of neoliberal capitalism. Kraidy (2006), for instance, draws on the example of the copycat show *Tele Chobis* to highlight the increasing standardization of global media production in creating hybrid texts "finely tuned in pursuit of profit" (p. 115). Reskins, much like TV formats, operate as interchangeable templates that allow for mass adaptation of culture across different local markets. Mr. Zhao, a product manager on my team, when asked about the proliferation of palace games, confided in me, "the barrier to entry for palace games is really low in terms of programming, and most of the time is spent on art assets to make it look different—the basic blueprint is already there which allows us to swap out any theme we want". In other words, reskinned games are never conceived as unique games but as modular frameworks that can be remediated into multitudes of copies with cosmetic variations. Game reskins, therefore, represent a hybridized process that allows for the proliferation of cultural differences through the standardization of mobile game production.

The popular gaming site *Kotaku* even labeled *Game of Sultans* as a "horny-looking game [that is] actually just a series of menus" (Jackson, 2019). Many of these features are interchangeable across all palace games. These menus boil down to a series of repetitive tasks set to cooldown timers that players need to complete each day to maximize resources and collect more assets. Speeding up certain features and characters often requires spending real money for in-game items, which reflects the trend toward pay-to-win mechanics in many mobile games. Additionally, characters in the game have their own skins in the forms of different outfits and designs that players must often pay to obtain, many of which are appropriated from other media tropes in TV and film. Mr. Zhao goes on to say rather bluntly, "palace games have nothing to do with making an accurate game; it is a vessel for monetization". In this

regard, the actual content of palace games, such as its history, story, and characters, is largely irrelevant for the developers as long as they are commodifiable for making profits on the app store.

Because all reskin games share the same operational logic, my experiences in making palace games offers me insights into the opaque process of how reskinned titles like *Game of Sultans* are produced. For instance, the company I worked for operates two palace games: one with an ancient China theme dedicated to the domestic Chinese market, and the other set-in medieval Europe, aimed at Western markets. Both games share identical source code and mechanics, which streamlined the processes of operations, design, and updates. Reskinning games involve the process of changing a game's appearance by altering its text and art assets, while keeping the original game mechanics and gameplay intact. My role in localization design therefore goes beyond simply translation and extends to the remediation of different aspects of the original game's art, storyline, and UI/UX design adapted in ways that Western players can understand. My typical workflow involves looking through side-by-side spreadsheets of translated (or mistranslated) game terms from each reskin to ensure both the quality of the translations and the cultural suitability of content in the newly reskinned version. Additionally, I offered feedback—both artistic and technical—for potential feature changes that address some of the more questionable and potentially problematic aspects of the game.

More permanently, my localization team frequently clashed with the development and design teams regarding the offensive depictions of race, gender, and sexuality in palace games. Such problematic representations are often the unintended results of the reskin process as opposed to deliberate efforts to make offensive games. Because *Game of Sultans* is directly adapted from a Chinese palace game, all the core mechanics such as harems and concubines are built into the source code and cannot be easily altered. In other words, the harem is embedded into the very genre of palace games that drives much of its story, dialogue, and mechanics; it inevitably gets carried over through reskins into other similar titles. These issues are even more apparent when palace games are localized into different historical contexts. For instance, *Golden Empire*, a palace game set in ancient Rome, also features a harem, despite the Roman Empire never having adopted a harem system like those of Asian empires.

Likewise, my experiences localizing a similar palace game set in medieval Europe faced the same dilemma, as we had to adapt a harem mechanic despite the lack of historical precedent for having harems within European nobility. The localizing team eventually decided to rename the harem as the "maiden's chamber" to reskin the game without compromising the core mechanics and gameplay of the original palace game. Herein lies one of the key contractions of reskins. On one hand, reskins as a form of game production process allows near infinite reproducibility of different themes. On the other hand, reskins through their standardize templates also create inflexibility in the design process that can be difficult to overcome. Such contentions

divulge the challenges in localization for a global market with different sets of cultural norms and sociopolitical taboos. However, in recent years, *Game of Sultans* has undergone several updates in response to backlash and negative media coverage of sexism. In response, the developers opted to give female characters more agency, introducing heroines in the game as opposed to passive consorts in the harem. For instance, the game introduced the option to select a female avatar for the player as a Sultana rather than a Sultan. But because the core mechanics remain unchanged, the game still features a harem of female consorts despite the change in player's choice of gender roles (Figure 4).

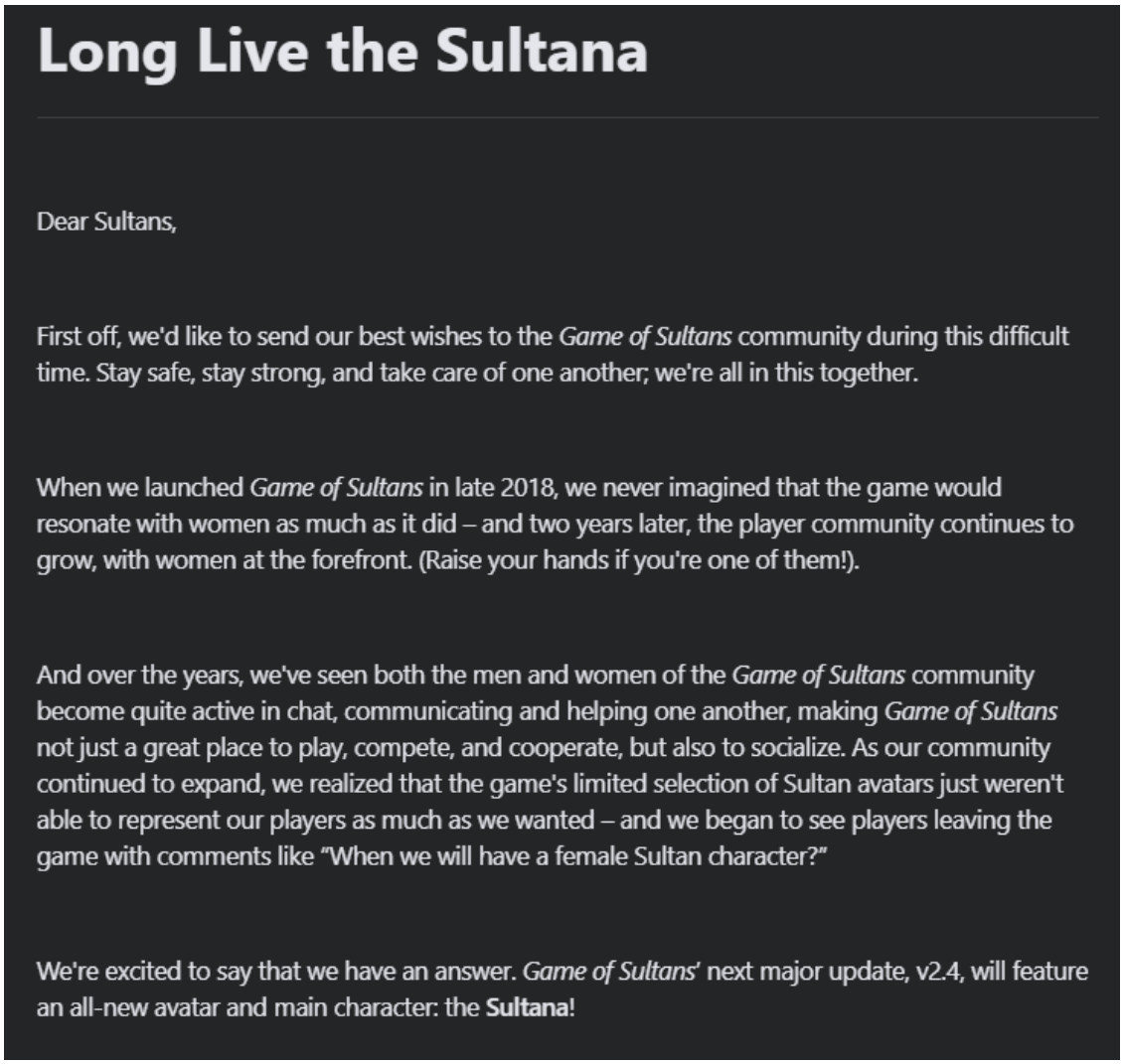

Figure 4. Changelog for version 2.4 of *Game of Sultans* that incorporated female avatars in the form of the Sultana. © Facebook

Here, localization serves the important process of "dubbing", which adapts and alters the original in ways that render different cultures legible to the player. For Consalvo (2016), dubbing "work[s] to create game versions that are neither faithful reproductions nor derivative products" (p. 182). In other words, game reskins, as a form of localization, are not merely acts of copying and cloning but rather a highly

contested and generative process. Rather than simply translating existing content, significant efforts were made to create new ideas, concepts, and designs that can better conform to local tastes. For example, my localization team was able to convince the design team to incorporate additional racial categories in the player character selection by providing characters with different skin tones. On one hand, such changes reflect the overall industry trajectory in promoting more inclusive game design given the historical lack of minority representations in video games (Iantorno & Consalvo, 2023). On the other hand, the interchangeability of racialized skins also presents the problems of "identity tourism" where players can perform minority representations that further Orientalize and fetishize the signifiers of Asian culture in palace games (Nakamura, 1995).

Such issues help to illustrate how reskins as localization is not merely a one-way street but rather a constant negotiation among cultural workers (coding, graphics, operations, marketing, localization, etc.) to generate meaning based on contingent institutional and infrastructural factors that lie both within and outside the media production process. Moreover, the industry pressure to create low-cost, mass-produced titles makes localization challenging, as games are often hastily converted to quickly turn a profit. This in turn, often results in problematic depictions and design choices that are increasingly done through an Orientalizing lens. Finally, workers also must operate under the persistent oppression of not just corporate but also platform-mediated forms of control. So, while reskins allow for certain cosmetic variations, they also confine workers within the framework of standardized production predicated on a singular distribution channel via the apps of empire. This paradoxical nature of reskins therefore both highlights the contentions between localizing divergent cultures but also the extractive labor of gamic production made for Western consumption.

Copycat, mimicry, and platform subversion

The proliferation of Chinese-made palace games in the app stores points to the increasing reliance on digital platforms—specifically, the duopoly of the Google Play and Apple App Stores that maintain US dominance over media distribution. Jin (2017), for instance, noted digital platforms as a double-edged sword that not only eases the spread of non-Western media but also intensifies the hegemonic control of US-based platforms. App stores have nearly complete control over the creation, distribution, and monetization of mobile software. Whether it involves high app store commission fees, strict app publishing requirements, or political censorship, the app stores have long been criticized for anti-competitive behaviors. Apple for instance, is notorious for its complicated approval process where developers are frequently at the mercy of strict design and regulatory guidelines. According to Apple's App Store Transparency Report, 1,679,694 apps were rejected for guideline violations out of 6,101,913 submitted. More ominously however, is the removal of 1,474 apps due to government takedown demands, of which 1,435 were from China

(Apple, 2022). The app stores are therefore not just instrumentalized through asymmetrical power relations, but also through complicity with illiberal regimes that maintain and maximize global capitalist extraction.

On a practical level, US-centric app platforms fundamentally reconfigure developer-publisher-advertiser relations where app stores dictate the rules of cultural production that is often obfuscated and subject to constant changes. For example, the app approval process can include specific design, accessibility, and moderation requirements that can be difficult for developers to navigate. More importantly, the means of discoverability on the Google Play Store is based on App Store Optimization (ASO), which, unlike search engine optimization (SEO), remains largely opaque as to how app search results are ranked. Compared to SEO, which can be easily gamed through tactics such as "Google bombing" (Tatum, 2005), ASO's ranking algorithms are more challenging to exploit, thereby limiting app discoverability. Instead, ASO relies on the implementation of app icons, game names, store descriptions, screenshots, and key terms as the barometer for success and visibility on the app store. For instance, during the beta testing of a new palace game, my company issued a poll to pick potential game icons for the app store. This was followed by numerous internal team meetings debating which icon would gain the most attention. One of the UX designer at the company, Ms. Lu, conferred to me, "our choice of app icons are based on the current app store meta of the types of games that are popular and whatever our competitors are adopting". The spread of copycat app icons has in turn led to what many game critics point to as the proliferation of near-identical shouting face or "action face" app icons (Jordan, 2015).

In other words, the saturation of copycats, clones, and various reskins on the Google and Apple app stores is not simply a cheap cash grab but also a form of subversion. The nebulous and seemingly totalizing control of app stores creates the conditions by which developers must find ways to game ASO through mimicry and imitation of other apps' successes. Such tactics are not unique as there are well documented cases of the manipulation of YouTube thumbnails to exploit search algorithms (Bishop, 2020). By engaging in these tacit forms of subversion developers can not only break the opaque rules set through ASO, but also exploit its failing to their own benefit. Accordingly, Morris and Morris (2019) contend that copycat apps are "a symptom of (and solution to) platformized software distribution" and that imitation can exploit the very failure coded into app store infrastructures. In this regard, the apps of empire operate within a double bind of invisibility where developers from China are both kept in the dark about the working logic of the app stores and alienated as global media laborers. Reskins, as an important aspect of game mass production, can thus challenge and destabilize information asymmetry imposed through "platform imperialism" and the continuing dominance of US-centric media industries (Jin, 2017). This dovetails with Noh's (2020) assertion that aesthetic mimicry in Chinese mobile games, such as NetEase's *Onmyoji* (2016), serves not only as a means of extending global appeal but also as a counter to dominant global media flows.

It is important to point out that game reskins and copycats are not direct imitations of the dominant texts. Nor does mimicry contribute to what Fanon (1952) considers as the sense of inferiority, subordination, and shame. In the case of reskins, palace games are not merely cheap, derivative products; rather they innovate in attaining validity despite the limitations imposed by the app stores. Indeed, these skins are designed from the inception to be easily adaptable, interchangeable, and malleable for various markets. They do not carry the baggage of cultural specificity and relies on hybridized production processes and cosmopolitan laborers. Here, mimicry as a byproduct of platform control conforms to what Bhabha (1994 calls "double articulation"—the simultaneous appropriation of "the Other as it visualizes power" and the repudiation of the disciplinary regimes of colonial powers (p. 151). Reskins as an industry practice reflect the collective mimicry of these empire-building games that instrumentalize empire not just through its textual localizations but also its proliferation and monetization on the app store. The popularity of palace games in the West shows how success can be attained by working against the operating logic of the app store duopoly. However, Kim (2021) also posits that mimicry can take on hegemonic forms, whereby the process of copying also further replicates the imperial logic of empire(s). In fact, Nieborg et al. (2020) suggest that China's rapid rise in the app economy follows the US as a "newly emerging game empire, but very much on its own terms". In the case of reskinned palace games, problematic representations further reinforce racist Oriental tropes vis-a-vis Western consumers. In this regard, game reskins divulge an industry practice marked by ambiguity and unease—one that can ultimately both uphold and upend the struggle for global media dominance.

Conclusion

This article provides an important vantage point to understand game reskins as not only hegemonic in-game representations of race, gender, and national cultures but also the contending issues of labor, control, and resistance in the US-dominated global app ecosystem. On one hand, the rising success of the Chinese mobile game industry disrupts the ideas of cultural imperialism where global media flows reverberate from dominant institutions to the periphery. On the other hand, the opaque operating logic of app stores further perpetuates the structures of inequality imposed on non-Western developers. Here the circuits of digital commodity exchange that are part of the global app economy also produce new sustained forms of oppression, whereby the violence associated with extractive labor is largely rendered invisible to Western audiences.

But game reskins are not simply cheap cosmetic commodities; they also serve as markers of race, gender, and national affinities. At the same time, the rising popularity of Chinese mobile games led to increasing scrutiny in relation to its problematic representations in titles such as *Game of Sultans,* frequently called out for its sexism, misogyny, and offensive depictions of other cultures. Reskins, as a form of

media replication, reproduce the same sets of objectionable material through Orientalizing gazes. However, game reskins also complicate the existing discourses of Orientalism within the unequal relations that allow the West to define the East. As my ethnographic experiences have shown, localizing palace games is a deeply negotiated and contested process, contingent on the critical roles of cultural broker in mediating differences. To be clear, this article is by no means a defense of the more questionable aspect of reskins such as *Game of Sultans,* but rather a nuanced understanding of how the labor of making palace games are co-constituted through both the fetishization and exploitation of the Orient.

More broadly, in recent years, there have been renewed efforts from both regulatory and corporate bodies to challenge monopolistic US tech companies and their control over global app distribution. A notable example is Epic Games' ongoing lawsuits against both Google and Apple for its anticompetitive practices (Allyn, 2023). Ironically, the Chinese tech giant Tencent, which conveniently owns 40% of Epic Games, has maintained its own domestic app stores in China and have themselves become a dominant player in the global game industry (Jia et al., 2022). But on the micro-level, the successes of Chinese mobile games also reflect how reskins, as a form of imitation and copy, can operate within and against the App Store duopoly. The proliferation of imitation games is indirectly the very byproduct of not just centralization and concentration of platform control, but also the casualization and capitalization of the monetization process. The singular point of distribution allows for the production and standardization of apps in ways that provide ease of access to global markets. But the nebulous App Store rules also inadvertently create the conditions by which recalcitrant practices can occur through industrialized mimicry. These strategies of imitation and copycats should not be dismissed as merely unimaginative and derivative commodities; rather, they represent innovative acts that can undermine and disrupt the power asymmetries imposed on mobile game developers worldwide. Just as the global app empire continues to reproduce itself through the logic of capitalist extraction, game reskins points to the reorientation of power and the hegemonic reversal of its authority.

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Parties as Playful Experiences
Why Game Studies Should Study Partying

LELAND MASEK AND JAAKKO STENROS

Abstract

Partying is a widespread, understudied, and playful phenomena. Game Studies has seen great value from defining important concepts related to games since its inception. Foundational play and game scholars urged for a need to analyze parties and celebrations as a form of playfulness, yet there is little empirical Game Studies work enabling a deeper understanding of partying. Partying bears striking resemblances to games: inefficient use of resources, arbitrary rules, cultural group formation, and ongoing moral panics. There are also practical overlaps: games occur at parties and digital party games are quite popular. This work contributes to a deeper understanding of parties by analyzing 33 semi-structured interviews where individuals from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds had highly playful experiences at parties. A new theoretical conception of partying as a form of playfulness is proposed as a "phenomenon that creates an experience of social connection in a group mediated through a shared engagement-prioritizing activity". This work concludes with a call for *party studies* to become a sub-field in game studies.

Keywords

Parties; partying; playfulness; playful experience; party studies

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Parties and partying are a central feature of normal life for many people across the world. Partying has been described as an important *rite of passage* and developmental phase for adolescents starting to socialize as adults (Caldwell & Darling 1999; Demant & Østergaard 2007) and a way adults create identity in social groups (Sutton-Smith 2009). In informal terms, partying is ubiquitous every weekend in most major cities. Large groups of people drinking, going to dance clubs, dancing with their friends or strangers is a crucial enough concept for those who do it that it has informal terms implying it is its own form of life termed "nightlife" (Nofre et al. 2018). This is not the only revealing colloquial implication that would associate partying as a core part of life, as regular participation in sex parties also has frequently been

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termed being in the "lifestyle" (Harviainen & Frank 2018). This importance can furthermore be linguistically sublimated into identity such as adult gay male partygoers in Sydney, Australia who sometimes refer to themselves as "party boys" (Hurley & Prestage 2009). This kind of casual terminology implies a critical importance to parties and normalization for those who participate. This is furthermore supported by empirical studies on those who regularly attend parties defining it as a core part of life such as occurring at American colleges (Pedersen & LaBrie 2007) and electronic dance parties in both the Netherlands (Ter Bogt & Engel 2005) and Southwest England (Riley et al. 2010). These forms of partying are clearly quite essential in people's lives, yet despite this prominence, partying is rarely studied as a general human activity.

Foundational theoretical texts on play and playfulness such as Brian Sutton-Smith's *The Ambiguity of Play* (2009) and Richard Schechner's *Performance Studies* (2017) have argued for the study of parties in connection to human capacity to structure, organize, and facilitate play. Recent works have demonstrated the benefit of analyzing party activities in and through games (e.g. Harviainen & Frank 2018). Game Studies and the video game press have a history of ignoring and excluding players who are not interested in popular commercial and indie games, including those who play party-games (Scharkow et al. 2015). Parties may represent a powerful method of re-including players who do not identify as (core) gamers in their relationships to games. This is reinforced by how, in defining "queerness" in games, Ruberg (2018) first brings up play-parties. Clearly labeled "Party Games" are also commonly listed in genre descriptions for video games for sale (Arsenault 2009; Scharkow et al. 2012) though sometimes put in the ambiguous "Miscellaneous" Category (Gackenbach & Bown 2011). This exclusion from a "core gamer" image may explain why some genre descriptions seem to have no description or discussion of party games (Clarke et al. 2017) and furthermore may explain why one study analyzing overlooked genres by game researchers concluded "[t]hese underrepresented genres include mobile, "casual" and browser games, *party games*, platform games, and sports games." (Coavoux et al. 2017, emphasis added). In addition, widely played non-digital party games, such as *Werewolf* (Bi & Tanaka 2016), *Twister* (Poremba 200/9, and *Mafia* (Demyenov et al. 2015) appear to have limited analysis in Game Studies. There exists no empirical work on what would make a playful experience party-like or whether parties are seen by participants as connected to playfulness.

Considering that partying is widespread, is a common game genre, and is lacking generalizable work on the topic, there is a major gap left in the literature: *How do participants experience playfulness connected to partying? How is the experience of playfulness connected or transformed within partying?* This work will provide qualitative interview data on this topic from 33 experiences where individuals describe how they had highly playful experiences at parties. These interviews provide a critical insight into the nature and motivations of partying. Since the original goal of the interview had no association to partying specifically, but rather was targeting experiences that participants considered highly playful, the emergence of partying as a context for highly playful experiences was an emergent and critical feature to the data.

In this way, there is fruitful territory behind a more thorough understanding of party experiences for game studies. The mediating role of playfulness brings a theoretical connection from partying as an activity to game studies as a field interested in designed playful experiences. This work will conclude with a full-throated argument that game studies should move further towards this kind of broader analysis of engagement-oriented phenomena, and partying is a premier example of potential benefits for such a move. In summation, game studies would be benefited by creating an academic sub-discipline that builds on and defines *party studies*.

Background

Research on parties can be found from a diversity of sources, in part because there is no established "party studies" literature. Three pools of past research will be addressed for context: theoretical work in game studies, empirical studies on risks and dangers of partying, and motivations of inferred or explicitly labelled partygoers. In defining which studies are important to include in this overview, it is relevant to address that most studies that discuss partying do not use theoretical or definitional criteria. Past works generally ask survey respondents specifically about the word "partying" (Caldwell & Darling 1999; Doxbeck & Osberg 2021; Grov et al. 2014) or study spaces that are already labeled as "parties" (Riley et al. 2010) or study other terms that imply partying such as "drinking at pubs" (Törrönen & Maunu 2005) or "nightlife" (Eldridge 2019; Kramer & Wittman 2023). This works acceptably in their context, where often partying is such an entrenched culture of activity that an ostensive definition creates a clear image for the reader. Studies have analyzed behaviors associated with partying such as Nichols (1993) and Törrönen & Maunu (2005) who describe drinking alcohol as an activity occurring at parties. Night-tourism is similarly a concept addressing night-time drinking (Eldridge 2019) which has also been presented as occurring at parties (Hunt et al. 2010). None of these works define parties however, and without a definition it is difficult to connect these studies with partying across varying contexts, such as different cultures (e.g., one in which alcohol is not regularly consumed) or different ages.

Scholars have argued for theoretical analysis of partying by connecting it to broader play-phenomena. Sutton-Smith (2009) argued for the inclusion of "Festivals, Parades, Parties" (p. 213) as a form of identity-creation play. Schechner (2017) argued for the importance of analyzing religious ceremony, carnival, and even birthday parties (p. 53) in performance studies. In more contemporary game studies, there have been publications analyzing sex parties (Harviainen & Frank 2018) and parties hosting drinking games (Sotamaa & Stenros 2019). The social functions and meanings of gatherings that could be called parties—such as liminal events including rituals, rites of passages, ceremonies, and carnivals—have also been studied in anthropology, sociology, and literature studies (e.g. Turner 2008; Bakhtin 1984; Goffman 1974). Despite this theoretical interest, there has not been a wide-spread effort to define this theoretical behavior sufficiently to empirically understand how parties occur as

a playful practice in particular contexts. This frames the first research question: *How do participants experience playfulness connected to partying?*

Past empirical studies on partying seem to instead be highly focused on repetitive subgroups—namely, *teenagers* (Bærndt & Kolind 2021; Caldwell & Darling 1999; Cepeda & Valdez 2003; Demant & Østergaard 2007; Doxbeck & Osberg 2021; Larson & Seepersad 2003; Pedersen & LaBrie 2007), recreational illegal *drug users* (Cepeda & Valdez 2003; Hammoud et al. 2017; Hunt et al. 2010; Riley et al. 2010; Ter Bogt & Engel 2005), and *gay men* (Hammoud et al. 2017; Hurley & Prestage 2009; Mimiaga et al. 2011; Solomon et al. 2011). Based on the amount of academic focus on these populations, some may be tempted to think that they are the largest three groups who engage in partying, a conclusion that virtually no article argues. The more undeniable connection is that these are marginalized groups whose behavior is easy to criticize from an outside point-of-view, whose party behaviors are often criminalized and thus are prime targets for an ongoing *moral panic* about partying (Bowman 2015).

Most empirical studies on "partying" focus upon those who are breaking legal restrictions. Studies on parties with teens feature alcohol consumption by people probably under the legal drinking age, such as Danish teenagers aged 14-16 (Demant & Østergaard 2007) where the legal drinking age is 16, and studies of teenagers and age-unspecified college students in the United States (Caldwell & Darling 1999; Cepeda & Valdez 2003; Pedersen & LaBrie 2007; Reed et al. 2011), where the legal drinking age is 21, and college attendance often starts by the age of 18. Other studies feature illegal acts occurring at the parties, most commonly the use of illegal drugs (Caldwell & Darling 1999; Cepeda & Valdez 2003; Grov et al. 2014; Hurley & Prestage 2009; Mimiaga et al. et al. 2011; Riley et al. 2010; Ter Bogt & Engel 2005), violent behaviors (Cepeda & Valdez 2003; Hughes & Short; 2014; Hunt et al. 2010; Törrönen & Maunu 2007), violating Covid-19 lockdown regulations (Holm 2021, Osberg & Doxbeck 2021), and sexual assault (Cepeda & Valdez 2003; Sweeney 2011; Törrönen & Maunu 2007). There are only a minority of studies that address parties and do not discuss criminalized behavior as a major element of the partying, such as Harvianen and Frank (2018) who discuss illegal drug use, but only briefly, or Larson and Seepersad (2001) and O'Neill (2012) who mention no illegal behavior.

This focus on illegal parties is probably related to how these works mostly study potential harms of partying such as their connection to "HIV risk behaviors" (Mimiaga et al. 2011) "public health issues" (Doxbeck & Osberg 2021, p.1554) "high-risk sex behavior" (Cepeda & Valdez 2003, p.102) and "alcohol related negative consequences" (Pedersen & LaBrie 2007, abstract). It is possible that dangerous behaviors are more likely to occur within criminalized parties. However, primarily focusing upon parties with criminal behavior rhetorically implies partying should be seen as somehow unacceptable or forbidden by society. This depiction of parties as at odds with normal society is also explicit in several studies on partying. For example, O'Neill (2012) justifies their study on partying among managers in the hotel industry by discussing how parties have "deleterious effect on employees' ability to balance

their work and family lives" (p. 84). This description of parties with being at odds with both work and family seems to signal a strong isolation between parties and society at large. Night-tourism is also marked by similar descriptions of it being against society at large where it "has been marked by concerns about anti-social behaviour" (Eldridge 2019 p. 423). Kramer & Wittman (2023) imply this same problem when they position their work as studying nightlife "not only its usual negatively connotated space of sexual violence, oppression, and injustices" (p. 3).

This negative and socially isolated position of partying is in direct contrast to how participants describe their own lived experiences in parties as a component of normal and societally supported life. Danish teenagers describe party-drinking as a key part of their social life (Demant & Østergaard 2007), with studies even emphasizing how muslim teens in Denmark suffer socially from *not* engaging in partying and drinking (Bærndt & Kolind 2021). Other discussions describe it as a part of a normal social life (Larson and Seepersad 2001) and a healthy social life (Kramer & Wittman 2023). Partiers do not generally describe their own party experiences as illegal or societally forbidden, but rather socially approved of spaces for accepted forms of "light transgression" (Törrönen & Maunu 2007; Kramer & Wittman 2023). Past studies have theorized parties as an ideal space for individuals to assert autonomy over potentially oppressive social norms (Riley & Griffin 2010; Tsui 2022) and expression of authenticity (Törrönen & Maunu 2005). In this way, we can see how the critical choice of investigating how partiers see themselves, and their own party experiences in general, are an important and underrepresented approach to the topic.[1]

When party motivations have been studied in past works, they generally conclude with a focus on positive emotion and social contact. One study on male partygoers in Sydney, Australia does discuss intensive sex partying through a wider lens of "pleasure maximizing" during sex while participants are simultaneously engaged in "risk reduction" regarding the spread of HIV (Hurley & Prestage 2009). Partying has been analyzed for teenagers as the most positive emotions they experience each week (Larson & Seepersad 2003, p. 57). Studies on MDMA drug use in rave parties in the Netherlands argued that party goers are motivated by a desire for emotions, such as euphoria, energy, and sociability and not motivated by problem-solving motives such as coping or conformity (Ter Bogt & Engel 2005). Similarly, another study on reasons to participate in electronic dance music culture, found participants were primarily interested in sociality and pleasure, and how those experiences informed a multiplicity of identities and self-expressions (Riley et al. 2010). Group drinking at parties has also been associated generally with "pleasure, enjoyment, and sociability" (Bærndt & Kolind 2021, p. 1). Studies on Finnish drinking culture discuss how

[1] There is brief mention of parties associated with major holidays in many cultures such as Halloween parties in the United States (Belk, 1990), or Carnival parties in Germany (Salzbrunn 2014). These works however do not spend much time analyzing the *partying* that they reference.

individuals view authentic socializing (Törrönen & Maunu 2005) and socializing amidst light transgression (Törrönen & Maunu 2007) are both critical motivations. This opens up a general door of how the "partying" experience may or may not be unique to other engaging experiences, such as playing non-party games, or other forms of designed play. These studies are however limited to the narrow populations they study, so this frames the third research question: *How is the experience of playfulness connected or transformed within partying specifically?*

Methods

The dataset used for this work is a subset of a semi-structured interview process that was carried out at mid-sized Finnish university from spring 2019 through winter 2021 on the topic of playfulness. International students from a diversity of backgrounds were asked to reflect on a "highly playful experience" or "the experience often associated with play, where since it is an internal experience, you may be doing any type of activity" (Interview Guide). This was further clarified for the interviewees that any interpretation of playfulness they may have was considered relevant, a technique derived from content-empty definitions in micro phenomenology (Petitmengin 2006, p. 248).

Interviewees were theoretically selected for diversity in national background (Teppo 2015), and recommendations from past interviewees. This interview process gathered a total of 125 highly playful experiences from 84 interviewees, ages 18-39 (avg. 25), from a diversity of national backgrounds (N=43), both in-person or online, taking an average of 64 minutes per interview. The interviewer was living in an international exchange student dormitory at the time, approached each person as a peer, and interviewed them in natural private settings. All participants had the study explained to them, filled out privacy and consent forms as required by local legal standards, and were informed of how their interviews were being analyzed with a chance to disagree with the researcher's interpretation. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, pseudonymized, and analyzed without software by the first author. Thirty-three of these highly playful experiences occurred during what the participant called partying and this subset is the primary data set for the current analysis.

The semi-structured interview collection utilized a triangulation of methodologies (Thurmond 2001) between Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss 2017), Micro Phenomenology (Petitmengin 2006) and Qualitative Thematic Analysis (Yin 2015). First, Grounded Theory techniques (Strauss & Corbin 1997) were utilized primarily as a method of bottom-up elicitation of participant's interpretive views and ongoing theoretical development categorizing those views across a theoretically chosen participant pool. Specifically, the following elements of Grounded Theory methods were utilized: constant comparative analysis, open and intermediate coding, theoretical sampling and saturation, theoretical integration of codes and categories, and concurrent and continuous data generation and analysis, and theoretical sampling

(Teppo 2015). Second, Micro-phenomenology was used primarily for enabling interviewees to recall complicated elements of specific memories and more accurately deconstruct important sequential aspects of those memories. In specific, the following interview stabilization considerations were applied: stabilization of attention, focusing upon a singular experience, refocusing from what to how, focusing on different dimensions of experience, retrospective analysis (re-enactment) and scale of precision (Petitmengin 2006). Finally, a broader qualitative thematic analysis technique was used to analyze how specific types of words, in this case parties, partying, and other associated terms were present in individuals' experiences, using a five-phase thematic analytic process (Yin 2015).

The current work focuses upon a subset of 33 of these highly playful experiences that occurred at parties. During the larger Grounded Theory data analysis, partying was an emergent theme. This work analyzes the subset of experiences labeled as partying. Each partying experience was read several times, the experience they described was re-organized to create a timeline of how the experience occurred (Petitmengin 2006), important factors described about the experience were given codes, these coded important passages were connected between experiences, with larger explanatory codes and finally themes were determined (Yin 2015). An overall theoretical conception and explanation was created (Glaser & Strauss 2017). These party experiences were diverse nationally, with participants from 23 different national backgrounds, from all 6 continents, describing party experiences. Participants had party experiences at a diversity of ages (8-25) with an average age of 20. Fifteen of the playful party experiences were had by women, 17 by men, and one person who wished to not disclose their gender. In general, the age, national background, and gender of participants will not be discussed unless the participant viewed those elements as important to the playful party experience they had, or if it is important for contextualizing their experience.

Analysis

By analyzing 33 highly playful experiences at parties, the following conception of playful experiences with parties can be seen: *Highly playful partying is a phenomenon that creates an experience of social connection in a group mediated through a shared engagement-prioritizing activity*. There are furthermore three important types of social connection frequently associated with parties in the sample. First, parties are used as social tools between strangers to develop connection in a first interaction. Second, parties are ritualized events in friend groups and families to reinforce patterns of social connection. Third, parties are structural tools of societies, states, and cultures for reinforcing social connection over a larger group and during liminal changes in cultural identity. These three social groupings are not necessarily exclusive but have distinctive characteristics that will be explored. The nature of engaging mediating activity generally includes conversation between people and frequently includes the consumption of food, alcohol, or mind-altering substances, gift giving,

shared group music, and playing games. Importantly, partying was a labeled space by participants where highly playful experiences were supported in a unique way. The way that participants discussed partying speaks to them viewing parties as generally a space *defined by* their attempt to support playful experiences.

This conception and its methodology speak to how playfulness exists in parties. While this very well might have broader meaning for parties in general, this data cannot speak to non-playful partying. In essence, parties host a specific type of highly playful behavior and that is what this paper is focusing on. Like any complicated phenomena it is inevitable that parties also host plenty of other behaviors and experiences not discussed in this work.

Parties connecting strangers

Clubbing, networking events, party games

Parties that create social connection between strangers is the first manner of partying. In this type of party experience, a group of strangers is brought together, often spontaneously, and share an engaging activity. Usually, the party is initiated by a previously established friend group entering the party together but then separating and participating in the party activities with people that were previously unknown. During this activity, such as drinking alcohol, eating food, or listening to music, first time conversations are supported between strangers. As a result of these first-time conversations supported by the party activity, the participant described an elevated or quickened sense of social connection. One example of such a sense of social connection would be a person flirting at a party and feeling like another person is flirting back.

One example of such a stranger-connecting party experience is described here:

> I joined the university for the first time, and I just got into a hostel life, and when it happens, so you meet a lot of people… and out of the spirit of adventure, my friend asked us, would you like to go and meet my girlfriend. And it's a great day, you know we have a party, and you should join…It was good meeting different people, interacting with girls for the first time, that was new to me at the age of 17… We interacted we had a good conversation… Whenever you talk to someone for the first time you get a very good feeling when someone flirts back (E101)

This experience is insightful for multiple reasons. First, the partying represents the pattern of an established friend bringing a group of previous strangers together. The supporting activities included eating food at a restaurant, and the giving of gifts. Through these activities first time conversations are facilitated and the participant felt that others were sharing the same feeling of flirtation that they were. In this context, the act of rule-breaking, or meeting people of the opposite gender for the first time was a key facilitative component of the activity. This is similar to another

experience where alcohol played a fundamental facilitative role. When asked to reflect on what was feeling playful for them at a first-time party experience at university they said

> I think I feel more playful when I was drunk. I go to the club and hear loud music see many people probably, cool atmosphere. I want to do some more new activities… making friends with strangers, playing soccer indoors…. many mini games (E50)

This experience followed a similar pattern: A group of friends went to a party, the friends split up and experienced the facilitative activities of music, drinking, and playing a series of party-games with strangers. The participant talked and engaged with strangers and felt a sense of connection. Importantly, both experiences involved flirtatious activities reinforced by boundary-pushing of appropriate behavior, but neither involved illegal activity. Some stranger-connecting party experiences did not involve conversation, but rather intensive shared activity with de-facto physical communication. Experience 3 involved a participant dancing with a stranger for the first time at a large musical festival and defined a key part of their experience as being in "A sort of hive mind. You are one with the audience and connecting with people." (E3). Parties connecting strangers are often first-time experiences in the sample (E21; 50; 91; 101) but not always (E3). Experiences frequently include eating food (E50; 70), music (E3; 50), alcohol (E12; 21; 50; 91), playing games (E50; 70; 91) and flirtation or sexual activities (E12; 50; 91; 101). Most commonly these experiences feature talking as the primary activity (E12; 21; 50; 70; 101). In this way we can see a distinctive form of partying:

Parties connecting strangers: A party where a group of individuals, previously unknown, build first time social connection through a mediating and engaging party activity. These party activities are almost always facilitated by conversation and through alcohol or food consumption, flirtation, music, and games.

Parties reinforcing connections with family and friend groups

Game nights, barbecues, drinks with friends

The second type of social connection created at parties is a reinforcing of previous social connection in established friend groups and families. This type of party is generally ritualized and repeated by a social group often with a discrete schedule, such as occurring every year. These parties are repeated often for many years, with de facto names that the participants know and come to expect such as 'game night,' 'the family summer barbecue,' or 'Friday night drinking with coworkers.' These groups share an activity that is well known to be engaging for the group of people involved. By engaging in this ritualized activity, social connections are reinforced, and a sense of community is created. These social groups are generally previously established, and the participants are known before the beginning of the party. These party activities are most commonly the playing of games, and the consumption of

food and alcohol. An example of this kind of party would be an annual tradition of playing a board game with the extended family during a holiday vacation.

Experience 31 depicts this form of social connection occurring through parties well. In this experience a family has an annual ritual of playing the sport *volleyball* together at a group barbecue. It is the one time of the year where the whole family comes together, and the *volleyball* game was described as a key component. The family eats food and consumes alcohol together and engage in lots of active joking and playful "trash talking" surrounding the *volleyball* game. When the participant was asked what they are paying attention to the most during the game they say

> paying attention to my team, what we were doing, just really making sure that everyone's having fun. Like if I saw that it was like getting too competitive, if people are getting like too argumentative over the rules I'd try to crack a joke (E31).

In this experience, the participant emphasized that who won the game was less important than that everyone had the same type of, generally competitive, fun experience playing *volleyball*. This demonstrates how shared game experiences can be instruments for generating social connection at parties. If the game itself mattered more than the social connection through the game, then it would not fit the same pattern of how games at parties were present in the sample.

Game playing was a common activity throughout these parties. Other games discussed included other sports such as *wrestling* (E38), physical games from childhood (E37), video games (E20; 34; 83), adult drinking games (E19; 32) and imagination-based games (E40; 99). A valuable contrast party experience with a game is Experience 83, where a group of adult friends have an annual tradition of playing the video game *Minecraft* near Christmas time. When asked what kinds of feelings this party creates, they described:

> Fun, freedom to do anything. Kind of imagination... there's a spirit of like embracing every dumb idea because it could result in something fun... we've done it so many times. It's kind of like tradition, that is special. But moreover, we have all our friends together with no restrictions on the time and everybody is just fully engaged in just messing around in this world, and trying to come up with creative ideas, like spontaneously, but that's the core of it. (E83)

While this shared game-experience is highly different from the *volleyball* experience from before, the unifying factor is that the game is creating a singular experience between all participants. This experience also emphasized the importance of the *Minecraft* ritual for the friend group, as it was the only time of the year they all got together. Ritualized party behaviors were frequently described as key components for how larger social groups, often who lived far apart, maintained connection (E31; 36; 37; 83). Other party-experiences included established friend groups where the

participant felt closest to their friend group during a semi-regular party tradition (E34; 40; 89; 106; 116). In this way we can see a distinctive form of partying:

Parties connecting Friend Groups and Families: A party where a pre-established group of individuals reinforce social connection through an established, mediating, engaging party activity. These party activities are often facilitated by game play experiences, but also frequently include consumption of food or alcohol. This activity is often ritualized, occurring at specific times of the year when participants make sure they are available.

Parties reinforcing connection with society

Festivals, holidays, birthday parties, weddings

The third type of social connection created at parties is the reinforcing of a larger community and society through culturally entrenched parties. These types of parties usually have long-standing names and customs that are taught to the participants as fundamental, normal, and scheduled in a yearly calendar. For example, this category includes festival parties, holiday parties, and birthday parties. The activities associated with such parties are previously established by a culture and participants have little role in changing or making the activities associated with them. In addition, several of these predetermined types of parties include liminal rituals such as graduation parties, and entrance to university parties. It is common for these types of parties to co-occur with interactions between strangers, as well as friend groups. By engaging in these culturally pre-defined activities a sense of larger community is fostered and connection is formed, not just between the individuals involved but rather with the larger sense of society. These kinds of parties can also occur during liminal periods of participant lives, where their cultural identity is changing, and the party is used as a way of connecting them to the larger social group as their new identity. These parties include multiple engaging activities most frequently consumption of specific cultural food, alcohol, as well as making music. An example of this party would be a cultural holiday such as Christmas, or a graduation party occurring at the end of a study degree.

