

BEYOND PLAY

Aesthetics, Technology, and Design in Videogames as Socio-Cultural Practices

Edited by Alessandra Micalizzi, Fabrizio Festa, Claudio Pomo





G|A|M|E is an international, peer-reviewed, free access games studies journal. G|A|M|E publishes one issue per year

A PROJECT BY



Associazione Culturale LUDICA
Reggio Calabria IT & London UK
HQ: Via Vittorio Veneto 33
89123 Reggio Calabria, IT
Offices: 64 Colley House
London UB8 2NZ, UK

DISTRIBUTION

All GAME issues are available for viewing and download at www.gamejournal.it

ISSN 2280-7705

ETHICAL STATEMENT

<https://www.gamejournal.it/about>

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ISSUE 13, 2025
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LAYOUT & EDITION

Design Manager: Iliaria Mariani
Managing Editor: Marco Benoît Carbone & Federico Giordano

COVER ART

GAME Journal – Issue 13.

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editors@gamejournal.it
www.gamejournal.it

The special issue has been proposed within the framework of the P+ARTS project, funded by the PNRR (National Recovery and Resilience Plan) – Mission 4 – Component 1: "Enhancement of educational services: from nursery schools to universities" – Investment 3.4: "Advanced university teaching and skills", Sub-investment T5: "Strategic partnerships/initiatives to innovate the international dimension of the AFAM system (Higher Education in Art, Music and Dance)", funded by the European Union – NextGenerationEU; project code INTAFAM00037, CUP G43C24000640006

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INTERACTIVE DIGITAL NARRATIVES. COUNTER-HEGEMONIC NARRATIVES AND EXPRESSION OF IDENTITY

Edited by F. Festa, A. Micalizzi, C. Pomo, M. Spada

ISSUE 13, 2025: VOLUME 1 – PEER-REVIEWED JOURNAL

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Videogames World

Beyond art, culture and design. An Introduction

1. BEYOND PLAY: REFRAMING THE ONTOLOGICAL STATUS OF VIDEOGAMES

This special issue originates from a shared theoretical and epistemological concern: the need to reassess the ontological status of videogames within contemporary media and cultural studies. While game studies has long consolidated itself as a distinct field—drawing from narratology, ludology, platform studies, cultural studies, and design research—the rapid transformation of digital ecologies urges us to interrogate once again what videogames *are*, what they *do*, and what kinds of realities they enact.

Historically, videogames have been framed alternately as technological artifacts, interactive media, entertainment commodities, or aesthetic objects. Foundational contributions such as Aarseth's (1997) notion of the cybertext emphasized their ergodic dimension, foregrounding the non-trivial effort required of players. Bogost (2007; 2011) articulated their expressive and procedural capacities, positioning games as systems capable of modeling and persuading through rule-based representation. Calleja (2011) further expanded the discourse by moving from "immersion" to "incorporation," highlighting the embodied, situated entanglement of players and game worlds. Yet, despite these advances, a residual instrumental understanding often persists: videogames are still frequently reduced to tools—of entertainment, of education, of simulation, of gamification.

The premise of *Beyond Play* is that such reduction is no longer analytically sufficient.

Rather than approaching videogames as mere interactive media, this issue proposes to consider them as expressive languages, creative and artistic practices, and above all as socio-cultural and relational environments in which actions acquire transformative potential. In line with Huizinga's (1938) conception of play as a foundational cultural form and Turner's (1982; 1995) interpretation of ritualized performance as a space of liminality and *communitas*, videogames can be understood as contemporary arenas where symbolic orders are rehearsed, contested, and reconfigured. They are not only representations of worlds but infrastructures in which worlds are enacted.

Recent scholarship further supports this shift. Ensslin (2018) emphasizes the vernacular and semiotic texture of videogames, foregrounding their function as structured languages of meaning-making. Nørgård and Tosca (2020) explore

the affective attachments that bind players to digital worlds, moving beyond competition-centered paradigms toward relational and emotional engagements. Taylor's (2018) analysis of live streaming cultures demonstrates how videogames operate as performative environments where spectatorship, labor, and community formation converge. Together, these perspectives reinforce the idea that games are not merely played—they are inhabited, performed, circulated, and negotiated across multiple platforms and publics.

From this expanded perspective, games operate simultaneously on multiple levels:

- as aesthetic dispositifs, where visual regimes (from photorealism to pixel art), soundscapes, and procedural architectures articulate specific modes of perception and affect;
- as design systems, structured through mechanics, dynamics, and aesthetics (Hunicke et al., 2004), capable of encoding values, ethical dilemmas, and epistemic models within rule-based interaction;
- as networked socio-technical assemblages, embedded within algorithmic and platform cultures (Galloway, 2006; Castells, 1996; 2001), where economies of participation, fan labour, and data circulation reshape the conditions of play (Consalvo, 2007; Taylor, 2018).

To question the ontological status of videogames, therefore, means recognizing them not simply as artifacts but as relational systems—dynamic constellations of code, bodies, affects, institutions, infrastructures, and communities. Their ontology is not fixed but processual: it emerges through interaction, circulation, interpretation, and governance. In this sense, videogames may be understood as sites of what Collins (2004) calls “interaction ritual chains,” where repeated, codified exchanges generate shared meanings and emotional energies; or, following Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, as terrains of negotiated readings and contested interpretations.

Contemporary theoretical developments in posthuman and new materialist thought further deepen this understanding. Bogost's (2020) object-oriented reflections on digital entities invite us to consider games not only as representational systems but as assemblages in which non-human actors—algorithms, procedural systems, avatars—participate in shaping experience. Similarly, drawing on relational and nomadic subjectivity (Braidotti, 2000), videogames can be conceived as laboratories of subjectivation, where identity, embodiment, and agency are continuously reconfigured through interaction. The boundaries between player and character, designer and user, human and computational agent become porous and negotiated.

It is precisely this expanded and multi-layered ontology that informs the rationale of this special issue.

Beyond Play seeks to map and critically assess the current state of videogame research by bringing into dialogue three interconnected perspectives:

1. The artistic and expressive dimension, which considers videogames as aesthetic languages and experimental forms capable of articulating new modes of storytelling, visuality, and affect.
2. The design-oriented dimension, which examines the procedural, systemic, and infrastructural logic of games, foregrounding the ways mechanics encode cultural, ethical, and political assumptions.
3. The socio-cultural dimension, which situates games within broader ecologies of participation, platformization, community formation, gender politics, and identity negotiation.

These perspectives are not treated as discrete analytical domains but as mutually constitutive. The artistic cannot be disentangled from the procedural; the procedural is embedded within socio-economic infrastructures; and the socio-cultural is always mediated by design choices and aesthetic strategies. Games thus become sites of *worldmaking*—to borrow a concept that resonates with both cultural studies and contemporary media theory—where imaginaries are constructed, contested, and shared.

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The project is dedicated to exploring the intersections between art, technology, and social innovation. Within this context, videogames represent a paradigmatic field of inquiry: they embody the convergence of creative industries, digital design, participatory cultures, and platform economies, while functioning as experimental environments for pedagogy, civic imagination, and collective transformation. The special issue therefore reflects not only a scholarly endeavor but also an institutional commitment to understanding digital creativity as a driver of cultural and social change.

To move “beyond play” does not mean to abandon playfulness, nor to deny the ludic core of videogames. Rather, it means acknowledging that play itself is structured, situated, and politically charged. It generates economies, produces identities, sustains communities, and configures imaginaries. By interrogating videogames as expressive, procedural, and relational systems, this issue contributes to an ongoing redefinition of the field—one that recognizes games not merely as objects to be analyzed, but as environments where culture happens, meanings circulate, and transformation becomes possible.

2. GAMES AS CULTURAL, AESTHETIC AND EPISTEMIC DEVICES

The opening section of this issue foregrounds the plurality of perspectives through which games can be examined when understood as cultural, relational, and design-driven systems. The first contribution, Vincenzo De Masi's *Ecological Rationality and Cultural Innovation in China's Game Design*, explores how sustainability in the Chinese gaming industry operates as a socio-technical paradigm that integrates environmental responsibility, aesthetics, and governance, positioning games as infrastructures that mediate ethics, policy, and collective imagination. Shifting from infrastructures to communities, Aida Gallego-Márquez and Pablo Soto-Casás, in *Digital Ethnographies on Discord: The Diaspora Between Hostile Spaces and Online Refuges*, interrogate the methodological and ethical implications of researching gaming cultures on Discord, proposing a participatory ethnographic model that transforms research into a practice of care and co-creation. The global-local tension in game production is then addressed in *The Myth of Global Games, National Games, and the Folkloresque*, which draws on Brazilian case studies to show how developers negotiate cultural identity through strategies that oscillate between transnational appeal and situated authenticity. From questions of cultural positioning, the issue moves toward the pedagogical dimension of interactivity: in *Moral Learning and Ludic Responsibility*, Luisa Ferraro examines interactive storytelling as a hybrid form between cinema and videogames capable of fostering critical reflection, ethical awareness, and experiential learning. Finally, Yiling Hu's *Smitten with a Virtual Character* analyzes *Slay the Princess* to rethink digital intimacy and subjectivity, arguing that the game destabilizes traditional affective structures of dating simulators by transforming attachment into a relational "wound" that binds player and nonhuman character.

Together, these contributions establish the conceptual foundations of the issue: games emerge not simply as playable systems, but as sites where design, culture, politics, affect, and knowledge production intersect.

The issue then turns toward the political economy of participation and the infrastructures that sustain contemporary play cultures. In *Entering the Battlegrounds: Fan Labour in PUBG and its Connection to the Mega-Platform*, Argyrios Emmanouloudis analyzes how community-generated content, modding practices, and platform ecosystems contributed to the success of PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds, revealing the ambivalent dynamic in which participatory creativity strengthens communal bonds while simultaneously producing value for corporate actors. Questions of interpretation and reception are foregrounded in Raúl Alejandro Treviño González's *A Reading Typology for Video Game Players*, which proposes a framework integrating cultural studies and game studies to map how players construct aesthetic, narrative, ideological, and ludic readings, emphasizing meaning-making as an active and situated process. The affective dimension of play is explored in Tamires Lietti's *Split at the Core*, a study of *Split Fiction* that examines how branching narratives and emotionally coded

decisions transform gameplay into a space where trauma, grief, and moral ambiguity are structurally mediated through design. The socio-cultural dynamics of visibility and exclusion are then addressed in Ezequiel Ramon-Pinat and Diana Moisés Toro's *The Challenges Female Streamers Face on Twitch*, which investigates how gendered harassment, platform governance, and audience interaction shape the experiences of female content creators in a male-dominated streaming ecosystem. Focusing on narrative complexity in contemporary game design, the authors examine Hideo Kojima's *Death Stranding* through an antagonist-centred analytical framework. Combining film analysis and game analysis, the article investigates how the character of Higgs Monaghan operates across cutscenes, gameplay mechanics, and symbolic characterization to structure the game's narrative tensions between connection and isolation. By foregrounding the role of antagonistic encounters in shaping player experience and thematic meaning, the study proposes a methodological approach capable of addressing the hybrid cinematic and ludic dimensions of narrative-driven games. Closing this section, Friske, Novy, and Wimmer's contribution further consolidates this perspective by advancing an antagonist-centred methodology that bridges film and game analysis, offering a nuanced framework for understanding how narrative complexity in contemporary games emerges through the interplay of character, gameplay, and audiovisual storytelling.

Concluding this section, Fabrizio Matarese's *Ritual Elements in Souls Games* interprets *Elden Ring* and the *Souls* series through anthropological theories of liminality and *communitas*, arguing that these games function as ritualized digital spaces where challenge, transformation, and communal meaning-making converge. The final section of the issue further expands the horizon of what games do as aesthetic, cultural, and epistemic devices. In *The Study of the Players' Pixel Aesthetics in Design-Driven Practices*, Hsiao-Yueh Yu investigates pixel art as both visual language and experiential driver, showing how design frameworks such as Mechanics-Dynamics-Aesthetics illuminate the ways nostalgic visual styles shape emotional engagement, player identity, and even material culture beyond the screen. The relationship between play, community, and designed environments is explored in Chiara Bertasini, Rossetta Preziosa Bocchino, Luca Carlevarino, Adriana Ribalcenco, and Francesca Vulpiani's *EXON | Delusion of Equilibrium*, which presents a research-through-design case study of a multiplayer Roblox project conceived as a sociological laboratory, demonstrating how aesthetic transitions, ritualized interaction, and cooperative mechanics generate hybrid communities that blur boundaries between individual and collective, online and offline. Finally, Katie Garrett's "*True Colours*": *Queering Gender, Monstrosity, and Humanity in Little Nightmares II* offers a close formal and narrative analysis of the indie horror game to reveal how audiovisual design, mechanics, and paratext enable queer interpretations that destabilize normative constructions of gender, embodiment, and otherness, even when such readings are resisted by dominant player discourses.

Across these fourteen contributions, games emerge not as isolated artifacts but as relational systems: infrastructures of governance, laboratories of pedagogy, economies of participation, ritual environments, aesthetic dispositifs, and contested sites of identity formation. Together, they exemplify what it means to move beyond play.

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Ecological Rationality and Cultural Innovation in China's Game Design

ABSTRACT

This article explores how China's gaming industry has transformed sustainable design into a broader socio-technical practice that merges environmental responsibility, aesthetic expression, and digital governance. Building upon the regulatory infrastructures that have shaped China's technological modernization, the paper argues that sustainability in Chinese game design extends beyond ecological goals to embody a performative negotiation between players, platforms, and state-led policies. Case studies such as *Ant Forest*, *Genshin Impact*, and Tencent's cloud gaming systems illustrate how environmental awareness and technological innovation converge through gamification, energy efficiency, and algorithmic regulation. Drawing on theories of cultural production, platform ecologies, and critical design, the study positions the Chinese model as a unique paradigm of "design as governance." In contrast to Western market-driven approaches, China's regulatory framework embeds sustainability into the aesthetic and technical layers of gaming, shaping new forms of participatory environmentalism and collective identity. Ultimately, the paper proposes that sustainable game design in China exemplifies a shift from games as entertainment to games as cultural infrastructures that mediate ethics, ecology, and collective imagination.

1. INTRODUCTION – FROM PLAY TO PRACTICE

In recent years, the study of videogames has moved from an emphasis on play as leisure to an understanding of games as complex socio-technical systems that articulate values, identities, and ideologies. Within this expanded perspective, games are not merely instruments of entertainment but living infrastructures where technology, creativity, and governance intersect. This reorientation resonates with contemporary debates on sustainability, environmental ethics, and digital responsibility, urging a reconsideration of how design practices mediate the relationships between human and nonhuman actors.

China provides a particularly fertile terrain for this inquiry. As the world's largest gaming market, generating over 45 billion USD in annual revenue (Newzoo, 2024), it stands at the confluence of technological innovation, envi-

ronmental crisis, and state regulation. With more than one billion internet users (CNNIC, 2023) and data centers consuming an estimated 199.07 TWh of electricity in 2020, projected to reach 490.18 TWh by 2030 (Zhou, Wang, & Ma, 2024), China's digital ecosystem exemplifies both the environmental pressures and the systemic possibilities of sustainable design. Unlike Western markets, where sustainability tends to emerge from voluntary corporate initiatives, China's approach is defined by top-down regulation that integrates ecological objectives directly into the mechanisms of production and consumption.

This distinctive structure gives rise to what may be called *design as governance*: a model where policy, code, and aesthetics coalesce to create a framework of environmental accountability embedded within digital media. Games in this context are not isolated cultural products but performative agents within a national strategy of technological modernization. The intertwining of entertainment and policy is evident in initiatives such as *Ant Forest* (Wang, 2019), a gamified environmental program within the Alipay ecosystem that has led to the planting of over 200 million trees, or Tencent's energy optimization strategies that reduced data center consumption by 18 percent between 2020 and 2023 (Deng, 2024). These examples reveal how gamified systems of reward, monitoring, and behavioral nudging can extend environmental regulation into everyday life, transforming sustainability into a shared, playable experience.

The intersection of sustainability and play also reconfigures the aesthetics of game design. Titles like *Genshin Impact* (MiHoYo) demonstrate how ecological themes and resource management are inscribed not only in narratives but in technical architectures. Through advanced memory management and energy-efficient rendering techniques (Bailey, 2022; Pérez, Verón, Pérez, Moraga, Calero & Cetina, 2024), the game becomes both a visual spectacle and an exercise in optimization. The aesthetic appeal of virtual worlds thus corresponds to the material ethics of their production, illustrating how energy-conscious coding and artistic ambition can coexist within a unified design logic.

Yet this integration of ecological governance into entertainment is not without tension. The same regulatory framework that promotes sustainability also enforces moral and ideological boundaries, from gaming-time restrictions for minors (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2021) to the cultural domestication of foreign platforms such as Roblox, which failed to adapt to China's policy-driven ecosystem (Liao, 2023). These dynamics highlight a paradox: sustainability operates as both environmental ethics and socio-political control. Games become laboratories where aesthetic experimentation meets algorithmic discipline, producing a hybrid environment where play, care, and compliance converge.

By situating Chinese sustainable game design within this broader cultural and political matrix, the article proposes a shift in the theoretical framing of *play*. Instead of viewing gaming as a self-contained act of leisure, it suggests understanding it as a distributed practice of negotiation among players, design-

ers, infrastructures, and governance systems. Sustainability, in this sense, is not an external goal imposed upon production but an immanent property of design itself, a principle that aligns technological efficiency with social imagination.

The following sections will develop this argument through three analytical axes. The first examines China's regulatory framework and its impact on the organization of the gaming industry. The second explores how environmental gamification, exemplified by *Ant Forest*, fosters collective forms of ecological awareness. The third investigates how platform aesthetics and metaverse imaginaries reconfigure the boundaries between virtual and material sustainability. Through these perspectives, the paper aims to illuminate how China's gaming ecosystem embodies a post-entertainment paradigm where games act as socio-technical mediators of care, governance, and aesthetic innovation.

2. GOVERNANCE, SUSTAINABILITY, AND THE POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF PLAY

The relationship between governance and design in China's digital economy has gradually evolved into a model of political ecology where environmental responsibility, technological regulation, and aesthetic production converge. The sustainability of the gaming sector cannot be understood solely through metrics of energy consumption or carbon neutrality. It operates instead as a multi-layered process that binds material infrastructures, institutional frameworks, and player practices into a single performative system. Within this system, play becomes an instrument of governance as much as a site of creativity.

The architecture of China's digital governance has been shaped by state-led initiatives aiming to harmonize technological development with ecological modernization. The Chinese government's carbon neutrality targets for 2060 have required data-intensive industries, including gaming, to incorporate sustainability into their operational frameworks (Zhou, Wang, & Ma, 2024). Regulatory bodies such as the National Press and Publication Administration (NPPA) and the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) monitor both content and infrastructure, demanding compliance not only in ideological terms but also in environmental performance. As a result, sustainability in Chinese gaming is not an optional corporate virtue but a mandatory design condition that determines access to market authorization.

In 2020, data centers supporting online gaming accounted for 2.7 percent of China's total electricity use, a figure expected to more than double by 2030 (Zhou, Wang & Ma, 2024). This energy footprint has led to substantial innovation in cooling systems, server utilization, and cloud computing architectures. Alibaba Cloud's achievement in reducing its Power Usage Effectiveness (PUE) to 1.09 in its Hangzhou data center, well below the global average of 1.59, demonstrates how regulatory incentives have generated measurable technical progress (Alibaba Cloud, 2025). Such infrastructural optimization represents a shift from superficial declarations of corporate social responsibility to tangible, quantifiable results that reflect a systemic reconfiguration of design priorities.

China's environmental turn in game design is inseparable from the broader logic of platform governance. Rather than separating policy enforcement from creative production, the Chinese digital ecosystem merges the two within an integrated regulatory paradigm. The 2021 restrictions on online gaming for minors, though primarily intended to mitigate addiction, also contributed indirectly to energy efficiency. Developers were compelled to introduce sophisticated monitoring systems, optimize server loads, and implement off-peak power management strategies (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2021). These measures redefined the relationship between ethics and technology, transforming algorithmic control into a form of environmental governance.

Tencent exemplifies this intersection of design, governance, and ecological responsibility. Operating within a vast ecosystem that includes over 1.3 billion users across WeChat and its gaming divisions, Tencent has implemented a series of efficiency-oriented reforms. TiMi Studio Group, for instance, consolidated its server network and introduced adaptive power management systems, reducing energy use by 18 percent between 2020 and 2023 (Deng, 2024). These results illustrate how environmental objectives are embedded within the architecture of digital services rather than appended as external goals.

At the same time, ByteDance has pursued a similar trajectory through its acquisition of the virtual reality company Pico and its commitment to achieving operational carbon neutrality by 2030 (ByteDance, 2025). By sourcing 95 percent of its data center energy from renewable sources and incorporating performance benchmarks into hardware design, ByteDance has expanded the definition of sustainable game design beyond software to include material production and logistics. NetEase has followed comparable practices, reporting a 23 percent reduction in per-user energy consumption since 2020 through the application of real-time data analytics and server optimization techniques (Ma, 2022).

These corporate responses illustrate the emergence of what may be termed *eco-technological aesthetics*: a convergence of environmental regulation and technological refinement that transforms sustainability into a creative parameter. The aesthetics of efficiency, visible in algorithmic precision, smooth interface design, and seamless network integration, becomes a manifestation of ecological ethics. In this sense, sustainable game design in China transcends its material constraints to become a mode of aesthetic rationality, one that mirrors the nation's ambition to integrate environmental policy with cultural production.

3. GAMIFIED ECOLOGY AND EVERYDAY ENVIRONMENTALISM

The convergence of digital entertainment and environmental governance in China finds its most emblematic expression in the phenomenon of environmental gamification, where behavioral incentives and ecological participation are mediated through interactive design. Among these, *Ant Forest* stands as a paradigmatic example of how games can become instruments of collective sustainability. Developed by Alipay and embedded within the Alibaba digital

ecosystem, the platform transforms low-carbon behaviors, such as walking, using public transportation, or paying bills online, into virtual points that users can accumulate to plant real trees (Wang, 2019). By 2024, the project had facilitated the planting of more than 200 million trees across China, contributing to the restoration of over 2,900 square kilometers of desertified land (Obuobi, Tang, Awuah, Nketiah & Adu-Gyamfi, 2024).

What distinguishes *Ant Forest* from comparable Western sustainability apps is the degree of infrastructural integration and regulatory alignment that underpins its operation. Data collection is not dependent on user self-reporting but on verified transactions within the national digital infrastructure. This integration between the financial, environmental, and technological systems produces a model of *algorithmic citizenship*, in which individual responsibility is measured and rewarded through the state-sanctioned logic of gamified participation. Users experience environmental ethics not as a moral abstraction but as a quantifiable practice inscribed in the daily rhythms of digital life.

From a socio-cultural perspective, this model reveals the evolution of the “playable citizen,” a figure whose agency is both empowered and circumscribed by digital design. Within *Ant Forest*, environmental awareness is experienced through performative interaction rather than discursive persuasion. The visual aesthetics of the platform, animated trees that grow as users reduce their carbon footprint, translate abstract ecological goals into emotionally resonant, affective forms. These ludic metaphors create a sense of continuity between virtual progress and real-world transformation, generating what may be called an aesthetics of verification, where the pleasure of play coincides with the validation of environmental contribution (De Masi, Di, Li & Song, 2026).

The platform's design logic illustrates how *gamification functions as governance*. Each action performed within the system is automatically logged, verified, and rewarded, reinforcing patterns of behavior that align with collective sustainability objectives. The underlying architecture thus exemplifies Michel Foucault's notion of *governmentality* adapted to the digital age: the internalization of social discipline through self-administered incentives. In the context of Chinese digital culture, this manifests not as coercion but as a participatory ethics embedded in the infrastructures of everyday life.

Such mechanisms have also inspired new forms of aesthetic production within the broader gaming industry. The success of *Ant Forest* has encouraged developers to incorporate sustainability-related themes into narrative and gameplay structures. Environmental awareness now emerges not as an external moral message but as a design affordance, visible in energy-efficient interfaces, eco-symbolic visuals, and gameplay loops that mirror ecological cycles. The logic of *reward through care*, watering a digital tree, maintaining a resource balance, preserving an ecosystem, has migrated from environmental apps to commercial gaming contexts, shaping a new paradigm of *eco-aesthetic design*.

This diffusion of gamified ecology across multiple sectors reflects a deeper cultural shift in how play functions within Chinese society. Gaming becomes a mode of civic participation and self-regulation, bridging the gap between individual enjoyment and collective responsibility. By merging environmental governance with everyday entertainment, Chinese platforms have transformed sustainability into an *affective economy*, where ecological virtue is intertwined with social prestige and digital reputation.

However, this process is not without contradictions. The gamification of environmental responsibility risks transforming ecological awareness into a commodified form of engagement, where users perform sustainability to accumulate points rather than to enact long-term behavioral change. As *Ant Forest* demonstrates, the quantification of ethical behavior can reinforce instrumental rather than reflective relations to nature. Yet even within these tensions lies a key cultural innovation: the recognition that environmental consciousness can be sustained through aesthetic pleasure, social visibility, and systemic reinforcement.