These culturally connecting parties are generally well understood by the party organizers and often considered deeply important. Some participants talked about their most playful experience as being the responsible person for organizing a successful cultural party (E1; 77). These participants showed a similar awareness of responsibility towards creating a successful, socially connecting party. One participant was a leader at a university social organization and ran the entrance parties for incoming students and said their primary thinking was

> It just feels so like so hard when you enter this kind of like huge environment and you get rejected and you can't make friends and you don't know how things go around. So It felt like a big deal to not make people

> feel rejected even though if they didn't want to participate, like to show that they were welcome anyway, if they wanted to be. (E1)

In this sense, the participant had a feeling that at the beginning of university it was fundamentally important that students socially bond as a larger community, a culture of "students". The participant was responsible for the party and thus felt a responsibility to enact this larger community priority. Experience 77 presented a similar responsibility feeling, where a participant saw a child's birthday party as being poorly organized and felt like the children were being let down. As they said the party had "hired an emcee [Master of Ceremonies]. And the guy he showed up and did everything really fast. So, the kids were looking gloomy and sad because there was nothing fun to do. I picked up the mic and tried to organize games and dance sessions and stuff." (77). These two experiences demonstrate that the participants had such familiarity with both successful, connecting parties, and unsuccessful parties that they not only could recognize bad party running, but felt an imperative to run a party well.

Other participants demonstrate that well-run cultural parties were indeed treated as very important, often having official, paid, organizers (E1; 6; 22; 71; 77; 84). These parties were also connected to larger cultural events, such as the end of high school education (E13; 22). The party activities were so well established, that there were also participants who had their most playful experience humorously transgressing the primary party activity. In one experience a group of friends found it deeply funny to attend a graduation ritual, where they would normally drink lots of alcohol in costume on a boat, but instead *did not* drink lots of alcohol, while still being in costume on a boat (E22). When these cultural and communal parties had annual repetition, they were often described as creating a specific sense of connection with the time of year they would occur. In other words, enforcing the essential experience of a holiday through a party. One participant described their most playful party experience as a holiday festival where they would travel with friends, playing instruments, and receiving specific holiday food from strangers saying

> you go along with your friends and go to the village, and it's related to recreational activities, like singing and dancing. And you also get money doing it. It's not like they are paying me but it's more like religious values there. But I think it more in a cultural way than religious... I would say like the vibe is like deep down like when you hear the buzz of the of the instrument. It's already like connecting me. You're so carefree. An amazing moment. (E63)

This kind of immediate emotional reaction where participants described feeling a particular emotion even thinking about the time or place of such a party was also described by other participants for other cultural holiday parties (E18; 83). Key to this form of partying is a sense that the participant is being connected to a larger

cultural group or one's position in this group, such as an identity of becoming a student or a member of a cultural heritage. Birthday parties are also revealing because they demarcate a transition in one's cultural identity: the age that others should see you as. In this way we can see a distinctive form of partying:

Parties connecting Societies and Cultures: A party where a culture or community of individuals, reinforce social connection through a previously educated and entrenched set of engaging party rituals. These party activities are often facilitated by consumption of food, alcohol, music, costumes, and game playing. This type of partying is also tied to liminal changes in cultural identity.

Discussion

Playful experiences at parties are an important part of many people's lives around the planet. Due to partying not being a sought-after topic of the larger interview study, partying as an emergent category has a unique capacity to understand the overlap of playful experience and party experience. In essence, this technique best addresses when parties are considered highly playful what about them is playful and what about them is considered a party?

Playful party experiences generally utilize the power of engaging activities to facilitate a social connection between individuals, groups, and societies. The exact types of activities at a party are highly diverse and idiosyncratic, as with all playful activities, but often center around consuming food and inhibition reducing drugs, dancing to and creating music, giving gifts, playing games, and most importantly, talking. The most important feature to a party is whether a social connection is facilitated. If a party fails to facilitate a social connection between its participants, it is generally considered an unsuccessful party. Successfully creating social connections in the group is often considered a highly important goal to reach and in culturally repeated parties, the people who organize them will often feel a responsibility to build such an environment. Interestingly, succeeding at making a socially connecting party is often seen as a playful experience itself. Parties were described across a wide variety of cultures, and across a wide variety of ages. In this way a new definition of highly playful partying is argued. *Highly playful partying is a phenomenon that creates an experience of social connection in a group mediated through a shared engagement-prioritizing activity*.

This new definition of a party enables a more unified discussion on the phenomenon and hopefully inspires future research on the interconnections between parties, other cultural celebrations, play, playfulness, and games. This work also reinforces the findings of past works on party motivations. In response to the first research question *How do participants experience playfulness connected to partying?* The answer is assertive an unambiguous: When asked about playful experiences individuals decided to talk about party experiences almost 25% of the time. While percentages

should not be overvalued in qualitative work, this degree of repetition shows that individuals perceive a deep connection between partying and playfulness in their lives. In addition, numerous individuals measured the success or failure of parties, in general, based on the degree of elicited playfulness they were able to achieve in the party-goers. This offers the tantalizing possibility that in fact parties in general are goal-oriented toward facilitating a unique type of highly playful experience.

In response to question 2: *How is the experience of playfulness connected or transformed within specifically partying?* This analysis defines partying as connected to and transforming playfulness in two ways. On one level, parties use activities such as playing games, drinking, or listening or making music in a playful way. This playful way aligns with past theoretical conceptions that they *prioritize engagement* (Masek 2024). In simple language, party activities seek participation and desire to participate from players, much like games and other play activities. Then on a second level, partying leverages these *engagement-prioritizing activities* to *prioritize engagement* between *people* at the party. In essence, creating a double layer of engagement: an engaging party activity is meant to connect people at the party. This secondary layer of playfulness as instrument for social connection was different than other forms of playful experiences reported by participants in the study.

To clarify the depth and meaning of this difference a contrasting example will be unpacked. One experience (20) started with the participant being at a party with their friends. During this party, their friends were playing the group sports game FiFA and then they started playing the RPG-Shooter game the *Binding of Isaac*. In the beginning, the participant was engaged in social play, with their friend playing the *Binding of Isaac* they described "I remember that it was a lot of fun to play with friends, because there's no multiplayer. But whenever my friend was beside me, like we were chatting about the game, like, Oh, we should look at what I got. Stuff like that. And that made it more fun." (E20). In this context we can see how the game itself was furthermore facilitating social connection. However, as the participant played game more they became more involved with the desire to win the game. This desire to win took their attention and made the experience no longer a social one. They described how the game was designed such that "it's really easy to die if you lose concentration. So, it requires you to be really, like inside the game… I completely forgot about my friends" (E20). In this way, we see how a highly attention-demanding goal-based game is still seen as playful but does not match the definition for party-style playfulness. This speaks to, at least in this context, how the design of *Binding of Isaac* was not conducive to a party-type style of playful experience: By demanding high degrees of attention to avoid loss it replaced attention that was building social connection between friends. This opens a larger question of how or if party-games use mechanics to facilitate social connection and avoid social disconnection.

This work also offers a broader basis to criticize the past empirical focus on criminalized partying. Experiences in this sample do involve some rule-bending, rule-

breaking, and potentially criminal activity. Underage drinking is an activity that occurs at parties. In addition to rule breaking, there is also rule following and rule enforcing that occurs at parties. In addition to underage drinking, there is plenty of overage drinking. In essence, consuming alcohol to reduce inhibitions is a party activity no matter the legal status of the people doing it. Sex and flirtation are also common activities at parties. In addition, family activities and childhood birthday rituals are equally common activities to occur at parties. The only realistic conclusion that can be drawn is that people at a variety of ages in virtually every culture in the dataset have parties. Criminal partying exists because parties of all types exist. Unlike most empirical research on parties there is no reason to think that most parties are criminal or socially unsupported in their context. In this way, studying partying as exclusively disruptive to normal life appears to be highly misleading.

Conclusion

Game studies has benefited greatly by understanding the plurality of culturally important forms of games, game-related, and playful phenomena humans express. One form of human playfulness that is widely important for culture, has practical significance for game designers, and has yet to be adequately addressed by game studies, is partying. The association of parties with illegal or dangerous activities is most realistically like other moral panics associated with games and playful activities (Karlsen 2015). Parties focused upon underage drinking, illegal drug use, and the spread of STIs is clearly meant to focus on parties that, like certain game activities, could be "perceived to threaten social order" (Mortensen & Linderoth 2015, p. 6). Indeed, moral panics are an observed component of several forms of games and play including moral panics surrounding digital games (Karlsen 2015; Markey & Ferguson 2017), specifically competitive games (Puri & Pugliese 2012), role playing games (Laycock 2015; Waldron 2005), and even other entertainment media such as movies (Bowman 2015). The fact that parties and games can share such a socially condemned state, while being normal activities for the wide variety of people who do them, is a revealing overlap on the moralization of playfulness that should be studied further.

Game studies is the correct field to study partying further. It is uniquely positioned for this kind of endeavor due to its relative youth creating an environment of multidisciplinarity (Mäyrä 2008) where methods and theoretical influences are less limited by narrow sets of historical norms. The ability to step outside of certain constricting historical ways of seeing games enabled the field to give greater respect to a topic that historically was often seen through the lens of simplistic moral condemnation and panic (Karlsen 2015). Game studies has a long history of understanding broader engaging phenomenon including general human play (Lambrow 2021), performativity (Dicecco & Lane 2014), describing itself through broad terms such as the "ludosphere" in culture (Stenros & Kultima 2018). Partying is an essential phenomenon to include in such a ludosphere. It is a phenomenon that appears fundamental

to human culture, it is perceived as playful, is widely beloved by those who do it, and yet is primarily studied for its risks. It is time for game studies, which engaged in past theoretical consolidations on terms such as games (Arojoranta 2019; Stenros 2017), play (Sicart 2014; Stenros 2015) and playfulness (Masek & Stenros 2021) to begin the beneficial theoretical work of defining the term partying. Past studies have used highly culturally bounded situations where partying occurs to define the phenomenon such "drinking" or "nightlife". It is critical to create an understanding of this phenomenon that is not exclusively at night and while drinking alcohol, but rather understands the structure of the situation on a deeper level. This is highly similar to how games across culture are greatly influenced by their contexts and norms yet are also connected to each other and benefit from a games-oriented discourse. Given the scope and complexity of this phenomenon it furthermore would benefit future work to create a field of "party studies" to build on findings and create an informed discourse on the topic.

Partying is an essential phenomenon to not just look at theoretically, but also in practice. Parties share several deep similarities to games: they are a seemingly inefficient use of resources and full of arbitrary rules and rituals. They promote fictional 'as if' spaces where normal social expectations change. They frequently create positive experiences, that are pursued by specific communities of engagement. Parties can be people's favorite times of the year, a way of maintaining family connections, and re-framing potentially stressful transitions in cultural roles. Through repetition, parties seem to have a cultural-creation role as well. Parties repeated over years and decades, establish engaging activities that become customs. These engaging customs reinforce emotionally and socially satisfying components of being a society member at large. Individuals seek to create excellent versions of these parties for others, bringing new members into cultural ways of connecting to others. This playful method of cultural social-formation and reinforcement should be studied further and treated with respect far beyond a simplistic lens of how parties are associated with certain risks. In this way, this work stands as a full-throated argument that parties are understudied, misunderstood by most of the past empirical work that address them, and game studies is the right field to study them further.

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Playing Rogues

Picaresque Experiences in Video Games

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Playing Rogues
Picaresque Experiences in Video Games

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Abstract

This article explores how video games, with no apparent connection to the literary rogue, still articulate Picaresque episodes and simulate Picaresque experiences through their intended gameplay and worldbuilding. These experiences are a specific expression of the combination of mechanics, narrative, and the agency of the player around a defined type of character, the rogue. They show how pervasive the influence of Picaresque Literature is, influencing design choices and informing key forms of being and acting in virtual worlds. This paper aims to define what a Picaresque experience in video games is and how it is possible to produce them. To achieve this, three video games will be analysed to show the different specific tools video games use to enable these experiences. The analyses will be supported by a theoretical framework based on existing bibliography about agency, videoludic narrative, mechanics, and Picaresque Literature with the objective of offering a comprehensive description of Picaresque experiences while also explaining them as a transmedia phenomenon that demonstrates the influence of Picaresque Literature in video games.

Keywords

Roleplaying videogames; video games; rogues; Picaresque; narrative; agency; literature; mechanics

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Rogues are popular video game characters, especially in computer role-playing games (CRPG). We see them in numerous CRPG such as those from the *Dragon Age* series (BioWare 2009; BioWare, 2011; BioWare, 2014), the *Baldur's Gate* series (BioWare 1998; BioWare 2000; Larian Studios; 2023), the *Final Fantasy* series (Square, 1994; Square, 2000; Square Enix 2006) or the *Fire Emblem* series (Intelligent Systems, 1996; Intelligent Systems, 2002; Intelligent Systems, 2007; Intelligent Systems, 2019). But also, in stealth and adventure games like the *Thief* series (Looking Glass Studios, 1998; Looking Glass Studios, 2000; Ion Storm, 2004; Eidos-Montréal, 2014). When video games introduce rogues as part of their main cast of characters or allow the player to customize their character as a rogue, they usually feature the possibility of

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experiencing rogue-centric gameplay episodes that remind us of those from Picaresque Literature. In those cases, players participate in Picaresque experiences that contribute to what I have called the "Videoludic Picaresque" (Matencio 2024).

Picaresque experiences happen when players have an interactive role performing meaningful actions tied to Picaresque fiction in the virtual world that surrounds them. These experiences are attached to certain mechanics, narratives and characters that introduce instances of social criticism, transgressive storytelling, and diegetic dark play. Players that engage in these experiences are involved in narratives where social class struggles, ethnic discrimination and non-normative sexualities are the daily bread. On the mechanical level, Picaresque experiences feature stealthy actions, mockery, pickpocketing, scamming, and other types of deception skills. These are complex experiences in which we can observe a transmedia cultural manifestation where video games assimilate a literary tradition that it is tightly connected to certain characters and adapt it using the characteristics of video games as a medium, motivating unique gameplay.

Due to its peculiarities, this type of videoludic expression linked to literature should be addressed and explained to help discerning Picaresque experiences and their consequences in video games from other videoludic experiences. Thus, this paper has two objectives:

- Explaining and exemplifying how Picaresque experiences are created in video games.

- Explaining the literary origins of these videoludic experiences.

To fulfil these objectives, a theoretical framework will be established in the first and second sections. In the first one it will be explained how Picaresque literature pollinated video games, and what are the main defining characteristics of rogues. The second section will focus its attention in defining how Picaresque experiences are created in video games. The third section will consist of an analysis of the selected video games to show examples of the elements that shape Picaresque experiences. To explain the features of Picaresque experiences, this paper will use three video games with different characteristics: the stealth video game *Thief: The Dark Project* (Looking Glass Studios, 1998), the open world digital action RPG *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011), and the CRPG *Baldur's Gate III* (Larian Studios, 2023). These games are selected because they are paradigmatic due to the complex Picaresque experiences they feature and because they are different enough to show that Picaresque events may happen in video games with different characteristics.

The study of transmedia archetypical characters in video games, tied to possible mechanics or narratives, has been previously performed by Jan-Noël Thon (2019) and, especially, Joleen Blom (2023). This paper inherits their transmedia intention, but also makes a special focus in the genetic connection between videoludic and literary rogues as an expression of the evolution of Picaresque Literature. Since rogues are part of diegetic dark or transgressive episodes, the analyses of this paper

can be partly connected to Kristine Jørgensen's (2015) analysis of *Dishonored* (Arkane Studios, 2012) and Holger Pötzsch's study on transgressivity in video games (2018). In the same fashion, since this paper features the analysis of experiences where the agency of the player is essential, it can be linked to Bettina Bodi and Jan-Noël Thon's (2020) analysis of the agency in video games, Leanne Taylor-Giles' (2020) exploration of agency and choice in CRPGs, and Bettina Bodi's deep study of agency in video games (2023). This paper also inherits the narratological interest that we can observe in the studies of Sebastian Domsch (2013; 2019), Jan-Noel Thon (2016a; 2016b; 2017), and Harmut Koenitz (2018; 2023; 2024) to explain interactive narrative experiences in video games.

Rogues and Picaresque: From literature to video games

The road of Picaresque Literature has led to the global presence of rogues in contemporary fiction[1]. To understand how it happened, it is necessary to explain a cultural process of diluted literary references and complex transmedia and cultural relationships that connects literature and video games. This process involves three key concepts: hypertextuality, the shared encyclopaedia and the myth of the rogue.

As authors like Souvik Mukherjee (2015), Jan Švelch (2017) or Regina Seiwald (2023) have done before to explain key narratological aspects of video games such as paratexts, this paper also uses the theories of Gerard Genette. In this case, this author is used to explain the nature of the influence between past literary works and video games. The concept of "hypertextuality" (Genette, 1989) is fundamental to explain the continuous expansion of this type of fiction across history. This concept describes that previous literary works, or "hipotexts", inspire directly or indirectly new ones, called "hypertexts" (Genette, 1989, pp. 14–16). As more hypertexts are created, the amount of hipotexts increase, leading to the creation of a corpus of related literary works that expands across time. These works share common characteristics that are gradually updated and modified but will always have a permanent connection with their literary roots. This way, there is a regular process of expansion text by text that may give birth to hypertexts in the same medium or different media. In the case of Picaresque fiction, this process led to the creation of Picaresque hypertexts that took the shape of video games.

[1] When talking about rogues' global presence, we must not confound the mythical identity of rogues and tricksters. Every rogue is a trickster, but not every trickster is a rogue. The trickster is a universal prehistoric myth that can be found through time in cultures across the globe. For example, it is specifically fertile in Native American and African cultures (Berezkin 2010; Szyjewski 2020; Jeremić-Molnar and Molnar 2021). However, the rogue is a prolific modern variation of the trickster, with clear and traceable literary origins and specific characteristics, that has become a myth by itself.

The characteristics of these Picaresque texts are shared between members of different cultures, sometimes despite not knowing their origin or true nature. They are part of what Umberto Eco calls a "shared encyclopaedia"[2] (1995, p. 38), where myths, literary works and other cultural references are shared by the members of a culture. The shared encyclopaedia does not need conscious or explicit references to allow the use of the elements contained in it. As Claudio Paolucci (2021) explains, it features a rhizomatic structure of collective literary and non-literary references that do not necessarily need an identifiable origin. The shared encyclopaedia works as a compendium of information about certain topics that is always ready to be used in different contexts. Authors/developers, generally, use it unconsciously, receiving the influence of cultural traditions indirectly.

Within the shared encyclopaedia, the information about the characteristics of Picaresque fiction and rogues is stored within the myth of the rogue. In this paper, the concept of myth follows Roland Barthes' definition. The myth is one of the strongest and more fertile forms a story or character can take (Barthes, 1972, p. 107). As authors like Fajriannoor Fanani (2016), Ekaterina Galanina and Alexey Salin (2017), and Eugen Pfister (2019) shows in their studies, the potential that the Barthesian myth holds to create new narratives and connections to past ideas or current social challenges in video games is immense. For example, Pfister insists in the capability of the myth of the collapse of the state to explain the cultural intricacies of zombie-based video games, while Fananj explains the political power behind military video games. Similarly, Galanina and Salin analyse video games that develop the myth of the revolution, stablishing a connection with the French Revolution.

Barthes defines myths as semiological systems where a meaning or "signified" is expressed through a form or "signifier" that changes every time the myth is articulated (Barthes, 1972, pp. 115–116). The relationship between form and meaning is called "signification", which allows us to understand why the form is connected to that meaning. The key aspect of the Barthesian myth is its fertility, which is caused when the signification dilutes as new forms are created and time goes by. When the myth is articulated, the form adapts to new contexts, different from those directly connected to its original meaning, making the relationship between form and meaning more difficult to track (Barthes, 1972, pp. 120). This increases the flexibility of the myth, since myths do not need the full context of its original meaning to produce new forms and significations. At the same time, the myth accumulates all its previous forms and every semantic relationship the signification has motivated across history, being literary or extraliterary, waiting to be potentially used in any cultural

[2] Eco's theories have already been applied to Game Studies to explain how players interpret the cultural associations behind video games (Chandler and Noriega 2005; Cayatte 2016; Liu and Gao 2024).

media. For instance, when the myth of the rogue is articulated we can use the "original" rogues and all their evolved forms mixed with extraliterary information about them (prejudices, ideologies, etc.), creating new forms and significations derived from previous ones.

Rogues evolve and take different shapes as they expand in different cultural media, inspiring a transmedia character with its potential forms contained in the myth. Thus, this mythical system of possible articulations created through time is perforce transmedia in its nature. This treatment of myths is similar to Joleen Blom's transmedia approach towards video games characters (Blom 2023, pp. 10–11; pp. 44–49), where they have a mythological nature (having a meaning and a changeable form) that is developed with the experiences of the player (the personal input that fills its meaning) and their iconic visual aspect, but also by external factors such as popularity, fandom or even market practices. In the same fashion, for Blom (2023, p. 167), the discontinuity of their stories is key to construct successful transmedia characters. In this case, it is precisely the capacity to create different stories around the figure of the rogue what makes the myth so fertile as a system of potential characters and stories.

In fact, each articulation of the character in those discontinued stories contribute to what Blom (2023, 56–58) defines as "transmedia character network", following Thon (2019, 187). For Blom, this network is the sum of all the versions that a character may take in different media as it reproduces itself constantly. Although Blom talks about characters with proper names like Sherlock Holmes, this concept can be also applied to a myth. Like the transmedia network defined by Blom and Thon, myths keep the sum of all the forms it has taken through history. In this case, the difference is that we are talking about a descriptive prototype for future potential defined characters. In other words, the myth of the rogue produces characters with proper names and shared traits like Guzmán or Gray Mouser for "discontinued" stories.

The process of the rogue to become a literary myth was one of the fastest in the History of Literature, since it needed less than a century to surpass the barriers of the genre that brought them to life (Rico, 1970, p. 114; Ardila, 2015). The rogue was born along a genre of novels called Picaresque Novels in Spain during the 16th and 17th centuries. The first novel, *Lazarillo de Tormes* (Anonymous, 1554), became a national (Lázaro Carreter, 1972, p. 20) and international success with multiple editions and translations (Bjornson 1977, p. 126; Rabaté, 2017). However, the novel that became the main piece of inspiration for future rogues in those centuries was *Guzmán de Alfarache* (Mateo Alemán, 1599–1604). It worked as the main inspiration behind the first original Picaresque novels in English (Parker, 1971, p. 156; Bjornson,1977, p. 129), such as *The English Rogue* (Richard Head and Francis Kirkman, 1665–1671). When the English Literature took the baton of the Spanish Picaresque, the myth was already stablished and was used to give born to multiple hipotexts and hypertexts that featured new variations of the rogue during the following centuries such as *Moll Flanders* (Defoe, 1722), *Roderick Random* (Smollet, 1748), *Oliver Twist* (Dickens, 1837–

1839) or *Huckleberry Finn* (Twain, 1884). In the 20th century, the myth started to be used in fantasy settings,[3] upgrading its potential traits, such as Robert E. Howard's short story *Rogues in the House* (1934), J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937) or Jack Vance's *The Eyes of the Overworld* (1966). However, the most important example is the *Fafhrd and Gray Mouser series* (1939–1988) from Fritz Leiber, in which the city of Lankhmar is influenced by the Seville depicted by Cervantes in *Rinconete y Cortadillo* (Cervantes, 1614), and Gray Mouser is a rogue that features most of the characteristics and potential episodes contained in the myth.

The 20th century adaptation of the myth to a fantasy setting is key to understand the important role that Picaresque had in the history of tabletop RPGs (TRPG), which influenced video games afterwards. These novels were used as inspiration for the "thief" class from *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax, 1975; Gygax, 1979), that started as a mod class in 1974 (Peterson 2012), and the "rogue" from *Tunnels and Trolls* (St. André 1975). We can see this literary influence in the article that introduced the new class (Gygax, 1974, pp. 8–9), the Appendix N of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax, 1979, p. 224) and the first edition of *Tunnels and Trolls* (St. André, 1975, p. 7). Shortly after, new supplements appeared where rogues were developed in detail in Picaresque cities using classical Picaresque inspiration, as it is mentioned in *Thieves' Guild* (Meyer and Lloyd, 1980, p. ii) and *Thieves' World* (Asprin et al, 1981, p. 3). These TRPGs influenced future CRPGs, as it has been already pointed out by Tresca (Tresca, 2011) and Schules, Peterson and Picard (2018, pp. 107–108). This establishes a clear implicit connection between Picaresque Literature and video games that explains how rogues are depicted when the myth is articulated in this medium.[4]

During this expansion of the myth, rogues shared a series of traits that distinct them from other characters. They are portrayed suffering the effects of social determinism, that is, the incapacity of the rogue to ascend in the social ladder or thrive in their society depending on their social class, religion, gender, or ethnicity. This concept has been studied and pointed out as one of the main traits of the rogue by several authors (Bataillon, 1969, p. 210; Rico, 1970, p. 104; Lázaro Carreter, 1972, p. 211; Sevilla, 2001, p. 17; Rey Hazas, 2003, p. 23; Ardila, 2010; Piso & Tomoiagă, 2012; Elze, 2017; Clark, 2019; Baldritch, 2019, p. 87). Rogues are characters that are usually oppressed by the institutions of an estate that makes them suffer situations of hunger or other life-risking circumstances. They are part of the lower classes, ethnic minorities, or sexual minorities. In some exceptions, they are normative people that fell from grace in the past. Social determinism is the reason behind the criminal career of rogues, who start being young scoundrels and end up becoming full-fledged

[3] Dennis Wise (2019) and I (Matencio 2024) explore this Picaresque influence in fantasy literature.

[4] For a more detailed evolution from Picaresque Literature to video games check my PhD dissertation (Matencio 2024).

criminals. In their stories, they are used as the counterforce of the higher classes through their actions, proposing a different way of living. Due to this, social determinism is used to introduce social criticism as an important element tied to the rogue and Picaresque Literature. It invites authors to criticise political ideologies and sociocultural issues.

Delinquency has also been explained as one of the main characteristics of rogues (Molho, 1972, p. 15; Rico, 1970, p.106; Parker, 1971, p. 156; Ardila, 2010; Dahlstrom, 2016). Rogues are characters that use their wits, playful charisma, and instincts to fight the effects of social determinism while also engaging in criminal schemes. We can see traditional rogues stealing (Alemán, 2020, p. 310; Dickens, 1999, pp. 65-68; Leiber 2020, p. 147), pickpocketing (García, 2001, p. 779; Salas Barbadillo, 2012, p. 89), lockpicking (Alemán, 2021, pp. 240–241; Leiber 2020, p. 284), scamming (López de Úbeda, 2012, pp. 631–632), seducing (Salas Barbadillo, 2012, pp. 94–95; Defoe 2011, p. 117), gambling (Cervantes, 2018, p. 166; Thackeray, 2008, p. 117), assaulting (García, 2001, p. 789) or assassinating (Quevedo, 2016, p. 177; Head 2008, p. 156), among many more examples. Thus, rogues participate in stories where they confront the normative society, delinquency is a tool for survival and oppression is the bread and butter of their daily life. These traits are the main differential elements of the rogue.

Creating Picaresque experiences in video games

The characteristics that the myth of the rogue carry to new hypertexts can be experienced in video games. As has been explained before, Picaresque experiences happen when players can perform meaningful actions historically attributed to literary rogues in Picaresque Literature. This definition has three main components that should be explained: a ludic aspect closely connected to certain core mechanics and gameplay; a narrative aspect; and the agential aspect, that affects both ludic and narrative facets of the Picaresque experience, since players have influence over them (Bodi, 2023, pp. 41–42). The narrative and ludic aspects are explained in separate parts for the sake of easing their comprehension, but it is important to remark that they are intertwined, as Koenitz points out (2023, p. 114). In fact, the narrative aspect of video games can be a core mechanic by itself in dialogue-focused games or multiple-choice story-driven games (Dubbelman, 2016).

Ludic aspect of Picaresque experiences

The ludic aspect of Picaresque experiences is motivated by mechanics that allow the actions that have been historically associated with rogues. They stablish which actions the player can perform, limiting the game's experiences to those that depend on using those mechanics. Following Fernández-Vara (2019, p. 108) and Zubek (2020, p. 17), mechanics can be considered as the verbs that execute inside the video game. These verbs, or core mechanics using Salen and Zimmerman's terminology

(2004, chapter 23, p. 4), can be combined to perform other, more complex, actions that are part of the gameplay (Heussner et al., 2015, p. 25). For a Picaresque experience, these mechanics should represent the dubious actions attributed to rogues since their origins, those are activities such as stealing, pickpocketing, lockpicking, moving silently, scamming, manipulating characters, etc. In the case of a video game in which rogues can engage in combat, they should be portrayed being dexterous or agile (Cervantes, 2018, p. 167) and carrying weapons such as daggers (Alemán, 2020, p. 352; Leiber, 2020, p. 63), light swords (Cervantes, 2018, p. 163; Smollet, 2017, p. 346), bows (Leiber, 2020, p. 391), pistols (Quevedo, 2016, p.41; Cervantes, 2018, p.183), or sticks (Thackeray, 2008, p. 63). If some of these actions and weapons can be used, we may be before a video game that allows Picaresque experiences. The main mechanics that we observe in Picaresque experiences are those related to stealing, performing stealthy criminal actions (for example, breaking into a house), scamming or harming other characters as part of criminal plots using certain weapons limited to these characters.

These mechanics, combined with the Picaresque narrative episodes and traits mentioned earlier, guide the player to engage in a type of dark play, which Linderoth and Mortensen define as "content, themes, or actions that occur within games that in some contexts would be problematic, subversive, controversial, deviant, or tasteless" (Linderoth & Mortensen, 2015, p. 5). Dark play is a type of transgressive play, meaning that is provocative or controversial in the diegetic or extradiegetic levels of the video game (Jørgensen and Karlsen, 2018, p. 3). In the case of Picaresque experiences, the dark play that we observe is diegetic. The videoludic rogue engages in actions that can be labelled as controversial in their own virtual world. This is inherited from Picaresque Literature, which has always been transgressive (Rey Hazas, 2003, p. 19) since it starred non-normative characters that challenged the status quo through satirical or criminal episodes. Moreover, it can be considered an example of dark literature due to its criminal and sexual passages (Luna, 2001, p. 814; Head, 2008, pp. 154–162). Thus, a fundamental aspect of Picaresque experiences is being able to perform some type of dark play mechanically that reflects the immoral actions traditionally attributed to rogues. For example, a video game starring a rogue with stealing mechanics that allows the player to also manipulate other characters can, potentially, feature Picaresque experiences.

This core diegetic and mechanical dark play feature three types of transgressive gameplay if we consider Pötzsch's division of the types of transgressivity in video games (Pötzsch, 2018, p. 50). We are especially interested in the diegetic, critical, and hegemonic transgressivity. The diegetic transgressivity is the most important one for Picaresque experiences. It implies the possibility of using transgressive actions with diegetic consequences in the video game's world (Pötzsch, 2018, p. 52). For example, stealing, scamming, or breaking into houses. Similarly, this author combines the critical and hegemonic transgressivities to explain those gameplay practices that might be considered as an attempt to break extradiegetic conventions, rules, or

power relations. As political cultural products, video games always carry certain ideologies along the way, as we see in the analyses of Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig De Peuter (2009), Souvik Mukherjee (2017), Craig Johnson and Rowan Tulloch (2017) and Fitrawan Akbar and Bevaola Kusumasari (2021). This is not different in the case of video games that feature Picaresque experiences, in fact, it is reinforced since they replicate what has been done historically in Picaresque fiction. We can find the intentional use of rogues as the nemeses of characters that represent certain institutions or discourses that can be linked to the real world as a form of protest or social commentary. In the same fashion, rogues may represent different minorities in their stories, bringing over the table passages of reflection about the life of real people in their situation. Rogues carry an immense political potential as oppressed characters that represent non-normative ways of living. Knowing this, Picaresque experiences should be diegetically transgressive and are supported by critical and hegemonic transgressivities.

Narrative aspect of Picaresque experiences

Part of this transgression can be found in the narrative aspect of Picaresque experiences. The story and the characters we find in video games are essential to produce them. If we consider Jenkins' theories on narrative structures within video games (Jenkins, 2004, pp. 124–129), these characters may appear or participate in enacted, embedded, and emergent narratives. Enacted narratives can be found in video games with a main story that is developed through different compulsory episodes located between or within gameplay cycles. This type of narrative, which is not always named as "enacted", can be developed through cutscenes, dialogues or interactive sequences located in certain spaces, like Ryan (2006), Domsch (2013), Thon (2016a) or Klevjer (2023) have studied. These strategies can be used in Picaresque experiences since they are not limited to certain types of stories or characters.

Embedded narratives can also be developed using these strategies, but they are established through different non-compulsory framed stories such as secondary quests located within a main story or those that can be found in books or item descriptions. This type of narrative has been studied by Ryan (2006, p. 205), Wei (2010) and Domsch (2019, p. 114), among others. Embedded narratives, following these authors, increase the complexity and depth of certain stories, allowing the inclusion of multiple characters and plots, which makes them susceptible of being used in Picaresque experiences since they allow the inclusion of related characters and stories. Finally, emergent narratives are those that usually happen circumstantially while exploring in video games. They are developed through spontaneous interactions with other players, non-playable characters (NPCs), objects, etc. They have been studied as one of the main narrative structures that produce stories in different types of video games (Meifert-Menhard, 2014; Bergstrom, 2019). These stories are unique for each player since emergent narratives are not pre-established, and they are heavily dependent on the actions of the player (Chauvin et al., 2015).

These narrative structures can be used to create a Picaresque experience or a non-interactive Picaresque episode that may happen in a cutscene or similar situation. For example, an emergent narrative where the player tries to pickpocket the keys from an NPC, and they end up getting caught red-handed can be considered a Picaresque experience. On the other hand, a monologue where a character talks about their past as an oppressed rogue that is part of an ethnic minority, does not create a Picaresque experience, but it can contribute to it.

These narrative structures are reinforced by the cast of characters. Videoludic rogues are what Blom calls "dynamic game characters" (Blom, 2023), which are defined as characters "whose identity changes depending on how the player plays the game" (Blom, 2023, p. 10). Dynamic game characters can be characterized by the ludic, narrative and performative aspects (those allowed by design in pre-scripted scenarios) of a video game (Blom, 2023, p. 80–89). For Blom (2023, p.10), dynamic characters are part of the mythological beings we have been experiencing since our childhood, which aligns with the approach of this paper. We have already claimed the mythical nature of the rogue in video games, but it is important to insist on them as part of the type of character that Blom is defining. Rogues, as myths, are dynamic. They change with each articulation, something that it is not different in video games. In fact, video games allow them to be more dynamic than ever before through the actions of the player, especially if the playable rogue is what we know as *avatar*. An avatar is a blank page that can be defined by players' actions (Taylor-Giles, 2020, p. 300), something shared with the dynamic game character. The avatar has no voice and their interactions and relationships with the elements that shape the world are limited to the decisions of the player. When a game introduces an avatar as the character controlled by the player, it usually features meaningful decisions in dialogues or actions that customize the experience that they want to achieve. An avatar which is a rogue should be able to define their potential Picaresque traits through different types of agencies, mechanics, and narratives. If the aspects that define the avatar reenact the potential characteristics contained in the myth of the rogue, they will support a Picaresque experience. The avatar is opposed to the *actor* (Taylor-Giles, 2020, p. 300), a type of character that has preestablished storylines, morals, and motivations. These characters have less margin to be defined by the actions of the player, making them less dynamic, but they are still dynamic characters due to their mythical nature and, in case of being playable, the meaningful actions and decisions they are involved in.

Independently of being avatars or actors, rogue characters are usually labelled with a character class in CRPGs. Classes serve as preestablished frameworks of mechanics and skills, sometimes even narratives, attributed to the character that belongs to that class. We may think that only those characters labelled as part of the rogue class can be considered as such in these video games. However, the concept of the rogue transcends these categories since it references a literary myth that existed before role-playing games existed. If a character of a different class participates in the type of stories mentioned earlier, has access to certain mechanics and gameplay, they

can still be rogues and participate in Picaresque experiences, despite not being categorized as such in the game's system. The same happens in video games where the concept of character class does not exist. Thus, rogues transcend these practical classifications due to their unrestrictive dynamic mythological nature. A rogue does not need character classes to be identified as one, it just needs to follow its historical characteristics.

Apart from the playable rogue, there is a cast of secondary characters that are typical in Picaresque narratives and can be a supporting element of Picaresque experiences. Rogues interacted with these characters in the texts they starred. For example, rogues usually act against corrupted high classes. Historically, these characters have been corrupted nobles, clerics, or bourgeois merchants, but it can change depending on the setting of the story since they are part of the tradition of a dynamic mythological character. Likewise, rogues can interact with other robbers, pickpockets, charlatans, beggars, or prostitutes, while also be connected to cruel or merciful parents/masters. If these characters appear in the story in which the rogue participates, the Picaresque experience is supported, especially if the player can interact with them.

Agential aspect of Picaresque experiences

If the participation of players is important, their agency is key to develop Picaresque experiences on both the narrative and mechanical level, since both levels might be affected by the actions of the player (Bodi & Thon, 2020, p. 158). The use of certain mechanics and the possibility of being part of different narratives are linked to players' capacity to interact with different characters, items, or spaces. If the game enables certain actions, like lockpicking a door, and include narratives that use them, players will be able to engage in Picaresque experiences. Considering the theories of Marie-Laure Ryan (2006, pp. 190–191), only the involvement of the player can lead to the creation of certain videoludic experiences. Taylor-Giles follows the same approach, defining agency, using Janet Murray's definition (Murray, 1997, p. 110), as "the ability of the player to feel they are having an impact upon the game world" (Taylor-Giles, 2020, p. 297). Bettina Bodi and Jan-Noël Thon's theories about players' agency can be connected to this idea since they also focus on the possibilities of the player to perform certain actions that have consequences in the video game's world. They call them "meaningful actions" and are also restricted by design (Bodi & Thon, 2020, p. 158; Bodi, 2023, p. 23). These actions can take place through four types of agencies: the spatial-explorative agency, the configurative-constructive agency, the narrative-dramatic agency, and the temporal-ergodic agency (Bodi & Thon, 2020, pp. 159–160; Bodi, 2023). First, the "spatial-explorative agency" (Bodi, 2023, pp. 43–44) is stablished by those elements of the video game's design that affect the ability of the player to traverse and explore the game's virtual spaces. It can be separated in "spatial agency" and "explorative agency". The first focuses on the character's movement, while the second considers how the player interacts with the space. In our case, for the spatial agency we are interested in how rogues move (acrobatically or

stealthily, for instance). On the other hand, for the explorative agency, we are interested in the possible actions players use to interact with the elements of the game's world like rogues, such as lockpicking.

Second, the "configurative-constructive agency" is afforded by the inclusion of customizing options for our character and some of the video game's spaces (Bodi, 2023, pp. 53–56). It can also be separated into "configurative" and "constructive" agencies. The first is focused on the character's customization, using tools like character classes, choosing skills, or customizing the background of a character. Thus, we will be looking at possible ways to configure a character to express their Picaresque traits. Meanwhile, the constructive agency is interested in the ability to change the landscape of a video game. However, there are considerably less significant cases in which rogues can change the space to introduce Picaresque experiences, so this agency will be left aside for future research. An example can be found in *The Guild 3 (*GolemLabs and Purple Lamp, 2017), which allows the construction of thieves' houses as a crime lord of a medieval city.

Meanwhile, the "narrative-dramatic agency" (Bodi, 2023, pp. 58–62) explains the use of meaningful actions that affects the progress of the story. It can split up in "narrative agency", which focuses on what degrees the player can alter the narrative events of the game, and "dramatic agency", which allows players to create emergent personal stories with the different elements that shape the game. For instance, there is narrative agency if players can solve parts of the story in a different way because they are acting as rogues, and this is acknowledged by offering different resolutions, dialogues, or rewards. On the other hand, the dramatic agency is used when players, as rogues, are allowed to steal or manipulate NPCs at their will to create a personal coherent story filled with Picaresque experiences.

The narrative-dramatic agency involves certain degree of what it has been called "embodiment", as part of the player's subjectivity (Keogh, 2014; Schröter, 2017; Berents and Keogh, 2019; Vella, 2021). That is, the circumstance in which a player embodies the character they are playing with and explore new ways of being in a personal manner (Gualeni and Vella, 2020). Picaresque experiences allow the player to embody a rogue introducing them to their circumstances and abilities. If the video game invite players to think and behave like rogues in contexts like those explained before, they may participate in Picaresque experiences while embodying that type of character. This is limited to games where the player can control a rogue as a main character, especially when there are avatars as protagonists. The virtual existence of an avatar is filled with the embodying experiences of the player, who interacts with the ludic space in certain ways to explore new identities. This way, the narrative-dramatic agency, but also the configurative agency, create a new layer of complexity in the development of Picaresque experiences.

Finally, the "temporal-ergodic agency" (Bodi, 2023, pp. 48–53) is not the most important in Picaresque experiences, but it should be addressed. It can be divided into

"temporal agency" and "ergodic agency". The temporal agency focuses on how the time is used and perceived in certain game states, such as game over states. In addition, the ergodic agency involves players' ability to modify temporal structures in the game. For example, if they can advance or reset the time of the game through their actions. In the case of Picaresque experiences, we are interested in the ergodic agency in case the time of the day is used to facilitate certain activities for rogues. One interesting case would be the use of the night as the main time frame for criminal activities.

Thus, Picaresque experiences are shaped in the following way: first, they are heavily influenced by the agential possibilities that a video game offers. Players should be able to act as an avatar or actor rogue through the mechanics introduced in the game, which usually inspire a diegetic dark and transgressive gameplay. Similarly, the narrative and the cast of characters should support the Picaresque experience, recreating what we see in Picaresque fiction. If the player can perform the previously explained meaningful actions within certain stories, a Picaresque experience takes place. These experiences are not limited to characters labelled as rogues in the game, since players may participate in them using characters that are part of the myth of the rogue, but the game does not consider as such. Picaresque experiences do not depend on labels, but in the actions that the player is allowed to perform and the different narratives they may participate in.

Exemplifying Picaresque experiences

The first step in the analysis of the elements that create Picaresque experiences should consider the tools of the configurative agency that are at the disposition of the player. *Thief: The Dark Project* (TTDP from now on) features an actor named Garrett as the rogue main character. The player cannot modify any visual aspect or background information of the protagonist. There is not a character class that frames the character within a myth or stereotypical character. However, it is stated in the prologue that the character is a rogue, since he is an orphaned pickpocket of the streets of The City that has been trained to be the perfect thief.