Ultimately, *Ant Forest* exemplifies how China's model of sustainable design merges regulation, affect, and aesthetics into a unified system of socio-technical participation. It represents not merely a successful application of gamification to environmental policy but the emergence of a new paradigm of environmental subjectivity, where citizens play their way into sustainability. Through its integration with digital finance, algorithmic verification, and social networks, *Ant Forest* has transformed the ethics of care into a measurable, playable practice, an innovation that encapsulates the Chinese approach to harmonizing ecological governance with digital creativity.

4. DESIGN AS CULTURAL NEGOTIATION: THE CASE OF GENSHIN IMPACT

The case of *Genshin Impact* illustrates how sustainability in China's gaming ecosystem has expanded beyond environmental efficiency to encompass broader cultural, technological, and aesthetic negotiations. Developed by MiHoYo (now HoYoverse) and launched globally in 2020, the game represents one of the most influential examples of Chinese creative industry success in the global market. While its international acclaim has largely been attributed to artistic quality and open-world design, *Genshin Impact* also exemplifies how ecological rationality and technological optimization have become integral to game production under China's regulatory framework.

From a production standpoint, *Genshin Impact* integrates a variety of energy-saving and performance-oriented design solutions that reflect a convergence between environmental responsibility and creative ambition. MiHoYo has invested heavily in server optimization, data compression, and dynamic memory allocation techniques that minimize hardware load without compromising visual quality (Bailey, 2022). The company's decision to develop a custom rendering engine capable of scaling efficiently across mobile, PC, and console devices demonstrates a strategic response to both market diversity and sustain-

ability mandates. As research by Pérez, Verón, Pérez, Moraga, Calero & Cetina (2024) shows, energy consumption can vary significantly across game engines, with Unity exhibiting lower power use in static mesh simulations while Unreal performs better in dynamic mesh scenarios. MiHoYo's hybrid approach, combining low-consumption rendering with adaptive asset streaming, reflects a deliberate alignment of creative flexibility and ecological efficiency.

Such optimization is not merely a technical decision but a cultural negotiation between aesthetic aspiration and systemic constraint. In the Chinese regulatory context, sustainability operates simultaneously as a policy objective, a design condition, and a form of national soft power. The state's emphasis on "green innovation" within the creative industries encourages companies like MiHoYo to internalize environmental performance as an aspect of brand identity. *Genshin Impact* thus embodies a model of *performative sustainability*, a mode of creative production that links the efficiency of digital systems with the expressive autonomy of art.

This dual logic, creative and regulatory, transforms the very meaning of design within the Chinese digital economy. The meticulous world-building and artistic coherence of *Genshin Impact* cannot be separated from the infrastructural conditions that enable its operation. The game's vast open world, distributed across multiple servers and platforms, depends on data centers optimized for energy efficiency and resource allocation. Alibaba Cloud's carbon-neutrality initiatives, combined with Tencent's improvements in server utilization and cooling, contribute indirectly to the operational sustainability of the entire ecosystem in which *Genshin Impact* circulates (Alibaba Cloud, 2025; Deng, 2024). Sustainability thus becomes a systemic aesthetic, expressed through the harmony between computational architecture and narrative immersion.

Moreover, *Genshin Impact* represents a negotiation between global aesthetic expectations and local regulatory mandates. While the game draws heavily on international fantasy tropes and Japanese role-playing aesthetics, its production and circulation remain rooted in China's domestic policy environment. This dual positioning enables MiHoYo to function as both a creative innovator and a cultural diplomat, projecting Chinese technical competence and environmental awareness to a global audience. Through this transnational mediation, the game contributes to what could be termed a *green soft power* strategy, where ecological modernity becomes an extension of national identity.

At a deeper level, *Genshin Impact* reconfigures the ontology of play itself. Its open-world structure encourages exploratory behavior, long-term engagement, and resource management, forms of interaction that mirror ecological systems of balance and renewal. Players are invited to inhabit virtual environments that reward care, patience, and sustainable use of resources rather than extraction or domination. These mechanics reflect the game's underlying eco-aesthetic philosophy, in which environmental harmony serves as both thematic content and gameplay principle. Although these design choices may not directly reduce car-

bon emissions, they produce symbolic alignments between ecological values and player experience, reinforcing sustainability as a mode of cultural imagination.

The internal organization of MiHoYo further reveals how sustainability is embedded in corporate governance. In 2022, the company announced significant investments in fusion energy research, signaling an awareness of the energy-intensive future of digital entertainment and the need for long-term innovation in energy systems (Bailey, 2022). This initiative extends the concept of sustainable design from the level of gameplay and infrastructure to that of scientific experimentation, illustrating how gaming companies in China increasingly operate at the intersection of art, technology, and environmental science.

Through the lens of *Genshin Impact*, sustainable design in China appears as a multiscalar process, connecting individual acts of optimization with broader systems of ecological modernization. At the aesthetic level, sustainability manifests in visual clarity, balance, and minimal waste. At the infrastructural level, it emerges through energy efficiency and data management. And at the ideological level, it becomes an instrument of soft power and technological sovereignty. The game's success lies in its ability to translate this complex assemblage into an emotionally compelling experience that merges technological rationality with artistic enchantment.

Ultimately, *Genshin Impact* exemplifies how sustainability operates not only as a constraint but as a generative force in contemporary Chinese game design. The regulatory environment that compels companies to reduce energy consumption simultaneously stimulates technical creativity and aesthetic refinement. Rather than opposing freedom and control, Chinese developers are learning to transform regulation into design potential, producing works that embody the harmony between environmental governance, technological sophistication, and cultural expression.

5. PLATFORM AESTHETICS AND METAVERSE IMAGINARIES

The emergence of the metaverse in China has deepened the relationship between technological infrastructure, aesthetic mediation, and environmental governance. Within this rapidly evolving field, game design operates not simply as entertainment but as a mode of spatial and ecological experimentation. Chinese metaverse development embodies the convergence of data infrastructures, artificial intelligence, and gamified interfaces into a comprehensive system of governance and participation. Rather than replicating the Western imaginary of the metaverse as a purely immersive consumer experience, the Chinese model situates virtual environments within a broader framework of national modernization, environmental planning, and public service innovation (Zhong, Zhong, Zhang & Tang, 2024).

This integration reflects the Smart China strategy, which promotes digitalization as a tool for urban sustainability and ecological management. Metaverse technologies, augmented reality navigation, digital twins, and virtual simula-

tion, are employed to optimize transportation, energy distribution, and public administration (Open Chat, 2023). Within this paradigm, games and interactive media become laboratories for sustainable urban futures. Their design principles—efficiency, interactivity, adaptability—are mirrored in urban planning processes that rely on simulation and predictive modeling. The metaverse thus functions as both metaphor and mechanism for the alignment of digital culture with ecological rationality.

At the aesthetic level, this alignment manifests through what may be termed a platform aesthetic of sustainability: a visual and technical language characterized by minimal latency, seamless data exchange, and clean interface design. These qualities are not purely stylistic choices but indicators of infrastructural optimization. Each frame rendered and each network packet transmitted represent units of energy expenditure; therefore, aesthetic smoothness coincides with ecological efficiency. The convergence of visual harmony and computational economy reveals the extent to which sustainability has become embedded in the semiotics of digital design.

The evolution of platform aesthetics in China can also be traced through the environmental implications of virtual production. As companies like Tencent, ByteDance, and Alibaba expand into metaverse services, their commitment to renewable energy sourcing and carbon-neutral data centers becomes part of the visual and ethical identity of their platforms. ByteDance's acquisition of the VR hardware manufacturer Pico, and its subsequent pledge to achieve operational carbon neutrality by 2030, illustrate how environmental policy is materialized within technological form (ByteDance, 2025). The hardware's energy-efficient design and renewable power integration signify the translation of sustainability from discourse into device architecture.

Such transformations carry profound cultural implications. The Chinese metaverse model promotes not the escapism of virtual worlds but their integration with physical infrastructures. Digital spaces are designed to complement, rather than replace, material environments. This perspective challenges the notion of virtuality as disembodiment, positioning digital systems as ecological extensions of the physical world. As Kshetri & Dwivedi (2023) note, digital tools can simultaneously reduce and generate pollution: virtual meetings may decrease travel emissions while increasing data center energy demand. The Chinese response to this duality is regulatory synchronization—ensuring that technological innovation proceeds within a monitored framework of environmental accounting.

In this context, game design serves as a critical mediator between technological optimization and cultural imagination. The immersive aesthetics of virtual worlds are increasingly understood as tools for modeling sustainability. Urban simulation games, interactive installations, and VR experiences inspired by real-world ecological challenges allow players to visualize the balance between development and conservation. By translating complex environmental

systems into experiential interfaces, these games cultivate a sensibility of interdependence and systemic awareness. The user becomes both participant and observer in an unfolding digital ecology, learning to perceive infrastructure as both medium and message.

The aesthetic sensibility of the Chinese metaverse extends beyond the screen into everyday sociality. Platforms such as Alibaba's metaverse commerce and Tencent's virtual events illustrate how the dematerialization of activities, shopping, conferences, exhibitions, can reduce certain physical emissions while generating new forms of digital consumption (Husband, 2023). This shift from material to immaterial production demands a re-evaluation of the environmental costs of immateriality itself. The reduction of carbon footprints through virtual substitution may conceal the redistribution of energy demands toward invisible infrastructures. Sustainable design, therefore, requires not only aesthetic elegance but epistemic transparency: the capacity of platforms to make their environmental operations legible to users and policymakers alike.

From this perspective, the metaverse becomes an epistemological device, a structure for perceiving and managing the interdependencies between energy, computation, and culture. The Chinese approach, rooted in coordinated regulation and technological pragmatism, demonstrates that aesthetic innovation and environmental responsibility are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, the optimization of energy flows, user interaction, and data transmission forms the basis of a new ecological aesthetics that unites efficiency and expressivity.

In sum, platform aesthetics and metaverse imaginaries in China exemplify a holistic model of digital sustainability. The beauty of interface design, the smoothness of network experience, and the precision of algorithmic control are not merely artistic achievements but indicators of environmental rationalization. Within this framework, sustainability becomes a visible, perceptible quality, an aesthetic property of optimized systems and balanced interactions. As China continues to expand its digital infrastructures and cultural industries, the metaverse stands as both symbol and laboratory of the country's attempt to harmonize technological modernity with ecological ethics.

6. ETHICS, REPRESENTATION, AND THE POLITICS OF OPTIMIZATION

In recent years, the study of videogames has moved from an emphasis on play as leisure to an understanding of games as complex socio-technical systems that articulate values, identities, and ideologies.

The integration of sustainability into China's gaming and digital media ecosystem introduces a new ethical paradigm rooted in optimization. In this context, ethics is no longer limited to content or representation but becomes embedded in the technical architecture of systems. Optimization, of energy consumption, server performance, or user engagement, functions as both a moral and aesthetic principle, linking environmental responsibility with com-

putational efficiency. Within this framework, the ethical and the technical are not opposites but mutually constitutive forces.

The political ecology of optimization extends the logic of environmental governance to encompass questions of inclusion, access, and representation. Regulation ensures that digital infrastructures operate within sustainable parameters, but it also defines what counts as legitimate or desirable behavior. The same algorithms that reduce carbon emissions and resource waste also monitor playtime, regulate social interactions, and filter cultural content (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2021). The outcome is a complex assemblage of environmental care and social control, where design ethics are negotiated through both aesthetic and bureaucratic processes.

This dynamic can be observed in the broader context of China's data localization and carbon-neutrality strategies, which require digital companies to situate their infrastructures within national borders. While this policy fosters domestic investment in renewable energy and efficient data management, it also contributes to the duplication of global data systems, potentially increasing total energy consumption (Zhou, Wang & Ma, 2024). These contradictions reveal that optimization, while framed as an ethical goal, often produces ambivalent outcomes. Sustainability, in practice, involves a balance between competing demands: efficiency and redundancy, innovation and regulation, centralization and global circulation.

In aesthetic terms, optimization generates a new visual and sensory regime. The sleekness of interfaces, the responsiveness of controls, and the clarity of digital imagery all signal the successful management of energy and computation. This aesthetics of efficiency becomes an ethical code inscribed in design. Players experience environmental responsibility not through explicit messages but through the smooth functioning of the systems they inhabit. Each act of play, each seamless transition, minimal lag, or low-power rendering, embodies the principle of sustainability as optimization. The moral dimension of design is thus translated into a perceptual experience.

However, the same logic that equates efficiency with virtue also risks concealing the material and labor realities underlying digital production. The constant drive toward optimization can obscure the environmental costs of hardware manufacturing, electronic waste, and infrastructure maintenance. In 2019, China generated approximately 10.1 million tons of electronic waste, one of the highest figures globally (Forti, Baldé, Kuehr & Bel, 2020). Despite the implementation of extended producer responsibility laws requiring recycling quotas, the recovery rate remains limited. The rapid obsolescence of gaming hardware and mobile devices, accelerated by competitive market cycles, undermines the broader goals of sustainability. Environmental ethics in the digital domain must therefore extend beyond software optimization to encompass the full material lifecycle of production, consumption, and disposal.