On the other hand, both *Skyrim* and *Baldur's Gate III* (BG3 from now on) include an avatar which the player might embody to participate in Picaresque experiences. The only information that *Skyrim* provides us about our avatar is that they are a prisoner for an unknown reason. The game has no tools to develop this background information, but we can configure their race or ethnic group; the gender of the character, limited to men and women, and their visual representation. The race of the avatar affects some skills or statistics. Races like the Khajiit, the Argonians, the Dunmer and the Bosmer carry bonuses that are related to Picaresque skills such as sneaking, pickpocketing or lockpicking, making them ideal in the case of playing as a rogue while reinforcing the role of the explorative agency and the potential carried by the dramatic agency in the Picaresque experience. Furthermore, these subgroups are

part of suspected minorities in the region of Skyrim, associated with smuggling, thievery, or drug dealing. Thus, if we select the races that carry bonuses for Picaresque skills, or interact with characters of these races, we might experience situations of blatant racism and oppression that align with the Picaresque episodes we can observe in Picaresque Literature (Alemán, 2020, p. 162; Salas Barbadillo, 2012, pp. 108–110). The racial and ethnic origins of the avatar, combined with their condition as a prisoner at the beginning of the game, might help the player build a fitting background for a rogue that enables multiple agencies.

Figure 1. Garrett as a young rogue in *Thief: The Dark Project* (Looking Glass Studios, 1998). © Eidos Interactive

BG3 provides more options for the configuration of the background of its characters. We can select one out of 11 backgrounds that support specific dialogue interactions and skill bonuses, backing both the narrative and dramatic agencies. Three of them provide an increased proficiency in statistics traditionally attributed to rogues: “charlatan”, “criminal”, and “urchin”, which are aligned with Picaresque Literature. They increase the capacities of the character for stealing, tricking other characters through dialogue choices, and moving silently, which support the explorative and dramatic agential aspect of the games, as well as their ludic aspect. These backgrounds provide brief narrative descriptions of the past of the character that support the Picaresque experience that the game proposes. For example, the urchin background includes the following description: “After surviving a poor and bleak childhood, you know how to make the most out of very little”. Apart from these backgrounds, players may select different races and ethnic groups for their character.

Among them, “lightfoot halflings”, “deep gnomes”, “wood elves” and “wood half-elves” have bonuses in either stealth actions or movement speed, which are required to play rogues effectively, affecting the spatial and explorative agencies. Both types of wood elves and “drows” (roughly, underground elves that are considered as evil) also feature proficiency using weapons historically connected to rogues such as short swords or daggers. These races, except for drows, are not discriminated in the world of BG3, so they do not add a racial narrative Picaresque background to the character creation. Finally, we can select a character class that increases the proficiency of the character with certain mechanics and give access to class-specific skills. Among these classes, the “rogue” class is the one made to support Picaresque experiences. It increases the stealth, pickpocketing, backstabbing, and deception skills of the characters. Knowing this, we can confirm that, except for TTDP, the configurative-constructive is used to improve future Picaresque experiences through the selection of certain races, background information or classes in the selected video games. BG3 also introduces the possibility of using the narrative agency in its Picaresque experiences, since it allows the player to resolve quest dialogues using the social background stablished through the configurative-constructive agency, for example in the quests “Return the locket” or “Kill Raphael's old enemy”.

Figure 2. Choosing a background in *Baldur's Gate III* (Larian Studios, 2023). © Larian Studios

If the mechanical aspect of Picaresque experiences is considered, we can see that the three games include mechanics that support it along the explorative agential aspect. TTDP is focused on stealing objects and breaking and entering somebody

else's property. Supporting the spatial agency, this game features stealthy and acrobatic movements that allow players to break into those properties. The obtained loot is later added to an accumulative gold reward that reflects the success of the actions of the player. TTDP is a stealth-based game supported by detailed sound-detection and lightning mechanics that affect the explorative agency. As part of the offensive mechanics, the main character can also fight using a light sword and a bow. The player might decide to knock out enemies or kill them, if necessary, which aligns well with Picaresque Literature and gives space to use the dramatic agency. TTDP presents refined mechanics aimed to recreate Picaresque experiences when combined with the narrative setting provided in the different chapters of the game. The setting situates Garrett's adventures at nighttime, but the player cannot modify it, making the ergodic agency irrelevant in the game.

In *Skyrim* and BG3 we find several mechanics that contribute to Picaresque experiences, which represent the historical literary dexterity and charisma attributed to rogues. In both games, rogues are encouraged to be played using bows, daggers and light swords, following their literary past. They also introduce a "stealth mode" that the player may use to move silently, hide from other characters, pickpocket them and attack them using a backstab or surprise attack that deals extra damage. In the same fashion, both games feature a lockpicking mechanic which allows the avatar to open doors and chests. As a side note, in BG3 rogues can distract their victims using disguises or decoys that allow easier lockpicking, pickpocketing or backstabbing. Similarly, players may manipulate other characters through persuasion, intimidation or deception. *Skyrim* goes beyond that including the guard bribing mechanic, used to avoid the consequences of stealing, and the fence mechanic, which enables selling stolen goods to fences. In the same game, players that want to act as rogues can forge business ledgers to get extra money, or brew powerful poisons using their "alchemy" skill. Additionally, showing the potential of the ergodic agency, *Skyrim* players may change the time frame using beds or an option in the menu to facilitate their criminal attempts during the night, when most NPCs are sleeping. It can be seen that these mechanics motivate Picaresque experiences affecting the spatial, explorative, configurative and dramatic agencies.

As a paradigmatic addition in *Skyrim*, if the avatar steals objects, lockpicks certain doors or chests, forges business ledgers or kills an NPC, they will put into action the law-enforcement mechanics the game features. The objective of these law mechanics is penalizing the excessive use of these criminal actions. They balance the game, since players could become rich very quickly if they steal without consequences, while also supporting the creation of emergent Picaresque experiences close to their literary counterparts. The previous actions, which are examples of diegetic transgressions and dark play, are considered as illegal within the video game's world. Each time the player commits a crime, they are assigned with an internal number that indicates the amount of money they owe called "bounty". As the bounty increases, players will be followed by the guards of a town and bounty collectors hired by the authorities that will try to kill or subdue the avatar. Players may pay a

fine depending on their bounty or bribe the guards, otherwise they will be imprisoned. In the case of imprisonment, the players lose all their items, and an emergent Picaresque narrative starts. In this event, players should decide to escape from prison using lockpicks and getting back their items or serve the amount of time that has been decided, losing skill levels and money. BG3 also features this type of mechanics, by introducing an opinion and revenge system in case of stealing or killing NPCs. When the player is discovered, they engage in a dialogue that can be solved through bribing or manipulative dialogues that are improved with the deception proficiencies of the character. In case of not convincing the victim, players may end up being attacked by a group of enemies. These video games use the diegetic transgressivity, the consequences of behaving as a rogue, and the dramatic agency to increase the number of Picaresque experiences in which the player can participate.

Figure 3. Getting caught and bounty increase in *Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011).

Mechanics are supported and motivated by the narrative aspect of these video games. TTDP features a protagonist that steals to survive and humiliate the corrupted high classes of The City. As the game progresses in its enacted narrative, it is inferred that he became an orphan due to the oppressive politics of the crime lords that control The City. The game starts with Garrett trying to steal from Lord Bafford's Manor, a minor corrupted nobleman, and it progresses as Garrett ends up involved in a bigger plot after humiliating one of these crime lords. His motivation is clear, enriching himself while also confronting those that caused the oppression suffered during his childhood. The more we know about the politics of this state, the more we understand that the high classes are exploiting the most vulnerable to extend their influence. Thus, Garrett becomes a defiant side that represents witty resistance and freedom.

Skyrim features a main story which does not include Picaresque stories, but there are factions and embedded narratives in side-quests that develop them. Whether they are played or not, depends on the dramatic agency of players. In the slums of the decadent city of Riften, we can find the Thieves' Guild faction. It introduces the player to a long side-quest, an embedded story, in which the player initiates a career as an amateur scoundrel and ends up becoming the master of the guild. It also gives access to randomly generated minor quests, emergent stories called "city influence quests", that are focused on stealing, pickpocketing, breaking into properties, fencing items, tampering with accounting books, or slandering rivals. This faction enables the introduction of stories or dialogues about oppression or delinquency throughout the game. For example, Sapphire's side-quest, another embedded story, introduces us to the story of an illegitimate child that was kidnapped and abused by bandits until she killed them. This rogue became an assassin and thief afterwards since it was the only type of life she knew. These types of stories can be found in novels such as *Guzmán de Alfarache*, *La hija de Celestina*, *The English Rogue,* or *Moll Flanders*.

Likewise, the Dark Brotherhood faction takes a darker approach to rogues. This embedded storyline introduces the player to stories of assassination, political intrigue, and treason in exchange for money. Through this faction, the player can experience the most violent side of rogues that is very similar to what we see in Leiber's stories, Cervantes' *Rinconete y Cortadillo* or *The English Rogue* where there are rogues within guilds or fraternities that are employed to hurt or kill people. Additionally, cities like Riften, Markarth or Windhelm include slums where the player can observe the life of rogues and other poor people that may end up becoming criminals. For example, thieves, like Brynjolf; thugs or assassins, as Nazir; drug addicts, like Wujeeta; beggars, such as Edda and Snilf; racial minorities, like the argonians in the ghetto of Windhelm, and orphans, as Lucia. These characters support Picaresque experiences through side-quests like "Skooma trade" or "Argonian dock workers".

Meanwhile, BG3 includes the possibility of participating in Picaresque experiences in its main enacted story, since it allows to solve most of its stages through manipulative dialogues, stealthy gameplay and other actions derived from the mechanics featured in the game. That means that the narrative and dramatic agencies are heavily developed in its main quest. In this video game, the player can constantly use their abilities as a rogue in conversations or exploration to progress in the story through sleights of hand, deception or acrobatic movements. This shows a complex combination between the three aspects (ludic, narrative and agential) that results in detailed and pervasive Picaresque experiences. It also expresses narratively the life of rogues through different groups of peoples that introduce several quests or embedded stories for players.

For instance, BG3 develops Picaresque experiences through the eyes of rogue children starting from its first act. Not much time after starting the story, the player may

find a gang of rogue children that represent an oppressed racial minority in this virtual world. These children are tieflings, the result of human and demonic relationships, which are considered as pariahs by many other characters. Most of these children are orphans trying to find a way of living in a world that turns its back against them; like what we see in Picaresque Literature. Their leader, Mol, is a female rogue that resorts to witty plans and trickery to get money to protect the rest of the children. At the same time, another rogue called Mattis tries to scam the player with false magic rings to ensure Mol's objective while also maintaining his sister. During this first act, we can see other rogues of the gang pickpocketing characters or learning to defend themselves. They offer quests, embedded stories, related to robbery and deception that introduces players to several Picaresque experiences. As the game's story progresses, the vulnerability of these children manifests itself and the player shall decide if they participate in their plans, helping them, or cause their deaths through different emergent or embedded narratives. For example, Mol ends up being deceived by a devil, and the player may trick the same demon to save her or let her suffer the consequences in the future. As an interesting easter egg with this group of rogue children, if the player has a rogue with urchin background, they can engage in a competition of rogue techniques with Mattis that may end up in the player receiving a background goal called "Artful Dodger" which is the name of one of the main rogues in *Oliver Twist*. This shows the literary influence of the video game and reinforces the Picaresque experience if the player knows the reference.

Figure 4. Start of a Picaresque experience with Mattis using a rogue avatar (Larian Studios, 2023). © Larian Studios

Furthermore, these three video games, through their mechanics, characters, and stories, allow the inclusion of hegemonic or critical transgressive episodes in which players might interpret different situations as the result of political and social struggles that can be reflected into the real world. For example, the rogue children context from BG3 can be understood as an example of discrimination towards ethnic minorities and the consequences it has in children. The same can be applied to Garrett's story in TTDP or the stories connected to ethnic minorities in Skyrim. On the other hand, the adventures of *Skyrim*'s Thieves' Guild might lead the player to think about the consequences of living in a deprived urban area.

If we consider the agential, mechanical and narrative aspects of these games. We can see that the dramatic agency stands out in Picaresque experiences. Since players know that they have certain tools at their disposal, as well as a narrative role that can be fulfilled, they are invited to create personal narratives filled by unique Picaresque experiences derived from their actions. The dramatic agency then becomes a key element of Picaresque experiences, since players, in their context, act as rogues in the way they consider using the designed elements of the game to create their own story. This personal narrative, which is highly political due to the characteristics of Picaresque fiction, can be used to support the previous transgressive episodes within the games.

Conclusions

From the previous examples, it is possible to see how Picaresque experiences take shape. They need a combination of mechanical and narrative potential combined with a rather flexible agential aspect that allows players to reenact passages that resemble those of the Picaresque tradition. The selected video games show that there are several options to create these experiences embodying rogues. Mechanically, they offer numerous actions that can be tied to rogues and Picaresque Literature such as pickpocketing, lockpicking, manipulating other characters or assaulting them. To increase the feeling of being a rogue, two of these video games feature law-enforcement mechanics like the bounty system that works as a tool to point out the transgressive aspect of behaving as a rogue, but also balance the performance of rogues within the video game. Narratively, video games use Picaresque dynamic characters located in the myth of the rogue to introduce different narrative approaches towards rogues, like those living situations of oppression and social determinism or being part of criminal groups. Similarly, the portrayal of rogues living in the slums of cities or being discriminated shows possible transgressive political interpretations of their situation while also enriching the Picaresque experience by interacting with characters with different motivations and backgrounds. The dramatic, narrative, explorative and configurative agencies have also been shown as fundamental in the creation of Picaresque experiences.

Ultimately, Picaresque experiences allow us to reenact episodes which we can observe in literature since the 16th century. As it has been explained, this situation is not necessarily conscious. It is an example of the implicit literary influence that video games receive as cultural products. The myth, after the evolution of Picaresque Literature, is articulated once more offering a bridge that connects the literary past of the rogue with its contemporary videoludic expressions through the unique tools that shape this medium. Despite the different settings introduced by video games, we can state that they allow rich Picaresque experiences and episodes that are part of the contemporary Picaresque fiction through the articulation of the myth of the rogue.

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Queer Gender Identities and Videogames

Literature Review

Mark Maletska

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Literature Review

MARK MALETSKA

Abstract

This narrative literature review discusses peer-reviewed research articles connecting queer gender identities and videogames. Its main purpose is to describe directions of research on connections between queer gender identities and videogames, and to indicate gaps and missing connections in existing studies. The analysed material was collected in April–August 2023 using *Google Scholar*, *Web of Science,* and *Scopus* databases. Three major thematic categories were identified in the publications: representation of queer gender identities in videogames; player–avatar connections and gender dysphoria; and queer gender identities in game-related spaces. The main finding of the review is that articles focused on queer people do not tend to address the inherent queerness of videogames. Queer temporality and spatiality are not sufficiently studied in interaction with queer players, and narrative and/or visual elements remain in focus, even when potentially interactive activities like avatar creation are being researched.

Keywords

LGBTQIA+; videogames; queer game studies; narrative literature review

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Queer theory has been challenging fixed norms for decades. Queerness has been considered from various perspectives, both as "a term which refers not only to lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans identities, but to a range of identities who cannot (or will not) be accounted for within existing normative categories of sex, gender and sexuality" (Greer, 2013) and as a phenomenon "attempting to disturb the 'norm'" in broader senses (Nylund, 2007). When mixed, these approaches to queerness aim to disturb anything regular and stable in various parts of life—videogames and game studies included.

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In queer game studies, the focus on queerness as an identity category preceded the shift to consideration of queerness as various forms of non-normativity in videogames. Earlier publications in queer game studies primarily considered LGBTQIA+ representation, and queerness as difference from the norms was not sufficiently discussed. Ruberg argues that "queer game studies changes the dominant narrative about the place of LGBTQ subjects in videogames and aims to reclaim the medium by imagining videogames themselves as queer," and, thus, "queerness 'beyond representation'—that is, queerness as a function of video game systems themselves" comes to the forefront (Ruberg, 2018). Since this shift, much more attention has been drawn to the queerness inherent in videogames, and various ways to make them non-normative—such as the creation of queer game engines (Freedman, 2018) or the non-normative use of controllers (Harrer et al., 2019).

At the same time, studies on gender identities in videogames are still dominated with works focused on gender binaries (Richard, 2013). There are works that, although using queer studies as a part of their theoretical background, focus mainly on binary divisions, sometimes noting that nonbinary representatives are simply out of scope or do not make a significant difference in studies. Lacey (2023) noted in their research on nonbinary representations in videogames that even if a study starts with diversity, its practical part either does not contain or does not mention transgender and nonbinary people. This has resulted in a situation where the focus of queer game studies has shifted from queer identities to queerness as an inherent characteristic of videogames instead, while studies on games and identities beyond queer game studies typically pay more attention to traditional gender binaries.

This poses the following question: how homogeneous are the tendencies within queer game studies, particularly considering those focusing more on abstract queerness or binary genders in respective areas? To answer this question, it is necessary to address the gaps in game studies that could help include more diversity in research outside of queer studies not only in terms of theory, but also in practice.

The aim of this literature review is to find out which areas remain underdeveloped and could be addressed in further studies, and to highlight the need to continue challenging binaries in studies of gender and gaming. The main tasks of this review are: to describe directions of existing research on connections between queer gender identities and videogames; and to highlight the directions that need further work.

Conceptual background

This study is positioned in the domain of queer game studies—the paradigm embracing queerness as an approach to game studies and games critique (Shaw & Ruberg, 2017). Key works of the domain, including *Queer Game Studies* (Shaw & Ruberg, 2017) and *Videogames Have Always Been Queer* (Ruberg, 2019), offer a set of tools to challenge traditional and normative approaches to games and game studies. From

a critical exploration of queer as a term applied "not only to lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans identities, but to a of range of identities who cannot (or will not) be accounted for within existing normative categories of sex, gender and sexuality" (Greer, 2013), queer game studies has moved towards a strong association of queerness with non-normativity in a broader sense (see e.g., Chang, 2015; Krobová et al., 2015; Ruberg, 2018; Shaw, 2011). Queer games studies aims at queering the very structure of games and the ways people play, going beyond queerness as non-cis-heteronormativity. This change has been later described as follows:

> Recently, queer theory has extended its scope beyond the representation of gender and sexuality, to help re-conceptualize the design of interactive technologies, and from a non-cis-heteronormative angle (e.g., exploring technology as a site for queer freedom [Blas, 2006], centering transgender and nonbinary people towards inclusive technology design [Haimson et al., 2020], etc.) (Hantsbarger et al., 2022)

Recent studies consider non-normative videogames and mods as manifestations of 'queer posthumanism' (Ruberg, 2022) and as a means to go beyond oppressive norms of society through unusual ways to play games (e.g., playing for 'no-fun,' observing non-playable characters).

Positioned within queer game studies, this study stands close to the intersection between LGBTQIA+ game studies and queer studies, or what could be described as "scholarship that takes as its primary focus LGBTQ topics—from LGBTQ players or designers to games with LGBTQ representation—and work that seeks to understand videogames through the conceptual frameworks of queerness" (Shaw & Ruberg, 2017). Thus, it seeks queerness as, first of all, a range of gender identities outside the normative categories, while acknowledging the broader views on what queerness is.

Gender identity here refers to "a person's internal sense of their own gender" (Ok & Kang, 2021). Although in some existing works it is separately underlined that the term 'queer identities' is used for identities outside the binaries or those deviating from heterosexual cisgender norms (Worthen, 2023), for this review I include transgender, nonbinary, intersex, and other gender nonconforming identities into the umbrella term 'gender identity.' This decision aims at underlining the inclusion of nonbinary identities into research surrounding gender identities as they are, one way or another, a part of broader spectrum.

As Shaw and Ruberg (2017) note, diverse gender identities have been studied for a while in terms of representation, and work on queer players has also been undertaken for a while. Games have been looked at not only as a medium representing queer people, but also as a tool for self-exploration. Shaw's dissertation (2010), for example, was dedicated to understanding the self-identification processes of people

playing videogames in general and in relation to their in-game selves. In *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender. and Sexuality in Videogames* (Malkowski & Russworm, 2017), there is a particular focus on how gaming could be seen as the reflection of a player that is linked directly to the perception of oneself. Moreover, *Queerness in Play* (Sihvonen & Stenros, 2018) discloses various topics related to queerness and points to the impact of interacting with game characters. This review, however, looks at various connections between gender identities and games and focuses on videogames in particular, but does not cover analogue games. In this study, videogames are defined as "a game which we play thanks to an audiovisual apparatus and which can be based on a story" (Esposito, 2005). Digital copies of analogue games are consciously excluded from the talk of videogames as well—I consider them a way to play analogue games, not separate entities.

Queer game studies not only focuses on narrative, but also on the ludic aspects, and the ludic dimension of videogames is another direction to seek intersections with research on gender identities. Game mechanics can be defined as "methods invoked by agents, designed for interaction with the game state" (Sicart, 2008), where methods are mechanisms of interaction or actions within a process of playing. These mechanisms, in essence ludic elements of videogames, could be considered as queer, and—as in case with mechanics of avatar creation—are sometimes seen as connected with players' gender identities.

The key terms of this review, used in various combinations as keywords for material searches, reflect a deep dive into the cornerstone publications of queer game studies.

Material and method

The collected sources are presented according to central themes in a traditional narrative literature review form. To formulate the tasks of the review, I investigated key publications and concepts of queer game studies, while formulating keywords and designing steps for processing the acquired material. Although I framed this article as a traditional review aimed at critically assessing results of existing studies, it also functions as a scoping review (Jesson et al., 2011), pointing to directions for further research within queer game studies.

To collect the material, I conducted two searches using *Google Scholar*, *Web of Science* and *Scopus* databases. The first was conducted in April–May 2023, and the second in July–August 2023. The following keywords were used for searches: 'queer game studies,' 'queer' AND 'video game*,' 'queer studies' AND 'mechanics,' 'queer identity' AND 'video game*,' 'gender identity' AND 'video game,' 'trans identity' AND 'video game,' 'transgender' AND 'game mechanic'. The symbol '*' was used to allow searches with various forms of the words.

The articles included in this review were identified through the following steps:

1. Initial screening. After identifying keywords, I collected materials from databases based on titles and keywords mentioned in an abstract and/or in the text. As some text relevant to the search could use different wording for same phenomena (for example, the interchangeable use of acronyms SGD [sexual and gender diverse] or MOGAI [marginalised orientations, gender alignments and intersex], or not mentioning identity in the title and abstract while talking about identities in main text), including sources to initial material based on keywords present in main text appeared to be a necessary condition.

2. Excluding the same sources appearing in different searches/databases. As most sources indexed by *Web of Science* and *Scopus* are also indexed in *Google Scholar*, and some of them appeared in different searches, it was necessary to distinguish unique sources for further examination. At this stage, 293 unique sources were selected for further detailed screening, from which: 0 from *Web of Science* (all 16 were also present in *Scopus* and *Google Scholars*), 1 from *Scopus* (out of 25, where 24 were also present in *Web of Science* and *Google Scholars*), 292 from *Google Scholar*. Only works with openly available full texts were collected.

3. Categorising material based on publication type. At this point, I categorised the collected material according to its type (article, book chapter, thesis, etc.). Table 1 presents the division of the collected sources:

Type	**Definition**	**Number of texts**
Abstract	Only abstract available	8
Article	Full text of an article	148
Bachelor's thesis	Full text of a bachelor's thesis	8
Book	Text or description of a book content	1
Book chapter	Full text of a book chapter	15
Conference proceedings	Full text of conference proceedings in form of an article, extended abstract or short abstract	19
Essay	Full text of an essay	1
Honour's thesis	Full text of an honour's thesis	2
Invited talk	Text of an invited talk	1
Journal introduction	Full text of an introduction to a journal issue briefly describing the further content of the issue	2
Master's thesis	Full text of a master's thesis	44
Other	Course papers, study tasks, minor's degree papers, lists of sources / bibliographies, project descriptions	22

PhD thesis	Full text of a PhD thesis	19
Presentation	Presentation visuals	2
Research proposal	Full text of a research proposal	1
Review	Review of a book	13

Table 1. Material categorisation according to the publication type.

4. Separating peer-reviewed articles for further coding. For 148 items appearing as an 'article' or both as 'article' and 'conference proceedings' (for texts published as outputs from conferences), I checked the web sites of venues, calls for papers, and information about article issues to find out whether publications had gone through a peer-review process. Out of 148 texts, 126 were peer reviewed. Articles not identified as peer-reviewed were not processed further.

5. Coding. 126 peer-reviewed texts were coded to distinguish works relevant to this review and separate those that were out of scope. The code group 'content' and a description of the main topic(s) of the articles were assigned to items, and further exclusion/inclusion of items was based on the codes assigned. Overall, I assigned 83 'content' codes. Coding was conducted with the use of ATLAS.ti, so all the codes were assigned and defined to the texts within the ATLAS.ti software. At this stage, I read through each text to develop 'content' codes corresponding to the main topics discussed in a publication and the ways queerness and games were mentioned.

6. Distinguishing items out of scope. The codes used to exclude articles were grouped into following themes:
    a. Out of scope (39)—content not including gender identities and/or videogames.
    b. Only binary genders (25)—articles focused only on binary division of gender identities.
    c. Focus on queer sexuality (15)—articles focused on sexuality, even when mentioning gender identities indirectly.
    d. Only mentioning LGBTQIA+/queer (7)—articles only mentioning queerness as a part of theoretical background or as an example, but not being focused on queerness or queer identities.
    e. Queer player (queergaming) (7)—articles giving a perspective on queer play as a way to play differently than anticipated by designer.
    f. Queer game studies theory (6)—articles focused on the theoretical background of queer game studies.

7. Developing themes. After I separated items that were out of scope, I analysed texts and codes assigned to them to identify generalisable characteristics that could be developed into themes. For developing the themes, I worked

with the 'content' codes assigned, identified the codes that reflected the most developed topic of each article, and grouped articles according to the most developed codes. Content codes assigned to publications can be found in Appendix 1.

The connection between queer gender identities and videogames was discussed in 27 peer-reviewed journal articles. I developed three central themes discussed in the works: representation of queer gender identities in videogames (17 articles); player–avatar connections and gender dysphoria (6 articles); and queer gender identities in game-related spaces (4 articles).

Main findings

General characteristic of studies on queer gender identities in videogames

To start forming an overview of currently available works, I would like to point to the general characteristics of analysed texts. First is the noticeable difference in the distribution of texts between themes—representation of queer gender identities in videogames is discussed in 17 articles, which is much more than works that address the player–avatar relationship or queer gender identities in game-related spaces. Also, although there are several articles from 2010s, most of the present studies were published after 2016.

In terms of theoretical backgrounds, the articles can be conditionally divided into two bigger groups, presented in detail in Appendix 1: the first group (e.g., Shaw & Friesem, 2016; Smith & Decker, 2016; Thach, 2021) is mostly based on (queer) game studies and their sources; the second group (e.g., Griffiths et al., 2016; McKenna et al., 2022; Rivera, 2022) leans towards a background from psychology and medical sciences.

Some works use similar lists of games for research purposes and as examples of gender diverse characters. Although it is hard to state whether the reason for this is the popularity of these games or lesser prominence of others, in this way, only certain areas are covered by published research. Among the games that gained more attention than others were *World of Warcraft* (Gillin & Signorella, 2023; Griffiths et al., 2016; Shaw, 2011), *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (Cantrell & Zhu, 2022; Howard, 2020; Thach, 2021), *Gone Home* (Blume, 2021; Kohlburn et al., 2023). Some of the analysed studies are also based on *LGBTQ Video Game Archive*, which is a "curated/researched collection of information of LGBTQ content in digital games from 1980s-present" (*About…*, 2017), using it as the main source base even after it started being updated less frequently.

The gradual shift of focus from text to players could be seen in the identified themes. The biggest one, namely, representation of queer gender identities in games, is

mostly text focused, while articles revealing the avatar-player relationships are built around interactions between a person and a game, and publications on queer gender identities in gaming communities are subject focused. The following subsections proceed accordingly, moving from a focus on texts to intersubjective relationships.

Representation of queer gender identities

The first theme presented here is the representation of queer gender identities. As already noted, this theme includes the biggest number of articles compared to other themes, and it was developed based on publications including a broader representation of gender identities or transgender/nonbinary representation. The works belonging to this category present various frameworks, not only reflecting representation, but also contextualising or positioning it within various research areas.

One of the oldest works pointing to the issues of LGBTQIA+ representation including queer genders was written by Shaw (2009). In this article, she discusses issues of representation in videogames, the backlashes the developers were afraid of, and stereotypes present both in games and gaming cultures. As Talbert (2016) notes, because of Shaw's article, multiple companies implemented changes, and while the difference is notable, the discussion around stereotypes in representation and diversity in game industry is still relevant.

Talbert (2016) also discusses the dynamics of LGBTQIA+ representation and different attitudes towards it. The article raises questions about misunderstanding of proper queer representation in videogames and negativity towards it and emphasizes the importance of involving queer people in game development. Talbert discloses the results of a survey aimed at collecting thoughts about the representation of marginalized groups. Smith and Decker (2016) talk about representation of queer people of colour, and its impact on queer players' feelings. The authors disclose the results of an online survey conducted among queer people of colour in 2015–2016. Although this study does not focus separately on queer gender identities, it does record and give some quotes of thoughts expressed by trans and nonbinary individuals.

In one of the later works that was collected during the search, Shaw and Friesem (2016) talk about different approaches to representation using the games collected in *LGBTQ Game Archive* that they review in the article as examples. Later, Shaw et al. (2019) cover representation trends in videogames between 1985 and 2005. Using two open databases, *Queerly Represent Me* and *LGBTQ Game Archive*, the authors analyse the frequency of races, genders, and sexualities, as well as humanness/nonhumanness represented by game characters. These two articles also document homophobic and transphobic content in listed games.

Thach (2021) has conducted an analysis of 63 games from *LGBTQ Game Archive* and found trends regarding the ambiguity of trans representation, the depiction of dysphoria/'wrong body,' physical transition, mental illness and/or trans people being

killers, as well as trans shock and trans reveal. The author points out that only four games had "narratives centering trans perspective" (Thach, 2021) and mentions the need to analyse character-creating tools as a limitation. This comprehensive study gives an overview of how trans people are depicted, and consequently, perceived by people playing videogames. As character design is often created not simply to represent gender identities, but to portray stereotypes more understood by cisgender people, Kosciesza (2023) provides a perspective that deals particularly with trans non-player characters (NPCs) in role-playing videogames. The point of interest of this study is queer characters in the role of moral service. The author proposes the term 'magical transness' to describe the trope where trans characters who are victims of violence become a trigger or catalyst to cis characters' advancement or moral redemption. In addition to offering an interesting point for further discussion, this study shows preservation of some video game plots' orientation towards cis players, thus reinforcing the view on game culture as one that is cis-heteronormative.

Howard (2020) compares queer representation in mainstream and indie gaming, formulating the reasons for communities' dissatisfaction with LGBTQIA+ representation in many games. The most important point concerns the quality of queer content in mainstream gaming, illustrating how the reduction of representation to a few characters and cis-heteronormative narratives influences its quality. Howard sees modding as one of the ways queer people add diversity to mainstream series like *Fallout* and *The Elder Scrolls*, framing it as a possible way of exploring queer representation (2020). Another way to address representation not in the game but around it is fan fiction, and in their research of this field, Dym (2019) once again point to the issue that in-game representation is made by and often for straight cisgender people.

Another example of this is Látal's study (2022) of *Reddit* posts that shows how queer representation in different videogames is perceived by participants of LGBTQIA+ threads. Among the first statements in the article, Látal mentions that heterogeneity of LGBTQIA+ communities should be considered in such studies, as well as the silence of a larger part of communities where representatives who speak of themselves louder are engaged more actively, so voices of silent representatives are lost. These close ties between how queer identities are represented and perceived by players may impact LGBTQIA+ (non)identification with characters, and the use of them in self-exploration process. Similarly, Kohlburn et al. (2023) study queer representation in four games through the lens of player reviews on *Steam*. As the authors point out, they chose games with significant LGBTQIA+ characters and themes important to LGBTQIA+ communities that were "reflective of their lived experiences in various ways, for example, having LGBTQ+ protagonists, depictions of the experience of LGBTQ+ characters, relationships, or culture" (Kohlburn et al., 2023, p. 385). In this way, the article discusses how queer identities are both presented and perceived by communities.

Ho et al. (2022) discuss queer content in LGBTQIA+ games on *itch.io*, carrying out both quantitative and qualitative studies. They present numbers of nonbinary and transgender characters and demonstrate how the life of a trans woman is shown in the study of a game called *A Normal Lost Phone*.

The previously mentioned studies are mostly or fully focused on a set of games or communities' attitudes towards representation; however, more detailed context or case studies are seldom provided. Other works study representation in particular contexts. As an example, learning games and games used for learning have been studied by Blume (2021) as tools that could teach inclusive language and help with raising LGBTQIA+ awareness on a school level. The main aim of this study is "to facilitate the exploration of all language learners' identities, regardless of gender or sexual identity" (Blume, 2021). Not only games designed for learning are mentioned here, but also commonly known queer-themed titles such as *Gone Home*.

Two studies are built around one character's story and queer representation through the character. Youngblood (2013) talks about queer representation using the *Persona 4* character as an example. Here, the search for one's identity and personality are also shown through the prism of the game and the relationship between characters. Pow (2018) also talks about a character's gender identity through the prism of one game. Discussing *Curtain* software interface, the author also discloses how the game tells the story of a main character who is a trans woman.

Although Hester's (2021) study contains game mechanics in name, it should be a part of the category of representation of queer gender identities. Generally, this study explores the phenomenon of Bowsette, a character created by fans based on the *Super Mario* character Bowser. While Hester tries to show further opportunities to queer videogames, most of the article is dedicated to the interaction between a game series and its fanbase. However, the theoretical part of the article is worthy of particular attention, since it raises a similar question, namely what characteristics allow a player to define a character's gender identity and navigate around it.

While the articles in this theme show how gender identities are represented in various games, most of them do not focus on transgender or nonbinary representation. They either cover various sets of diverse identities reflected in videogames—considering these identities as a single group—or contextualise these reflections.

Video game avatars, gender exploration, and gender dysphoria

The theme of player–avatar relationships has been developed around studies on the connections between gender diverse players and the videogames they play. Several publications reflect on how videogames can lead to paths of self-exploration and how media can help people cope with gender dysphoria.

Most of the publications under this theme are quite recent, the earliest study on gender identity framing through gaming experience among the collected material

was conducted by Griffiths et al. (2016). This work looks in detail at the personal stories of people who experienced gender dysphoria and who felt at ease when playing videogames, creating avatars different from their real bodies, and talking to online communities using their preferred names and pronouns. Although the study has some concern regarding the escapism of trans people into video game worlds, it generally describes game worlds as helpful in terms of figuring out one's gender identity. Griffiths et al. 's study of four people's cases has shown that gaming can be used as a 'testing area' for gender feelings, as a space to come out, and as an environment that is safer than the offline one. Although the authors state a small number of cases as a limitation to their study, it complements existing research on important questions concerning trans people's experiences in videogames.

Baldwin (2018) argues that avatar choosing could be a part of self-exploration and that it could further understanding of one's queer gender identity. The author shows the participants' close connection with their avatars, which then reveals their desired identity and eases their dysphoria.

Rivera (2022) also studies the therapeutic effect of engagement in virtual life and of playing videogames. This work is directly focused on using an avatar to express a true self. Particularly, it discloses a case where the video game avatar helped to achieve "a more stable sense of true self-expression during a difficult medical transition" (Rivera, 2022) since it was previously used for self-exploration.

Avatar creation as a gender-affirming experience has been studied by McKenna et al. (2022) through interviewing transgender and gender diverse youth in the United States. This study attracts special attention due to the involvement of not only trans people, but also nonbinary and other gender diverse participants to address the limitations of previous research. Cantrell and Zhu (2022) focus on choice-based videogames as a tool for resilience building, and they describe avatar creation as one of the important steps of engagement in playing.

Di Cesare et al. (2023) conducted a literature review on studies of videogames and sexual and gender diverse youth, including those concerning avatar creation, videogames as a means of supporting and coping, and as transmitters of social interactions and even civic engagement. This review separately emphasizes the usefulness of videogames as spaces providing gender-affirming experiences through interaction with both games and game communities.

All of the publications discussed above deal with a particular set of mechanics, namely avatar creation. The study participants described in these publications often reflected on connections between their gender identities and the process of creating a character that could represent their true self. There is, however, one article that does not deal with player-avatar relationships, yet I included it in this theme as it highlights exploration of queerness and queer mechanics by gender diverse players.

Hantsbarger et al. (2022) describe the game creation of *You're Going To Be Late*, built around queer temporality and then playtested by LGBTQIA+ participants. This work is the only study focused precisely on video game mechanics, which shows how players search for ways to play differently from designed playing solutions and create queer models of playing. It is worth noting that this study separately focuses on LGBTQIA+ playtesters, and not only on the non-normativity of game mechanics. In addition to exhibiting the game testing in detail, the authors describe encounters of queer players with queer mechanics, and their attempts to search for queerness in video game structures.

Overall, the articles under this theme provide insights on the interaction of queer players with videogames, and in most of them, queerness in study participants is more in focus than the games themselves. This makes the theme to some extent opposite to the previous one, where the queerness represented in videogames was central.

Queer gender identities in game-related spaces

Studies on gender nonconforming players and in-game interaction and/or interactions with communities are the most player-focused and experience-focused included in this review. They contain both research on particular in-game communities, and communities built around playing videogames. What unites them is an interest towards intersubjective relationships. In contrast to the publications in the themes above, these works pay less attention to interactions with games.

One of the oldest detailed studies among collected articles is research on *Second Life* (Brookey & Cannon, 2009) that deals with the struggles of gender-diverse people observed in certain gaming communities. The study itself is focused on two dimensions, namely virtual objectification and virtual sexuality. Although it is not focused mainly on queer genders, it considers such questions as 'GVF' (Gender-Verified Females) and the transgender experience of *Second Life* players. A large part of the study is about transgender people and the use of voice in game to verify the 'real gender identity.' It is also of a special interest due to its mention of 'furries,' people who perceive themselves as anthropomorphic animals. The authors call furries "the queerest of the queer" and describe both pro-furry and anti-furry moods in *Second Life*. Among the analysed texts, this was the only study considering furries as a part of queer communities.

Among the sources collected for this review, the earliest study that focused on LGBTQIA+ outside of the gaming environment—with insights on gender identities—was conducted by Shaw (2011) among gamer website users. Although sexuality was discussed more than gender identity with the interviewees, the question of transphobia and underrepresentation of gender diverse people can also be traced. Shaw's article, while not dealing with the topic of queer gender identities directly, is one of the pillar articles that led to further player studies carried out in the area.

The articles by Brookey and Cannon (2009) and Shaw (2011) were published quite close in time. Other publications are more recent, and the focus of these is broadened as new phenomena such as streaming become more widespread. Particularly, the study by Freeman and Wohn (2020) on gender identity and sexuality presentation through the live streaming of games illustrates that streaming games can be a part of a gender acknowledgment process.

Gillin and Signorella (2023) continue studies on queer identities in gaming spaces with the hypothesis that there are several encounters with negativity towards LGBTQIA+ people, which has been demonstrated through research with LGBTQIA+ and cis/hetero participants. This underscores the need to work with inclusivity in gaming communities and shows that the work for tolerance and acceptance in this environment has just begun.

All the publications united by the theme of queer genders and communities around gaming present various facets of game-related communities. Most studies focus on the interaction between people, and videogames are mostly a background phenomenon there, apart from the study on *Second Life*, where peculiarities of in-game interactions are discussed in detail.

Discussion

The discussed themes partially stand in line with topics in LGBTQIA+ studies distinguished by Shaw and Ruberg, namely "community/cultural research, textual analysis, and design studies" (2017). In this review, design studies are not presented in much detail. However, articles under the theme of queer representation focus mostly on textual analysis, and the theme of community studies is present, although the least featured.

Among the three themes described above, queer representation contains the biggest number of sources and is discussed thoroughly. This reinforces the statement that queer representation features as the most dominant research topic. At the same time, many of the works mentioned cover more narrow topics related to queer representation, including representation of queer people of colour, as well as a focus on trans or nonbinary characters.

All of the articles on representation mostly deal with the narrative parts and images of in-game characters. Interactivity is not in focus, and while some information about gameplay or mechanics is provided (as, for example, a detailed analysis of interface in *Curtain* [Pow, 2018]), the connection with (queer) players' experiences remains undiscussed. Several of the mentioned studies provide insights on players' experiences through analysis of comments or quoting players' thoughts otherwise.

In articles united under the theme of player-avatar relationships, the interest shifts towards players' experiences. Studies described in this theme are framed less as a

part of game studies, and most of the attention is paid to avatars and not the other characters providing gender-affirming experiences.

The articles in the section on queer gender identities within communities show that gaming communities, one way or another, affect people's self-exploration and the formation of their self-perception. All of the environments mentioned in the articles—from in-game communities to ones built around streaming—create an image of people representing queer gender identities, which further affects those who are searching for their own identity and self-image.

The articles in all these themes have several things in common, apart from dealing with gender identities and videogames. Except the works by Hantsbarger et al. (2022) and partly Pow (2018), the articles focused on queer people do not at the same time address inherent queerness of videogames. Queer temporality and spatiality are not sufficiently studied in interaction with queer players. Narrative and/or visual elements remain in focus, even when potentially interactive activities such as avatar creation are being examined.

One of the initial keywords of this review was 'mechanics,' yet I had to exclude almost all the works considering queer mechanics from the review as they are often not connected with gender identities, and search for non-normative interactions that may be inspired by gender diversity or queerness overall. While these topics are important for queer game studies, connecting them to gender identities could be useful as an argument supporting the inherent queerness of videogames, and, perhaps, paving new ways to deal with the heteronormativity that still dominates many gaming-related environments.

The starting point for bridging gender identities and the queerness of videogames could be to research player perspective, as done by Hantsbarger et al. (2022). The player perspective could also make a concept of 'queer mechanics' known outside of academia and, as a potential result, be understood by more people.