At the same time, the cultural representation of sustainability within games contributes to the normalization of these ethical frameworks. Games such as *Ant Forest* and *Genshin Impact* model sustainability as an individual and collective virtue. Players are encouraged to act responsibly, conserve resources, and cooperate for ecological goals. Yet these symbolic gestures coexist with the industrial realities of mass production and data-intensive operation. The ethical efficacy of such representations depends on the transparency of the systems that sustain them. Without mechanisms for environmental verification, sustainability risks becoming an aesthetic motif rather than a structural commitment.

Another dimension of this discussion concerns the affective politics of sustainability. The Chinese model relies on the emotional engagement of users to promote behavioral change. Gamified systems of reward, points, growth, visual feedback, translate ethics into affect, turning care into pleasure. This affective mediation strengthens the social legitimacy of sustainability but also introduces new hierarchies of participation. Those who conform to the gamified logic of ecological virtue gain symbolic capital, while others are marginalized within the system of moral visibility. Thus, the politics of optimization extends to the domain of subjectivity, defining who is recognized as a responsible digital citizen.

Ethical sustainability in Chinese game design must therefore be understood as a form of governance by design. The optimization of systems simultaneously structures the optimization of behaviors, aligning ecological values with computational order. This does not imply a simple imposition of control but rather a dynamic negotiation between users, platforms, and regulatory authorities. Each level of design, from interface to infrastructure, functions as a site of ethical inscription where environmental responsibility is materialized, aestheticized, and normalized.

In conclusion, the politics of optimization redefines the boundaries between technology, ethics, and aesthetics. Sustainability is no longer an external standard to be achieved but an internal logic that organizes perception, participation, and production. The Chinese experience demonstrates how digital design can become a medium for moral imagination, translating environmental objectives into affective, visual, and procedural forms. Yet it also warns of the risks inherent in equating optimization with virtue: the danger of mistaking operational smoothness for ethical depth, or computational efficiency for genuine ecological care. True sustainability requires not only technical mastery but reflexive awareness, a capacity to recognize the contradictions embedded in the very systems that make digital life possible.

7. CONCLUSION – BEYOND SUSTAINABILITY, TOWARD DESIGN AS CARE

Sustainable game design in China reveals the emergence of a new paradigm that redefines the boundaries between play, governance, and ecology. Far from being an isolated policy objective or a temporary corporate strategy, sustainability has become a structural principle of digital design, shaping how games

are conceived, produced, and experienced. The Chinese model illustrates how environmental ethics, technological optimization, and aesthetic innovation can converge within a coordinated system of governance that unites state regulation, corporate adaptation, and user participation.

The preceding analysis has shown that this system operates across multiple scales. At the infrastructural level, data centers and cloud architectures are subject to regulatory standards that enforce energy efficiency and carbon reduction. At the design level, companies such as Tencent, ByteDance, and MiHoYo integrate ecological principles into their production pipelines, transforming sustainability into a creative parameter. At the experiential level, players encounter environmental ethics through gamified participation, aesthetic pleasure, and the smooth functionality of optimized systems. Together, these dimensions compose a political ecology of play, where entertainment becomes an arena for negotiating the relationship between innovation, responsibility, and collective well-being.

Yet the integration of sustainability into the digital economy also exposes persistent contradictions. The same systems that promote efficiency can conceal the material costs of production, from electronic waste to the global redistribution of energy consumption. Policies that encourage carbon neutrality domestically may externalize emissions abroad through relocated data infrastructures or outsourced manufacturing (Zhou, Wang & Ma, 2024). Similarly, the quantification of ecological behavior, as seen in *Ant Forest*, risks reducing environmental ethics to a system of measurable compliance. These tensions do not invalidate the achievements of the Chinese model but highlight the complexity of pursuing sustainability within globalized technological systems.

To address these challenges, sustainable design must evolve beyond its technical and regulatory functions to embrace a broader ethos of care. Care, in this sense, refers not to sentimental compassion but to the ongoing maintenance and attentiveness required to sustain ecological and social balance. Within China's gaming ecosystem, design as care implies a commitment to transparency, inclusivity, and reflexivity. It calls for systems that not only optimize performance but also make their operations visible and accountable. Such a framework aligns with the Confucian and ecological traditions that emphasize harmony between humans and their environment, reinterpreted through the digital infrastructures of the present.

The notion of *design as care* also reframes the relationship between aesthetics and ethics. Visual beauty, functional elegance, and algorithmic precision acquire moral significance when they embody principles of balance, efficiency, and sustainability. Conversely, care transforms optimization from a purely technical goal into an ethical and cultural practice. When design is understood as care, sustainability becomes a continuous process rather than a fixed target, a dynamic interaction between technology, environment, and society.

China's experience offers valuable insights for the future of digital sustainability. Its regulatory framework demonstrates that environmental responsibility can be institutionalized without stifling creativity. Its industries show that technical innovation can coexist with ecological awareness. And its users, through platforms like *Ant Forest* or *Genshin Impact*, exemplify how play can cultivate forms of participatory ethics and collective consciousness. Together, these elements signal a transition from sustainability as policy to sustainability as culture, a transformation in which design mediates not only environmental outcomes but the very meanings of citizenship, creativity, and ecological belonging.

In conclusion, the evolution of sustainable game design in China marks a critical step toward a more integrated understanding of digital modernity. By treating sustainability as both a technological and aesthetic practice, the Chinese model points toward a future where environmental responsibility is not an external constraint but a constitutive element of creative expression. The challenge ahead lies in ensuring that this alignment between innovation and ecology remains transparent, equitable, and humane. When games become instruments of care, bridging regulation and imagination, they redefine not only how we play but how we live within the infrastructures of a shared planet.

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Digital Ethnographies on Discord

The Diaspora Between Hostile Spaces and Online Refuges

ABSTRACT

This article examines the epistemological and ethical challenges involved in conducting digital ethnographies within gaming communities on Discord. Despite its mainstream status, the platform's culture often reproduces hegemonic masculinities and antifeminist technocultures. This forces women and dissident identities into a 'diaspora of otherness', a flight from hostile public servers to private, safe refuges. We argue that traditional ethnographic methods of 'occupying' space are inadequate; instead, researchers must 'inhabit' these environments, recognising how the features of the platform co-construct social reality. The study contrasts the methodological requirements of two distinct environments. In hostile environments, the protection of researchers is key to observing rigid gender performances. Conversely, studying safe spaces presents an ethical paradox, as an external academic perspective could violate the community's intimacy. To address this issue, we propose Critical Digital Participatory Action Ethnography [CDPAE]. Rather than infiltrating existing refuges, this method advocates the co-construction of new digital infrastructures with participants. This approach transforms research from an extractivist practice into an act of social repair, prioritising dynamic consent and the creation of autonomous, care-centred communities. Ultimately, we posit that the design of methodology constitutes a political stance, with the aim of repairing the digital diaspora by fostering environments based on radical trust and mutual support.

1. INTRODUCTION: LIVING IN GAMING COMMUNITIES

Accessing the study of gaming communities presents specific epistemological challenges that require methodological re-evaluation. This involves examining how we observe and inhabit the field, precisely defining which community we analyse, and determining how our interaction with it will take shape.

Historically, the creation of these communities arose from the absence of software capable of mediating communication across platforms. In the realm of video games, applications such as TeamSpeak and Discord have enabled the existence of spaces where individuals can meet based on common interests, play

together, and communicate more effectively, making gaming communities predominantly multi-platform. Moreover, the architecture of these platforms incorporates rituals, routines, and norms that configure social relations and roles, shaping what is called gaming culture.

This culture reproduces much of the socialisation of young populations on the internet. Currently, the most used application among gaming communities is Discord, which boasts over 200 million active monthly users (Discord Inc, 2025). According to Resourcera (2025), a statistical analysis portal, in 2025, 66.3% of Discord users identified as male, and 69.94% were aged between 16 and 34. Regarding active servers, Discord hosts 19 million, compared to 6.7 million recorded in 2020.

Although this platform is part of the mainstream within gaming culture, marked gender disparities are evident. Gaming communities, like offline social reality, mirror the socio-cultural values of their time, and advances associated with the fourth feminist wave have generated resistances rooted within contemporary masculinities. This phenomenon includes both the incel turn within internet culture and the current state of masculinities, which, according to Whitehead (2021), are on the brink of collapse. In this context, categories underpinning the myth of masculinity weaken active sexuality becomes unmanageable for a subject who is not the object of desire dictated by patriarchal standards, and identity performance demands adherence to hegemonic mandates in opposition to feminist deconstruction. This tension is intensified by the difficulty in acquiring social skills related to caregiving, necessary for repairing the gender debt generated by the mandates of masculinity's genealogical lineage.

This resistance to gender progress also manifests within the gaming sphere. As Discord data indicate, these environments have historically been configured as spaces of cis-heterosexual male homosociality (Puente and Lasén, 2015). In this context, Discord functions as a *private connected room* (Zafra, 2010), a concept resonating with Pearce's idea of diaspora (2009). This diaspora is understood as the perpetual journey of otherness within these communities, resulting from their constant expulsion due to the prevailing homosociability among men.

Furthermore, Discord is not only a platform where gamer identities are located. Its role includes facilitating communication within the game and creating a shared space organised through platform reappropriation (Davis, 2020). The functioning of these spaces aligns with Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2011), shifting technology from a passive role to one of active agency. Discord's algorithmic design and affordances (Cirucci, 2017) -ephemeral voice channels, hierarchical permission systems, moderation bots- possess agency: they influence who can speak, who is visible, and how authority is structured.

This technical mediation compels a reconsideration of access to the field under a new ethical and epistemological framework. Confronted with polarised spaces -hostile environments where exclusions are (re)created and safe spaces where care dynamics are maintained- there emerges the necessity to shift from a

logic of *occupying* to one of *inhabiting*. An approach based on *occupying* ignores how software co-constructs social reality and how these spaces are part of users' daily life. Conversely, *inhabiting* entails that the researcher adapts to the same technical mediations as participants, recognising that, in gaming culture, the community's dynamics are inseparable from its digital infrastructure and design, and it also functions as a meeting place where users construct, situate, and embody their digital selves (Agustin, 2018).

To illustrate this methodological proposal, this article outlines the epistemological and methodological differences between inhabiting both types of spaces. Through presenting two Discord-based studies, we will analyse how interaction dynamics and tool usage vary depending on whether the researcher inhabits a community governed by hostility or one built on trust and care.

2. LIVING IN COMMUNITIES (II): HOSTILE SPACES

In arguing this, we do not assert that all masculinised gaming environments are intrinsically toxic (Maloney et al., 2019). We acknowledge the long-standing pejorative treatment of video game culture (Kowert et al., 2014); however, our objective is not to promote this stereotype, but to identify and contextualise the communities that sustain this social imaginary through toxic technocultures linked to antifeminism (Massanari, 2017). We therefore vindicate Discord as a locus of *onlife* socialisation (Soto-Casás et al., 2026), where the online-offline dichotomy becomes negligible (Floridi, 2015). It serves as a site for imagination, readaptation and, crucially, as a venue to find others with whom to share a space, a journey, and a place.

Nonetheless, living in and researching masculinised gaming spaces from a feminist perspective involves intrinsic complexity. The gender resistances inherent in geek masculinities (Maloney et al., 2019) rest on the premise that gender is an exclusive construct of women and that, from an antifeminist perspective, feminism instrumentalises this construct as a lens through which to judge male identity performance. This phenomenon permeates gaming spaces, as masculinities therein are constructed and identified more easily under the shelter of heteropatriarchal culture (Butler, 2007). This construction does not substantially differ from the articulation of hegemonic masculinities proposed by Connell (1987), grounded in work, sexuality, and fatherhood, but adapts its markers: geek masculinities are defined by skill acquisition in gaming, demonstration of active sexuality, and assimilation of misogynistic values (Massanari, 2015, 2017; Braithwaite, 2016), elements operating as a masculine structural framework (Hearn, 2004; Lugones, 2014).

It is pertinent to contrast this framework with groups associated with the manosphere (Ging, 2019). In the current social context, where the fourth feminist wave has advanced propelled by social media movements, reactive resistances arise against such progress. This is an internet culture shaped by algorithmic drift, nourished by mechanisms of hate and the popularisation of the incel

subculture through meme dissemination. Comparing the evolution of values between hegemonic masculinities and geek and incel masculinities reveals an alignment grounded in the impossibility of fulfilling traditional masculine mandates. These identities solidify through policing compliance with incel imperatives, which stipulate a hegemonic bodily ideal and emotional non-management linked to the figure of the *GigaChad*, validated through homosocial peer processes. This interaction culminates in generating an antifeminist worldview, intrinsically linked to the phenomenology of the Blue Pill, Red Pill, and Black Pill.