Limitations

This review has several limitations. The first limitation lies in the fact that only English-language texts were analysed. Being a non-native English speaker myself and having grown up in a non-European environment, I know how national fields can differ from the general picture. Therefore, it is fair to assume that studies on queer mechanics and queer gender identities could be conducted in other languages and therefore not be represented in this review. The same limitation concerns the use of sources available through open access or institutional library access. The texts that require additional payments to be accessed have not been included in this review.

Another limitation is that the article covers peer-reviewed publications, which might exclude some topics described in books, theses, blogs, personal notes, etc. Several

of the central works of queer game studies are books, including *Queer Game Studies* (Ruberg & Shaw, 2017) and *Videogames Have Always Been Queer* (Ruberg, 2019), and some appear in databases either in parts, or, as in the case of books, mentioned in reviews. Being essential to queer game studies, these books have formed the basis of the field and are often mentioned in texts that could belong to various other fields. Yet this particular review focuses on works built on these cornerstones, and that is why I chose to focus particularly on peer-reviewed articles.

Conclusion

This review deals with a set of publications connecting queer gender identities and videogames. One of its findings, namely the significant number of works on the representation of queer genders in videogames, is in line with claims that the focus of queer game studies needs to be broadened. At the same time, many of the studies focus on one or several smaller topics that have not received much prior coverage. However, most works on representation are text focused, and together with studies on player–avatar relationships, they tend to be narrative focused and pay less attention to mechanics.

This lack of connections between the shift towards looking at videogames as a queer medium and the consideration of queer identities mostly based on narration and visuals could be addressed further in future research. Establishing these connections may be helpful for blurring the division between 'gender identity' as a term for binaries and 'queer gender identity' as something separate in research. However, for queer game studies, it is not the only—and certainly not the most significant—positive impact. Combining perspectives on queerness and adding gender identities to the inherent queerness of videogames could also give insight on identity exploration through various ways of interacting with videogames as well as new perspectives on the ways in which videogames a queer medium.

Studying queer players could be a way to deal with this lack of connections, and the need for a player-focused approach has been voiced in queer game studies, although for a different direction. In *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (2014), Shaw argues that talking about representation, identification, and other matters needs people's voices in addition to developers' voices, as "analyzing texts tells us how the audience was constructed and about the inner workings of industry logics, but an audience study helps us make sense of where these meanings go after they are constructed" (p. 63). Working on representation issues, Shaw shares the voices of people playing videogames and their experiences of identifying with game characters and being represented by the videogames. This is not the first point of focusing on the importance of talking about videogames in players' voices, yet even today, a significant number of studies remains theoretical or text oriented, as demonstrated by this review.

Moving away from cis-heteronormativity may be more impactful when queer players are invited to talk about their identities and seek out the inherent queerness of videogames. Adopting such an approach may become a way to broaden knowledge, influence game development, and facilitate the further spread of various types of queerness in videogames. However, a systematic and comprehensive review of the field is needed, as it could point to other underdeveloped topics.

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Appendix 1. Peer-reviewed articles separated according to the themes

Title	Author(s)	Year	Venue	Content codes assigned	Background of sources
		Representation in games			
Inclusive digital games in the transcultural communicative classroom	Blume, C.	2021	*ELT Journal*	inclusivity game-based learning representation in games	psychology / medical studies
The burden of queer love	Dym, B.	2019	*Press Start*	game analysis queer romance representation in games	game studies
Nintendo Switch-ing genders: Bowsette and the potentiality of transgender video game mechanics	Hester, J.	2023	*Visual Resources*	fan queering representation in games	game studies
Queer indie games on itch.io, 2013-2022	Ho, X., Perez Escobar, R., & Tran, N.	2022	*Proceedings of the 17th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games*	representation in games queer indie queer creator(s)	game studies

Learning about queer representation through mods: Reviewing past challenges and outlining ideas about future approaches	Howard, K.	2020	*Proceedings of the 31st ACM Conference on Hypertext and Social Media*	representation in games game-based learning game modification	game studies
Players' perceptions of sexuality and gender-inclusive videogames a pragmatic content analysis of Steam reviews	Kohlburn, J., Cho, H., & Moore, H.	2023	*Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*	queer creator(s) studying player(s) queer games representation in games	game studies
Reaching toward home: Software interface as queer orientation in the video game *Curtain*	Pow, W.	2018	*The Velvet Light Trap*	close readings representation in games	game studies
Putting the gay in games: Cultural production and GLBT content in videogames	Shaw, A.	2009	*Games and Culture*	game about queer(s) studying LGBTQIA+ players queer creator(s) representation in games	game studies
Where is the queerness in games?: Types of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer content in digital games	Shaw, A., & Friesem, E.	2016	*International Journal of Communication*	LGBTQ Video Game Archive representation in games queerphobia	game studies
Counting queerness in games: Trends in LGBTQ digital game representation, 1985–2005	Shaw, A., Lauteria, E., Yang, H., Persaud, C., & Cole, A.	2019	*International Journal of Communication*	LGBTQ Video Game Archive representation in games	game studies

Understanding the impact of QPOC representation in videogames	Smith, R., & Decker, A.	2016	*2016 Research on Equity and Sustained Participation in Engineering, Computing, and Technology (RESPECT)*	queer people of colour representation in games representation in industry studying LGBTQIA+ players	game studies
A gatekeeper final boss: An analysis of MOGAI representation in videogames	Talbert, J.	2016	*Press Start Journal*	representation in games studying LGBTQIA+ players	game studies
"C'mon! Make me a man!": *Persona 4*, digital bodies, and queer potentiality	Youngblood, J.	2013	*Ada*	queer character(s) representation in games digital bodies	game studies
The moral service of trans NPCs: Examining the roles of transgender non-player characters in role-playing videogames	Kosciesza, A. J.	2023	*Games and Culture*	trans representation close readings queer character(s)	game studies
LGBTQ+ representation in videogames through the eyes of the queer community	Látal, M.	2022	*Iluminace*	representation in games studying LGBTQIA+ players trans representation	game studies
A cross-game look at transgender representation in videogames	Thach, H.	2021	*Press Start Journal*	representation in games LGBTQ Video Game Archive trans representation	game studies
Avatar-plater relationships and gender exploration					
Virtual avatars: Trans experiences of ideal selves through gaming	Baldwin, K.	2018	*Markets, Globalization & Development Review*	studying LGBTQIA+ players avatar-player relationship	psychology / medical studies

Choice-based games and resilience building of gender nonconforming individuals: A phenomenological study	Cantrell, Y., & Zhu, X. A.	2022	*Digital Transformation and Society*	studying LGBTQIA+ players avatar-player relationship gender-related experimentation representation in games	psychology / medical studies
Setting the game agenda: Reviewing the emerging literature on video gaming and psychological well-being of sexual and gender diverse youth	Di Cesare, D. M., Craig, S. L., Brooks, A. S., & Doll, K.	2023	*Games and Culture*	avatar-player relationship literature review LGBTQIA+ well-being	psychology / medical studies
Video gaming and gender dysphoria: Some case study evidence	Griffiths, M., Arcelus, J., & Bouman, W. P.	2016	*Aloma: Revista de Psicologia, Ciències de l'Educació i de l'Esport*	gender dysphoria case study studying LGBTQIA+ players	psychology / medical studies
Alienated serendipity and reflective failure: Exploring queer game mechanics and queerness in games via queer temporality	Hantsbarger, M., Troiano, G. M., To, A., & Harteveld, C.	2022	*Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction (CHI PLAY)*	queer mechanics studying LGBTQIA+ players queer playtesters	game studies
"You can't be deadnamed in a video game": Transgender and gender diverse adolescents' use of video game avatar creation for gender-affirmation and exploration	McKenna, J. L., Wang, Y.-C., Williams, C. R., McGregor, K., & Boskey, E. R.	2022	*Journal of LGBT Youth*	studying LGBTQIA+ players avatar-player relationship gender-related experimentation	psychology / medical studies
From battleground to playground: The video game avatar as transitional phenomenon for a transgender patient	Rivera, S.	2022	*Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*	avatar-player relationship queerness as play studying LGBTQIA+ payers case study	psychology / medical studies

Queer gender identities in game-related spaces					
Sex lives in *Second Life*	Brookey, R. A., & Cannon, K. L.	2009	*Critical Studies in Media Communication*	*Second Life* in-game community transgender player experiences	game studies
Streaming your identity: Navigating the presentation of gender and sexuality through live streaming	Freeman, G., & Wohn, D. Y.	2020	*Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW)*	community studies streaming LGBTQIA+ genders	game studies
Attitudes toward sexual orientation and gender identity in online multiplayer gaming spaces	Gillin, L. E., & Signorella, M. L.	2023	*Psychological Reports*	community studies biases in gaming studying LGBTQIA+ players	psychology / medical studies
Talking to gaymers: Questioning identity, community and media representation	Shaw, A.	2012	*Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*	studying LGBTQIA+ players web site studies community studies	game studies

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Who Cares About Esports?

Introduction to the Special Section on Sustaining Equitable Competitive Gaming

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Who Cares About Esports?
Introduction to the Special Section on Sustaining Equitable Competitive Gaming

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Abstract

Meant as both a provocation and a prompt, 'who cares about esports?' opens the topic up to critical scrutiny at a time when the esports *industry* is in the midst of a(nother) serious contraction, even as there is a sizeable jump in the breadth and amount of esports *research*. As the introduction to this special section on Sustaining Equitable Competitive Gaming, this article considers the interplay of these two transformations, while also opening up a third, vital line of inquiry: 'who cares *for* competitive gaming?' This question is meant, on the one hand, to underscore the difference—and the relationship—between competitive gaming and esports, while also providing an overview of the kinds of critical and timely care documented by the four articles in this special section.

Keywords

Competitive gaming; esports; platformization; labour; care

The preparation of this special section of *Eludamos* on Sustaining Equitable Competitive Gaming comes at a transitional and uncertain time, with our preparations transpiring against the backdrop of what has been characterized as a widespread "esports winter", a notable and in some cases, drastic reduction in the flows of capital that have fuelled the industry over the past decade. A confluence of higher interest rates, slow revenue growth, and a crash in the cryptocurrency ecosystem (Partin, 2024, p. 184), not to mention bloated salaries at the upper reaches of esports organizations (and talent pools) and the lack of a sustainable revenue model beyond comparatively fickle corporate sponsorships, all contributed to acute industry contraction throughout 2023 (Franco, 2023; Lee, 2023). This past year has seen layoffs, bankruptcies, and a dip in "public hype-cycles" that threaten to put esports on the same footing as Google Glasses and "blockchain gaming": "ostensibly disruptive paradigms with low commercial viability" (Partin, 2024, p. 185).

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One small side-effect of this winter was a re-arrangement in the kinds of collaboration that the scholars assembled for this special section of *Eludamos* had hoped to carry out. This section was initially intended as a publication venue for work that was to have been presented and collaboratively workshopped at an in-person symposium in Toronto, tentatively titled "Sustaining Equitable Esports Communities". Though the grant application to Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) was unsuccessful (providing a possible answer to the question of whether and how the Canadian government 'cares about esports'), it provides a chance for us to highlight the kinds of care that are vital to the sustainability of grassroots communities impacted by the freeze in capitalists' enthusiasm.

What is not often mentioned in the forensic analyses of *this* esports winter is that there have been previous winters, and there will be future ones. That's how seasons work. My own intellectual interest in esports began just prior to, and in the wake of, the last esports winter in 2008-2009, as the US housing market collapsed and was followed by a major recession (N. T. Taylor, 2009). Overnight, several of the mainstays of esports' initial heyday (the World Cyber Games, Major League Gaming), not to mention well-funded upstarts like the Championship Gaming League, either folded outright or were substantially devalued and sold off. What followed *that* esports winter was the foundational reorganization of esports around the logics of "platformization". Under the arrangement that has crystallized over the last decade, an oligopoly of publishers (Activision/Blizzard, Riot, Valve) function as "content intermediaries" for players, spectators, sponsors, streaming platforms, teams, researchers, educational institutions, event organizers, statistics brokers, and so on, outsourcing the risks of investing in esports onto these stakeholders while capitalizing – mightily – on the connections made among them, and the cultural productions that arise (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Partin, 2024).

What will follow *this* esports winter is yet to be determined but will likely be as transformative as its realignment in the early 2010s. There's reason to believe that what might keep esports afloat is massive investment by nation-states and their tentacular educational and civic organizations. This has arguably been the goal of the industry's push into schooling: offering a stable source of investment and labour for transforming amateur competitive gaming on university campuses and high schools into esports products (Cote et al., 2023; N. T. Taylor & Stout, 2020). And this certainly seems to be the underlying logic with Saudi Arabia's much-trumpeted plans to pledge billions towards building an infrastructure for the production of esports content (Wilde, 2022). In what is not a wholly new paradigm so much as an intensifying pattern of state sponsorship (Chee, 2023; Szablewicz, 2020), esports are emerging as one cog of a geopolitical public relations strategy, becoming part of the expansive "sportswashing" portfolio that nation-states wield to ameliorate criticism over human rights abuses and environmental degradation (Ingle, 2023). We may thus come

out of this winter with esports emerging as the "plaything of institutions", as John Durham Peters described 20th century mass media (Peters, 2010, p. 280).

Who cares about esports? A provocation

Set against this tumult, the title of this introduction, "who cares about esports?", is offered as both as a rhetorical provocation and an empirical prompt. The ambivalence of the question—is it academic trolling, or a more earnest inquiry?—is reflective of the current uncertainty regarding the viability of the esports industry. It is also reflective of my own relationship to an academic field that increasingly seems more concerned with supporting the industry than holding it to account.

Approached as a rhetorical provocation, "who cares about esports?" can invoke either a cynical reaction ("what's the point of esports?") or a sense of indignation; "how could you possibly care about esports now, given everything else going on?" These reactions are not without their allure, particularly for those inclined to measure their interests, research or otherwise, against the scales of urgent social, political, or environment crises. As I write this in late 2024, several of the 'tipping points' we have been warned of—whether it's the rise of authoritarianism and ethno-nationalism and its genocidal outcomes, the concentration of more and more wealth into fewer and fewer hands and the conversion of our basic needs into esoteric financial products, or the various climatological thresholds we are blowing past in our dogged attachment to the fantasy of endless growth—seem like foregone conclusions.

Set against such existential threats, it seems a stretch to insist that esports *matters.* But then, the same is true for any of the other innumerable media practices in which we find joy or meaning—that certainly don't matter much 'in the grand scheme of things' and that likely, in some way or another, perpetrate some form of harm, whether social injustice, economic exploitation, and/or environmental destruction. Maybe it's playing or watching esports; maybe it's building LEGO; maybe it's binge-watching reality TV, or speedrunning, or sharing dance moves through Tik Tok, or asking ChatGPT for a dinner recipe. The point is, mediated leisure doesn't simply stop *mattering* under the looming and cascading threats we face. Indeed, one task of critically engaged research on media (including, certainly, on esports) is to connect our quotidian media practices to broader transformations: to ask what relations of power, and what economic, social, technical, and ideological arrangements, are served and/or subverted in even the smallest communicative act. It is the kind of connection-making that is succinctly captured (though by no means exhausted) through insights like "every time you post to Instagram, you're turning a light bulb on forever" (Michel, 2024).

As Will Partin and Matt Howard observe, such critical approaches characterized the bulk of early research on esports (mine included), with a particular focus on gender-based inequities (Partin & Howard, 2021). This initial scholarly attention also saw the

framing of competitive gaming as "esports" unfold in real time, and through fits and starts. We understood the 'sportiness' of esports as neither inherent nor easily dismissible, but rather as a *problematic*: a historically situated attempt on the part of boosters to frame the nascent industry as a continuation and transformation of sports under new sociotechnical conditions (Hutchins, 2008; T. L. Taylor, 2015; Witkowski, 2012). For critical scholars, esports matters because it was (and continues to be) a terrain of experimentation for emergent formations of labour, leisure, and cultural expression. Such approaches help us undercut (or at least temper) the sense of meaninglessness or outrage prompted by the rhetorical "who cares about esports?" *We* care about esports because it can tell us something about platformization (Partin, 2024; N. T. Taylor, 2024); the nature of affective work in the gig economy (Johnson & Woodcock, 2021); contemporary mutations of nationalism and Orientalism (Chee, 2023; Fickle, 2021), not to mention race and gender (Fletcher, 2020; Witkowski, 2018); and how we understand value (Boluk & LeMieux, 2021).

Who cares about esports? A prompt

Asked more earnestly, "who cares about esports?" can also serve as an invitation for empirical consideration rather than provocation, inviting us to gauge the spread of interest in organized, spectatorial competitive gaming. The platformization of esports over the last decade, part and parcel of the platformization of cultural production more generally, means that 'caring about' anything that reaches us through a content intermediary— from a professional *CS:GO* match to the antics of an ornery baby hippo—can be measured through likes, subscribes, impressions, downloads, and so on. Pursuing 'who cares about esports?' along these lines, we are quickly met with an array of claims about the growth of esports, expressed through quantified metrics and, for the most part, seemingly unfazed by the latest esports winter. Hours of content watched; peak number of viewers; industry revenue, broken down by year, quarter, region, and game genre; total market value; player accounts; Twitch subscriptions; and so on.

Esports research itself is both preoccupied with and reflective of this concern with measuring growth, as fields including sport management, business and marketing, psychology, and educational science have leaned heavily into esports research initiatives (not to mention, undergraduate degrees and certification programs) over the past decade, leading to an explosion in publications and citations. This spike in scholarly activity roughly coincides with, and is in fact intertwined with, the realignment of the esports industry around oligopolist content intermediaries. The impressively hefty *Routledge Handbook of Esports*, organized by the Esports Research Network, represents a landmark for the field, and is indicative of this direction. The *Handbook* is written as much for practitioners as for researchers, with a broad range of topics representing an array of academic and applied perspectives, from player psychology to recommendations for technical specifications and equipment (Jenny et al., 2024). The impression generated by this volume is that a lot of people, organizations, and

institutions *care about* esports, perhaps more now than ever before—and that it is the job of researchers in this field to respond to, interpret, and help channel this 'caring about' in a way that ultimately best supports the industry.

Esports vs competitive gaming

For all that I find commendable about the *Routledge Handbook of Esports*, from its broad scope of topics, to its inclusion of critical perspectives, to its deliberate engagement of both academic and non-academic audiences, I wonder about the central definition of esports that the editors put forward: "organized and codified competition between human players using video games" (Nothelfer et al., 2024, p. 10). This definition elides the technocultural *work,* both historical and ongoing, to *transform* competitive gaming into esports; work that a number of early esports scholars (myself included) documented as it began to unfold over a crucial period from the mid to late 2000's.[1] Is it pro gaming? Or powergaming? Is it eSports? Or e-sports? Alongside this question of what to name it and how to spell it, esports did not truly solidify into the shape we understand it today until there was a stable, relatively cheap infrastructure for broadcasting competitive gaming, not to mention a set of technologies—screen recording software, Twitch subscriptions, shoutcasters, statistical and graphical overlays—for *producing* esports, and monitoring (and monetizing) the distribution of said products (T. L. Taylor, 2018). Seen in this light, esports is decidedly not synonymous *with* organized competitive gaming, so much as it is a "cultural technique" grafted *onto* competitive gaming (Siegert, 2015): a concretization of infrastructures, technologies, ideas, and bodies into a more or less stable arrangement aimed at transforming competitive gaming into a media product.

Seen in this light, it can be quite generative to locate historical precursors to esports, particularly insofar as such work highlights early attempts to harness an interest in watching people play video games competitively (see, for example, Boluk & LeMieux, 2017). But it is anachronistic to refer to these precursors *as* esports. From a media theoretical perspective, referring to early competitive gaming spectacles as 'esports' would be like referring to the camera obscura as photography: some of the elements of the cultural technique are there, but they have not been formalized and incorporated into the arrangement that came to later be called photography (Kittler, 2010). For esports, one key piece of its definitive arrangement—what is produced

[1] As it happens, none of the scholars featured in a (virtual) roundtable discussion about the early, critical focus of esports research, featured in *ROMchip*'s special issue on the history of esports (Partin & Howard, 2021) contributed to the Routledge volume. This is less of a deliberate omission and more of a respectful self-selection, though it is nonetheless indicative of the field's recent transformations.

through the cultural technique of esports—is the esports spectator. This is the subject that, when properly engaged and measured, makes it possible for the esports industry (and analysts, whether those employed by universities, publishers, or esports organizations) to deliver a ready and demographically intelligible answer to the question 'who cares about esports?'

Media historian and theorist Jack Bratich provides a framework for better understanding this process. He offers the distinction between the "constituent" energies at play in our media practices, and the techniques of capture and representation (likes, subscribes, logins, and so on) through which these energies are "constituted" as resources from which value can be extracted (Bratich, 2005, p. 246). This is the transformation through which competitive gaming enthusiasts become "audienced" as esports spectators (Partin, 2019; N. T. Taylor, 2016, p. 296; T. L. Taylor, 2018).

I make this distinction between esports and competitive gaming to insist on what I see as their underlying relationship: not as more or less formalized versions of the same thing, but as that of a parasite to its host, albeit the kind in which the parasite is so deeply entwined in the body of the host as to not only seem inseparable but to exert control over the host's behaviour. Definitions that collapse this relationship, for instance by eliding the historical and ongoing techniques through which competitive gaming communities are professionalized for the sake of esports content creation, risk naturalizing this parasitism. Esports scholarship that plays into this naturalization—that sees esports as synonymous with, rather than parasitic to, competitive gaming—undermines its ability to fully grasp the following:

- the forms of labour – some consensual, some exploitative, many both – through which competitive gaming itself is sustained, and the processes through which it becomes esports; and

- the "constitutive" practices, energies, affects, and identities that are *sidelined* through these processes – namely, the perspectives and practices of people who love competitive gaming but who, for any number of reasons, are neither welcome in nor feel drawn to esports.

I do not list these out of any desire to put forward an alternative research agenda for competitive gaming, but to flag what kinds of considerations are left out of even the heftiest handbooks of esports. These are precisely the kinds of concerns that we have gathered for this special section, and they open up one last prompt: who cares for competitive gaming?

Who cares for competitive gaming?

Note the slight but substantial shift in wording: not just from esports to competitive gaming, but from "caring about" to "caring for". As far as I can tell, this distinction was first deployed as a conceptual concern by anti-racist educators (Gay, 2010), and

is meant to signal the distinction between being *interested* in someone or something, and being *materially committed* to their well-being. It is the difference between being sad that something has gone, versus devoting time, labour, and energy toward its preservation. While communication research often positions these along a continuum—for instance, at what point does interest in a cause translate to social action? When, if ever, does "hashtag activism" become direct action (Tufekci, 2017)? —they can also remain mutually exclusive. As an example, and for my own part, I have never cared that much *about* esports; outside of a couple of memorable events (such as attending Dreamhack with friends and colleagues who are far better esports scholars than I), the onscreen displays of skill and offscreen drama of teams have rarely set my pulse racing. But I have been in positions of responsibility towards communities of competitive gamers, even when the care on offer was as straightforward as making sure that university *League of Legends* clubs had a safe and accessible place on campus to watch tournaments and talk shop (N. T. Taylor & Hammond, 2018).

The articles assembled for this special section both highlight and enact forms of care that go much further than this. Collectively, they report on the efforts and perspectives of people who strive to make competitive gaming liveable and sustainable for their communities; who find in competitive gaming a source of identity formation and belonging, and who toil on their behalf, in ways that are not so easily registered by the esports industry's metrics. These articles also, collectively, represent the work of emerging scholars, and centre the perspectives and voices of those at the margins of the North American and western European-centric purview of English-language esports (including, crucially, English-language esports research).

Tom Legierse and Maria Ruotsalainen open the section by insisting on the embodied dimensions of competitive gaming and their attendant politics; who is left out of the industry's construction of the esports subject as able-bodied, cis-het, white, and masculine? Synthesizing and extending feminist critiques of the boundaries through which esports are built, the authors offer a theoretical intervention that prompts us to acknowledge and remain grounded in a concern for the acceptance—and visibility—of all manner of bodies.

Carina de Assunção, Michael Scott, and Rory Summerley's work explores precisely the kinds of barriers that efforts to implement more equitable conditions for esports participation face, under the broader banner of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity (DEI) initiatives. Focusing on the under-attended Portuguese esports community, they illuminate the kinds of discursive strategies leveraged by members of the *Overwatch* Portugal Discord community to undermine DEI-driven interventions, such as tournaments for gender-minority players. The authors' careful account demonstrates how top-down, corporate-driven DEI initiatives can so easily backfire when imposed rather than cultivated and championed at a grassroots level.

Beatriz Blanco offers something of a companion piece to Assunção et al., examining how a thriving esports industry in Brazil appropriates grassroots initiatives that find initial success in supporting non-normative competitive gamers. In a compelling case story of the broader mechanisms through which the precarious work of feminist advocacy becomes, under platform capital, 'cause-driven marketing', Blanco analyses how key feminist gaming collectives in Brazil were first sponsored and then undermined by for-profit esports organizations, so that those organizations might better perform DEI.

Fredrik Rusk, Matilda Ståhl, and Isac Nyman provide another nuanced look at the work required to sustain grassroots competitive gaming communities but are nonetheless entangled with the logics of dominant esports platforms. Examining a gaming-focused youth group that has, since the pandemic, operated entirely on Discord, the authors document the kinds of labour that become 'infrastructural'—invisible, feminized, and entirely indispensable—to the communicative practices of the group. Like Blanco, they explore what caring *for* competitive gaming can look like, in terms of situated practice, particularly when this care is in the service of cultural belonging rather than corporate gain.

In the midst of an esports winter, there is real warmth to be found in these four articles, both in terms of what they accomplish and the perspectives they document. They remind us what it can mean, as researchers, to care *for* competitive gaming, and for those community organizers whose precarious and often invisible work helps sustain competitive gaming communities. These forms of care are particularly worth holding onto as the caprices of platform capitalism—which, by design, does not care *for* much of anything, beyond the extraction of value—leave esports, once again, in peril.

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Why We Need to Acknowledge Bodies in a Move Toward More Equitable Esports Practices

TOM LEGIERSE AND MARIA RUOTSALAINEN

Abstract

Branding competitive gaming as esports, part of a process known as sportification, has contributed greatly to the wider acceptance of competitive gaming as legitimate leisure and professional activity. However, the social effects of sportification remain largely overlooked in current research. In this paper we argue that in order to understand the normative and formative social effects of sportification of competitive gaming, we need to forefront the bodies in esports. Building on scholarship that highlights inequities in (competitive) gaming and esports, we identify four ways in which bodies are made relevant in esports: 1) the obscuring of the playing body and establishment of an idealized and normative masculine athletic body; 2) the 'visibility' of women's bodies as deviant from the norm; 3) the invisibility (and impossibility) of disabled bodies through design (embodied nature of design of both games and gameplay); and 4) the embodied nature of infrastructural issues that cannot be reduced to materiality. We argue for a deconstruction of esports as a social practice that forefronts bodies. Understanding exactly how bodies become relevant will allow us to deconstruct the structural conditions of participation that dictate which bodies are possible or not in esports and move towards more equitable esports practices.

Keywords

Esports; competitive gaming; bodies; equity

In this essay, we will call for a more critical engagement with framing competitive gaming as 'esports' and draw attention to how bodies are situated within this framing. To make this call, we will discuss what it means for competitive gaming to be understood as a sport, engaging with the scholarly debate on the sportification of competitive gaming. We will highlight how the sportification of esports is shaping and hiding the structural conditions for participation. In order to do this, we will pay

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particular attention to bodies. We argue that by deconstructing esports as social practice (Pfohl, 1985), by scrutinizing the ways esports normalise certain bodies over others, these structural conditions can be unveiled. We trace the ways bodies are depicted, recognized, and situated within esports. We continue by arguing that the ways in which different kinds of bodies are rendered visible or invisible in esports is central to these structural conditions. Furthermore, we identify that current research in esports lacks a sufficient understanding of exactly how bodies become (and are made) relevant. In this light, we call for research on esports to centre on bodies in order to deconstruct the structural conditions of participation (see also Taylor, 2021). Before we make this argument, we will first turn toward exclusion in games more broadly and the sportification of competitive gaming in the following section.

Exclusion in games

Playing videogames has become a popular past-time and mainstream activity. This has not, however, solved the social issues gaming is ripe with. These issues of inequity in gaming are well documented by gaming scholars. Especially since the events of #Gamergate in 2014, increasingly more academic work has highlighted the normative construction of the gamer identity. Young, white, middle-class men are generally regarded as the default gamer (Witkowski, 2018), and while some other groups—such as young Asian men—are partially acknowledged as rightful participants, they are continuously othered, feminised, and fetishized (Zhu, 2018). Indeed, studies have shown how groups of men make an effort to defend 'their' space from unwanted 'outsiders' (Salter & Blodgett, 2012). #Gamergate can be regarded as the most notorious example of this. What started as a harassment campaign quickly developed into a battleground over gamer identity and who gets to consider themselves part of game cultures (Mortensen, 2018). However, even ten years after these events, game cultures continue to be troubled with issues of sexism, racism and other forms of harassment and exclusion (Cote, 2020; Friman & Ruotsalainen, 2022; Gray, 2012).

These issues have always been tied to bodies. It is certain *kinds* of bodies that struggle to belong in gaming spaces, whilst other kinds of bodies are privileged. Amanda Cote (2020) shows how narrow definitions of stereotypical gamer identity categories are deeply ingrained in the social fabric of gaming spaces. Players are aware of what makes a 'real' gamer, and these normative ideals inform how they position themselves within gaming spaces (Cote, 2017; Cote, 2020; Gray, 2020; Kivijärvi & Katila, 2022). In a similar vein, Kishonna Gray has highlighted "the inescapable chains constantly binding marginalized populations to stereotypical frames and limited narratives" (2020, p. 36). The 'real gamer' is not only a particular kind of man, but also plays a particular type of games, in a particular kind of way (Kirkpatrick, 2017). This is compellingly illustrated by Nakamura (2009a; 2009b), who shows that not only the avatar of a player, but also the *imagined* body of the player based on their way of

playing matters for how others interact with them in-game. Additionally, Young (2014) observes that the LAN-parties he attended drew in mostly white men, and 'others' are often stigmatized, othered or even literally excluded from participation. Beyond social exclusion, LAN-party aesthetics are traditionally dark rooms, making these spaces potentially even more unsafe for minorities. Other ways in which the 'real gamer' is established include upholding a dichotomy between 'hardcore' and 'casual'. In this dichotomy, hardcore gaming is associated with men and casual gaming with women, regardless of evidence that complicates these stereotypical notions (Zaremba, 2012). Casual gaming is disregarded as unskilful, low intensity, and uncommitted (Blamey, 2022). This dichotomy is most often applied to sideline women, who are by default not recognized as legitimate participants based on their assumed mode of gameplay and their supposed lack of skills (Ratan et al. 2015; Ruotsalainen & Friman, 2018). As a result, women often deal with discriminatory and exclusionary behaviour directed toward them, ranging from insults to sexual harassment, and aimed at discouraging their (critical) participation (Butt & Apperley, 2018).

Esports are not an exception to this, and many of the issues we see present in gaming are likewise present in esports (Friman & Ruotsalainen, 2022; Schelfhout et al., 2021; Taylor & Stout, 2020; Wilson et al., 2024), even though esports is sometimes considered as the "antidote" to the toxic gaming cultures, especially in public discussion (Cumming, 2021; Ruotsalainen & Välisalo, 2020). However, as we argue, issues in esports should not be seen as mere extensions of issues that are present in videogames, nor should a move from competitive gaming toward esports be seen as the solution to all problems persisting in gaming. Rather, structuring and branding competitive gaming as esports—a process known as sportification—brings with it and transforms a number of issues deriving from both videogames and sports. This becomes especially relevant when we look at the relevance of bodies, which we will come back to later in this article. As such, we should zoom in on how the branding of esports as separate from *and* similar to gaming and sports in some ways affects its social organisation.

The sportification of competitive gaming

Even though games have been played competitively since the first iterations, it has only been since the early 2000s that the term esports has become synonymous with (professional) competitive gaming. One of the earliest known uses of the term esports dates back to 1999, to the press release on the launch of OGA, Online Gamers Association (Wagner, 2006). During this period, competitive gaming grew from merely a (looked down upon) leisure activity into an industry in which its participants *could* earn a living. Drawing parallels between sports and competitive gaming has become a key strategy through which esports has attempted to become a mainstream (sporting) activity. Emblematic of this approach is Riot Games' promotional video Our Game (League of Legends, 2017). In this video, the argument is made that *League of Legends*' professional competitive players should be considered esports

athletes, ending with the following text: "not just a sport, our sport". Local and national governments are also increasingly expanding their legislation for sports and athletes to include competitive gamers, recognizing esports as an official sport. This for example provides professional competitive gamers with the opportunity to apply for athlete visas and allows esports organizations access to funding earmarked for sports.[1] The recently announced Olympic Esports Games, to be hosted in Saudi-Arabia from 2025 onwards, further underscores esports events moving toward becoming mainstream 'sporting events'.

By adopting the term esports, competitive gaming is drawn out of the sphere of regular gaming through a process typified as sportification. Pargman and Svensson argue that esports are following a trajectory toward becoming a legitimate sport compared to many sports, which includes "standardization, specialization, rationalization, regimentation, professionalization and other criteria" (2020, p. 32), following Guttmann's (1978; cited in Pargman & Svensson, 2020) framework for the sportification of leisure activities. Esports have adopted and mimicked competitive formats, rules, and regulations from sports (Reitman et al., 2020; Summerley, 2020; Steinkuehler, 2020). Also, the production and broadcasting of esports events closely follows that of sports (Turtiainen et al, 2020) and esports is also a branding tool for competitive gaming. What is missing from Pargman and Svensson's (2020) analysis of esports' sportification, but hypothesized by Summerley (2020), is that through adopting and mimicking the organizational structures of sports, esports might also have to adopt the power structures that are fundamentally built on inequalities. Taylor (2021) takes this argument one step further, arguing that "esports do not have a gender problem, it is a gender problem", meaning that esports cannot be seen as separate from gendered issues because they are an epitome of these issues.

The sportification of esports functions to reproduce two problematic facets that are emblematic to sports: masculine, even misogynistic culture, and banal nationalism, which itself is deeply embedded in the construction of modern hegemonic masculinity (Ruotsalainen, 2022). Thus, far from solving the issues of exclusion, sexism, and racism that are part of game cultures, sportification of competitive gaming brings with it its own bag of issues, and at worst runs the risk of hiding or legitimising the existing issues.

Although sportification has contributed greatly to the wider acceptance of competitive gaming as legitimate leisure and professional activity (Ruotsalainen & Välisalo, 2020), social issues continue to threaten the sustainability of the industry (Nyström et al., 2022). Beyond some notable expectations (Taylor, 2021; Ruotsalainen, 2022;

[1] For instance, the Finnish Esports Association was accepted as part of Finnish Olympic Commitee in 2016, making it eligible for some of the funding earmarked for sports (see Finnish eSports Federation, 2016). Similarly, Germany officially recognizes esports as a ground to issue visas for professional players, as can be read on p. 522 of the *visumhandbuch*: visumhandbuch-data.pdf (auswaertiges-amt.de).

Witkowski & Harkin, 2024), the social effects of branding competitive videogaming as sport through sportification seem to be largely overlooked in current research on esports. What is meant when we apply the term esports is seldomly defined, and if it is, the definition rarely touches upon its social sides. Similarly, the ways in which sportification does not solve issues of inequity present in game cultures, but in many ways compounds them, continues to not be adequately addressed. We will come back to what this means for our understanding of bodies in esports later in this paper.

The myths of inclusive potential and meritocracy

Scholars have been optimistic about esports' potential to be a vehicle for social change and to become potentially more inclusive than sports spaces (Hayday & Collison, 2022; Nyström et al., 2022; Reitman et al., 2020; Summerley, 2020; Steinkuehler, 2020). This seems largely influenced by views on gaming as spaces in which out-of-game identities are less relevant or irrelevant, as well as a lesser emphasis on physical athleticism. However, we still see that esports and gaming spaces are predominantly occupied by (white, young) men, with misogyny and exclusionary practices being part of the daily, 'ordinary' experiences of its participants. We argue that a focus on esports' inclusive potential distracts us from both the critical examination of the undercurrents that enable inequalities to take shape and persist as well as the way branding competitive gaming as sports normalises these inequalities. Assuming a potential for esports to be inclusive is to assume that there is inherently something about games that makes them inclusive, but as many scholars have shown, game design is not neutral and often contributes to the reproduction and reinforcement of offline social structures (Kirkpatrick, 2017; Paul, 2018). It also carries the assumption that all that should really matter is how good you are at the game. Arguably this should be the case, but we cannot let our desires misguide our analysis. To assume that esports have potential is to assume that the conditions for this potential to be fulfilled are there. The empirical evidence to make this assumption is lacking.

Additionally, the notion of this inclusive potential allows for an understanding of the current absence of marginalized competitors as a lack of skill development. Following this logic, issues of exclusion in esports can simply be solved by providing marginalized competitors with the right opportunities. As if once marginalized competitors become (even) better players, the current issues that cause their exclusion disappear. This logic seems to be deeply embedded in how the current commercial women's and gender minority leagues are constructed: rather than addressing the structural issues deeply entwined with the construction of current esports, separated, but structurally similar, competitive space are created for those targeted with harassment and exclusion in esports, with the rhetoric of their aim becoming eventually obsolete (Ruotsalainen et al., 2022). However, we should be cautious not to present women and gender minority leagues and tournaments as the solution to fix

it all. In a study of the sportification of skateboarding and its effect on female skateboarders, Dax D'Orazio (2021) shows how sportifying and mainstreaming skateboarding has opened up opportunities to female skateboarders who have been marginalised in the community, which has had a strong, subcultural ethos. However, even with new opportunities, women continue having extensively smaller price pools than men and struggle to get sponsorships. This underscores that more opportunities do not necessarily translate to equality, by any means.

Furthermore, given the binary logic of gender in which most institutionalised sports operates, structurally separating marginalized competitive gamers under a logic of development runs the risk of eventually becoming a justification for segregation rather than inclusion, essentializing the difference rather than situating them as outcomes of structures. As organizations like AnyKey argue, women and gender minority initiatives are productive only if these initiatives are paired with structural efforts to improve equity (AnyKey, 2017). Otherwise, creating a separate space for marginalized gamers to compete with a fraction of the resources (monetary, material, and support) will only further perpetuate existing inequalities. As Ahmed (2017) argues, different types of institutions do violence also via the practices of inclusion, as support is given to some marginalized groups rather than all (p. 264). In this vein, also those who receive support in the name of inclusion end up providing labour to these structures. We should therefore be wary that at worst, women and marginalized gender leagues can end up further legitimizing exclusionary practices. Additionally, Ruotsalainen and Friman (2018) argue it is not enough to address a lack of women's participation in esports at the professional level, as the problems women face start considerably earlier and are deeply embedded to everyday play practices and player communities. Presenting the structural inequalities in esports as a matter of deficiencies does not allow for a critical reflection on the strategic exclusionary efforts, and instead puts the responsibility for change with those who are most disadvantaged in the current system.

The issues described above offer emblematic examples of what Nakamura (2017), inspired by Berlant (2011), calls gaming's cruel optimism. As noted by Taylor (2021), it presents success in esports as something that can ultimately be earned if one works hard enough, even though the reality for many marginalised gamers is that they are evaluated not just based on their merits, but rather on their identities. Paul (2018) discusses the concept of 'toxic meritocracy' to describe similar observations: the false assumption prevalent in gaming that everyone has the same opportunities and success is merely dependent on hard work. These assumptions, however, hide and obscure the different challenges non-normative bodies and marginalised players face. Similar dynamics have been observed in sports. Sports carry the inherent illusion that the best will always be on top and that it is through a mix of sheer willpower and talent that one achieves greatness. Messner (1988; 2007) argues that the dominant position of men in sports is far from self-evident, but rather carefully constructed, reinforced, and protected. We see similar dynamics in gaming spaces and esports, as discussed earlier in this paper. With the adoption of sports as a frame

for competitive gaming, we risk turning a blind eye to the inequalities that are currently allowed to fester within the industry. The sports paradigm supports the normalisation and naturalisation of perceived differences within competitive gaming, allowing biological and natural notions of superiority to gain legitimacy and prominence (Taylor, 2021). The narrative of meritocracy obscures the unequal foundation of competition in competitive gaming by making it seem like the result of some sort of natural selection. In doing so, it becomes a function of its own logic; instead of an ideology of equal opportunity and chances, meritocracy becomes a source of gratification for those with merit that ultimately serves to justify their position as somehow more elite than others (Liu, 2011). In this light, efforts to diversify and calls for inclusivity are presented as a threat to meritocratic ideals of fair competition (Seron et al., 2018). It is important to note how this justification of merit through narratives of meritocracy dictates what we consider merit to be, how it is measured, and thereby creates the conditions for how it can be achieved. In this light, we argue it is crucial to critically reflect on the social and material conditions that enable esports participation. In the following section, we will forefront the ways in which bodies are rendered (in)visible and call for a more thorough understanding of how people make sense of bodies in esports spaces.

The (in)visibility of bodies in esports

In this section, we will identify four ways in which bodies are made relevant in esports: 1) the obscuring of the playing body and establishment of an idealized and normative masculine, athletic body; 2) the 'visibility' of women's bodies as deviant from the norm ; 3) the invisibility (and impossibility) of disabled bodies through design (embodied nature of design of both games and gameplay); and 4) the embodied nature of infrastructural issues that cannot be reduced to materiality. It is important to note here that we apply a definition of bodies that exceeds just physicality. Bodies are never just a biological and material entity, but also a social and cultural construct (Mol, 2002), and we should understand it as both simultaneously (Rafanell, 2023). Our application of bodies in this text alludes to the many ways in which different forms of inequity are embodied and enacted.

The establishment of an idealized and normative body

We want to approach this by drawing attention to sporting jerseys that have become commonly used in esports. They are curious items that both obscure and highlight the way esports addresses bodies. In many sports, the sport jersey has a double function: its material is designed for bodies which sweat under the physical strain, and the player numbers offer sportscasters a way to quickly identify players in the field. However, in esports bodies are under less strain, nor do the players move from one place to another while playing—only their in-game characters do so. As such, in esports these sports jerseys lose the double-function they have in many sports and rather become a token of sportification; a way of signalling esports as a real sport

by adopting the sport aesthetics. In this way, they also signal how bodies are positioned in esports and how they are made visible. The sporting jersey, in a similar manner to esports teams' promotional material consisting of videos and pictures of e-athletes lifting weights at the gym, creates a disconnection between the of an esports player and the way esports is played for example with fine motor movements. As Taylor (2021) has pointed out, esports is invested in promoting certain kinds of bodies, in this case athletic and masculine, as 'naturally' better. This obscures the playing body that operates the keyboard, the controller, or the mobile phone.