Consequently, researching such spaces requires rethinking access strategies and the nature of data to be gathered. From a digital ethnographic perspective, engaging with hostile, hidden, or legally marginal contexts represents a considerable challenge. Faced with online communities exhibiting aggression and rejection towards social studies from a gender perspective, it is imperative to reconsider who constitutes the vulnerable group. Following recommendations from the Association of Internet Researchers [AOIR] (AOIR, 2025) for research in environments presenting risks to researchers, it becomes necessary to adopt and implement specific, appropriate protection mechanisms for the space to be inhabited.

In this respect, maintaining some degree of concealment or discretion is recommended to ensure research viability; rather than avoiding this practice, it is crucial to constructively reflect on its implications. Participant observation of behaviour in digital communities causes minimal harm provided anonymisation practices are rigorously respected and the sample is not traceable. In accordance with General Data Protection Regulation [GDPR], (2016) verifying traceability of data is essential, ensuring that subjects remain unidentifiable post-anonymisation.

Participant observation is an ethnographic approach bearing significant ethical dilemmas, especially when accessing controversial groups like antifeminist cultures. Engaging with difficult or hidden contexts constitutes an arduous path for ethnography (Meneses-Falcón & Urío, 2021). Under this premise, covert and overt participant observation exist in constant dialectical tension, with neither prevailing as a superior option due to ethical complexities (Strudwick et al., 2018). On one hand, covert observation allows researchers to conceal their identity, minimising impact on the environment; on the other, overt observation requires participants' awareness and understanding of study purposes. Additionally, some researchers highlight the extreme difficulty, or even impracticality, of guaranteeing total anonymity in a complex and evolving digital environment (Hennell et al., 2020).

Nonetheless, when accessing contexts characterised by a growing antifeminist current, prioritising researcher protection is imperative. This aims to minimise harm arising from exposure of personal data and mitigate risk of the research team's identity being instrumentalised by participants to generate violent social media content. Simultaneously, guaranteeing sample integrity regarding person-

al data and sensitive content dissemination is essential, ensuring proper recognition of participants' narratives in analysis without compromising anonymity.

3. LIVING IN COMMUNITIES (III): SAFE PLACES

The study of safe spaces compels us to reconfigure and rethink field access, necessarily positioning ourselves within feminist epistemology. Merely observing a specific environment is insufficient; it is imperative to recognise that we produce knowledge from embodied and situated positions (Haraway, 1991), which entails radically questioning where we conduct research and who we are in that place. Within the videogame ecosystem, the traditional figure of the researcher often resonates with the sociological archetype of the *stranger* (Simmel, 2014): one who attempts to decipher foreign cultural codes from an aseptic distance. However, for women and dissident identities, the experience of being *strangers*, intruders, or impostors—pejoratively labelled *casual gamers* in gamer identity terms (Muriel, 2018)—is normative within a hegemonic culture marked by structural violence that systematically expels gender otherness.

In response to this environmental hostility, what we term the *diaspora of otherness* emerges: a strategic retreat from the public square (large, open servers) towards the privacy of non-mixed servers or those created amongst acquaintances. In contrast to the noise, aggression, or fear elicited by generalist spaces, digital safe spaces arise: rear guard, invisible, and communal places where networks of care and resistance are woven beyond the gaze of the hegemonic cis-heteronorm (Butler, 2007). In these environments, users engage in what Davis (2020) would term a *deviation* of platform affordances: tools originally serving exclusionary purposes—such as rigid hierarchies or voice use as gender indicators and focal points of hostility (Gallego-Márquez, 2023)—are reinterpreted by users to design violence-free spaces. Thus, infrastructure designed for gaming's competitive efficiency is repurposed to construct, instead, architectures of affection and mutual support.

However, studying these environments poses a fundamental ethical paradox: researching a pre-existing safe space carries the inherent risk of violating it. Academic access cannot be approached from extractivist curiosity, as entering a closed community with a *notebook* renders the researcher an external agent whose objectifying gaze may shatter the circle of trust. It is vital not to *taint* the space; the mere presence of an external analytical perspective can alter the climate of intimacy that defines the community, transforming a sanctuary into a laboratory. As researchers, we acknowledge that we are fallible subjects, bearers of biases and power dynamics that can irreversibly cloud the group's naturalness.

Faced with this dilemma, we propose a methodological framework that crystallises in what we define as Critical Digital Participatory Action Ethnography inspired by Paño Yáñez's (2022) methodological confluence proposal. We understand that to study a safe space ethically and respectfully towards its native dynamics, the approach cannot be limited to passive description. However, we

do not seek simply to *digitalise* the technique (Rogers, 2013); the objective is to adapt its ontological and epistemological principles to digital nativity in order to apply a situated method designed specifically for the interaction and sociability logics of online gaming environments.

Under this premise, the most honest approach is not to seek a community to infiltrate—thereby perpetuating extractivist dynamics in trust-based environments—but to construct an ad hoc infrastructure for research. We abandon the logic of *occupying* to embrace that of social change and empowerment (Zapata and Rondán, 2016). Following Blanco-Ávila et al. (2025), we understand participation not only as collaboration but as a risk management strategy: just as vulnerable communities organise to mitigate physical threats, we create a digital space where participants can empower themselves, generating an asynchronous and digital *dialogue of knowledge* that persists even without the researcher's presence. Thus, we ensure that the study is governed by principles of horizontality and de-hierarchisation of knowledge, inherent to feminist research (Gallego-Márquez, 2026). The researcher abandons the lurker position to become a facilitator (Zapata and Rondán, 2016) who helps sustain a space designed for speech and safety to circulate freely. Ultimately, we do not study safe spaces by invading them; we learn about them by building them collectively.

In the specific case of Discord, operationalising this method entails co-designing the server's digital architecture from its foundations. It is not about delivering a *turnkey* space but inviting participants into the construction from its genesis. Moderation dynamics, crucial for securing the environment, are not imposed top-down but proposed based on prior interviews with expert moderators and refined collectively, transmuting punitive norms into coexistence agreements. Similarly, the space's symbolic identity—the server image, naming, and taxonomy of text and voice channels—is decided through assembly dynamics that combine the synchronicity of voice chat with the asynchronous reflection of text threads. In this process, dialogic consensus is prioritised over simple democratic voting, preventing majorities from silencing minority sensitivities within the group itself.

This entire process is framed within informed and ongoing digital consent, where it is made explicit that user agency prevails over research interests, allowing participants to revoke their participation at any time without penalty. This consent transcends the bureaucratic formalism of a static document—the traditional *fine print*—to articulate itself as a living, negotiated conversation. The aim is to enable an environment where the capacity to establish boundaries or exercise refusal is explicitly validated as part of the space's safety. Consent is thus understood as a dynamic, reversible, and bidirectional process, permanently sustained by communication, horizontality, and mutual trust.

Through creating this environment, we seek not only to conduct ethical, rigorous research adapted to the medium's reality but also to cultivate a space with potential for autonomy and *life of its own*. We aspire for the server to endure

beyond academic timescales, sustaining itself as a place that, whilst straddling the public and private, remains safe, self-managed by conscious individuals, and based on radical trust. Ultimately, this is about erecting a refuge where gaming dynamics do not expel those who do not identify with the cis-heteronorm; a space where methodology ceases to be an end in itself and becomes a tool for social repair, demonstrating that another way of inhabiting and playing on the internet is possible.

4. METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

The methodological proposal emerging from this research is not merely instrumental; it constitutes a political and ethical stance towards the field of study. When engaging with digital communities on platforms such as Discord, we immediately encounter complex issues of selection and field access that transcend logistics. Following the most recent ethical guidelines for internet research (AoIR, 2025), researchers must question not only how to obtain data but also the impact their intrusion has on the ecosystem. In this regard, research ceases to be an extraction and is instead conceived as a repair of the diaspora: an attempt to understand the expulsion of otherness and to contribute, through academic praxis, to the visibility or construction of habitable alternatives.

By observing these two case studies—the hegemonic community and the dissident refuge—we can see radical differences in the methodological, epistemological, and ethical approaches required, even if similar research methods are used at their base. The nature of the space dictates the ethics of access.

In hostile spaces, it is necessary to understand that vulnerability lies within user interactions. Paradoxically, these are spaces where individuals, by virtue of their socially privileged positions (cis-heterosexual men), who are not subject to concrete or physical danger, voluntarily expose themselves to a very particular form of performing gender. This constant performance of hegemonic masculinity ultimately becomes a corset: a rigid structure of virile validation that stifles the possibility of alternative forms of relationship and care (Messerchmidt, 2018). Methodologically, this involves observing how the platform's architecture incentivises such rigidity by analysing power dynamics without intervening, so as not to alter the manifestation of systemic toxicity.

Conversely, in safe spaces, the logic is reversed. We face the treatment of a space to which, initially, access may be denied due to its strict privacy and protective exclusion norms. However, the greater challenge is ethical: our mere presence as external observers would disrupt the trust and intimacy dynamics that constructed the place. Entering a digital *coven* with the researcher's gaze inevitably profanes it.

This is where the repair proposal gains methodological significance. If studying a pre-existing safe space threatens its integrity, the ethical response is not to force entry but to facilitate the creation of a new one. Thus, research becomes an act of service: we build the infrastructure for the community

to gather, and it is in that process of joint construction and habitation that knowledge is produced, respecting participants' safety and freeing ourselves, as researchers, from the extractivist role.

Therefore, we situate methodological reflection on a *power scale*, where depending on how we see ourselves reflected relative to the space we are to inhabit, we must act accordingly but always respecting the ethical principles of digital research and maintaining empathy towards everyone potentially involved.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Research in contemporary gaming communities, mediated by platforms of high technical complexity such as Discord, requires a profound revision of our epistemological and methodological instruments. As argued throughout this article, accessing the field of study is neither a neutral nor purely logistical act; it requires recognising that technology holds agency and that software architecture—its affordances—co-constructs the social reality of subjects. Accordingly, the methodological approach cannot overlook that these digital environments are not mere containers of interaction but actors that shape the possibilities of being and existing online.

This work has shown that structural violence and masculine hegemony in gaming culture generate a *diaspora of otherness*, compelling women and dissident identities to retreat to private spaces for protection. Facing this polarised reality, we conclude that the ethics of access vary radically according to the nature of the inhabited space. In hostile spaces, methodology should focus on observing how hegemonic masculinity's performance becomes a rigid corset for its own users, advising against direct intervention to preserve safety. Conversely, in safe spaces, the traditional extractivist approach is ethically unsustainable, as the mere presence of an external gaze *taints* the intimacy of the refuge. Therefore, we maintain that to research safe spaces without violating them, the most honest path is to abandon the logic of inhabiting a pre-existing space and instead approach the situation by constructing an ad hoc infrastructure. By co-designing the Discord server from its foundations, research ceases to be data extraction and becomes joint knowledge creation and a means to facilitate spaces and connections with people who may relate.

This methodology entails a radical reconfiguration of consent, moving from a static bureaucratic process to understanding it as a living, negotiated, reversible, negotiable, and situated conversation. Thus, we propose that ethics should not be located in signing a paper or ticking a box but rather understood as a dialogical process involving power dynamics that must be constantly reviewed, from methodological design to publication and dissemination.

Finally, we conclude that the ultimate aim of this methodological proposal transcends academic production: we aspire to the *repair of the diaspora*. By nurturing a space with potential for autonomy, we seek for the server to endure beyond research as a self-managed refuge. In so doing, we demonstrate that in-

habiting the internet from care is possible, erecting digital architectures where exclusion is not the norm, but mutual support against the cis-heteronorm.

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The myth of global games, national games, and the folkloresque

Reflections from Brazil

ABSTRACT

The present work reflects on the tensions between gaming as a global phenomenon, and the relationship between games and local/regional cultures. Beginning from a reflection on the ideological positioning of gaming as a global – and almost universal – culture, the present paper moves on to, following recent scholarship, present a more nuanced view on this relationship, reflecting on the idea of regional/national games, and how game developers might reject or claim particular regional links. To operationalise this view, I recruit contemporary work on regional game studies and, to reflect about games to decide to ‘own’ particular links with certain cultures, the ‘folkloresque’ as a bridging concept between folklore, popular cultures and authenticity. To detail how the folkloresque can operate as a relevant concept in this debate regarding regional/national games, I analyse, through a close reading, two independent games made in Brazil during the 2010s, *Dandara* and *Chroma Squad*, detailing their relationship with Brazilian (and other) cultures through the folkloresque. I conclude this paper with a reflection on how the folkloresque can work as a conceptual tool to dive deeper onto how localised cultures might be amalgamated in media productions, and how that can complicate and enrich our understanding of what constitutes a regional game, as well as recruit in different ways the myriad of positionalities that constitute the universe of videogame players around the world.

1. INTRODUCTION

Videogames are no short of myths: beyond the literal engagement with mythical creatures at textual level – from Greek mythology in *Hades* (Supergiant Games, 2020), to Chinese folktales in *Black Myth: Wukong* (Game Science, 2024), to Northern Mexico Tarahumara culture in *Mulaka* (Lienzo, 2018) – the cultural apparatus around videogames also present, their own ideological mythologies (Barthes, 2012). Videogames are, for example, ‘often understood to be the first “global” medium’ (Mandiberg, 2021, p. 177), as if they were ‘untrou-

bled by borders, boundaries, cultures and languages’ (Mandiberg, 2021, p. 181), when the reality demonstrates that there is substantial hidden work throughout history to build up this myth (Carlson & Corliss, 2011; Mandiberg, 2021).

In this myth, videogames are mostly seen as the product made by big conglomerates, often led by their headquarters in mainstream gaming spaces, such as Anglo-Saxon North America or Japan. Such mythic constitution of game production has a clear side-effect for game developers. As a way to leverage this ideological setting, game-makers often have to navigate tensions between producing works that are seen as “localisation ready”, easier to be transposed and adapted to different markets (Carlson & Corliss, 2011; Kerr, 2017; Vanderhoef, 2021; Webber, 2020), or leveraging their own ‘cultural fragrance’ (Iwabuchi, 2002; Webber, 2020), leaning into their pedigree in the case of prestigious locations, such as Japan (Consalvo, 2022; Hutchinson, 2025), or their own ‘exoticism’, in peripheral spaces (Švelch, 2021).

The present work contributes to the recent scholarship (Barreto & Jensen, 2020; Krawczyk, 2024; Li & Li, 2023; Penix-Tadsen, 2016; Pérez-Latorre & Navarro-Remesal, 2022; Švelch, 2021; Webber, 2020) that focuses on the relationship between games and regional/national cultures. I examine how particular connections between text and place might be established through close readings (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2011) of two games made in Brazil: *Dandara* (Long Hat House, 2018) and *Chroma Squad* (Behold Studios, 2015).

In order to operationalise the different strategies and the different potential links to (different) local and popular culture(s), I recruit the cultural theory concept of the folkloresque (Foster, 2016; Tolbert, 2016), highlighting the contact zones between vernacular, informal, noninstitutional nature of folklore (Noyes, 2012), and more institutionalised, often commercial and proprietary forms of popular culture (Tolbert, 2016).

In the following sections, therefore, I present a brief overview of the key concepts that underpin this research – namely, a brief discussion on regional game studies, and the folkloresque as a bridging concept between folklore, popular cultures and authenticity – to then move onto the analysis of the two games. I conclude with a reflection on how the folkloresque works as a conceptual tool to better understand how localised cultures might be amalgamated in media productions and how that can complicate our understanding of what constitutes a regional game.

2. REGIONAL GAME STUDIES AND NATIONAL GAMES

While the rhetoric around videogames historically tended to emphasise their global nature by reproducing narratives around income and the ubiquity of certain platforms and games, recent scholarship has deliberately challenged these more traditional models, be it looking at flops and failures (Navarro-Remesal, 2017; Nicoll, 2019), at forgotten biographies, especially when developers do not fit the “male genius” mold (Lemon & Rietveld, 2020; Navarro-Remesal,

2024; Nooney, 2013), or in looking at how games and gaming cultures have been developed in particular places around the world (Swalwell, 2021). The work presented here is aligned to the latter.

Different authors have looked at the relationship between particular regions and games, including here the UK (Webber, 2020), China (Li & Li, 2023), Italy (Carbone & Fassone, 2020), Japan (Consalvo, 2022; Hutchinson, 2025), Europe (Pérez-Latorre & Navarro-Remesal, 2022), and Latin America (Penix-Tadsen, 2016). This debate is summarised by Krawczyk (2024), who identified across the Game Studies literature different categories for associating a game with a place/region. Two of the most common ways of association are based on where the developers are based; and on the ‘textual’ representation of certain places through history, geography and culture. These two categories, however, still create some tensions: while they easily explain *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red, 2015) as a Polish videogame, or *Thank Goodness You’re Here* (Coal Supper, 2024) as a British game, they do not help in other instances. A game such as *Cai Cai Balão* (DADIU, 2020), produced by students at IT University of Copenhagen in which the player immerses themselves in the world of *baloeiros*, the hot air balloon¹ crews in São Paulo, Brazil (who acted as consultants for the game production) becomes more difficult to be classified through these categories.

To complicate this issue, even in small-scale game development, the imaginary that games are a global medium is a recurrent idea (Vanderhoef, 2021). In defining the key aspects related to the ‘transnational indie imaginary’, Vanderhoef (2021, p. 161) argues that while some independent developers “double down” on their origins, most independent game developers tend to ‘omit or occlude national signifiers in their games in order to (re)produce transnational entertainment products that appeal to global markets [...]’ (idem).

When mapping the different ways games have been associated with regions or national states, Vanderhoef (2021) argues that another way these links might be established could be via specific sensibilities that appeal to the local audience, which might be lost in translation for a different public. A similar version of this argument is put forward by Webber (2020, p. 143) who, looking at Britishness in productions such as *Everybody’s Gone to the Rapture* (The Chinese Room, 2016), claims that these games, due to being ‘situated within [...] recognisably British landscapes, offe[r] a referential form of experience which speaks to a British audience in a way that it may not do to international players’.

This consideration, therefore, opens space for questions regarding the representation of certain countries to a “global” audience, and how that might fall onto stereotypes. Discussing Brazilian representation through culture, Barreto and Jensen (2020) problematize the idea of “Brasilidade” as a ‘prepackaged cluster of familiar signifiers portraying a unified cultural landscape’ (Barreto & Jensen, 2020, p. 1668) for outsiders including, for example, ‘*Carnaval, favelas, Rio de Janeiro, beaches, crime, bossa nova and samba music, the Christ statue, the Amazon, and Pelé as an avatar for Brazil’s futebol obsession*’ (Barreto &

1. The hot air balloons described here could be considered a cross between transport hot air balloons and flying lanterns: they are often as big as transport hot air balloons, but they are not controlled by any pilot.

Jensen, 2020, p. 1668). These tokens have been exploited by different international game developers to signify Brazil: *Little Big Planet* (Media Molecule, 2008), for example, recruits samba and *carnaval*, and *Max Payne 3* (Rockstar Games, 2012), *favelas* and violence. Fighting games, such as the *Street Fighter* and the *Tekken* series, mix more problematic representations, such as the Amazon region as a space of savages – e.g., Blanka, in *Street Fighter II* (Capcom, 1993) – or highly sexualized characters – e.g., Laura Matsuda, in *Street Fighter V* (Capcom, 2016), and Christie Monteiro, in *Tekken 6* (Bandai Namco, 2008) – with more relevant connections, such as having typically Brazilian fighting styles represented through characters – e.g., Laura Matsuda with Brazilian Jiu Jitsu in *Street Fighter V* (Capcom, 2016); Eddy Gordo and Christie Monteiro with *capoeira* in *Tekken 6* (Bandai Namco, 2008). Of course, neither of the games discussed here were produced in Brazil, but the way they communicate “Brazilianess” has been influential to games developed in Brazil, with most local games opting for either “hiding” their Brazilian origin, or doubling down on their situatedness, a topic that will be retaken in the methodology section.

In relation to the quality of these representations, however, Barreto and Jensen (2020) – in a slightly different iteration of the argument presented by Vanderhoef (2021) and Webber (2020) – argue that going beyond these stereotypical views of “Brazilianess”, and digging deeper into aspects of the myriad of lived experience of Brazilians, can lead to more accurate depictions, even if they might end up “lost in translation” (Vanderhoef, 2021). As an example, Kotaki (2016) argues that more than stereotypical tokens such as beaches, samba and carnival, resilience and the idea that “no matter what happens, life goes on”, runs deeper in the Brazilian imaginary, and therefore, tapping into that would lead towards more accurate Brazilian representations.

What this position on the use of particular cultures in games present is, therefore, a more nuanced approach to read the way locality might influence game production, from more explicit, easily perceptible references to ones that might only interpellate cultural insiders. A question that remains, though, is related to the relationship between situated cultural references and game development, more specifically in how these might be employed to build a sense of authenticity. In the next section, then, I turn to the concept of folkloresque (Foster, 2016; Tolbert, 2016), which might shed light on how such processes can occur in commercial productions.

3. FOLKLORE AND FOLKLORESQUE

Folklore is defined, in a broader sense, as the shared vernacular elements of everyday life, underlying elements not necessarily regulated by formal institutions (Noyes, 2012). As a concept, it can be linked to the romantic nationalism of the 19th century, which saw in folk traditions a pivotal element to establish unified national identities as part of the project of modern nation-state building (Fischman, 2012). Throughout the 20th century, though, cultural theorists chal-

lenged this naïve position that considered ‘folk tradition[s] streaming unsullied from a pure social source, unclouded by mediation and unpolluted by self-conscious manipulation or foreign influences’ (Noyes, 2012, p. 29), indicating how folklore often constructed identities rather than expressing a pre-existing identity shared among cultural insiders (Noyes, 2012). Therefore, contemporary understandings of folklore highlight its communal nature, but considering that this communal element is grounded in shared forms and formats, and not in pre-determined identities (Noyes, 2012). Such focus on forms – therefore, on practices – reiterate the liminal nature of folklore, remarking its nature as part of vernacular cultural elements that are performed, rather than an essential element as earlier (romantic) conceptions of identity might have indicated.

Such understanding of folklore as having a social base is relevant to comprehend the role that folklore can play in the contemporary age. There is, as Bacchilega (2012) claims, an undeniable “web of intertextuality” between folklore and contemporary cultural productions. However, these intertextual connections do not erase the differences, nor the ‘material and ideological relations that inform the web’s links and hierarchies’ (Bacchilega, 2012, p. 457). It is in these hierarchical relationships that the idea of folklore – and, later, of folkloresque – become relevant for analysing the relationship between cultures and cultural products such as videogames. Relying on folklore can produce an aura of authenticity, which can be employed to distinguish certain cultural productions.

The folkloresque, therefore, emerges as a concept to highlight the contact zones between the vernacular, informal, non-institutional nature of folklore (Noyes, 2012), and the more institutionalised, often commercial and proprietary forms of contemporary popular culture (Tolbert, 2016). More explicitly, Tolbert (2016, p. 16) defines the folkloresque as a ‘process of bricolage by which commercial interests cannibalize folklore, extracting component parts and reassembling them in a product that retains a connection to folklore, or seems folkloric, or has the style of folklore – and, most important, sells because of this perceived relationship’. But how exactly folkloresque appropriations operate?

Foster (2016) categorise the intertextual relationships between folklore elements and cultural productions in three main approaches: version or adaptation; precise allusion (or folklorism); and fuzzy allusion (or folkloresque integration). In his understanding, the first approach would be direct adaptation of a known folkloric narrative. The second approach – precise allusion – would entail the use of ‘identifiable characters, motifs and narratives from a shared tradition [...] within a new medium and narrative’ (Foster, 2016, p. 46), creatively resituating (and potentially remediating) folklore. The third approach, fuzzy allusion, alludes to folkloric motifs, characters and tale types in unusual juxtaposition: in other words, it is a wholly new creation that is not based on a specific tradition, but one that alludes to folkloric elements in an imprecise way (Foster, 2016). The audience might be able to feel the ‘folkloric odour’ in these

folkloresque productions, but would not be capable of relating back these elements to specific sources in specific folkloric traditions (Foster, 2016).

These categories are useful to understand, then, how commercial productions might refer to specific forms of folkloric and vernacular elements to potentially leverage specific elements that distinguish such productions in the contemporary media landscape. Such ideas might also be relevant under the light of the earlier discussion on how locality might become embedded (or not) in particular productions, and how such ideas might be combined or erased in independent productions (Kotaki, 2016; Vanderhoef, 2021).

4. METHODS: CASES AND ANALYSIS

In this paper, I analyse two Brazilian games: *Dandara* (Long Hat House, 2018), and *Chroma Squad* (Behold Studios, 2015). These games were selected because they fall in-between the two main approaches to the use of culture in peripheral independent game production, either eschewing their origins to make a “localisation-ready” product, or doubling-down on their locality as a way to rise above the mass of games released every month around the world (Vanderhoef, 2021). But how are these two poles represented in local Brazilian game production.

There is a substantial number of recent popular Brazilian releases that had reasonable recognition in Brazil and abroad and that avoid establishing explicit connections to Brazil, such as *Vengeful Guardian: Moonrider* (Joymasher, 2023), *Out There Somewhere* (MiniBoss, 2016), *Horizon Chase* (Aquiris, 2015) or *Mullet Madjack* (Hammer95 Studios, 2024). These games rely on other strategies such as alluding to particular game genres (e.g., fast-paced FPS in *Mullet Madjack*) and gaming periods (e.g., 16-bit era in *Vengeful Guardian*) while dealing with specifically fictional worlds, or presenting a more global perspective depicting different countries in the case of *Horizon Chase*. In either case, the result is a certain erasure of their Brazilian roots.