The studies that discuss the relevance of bodies in esports, do so mostly in the paradigm of sportification and function consciously or unconsciously to further justify esports as a sport (Riatti & Thiel, 2023). For instance, Jenny et al. (2017) argue that esports lack the physicality of sports. However, while it is true that in esports players' bodies are not under similar physical strain compared to many other sports, this does not mean that bodies would be inconsequential in esports—far from it. It is rather that the athletic and masculine body promoted via the paradigm of sportification is not as consequential in esports as increasingly suggested by the sportification aesthetics. This, however, obscures the way the playing body is important, as is the case in sports such as pool or darts or shooting. There is also considerable difference between different esports titles on what kind of bodily engagement they require. It might be that those denouncing the importance of the physicality in esports are denouncing physicality related to a particular kind of hegemonic understanding of both body and esports. This is also present in the ways the body is attempted to be made more relevant or rendered visible in esports through the hegemonic understanding of sports and the body. For example, a *Quartz's* (digital news outlet) video on YouTube, titled "Esports players are training like professional athletes", has the following description: "esports players train like traditional professional athletes with regular gym visits, performance coaching, and a nutritionist-designed diet. CompLexity, an esports franchise, is developing training that borrows straight from the books of professional football players—and there's a reason for that" (Quartz, 2019). The video opens, not so surprisingly, with an esports player lifting weights.

The often-claimed irrelevance of physicality, or the way idealised athletic sporting bodies are highlighted, is problematic in several ways, but we will highlight two here. Firstly, it normalises the narratives of difference in sports as legitimate and based on biological truths, even though practices like sex-segregation have compellingly been shown not to be a natural given (Dworkin & Cooky, 2012; Karkazis et al., 2012: McDonagh & Pappano, 2008; Messner, 1988; Messner, 2007; Schultz, 2018). This is an important issue to consider, and one that applies to the social sciences and humanities more broadly, but falls outside the scope of this paper. Secondly, hiding the ways in which bodies are physically relevant, and making them relevant in a very narrow way, obscures the ways in which bodies become (and are) relevant in esports, which we argue hinders our ability to pinpoint and discuss those issues that are at the core of esports' current foundation.

Reducing bodies to an irrelevant aspect of playing games reproduces and establishes an idea of what a 'normal gamer' is or should be. This not only relates to an expected style of play (i.e., hardcore instead of casual), but also the way in which one is able to play (i.e., the way games and tournaments have been designed). These taken-for-granted expectations dictate who is included in the ideal image of participation, and who is excluded.

The 'visibility' of women's bodies as deviant from the norm

A poignant example of the relevance of the bodies in esports is the way women's bodies are depicted and framed as all pervasive and almost as obscene, especially when they are present in esports spaces that are not reserved for women and gender minorities. In 2018, Se-yeon "Geguri" Kim, a professional *Overwatch* player, was not signed to Overwatch League in its inaugural season, and one of the teams not signing her gave as one of the reasons co-ed player housing (Cullen, 2018). It is the divergence from the normative (masculine) body that makes bodies visible again, showing what bodies are seen as not fitting and not desirable—and showing that there is a desirable body that is legitimised through the project of sportification. Friman and Ruotsalainen's analysis (2022) of the case of "Ellie" in professional *Overwatch* likewise highlights this. Ellie was an *Overwatch* player who rose to top ranks apparently out of nowhere and was signed by a team. From early on, questions about Ellie's gender were raised and echoed throughout social media and it turned out that Ellie was in fact a male, known by the community, pretending to be a woman. According to Friman and Ruotsalainen, "Ellie's skill or rank was never under suspicion, their gender was. When it was revealed that there was indeed a man behind the account, both the media and the community seemed to let out a huge sigh of relief and get back to their lives, considering the case Ellie closed" (2022, p. 150).

The invisibility (and impossibility) of disabled bodies through design

Bodies, and what is considered a normal (and normative) body, also become evident when examining both games played as esports as well as technology used for playing them. As Ahmed (2006) teaches us, objects are made to fit those who are envisioned to use them, as well as made to order who *can* use them (p. 51). This is no less the case for esports. In their study on competitive gamers with disabilities, Ripetta and Silvestri (2024) highlight the ways in which the choice for which games are played, the peripherals available, and how space is organised, all impact the experiences and possibilities that gamers with disabilities have. They argue that certain games value certain skills more than others, which should not be seen as a given but as a (design) choice (Ripetta & Silvestri, 2024). Additionally, the gamers in Ripetta and Silvestri's study who were born with disabilities experience that they often cannot fully identify with the avatars they play with. The movements of these characters are in some ways simply alien to them. To accommodate for their own participation,

gamers with disabilities customise their in-game settings, peripherals (mouse, keyboard, etc.), and furniture. Ripetta & Silvestri (2024) note that these players are burdened with the costs for such customization, even in highly professionalized environments, creating an additional barrier for their participation. In an interview between the British Esports Association and Tucker Griggs, a gamer with a disability, they discuss how tournaments often do not even accept what is called 'adaptive equipment', meaning gamers with disabilities that rely on such equipment are excluded by default (British Esports, 2021).

The embodied nature of infrastructural issues

Financial means as an entry barrier remains largely overlooked in research on esports, but are certainly not exclusive to gamers with disabilities. The example of gamers with disabilities does show, however, that this is not simply a monetary issue. It becomes another mechanism for the exclusion of unwanted or non-normative bodies. Most games that are considered esports are, as mentioned earlier, played on PC, require high-quality, expensive hardware, and depend on equally expensive infrastructure. Not everyone has access to the financial means necessary to afford this hardware. In that light, the industry's preference for technologically high-demanding PC games over more affordable alternatives becomes an issue of (economical) class, which is inextricably tied to other forms of inequity like race and gender. DiSalvo and Bruckman (2010), as well as Richard and Gray (2018), highlight the ways in which financial disparity further hinders the participation of racialized players. These issues cannot be solved merely through solutions that tackle the material inequalities between players. These material inequalities have lasting effects on the affected bodies. This is not just a local issue in the sense that currently most esports industries value PC games over console games, platforms on which economically disadvantaged gamers are more prevalent. The issue is also global, as the prominence of high-demanding esport titles (e.g., *League of Legends*, *Counterstrike* and *Valorant*) favours the economically wealthier Global North over the Global South, where technologically lower-demanding mobile games (e.g., *Mobile Legends: Bang Bang*, *Arena of Valor* and *Free Fire*) are hugely popular. Access to certain popular esports titles is limited in certain geographical areas. For example, Riot Games opened their first server on the African continent in 2023, 14 years after releasing *League of Legends* and three years after releasing *Valorant* (Riot Games, 2023). The server, located in South Africa, is exclusively dedicated to *Valorant*, meaning that African players still have no options to play *League of Legends* on a server located on their own continent. Given the concentration of developers for esports titles in North America and Europe and the power that resides with game developers in enabling and organizing esports events (see: Karhulahti, 2017), this means that what can be considered a 'true' esport, and who gets to compete, is highly dictated by actors in the Global North.

Together, these four ways we have discussed dictate which bodies are possible in esports, and which bodies are not. Furthermore, this shows that what counts as esports is always socially, culturally, and institutionally constructed and legitimises some games and forms of participation over others. Most importantly, it highlights the unwritten and mostly unspoken idealization of certain bodies over others, favouring bodies that are abled, masculine, wealthy, white, and young. This is exactly where we believe the lack of critical engagement with the social effects of sportification, and the application of the term esports, are most violent; in normalising and formalising the conditions for participation and acknowledgement thereof. It is this violence that we turn to in the next section.

Toward more sustainable and equitable practices and language

In taking for granted a definition of esports, we are taking for granted the ways in which esports are currently building on inequalities. There are no inherent qualities to esports that would allow for social change. Rather, if we wish for esports to become a vehicle for social change, we should start with deconstructing what esports currently represents, and more importantly who is represented and representable. Failing to do so will further establish the current state of affairs as if it is the result of some sort of natural order, a meritocracy if you will. However, we have shown in this paper how nothing in esports should be considered neutral. The equipment used, the choice of games (and their design), the way of organizing competition—it all factors into questions of who gets to compete in what ways, and how this participation is valued. The meritocracy is toxic because it is unequal by design, and we have highlighted the relevance of bodies in this design.

Esports set the norm for who can be considered a participant as well as how these participants can be (and in many ways should be) valued. The idealized body is not just the norm, it is also formalized in how esports present themselves to the public, both as competitive gaming and as a sporting activity. In this light, we argue that recognizing what esports *do* is crucial for understanding what esports are. There are many forms of inequity that relate to the idealization of some type of body over other types of bodies which we have not mentioned or dealt with in this paper. Our main aim has not been to tackle all these inequities, but rather call attention to the necessity that future research in esports does. There is violence in obscuring the processes that establish and naturalize the idealized body. It complicates efforts to address issues of exclusion and inequity, and further supports the erasure of those who do not fit the ideals promoted through the idealized body. The playing field is set up in a way that does not properly recognize those whose body is not ideal, and it makes them impossible esports participants in some ways (Butler, 2004, p. 31). As long as we take the idealized body for granted by not clearly defining what esports are and to whom they are supposed to appeal, the idealized body perpetuates itself and marginalized bodies will continue to be excluded.

Our argument is not to move away from the term esports in favour of another term, like professional competitive gaming. Merely changing our terminology will do nothing to change the structural issues of gaming and esports. It could even further obscure the social issues that are part of the very foundation of esports as we currently know them. Instead, the deconstruction of esports that we call for should be understood as a call for a critical engagement with its current foundations. This starts with an acknowledgement that the *terms* we use matter beyond text. Approaching competitive gaming as a sport under the banner of esports is, as we have argued, more than just strategic use of words. Deconstructing then starts with unravelling exactly how bodies become relevant and under which conditions. As such, we argue, we need to deconstruct esports as social practice (Pfohl, 1985). This will allow spaces to rebuild esports in ways that are more equitable and just. Such an engagement should, in our view, aim to contribute to a more thorough understanding of how people in esports make sense of bodies. This relates to questions of how participation is enabled, the ways in which participation is valued, and the broader normalization and formalization of idealized bodies. It is critical to note here that we should also look at our own roles as researchers in enabling, normalizing, and possibly promoting the idealized bodies through our academic work. If we fail to critically interrogate the industries' terminology in our academic work, and if we fail to account for the social work that sportification does, we perpetuate existing inequalities through our research practices.

Beyond the question of how people make sense of bodies in esports, we should furthermore ask how bodies make sense of esport practices. What we mean by this is to not only look at what kind of bodies are invited to take part in esports and how, but also at the everyday practices of bodies engaging with esports and how this is enabled, sometimes in radical ways. Through an exploration of these questions, further research will not only highlight issues of inequity in esports that should be dealt with, but it will also allow us to collectively envision how esports could be different.

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The original idea for the article came from author one and was developed further in collaboration. Both authors contributed to the writing of the article with author one leading the process.

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"I Want to Play a Normal Game. I Don't Need All This."

Exploring Gender Diversity in Portuguese Esports

Carina de Assunção, Michael Scott and Rory Summerley

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“I Want to Play a Normal Game. I Don’t Need All This.”

Exploring Gender Diversity in Portuguese Esports

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Abstract

Esports in Portugal have been growing steadily in recent years. As in many other countries, women are significantly underrepresented in Portuguese esports. New studies with Portuguese students show conservative views towards gender roles and disinterest in prioritising diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), which contrasts with the global tendency to incorporate it in the industry. Lately, initiatives promoting DEI have populated the esports landscape. However, the communities’ response, which may impact effectiveness, remains under-examined. This work is part of a larger ethnographic project that aims to understand how the esports communities in Portugal perceive and react to DEI initiatives such as women-only tournaments or harassment awareness campaigns. This paper will discuss findings from the thematic analysis of 10 interviews with Portuguese members of an esports community. The recurring themes were (1) DEI initiatives are imposed; (2) Portugal is too small to care (about DEI); (3) nepotism; (4) self-preservation; and (5) ubiquity of online toxicity.

Keywords

Esports; diversity, equity & inclusion; Portuguese esports; online toxicity; women in games

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Women—or rather, anyone who does not identify as a cisgender man—have been consistently locked out of gaming and esports as emerging cultural spaces. Multiple barriers have contributed to this; for instance, the historical marketing of videogames to boys since the 80s (Kirkpatrick, 2013), which led to “both girls and boys thought video game machines were ‘boy things’” by the 90s (Laurel in Cassel & Jenkins, 1998, p. 119). With online games, girls and women became aware of this gatekeeping culture as they endured abuse due to their gender (Fox & Tang, 2017), with livestreaming, they started getting more comments about their physical appearance than about their gaming performance (Nakandala et al., 2016), and thus

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many girls and women who play, prefer to mask their gender using masculine-sounding usernames or avoiding voice chats (Cote, 2017). Due to this historical imbalance, some suggest gender segregation as a temporary solution to create safe spaces for women to compete in (MissHarvey in Chaloner, 2020) while hoping for "a world where mixed teams are simply normal" (Hiltscher 2023). Nonetheless, a multi-pronged approach including workshops with stakeholders and providing best practice recommendations for industry folks seems to be the better option (AnyKey, 2015; Anykey, 2017; Taylor in Lowood, 2019).

Lately, initiatives for diversity, equity and inclusion (herein DEI) have populated the esports landscape; however, the communities' response remains under-examined. In this paper, we engage with the definition of DEI set forth by Friman et al (2024) "describing an intention for building environments where all kinds of people are welcome, are treated fairly, and have an equal opportunity for participation and agency." (p.481). In practical terms, DEI initiatives in esports are often events such as tournaments, video campaigns, moderating tools, and resources for esports. Examples of such initiatives are the promotion of LGBTQIA+ streamers on the Activision Blizzard (herein Blizzard) launcher,[1] tournaments for teams of marginalised genders such as Calling All Heroes (Blizzard Entertainment, 2024), or campaigns such as Sky's partnership with Guild Esports' No Room for Abuse campaign.[2]

AnyKey is a non-profit advocacy organisation that has published extensive work in that direction, aiming to establish how DEI can be implemented in esports (AnyKey, 2015). While their work contributes to a growing body of knowledge, it does not analyse diversity in different cultural contexts, which this project aims to do. Anykey's resources are said to be applicable to different cultural contexts, but these do not consider cultural dimensions that can aid or hinder their adoption and/or effectiveness. This is one of the main contributions of the present paper: to understand the extent to which international DEI initiatives are applicable in different cultural settings from the ones they were developed in.

The present work addresses various gaps in the literature. The interviews have the goal of exploring how DEI initiatives are seen in a competitive OW community. The dearth of research on how non-Anglocentric communities navigate hurdles related to DEI, grants this work its novel and vital character through empirical research. The following section contextualises this study discussing the status quo of esports and of DEI in Portugal. Within the Method section, the interview protocol, participant recruitment, ethical considerations, and analysis of data collected are explained. The Themes section will expand on the data analysis utilising data segments from the

[1] Blizzard's software application used to install and start games on the PC.
[2] Video campaign 'No Room for Abuse' launched in 2023 on Twitch.tv and other platforms: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fC0yzzCWKG4&t=2s&ab_channel=Sky

interviews conducted. This is followed by a discussion of findings, limitations and future work, and a conclusion.

Portugal

Portugal is an opportune place to study DEI in esports because its esports scene is still under development in an underexplored national context. Hofstede's cultural dimensions model (Hofstede Insights, 2024; Minkov & Kaasa, 2022) indicates that Portugal has an incredibly high score of 'uncertainty avoidance', meaning resistance to change, which might be useful in understanding the country's outlook on esports as a nascent industry and on DEI.

Studying Portugal in the context of gender diversity is particularly insightful due to the persistent influence of patriarchal attitudes within its society (M. Ferreira et al., 2022). These attitudes continue to shape various aspects of gender relations, from the workplace to home (EIGE, 2023; INE, 2020). Exploring gender diversity in such a context can provide valuable insights into the challenges and progress associated with gender equality in a modern yet traditionally influenced society.

DEI in Portugal

To understand a country's equity and diversity ethos, and given the sportification aspect of esports[3], it is useful to look at how a country navigates equity and diversity in traditional sports. Football is immensely popular in Portugal. An adage of the Portuguese culture is "*Football, Fado & Fátima*" referring to the cultural aspects which are dearest to the Portuguese: the sport, the national musical genre, and the religion.[4] The international success Portuguese footballers[5] have amassed over decades, could perhaps explain the further investment and continued interest by the population. Further, these examples serve as role models for young boys and their fathers; whereas the lack of female role models is often cited as a reason behind the low numbers of women professional players (Romine, 2019).

Women's football in Portugal has always been neglected, however, there has been a recent push to raise its profile. This includes the establishment of a broadcasting network that connects all stadiums where women's football is played, which enables the livestreaming of games to a broader audience (UEFA.com, 2022). The Portuguese

[3] Sportification refers to the adoption of language, imagery, and structures from traditional sports (McMullan and Miller 2008).

[4] Fátima is a city in Portugal where a religious Saint supposedly appeared, originating the myth.

[5] For instance: Cristiano Ronaldo, Luís Figo, Eusébio da Silva Ferreira.

women's national football team qualified for the 2023 World Cup, which further enhanced the sport's prominence in the country (Marmé, 2023). At the time, a Portuguese bank released a marketing campaign to support the team. The posters depicted an athlete with a football under her jersey which, in football context, is a common celebratory practice. However, in the context of the video campaign, it was a reference to pregnancy. The campaign was received with a mixture of praise and criticism as it reproduces essentialist gender stereotypes.

Some recent studies with higher education students in Portuguese game-related degrees show that improving equity and diversity in the nation's gaming industry is not seen as a priority (Lima & Gouveia, 2020). Issues such as representation in games are dismissed and gender essentialist stereotypes reinforced in these participants' discourse. Researchers have identified three types of fallacies in perceptions and beliefs the Portuguese have about the gaming industry: the fallacy that game development always requires programming skills, that it is unprofitable or unviable as a career, and that it is a profession suited for men (Lima et al., 2021). Interestingly, in their 2020 paper, Lima & Gouveia, highlighted a theme in the participants' discourse which they termed 'sensitivities of interest'. Unpacking this concept, it seems that participants were reinforcing the idea that women do not tend to develop an interest in exploring the nuances of the gaming technology. This further reinforces the notion that there is a strong adherence to gender stereotypes in Portugal, especially when it comes to videogames.

Esports in Portugal

The esports industry in Portugal has been growing steadily in recent years, with an increasing number of tournaments, teams, and players participating in various esports titles (Cardoso, 2021; C. Ferreira, 2019). Data regarding the number of esports tournaments happening in Portugal has not yet been systematically documented. Below, figure 1 shows a representation of this trend though it is not exhaustive.

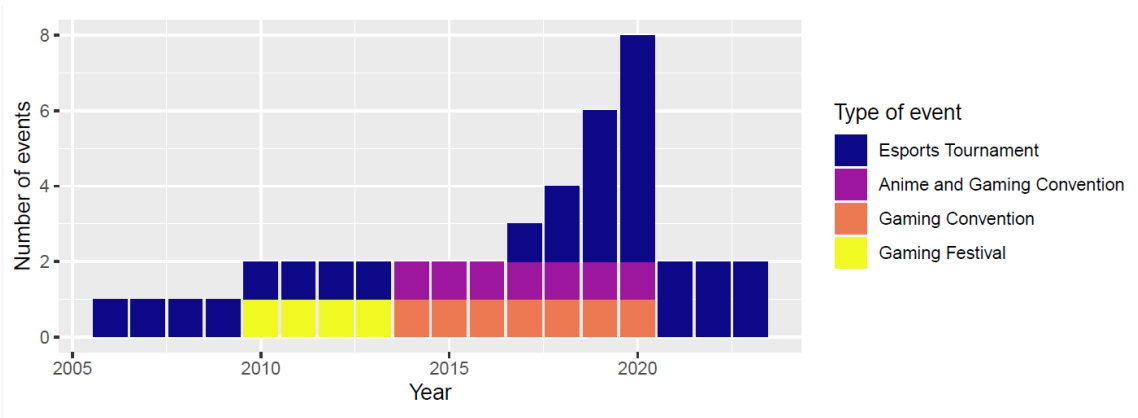

Figure 1. Number of gaming and esports events in Portugal in the last decades.

Lisboa Games Week, one of the biggest gaming events in the country was inaugurated in 2014 and has been including even more esports competitions in its programme. Other regions in Portugal have followed their footsteps and started their own gaming events with small tournaments, e.g. Óbidos Village Gaming (central region) or Street Gaming Cantanhede (north region).

In terms of equity and diversity, the Portuguese esports industry, like in many other countries, has been struggling to overcome a considerable gender gap. Women are significantly underrepresented both in Portuguese esports (Monteiro, 2021) and the national game development industry (Gil, 2022; WPGI, 2022). Efforts to address this issue have been somewhat superficial. While events like Lisboa Games Week and Comic Con Portugal have dedicated areas for women in gaming, these initiatives often fail to address the deeper cultural and structural barriers that prevent women from fully participating in esports (Passos, 2022; Women in Games, 2022). Panels and discussions are valuable, but they need to be coupled with tangible changes in hiring practices, support for marginalised genders, and visibility in major tournaments to make a real difference.

GIRLGAMER, a women-only international tournament, is owned by a Portuguese company. It exemplifies this gap between intention and impact. Despite organizing a notable event in Lisbon in 2018, the absence of Portuguese teams underscores the lack of development and support for female gamers within the country (C. Ferreira, 2019; Saraiva, 2013). This failure to nurture local talent points to a broader issue of inadequate grassroots support and mentorship for women in esports. The Portuguese *Overwatch 2* (OW; Activision Blizzard, 2022) team's participation in Blizzard's Overwatch World Cup without female players (Pedersen, 2019) highlights the community's apparent gender bias, showing resistance to change.

Exploring the themes that emerge when members of the Portuguese esports community discuss equity and diversity is crucial for understanding the underlying challenges and opportunities within the industry in this specific cultural context. Addressing these issues is essential for fostering a sustainable and equitable esports ecosystem in Portugal, aligning with broader global efforts to promote diversity and inclusion in competitive gaming.

Method

Overwatch 2 (OW, Activision Blizzard 2022) is a team-based first-person shooter esport. The game was chosen for this study because its developer introduced, since its inception (Overwatch, 2016), multiple DEI initiatives such as a diverse roster of characters and more recently tournaments exclusively for teams of marginalised genders (Blizzard Entertainment, 2024). Portugal has a small, dedicated community of OW casual, amateur, and professional players. The authors interviewed past and

present members of the Overwatch Portugal (OWPT) Discord community. This community was chosen not only due to the researcher's familiarity with the community and the game, but also because OW has been hailed as having one of the most diverse character rosters in first-person shooters as well as having the most diverse userbase (Välisalo & Ruotsalainen, 2019; Yee, 2017).

The size of the community is relevant in ethically approaching this study. As part of a larger ethnographic study, the interview data was handled carefully to avoid identification of participants given the small size of the population. I.e. anonymisation went beyond the typical participant pseudonym, avoiding naming specific tournaments and other Portuguese esports scenes beyond OW, which participants mentioned.

Ten semi-structured, respondent interviews were conducted online in August 2023 to investigate what themes could be identified when members of the Portuguese esports community talk about equity and diversity. The interviews lasted from 50 minutes to 1h37min. Three participants identified as women, four as men, one as non-binary, one as a trans woman, and one as genderfluid. The participants' ages ranged from 21 to 34. They had currently or formerly worked in esports professionally or in grassroots organisations. This method fits the research purpose and the sample as respondents had similar positions within the community but different personal experiences, which could be expanded upon through a semi-structured protocol (Tracy, 2020).

In the participant information sheet and consent form, the following description is included: "This study aims to understand the experience of esports fans in relation to diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in esports communities. Specifically, to understand esports fans' views of DEI such as female-only tournaments." The interviews have the goal of uncovering how DEI initiatives are perceived in competitive OW communities. Using a semi-structured protocol, the interviews enabled participants to expand on their views and talk more broadly about internal and external factors that may impact their participation in esports. Some of the prompts were: what brought them to OW; their role in esports; challenges in the role/organisation/in esports in general; are esports a sport; gender segregation; views on specific DEI initiatives; diversity in organisations where you work(ed). Interview protocol in Appendix 1.

By internal and external factors, we understand 'internal factors' as internal to the individual (participants' first-person perspectives) or internal to the community; and 'external factors' as external to the individual (e.g., family or financial pressure) or external to the community (but within esports) such as pressure to be a role model, or to represent the country. The interview questions focused both on social aspects as well as material and technological aspects of participants' experiences. Thematic Analysis (TA) enables a deeper exploration of specific themes, offering a better view

of how particular interactions, roles, and influences that contribute to esports as a phenomenon.

As per Braun and Clarke (2022) themes identified in the interviews were not merely commonly occurring but transmitted importance and significant meaning, relative to the subject matter. Coding was achieved through the strategy called '3-level coding' (Langdridge and Hagger-Johnson 2013). The first level is concerned with *what* is being talked about; the second level with *how* it is being talked about; and the third level brings in theory and external knowledge to help identify patterns in the codes from previous levels.

Themes

1. *Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives as imposed and unproductive*

DEI were seen by participants as being artificially imposed on them for two reasons. On the one hand, Blizzard is seen to be sanitising their own public image[6] and, on the other hand, the developer is perceived to be adopting social justice narratives and strategies which have become trendy in order to increase their own popularity.

This view was shared about different types of initiatives. First, Blizzard including streamers of marginalised gender identities in its client: "The first thought people have when they see this [...] is that 'this person's here just because they are marginalised. They were put here on Blizzard's client just for that.' And it reinforces a horrible mindset" (P6).

The above segment displays some negative attitudes towards something that resembles a quota system. After seeing that Blizzard is promoting players of marginalised genders, their merit for being promoted is negated by their identity. Additionally, P6 also suggested that prioritising social justice via this type of initiative may exacerbate negative behaviours towards marginalised folks in esports.

> If now they [Overwatch] added like 30 different heroes and they all had uncommon identities people would be like 'OK I wanna play the game, and this is starting with obstacles that... like, I want to play a normal game, [...] I don't need all this'. (P8)

[6] After a lawsuit related to sexual harassment accusations was made public recently.

P8 suggested the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ characters in OW is unusual and unexpected, potentially deterring people from playing the game. The segment also suggests that a "normal game" would therefore be a game without "uncommon identities". He also later attributed this decision by the developers as a PR strategy rather than a design choice. The implied designation of 'normality' is revealing of unconscious bias.

> I'm limited to players in Portugal. […] so, if I'm getting a new player, he's gonna be of an inferior level because I already had the best 5. […] Now think about a community that's even smaller, that's the community of girls who play. (P11)

P11 here used the logic that 'it is already so difficult for men, let alone for women' as justification for why women's teams would be unsuccessful. It follows that women's teams as a DEI initiative would be unproductive because… who would want to be in an unsuccessful team? P11 also makes a comparison between the Portuguese player pool and the Portuguese women's player pool, which is necessarily smaller than the former. But P11 presumes that the 6th best player in Portugal could never be a woman. This focus on how small the pool of players is as a justification for the lack of DEI also links to theme 2 below.

Subtheme 1.1: Own DEI solutions

There was consensus that mixed teams should be the ideal model in esports competitions. This was contrasted with women-only leagues, which were generally accepted with some caveats.

"To separate completely would be bad; having space to get as much attention as the other teams […] To create a space or a different league or different communities, tournaments, where everyone can meet in friendly tournaments" (P1). In this segment, even though P1 considered gender segregation a negative thing, they suggested the creation of a separate 'Path to Pro'[7] for marginalised genders justifying this with the added media attention that a separate league would involve. "There should be three options: one just for guys, one just for girls, and one mixed […] because in the end that all helps [esports] to grow. I think that would probably be the best solution" (P10). In this second segment, P10 also talks about different paths for different groups of people, with the justification that the more activity there is, the bigger the industry becomes. In sum, a safe space, visibility, and media attention to be as equal as possible was a common answer.

[7] Path to Pro is the name of Activision Blizzard's programme for aspiring professional players to participate in tournaments of increasing performance level.

P6 had a different take on the concept of mixed teams. He recalled a situation he reportedly has seen "happen a thousand times". When a woman joins an existing men's team,

> …three months into the team – and it's even going well – but there's a guy who wants to be her boyfriend. And then there's another guy who also wants to be her boyfriend. And these two guys are going to destroy the team because they're fighting over a girl who may not even be interested in them. You know? It creates a lot of problematic dynamics. (P6)

The above quote by P6 provides insight into how men in the Portuguese esports community might resist the idea of having women in the same team as them. This view of women as the object of desire in a team lends support to a heteronormative view of masculinity.

P11 mentioned his organisation wants to tackle the gender diversity imbalance by creating a team and following them, documentary-style, registering their professional progress:

> We take five girls, […] train them, follow them around as a documentary, you know, following their evolution for a year […] take them to bootcamps. […] [Film them] while they're practicing, make content with them, those funny Q&A videos, and yeah, that's a project. (P11)

Although the enthusiasm for the principle was clear, the opportunities for audience growth and content creation was very present too. As this project seemed too ambitious for now, P11 mentioned his organisation has focused on recruiting more women to the roster of gaming influencers and streamers as a way to balance the gender gap. When mentioning social media influencers, P11 reinforced that his organisation is only interested in *real* women who play games, as opposed to those who resort to sexually titillating content by livestreaming in Twitch's non-gaming related categories. This discourse resonates the literature stating women in esports are limited to performing femininity in an undistracting amount, as this is essential for them to blend in male-dominated sport (Taylor, 2012).

The sort of strategy to improve women's visibility was also mentioned by P5 who declared being made to feel like the *token* woman. Both her then-boss and a national TV esports channel would often request her for media appearances:

> him wanting to take a selfie with me… just to post it on social media to show off 'here's our only girl in the team'; … I know sometimes they used me a bit as a token… even [Portuguese TV channel] also wanted to do an interview with the OW players from the organisation and they said to our faces that they wanted me to do it because I was the only girl, so I don't think it's a bad thing. (P5)

The above quote is a first-person perspective of a Portuguese then-professional player. Being the only woman in the team, P5 noticed that the media attention she got may have been due to her gender, and due to being the only one presenting as a woman in the team. There is some conformity in the discourse, accepting the status quo, but also a recognition that promoting the women that are already present in the industry may be a good strategy to inspire others. This led the researcher to ask P5 whether she felt the burden of representing her gender. P5 replied recognising that there is something beyond meritocracy when it comes to women in esports:

> I never felt a burden, for me it was pride… of doing well, of showing that I'm here and I deserve to be here. It was like… I'm a girl and I'm not here just because I know person A or B, I'm [here] because I played, and I practiced, and I did everything the same as the others or even more, sometimes… because I think that as women, we have to further prove we deserve it more than others. (P5)

The above quote by P5 starts by denying the feeling of tokenism as a burden. Instead, P5 said she felt proud of showing off her talent and her choice of being a professional player. She also invoked merit as the reason for her success instead of nepotism – which is a recurring theme discussed below. Further, P5's response also echoes what others have said in relation to the additional hurdles women face when working in male-dominated spaces.

Another suggestion to improve an existing DEI initiative came from P8 after being shown the visual elicitation tool.[8] P8 suggested that instead of harassment awareness campaigns showing how women are often victims of bullying in online games:

> If they swapped this for an ad for example with girls playing […] and winning […] it would be much more successful. Because this here is very much victimhood in the sense that 'if I play I'm gonna feel bad'. (P8)

The segment above suggest that esports or videogames related campaigns should focus on the positive: rewards (winning, being part of a team), as well as representation and inclusion; rather than the negative (women being victims) and punishing (men becoming aware of women gamers' realities). An example of this would be the Portuguese Football Federation campaign[9] for their esports division which included

[8] A visual elicitation tool was used during some interviews where harassment towards women was already being discussed. The video shared was the Sky campaign 'No Room for Abuse' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fC0yzzCWKG4&t=2s&ab_channel=Sky

[9] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TNwkMvl_v_E&ab_channel=Federa%C3%A7%C3%A3oPortuguesadeFutebol

a professional female eFootball[10] (Konami, 2021) player who is a national bi-champion.

However, in P8's discourse there is also a note of cynicism for women's claims regarding online harassments. Perhaps as a man and as a streamer it makes P8 feel uncomfortable to see men portrayed as the perpetrators of such behaviour. P8, later in the interview noted that "the way women hear those comments, men will hear others… I get flamed every day." Nonetheless, the point to P8's initial quote is taking a positive approach to inclusion and representation rather than making players aware of the negatives of online gaming. It is a positive approach and one that game studies scholars have been trying to introduce in the development of frameworks to tackle toxicity and improve prosocial behaviour (Assunção et al., 2023).

2. Portugal is too small to care (about DEI)

> No one cares in a good way; that is, if you want to play, play. […] there was never an instance where a girl wasn't allowed to play. So, I think in a good way, no one cares about it, and let's play. That's it, no matter who you are. (P8)

In the segment above, P8's comments rendered the diversity issue invisible by framing it as a non-issue. The community does not recognise it as an issue and thus, the position is that there is nothing to resolve or to fix. It adopts the positive spin which esports enthusiasts often use to portray the industry as progressive and accessible to everyone, as opposed to traditional sports (Witkowski, 2018).

"The main organisations in Portuguese esports have no intentions of developing feminine esports in Portugal, they really don't! […] If they already know it is so difficult to make it for the guys…" (P11). In P11's perspective, the justification for a lack of investment in women's esports and DEI in Portugal is the knowledge and status quo regarding the national scene. As it is still in development, women's esports are not seen as a potentially profitable endeavour. 'Difficulty' is used by P11 as a way to code the strenuousness of trying to succeed in Portuguese esports.

> We could give that spin that Portugal is a homophobic or racist country… I think that everybody lives in their own little bubble and people just don't care enough. […] if it's not a problem that concerns you directly, the majority of people don't care about those topics […] it's like the problem of homelessness. (P6)

[10] eFootball (Konami, 2021) is a football simulation videogame previously known as Pro Evolution Soccer.

In the segment above, P6 adopted an individualistic lens to explain the lack of interest in social issues such as absence of diversity, and compares this to homelessness. At the same time, P6 defended Portugal from potential criticism of this study, for seeming homophobic or racist by resisting DEI initiatives.

Subtheme 2.1: #MeToo

The researcher was aware of a #metoo accusation within the Portuguese OW community before recruiting both parties to the study, although she was not completely sure of who the accused party was. After the interviews, she realised they are both prominent figures in the community: one was a founder of the Portuguese OW community and is currently a professional in Portuguese esports, and the other was one of the best female Portuguese esports players during her active years; so their perspectives were essential to collect.

> I didn't want to talk with this person. But at a professional level, for my career, and to follow a goal that I have which was to play OW in this team… I know I have to talk to him. I have to push my trauma aside (Participant X).

This participant's perspective demonstrated that even though there was a traumatic experience being relived through the 'imposed' contact with this person, the participant's desire to succeed in esports superseded the pain of remembering said experience.

> I'm a step away, so close to following my goal to be the first girl, and on top of that, to be part of the [tournament name] and I felt that I was so close to that dream but at the same time… to get there, it meant travelling and being with these people with whom I did not feel comfortable (Participant X).

The quote above shows how much Participant X was determined not only to be successful in esports but also to be a trailblazer in terms of gender diversity in esports. However, when faced with the need to travel with the rest of the team, self-preservation superseded this desire.

3. *Nepotism*

Nepotism as discrimination in the OWPT community was a recurring theme. One consequence of this favouritism was that:

> You either were friends with some of the right people or you couldn't really do anything. No one took you seriously. Some teams wouldn't even

> scrim[11] with us... they just never took us seriously because we were 'that team'. (P2)

Here, P2 refers to a separate grassroots esports organisation. This separate organisation was ridiculed in the community because it welcomed players of almost any rank to be part of their teams. According to P2, this was seen by some people as diluting the esport and misrepresenting the Portuguese community. Incidentally, this alternative organisation had multiple women players.

The following segments refer to the OW World Cup (herein OWWC) committee, which was composed of mainly founders and administrators of the OWPT. Together, this group organised trials for Portuguese players to play in and try to be selected to represent the country in Blizzard's OWWC.

> They [Portuguese OWWC committee] had already chosen the top players based on who they were; [...] They were only chosen because they were famous names in Portuguese OW. (P5)

> The team that went to the OWWC was decided on the basis of who is friends with those people, not by their skill [...] and what happens is [...] we don't take the best team... we take the team who talks to the right people. (P2)

In the quotes above both P5 and P2 present the perspective that the national rosters are selected with bias. The *famous names* were all male players who had previously participated in the OWWC and/or had been professional OW players. P2 and P5's perspectives seem to indicate that nepotism is used to maintain the status quo marginalised folks from accessing esports spaces and events. While it could also be said that the most skilled players were selected based on their OWWC and professional experience.

"More of non-Portuguese speaking people than actual Portuguese... [a guy came out of nowhere] it was found that he was half Portuguese and so he came in" (P4). P4 and one particular non-Portuguese speaker player were the last two people who could be selected from the trial phase. Only a small difference in game 'skill rating' separated them. When probed[12] about whether she thought it was discrimination due to her gender, P4 said "I think so. I don't see any other reason. Other than the high peak [in skill rating]." Said difference in both players' skill rating was marginal

[11] Scrimmage: Practice games.

[12] The researcher was cautious not to lead the participant into admitting that she felt discriminated due to her gender. In fact, the researcher only probed this topic because the participant had used the word 'prejudice' earlier in this question, indicating some level of discriminated feelings.

and thus could easily be construed as an excuse to choose a male player over a female one. A relevant insight here is that P4 employs nationalism to construe herself as more worthy and deserving of being part of the team, because she spoke Portuguese fluently whereas the other player did not.

"With all the problems I'd already had being the only girl in the team… I didn't know everyone that well like they knew each other" (P5). In this quote, P5 alluded to having felt gender discriminated before and that having conditioned her experience in the community, which had the consequence of her not advocating for her spot in the World Cup team. Besides nepotism, P5's perspective points towards gender discrimination.

4. Self-preservation

Given that online communication is often fraught with animosity among its habitués, the interviewees inevitably discussed how they manage toxic behaviour in online gaming spaces. Known self-preservation techniques used by women-identifying people were among the mostly cited. These were: refraining from using voice-based communication in games, blocking or muting other users, or "having thick skin" (P1). When faced with gender-based discrimination, many prefer to stay silent and let their skill in the game speak for them:

> I would shut up. At least with Portuguese folks I'd just shut up. […] What am I gonna do? I can't change their minds […] we literally did some 1v1s[13] on OWPT and I would win the 1v1s […] it was never enough to show them. (P4)

This quote from P4 echoes some of the findings in literature (Assunção, 2016) about women in esports and other male dominated areas. No matter how much a woman demonstrates they have merit to be at a high rank, they are still targeted based on their skill. It also demonstrates a level of conformity with the status quo, instead of resisting, P4 preferred to remain silent. When P4 was asked why she mentioned the use of this strategy specifically with other Portuguese players, P4 explained:

> Any wrong moves or something and you become a meme in the community. With other folks […] because I don't know them, I can simply fight back the stupid things they say because I don't want them to roll over me or the women who play the game in general. (Personal Correspondence)

[13] Meaning one-versus-one matches. In online gaming spaces they are associated with online 'beefs', where one person challenges another to settle a dispute regarding their skill at the game.

P4's response denotes a fear of being humiliated by the Portuguese community. I.e. "becoming a meme" means becoming a joke in the community where something someone said or done in the context of an online match or otherwise is repeated jokingly among others. Whereas the anonymity granted by playing with people outside the Portuguese community, gives P4 the courage to stand up for her values and defend herself.

> Blocking, stop interacting, or even [...] simply leaving the game [...] or muting [...] and I know there's a huge debate around that and I understand both sides [...]: if someone is mistreating you, why don't you mute them? But [...] I want to win, I want to contribute, I can't mute someone if it's a team game. (P1)

In the segment above P1 mentions some of the strategies they have had to use at distressing times during OW matches. They also mention the disadvantage some of those strategies put players in. OW, as a team-based game, requires players to communicate. And if revealing one's gender through voice creates animosity in the team, it is a potentially excluding tool.

5. *Ubiquity of online toxicity*

Lastly, the ubiquity of toxic behaviour was a frequent theme to come up. Besides the type of toxicity directed at women-presenting folk discussed in various themes above, it was also discussed in relation to its role within esports teams and other spaces.

"When the cameras are not *on* every player in every league say something that [...] there's no one, no one, who could avoid being that honest. Everyone there says something that could be like, socially cancellable." P6's quote gives some insight into the normalisation and perhaps even encouragement to say inappropriate things in esports spaces. However, the player notes that in the higher echelons of professional play, such as the OWL or the Contenders leagues where players are often filmed and their communications recorded, this behaviour is subdued. This is consistent with literature showing that toxicity is not as rife in higher levels of esports play (Leiman & Herner, 2019; Sacco, 2016; Türkay et al., 2020). Nonetheless, P6 links said behaviour to 'social cancellation', a term relative to cancel culture, "'cancelling' is an expression of agency, a choice to withdraw one's attention from someone or something whose values, (in)action, or speech are so offensive, one no longer wishes to grace them with their presence, time, and money" (D. Clark 2020, p.88). This means P6 believes that toxicity is so ubiquitous that nothing could change that, especially because it is overt. Moreover, he attributes honesty to these "socially cancellable" things that are spoken by professional players, which ignores peer pressure effect and in-group behaviour as well as creating practices and languages that reinforce the exclusionary nature of esports.

"I had people coming into the stream and criticising me saying "eh you're bad at it" or something, and I got a bit conditioned by it" (P11). The quote by P11, currently a team manager, reflects upon his experience as a player who sometimes streamed his gameplay. The negative comments he got were related to his gameplay skill which is also consistent with literature findings that men-presenting streamers get comments about skill rather than appearance (Nakandala et al., 2016). What is revealing here is that P11 admits that his performance got impacted by those comments. In a similar vein, P10 also mentioned this conditioning due to pressure to perform by fans of a team he had been playing for, before becoming a team coach.

Discussion

The findings in this paper reveal that DEI in Portugal is seen as much more than a numbers game. Future DEI in Portugal should not merely focus on increasing the presence of women and marginalized genders in the esports industry but should strive for fundamental change in how all individuals can become professional gamers, embracing acculturation and communities of practice. In Portugal, professional gaming is intricately connected to casual gaming; it is not a separate sphere. Those who become professionals were once casual players who collectively constructed the gaming culture, created the memes, and challenged companies to improve. By nurturing communities of practice and promoting acculturation, the industry can create inclusive spaces where diverse individuals naturally progress from casual to professional gaming without being singled out based on gender expression.

It seems that Portuguese players see games companies as the "all-powerful Other" confirming esports as an "institutionalised game" such as other traditional sports (Summerley, 2020). Just like traditional sports governing bodies establish rules, manage competitions, and promote sports' development, game publishers impose values, narratives, and practices on the players which they have to contend with, and many times resist – perhaps out of spite for the lack of control over those narratives and value-laden practices.

The data shows that DEI initiatives face significant challenges within the Portuguese community due to its small size and limited economic resources.

Even though evidence exists that more equal societies become more wealthy (IMF, 2020), Portugal seems resistant to this. Hofstede's cultural dimensions model (Hofstede Insights, 2024; Minkov & Kaasa, 2022) is useful here to explain this resistance. Hoftede's cultural dimensions model is a framework for explaining cultural differences and their impact on behaviour in various contexts. Portugal's main cultural dimension is uncertainty avoidance which means relying on proven methods and sticking to one's beliefs, leading to intolerance of "unorthodox behaviour and ideas" (Hofstede Insights, 2024). This would explain resistance to change and desire to

maintain traditional and conservative practices inherited by the videogame culture at large and by traditional sports frameworks that negate women's participation.

The Portuguese esports community, though passionate, is relatively small and economically modest. This limits the number of organizations, tournaments, and prize pools available, making it overwhelmingly difficult to allocate resources for DEI initiatives without the certainty this will be valuable.

Therefore, while the Portuguese community's underdog character adds to its charm and resilience, it also poses substantial challenges to the successful implementation of DEI initiatives, requiring tailored strategies to overcome these obstacles.

Most DEI mentioned were resisted rather than championed. Alternative solutions were often proposed or idealised, provided with the caveat that the future should be inclusive of mixed teams. The implications of these are multifaceted: gender exclusive spaces are seen as a safe environment and as an opportunity for media attention, an overall positive for esports as it means more events and thus more opportunities for advertising revenue. On the other hand, the gender divide perpetuates the fallacy of skill difference as justification.

Participants' perspectives focused on how existing DEI feel artificial, imposed, and thus unproductive or even counterproductive. This finding parallels the views of games workers in Canada who seem sceptical of DEI, pointing to loopholes in policies and how big studios can afford to hire the few skilled women available, leaving the many indie studios to seem unwilling to hire them (Perks & Whitson, 2022). Perspectives from those with some power in the community, however, tended to render the diversity issue invisible, to lament the lack of resources (to cement DEI), and to the echo the meritocracy myth (Paul, 2018).

Nepotism emerged in the data as an explanation for two things. 1) A reason why DEI is resisted in Portugal - friends of friends are benefitted rather than being open to new (marginalised) individuals; and 2) a reason why the scene has not evolved, as it is badly managed, and the wrong people are given opportunities. This theme evidences the fallacies of meritocracy as the same participants who previously were defending it, here prove that it is fallible. This finding provides an argument for fair and transparent try outs with performance indicators. The lack of transparency and lack of data availability might actually be causing a false perception of nepotism because the process of selection is just too opaque for the rest of the community.

Self-preservation was mentioned in relation to players identifying as women and how they reacted to negative communication online, mostly gender-based harassment and critique. This theme supported previous research, reverberating the comments of many other players who resort to hiding their gender identity to attempt a fairer appreciation of their skill at the game, rather than the prejudice that often comes with hearing a female voice during an online match - even before seeing one actually play. It also revealed that in such a small community such as the Portuguese

who play OW competitively, even though gender is portrayed as 'invisible', women cannot have a voice of protest, lest they be tagged as an outsider. That is, since the community is so small, women are welcomed as "part of the gang" so long as they do not bring up issues related to their gender and "play by the rules" of the (male) majority.

Relatedly, fatalism was present across many themes, but especially in relation to online harassment or toxicity. This feeling came through testimonies of the lack of openness to change, in relation to the community in general, to the country and its peoples, which linked to scepticism as to where esports in Portugal will go, or whether a scene exists at all.

Limitations and future work

Being part of a larger project that aims to triangulate this data with additional work, this study is necessarily smaller in scale. The details unveiled in its analysis may not be representative of the whole Portuguese esports community.

Further research should aim to find the representativeness of these findings, casting a wider net over the Portuguese esports community. It is essential to understand why it seems most Portuguese esports fans see DEI as unproductive and artificially implemented. This will aid future work to develop esports equitably in the country, and potentially other countries with similar outlooks on DEI.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study reveals significant tensions between the expected DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) initiatives and the experiences of the Portuguese esports community. The imposition of DEI efforts, often seen as top-down and externally driven, clashes with the local community's perceptions and needs. Participants viewed many DEI initiatives as artificial, lacking genuine integration within the cultural and structural realities of Portuguese esports. The small size of the community and limited economic resources further complicate these efforts, with many feeling that DEI is not a pressing concern compared to other industry challenges.

While the global esports industry increasingly prioritises diversity, equity, and inclusion, the Portuguese community remains sceptical, seeing these initiatives as either unproductive or counterproductive. This misalignment between international expectations and local attitudes results in resistance rather than the adoption of DEI goals, highlighting the need for culturally adapted strategies. Participants proposed alternative solutions, such as mixed-gender teams, but maintained concerns about the real value of DEI in their context. Future efforts must focus on bridging this gap,

ensuring that DEI initiatives are not merely enforced but genuinely resonate with and address the specific needs of the community.

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Appendix 1

1. What age are you?
    a. Whats your main occupation right now? Job/studying? Esports?
    b. Whats the gender you identify as? And your pronouns?
    c. In what country do you live? And your nationality?
    d. Are you married/single/living with partner?

[overwatch]

2. What made you start playing overwatch?

    a. Whats your relationship with OW now?

3. What made you want to start playing at competitive level/in teams?
4. Did you ever livestream your OW play? Why/why not?

[esports]

1. What is your role in esports?
    a. How does your role impact your life?
    b. Is it important to keep up with whats happening in the OW esports scene?
        i. Anything specific to Portugal?
    c. What sort of challenges did or do you have in improving and furthering your career?
        i. If you left esports, would you like to go back?
    d. Would you like esports to be your main work?
2. Are you in an esports org? why? Whats the advantage?
    a. How did you start, did you have to apply/try out?
    b. What challenges did you encounter?
    c. How did you feel supported?
3. What importance do role models have?
4. Is esports a viable career?
5. Esports in Portugal?
6. Do you consider gaming equivalent to sports?
7. What do you think about gender segregation in esports?

[diversity]

1. What do you think about EDI in esports?
    a. Eg. Overwatch Calling all heroes tournament

   b. Overwatch diverse characters
   c. [Sky & Guild esports campaign – video elicitation tool]
   d. Do you think these DEI work?
2. What have you seen being done like this (DEI) in Portugal?
3. How diverse are the organisations you are/have been in?

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Changing the Game but Keeping to the Rules

Ambivalences Between Social Activism and Content Creation in the Brazilian Esports Scene

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Changing the Game but Keeping to the Rules

Ambivalences Between Social Activism and Content Creation in the Brazilian Esports Scene

BEATRIZ BLANCO

Abstract

The vulnerabilities faced by social minorities in Brazil, such as women, Black people, and LGBTQ+ people, are also very prevalent in local gaming cultures. Because of this, members of these groups organize collectives through social media to debate strategies and to provide mutual support for their esports initiatives. In the last few years, many of these activist collectives were absorbed by formal esports organizations, with some of their members now leading equality and diversity initiatives for esports in Brazil. Nevertheless, the movement from grassroots activists to PR representatives has contradictions, especially considering how social media platforms mediate the transition between activism and cause marketing. This paper aims to highlight some of these ambivalences, and how they impact the most vulnerable esports workers in Brazil.

Keywords

Esports; feminism; Brazil; activism, gamer culture

Gender inequality in the digital games culture has been an extensively documented and debated issue for at least the last 20 years (Cassel & Jenkins, 2000; Shaw, 2015; Burrill, 2008). Despite being a global phenomenon, it has multiple specificities shaped by different interactions between class, race, and locality (Kafai et al., 2016; Dyer-Witheford & De Peuter, 2009). This essay will address some of these characteristics in the Brazilian video game industry, focusing on feminist activism in the regional esports scene.

The Brazilian video games market boasts impressive numbers, reaching the value of 5.4 million dollars in 2021 (PwC, 2022), and Brazil has become a relevant site for

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hosting big esports competitions, such as the IEM Rio Major in 2022 and the ESL One in 2018. The popularity of live streaming is one of the defining characteristics of Brazil's gaming culture. For instance, one of the biggest streamers in the world with 4.2 million followers on Twitch is Gaulês, a Brazilian man focused on the game *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive.*

Despite the success of many Brazilian gaming content creators, such audiences are not as easily accessible to the women living in the country. Official competitions focused on women and non-binary people are relatively new. Also, none of the many Brazilian female streamers have reached the same metrics as the most popular male influencers, in part because they are not so favored by digital platforms' algorithms (Dallegrave et al., 2021).

Yet, conditions are slightly better nowadays than around ten years ago. Today there are a few inclusive[1] competitions supported by companies such as Riot Games (Ignis Cup[2] and Valorant Game Changers[3]) and an emerging LGBTQIA+ scene composed of young influencers such as trans woman Sabrinoca.[4] These professionals are not as famous as Gaulês, but relevant enough to be hired for marketing purposes for regional events as niche digital influencers whose audiences are mostly composed of women and queer people.

However, it was not gaming companies who started these niche initiatives aimed at more inclusivity and diversity. They were built by multiple organic, and often decentralized grassroots initiatives, organized, attended, and promoted by and for women and queer esports fans. Despite the essential role these activists play and their importance in the ongoing gains in inclusivity in Brazil's esports' scene, many of these enthusiasts remain volunteers. On the other hand, corporate-sponsored initiatives, such as Riot Games' inclusive tournaments have gained a wider audience and more marketing attention.

By analyzing the trajectory of the feminist collective of Sakuras Esports, and taking into consideration how the collective of its early years has been increasingly absorbed by influencer-centered logics guided by digital platforms, I propose the following research question:

[1] I have adopted the term 'inclusive' for teams and tournaments that are exclusively for female and non-binary athletes because this is how they are referred in Brazilian-Portuguese.

[2] https://lol.fandom.com/wiki/Ignis_Cup_2024/Split_1

[3] https://playvalorant.com/pt-br/news/esports/valorant-game-changers/

[4] https://www.twitch.tv/sabrinoca?lang=pt-br

RQ: Does the alliance between feminist grassroots collectives and cause-driven marketing initiatives help to improve conditions for the women working in the Brazilian esports scene?

Theoretical background: being women and LGBTQIA+ in the Brazilian esports culture

The consequences and causes of gender imbalance in esports and the broad video game culture are in many aspects different manifestations of the same problems. Nevertheless, since this paper focuses not only on gender inequality in esports, but on the Brazilian esports scene specifically, esports' inequities are shaped by Brazil's position in the Global South.

Labor conditions in the Brazilian esports scene

Concerning the gender imbalance in esports job positions and salaries, some manifestations of it are more visible than others. While it is easy to verify the deep gender gap in esports through rankings such as 'The Most Watched Twitch Streamers' (Twitch-metrics, 2024), or in the biggest teams' lineups, there are other aspects of vulnerability that are not as easy to quantify.

Brazilian esports workers are not protected by national labor laws, because the country does not recognize the esports industry as a formal labor market. As a result, they are hired under contracts defined only by their employers without any government regulation. In theory, these workers would be able to negotiate their terms and priorities. However, this does not happen due to the scarcity of paid work opportunities, resulting in a significant power unbalance between employers and employees. Léria and Maciel (2022) discuss how this impacts Brazilian professional players, concluding that it makes them more vulnerable to exploitation such as unpaid overtime, lack of guarantees in case of unfair firings and punishments, and no benefits covering health care and financial stability. The scholars also point out that minorities (including but not limited to women) are more vulnerable to these issues since there are fewer job positions available to them.

Grassroots feminist activism in esports

Besides the issues concerning labor rights, Falcão and colleagues (2020) highlight the entanglements between the lack of regulations in the Brazilian esports scene and the neoliberal discourse on work and meritocracy. This discourse—particularly prevalent in the conspiracy theories of extremist right-wingers—frames initiatives pushing for equality and better labor laws in esports (and elsewhere) as manifestations of left-wing activism. Since esports still lacks governance and legal regulation in Brazil, labor relationships are, predictably, highly informal. Macedo and Falcão (2020) analyze how social ties and camaraderie play a central role in the local esports scene as a strategy to deal with its precarious conditions. These practices

are a consistent feature of grassroots activism among Brazilian esports workers; here, grassroots activism is understood as bottom-up strategies in which the practices, guidelines, and goals are driven by community members themselves (Loue et al.,2002).

Digital platforms are central for activist collectives in Brazil, allowing groups to connect with their members, publish their work, and search for sponsors. Hence, grassroots practices are deeply shaped by the logic of these platforms, especially concerning algorithmic curation and economies of visibility. Many members of these groups are at the unsettled intersection between social activist and digital influencer. Brazilian scholar Issaaf Karhawi (2021), in her study of local fashion bloggers' trajectory from niche informal creators to professional digital influencers, observed that the more institutional acknowledgment the bloggers receive through sponsorships, the more distant from their original communities' needs they become. There are parallels between this phenomenon and the disbandment of activist collectives in the Brazilian esports scene, as EDI (Equity, Diversity, Inclusion) initiatives funded by big companies displace grassroots activist practices, and (some) community members become corporate-sponsored digital influencers.

Cause Marketing

The lack of regulated job positions and specific labor laws, makes sponsorships the most viable way of earning an income in the regional scene. So, cause marketing has a central role in the labor dynamics of activist esports workers in Brazil. As defined by Varadarajan and Menon (1988), cause marketing or cause-related marketing is a marketing strategy in which a company's support for a social cause, results in profit-making for that same company. In the esports industry, for instance, a common cause marketing approach is to target some minority group for selling a product, such as selling a team's uniforms showing the Pride Flag or hiring queer digital influencers to promote cosmetic items on a game. The inclusive tournaments, analyzed in this essay, are also examples of cause marketing.

Support and self-organization

Brazilian scholar Gabriela Kurtz (2019) analyzes symbolic violence against women during gameplay by watching live streams in which female streamers competed with and against male players, concluding that gender-based violence occurs not only through verbal and textual interactions but also through the gaming platforms' affordances, a phenomenon named by her as ludic-discursive violence. This sociotechnical arrangement highly impacts women's performance and confidence during gameplay, as observed by Ruvalcaba and colleagues (2018). Because of these multiple levels of vulnerability, Kurtz noticed that many women react via internalized misogyny, replicating their partners' sexist comments. Cullen (2022) observed similar occurrences in her analysis of women who are self-identified feminists in video game culture, and states that to be accepted among male gamers in virtual

communities, many feminist gamers decry more vocal and assertive feminists as 'bad ones' who make the 'real feminists' seem aggressive and unpleasant.

Kurtz and Cullen's separate observations highlight the importance of supportive women's communities, as they lessen peer pressure to conform to male expectations. As observed by Macedo and Falcão (2020) in the Brazilian context, the support provided by community dovetails with a culture of camaraderie and self-organization. The convergence of these factors has resulted in the emergence of collectives formed by minoritized gamers, such as women, LGBTQIA+, and black people. These groups started as informal organizations, often using social media platforms such as WhatsApp or Facebook to connect with other players without being targeted by bullies. Some of these collectives grew into more institutional organizations that ran exclusive tournaments and acted as career advisors for their members. The group analyzed in this paper, Sakuras Esports, is one of the most relevant examples of this practice in Brazil, but there are other collectives still in activity such as Valkyrias, Wakanda Streamers, and Project Fierce.

Methodological approach: The Sakuras Esports case

This analysis relies on the trajectory of Sakuras Esports to discuss the broader conditions of possibility for EDI initiatives in the contemporary Brazilian esports scene. The primary sources for this study is content posted on the collective's social media profiles and articles published by the local press, analyzed through exploratory case study methodology (Yin, 2009). This approach focuses on contemporary events that can be studied through multiple sources, such as documents, interviews, experiments, and field observations. The data is then analyzed according to a suitable theoretical framework, considering the context of the focal case; in this instance, theories on labor, gender, and esports, both globally and in the Brazilian context. The Sakuras Esports organization is not anonymized because all the information presented in this text is public, and the details and events mentioned in this study are fundamental to the analysis.

I also mention, for context, some narrative interviews (Rosenthal, 2018) with women who work as content creators and streamers in the Brazilian gaming industry who participated in my doctoral research on this subject. I interviewed seven professionals, between November of 2023 and August of 2024. All work as gaming streamers in Brazil and all are openly feminist in their live-streams and on their social media profiles. Their ages vary between 20s and mid-30s, they are from multiple ethnicities, and their follower numbers range between 200 and 30,000. They are anonymized for safety reasons, and their interview data was stored offline in a password-protected hard drive, according to the research protocol suggested and approved by the University's Research Ethics Committee.

The interviews were conducted online on Discord using the narrative method proposed by Gabriele Rosenthal (2018). This approach has two main stages: first,

the interviewees were invited to speak freely, without theme or time limitations, about their experiences as feminist women working in the Brazilian gaming industry. After this narrative step, I asked them about three main subjects:

- Which strategies do they deploy to communicate their feminist views to a gaming audience?
- How does their political positioning affect their relationship with sponsors and gaming companies?
- Do they participate in any form of collective organization with other female gamers?

The coding process followed the extended narrative analysis method proposed by Webb and Mallon (2007). This approach combines the grounded theory coding stages (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) with the narrative structure organized by Chatman (1978), preserving the former approach's broad categorization, which is useful for generalization, but also bringing the causal relationships mapped by the latter. So, the narratives were first classified in general concepts, and then organized in a narrative structure in which the main actors were categorized according to their participation and agency in the facts described by the interviewees. Finally, I identified contextual relationships and I classified the narrative sections into thematic categories.

I chose Sakuras Esports due to its relevance to the local market since it was the first group that had planned an inclusive tournament with relevant organizations and companies as commercial partners, and because this trajectory was extensively covered by local niche media outlets, making it easy to track the key events in its history. Furthermore, the rise and dissolution of Sakuras Esports occurred in parallel with the formalization of inclusivity and equality initiatives in the region, and serves as a compelling example of how grassroots activism has been gradually replaced by cause marketing in the Brazilian scene.

Analysis: From Projeto Invocadoras to the companies-sponsored inclusive tournaments

Sakuras Esports' trajectory

Sakuras Esports emerged as a collective in 2018, first named Projeto Sakuras (Sakuras Project, in English). It began as a women-exclusive WhatsApp group formed by people who wanted to find partners for playing *League of Legends* (LoL) without being targeted by sexist cyberbullying. Its founders were two young women, then approximately 20 years old: Juliana 'Moonded' Alonso and Thais 'Misa' Queiroz. In an interview about the motivations for creating the collective (Oliveira, 2019), Moonded stated that Projeto Sakuras' main goals were to organize women-exclusive

competitions, create content focused on women's participation in esports, and publicize female streamers who play LoL.

In 2018 the group became popular in the local esports scene after organizing its first women-only tournaments, quickly noticed by Riot Games. The company then started to support the collective by advertising its events, allowing the group to use the Riot Games brand, and providing money for the tournaments. Sakuras Esports also caught the attention of INTZ, one of the most high-profile LoL teams in the Brazilian competitive scene, which resulted in a partnership for the realization of Projeto Invocadoras competitions in 2019, intending to find female players to join INTZ's main team (Mackus, 2019). The two players chosen by the organization were Mayumi and Yatsu. Mayumi was a member of the INTZ lineup until 2020 when she left the organization and sued it, alleging violation of Brazilian labor law. The details of Mayumi's departure are analyzed in the next section of this paper.

Moreover, in 2019 Projeto Sakura announced a rebrand, changed its name to Sakuras Esports, and started some sub-organizations focused on specific aspects of esports careers, such as PR advisement, special training for streamers, and psychological support for pro players. Its official statement, published on its website, affirmed that the group did not identify itself as a collective anymore, but as an organization, the same word used to describe established teams and companies in the Brazilian esports market (Blanco, 2022). Also, the text stated that, despite not positioning itself as a feminist collective anymore, it was still rooted in feminist values. At this time, the group representatives affirmed having around 100 volunteers working with them, organized according to professional skills and career goals (Camillo, 2021).

In 2021, after being exposed on social media by its members as a toxic working environment, Sakuras Esports announced a hiatus, still in progress. The denouncers reported abusive behavior by the collective's leaders, including transphobic and ableist comments, besides excessive work charges on volunteers. In the official note announcing the hiatus, the group's leadership recognized the issues, apologized, and affirmed that this pause would be used to make the organization better (Blanco, 2022).

The companies that supported Sakuras Esports were not directly related to the collective's dissolution. Still, the lack of remuneration for volunteers played a central role in the disbandment, a consequence of these companies' partnership model, which involves media visibility but no remuneration. Although this volunteer-based minority-led model is common worldwide (Witkowski & Harker, 2024; Taylor & Stout, 2020; Saiz-Alvarez et. Al, 2021), its impact on Brazilian pro players is amplified by the country's more precarious labor market. Despite its huge audiences for esports, Brazil is still on the margins of the global video game industry, having fewer and more disputed job positions. Without remuneration or career prospects, women

abandon these collectives to focus on other, more financially stable professional plans.

Projeto Invocadoras

Sakuras Esports' beginning is a typical example of grassroots activism in the Brazilian video games culture: often, it starts with a group of friends, all or most of them amateurs and fans, organizing meetings for playing together. Then, some people in these meetings join teams with each other, and the group starts to promote tournaments and search for commercial partners. The more attention the collective draws from esports organizations and sponsors, the more it distances itself from the amateur grassroots tactics employed until then, such as organizing informal competitions through social media groups in which the members fully and collectively decide the rules. The commercial partners replace the collective members in defining priorities and strategies for promoting diversity and equality in esports, and the activist practices get closer to cause marketing (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988).

To illustrate this phenomenon, I consider Projeto Invocadoras, a significant initiative and commercial partnership oriented towards women's inclusion in Brazilian esports. The project promoted two tournaments in March and August 2019, exclusively for female athletes. It was organized by Sakuras Esports (then Projeto Sakuras) and supported by the Brazilian esports organization INTZ, which holds a central position in the local professional scene. The competition's main goal was to find women athletes to join INTZ's main LoL team, where they would play side-by-side with male teammates. Projeto Invocadoras' announcement was the final step of an INTZ advertising campaign focused on Women's History Month, named #JogoÉCoisaDeMenina in Portuguese (#GamingIsAGirlThing in English). Two pro players were hired by INTZ after the competition: Mayumi and Yatsu.

According to the INTZ official statements at the time, the two players would be prepared in a special training program while also training with the main team, all male, aiming to join them as soon as possible in the most important competitions, such as CBLoL (*League of Legends* Brazilian National Championship). Nevertheless, in 2020 Mayumi announced she was leaving the team, alleging neglect by INTZ. According to the pro player, her participation in the organization was limited to attending non-competitive events or advertising campaigns, while Yatsu and herself were not training with the main team or being prepped for the most relevant competitions (Mackus, 2020; Oliveira, 2020). Mayumi sued INTZ and gave up on being a pro player, focusing on her work as a streamer and digital influencer. Yatsu stayed on with the team until 2021 and was the first female player to participate in a CBLoL Academy match as part of the INTZ team, in the same year. However, CBLoL Academy is the second division of CBLoL, so the athlete never played a first-division match with the main team. Today, Yatsu is in another organization, MIBR, participating in the inclusive LoL team, which is composed of non-male players.

Thus, she still is competing only in inclusive tournaments and is not part of a mixed main team.

The case of Projeto Invocadoras is illustrative of the co-opting of a grassroots and community-centered initiative for cause marketing purposes. The two tournaments were advertised by INTZ as a first step for the inclusion of women in the professional LoL scene, but it resulted in one woman giving up on the pro player career and another one going back to women and non-binary exclusive competitions. Also, Mayumi's complaints about having her work as an athlete limited to advertisement and PR campaigns show how companies often align with social activism mostly for marketing reasons, not engaging in relevant structural changes that could improve diversity and equality in their professional context. In other aspects of the gaming industry, this phenomenon is described by Shaw (2015), Ruberg (2019), and Harvey and Fisher (2013, 2014). Shaw affirms that many initiatives for more inclusive representation in the gaming industry are limited to big companies recognizing minorities as a niche market and making their products more appealing to them, but still do not bring relevant structural changes. Ruberg presents a similar reflection regarding the queer indie video game developers whose work is often praised as innovative and fundamental for making the gaming industry more diverse and inclusive. On the other hand, these workers are rarely compensated for their contributions to video game culture and often live in critically precarious financial conditions. Harvey and Fisher observed how feminist initiatives are frequently co-opted by post-feminist discourse (2014), which focuses on individual initiatives and self-entrepreneurial tactics instead of collective mobilization. These scholars also highlight how such tactics can serve to reify dominant narratives of the mainstream industry even in feminist spaces (2013).

From team member to digital influencer

Today, there is a rising inclusive competitive scene in Brazil, in which two main tournaments are sponsored and organized by Riot Games. These competitions catalyzed all-female and queer team formation, and also brought visibility to many female journalists and commentators covering them. Nevertheless, the collectives that started the Brazilian gender-inclusive circuit through their grassroots tournaments, such as Sakuras Esports, were never financially compensated by the biggest esports companies that are now controlling the scene. While some former collectives' members and volunteers were able to work in the new inclusive scene, many others were never acknowledged or paid for their hard work in bringing more diversity and equality to the local esports culture, similar to the cases observed by Shaw and Ruberg. Hence, many activists aim to work as digital influencers because it is perceived by them as the only way to have an income, even though it is often low and uncertain. Following this trend, in its last years, Sakuras Esports concentrated most of its activities in the Sakuras Aurora subdivision, which was focused on giving career advice to female streamers. As I analyzed in another article (Blanco, 2022), the collective's discourse around working as a digital influencer was

much more focused on teaching the streamers how to better manage social media platforms' affordances than to mobilize women to engage in collective action in resistance to platform logics, a very post-feminist approach which is common in the gamer culture, as observed by Harvey and Fisher (2014).

Mayumi is an example of how cause marketing compels public personalities allied to social causes to distance themselves from grassroots organizations and focus instead on the companies' demands, managing their careers, and finding sponsors. As soon as INTZ hired her, Mayumi's activism was defined and limited by the organization's needs, neglecting her development as an athlete who could inspire more women to join the competitive LoL scene (Ruotsalainen & Friman, 2018). The strategy adopted by the pro player to keep her career viable was to focus on her work as an influencer instead of going back to feminist collectives such as Sakuras Esports. This movement is the same one described by Karhawi (2021) concerning niche fashion bloggers, as mentioned before.

Zolides (2015) describes how pro players need to commoditize their public personas through strategic identity management to build a personal brand attractive to both esports audiences and sponsors, pointing out that this demand is more challenging for women since they also need to navigate hostile and sexist conditions in esports environments (Darwin et. al, 2021). Without institutional support, female athletes are in a precarious position to sustain both a marketable persona and a competitive gaming performance, which can result in privileging aspects that make their feminine identities perceived as more suitable (Taylor, 2012). Mayumi, for instance, declared in an interview she is no longer interested in being a LoL athlete and prefers to focus her efforts on her career as a fashion influencer (Coutinho, 2020).

During the interviews for my doctoral research, this was framed differently by the women who talked to me. One interviewee declared that she avoids being too assertive about feminism on social media because she is afraid of being cyberbullied, as she knows that esports companies offer little or no support to the victims in those cases. Another one told me that she softens her feminist statements to her audience to not be rejected by them, echoing Cullen's (2022) observations about the perception of 'good' and 'bad' feminists in video game culture.

The same woman, a popular streamer, also said that she used to participate in feminist collectives some years ago when few women were working in the Brazilian gaming industry and their work was not acknowledged by the biggest companies. But now, with more female workers in the scene, she does not feel the need to participate in these spaces anymore, attending only events focused on women organized by gaming companies such as Twitch. Her narrative is interesting when juxtaposed to Macedo and Falcão's (2020) study on camaraderie in the scene because, according to the scholars, camaraderie is deployed as a replacement for more formal organizing. While this acknowledgment is positive for bringing more work opportunities to women, it also results in the demobilization of grassroots

collectives, and the replacement of social activism by cause marketing, maintaining the dominant narratives instead of finding new feminist approaches for the gaming industry (Harvey & Fisher, 2013).

Conclusion

This essay has focused on discussing the complex relationship between feminist grass-roots initiatives, here represented by Sakuras Esports, and cause marketing, questioning whether this kind of alliance helps to improve working conditions for female professionals in the Brazilian esports scene. Since Projeto Invocadoras' first announcement, it was positioned by INTZ as part of a marketing campaign, while Mayumi and Yatsu's experiences as team members show that the organization's priority was having these women in advertising pieces focused on female audiences and not in their lineups. I therefore consider the tournament an example of cause marketing.

Hence, the role played by cause marketing in making the esports labor conditions more equitable for women in Brazil is ambivalent. Thanks to the support of gaming companies through cause marketing, the local scene has grown from amateur tournaments to an official competitive circuit, bringing more working opportunities for women and making it possible for many of them, some interviewed by me, to work exclusively in the esports market.

However, due to the lack of labor regulations in Brazil, which could protect these workers from unfair contracts, and the fact that today these initiatives focus on immediate visibility instead of long-term changes in their power structure and gender balance, feminist collectives have been gradually replaced by individual digital influencers. These professionals need to shape their activism according to the digital platform's logic and demands, maintaining them in a vulnerable position. So, while cause marketing is not itself responsible for the challenges faced by women working in the Brazilian esports industry, cause marketing is arguably not enough to build a better working environment for them. Rather, it is limited to creating opportunities and positions that are still fragile, concerning labor rights and financial stability. For future research, there are still some small grassroots collectives active in Brazil, some of them focused more on labor activism than on visibility through digital platforms. These groups offer compelling opportunities to understand how grassroots activism survives in a very competitive and profit-focused context such as the Brazilian esports industry. Another point for further research is the relationship between company representatives and the activism against labor regulations for esports in Brazil, which has been already documented by Falcão and colleagues (2020).

Limitations

This paper presents a reflection on some aspects of the Brazilian esports scene in regard to EDI initiatives, through a very specific case. It is focused on one specific group and it has the expected limitations concerning a single instance; yet it is possible to draw on Sakuras Esports's case to make some generalizations about equality and diversity politics in the Brazilian esports scene, due to its relevance and pioneering work in this context.

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Infrastructuralized Moderation on a Gaming-Adjacent Platform

The Platformization of a Youth Center

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Infrastructuralized Moderation on a Gaming-Adjacent Platform
The Platformization of a Youth Center

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Abstract

To connect with youth online, a non-profit organization in Finland is organizing a youth center on a server on the gaming-adjacent social platform, Discord. We focus on the infrastructuralized platform and study ethnographically how the labor of moderation and technical competencies that platforms require on the part of the youth workers. We want to better understand the technical conditions by which youth workers have to navigate equity in platformized communities. How does the platform and connected infrastructure determine what forms of communication and interaction are and are not permitted and when and to whom? The results indicate that the employment of opening hours and the presence of youth workers who actively moderate the server during those opening hours, seem to create a safe space for a diversity of youth. The moderation, largely invisible and frictionless, becomes an intricate part of the infrastructuralized platform and the socialization on the platform. This infrastructuralized moderation requires technical, pedagogical and psychological knowledge, competence and resources.

Keywords

Discord; ethnography; platformization; moderation; infrastructure

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Networked social platforms and their communities construct their own, both implicit and explicit, norms and values that they adhere to. When networked communities are moderated, it is usually done by volunteers or understaffed and underpaid labor (Gillespie, 2019), since auto-moderation is not reliable enough and seldom understands the contextual setting well enough to be able to take that into consideration. Therefore, the effect that moderation has is, at best, moderate, and several forms of harassment and bullying are present on most social platforms and in most communities because moderation is both time-consuming and challenging

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(Gillespie, 2019; Jiang, et al., 2019; Kerr & Kelleher, 2015). The norms of technomasculinity (N Taylor & Voorhees, 2018; Witkowski, 2018), especially regarding gaming-adjacent communities, maintain that those who are not young, white, able-bodied, heterosexual and cis-men are continuously excluded from the gaming communities. Creating safe, actively moderated, networked communities for everyone to enjoy is, therefore, challenging and involve similar pitfalls to how including games and gaming in educational contexts do (Rusk & Ståhl, 2024). Many of the technomasculine norms and values that gaming communities implicitly and explicitly bring into the contexts are in stark contrast to educational ideologies and values. Nevertheless, through a critical awareness and an understanding of networked communities and gaming, as well as online youth culture, there may be a way for educators and youth workers to connect with youth that spend much time online. This is the starting point of this article, which investigates a very specific networked community: a Discord server. The server is maintained and organized as an online youth center, and our ethnographic study involves how youth workers navigate equity within the technical conditions of the infrastructuralized platform.

Digitization has changed conditions for participation and social relations. For youth, the digital dualism between being on- or offline is no longer relevant. The spaces that they inhabit are rather on a continuum between on- and offline than in a strict binary (Nelson, et al., 2020). Because of an omnipresent internet connection through mobile devices and/or stationary devices (PCs) that are available to most Western global north youth (which the participants of this study belong to) the socialization that they are involved in happens both on- and offline, not either or. Therefore, digital platforms have become the de facto curators of the social interaction online for these populations. Discord is only one of many so-called platforms that are part of this development. Discord's history, since its launch in 2015, is in being a gaming-adjacent social platform that is still mostly used by players to communicate effortlessly while gaming, as well as in between gaming sessions. Nevertheless, as of today, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, Discord is also actively used by all kinds of different participants for diverse social and community needs. Part of the appeal may be its privacy-minded approach and focus on anonymity, and that it provides a lot of control of how the communities (Discord servers) can be moderated, structured and organized by the administrators of the servers. In other words, server administrators are free to create much of the server's policy with regards to who and what is permissible so long as it does not violate Discord's policies. Administrators have a lot of power with regards to who is included and, also, excluded. They can set the groundwork for what kind of server they are setting up. It can be inclusive and well-mannered, but it can also be set up to, explicitly, be as toxic as Discord's policies allow. Many servers may be accessible only to those that have been invited by a server administrator. The interaction is organized like a less formal Slack, or MS Teams, where Discord connects users through, for example, features such as VoIP (Voice over IP), text chat, emoji/gif responses, file distribution, and live streaming organized into threaded topic channels or user groups. Although Discord's user base has grown since 2015, it is still small compared to the bigger social

platforms out there and the feeds are not algorithm-driven, instead they are chronological feeds divided into different servers and channels. That is, posts are presented to the user in chronological order within the channels (Gillespie, 2019). Discord is also severely under-researched as a social online platform and consists mostly of how the platform could function as an alternative to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Danjou, 2020; Wiles & Simmons, 2022). Additionally, Johnson and Salter (2022) have critically reviewed the implications of using a gaming-adjacent platform in an educational context. Discord's background in gaming culture brought a risk of toxic elements from that culture creeping into the teaching environment. This is exemplified in Johnson and Salter's (2022) study when one of the authors themselves taught a course held on Discord during the pandemic. Connected to unwanted elements creeping into the environment, Jiang, et al. (2019) discuss the problems of auto-moderating and moderating voice channels.

In our study, a non-profit organization in Finland has organized a youth center on Discord to connect with youth online. The server, with six full time youth workers (2–3 of which are online and active on the server each day), functions as a Swedish-speaking online youth center for 13–20-year-olds, where they can find new friends from all over Swedish-speaking Finland. Besides Finnish, Swedish is an official language in Finland and 5.2% of the Finnish population report Swedish as their first language. We have done digital ethnography (Ståhl & Rusk, 2022) on this specific server to better understand the "platformization" of communities, such as the youth center, focusing on how participants shape the platform, as well as how the platform shapes the participation. That is, we want to better understand how the infrastructuralized platform forms and sets the conditions for the youth workers' labor of moderation, as well as demands on their technical competencies. In other words, how do youth workers navigate the technical conditions of the platform as they strive for equity in the platformized community?

Infrastructuralized platforms

The term platform may be understood as having several different meanings and connotations with the most intuitively thought of being an actual platform on which individuals or collectives can stand and possibly use to be elevated from the 'crowd'. Gillespie (2010) makes a strong case for understanding the complexity of the term platform by displaying the discursive uses of the term and dividing them into four categories; (1) computational, (2) architectural, (3) figurative, and (4) political. Lack of space hinders us from delving deeper into these, but for our argumentation we lean on the category that Gillespie calls 'computational'. This is a way for us to understand and analyze platforms in a more technological sense: "an infrastructure that supports the design and use of particular applications" (Gillespie, 2010, p. 349). In this sense, platforms can be viewed as sets of computational rules that determine what forms of social interaction are and are not permitted and when and to whom at which time and in which space. The rise and domination of the internet by platforms

is part of what some call the emergence of a "platform economy" (Srnicek, 2017) and a "platformization" (Nieborg & Poell, 2018) of our (social) lives. The use of Discord as a youth center should be understood against this background. By using theories and perspectives that problematize platform economic tendencies, we want to focus on how the use of said infrastructuralized platforms in many ways creates and shapes the conditions by which participants interact and communicate; that is, how platforms are infrastructures for interaction (Plantin et al., 2018). We mean that this perspective is important to incorporate in studies on online communities in order to contribute with an understanding of the platform as infrastructural to the socialization that happens.

Infrastructures, such as water and electricity, are often both visible and invisible. As long as the infrastructure works as it should and without creating friction between users or between the users and the infrastructure, it remains hidden in plain sight. This leads to the users of the infrastructure to use it without actively registering the usage or impact on their lives. However, as soon as some friction emerges, the infrastructure becomes visible to the users, but from their own perspective (Larkin, 2013; Star, 1999). Plantin et al. (2018, 295) present a compelling case for understanding platforms as infrastructures and vice versa: “Digital technologies have made possible a “platformization” of infrastructure and an “infrastructuralization” of platforms.” If we apply this to a Discord server, then it has achieved infrastructural characteristics as being omnipresent and invisible as long as there is no friction. By focusing our attention on "invisible" data infrastructures, we can analyze how social interaction and the flow of data depend on everyday but crucial material systems (e.g., wireless internet and participants’ devices and peripherals) and how the data flow is controlled by processes and practices directly linked to what is possible in-and-through the platform. That is, what are the technical and infrastructural conditions on the platform with regards to youth workers creating safe and moderated networked spaces? Moderation is an integral part of the social interaction on platforms and it is dependent on the computational rules of the platfrom. Therefore, moderation can also be considered as infrastructure; invisible until there is friction, social or technical. The infrastructuralized platforms appear to create conditions for both inclusion and exclusion (Caetano & Blanco 2022; Rusk & Ståhl, 2024), and their use is contingent on how the platform decides to provide computational tools to be used for moderation. That is, from an infrastructuralized platform perspective, the social interaction and participation is contingent on how and when the platforms provide which moderation tools for communities to employ. These decisions, however, will most probably not be taken from a perspective on equity and moderation, but from a perspective on economic profit (Srnicek, 2017). Social justice movements are, in essence, at the mercy of platforms’ design decisions (Caetano & Blanco, 2022).

Ethnography

To explore the platformization of a youth center, we study how youth workers on an online youth center moderate participation on a gaming-adjacent platform. We use diverse digital ethnographic methods (see e.g. Brown, 2015; Taylor et al, 2013) to inquire into how the infrastructuralized platform determines what forms of communication and interaction are and are not permitted and when and to whom, as well as how participants navigate these conditions. This connects to what norms and values that are embedded in the platform and how they are shaped in-and-through youth workers' labor of moderation.

While this text is informed by infrastructure and platform studies, we wanted to understand this case from the participants' perspectives. Accordingly, the research design is not exploring the Discord server from a bird's eye view; on the contrary, we wanted to engage the participants in the research project and learn how the infrastructuralized platform shapes their participation by taking part in their everyday online activities. In other words, we want to approach the Discord server from a perspective that can highlight what is done but is not actively made visible or made aware in studies with predetermined categories of analysis (Star, 1999). The paper integrates several complementary sources of data to assemble a complex digital ethnography: (1) digital ethnographic field work (observations and field notes) conducted by all three co-authors (August 2022 to September 2023), (2) online semi-structured interviews with five youth workers (June 2023), (3) a two-day seminar with three youth workers (August 2023), and (4) a digital walk-along interview (October 2023) where the youth worker responsible for setting up the Discord server's rules and permissions is asked to guide the researcher through different parts of the server as a way to understand the reasoning behind the rules on the server (Møller & Robards, 2019). Hence, the data is in several ways parallel and overlapping, both temporally and in terms of method. This multifarious approach—in its focus, methods, contexts, and technologies—has yielded a thorough collection of data, together triangulating the explored phenomena.

To be able to understand 'a full cycle' of a work shift as a youth worker we were present from the pre-brief throughout an entire shift to the end of the shift and the debrief. During these briefings they update each other on the happenings during the day and what has happened the day before, as well as what the plan for the day is and how they will organize the work. These briefings are often viewed as important, so that the youth workers who are working that day know what is going on and can prepare themselves for the day. They also worked as perfect situations for us, as researchers, to pose questions about recent events and activities that have taken place while we have not been present and prepare ourselves for the coming field work. Three researchers were involved in the digital ethnographic field work (August 2022 – October 2023) that was done in shifts. Two of the co-authors (Rusk and Ståhl) both visited the server once a month from August 2022–May 2023, although not concurrently. Additionally, one of the co-authors (Nyman) visited the

server twice a month from January–March 2023. All visits were between 3–7 hours long, depending on the opening hours that day. The online interviews (June 2023) were conducted by one researcher (Ståhl) and the digital walk-along (October 2023) by another (Rusk). Through this data, we can gain a better understanding of an online youth community that is still moderated by an adult presence, as well as acquire insight into the social organization of a gaming-adjacent setting (a Discord-server) from a participant's perspective; that is, youth workers' perspective.