In the opposite pole, we have games that deal explicitly with Brazilian themes, often relying on hyperlocal cultures such as *171* (Betagames, 2022), inspired by São Paulo state urban cultures and often dubbed as the *Brazilian GTA*, indigenous legends in *Aritana e as Máscaras Gêmeas* (Duaik Entretenimento, 2021), North-eastern *sertão* culture in *Árida* (Aoca Game Lab, 2019), or Southern (specifically Rio Grande do Sul) *gaúcho* culture in *Gaúcho and the Grasslands* (Epoepia Games, 2025). In that case, these games have a clear Brazilian culture inflection, often depending on some kind of insider knowledge to fully follow the game universe, and sometimes relying on certain stereotypical views (e.g., crime in *171*) or dealing clearly with folkloric entities and elements (e.g., the use of *boitatá*, a folkloric creature, in *Gaúcho and the Grasslands*). How are, then, the two selected cases, different from these games?

Dandara is closer to the latter category, relying on a known folk hero in Brazil –Dandara dos Palmares (Caetano & Castro, 2020; Williams, 2016) – but

bringing in references and ideas from different domains, periods and cultures, rather than simply reproducing or adapting the known narratives about Dandara dos Palmares. This expansion leads to a meta-commentary on current Brazilian society.

Chroma Squad, on the other hand, can seem a game that falls under the category of Brazilian games that try to distance themselves from Brazil, since at a first glance it is a game that pay homage to super sentai², a media genre typically Japanese. However, as discussed in following sections, a deeper analysis makes clear its Brazilian roots as well as raises questions regarding the relationship between national culture(s), adaptations and, how power dynamics across international actors can affect the way certain cultural elements are attributed to particular locations.

Both games discussed here were analysed through a close reading (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2011) approach. Close reading, as applied to games, derive from a long-standing tradition in the humanities, in understanding that meaning is produced during the process of fruition of a certain cultural product (Carr, 2009), and not fixed in the product/text itself. It draws on and share traits with other analogous methods, such as textual analysis (Carr, 2009) and reader-response theory based methods (Fullerton & Farber, 2025), recognising that texts are never read in isolation, and on the same way that intertextual elements influence meaning-making processes, readers also bring in their own ‘reading formations’ when engaging with a text (Carr, 2009).

In this particular case, I employed my positionality as a Brazilian player-as-analyst to select and analyse the most salient ludonarrative constructs, combining both plot/narrative and ludic (e.g., game mechanics and dynamics) elements. These aspects were supported by some contextual information, leading to an analysis that discusses how cultural/folkloric elements (from direct adaptations to fuzzy allusions) were recruited in *Dandara* and *Chroma Squad*, establishing then specific connections with different kinds of “Brazilianesses”, as well as more generic structures beyond Brazilian representations.

5. DANDARA

Dandara (Long Hat House, 2018) is a 2D metroidvania developed by a small studio based in Belo Horizonte, capital of Minas Gerais state, Brazil. The title refers to the main/playable character in the game, making alluding to the folk hero Dandara dos Palmares. Dandara dos Palmares is, alongside Zumbi dos Palmares, recognised as one of the leaders of Quilombo dos Palmares, the biggest self-governing community organised by escaped enslaved people³ in colonial proslavery Brazil during the 16th century (Caetano & Castro, 2020). Palmares lasted for more than a century, resisting Dutch and Portuguese incursions until it fell for a Portuguese expedition in 1694 (Caetano & Castro, 2020; Williams, 2016). While the existence of Dandara has been questioned by some historians due to the lack of official records (Williams, 2016), here I agree with

2. Mixed-gender superhero combat teams, common in Japan from the 1970s to the 1990s (Sugawa-Shimada, 2014).

3. In Portuguese, the general term to describe such communities is ‘quilombo’. In English, the favoured term would be Maroon community (Williams, 2016). Even though Palmares was mainly organised by Africans or people of African descent, historical records indicate that peoples from different origins, including indigenous, mixed race, and marginal whites were also accepted in the community (Caetano & Castro, 2020; Williams, 2016).

Caetano and Castro (2020) that more important than trying to distinguish myth from fact is how Dandara dos Palmares became, especially in last decades, a collective totem for intersectional (antiracist, feminist) resistance in Brazil. But how are these elements recruited in *Dandara*?

Rather than trying to simply adapt the history of Palmares or Dandara dos Palmares – therefore, going beyond the first level of integration according to Foster (2016) – the game places a well-known Brazilian folk hero in a fictional world that is peppered with references from sci-fi (Barreto & Jensen, 2020), afro-futurism, and from Brazilian contemporary popular culture and its own recent history (Maia & Silva, 2023).

The overarching plot of *Dandara* is organised around more generic themes well-explored in heroic narratives, such as a world that has fallen out of balance by the emergence of an authoritarian figure (in the game, Eldar), the dichotomic relationship between (raising) oppression and (fading) freedom, and the rise of a new hero (Dandara) who is called upon to restore equilibrium. While this reliance on more general themes well-known in multiple folk traditions could be seen as a nod to fuzzy allusion – alluding to folkloric elements in an imprecise way – most of the referential elements in *Dandara* can be read through what Foster (2016) dubs as ‘folklorism’, or precise allusion.

These precise allusions are not only limited to the plot, characters or locations – since certain areas in the game make direct reference to Palmares – but also to how certain ludic decisions are integrated into the game, and the way Dandara traverse the game space is a good example of such process in the way it establishes links with different elements and iconographies from Afro-Brazilian traditions, such as the link between the genre (Metroidvania), the map and the role of *encruzilhadas*⁴ (crossroads) in the Afro-Brazilian⁵ cosmovision (Lima, 2025), and how salt is iconographically employed in certain traditions.

As a Metroidvania, the world of *Dandara* is made of different rooms that are interconnected. There is no clear indication of an “optimal path”, and the player must find their own way through the world, traversing the different areas and rooms. In that, the map – revealed to the player part by part, only after rooms have been visited – can be considered as a map constituted of *encruzilhadas*, in that almost every room holds not only an intersection, but also an important moment in terms of where to go next, and what to do next; it is a space where contradictions and possibilities exist (Lima, 2025). In some Afro-Brazilian religious traditions, the *encruzilhada* is the space occupied by Exú, one of the most emblematic orixás (orishas) in that it is an entity that challenges usual Western conceptions of time and space: ‘Exu killed a bird yesterday with a stone that he only threw today’ (Lima, 2025, p. 8). While the game does not explicitly dwell on Afro-Brazilian religions, the option to rely on a genre that is contingent on choices and on simulated *encruzilhadas* can be seen as a subtle, but relevant, nod to this particular well-known aspect of Afro-Brazilian religions and traditions (for Brazilians who are and are not initiated in this specific

4. Beyond the scope of this paper, Lima (2025) discusses the relationship between the *encruzilhada* and contemporary decolonial onto-epistemologies.

5. In a reflection that goes beyond the scope of this paper, Kosby and Bueno (2019) discuss how the fact that salt is symbolically read as a purification icon in multiple religions means that it can become either an act of well-wishing, or an act of religious violence against Afro-Brazilian temples in contemporary Brazil.



Figure 1: Dandara can only move across the salt-covered (white) edges. The object inspected describes a carving making reference to “a couple, ensnaked, laughing”, potentially making reference to Dandara and Zumbi dos Palmares.



Figure 2: Augustus, one of the bosses in Dandara, a reference to the military dictatorship in 20th century and, arguably, the rise of militaristic discourses in contemporary right-wing movements in Brazil

culture). These links between game and Afro-Brazilian iconographies, however, are not only related to the map/level design, but also to specific mechanics.

In order to traverse the different rooms, the player is not free to move anywhere but can only move by attaching Dandara to one of the edges of the screen/room (figure 1). The movement, therefore, is contingent on jumps, and controlled by screen flicks on the right side of the screen, in the mobile version, or flicks in the right analog stick, if using a controller. However, Dandara can only explore her world, dubbed as ‘The Salt’ in the opening cutscene, landing

across spaces covered in salt (as represented in Figure 1, the edges in white). This particular design decision not only adds a specific challenge to gameplay but also can be justified in integrating a ludic choice with narrative/cultural elements. Salt is related to purification in different religions, including those of Afro-Brazilian (Kosby & Bueno, 2019) origins, and such connection alludes to Dandara's mission to restore harmony by purifying a now corrupt, oppressive world.

Throughout the game, Dandara moves across different areas freeing them from the “Eldarianos” (Eldar's followers). Using flicks on the left side of the screen, in the mobile version, or flicks on the left analog stick on a controller, Dandara can use her arrows to eliminate enemies. The main goal, however, is to dismantle Eldar's operation, and that is done by solving puzzles throughout the areas, using the help of allies that oppose Eldar's oppressive regime. One of the first areas to be cleared in the game is named as “Vila dos Artistas” (Village of Artists), and it is an important area in *Dandara* because it signals two key elements in the game. Firstly, it highlights one of the central topics in the game, the dichotomic relationship between art and creativity (symbolised by Dandara's allies), and oppressive order and economical exploitation, represented by the different bosses such the aforementioned General Augustus (figure 2) or Eldar, the main boss, aligned to a exploitative neoliberal work ethic (Maia & Silva, 2023). Secondly, the particular framing of the area as both an urban setting and one that concentrates artists opens space for the developers to bring in several intertextual elements borrowed from modern and contemporary Brazilian culture, for example, references to artists such as the modernist painter Tarsila do Amaral (figure 3), or to Clube da Esquina (figure 4), an important musical movement in Minas Gerais (Maia & Silva, 2023). On the same way, much of the assets and scenarios – especially in the urban setting areas – are inspired by everyday elements found in major Brazilian cities, mimicking the same road signs, graffiti styles (Maia & Silva, 2023), and regional speech mannerisms (figure 5).

The game progresses with the player liberating different areas and allies that have either been in hiding or controlled by Eldar, until reaching the centre of Eldar's domains, where efficiency, order, and “hard work” are seen as the only way of progressing to a “better future”. Such structure demonstrates how *Dandara* operates in a space between precise and fuzzy allusions (Foster, 2016). While the overall plot can be seen as another iteration of generic folkloric motifs found in different traditions (i.e., the rise of oppressive powers that impose narrower values, and the emergence of a folk hero to liberate people from this oppression), there are precise allusions in the way the game recruit intertextual elements from Brazilian culture, such as the particular references to characters, movements, and everyday life elements such as ways of speaking. For a Brazilian audience, however, the fuzzy allusion gets closer to a precise allusion in the way the two opposing forces depicted in the game can be related to structures of feeling (Williams, 2012) in recent Brazilian history, depicting the rise of

Figure 3: Scene depicting Tarsila's house, making reference to one of her most famous art pieces, the Abaporu.



Figure 4: Room referring to Clube da Esquina, a playword with its literal meaning (Corner's club), also making reference to the important musical movement from Minas Gerais, Brazil.



Figure 5: In the Portuguese version, characters often have speech mannerisms that situate their origins (e.g.: “nó” is a typical interjection from Minas Gerais vernacular speech)



far-right and the persecution of the artistic class in public discourses oriented towards order and narrow views on economic development.

In that, I agree with other authors (Barreto & Jensen, 2020; Maia & Silva, 2023) that *Dandara* is, therefore, a game that is unapologetically Brazilian. It

draws on Afro-Brazilian traditions, folk, and contemporary popular culture references to represent a different – and, arguably, less stereotypical – sense of “Brasilidade” in ways that incorporate references to Brazil that are, at the same time, recognisable by cultural insiders, as argued by other scholars (Webber, 2020) but also capable of expanding the understanding of that particular cultural space for outsiders.

6. CHROMA SQUAD

Chroma Squad (Behold Studios, 2015) is a turn-based RPG produced by the Brasilia-based company Behold Studios. In *Chroma Squad*, the player is responsible to manage a super sentai crew recording its own TV show. The player must navigate the tensions of balancing the budget and attracting new audience members in the most spectacular fashion during the (turn-based) battles. In that, *Chroma Squad* relies heavily on humour, and establish substantial intertextual relationships with different subcultures, such as super sentai (figure 6), tokusatus⁶ and, more broadly, action movies. Considering that super sentai and tokusatus are genres well-established as Japanese (Consalvo, 2022), it would be easy to claim that *Chroma Squad* falls between an adaptation or even precise allusion to Japanese popular culture. In that, and considering the way super sentai and tokusatus are, per se, already folkloresque – as they play around usual folkloric dichotomies such as good vs evil, while also dealing with specific elements of Japanese culture, such as the nuclear postwar trauma (Sugawa-Shimada, 2014) – it would be possible to claim that *Chroma Squad* plays with this trait while reinforcing the transnational imaginary in game development (Vanderhoef, 2021), avoiding direct links with its place of origin, Brazil. However, as argued by Amaro and Freitas (2025), despite a salient link

6. Literally translated as ‘special effects’, tokusatsu is the term used to refer to tv shows dedicated to lone superheroes (Sugawa-Shimada, 2014). It could be considered that super sentai is a subgenre sprawling off tokusatsu (Sugawa-Shimada, 2014)



Figure 6: Cutscene, finishing with the typical formation pose of super sentais, when the transformation from regular humans to superheroes is triggered by the player during the gameplay.

to Japanese elements, *Chroma Squad* is a game typically Brazilian. Two different elements can be recruited here to support this argument.