Results

The youth workers, themselves, describe the Discord server as a physical youth center in digital form and, although online communities are expected to be open 24/7, they have migrated opening hours from physical into digital form. Outside opening hours, the server is accessible to young people, but they cannot post anything. That is, they can read what has been written and posted in text channels, but they cannot post anything or join any voice channels. These opening hours are an integral part of the labor of moderation and are created by manipulating the parameters that Discord allows servers to modify, providing different server roles to different users with different permissions. The opening hours are, with some minor seasonal exceptions, Monday 14:00–17:00, Tuesday 14:00–17:00, Wednesday 14:00–20:00, Thursday 14:00–20:00 and Friday 14:00–21:00. Friday is usually the most crowded day during the week. In other words, the purpose and idea of a physical youth center in Finland has been re-established in digital form. To continue the analogy, although it does falter in some respects, we can see that the common, directly shared, physical spaces and rooms in a youth center can be re-integrated, to a degree, on an online platform. The different channels can be understood as different rooms with distinct purposes (see Figure 1). The channels consist of either text channels or voice channels. In text channels, users can send messages consisting of text and attach links, files, images and gifs. In voice channels, users can talk to each other in real time through microphones that are either integrated or connected to their devices. Users who are in a voice channel can also share their webcam and/or share their screen with the other users in the channel to, for example, let the other participants watch when playing a game.

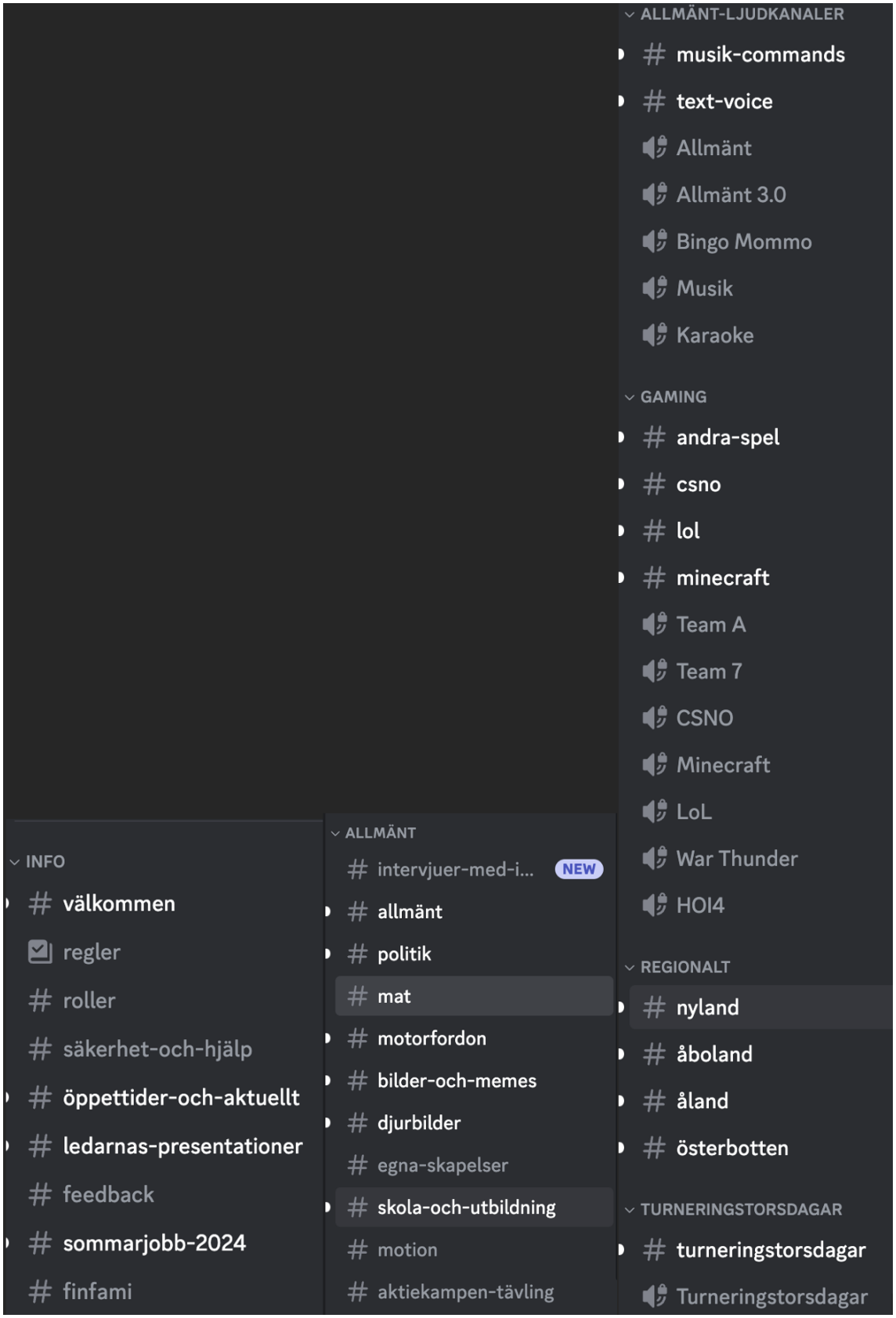

Figure 1. List of channels on the youth center.

Text channels are used sporadically and mostly the interaction is focused on a diverse array of voice channels. The youth workers try to monitor what is going on in all text channels and spread out onto the voice channels so that there is always one adult in each populated voice channel. There are usually 2–3 youth workers online during opening hours. The idea is that young people can join the server and feel that they have agency with regards to the activities on the server, as well as with regards to topics that are discussed. But sometimes youth workers have planned activities. An example is invited guests, such as a teacher streaming and explaining how to bake a chocolate cake or a discussion with an expert on sexual health. But most of the time there is nothing planned and young people can either just hang out and talk in the group, suggest activities or ask for a one-on-one with a youth worker. Young people initiate talking about diverse topics (talking about their day, life, etc.), gaming (e.g. streaming their own single game or playing multiplayer games with friends and/or youth workers) and/or streaming something via their webcam or their screen. Youth workers actively moderate and try to intervene when they determine that the talk (or text, images, gifs, videos) becomes uncomfortable or abusive. Otherwise, youth are permitted to stream and share gaming that is not rated K18 (Act on Audiovisual Programmes, National Audiovisual Institute, Finland) through the tools provided by the infrastructuralized platform. These tools are in active use as youth share their gaming with several users and even simultaneously stream entirely different games, and gameplay, and interact with others watching the streams or play something for themselves while they talk to others in the voice channel.

The infrastructuralized platform determines the forms of communication

The youth center's channels are named with an intention to steer discussions or activities towards what that name entails, like rooms in physical youth centers are named by activity or intended activity. For example, the karaoke voice channel on the server functions as a place where you listen to and sing karaoke and the different channels with game titles function as spaces for meeting in and around specific multiplayer games (see Fig 1). There is also a channel for listening to music by connecting to a music streaming platform. The most popular channel is a voice channel dubbed 'allmänt' (eng. general/common). This channel functions as a common room for a multitude of activities that are not preplanned. This may be why the 'allmänt' channel is the most popular one where most young people stay to talk about whatever is the topic at the time or share a game with others by streaming it to the channel. There are often streams of everything from gaming to painting to snowboarding to young people traveling home from school. These streams may sometimes be parallel, which means that two or more young people stream their gaming or other activities at the same time for the participants of the voice channel to comment on and discuss. Therefore, the channel can feel chaotic from time to time, as noted in Author 1's field notes from (September 2022) "How do they know who they are talking to? Because they were simultaneously talking about two parallel discussions in the same voice chat - bed bugs and cooking stream. It's like sitting in a large living room."

Hence, gaming, talking and socializing is not always a non-problematic combo with regards to how the infrastructuralized platform shapes the interaction and, sometimes, in need of moderation by youth workers by asking them to consider that there are several people overlapping and sometimes actively distribute turns to talk. Additionally, not knowing if someone is simultaneously gaming and discussing may shape the interaction in, for example, this way: Author 1 noted (February 2023) a young person playing Fortnite while in the 'allmänt' voice channel, which can explain why the young person is not consistently engaging in the conversation but: "he doesn't stream it so you don't know what's going on there either. The conversation becomes choppy and a lot of silence." Another example is from the researcher's own perspective noted in Author 3's field notes (January 2023) after he has finished playing two matches of Valorant with some youth:

> The playing went well, I didn't communicate much with the youth as I was trying to learn the game and identify the jargon that existed between them. (...) The young people talked a lot and there was an incredible amount that I didn't understand or join in with.

Pseudonymity and community online

The large online community that entails the youth center brings with it issues that connect to, for a youth worker, to youth's anonymity and to knowing who is who on the server. It also connects to the work of moderation in that, for example, youth workers need to know if a participant who changed their nickname is the same that they previously banned. There is a policy that young people do not have to state their names, just something that they want to be called. However, if young people return, or even during their first day on the server, the real name often comes up eventually. In the interview, one youth worker noted that when a new person joins the server, they "usually ask something like 'hey, how are you, what's your name' and so on, then if they don't want to say their name, they say, you know, can you call me, my name tag or something like that, then you're just 'okay'." (YW1, interview June 2023), highlighting that pseudonymity is an option. However, the networked nature with Discord nicknames that can be changed creates difficulties for new youth workers, or those who only work sporadically, to remember names, nicknames, and knowing who is who. According to one youth worker who is in this position, it leads her towards hanging out more with the young people whose names she knows. Not knowing a young person or knowing who knows who, and how, in some situations can be troublesome for the youth workers. Nevertheless, the server appears to attract an eclectic group of young people from all over Swedish-speaking Finland, according to the youth workers:

> We have very different kinds of people - both those who are more lonely, or have social problems, and those who have a lot of friends and hobbies, like (...) that actually it's a bit difficult to know, why someone actually comes to us, or something like that (YW2, interview June 2023)

However, the youth workers express that because the center is networked and organized on Discord this does determine, in some way, who attends the center. It means that, according to the youth workers, the center is attended by a diversity of young people that are grouped by the fact that they would probably not be the ones attending a physical youth center: "there are those who (...) can talk online a lot, but then when you see them in real life then they sort of (...) don't want to be there where everyone else is" (YW2, interview June 2023). They also add that the youth attending the online youth center seem somewhat comfortable with online environments and have knowledge about networked communities and online sociality. Youth workers wanted the server to not be focused on gaming, but Discord as a gaming-adjacent platform makes it hard and they have to work actively to keep the server from becoming a 'gaming youth center' at the expense of those who want to do other activities on the server. One of the youth workers that founded the server notes that he wants to make sure non-players also get space and so far, he thinks the center has been successful: "our young people are for the most part, even though they may be gamers, they don't come there to only play games." (YW3, interview, June 2023).

Individual devices and internet connections

The main aspect for why the analogy to a physical youth center falters is the fundamental fact that the digital youth center is networked on a digital platform with everything it entails with regards to platforms and data infrastructure. The interaction and community is framed, shaped and controlled by the infrastructuralized platform. Participants do not meet or see each other (they hardly ever stream themselves through a webcam) and they are constrained by both the technical conditions of the platform, the youth center on the platform, the devices youth and youth workers employ to be part of the center, as well as the online and offline communities they are part of. The server currently has approximately 500 members. According to the server's own statistics that they collect from Discord using statbot, there are approximately 20 young people that are active on the server daily, and they have had approximately 80-100 active unique users per month on voice chats. This entails a much larger, more shared, community than a physical youth center. In other words, every participant's online interaction is both individual and shared in a very different way than in a physical youth center. Individual, in that participants encounter different content in-and-through their individual screens, audio devices and microphones on their individual devices. These devices can be very different from participant to participant and the experience of the youth center is wholly different for someone using a tablet with simple earpod headphones or a full-fledged gaming PC with two monitors and hifi audio equipment. At the same time as the interaction is shaped very individually in-and-through their devices, the interaction is also shared with tens, or hundreds, of other users who interact in-and-through their individual devices. Nevertheless, the infrastructuralized platform provides a sense, for participants, that everyone is experiencing the platform and the interaction in the same

way as them. That is, they do not necessarily take into consideration that everyone is experiencing it differently, technically, but, therefore, also socially.

The networked platform as infrastructural to the social interaction on the youth center is especially palpable when there are technical issues and/or if the young person does not have a strong enough internet connection or device to be able to participate on the same level as others. There is a clear difference with regards to if youth have a PC or phone (and/or tablet) and what kind of microphone they have. Sometimes, young people solve their problems with devices by using several devices at the same time (e.g., streaming from PC, but talking through phone because of faulty microphone on PC). For example, as Author 3 noted in his field notes (January 2023) and commented that it was "a smart solution" upon which the young person responded "Yes, but I need two accounts on Discord to be able to do it". The capability of their internet connections and PCs come into play when young people play multiplayer games or stream their playing to the voice channels. There is also the fact that most multiplayer games need to be updated often, which may also be a hindrance to joining a game straight away. For youth workers, the networked setting brings an added responsibility; having a stable connection: "Although in principle you can be wherever and some of our leaders are also working from anywhere, but, I feel (...) responsible and so that you don't want to risk something." (YW2, interview, June 2023). This is also connected to the moderation as infrastructural for the social interaction, because if the youth worker is experiencing a bad connection, they cannot moderate as effectively and actively as when their connection is stable. The responsibility of being there and being present during the opening hours requires a stable and fast enough internet connection, including good enough headphones with a decent microphone. These issues are omnipresent in all kinds of networked interaction and hints at the platform being infrastructural to the socialization, and the young people on the server are quick to point out if something technological is not working for someone. They are especially observant with regards to how well one can hear others and quickly point this out if it is not working optimally. Additionally, the platform lets them mute users, so that they cannot hear them. They cannot mute them for everyone, but for themselves. This may result in them unknowingly overlapping each other in voice chat.

The structures set in place by the youth workers

Next, we will present how the youth workers set up the server and infrastructuralize the moderation in-and-through rules, guidelines, and permissions. The socialization is, in other words, infrastructuralized not only by devices and internet connections, but also by both Discord as a platform, generally, and by the rules and permissions on the specific Discord server that the administrations, the youth workers, have put in place. When young people attempt to join the youth center, they have to accept the rules that can be found on the 'rules' text channel. These rules have been composed by the youth workers and include broad codes of conduct (Respect, No toxicity, No trolling, Don't share prohibited or personal material, No spamming, Listen

to the youth workers, and Ask permission for marketing). The rules and guidelines, although very broad, are still usable for youth workers to point to if they ban or kick a user. No member can say that they have not seen the rules, since everyone who joins the server must accept them. Also, the verification level needed to be able to apply for membership is set to "low". The youth workers have "thought about raising it, but want to keep it easy to join", according to YW3. However, he adds, that if they would organize a center for a more "vulnerable group (e.g. a center for girl gamers), this should be the first thing you should change to the highest." (Interview, October 2023).

New members also need to go to the 'roles' text channel where they need to choose a role for the Discord server's Dynobot that handles the permissions for each role on the server. They only get one choice: 'Ungdom' (eng. Youth). If they do not choose the role and do not have any role, then they cannot do anything on the server, but they can see the channels. In the beginning of the server, there was a problem with youth not having any permissions and they could not even choose a role, so according to YW3 it was a work of trial and error. The role 'Ungdom' (Youth) entails that they have, during opening hours, enough permissions to interact on the server. The reason for choosing a small set of permissions was also a work of trial and error. They did not want to restrain the youth too much, but some functions are just not needed to be able to participate fully in the activities in the youth center. For example, functions like soundboard, text-to-speech and voice messages have been turned off, since they were used to spam the voice channels with sound (or noise). However, youth can still mute each other, so that they do not hear what the other is saying. The opening hours are governed by how and when the permissions are provided and taken away from users with specific server roles. For a long time, they did this manually. That is, a youth worker went into the settings of the server and clicked 'on' for the chosen permissions for the role 'Ungdom'. This could cause uncertainty regarding whether they succeeded in clicking the correct permissions, as noted in Author 1's field notes (December 2022) "YW5 opens, but no one came to 'allmänt' voice so she is unsure if she opened or not. YW2 says 'I know the feeling'." Three people soon joined the voice channel, but the uncertainty was there for a couple of minutes. Now they use a bot that one of the 'regular' youths, together with a youth worker, have coded, so that the opening of the server is easier and faster. The bot's hosting costs approximately 2,50 USD / month and is covered by the non-profit organization. The bot relieves the youth workers from having to click and remember what they had clicked with regards to the permissions when opening and closing the youth center.

The rules and guidelines, as well as permissions, are connected to the moderation on the server, and especially auto-moderation. This is also a possibility in Discord and the youth center makes use of it. According to YW3, both auto-moderation and manual moderation is easy to do with regards to text posts (links, etc.) in text channels. The auto-moderation feature can ban words that the youth workers have

listed. This list is continuously revised and reconsidered; for example, to avoid homophobic rhetoric on the server, the word 'gay' was banned. However, as the youth workers later realized, in their interaction with young people on the server, that this could also limit young people from expressing their sexual identity, the word is no longer banned. This example showcases how moderation is a moment-to-moment labor that is contextual and not always able to be automated on a server like the youth center. Although the function is called 'auto'-moderation, it still entails a lot of manual editorial and design work, testing and sensitivity to what the auto-moderation bans and when and how. This process involves technical knowledge because, apparently, it is not that transparent. The youth workers must go into the log of the Dynobot to see what and who was banned, and according to YW3, it is not always that clear from the log what has happened. Additionally, the word has also been deleted and one cannot see it in its context. The auto-moderation, when detecting a violation, deletes the word, and warns and mutes the user by assigning it the role 'Muted'. This means that they can only read channels and cannot join voice channels. This is what all users can do when the center is closed. The 'Muted' role provides youth workers a chance to react to someone using, for example, offensive language and have a conversation with that user with regards to how they expect them to behave and if the user still wants to participate in the center. During her first visit (fieldnotes from September 2022), Author 2 noted: "YW3 was careful to point out that it is not just any youth leader who should 'unban' the participant, but the person who banned the user in the first place. The reasoning was that that person knows best what happened and what type of action is required for the participant to mark that they regretted their behavior/will make amends." Context is important in the labor of moderation when trying to find the balance between inclusion, a safe space, and consequences for breaking rules and guidelines. The youth workers want to include all youth, however within some given parameters and rules, which are connected to all participating youth respecting each other as human beings and being considerate. The labor of the youth workers, moderation, becomes infrastructuralized to the participants interacting and socializing.

The auto-moderation also works for nicknames, so that users with nicknames that include banned words or phrases are unable to join before changing their nickname. It can also detect when users post Discord server invites to other servers. The youth workers implement a blanket ban on that, since they do not know what the servers are that young people are inviting each other to and they implement a policy that they will not join youths' own Discord servers and that they are not allowed to share their servers on the youth center, since they have not, necessarily, been vetted by any adults. So, the youth center's policy is that they do not endorse these servers. The auto-moderation deletes the invite link and warns the user who posted it. The auto-moderation works well enough on text for the youth workers to employ it. However, images, files, links to external websites, voice, streams and/or videos are a completely different story and need youth workers to be there to be able to know when lines have been crossed or not. This is the reason why the opening hours and an omnipresence of adults who moderate the social interaction is so important for

the server to work as a safe space. For example, as noted in Author 1's field notes (October 2022), one youth starts streaming with the webcam and shows pets, different rooms and the yard. But as he shows the sibling's room it is noted that "YW5 asks if it is OK for the sister to show it to us. YP says that it is and then says that next he will show his room. This spurs lots of questions about him and his life and his home and family." In this specific example the connectedness and the use of a webcam creates a situation that is not possible to moderate with auto-moderation and therefore demands an adult youth worker's presence to be able to solve and deal with.

Discussion

This study, by applying an infrastructure perspective, provides a route to understanding how Discord servers, as infrastructuralized platforms, contain several paradoxes (Larkin, 2013). These connect to which norms and values are embedded in the platform. Discord is connected to the idea of networked social platforms being easy to use for everyone (Gillespie, 2010). However, our investigation clearly shows that there are both technical obstacles and boundaries connected to norms enacted and expected on the server. Not least the fact that stable internet connections and well-functioning devices are a fundamental prerequisite for participation. The social platform is also imagined as providing endless possibilities for social and technological connections and networks, and this is true in some sense (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Plantin et al., 2018). But the platform is also very rigid in that the plasticity, modularity and modifiability of servers only work within specific set parameters that the platform allows for users to manipulate. The youth workers at this specific center use the parameters for moderation in an innovative way to create opening hours for the center, which is something that the networked revolution tried to get away from in its pursuit for 24/7 connection (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Nevertheless, the fact that the youth center is so integrally a part of a social platform creates a situation where the youth workers do not have the final say with regards to how the platform at large is constructed, framed and formed (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Srnicek, 2017). The worst-case scenario would be that Discord could be taken down or make a business or design decision that critically and negatively impacts the youth center and its way of structuring the server for moderation. Not to mention all the games that are played in connection to the youth center and the platforms and game launchers connected to those.

There seems to be a place for a youth center like this that creates a regulated and safe space among all the unregulated spaces on the internet (Caetano & Blanco, 2022; Gillespie, 2019). The labor of the youth workers, the infrastructuralized moderation, is what makes the center what it is. The labor of moderation can itself be seen as a simple task that can be automated, which involves regulating, suspending and giving warnings to users who do not behave according to set rules and principles of the community that have been decided, chosen and designed by humans

(although it is called "auto", but the automation is probably in the sanctioning action itself). But at the youth center, the active and situated part of the moderation work becomes imperative and part of a holistic approach with regards to building relationships and trust between moderator (youth worker) and server participants (youth). It is also imperative to be able to be able to moderate the voice channels (Jiang, et al., 2019). Through the moderation work, the youth leaders can nurture and educate the young people and through informal conversations where they use a moderation perspective as well as a youth leader perspective, help and support young people in their everyday struggles. The technological conditions, especially the innovative use of opening hours, provide for a way to control the interactions and apply active moderation and an adult presence to help create a space where youth can share their life (in different social and technological forms) with safe adults, in a regulated and safe environment. This seems to be the reason for why youth attend the center.

The fact that the center is online and on Discord, a gaming-adjacent platform, impacts who is comfortable using the platform and joining the server. The youth center is not an activity or operation that is as low threshold as one would think. It requires both youth workers and the youth attending the server to have more than basic technological knowledge, competence and resources to be able to effectively participate. Further, video games in general, and competitive multiplayer games in particular, have a history of being seen as an activity primarily for white, presumably heterosexual, competitive cis-men (Rusk & Ståhl, 2024; Witkowski, 2018). By being facilitated on a gaming-adjacent platform, there is a risk that values and norms associated with gaming as a gendered activity influences the youth center (Johnson & Salter, 2022). However, the infrastructuralized nature of moderation through, for example, the employment of opening hours and the presence of youth workers during those opening hours, seem to create a safe space where there is both freedom to discuss various topics and do various activities, as well as active moderation by safe adults to include a diversity of young people and not restrict the center to only encompass those that are part of the online norms, but instead attempt to broaden those norms, at least on the youth center server. In conclusion, we see strong indications that running a youth center online, as a Discord server, is no easy and low threshold feat. In our study, we see that for the center to work, there is a need for an active, and reflective, adult presence, combined with clear guidelines and expectations of civility, mutual respect and consideration for others as human beings behind the screens. This can be summed up in that moderation appears to be infrastructural for the socialization on the center. However, it involves a holistic approach to moderation from modifying parameters to create opening hours to enough adults being present when youth are present. This requires both technical, pedagogical and psychological knowledge, competence and resources, which the youth center that we studied appears to be able to amass.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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Book Review

Ecogames: Playful Perspectives on the Climate Crisis, edited by Laura op de Beke, Joost Raessens, Stefan Werning, and Gerald Farca

LYKKE GUANIO-ULURU

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Book Review

Ecogames: Playful Perspectives on the Climate Crisis, edited by Laura op de Beke, Joost Raessens, Stefan Werning, and Gerald Farca (Amsterdam University Press, 2024)

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Abstract

A review of the voluminous anthology Laura op de Beke, Joost Raessens, Stefan Werning and Gerald Farca (eds.): *Ecogames: Playful Perspectives on the Climate Crisis*. Published by Amsterdam University Press in their Green Media series, 2024. ISBN: 978-9-463-72119-6, 612 pages.

Keywords

Ecocriticism; critical metagaming; videogames; environmental humanities; climate change

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In their editorial to volume 14 of *Eludamos*, Holger Pötzsch and Kristine Jørgensen reflect on the position of games and play relative to multiple ongoing global crises, asking: "Given our current dark times, is there still a future for games and play?" (2023, p. 1). In line with ecocritical thinking, and theoretical work on climate fiction, they go on to emphasise the social, cultural, and political power of narrative in envisioning a way forward:

> If we want to get beyond the current post-political situation … we need narratives bringing forth progressive alternatives that inspire action and therefore matter for the real world—and urgently so. We need concrete livable utopias that can unite people in collective struggles for better worlds not only for humans, but for all living creatures on this planet—both present and future. (Pötzsch & Jørgensen, 2023, p. 2)

Similar themes are foregrounded in the recent 600-page anthology *Ecogames: Playful Perspectives on the Climate Crisis* (2024), edited by Laura op de Beke, Joost Raessens, Stefan Werning, and Gerald Farca, which is also infused with a persistent call to action—or even activism. Divided into four main sections—"Today's Challenges:

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Games for Change", "Future Worlds: New Imaginaries", "The Nonhuman Turn", and "Critical Metagaming Practices"—each part spans seven articles penned by both established and early-career scholars, artists, and game designers. *Ecogames* is a welcome—and theoretically diverse—contribution to ecocriticism, green media, and game studies. Broad in scope, the anthology's 28 chapters between them cover and explore "the themes, politics, and aesthetics of ecogames; the material and discursive contexts in which they operate; as well as the ways in which players experiment with and negotiate environmental issues in play" (p. 9), making it in more ways than one a weighty volume. Obviously, a short review like this one cannot hope to do justice to its many interesting contributions or to the synergy effects produced by their collection. So, I will simply start by encouraging you to treat yourself to the experience of reading it.

From ecocriticism to the environmental humanities

The 60-page introduction does a thorough job of compressing and organizing the vast theoretical landscape that entwines game studies with perspectives from the environmental humanities, the primary field of scholarship in which the editors position the anthology (p. 22). One might expect, then, a more in-depth introduction to the field of the environmental humanities, but all that initially is offered is the somewhat vague remark that the term "delineates a much wider field of scholarship [relative to ecocriticism] including the disciplines of environmental history, ecological philosophy, and anthropology, among others," and the observation that the field is "characterized by a more radically interdisciplinary attitude [again, relative to ecocriticism], one that is in conversation with the natural sciences" (p. 22).

The editors do locate the emergence of ecogame scholarship in "the field of ecocriticism in the 2010s" (p. 18), but make no sustained attempt to trace key ecocritical methods and concerns that have been fruitful to the study of games—except to note how early eco-scholarship by Alanda Chang, Hans-Joachim Backe, and John Parham was indebted to ecocriticism, thus demonstrating that "a lot of ecocritical scholarship can easily be applied to game environments," since games, like other cultural constructions, "draw on styles, tropes, and registers that have long histories in literature and the arts" (p. 19). In a similar vein, they note that research on ecogames has benefitted from scholarship on climate fiction, and that ecogames often draw on "spectacular science-fictional imaginaries" (p. 19), thus implicitly acknowledging their reliance on their literary and artistic forebearers.

Further underscoring how "cross-pollination between ecocriticism and game studies has proven very fruitful" (p. 21) is the lingering ecocritical influence on the study of ecogames evident in chapter contributions such as Soraya Murray's "Postcoloniality, Ecocriticism and Lessons from the Playable Landscape" and Souvik Mukherjee's "No Cyclones in the *Age of Empires*: Empire, Ecology, and Video Games". Mukherjee, oriented in postcolonial ecocriticism, holds that "despite efforts of game companies to

begin to address issues of environmental destruction and climate change, the thinking around this is very limited and lacking provisions to include the diverse and the subaltern" (p. 170). The sentiment is echoed by Jordan Clapper in "What Do We (NDNs) Do with Games?", which stresses how indigenous games can offer "alternatives to Western imaginaries, medial histories, and naturecultures" (p. 465).

The editors' choice of grounding the anthology in the broader field of the environmental humanities is qualified by the argument that, due to the complexity of the climate crises, "ecocriticism has been caught up with by the environmental humanities" (p. 22) and that "there are more dimensions to the climate crises and its playful mediations than ecocriticism can attend to" (p. 21). This is likely true, particularly when more recent ecocritical developments, such as affective ecocriticism (Bladow & Ladino, 2018; von Mossner, 2017), empirical ecocriticism (Schneider-Mayerson et al., 2023), and material ecocriticism (Clark, 2019; Iovino & Oppermann, 2014) are disregarded, which they are here.

These remarks are to some extent a quarrel over labels, since there is considerable overlap between the ideas now travelling under the label of the environmental humanities and the thinking circulating in the entangled and diffuse fields of ecocriticism (Garrard, 2012; Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996), posthumanism (Braidotti, 2013; Hayles, 1999), new materialism (Barrad, 2007; Bennett, 2009), animal studies (Singer, 1975) and critical plant studies (Hall 2011; Kimmerer 2003). While similar, "environmental humanities" has emerged as a new umbrella term for cross-disciplinary efforts across the humanities and social sciences to address our current, global predicament, marked by environmental degradation due to an over-exploitation of natural resources that is triggering species mass extinction and global warming.

The influence of Donna Haraway

It is important to explicitly acknowledge that underpinning the thinking currently furthered under the label of the environmental humanities, is critical work undertaken for several decades by multiple feminist, queer, postcolonial and indigenous thinkers, often with Donna Haraway as a key congealing agent. Her writings in the intersection between gender, technology, politics, and play have contributed to environmental scholarship since the late 1970s. Continuously highlighting—as do Pötzsch and Jørgensen—how narrative is vital to the re-imagining of collective, sustainable futures, Haraway has striven to undo fundamental dichotomies underlying Western thinking, not least through the figure of the cyborg (1991), the rethinking of human-animal relations (2008), and, more recently, through engaging with indigenous traditions, adopting an emphasis on kinship (2016). One of Haraway's strengths has been to steadily put forward productive critical concepts, like "the humusities", "companion species", and *sympoeisis* (which is Greek for "collective creation").

Haraway is the third most frequently cited scholar in *Ecogames*' useful "index of names" (where only Alenda Y. Chang and Benjamin J. Abraham feature more often) and is mentioned in contributions across three parts of the anthology, in "Future Worlds: New Imaginaries," "The Nonhuman Turn," and "Critical Metagaming Practices." Some of her central ideas are conveyed by Raessens in his chapter "*Symbiosis*, or How to Make Kin in the Chthulucene", which borrows parts of its title from Haraway's latest book (2016). Discussing the virtual reality installation *Symbiosis* (Polymorf, 2020), which aims to create a "transformative player community" (p. 391), Rassens argues that its multisensory experience, like art more generally, impacts participants mainly on an affective level, while engagement with the work's paratexts—such as a booklet that accompanies the experience and a symposium where Haraway spoke on interrelationships between her own work and *Symbiosis*—might be necessary for the participants to "cognitively understand the meaning of *Symbiosis* and its behavioral implications" (p. 390).

An emphasis on the interplay between affect and critical frameworks comes to the fore in several of the contributions to the anthology, but often with sparse contextualization. In "Hiding in the Tall grass," where Merlin Sellers reads *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog, 2020) and *Flower* (thatgamecompany, 2009) in light of perspectives from critical plant studies, she quotes Aubrey Anabel's assertion that "video games are affective systems" (p. 365), but without mentioning, for instance, Jenova Chen's pioneering role in broadening the emotional register of games. Equally, when the persuasive and affective dimensions of games are discussed in the introduction, it is without reference to the broader "affective turn" within the humanities and social sciences. Such gaps must be filled by readers, without help from the "index of themes," where "affect" redirects to "change."

Ecogame-history: From analogue to digital games

In their tightly packed introduction, the editors map the complexities of the intersection of the environmental humanities with game studies (itself notoriously theoretically multifarious) by establishing a framework of referential parameters that, between them, manage to signpost, in indexical manner,[1] a number of key concerns currently occupying scholars in the environmental humanities and green game studies—and which are fleshed out in various and interesting ways by the individual contributions to the volume.

[1] Showcasing, perhaps, how the label of *environmental humanities* spans such a vast number of research fields that in-depth discussion, contextualization, and careful discussion of how terms move across disciplines, is hampered. The field might have become a theoretical hyperobject, to borrow Morton's (2014) term.

The editors' first set of parameters name "three recurring perspectives" and overarching methodologies in the study of games (p. 11), namely a focus on games as "texts" or media products (correlating with a methodological emphasis on narrative and aesthetic analysis), a focus on the media industries (spawning analysis of industry documents and conventions), and a focus on the players and their practices (in the form of reception studies or reflections on modes of play). All three areas are covered by (and sometimes within) anthology contributions, with rich possibilities for cross-fertilization between the volume's four sections.

The editors' tripartite game-studies-based schema precedes a brief introductory overview of environmental themes in early analogue games, starting with "one of the oldest games still played in the world today", *Mancala*, a sowing game described as "a kind of farming sim" (p. 13). Further highlighted are traditional hunting games, typically for two players, pitting one as the hunter and the other as prey—a genre that is still alive in analogue children's games like *hide and seek*, or the Norwegian game *hauk og due* ("kestrel and dove"), which may involve multiple players. Such traditional games are usually played outside and were originally often tied to ritual festivals, like spring festivities, the editor's note. They further underline that "the geographic spread of these hunting games points to the ways in which shared experiences with nature are translated into and communicated across generations [not least] through board games" (p. 14).

Discussing how the history of analogue ecogames reflect "changing environmental sensibilities," the editors reflect on how independent tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) tend to experiment with environmental gameplay through the reskinning and hacking of existing games. Such hacking practices are discussed in more depth by Chloé Germaine and Paul Wake in their chapter "Imagining the Future: Game Hacking and Youth Climate Action," which explores, with a contemporary educational emphasis on active youth collaboration, how "board games have a cultural, civic, and educational role to play in confronting and negotiating the problem of the contemporary climate and ecological crisis" (p. 483). Another contribution concerned with games in education is Hans-Joachim Backe's chapter "Between the Lines: Using Differential Game Analysis to Develop Environmental Thinking," where he examines the environmental features of four survivalist games, *Minecraft* (Mojang, 2011), *ARK: Survival Evolved* (Studio Wildcard, 2017), *The Long Dark* (Hinterland Games, 2017) and *Subnautica* (Unknown Worlds Entertainment, 2018), finding that they all share an anthropocentric perspective. Highlighting how cooperative play may modify play behavior and impact player understanding, Backe suggests that small tweaks in game parameters can form the basis for comparative discussions of the environmental aspects of games in educational contexts.

As acknowledged in the introduction, most of the chapters in the anthology concern themselves with videogames. This emphasis may reflect player patterns—or current interests in games scholarship—but is salient in an anthology concerned with sustainability and the climate crisis, not least since several of the chapter contributions

thematise how environmentally sustainable gaming may involve downscaling one's digital equipment or reducing one's energy expenditure, for instance by playing 8-bit games, as discussed by Chang in "Change for Games: On Sustainable Design Patterns of the (Digital) Future." Given that the editors have solicited chapters on specific themes (p. 12), one may wonder why they have not sought further contributions on analogue gaming practices, such as LARPs, especially since they choose to mention the "prominence of environmental titles at Nordic LARP festivals" (p. 18). In a volume dedicated to exploring the interrelationship between games and the environment, comparisons between LARPs, board games and online practices would be of great interest—and Nicolle Lamerichs' chapter on "Sustainable Fandom" takes some steps in this direction.

Political and policy frameworks

A conspicuous absence in the introduction is its lack of reference to the largest international political framework for sustainable policies and collective action, the 17 United Nations (UN) sustainable development goals (SDG), adopted by all UN member states in 2015, as part of the ambitious "2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development". However, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)—which oversees 25 SDG indicators across several SDG goals—is mentioned by Chang (in association with the launching of the 2019 Playing for the Planet or P4TP initiative) and by Sonia Fizek, who discusses "Material Infrastructures of Play: How the Games Industry Reimagines Itself in the Face of Climate Crises". Fizek argues, in line with recent work by Abraham (2022), that making games with green content is not enough:

> If the games industry wants to become truly sustainable, it needs to tackle video game development and production as well as the manufacturing of hardware such as games consoles and computers. And if game studies wants to become truly ecocritical, it needs to engage with video games as material as well as labor and energy-intensive products." (p. 526)

In a close reading of the industry document *Green Games Guide*, Fizek finds that it pays considerable attention to the impact of individual player behaviours, while downplaying the environmental cost of device manufacturing, something that showcases the need for continued critical effort—and the tendency of the industry to shift responsibility onto the player.

Ecocritical dimensions of player agency

In game design, player agency tends to be heralded as a plus, but in green metagaming things are not so simple. In Péter Kristóf Makai's analysis of the climate change

games *Fate of the World: Tipping Point* (Red Redemptions, 2011), *Democracy 4* (Positech Games, 2022), and two *Sims 4* expansions (*Island Living* (Maxis, 2019), and *Eco Lifestyle* (Maxis 2020), Makai observes that they all, whether difficult or less demanding, supercharge the player's agency with respect to climate impact. The tendency of videogames to position the player as a user of resources, in control of the game environment—thus reproducing an anthropocentric environmental attitude—has previously been noted by Chang (2013, p. 9), whose pioneering work still forms the backbone of ecogame studies. In "Green New Worlds? Ecology and Energy in Planetary Colonization Games", Paweł Frelik argues that a player attitude of environmental domination is central also to planetary colonization games. Discussing what he terms the "Anthropocene ideologies" of games like *Aven Colony* (Mothership Entertainment, 2017), *The Planet Crafter* (Miju Games, 2022), and *Factorio* (Wube Software, 2020), he points out how "player's options and activities in these games often closely reflect the trajectory of the last five hundred years of Western history, allowing us to engage in the same processes as the colonial powers and industrial societies between the 1400s and now" (p. 278), thus inviting players to "reimagine colonial conquest" (p. 277), while obscuring how such activities degrade the environment by envisioning new and speculative forms of energy as harmless and benevolent.

In contrast, the term *petrofiction* (coined by Amitav Gosh in 1992) has given rise to a new ecocritical sub-field, namely the study of petrocultures, or the imaginaries surrounding the consumption and cultural dependence on oil (see Buell, 2012; Scott, 2018; Szeman, 2019). In "Dark Play and the Flow Time of Petroculture in Oil-Themed Games", op de Beke deepens the discussion of energy representation in games by drawing on this recent field, demonstrating how games like *Windfall; The Oil Crisis Game* (David Mullich, 1980), *The Oil Blue* (Vertigo Gaming Inc. 2010), and *Oil Mogul* (CHG Games, 2020) do not obscure petroleum infrastructures but rather "wear oil on their sleeve" (p. 295). Linking her discussion of oil imaginaries to the concept of "dark play" (Mortensen et al., 2015), she proposes that in oil games, dark play "is used to indulge in climate nihilism and misanthropy" (p. 298). Drawing on Csíkszentmihályi's well known concept of flow, which she glosses as "the illusory feeling of productivity" (p. 300), she further argues, rather elegantly, that "a world dominated by the aesthetics of oil" tend to politically quell dissent "for the sake of smooth flow," setting up a "cultural register of lubricity" that is reflected in the gameplay of games like *The Blue Oil* (p. 305).

Running out of space long before I run out of reflections spurred by engagement with *Ecogames,* I will round up by highlighting how the anthology contributions, in addition to pondering over game mechanics and aesthetics, foreground various forms of environmentally oriented player response—including dark play, hacking, ecomodding, regenerative play (Farca), "patient gaming" (Scully-Blaker), boredom (Ruffino), sustainable fandom and eco-cosplay (Lamerichs), remediation as green citizenship (Werning), engagement with the "orthogame" (Backe), and "nonideal play" (Murray). While the editors draw inspiration from Gretha Tunberg's *The Climate*

Book (2022), the volume as a whole provides diverse formulations of how games, play, and the making and study of games may contribute to a more sustainable world.

For instance, "a new angle on the transformative potential of games" (p. 182) is offered by Vervoort, Carien Moossdorf, and Kyle A. Thompsen in "Games for Better Futures: The Art and Joy of Making and Unmaking Societies," where they discuss how games may realise institutional change. Defining institutions as "any stable, socially constructed pattern of behavior between people," thus including not just governmental structures but also legal structures, informal conventions, and traditions (pp. 182–183), the authors find that "players enjoy playing with institutions and institutional change—and so games become a potential space for active, engaged learning" (p. 184).

Their explanation for this enjoyment is ported from theories of interaction rituals, where four ingredients are necessary: "physical gathering, barriers to outsiders, a shared mood, and a shared focus of attention," which together foster a sense of group membership. But how does one safeguard from the danger that such rituals may also foster mobs? This is a valid question, when the authors go on to argue that "the value of awareness raising as a change mechanism is disputable," instead calling for "games that stir up the trouble needed for systemic change"—specifically "games focused on tearing down existing structures and systems" (p. 189). However, the dedication to remain within broader, democratic structures is signaled when they cite as examples games that "allow players to organize court cases against powerful fossil fuel actors" (p. 191), as well as approaches that may help shift "the imagination structures of the game industry" (p. 193).

In a related vein, the editors emphasise how change may occur at either a micro- (individual), meso- (community), or macro- (societal) level, and systematise different dimensions of change in a table that—inspired by Tunberg's call for *understanding*, *feelings*, *alternatives*, and *actions*—outlines how changes along the axes of systems thinking competency, motivation, imaginings, and lifestyle choices may result in a "progressive ecological identity" (p. 26). As empirical ecocriticism has found, however, there is reason to caution against a strong belief in the ability of ecogames to help foster, on their own, a "progressive ecological identity," since the effect of any game depends on its interaction with the beliefs and capabilities of individual players. This perspective is borne out in the reception study of the diving game ABZÚ by Gabrielle Trepanier-Jobin, Maeva Charre-Tchang, and Sylvie Largeaud-Ortega, who, in "The Underrealized Ecocritical Potential of ABZÚ", found that only a small fraction of players (56 of 2421 comments) thematised the apparent environmental dimensions of the game:

> Thanks to its procedures, images, and sounds, ABZÚ theoretically holds out potential to conscientize players to the threat posed by the overexploitation of nature to life on Earth and to humanity. However, as our

> reception study indicates, there is no guarantee that this potential will be actualized by a majority of players in an ordinary context of play. (p. 324)

Given that players may not play with a "conscientized" mindset without sufficient prior knowledge, external input, or some form of provocation, the significance of volumes like *Ecogames* can hardly be overstated—and the contributions not mentioned here are all worth their ink.

The future depends on (conscientized) games and play—aided by the powers of reflection.

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Book Review

Everything to Play For: How Videogames are Changing the World by Marijam Did (Verso, 2024)

Emil L. Hammar

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Book Review

Everything to Play For: How Videogames are Changing the World by Marijam Did (Verso, 2024)

EMIL L. HAMMAR

Abstract

A review of Marijam Did: *Everything to Play For: How Videogames are Changing the World*. Published by Verso, 2024. ISBN: 978-1-804-29324-9, 288 pages.

Keywords

Game production; cultural studies; aesthetics; activism; political economy; capitalism; climate change; militarism; propaganda; reception; play

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How do you on one hand enjoy the wonderful, playful experiences that games provide, while on the other hand, know that they are only made possible through the exploitation and immiseration of people across the globe, while also destroying the ecological conditions of human civilization? Marijam Did is a multitalented anarchist-Marxist writer, researcher, game worker, activist, and artist hailing from Lithuania and the UK, and her new book *Everything to Play For*, published by Verso in 2024, grapples with this fundamental contradiction. She writes that play is,

> an activity that in and of itself should not be moralised [but] currently relies on exploitative routes to make those products, almost automatically rendering them tainted. With little to no choice, we are locked into a relationship of passive consumption, entertained in a circus not only while the world burns, but as we – with every push of the button – burn it ourselves. (2024, p. 176)

Her book is structured akin to an increasingly difficult game experience with varying levels with a final boss to overcome. The 'tutorial' gives a short political history of the videogame industry focusing on the larger companies that shaped and moulded the

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activity of play into the commercial industry it is today. Then Did invites us to consider the themes and ideologies that games facilitate as texts, where both reactionary and progressive values are present. The second 'level' of the book complicates how these values are played with by audiences, who can play oppositionally and in ways that game makers did not envision when they designed their game. The third part of the book explores the political potentials of games, not only as texts in comparison to other political artworks and their inherent limitations, but also through the political-economic factors that exclude radical or politically destabilizing play experiences. Did increases the difficulty in the subsequent fourth 'level' of the book, where she highlights the fundamental contradiction of progressive games when they are only made possible through their exploitative and ecologically devastating production. The final 'boss' of the book provides a more positive argument on how a non-destructive games industry might look. While Did clearly follows in the tradition of Marxist analysis and cultural studies, she also couches parts of her book in aesthetics, where she compares and contrasts the political potentials of art with games, thereby skirting between political economy, cultural studies, and contemporary art.

Did's book is particularly beneficial for three types of readerships: readers who are unaware of the dynamics and significance of video games as a cultural site for political struggle; readers who are unfamiliar with games at all, for whom the book provides a wide variety of cases that underscore the cultural and political dynamics across the production and consumption of videogames; and, finally, critical readers who might already be familiar with the dystopic nature of video games, but need to confront the inherent contradiction of contemporary video games as mere 'texts' to analyse and/or as forces for progressive causes. The book makes an ambitious and successful attempt at critically addressing the role of digital games in terms of how they are produced, what values and worldviews they represent, and how they are played for good and bad. The book's objective is a tall order, and it is commendable that Did provides an overview of complex topics while couching them in specific, tangible vignettes through which we more clearly can understand and acknowledge games as being ambivalent because they have both progressive and reactionary potentials. Did combines previously established research on games, capitalism, patriarchy and white supremacy with many different illustrative examples to substantiate her arguments, and sources from general mainstream writings on the issues that she is covering.

Did cites Stuart Hall to underscore the importance of culture as a terrain of political struggle. This is to especially convince progressive readers to take games seriously. She brings up many examples of how important and significant games are as playful objects, but also as an economic and ideological cultural industry. I personally have not encountered much opposition to or negation of the importance of digital games among leftist communities, as they have become normalized 'culture', but with Verso being a publisher aimed at a broad 'leftist' readership who are likely to be unfamiliar with the cultures surrounding videogames and their political significance, this appeal makes sense. Thus, if you do not know much about games, then the

book is a great illustration of the significance and political dynamics within their cultures, where Did goes through a wide variety of the social contradictions and political ambivalences in and around games.

For instance, Did points to how player communities around certain digital games negotiate and potentially subvert the meaning of games. She writes that "such activities by gaming communities exhibit the potential for game spaces to be sites of political expression" (2024, p. 108). This can be both for good and bad, as "games have the potential to enrich the fight for liberation and social justice, and they can equally be co-opted into tools for spreading hatred towards marginalised populations, trolling innocent people and propagating straight-up fascist conspiracies." (2024, p. 128). This means that Did holds a nuanced and critical view of games that acknowledges the flexibility and variety of what people do with and through the playing of games, and avoids falling into the trap of heavily criticized Jane McGonigal's (2011) naivety about how games can change the world for good.

The flurry of aphoristic anecdotes could be criticized for glossing over the specificities and differences between them. We suddenly read about *Pokémon Go* (Niantic, 2016) in the UK and then move quickly towards how it was played in Russia and then we immediately jump over to *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North, 2013) Twitch streams and the artist Brent Watanebe's use of the game for artistic expression all in the span of a couple of pages. To some pedantic readers, these quick jumps might appear lacking in analytical clarity, but the book should not be considered as a dissertation with a singular, laser focus on one case study, but instead as a general overview of the politics inherent in digital games and play with accompanying examples and anecdotes that illustrate their global dynamics of production, distribution, and consumption. In fact, Did's machine-gun-like serving of anecdotes can appear overwhelming and unstructured, but it is precisely this deep familiarity and experience that makes the book go from being not simply a generalist, by-the-numbers critical analysis of games and capitalism, but a convincing dialectic between the specific and the general. Did's aphoristic approach to the many examples provides a rich tapestry that highlights the multifaceted nature of cultures surrounding digital games. These dynamics are precisely the motivation for the argument that cultures in and around games should be taken seriously as objects of analysis and as sites for struggle.

Finally, a key and significant aspect to Did's book is her insistence on and analysis of the ecological impact of games. As we are barrelling towards climate apocalypse with many nations such as the US, Norway and Russia increasing their fossil fuel production, the environmental costs of the production of hardware and software, as well as the energy consumption of playing them, mean that digital games are part of the problem. Indeed, Did points out how even progressive games about climate change contribute to the warming of the planet and potential civilizational collapse. This contradiction is refreshingly highlighted further when Did points out how few game companies, journalists, critics, and academics who cover the cultures around

digital games often ignore the elephant in the room that is games' ecological impact and their role in hastening our demise.

While Did recognizes the political potential of digital games—and their complicity and reproduction of cultural oppression, labor exploitation, and ecological destruction—she also identifies avenues of resistance, such as vulnerabilities in the production chain for sabotage, collective struggles through unionization in the games industry, and decarbonization guides. Moreover, one of the book's biggest strengths, especially in comparison to previous publications on the political economy of games, is that Did lays out her soul to bare in her analyses of games and their production and consumption. Her personal memories and testimonies playing games and how they are intertwined with deep personal connections with family, friends, and comrades make Did's human warmth radiate from the pages. Did manages to convey what would otherwise be cold and drab political-economic analyses of a misanthropic cultural industry as heartfelt social relations and memories in her life. This is a major strength to the book's arguments, as Did's approach underscores how much she cares about games as a cultural activity through which people bond, struggle, or even fight each other over. In this way, the book is both a general analysis of the production, distribution and consumption of games and the complex dynamics between systems of exploitation and oppression versus human agents, as well as a personal and heartfelt vulnerability rarely ever seen in critical publications on games.

All in all, Did's book is a great addition to a summary of the struggles and contestations in and around digital games. It provides a convincing case for why games should be taken seriously (if they aren't already), as they—like any other cultural form—are symptomatic of the exploitation and immiseration within capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy we live and breathe every day. The book could be criticized for being overly broad and generalistic, and it (understandably) does not include the most recently published academic articles from obscure closed access journals. But the book is not a doctoral thesis. Instead, it is an ambitious mapping of the politics of the video game landscape infused with a personal touch that elevates the quality of the reading experience. The book proves that Did possesses great insight and familiarity with both research, popular writings, online discourse, and anecdotes that any potential reader benefits from.

For those who are already more than familiar with the dystopic nature of video games without ever being offered a positive argument, Did's book also provides some rays of hope to work towards. As the world has only dived deeper into darkness with the continued genocide of Palestinians actively supported by most Western countries, the increase in fossil fuel extraction, far-right policies being implemented, and increased military expenditures with the trumpets calling for war blaring, such rays of hope are extremely necessary. After reading critical literature such as Did's, I am left with what Andreas Malm once wrote about climate apocalypse: "all has already been said; now is the time for confrontation" (2018, p. xx). Therefore, perhaps the next logical step in a future book springing from Did's *Everything to Play*

For and the historical tradition it is located within could be—paraphrasing Andreas Malm (2021) once more—on *How to Blow up a Datacenter*.

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Book Review

Videogame Formalism: On Form, Aesthetic Experience and Methodology by Alex Mitchell and Jasper van Vught (Amsterdam University Press, 2023)

Hans-Joachim Backe

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Book Review

Videogame Formalism: On Form, Aesthetic Experience and Methodology by Alex Mitchell and Jasper van Vught (Amsterdam University Press, 2023)

HANS-JOACHIM BACKE

Abstract

A review of Alex Mitchell and Jasper van Vught's *Videogame Formalism. On Form, Aesthetic Experience and Methodology*. Published by Amsterdam University Press, 2023. ISBN: 978-9-048-55423-2, 264 pages.

Keywords

Aesthetics; game analysis; literary theory

Alex Mitchell and Jasper van Vught's *Videogame Formalism: On Form, Aesthetic Experience and Methodology* delivers exactly what the title promises. Published as a part of the Games and Play in Contemporary Society series from Amsterdam University Press, the book is part philosophy of science, part theory development, and part methodological framework. At roughly 250 pages length, there is enough room for exploring all three dimensions, and for demonstrating the necessity to deal with all of them. Formalist approaches to any medium, and especially to digital games, run the risk of appearing detached or solipsistic. Concentrating on the analysis of aesthetic coherence is antithetical to approaches that are player focused or based upon particular ideologies, which opens formalism up to all sorts of critique. As a result, most texts on formalism strive to address this criticism through a combination of arguing for the validity of the approach, demonstrating its theoretical consistency, and exemplifying its applicability—a difficult and uneasy compromise that is often quite apparent in this publication.

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This inevitable challenge notwithstanding, Mitchell and van Vught deliver an important contribution to games research. Their book provides an encapsulation and demonstration of videogame formalism that is rather peerless in its scope and ambition, not the least because of the unusual collaboration it has emerged from. Based on the doctoral dissertation of one author and the career-long research of the other, the book distills two very different perspectives and creates a multifaceted, nuanced engagement with the subject matter. Beyond the customary introduction and conclusion, it is segmented into two initial, shorter chapters—an elaboration on what is meant by the "videogame form" and an overview of aesthetic theory applied to videogames—followed by two longer chapters that develop the methodology and demonstrate the application, respectively. Especially in the second half of the book, numerous screenshots from the analyzed examples support the written argument well, while there are no illustrations or diagrams to serve as visual aids for the theoretical part.

At its core, the book is an application of the Bordwell/Thomson school of neoformalist film analysis to digital games. However, film studies is merely a touchstone in terms of adaptation of fundamental tenets of Russian Formalism, which Mitchell and van Vught engage with at considerable length, digging much deeper than the by-now relatively frequent reference to ostranenie (i.e., alienation or defamiliarization). Thus, they provide a rarely found groundwork for close readings of digital games both in terms of the original theory and its following refinement and application outside its original arena. While similar approaches to close reading of digital games exist (which the book refers to throughout), none of them are this systematically argued for and at the same time exemplified through examples. While this is rather an innovation by degree rather than category, it is a significant contribution to object-focused games research.

The intensive engagement with the reception history of formalism makes the text somewhat demanding. The authors clearly expect their readers to bring a certain level of knowledge about literary and cultural theory. The intended target audience appears to be non-game scholars with prior knowledge of formalism, and game scholars or students who want to learn about formalism. Without either of those foundations, readers will not get much from the text; undergraduates may struggle to keep up and wish for a more systematically didacticized presentation of the analysis framework. Still, the book should appeal to both games researchers with film, literature, or media backgrounds, and researchers from those disciplines with an interest in digital games. Looking at the book on a per-chapter basis (which the publication format with individually indexed and bibliographed chapters implies), especially the method chapter would fit well into a humanistic game analysis curriculum.

For a quantitative or even qualitative social scientist, the book's method would probably not pass muster. That is not meant as a criticism, but rather to emphasize that the method developed here stands decidedly in the tradition of humanistic interpretation and criticism. The authors portray their approach as a heuristic towards a

poetics of games, which they want to differentiate from a hermeneutical approach based on a different research interest. This is a very subtle distinction typical of formalist thought, as is the very elaborate identification and elaboration of the recipient as a theoretical construct. Ultimately, the text does present a hermeneutics, and its method consists chiefly in exemplifying the central concepts that scaffold the critic's engagement with the game artifact. The authors take their most important concept from Kristin Thomson, the dominant. The dominant is the unified expression that results from the aesthetic alignment of elements of a work, and which can be observed when it is successfully realized and creates harmony, but also when it is subverted or underdeveloped and causes tension within the work. The authors further emphasize the need to reflect on the subject position of the player-critic, both in terms of the digital game in its cultural context and with regard to their (non-)adherence to implied player behavior. The relevance and relation of these concepts is argued for and demonstrated in example analyses, which allows the authors to not just argue for, but demonstrate the necessity to keep the methodological framework lightweight and flexible. By applying each concept to two examples analyzed individually by one of the authors, they illustrate that a contextualized formal analysis needs to be tailored to the example and the researcher. It is here, in the freedom and adaptability of a discrete number of analytic steps, that the academic rigor of the method lies. This would surely be even more apparent if the book had at some point distilled the framework into a bulleted list or a diagram to make its structure more obvious and easier to apply.

For an academic text, particularly one with several authors, the book is very readable. Some minor points of friction can be found, albeit mostly in a manner of tone, style, and attitude. Most pronounced is a struggle with pronouns that results from the co-authorship clashing with the method's call for an individual perspective. The authors address this challenge by shifting between first person plural and singular pronouns in the analytical sections. This creates clear distinctions with a clear purpose, but it could have been executed less granularly, thus improving readability without losing much precision.

One thing to note is a certain tendency to overuse references. The text is very well-sourced, and the first half of the book bases the authors' argument on other works almost to a fault. Their own line of reasoning is sometimes buried underneath a wealth of views from different and often contradictory positions. Many sources are not discussed as much as mentioned, and the authors often render harsh judgments or refer somewhat obliquely to very complex arguments made in the literature. There is nothing wrong with either of these practices, yet they are slightly at odds: the copious amount of further reading will be of benefit for readers less familiar with the subject matter and theory, which, however, might get the wrong impression of many sources that are treated very briefly or somewhat reductively. This is not a weakness per se, but is probably a necessary trade-off between the amount of literature and the degree to which the authors could engage with it.

Similarly, the authors are very careful in how they position their contribution to the field, and they characterize their formalist approach as peripheral to an implied "core game studies" discourse center. They characterize their work as interdisciplinary, located at the intersection of game studies, film studies, and literary theory. While this is an honest and meaningful positioning, it might make it somewhat difficult for more novice readers to initially assess how the approach presented here relates to more established analytical approaches that self-identify as originally game-derived—especially as there is limited engagement with other analysis frameworks (e.g., Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2019; Fernandez-Vara, 2019; Mäyrä, 2008). There are some puzzling omissions, given the explicit positioning of the volume, like the literary tradition of close reading digital games (Ensslin, 2023), and very peripheral treatment of other film-studies-influenced game analysis (e.g., Arsenault & Perron, 2008). Some of this is certainly due to the need to compress the much more extensive work the book was based on into the concise format, which also leads to a copious amount of self-citation of both authors.

This is particularly noteworthy because the authors take a very judgmental stance towards other formalist approaches. The introduction positions the book both scholarly and politically, trying to distance it from (especially) practitioners' prescriptive formalism. While this is necessary, the rhetoric of this contextualization strikes me as unnecessarily aggressive. One can disagree with e.g., Lantz and Koster without morally stigmatizing their approach because of perceived parallels to the #Gamergate movement. This combative stance is not just unnecessary, it also evokes an oppositional relationship within game studies and is suffused by value judgments that it otherwise argues against. The introduction seems almost desperate to distance the book from "hardliners" and repeatedly encourages readers to also consider broader perspectives, which strikes me as an unnecessary gesture.

Its small issues notwithstanding, Mitchell and van Vught's book provides an important demonstration of the relevance of formalist analysis in contemporary games research. The difficulty and academic heft of the text make it less useful for undergraduate students (with the potential exception, as noted before, of the method chapter as a standalone analysis guideline). For (post-)graduate students and more advanced scholars, the text will introduce and document a well-established analysis method and its foundational theories, as well as provide a broad overview of relevant sources. In other words, *Videogame Formalism: On Form, Aesthetic Experience and Methodology* very successfully lives up to its premise.

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Book Review

World War Two Simulated: Digital Games and Reconfigurations of the Past by Curtis D. Carbonell (University of Exeter Press, 2023)

Philip Hammond

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Book Review

World War Two Simulated: Digital Games and Reconfigurations of the Past by Curtis D. Carbonell (University of Exeter Press, 2023)

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Abstract

A review of Curtis D. Carbonell's book *World War Two Simulated: Digital Games and Reconfigurations of the Past*. Published by University of Exeter Press, 2023. ISBN: 978-1-804-13060-5, 264 pages.

Keywords

World War Two; videogames; simulation; history

Amid the copious UK news coverage of the 80th anniversary of D-Day in June 2024**,** one story caused particular consternation. A public opinion survey indicated that only 37% of British 18–24-year-olds knew that D-Day occurred during the Second World War (Redfield and Wilton Strategies, 2024). Just 15% knew what D-Day was (as against 21% who thought it referred to the German invasion of France). Across all age groups, the most common answer to the question "Who did the most to defeat Nazi Germany?" was Britain (42%), with the US (12%) in third place after the "Don't Knows" (21%), while the contribution of the Soviet Union ranked a distant fourth (6%, equal to France). This was of course just one opinion poll, but it is worth noting that a survey on the 75th anniversary produced similar results (Rogers de Waal, 2019).

Yet if such indications of shocking ignorance of the history of the Second World War, particularly among younger people, are even partially true, this surely presents something of a puzzle. World War Two is continually celebrated and mythologised in Britain and other allied countries. It features in films, TV dramas and documentaries, museums, books, and in everyday political rhetoric. There are hundreds of thousands of videos with a WWII theme on YouTube, a sizeable number of which

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are about WWII-themed videogames—indeed, Wikipedia's list of WWII-themed games is time-consuming to scroll, let alone to read (Wikipedia, n.d.). We might wonder whether the consumers of all this cultural output are actually learning anything about the Second World War, and if they are, what sort of knowledge is being imparted.

Curtis D. Carbonell advances two theses about these questions, one of which, it seems to me, is in tension with the other. On the one hand, he sees games as highly valuable in promoting historical education; on the other, he sees them as offering "reconfigured" versions of the past which omit much and potentially skew understanding of history in particular ways. The first thesis is the most prominent, but ultimately the weaker of the two. The second is potentially more interesting, but under-developed—largely because the first seems to get in the way.

The main argument of the book hinges on what Carbonell calls the "simgame–simtext dynamic". Playing games that simulate historical settings and events, he contends, may prompt players to search for information from "simtexts": any digital or analogue text that contains relevant material. This dynamic is "the core process under examination" (p. 6). It engenders a "latent form of learning", which happens "often involuntarily" but "sometimes with surprising depth" (p. 6). He suggests that the player's journey towards simtexts may begin from "in-game paratexts" (such as "an official manual published by a developer, game narration or cut-scene descriptions, maybe even a squadron 'history' written by the developers coupled with videos, graphs, statistics, and so on"), which constitute the "first steps a player takes in traveling along an interpretive dynamic towards more demanding simtexts outside this narrow context" (p. 39).

This sounds perfectly reasonable. However, *World War Two Simulated* is a study, not of players, but of games. All its claims about how players are led to engage with and learn about history are speculative. It tells us much about what might potentially happen, but nothing verifiable about what does in fact happen. In a chapter exploring the capacious category of "simtexts", for example, Carbonell emphasises "player agency" and "the importance of player experiences" (p. 37), and concludes by claiming that "this chapter has argued the centrality of simtexts for the simulated experience that is afforded to players through the simgame–simtext dynamic" (p. 73). Yet arguing for the "centrality of simtexts" in principle is quite a different matter from investigating how such texts are actually used in practice. The chapter simply gives "examples from histories, fiction, technical works, and scholarly works … that represent typical types of simtexts a player might encounter" (p. 38). How he knows that his examples are "typical" is not explained, and it is hard to avoid the impression that Carbonell is simply recounting examples with which he is personally familiar. There is, for instance, a discussion of Anthony Doerr's 2014 novel *All the Light We Cannot See*, which was adapted as a Netflix mini-series in 2023. Carbonell concludes this with the thought that such "complex written and screened fiction is probably the genre least penetrated by players", but that "the connection can be made" even

with such "unlikely material" (p. 67). Perhaps this assessment is correct, perhaps not—but the book offers us no way of knowing either way.

It is not only simtexts that are judged to have different levels of complexity—a similar assessment is also made with respect to games and players. Carbonell explains that:

> casual players who may have only a passing interest in WWII play a simple game such as the original [*Call of Duty*] (2003) with its curated history, and never think twice about the past. The more serious player's potential encounter with real history (and likely failure) challenges this. … It may be preposterous to expect a casual player to learn how to parse history, war, and games from playing an FPS. But with more complex forms of simulation, even a casual player may be confronted with the need for a latent form of critique that considers the human condition, even if ever so subtly. (p. 33)

At one end of the scale, we have casual players and simple games, and at the other, serious players and complex games. These categories are never defined explicitly. Instead, they are deployed in terms of their commonsense appeal: a game that is difficult to play is more likely to prompt players to seek out extra-textual resources that will help them to complete it successfully, and the type of player who is willing to undertake such research is also more likely to be someone with a more-than-passing interest in the historical setting of the game. This is all entirely plausible, but the book does not take us much further in this respect. The opening claim that "even if success in the game is the goal, an awareness of the past gradually emerges, one that often leads to traditional forms of study" (p. 1) is never tested, so we have to make do with potentials and possibilities, maybes and might-dos.

These potentialities are elaborated in relation to three types of games—shooters, simulators, and strategies—which get a chapter each. Carbonell introduces his main examples as follows. For shooters, he focuses on *Hell Let Loose* (Expression Games, 2021) and *Post Scriptum* (Offworld Industries, 2018), which are chosen partly because they "distinguish themselves from the many more casual FPSs" by being "two of the most serious", but also because they illustrate how "game-time and game-space are simulated, especially … how players experience these in curated maps" (p. 8). The chapter on simulators focuses on *IL-2 Sturmovik: Great Battles* (1C Game Studios, 2013) and *Digital Combat Simulator* (Eagle Dynamics, 2008), chosen because they reveal the "formidable connection between how a simgame curates the past and an experience in the present" (p. 9). Finally, the chapter on Grand Strategy Games focuses on *Hearts of Iron IV* (Paradox Development Studio, 2016), working through the game's "national focuses as a way to show how curated history emerges as gameplay" (p. 9). As these repeated references to "curation" indicate, the interest of these chapters is not so much how imagined players may be led to studying history via simtexts, but more how the games themselves curate and "reconfigure" the past.

Carbonell is well aware that "myths [are] reinforced in simgames, especially those of national pride for the victors" (pp. 241–242). He argues that game developers typically approach the problem of historical accuracy narrowly, in terms of "degrees of curated authentic simulation" (for instance in the "meticulous simulation of aircraft, weapons, classes, maps, kits, and so on"), rather than striving to achieve accuracy "in a comprehensive manner that would capture the full lived experiences of historical agents" (p. 7). And of course, he is also aware that the history of the Second World War as presented in video games has important pieces missing—most conspicuously, the Holocaust—an "erasure [that] removes horrible truths that should be remembered" (p. 193). This last is an issue that has been addressed by other authors, whose work is discussed here, exploring the "limits to play" (Chapman & Linderoth, 2015) and the problem of "dark play" by those seeking to transgress those boundaries (Salvati, 2020). Carbonell's treatment of these issues is a little ambiguous. On the one hand, he repeatedly draws attention to the "glaring lacunae" in historical games (p. 9), yet on the other, he sometimes seems close to suggesting that the absences may have the positive effect in pushing players to find out more via engagement with simtexts. "When players encounter mysterious lacunae in game", he tells us, "they find themselves confronted with reconfiguring the past through an interpretive process in which they have to recognize that war causes mass destruction" (p. 60). Even in the case of the Holocaust, he maintains, players may be driven to read history books in order to "solve the mystery of such a glaring in-game lacuna" (p. 210).

This is the sense in which his argument about the educational potential of historical games tends to limit his critical assessment of such games. Carbonell announces early on that he is not interested in pursuing "a critique of 'milsims' or how the military industrial complex and entertainment have a long history", and instead wants to "shift the focus to individual players and how he or she experiences gaming aspects related to a historical understanding of WWII" (p. 7). There is nothing wrong with such a choice, of course. The problem, though, apart from the fact that there is no empirical investigation of these player experiences, is that the attempt to accentuate the positive educational affordances of games tends to close down critique. Thus, when he considers what Holger Pötzsch (2017) calls the "selective realism" of war games, Carbonell notes that "degrees of curated authenticity add to a particular gameist experience, rather than a direct correlation with history", but immediately counters that nevertheless, "aspects of lived history often emerge inadvertently through the simgame–simtext dynamic" (p. 7). Similarly, he raises some interesting issues regarding myth-making about the Second World War, noting that the "touchstone" for videogame depictions of D-Day is dramatised screen representations of the event—particularly *Saving Private Ryan* and *Band of Brothers* (pp. 85–86)—and observes that in this process of remediation history is reconfigured in a way that "often tells us as much about the present as about the past" (p. 83). Regrettably, this promising line of enquiry is quickly dropped in favour of an extended discussion of how game maps might work as "digital memorials" (p. 89).

In the end, Carbonell concludes that in-game "absences may point players to simtexts full of misinformation about the war as much as they might provide some form of consciousness-raising awareness of the past" (p. 244), which rather begs the question of why the emphasis throughout has been on historical education and learning. He is drawn to this conclusion mostly by the phenomenon of "dark play", which leads him to acknowledge that while the simgame–simtext dynamic might promote "involuntary education" and "a type of inadvertent consciousness-raising" prompting players to "become better aware of the mistakes of the past that led to war", what might "just as easily occur is an encounter with simtexts that … provide misinformation or … indoctrinate through propaganda that runs counter to liberal democracy" (p. 209). So does the simgame–simtext dynamic "create a more aware liberal subject who is better prepared to counter the sort of horrible totalitarianism seen in the war" (p. 209), or does it promote a form of "repugnant agency" (p. 88) and encourage players to "fetishize human suffering [and] embrace the graphic violence" of Nazism (p. 196)? Both possibilities seem equally (im)plausible. *World War Two Simulated* is successful in raising such questions, but less so in answering them.

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, trans theory has conceptualised gender identity and bodily autonomy, advocating for self-exploration and political affirmation (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010; Stryker, 2017; Stryker & Whittle, 2006). This focus has resonated with game studies, which have examined video games as a medium for trans representation (Ruberg, 2020; Ruberg, 2022; Thach, 2021). This commentary explores the emergence of transgender identities in video games, outlining the state of the art of transgender representations and the experiences of trans players and designers. It highlights the significance of procedural elements such as character customisation, embodiment, and player-avatar relationship for transgender players. In doing so, it also suggests potential tensions and contradictions inherent in transgender emergence, arguing that while video games can provide positive and beneficial spaces for exploring gender identity, they may simultaneously perpetuate transphobia and exploit transgender experiences.

Keywords

Transgender; independent video games; character customisation; gender dysphoria; player-avatar relationship; embodiment; queerness

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The past few decades have seen the emergence of trans theory as a discipline, which has gradually moved from the strictly medical field to history, aesthetics, narratives and even politics of self-perception and affirmation (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010; Stryker, 2017; Stryker & Whittle, 2006). In doing so, transgender[1] people have started

[1] According to the American Psychological Association (APA), 'transgender' serves as an umbrella term for individuals whose gender identity or behavior differs from the sex assigned

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to explore their political and social presence and to address the change they both perceive and wish for. Aside from the growth of the transgender discourse in academia and even in the public eye, this reflection has been mirrored in the media context, both in terms of quantifiable representations in films and TV and in terms of their critical reception (Billard, 2016; Cavalcante, 2017). From the 2010s onwards there has been a growing interest in LGBTQ+ themes also in the video game production and in the gaming community (Shaw, 2009; Shaw & Friesem, 2016).

Transgender emergence in video games

Different video games have showcased various approaches to portraying transgender presence: character creation options enabling a mismatch in secondary sex characteristics, scripted transgender characters, and representations of trans experiences through a critical use of the medium. This development underscores potential intersections between video games and transgender perspectives, particularly in the procedural dimensions of embodiment and player-avatar identification.

Character customisation options

In recent years, open-world video games have started to explore the possibilities offered by character customisation options in relation to transgender representation. Under the term 'character customisation' are intended a series of design practices that allow players to customise their avatar, personalising their name, gender, aesthetics, and/or statistics and skills. Games like *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt RED, 2020), *Baldur's Gate 3* (Larian Studios, 2023), *The Sims 4* (Maxis, 2014, 2022 update), have provided players with the possibility of customising in detail one's own appearance, including secondary sex characteristics, gender identity indicators, hairstyle, makeup, clothing etc, even introducing the option of customising pronouns. This has sparked the debate both in the gaming and in the transgender community (Whitehouse et al., 2023), with the various strategies receiving mixed reactions from transgender players (Lacey, 2023; Liang et al., 2023).

Customisation practices play a crucial role in shaping the relationship between players and their avatar, which serve as the game unit that allows players to perform in-game actions (Banks & Bowman; Klevjer, 2022). Klevjer (2022) defines the avatar as a player's proxy—a tool that allow players to assume a fictional body and a fictional agency, offering new possibilities within the virtual world. Through the avatar, players are embodied in the game, and can interact with and inhabit the fictional dimension, which responds to their inputs (Klevjer, 2022). Waggoner (2009) has noted that

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at birth, including those who may identify as men, women, neither, or both (APA, 2011). In this commentary, the word 'cisgender' will be used to indicate someone who identifies with their sex assigned at birth.

the relationship between player and avatar is further strengthened when players engage in avatar creation and customisation, as this process fosters a deeper sense of connection and identification. Recent research, particularly by early career scholars, has begun to explore how this close player-avatar relationship affects transgender individuals (Baldwin, 2018; McKenna, 2024; Morgan et al., 2017; Whitehouse et al., 2023). These inquiries will be addressed later in this commentary.

Transgender scripted characters

Another way in which transgender presence has emerged in video games is through scripted characters in narrative based games. Thach (2021) proposes a taxonomy of transgender characters, identifying common traits and associated tropes. The analysis highlights four main trends: dysphoria (distress experienced by transgender individuals when their bodies do not align with their gender), depictions of mentally ill killers, trans shock (the revelation of unexpected gender markers), and ambiguity (Thach, 2021, p. 20). This study is based on characters entries registered as transgender in the LGBTQ Video Game Archive, an ongoing project cataloguing LGBTQ+ characters and themes in video games. Thach identifies 63 transgender and gender-ambiguous characters appearing between the 1980s and 2010s, acknowledging that transgender representations have become increasingly detailed over time. However, Thach also notes a recurring association of transgender characters with mental illness and trauma, confining trans identities to reductive tropes.

Kosciesza (2023) brings forward such discourse, analysing the role of transgender non-playable characters (NPCs) in *Watch Dogs 2* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2016), *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare, 2014), and *The Last of Us: Part Two* (Naughty Dog, 2022). Drawing inspiration from the idea of the idea of the 'magical Negro' (stereotypical black helper in fiction), Kosciesza proposes the use of the term 'magical transness' to describe the "unique role of transgender supporting characters whose victimisation provides the opportunity for cisgender protagonists to act heroically" (p. 190, 2023). While the introduction of more diverse characters is commendable, such depictions risks flattening transgender narratives, in turn promoting stereotypes that might harm transgender communities. Kosciesza points out that it is important to reflect on the narrative possibilities that might be opened by trans NPCs, that at the time of the analysis are rather limited.

To summarise, at the time of writing transgender characters' narratives are rather scarce. While gender ambiguous characters or even races are not absent in video games, explicit transgender characters not only are still rare, but are rarely portrayed as integral part of video games narratives. Moreover, their introduction is often combined with tropes that flatten transgender identities and often come from heteronormative assumptions, as the overrepresentation of traumatic experiences. Such assumptions risk perpetuating a superficial engagement with transgender experiences and exploiting their narratives in favour of a facade of diversity that ultimately lacks depth and authenticity.

Transgender game design

Transgender emergence in video games further explored through the concept of transgender game design (Ruberg, 2022; Gass, 2024), following the existing scholarship on queer games design and its meaning (Chang, 2017; Ruberg, 2019a; Ruberg & Shaw, 2017). Chang (2017) describes 'queergaming', as an activity that challenges technonormative ideologies by incorporating glitches, inefficiency, unconventional rules, and alternative goals to embrace the experience of failure. Similarly, Ruberg (2019a) explores the potential to view the video game medium itself as queer, highlighting its capacity to be navigated in a subversive and non-normative manner. In 2022, Ruberg has expanded their reflection on queer games, suggesting a possibility for trans games, and emphasising transgender embodiment as a form of meaning-making (2022).

Other authors have focused on specific case studies that embody what transgender games design mean. McPhail (2024) analyses the video game *Celeste* (Maddy Makes Games, 2018), as a representation of the experience of becoming and surpassing adversities, which can be interpreted as an allegory of being transgender and transitioning. In this, McPhail highlights the reception of *Celeste*, showing that players had discussed the possibility of Madeline as a transgender woman long before it was confirmed by the game designer. Therefore, *Celeste* conveys the experience of being trans beyond character representation.

Gass (2024) has observed the role of glitches in games by transgender and queer independent designer. A glitch is an interaction with a piece of technology that is perceived as unexpected and that is not always possible to explain (Gass, p. 7, 2024). Gass shows that the glitch might be "a desired state … necessary for self-expression, creativity, … and survival" (p. 19). It renders visible the violence and unexpectancy with which events happen in transgender life, which scripted narratives "struggle to communicate" (p. 19).

The discourse around transgender procedural design appears therefore complex. Examining trans games in contrast to linear and techno-normative frameworks surely helps mapping the ways in which transgender designers and players interact with the medium. However, this approach carries potential risks. Defining terms like 'trans' or 'queer' in broad, abstract ways allows for expansive exploration, but it may also overlook the lived experiences of transgender individuals, rendering these concepts vague or inaccessible. Further research is arguably required to explore the definition of trans and queer games, and most importantly how these can contribute to understanding how transgender players and designers engage with game spaces.

To summarise, recent years have seen diverse approaches to transgender representation in video games and game studies, including character customisation, scripted characters, and trans-centred game design and mechanics. However, creative and

academic practices concerning transgender identities are still evolving, with hopefully more and more diverse representations and discussions expected in the near future.

The following sections outline the current research on transgender players and designers, focusing particularly on character customisation options and avatar identification and on the potential of game design for self-expression.

Transgender players

Scholarship on transgender players is rapidly growing, highlighting how medium specific aspects of video games, as embodiment or player-avatar relationship, impact transgender individuals in game worlds and often allow for gender identity exploration, easing feelings of discomfort and dysphoria.

Griffith et al. have observed how playing among individuals with gender dysphoria has positive psychological effects (2016). Furthermore, Morgan et al (2017) have attested the positive impact of gaming in improving the mental health of transgender youth. Baldwin (2018) has shown how transmasculine players create an idealised version of themselves and employ the video game environment to explore their gender identity.

Drawing from these studies, Whitehouse et al. (2023) have analysed the experience of transgender players with avatars and gender alignment. The study focuses on 40 transgender participants and asks in which way they experience their gender identity within the game This analysis goes beyond character creation, demonstrating how transgender players not only identify with their avatar in the customisation process, but also during the gameplay, particularly in the interactions with other players or NPCs. The authors note that transgender players find comfort in the anonymity provided by video games, where both NPCs and other players are unable to question their gender identity, or to 'deadname' them-that is to say, using their previous name. As the authors note, "gaming worlds were viewed as a place where they [transgender players] could express and experience their gender identity in a safe manner" (p. 9). For transgender players, gaming thus becomes a positive experience of recognition. However, Whitehouse et al. (2023) observe that players identifying as male or female benefit more from character customisation, as non-binary options are often harder to find.

McKenna et al (2024) investigate further how transgender players employ avatar creation, aligning their findings to Whitehouse et al. (2023). The authors find that "self-representation in video games through the customisation of avatars allowed them [trans players] to present as their affirmed gender without being questioned by others" (p. 39). For some players the aesthetic customisation of the avatar corresponds to an ideal version of themselves, while in other cases it comprises a goal

for medical and physical transition. The authors notice that: "the experience of avatar creation allows the individual to position themselves socially within a virtual setting in a way that is most authentic to the self and affords players the opportunity to explore their own gender and interact with a virtual world as that affirmed gender" (p. 42). In so doing, video games actively contribute to the formation of gender identity, to its exploration both in terms of aesthetics and intersubjective relationships, and ultimately to its consolidation.

Other studies have reported that players' engagement with transgender representation might result in negative experiences. Liang et al. (2023) have investigated on the experience of dysphoria of transgender players when confronted with transgender representations in games. As possibly expected, players experience feelings of dysphoria when exposed to stereotypical or non-informed representations. This brings the authors to a call for action "in avoiding remediating gender dysphoria triggers in contexts where they would amount to trans-exclusionary content" (p. 388:25).

Studies on the relationship between character customisation options and avatar identification among transgender players suggest significant differences compared to cisgender players. While both groups develop meaningful connections to their avatars, the experience often holds deeper significance for transgender individuals. Video games allow transgender players to embody their ideal self, or experiment with their identities, a process that is vital for gender exploration and affirmation. Moreover, video games offer the possibility of being perceived as their gender within the game world—an experience that is often denied to trans players in their physical lives.

Transgender autobiographies and labour exploitation

Another interesting aspect of the relationship between transgender emergence and video games is the work of independent transgender game designers, often focused on their own experience with transitioning. Even in this case, procedural developments have greatly impacted creative practices. At the end of the 2000s, the emergence of software as Adobe Flash, Twine, Ren'Py, and the growth of independent game design allowed transgender designers to explore their experience of transition through the medium of video game. Among those, one of the most important examples is the one provided by Anna Anthropy, in her video game *Dys4ia* (2012). *Dys4ia* explores Anthropy's medical transition, sharing vulnerable and intimate challenges, as bodily changes with hormone replacement therapy, and the difficulty in social relationships while changing. Other examples are the works of Maddy Thorson, npckc, Taylor McCue. All these authors have put in pixels the experience of transitioning and existing as a transgender person. This suggests that video games play a crucial role as political terrain for transgender advocacy and affirmation.

However, such affirmation often comes with a cost. Ruberg (2019b) observes how, while transgender and queer designers had the merit to introduce transgender narratives in the medium of video games, they gain very little benefit out of it. The author discusses trans designers' work as precarious, often complex and comprised of both physical and emotional labour, and most importantly exploited. Drawing from interviews with queer designers, Ruberg argues that while queer indie games inspire mainstream studios, the profits generated by these influences rarely benefit the queer creators themselves. The article challenges readers to recognise the industry's systemic exploitation and calls for greater acknowledgment and support for the labour behind queer indie games. Further research is essential to explore how transgender representations in mainstream video games are shaped by the lived experiences of transgender designers, and how the industry can recognise their contribution and support their voices.

Discourses, tensions, contradictions

This commentary has provided an overview of the state of the art of transgender emergence in video games, and of the relationship between transgender players, designers, and the video game medium. All the above leads to the suggestion that video games already comprise a safe space for the expression of transgender perspectives and identities and could become a crucial political terrain for trans affirmation. Yet, transgender representation emerges within a hegemonically cisgendered industry that largely stifles or merely appropriates and commodifies this emancipatory potential (Ruberg, 2019b). Trans-emancipatory narratives are opposed to the ones of mainstream video games, where trans characters have often been portrayed as oddities, subjected to stereotyping, or consigned to the role of supporting characters (Kosciesza, 2023; Thach, 2021).

Trans emergence in video games suggests therefore tensions and contradictions between distinct but intersecting areas of production, which raise questions about transgender ownership and affirmation in the mainstream and independent sector. This commentary suggests three main contradictions that emerge from this analysis:

1. It is widely accepted that video games provide spaces for self-exploration and recognition to transgender players (Baldwin, 2018; McKenna et al., 2024; Whitehouse et al., 2023). However, this suggests that players have a positive experience of recognition only as long as they *keep it quiet*. The positive euphoria of being unquestionably oneself comes with a cost: hiding one's trans identity to avoid scrutiny or harassment. This concealment erases visibility, possibly leading other players to assume transgender players are instead cisgender.

2. It is relevant to note that the close relationship between transgender players and avatars predates the introduction of explicitly transgender customisation options (as in *Cyberpunk 2077*). This raises the question of how customising secondary sex characteristics is relevant for transgender players, and why such amount of detail was introduced in the first place. Most importantly, as Liang et al. (2023) caution, the emphasis on sexual attributes risks objectifying transgender individuals, provoking feelings of dysphoria, and ultimately excluding precisely transgender players.

3. While game design offers a powerful medium for transgender creators to express themselves, it also poses risks of labour exploitation (Ruberg, 2019b) and identity tourism (Liang, 2023). These issues can undermine the contributions of transgender designers, turning what should be empowering creative spaces into environments of marginalization.

Therefore, it emerges that medium specific aspects of games can serve as a powerful tool for inclusion and self-expression, but also carry risks of exploitation and misrepresentation, potentially harming the transgender community, already under significant scrutiny in the current sociopolitical climate (Butler, 2024).

The tension between empowerment and marginalisation within both game design and player experiences underscores the need for continued critical engagement with the medium both in academia and in the gaming industry, striving towards a space of trans affirmation rather than one of harm and erasure.

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