Firstly, *Chroma Squad* plays significantly with elements that are quintessentially Brazilian, in that it combines ‘folk’ elements such as the embracement of precarity and *gambiarras* (de Paula & Luersen, 2023; Messias & Mussa, 2020; Tietzmann et al., 2023), humour, and self-deprecation. *Gambiarra*, a popular term employed to designate ‘cheap, practical, improvised solutions to diverse sorts of problems’ (de Paula & Luersen, 2023, p. 143) is a key phenomenon in Brazilian culture⁷, and is core to the game, including here in the storylines, costumes and equipment used by characters (figure 7). In that, the combination between improvisation/*gambiarras* and humour in media cultures is well-recruited by Behold Studios, making direct links not only with super sentai shows – themselves, often based on low-budget productions (Sugawa-Shimada, 2014) – but also other successes in Brazilian media cultures of late 20th century, such as the Mexican TV show *Chaves (El Chavo del Ocho)*, also an important humouristic reference in Brazilian TV (Martino, 2013). This reference becomes clear in the game broader structure, since the whole gameplay is organised in seasons and episodes, mimicking the production of a TV show. The *gambiarras* become clear in the way progression is established, with the traditional mechanics of upgrading equipment being contingent on everyday life materials (e.g., duct tape, canvas, cardboard) being collected as loot during fights, and a crafting system that allows to produce more sophisticated/better “on (diegetic) camera” materials.

While the gameplay per se follows conventional turn-based RPGs (players have a party of different heroes with specific strengths/weaknesses, move through a grid as in Figure 7, and can attack/defend in turns), there are specific aspects of the gameplay that make deliberate reference to super sentai. Among these, we



7. For example, in South Asia, we have the analogous concept of *jugaad* (Prabhu & Jain, 2015).

Figure 7: *Chroma Squad* gameplay, with the low-tech costume used by the first boss (a cardboard box with boxing gloves)

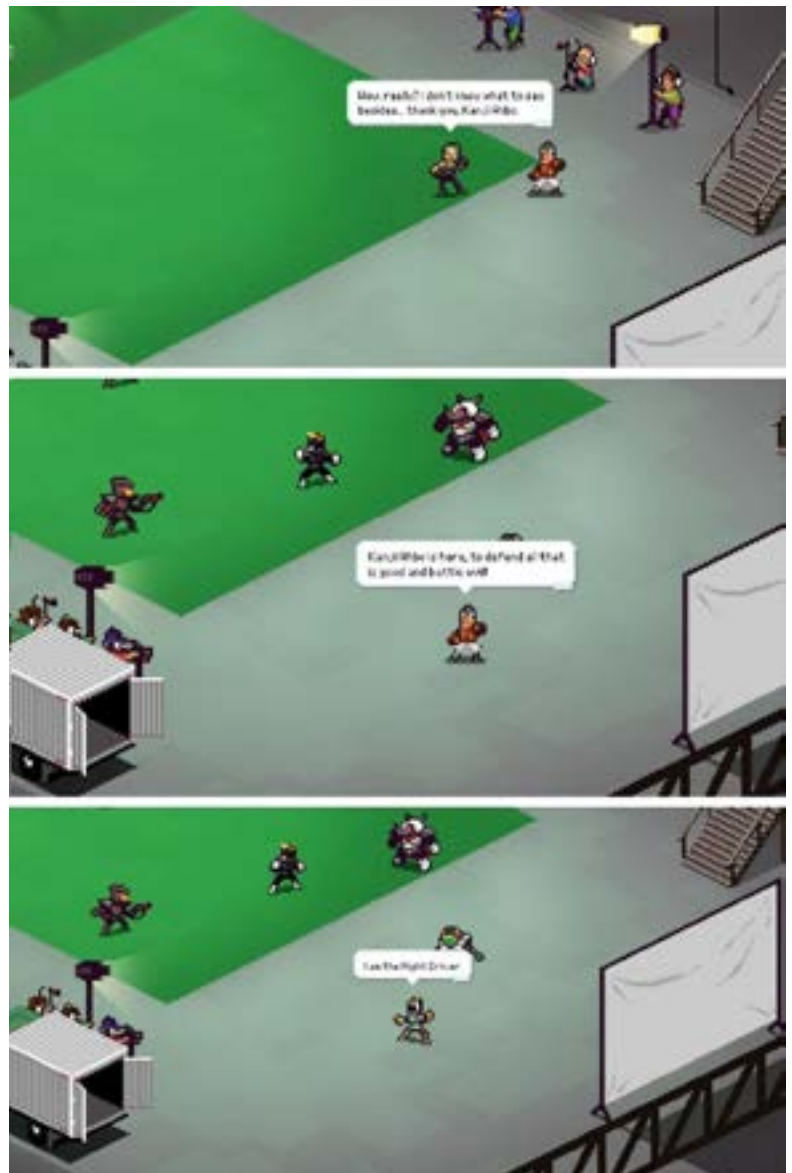


Figure 8: Sequence of scenes in season 5, ep. 1, when Kanji Ahbo reveals to be the Night Driver and becomes temporarily a playable character

have the ability to transform into superheroes (figure 6 above), group attacks or even – in certain chapters – mecha fights (themselves, like regular equipment, passible of being updated through collecting everyday materials and crafting), establishing therefore a clear connection with super sentai as a media genre.

As a second aspect, it is not possible to ignore the deep relationship between tokusatus and super sentai, and Brazilian vernacular culture in the 20th century. Between the 1960s and the early 2000s, tokusatus were a familiar form for Brazilians, easily accessible in multiple open-air TV channels⁸ (Amaro & Freitas, 2025; Isshiki & Miyazaki, 2016). Such pervasiveness created a particular phenomenon in which tokusatus just became part of Brazilian popular culture beyond TV, including toys and itinerant live performances (Amaro & Freitas,

8. The first tokusatsu/Japanese hero in Brazilian TV was National Kid, which was first broadcast in 1964 (Amaro & Freitas, 2025), with the peak of such shows happening between late 1980s and mid-1990s, exactly when I was growing up in Brazil.

2025). In *Chroma Squad*, this popularity is recruited beyond generic super sentai elements⁹, bringing in references to other heroes from earlier generations, such as Kanji Ahbo/Night Driver (figure 7), which makes direct reference – or a precise allusion – to tokusatsu actor Kenji Ohba and *Kamen Raider*.

In this perspective, *Chroma Squad* presents a case that is slightly different from *Dandara* and that, somehow, complicates the relationship between games and regional/national cultures, since it deals at the same time with appropriation and explicitly commercial elements. In that, the folkloresque, as a concept, becomes relevant to examine such production practices and claims to authenticity. As a case, though, *Chroma Squad* is also relevant because it reminds us that, besides production, circulation and the context where reception happens matter.

This becomes clearer when examining how *Chroma Squad* was read outside Brazil by other actors, including the media company Saban. Saban was the distributor and copyright owner of *Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers* (Saban & Levy, 1993), an US-based version of the multiple Japanese super sentai TV shows. Like other super sentai shows, *Power Rangers* was broadcast in Brazilian TV, which emboldened Saban – since 2001 a subsidiary of Disney – to sue Behold Studios for illegal copyright use (Amaro & Freitas, 2025). Threatened with a long legal battle against a multinational conglomerate, Behold Studios settled with a tongue-in-cheek solution, explicitly acknowledging *Power Rangers* as a reference (figure 9).

This process reminds us that, besides the better known issues regarding visibility and stereotyping (Barreto & Jensen, 2020), the sociomaterial conditions – such as economic power relations – are also important when examining transcultural readings of media. More explicitly, the legal action – and the solution adopted – had repercussions to how the product is read across the globe, since it changes the nature of the allusions in *Chroma Squad*. Before, *Chroma Squad* presented a very specific version of fuzzy allusion (Foster, 2016), combining different kinds of references that could be somehow related to particular

9. Among these elements, we can include the use of main and subplots, the archetypal role-based elements, the coloured uniforms that helped identify each team member, the use of mecha robots/gigantism and city-destroying battles, and the trope of the “enemy of the week” (Sugawa-Shimada, 2014).



Figure 9: Chroma Squad title screen on Steam

places, but not necessarily clear-cut. After the settlement, we have a “forced” precise allusion, since it explicitly cites *Power Rangers* (Saban & Levy, 1993).

Saban’s legal action makes strategic use of a particular partial way of understanding the world, one that deliberately ignores (or, at least, questions) the local Brazilian context – and the direct ties between Japanese and Brazilian 20th century popular cultures – rhetorically centralising an American product in this chain of meanings. More problematically, though, this “forced” precise allusion to an American text end up masking the direct Japanese-Brazilian popular cultural flows that happened in the 20th century (Issiki & Miyazaki, 2016), potentially giving the impression to non-Brazilian audiences that the Japan-Brazil connection was always mediated by a third cultural space (the USA). Nevertheless, as discussed in previous sections (Kotaki, 2016; Webber, 2020), such markers and connections are still accessible by an audience that is familiar with the local context, reiterating how certain games can reach specific audiences in particular ways that other audiences might not access.

7. FINAL REMARKS

As cultural products, it is undeniable that videogames can end up drawing on specific regional and/or national elements. While the idea that games are inherently global is a persistent myth in game development (Vanderhoef, 2021), different examples, including the two games analysed here, demonstrate that the reality is much more nuanced. The idea of folkloresque (Foster, 2016) as a spectrum that describes how different references might be recruited in particular cultural products, either as direct adaptations, specific and traceable references, or just as amalgam of loose cultural reference points, presents itself as quite valuable in supporting the different nuances regarding local cultures and videogame production.

Throughout the two cases presented here, *Dandara* and *Chroma Squad*, this paper contributes to recent discussions on national/regional games, in which it demonstrated how different strategies can be adopted by game developers to integrated cultural references in their games. Rather than simply rejecting particular locations or falling into stereotypical tropes, what those two cases demonstrate is that it is possible to represent a sense of locality without being tied to existing narratives or excluding outsiders. *Dandara*, in that respect, present itself as a quite relevant case interweaving colonial and contemporary history, managing to capture the struggles in Brazilian society. It also works as an important case to highlight the challenges implicated in adapting known narratives: in a later interview, *Dandara* creators discussed how their initial idea was to produce a game about Palmares, but the complexities implicated in the historical research – and, more importantly, the repercussions of that moment to inequalities contemporary Brazilian society – made them decide on a different direction (Coimbra, 2020). In that, the dual approach intertwining fuzzy and precise allusions (or folkloresque and folklorism) proved an important creative solution,

giving enough range for developers to add elements specific from Brazilian culture without resorting solely to stereotypes or hyper-specific references.

Chroma Squad, on the other hand, might seem at a first glance a mere adaptation or reliant on precise allusions to a particular text (*Power Rangers*), but a closer look at it demonstrates how its precise allusions also play with “Brasildade” in a broader sense through gambiarras, precarity and humour. In that process, *Chroma Squad* raises further questions regarding intercultural connections (i.e., between Japan and Brazil), and the limits between popular culture and transnational appropriations. Moreover, it also acts as a relevant case reiterating that in cultural spaces, sociomaterial conditions – including here the power relations between different cultural actors – still matter, as is illustrated by the way Saban forced developer’s hands in having *Power Rangers* explicitly recognised as a referential point, when culturally this is, at least, questionable (Amaro & Freitas, 2025). In that, *Chroma Squad* reiterates an important message known to those familiar with cultural studies: while the way makers rely on different cultural sources and references is important, this only shows part of the issue. As the Saban legal challenge demonstrates, the way actors that are cultural outsiders might read a product can be quite different from the way cultural insiders might do so, following Webber (2020).

In a world that is, contradictorily, interconnected and fractured as ever, researching the relationship between regional/national cultures and cultural products are established becomes essential, and hopefully this paper can inspire further research into the production, circulation, and reception of games across multiple local contexts. While this seems to be a fruitful field for further research in this field, including on the integration between such production practices, local policies pro-game development, I single out here the need to focus on the differences in the local and global reception of games that play around these different degrees of borrowing from particular cultures (adaptation, folklorism and folkloresque), since such processes are important not only from an economic perspective, but also in relation to process related to intercultural meaning-making. Looking at the use of certain culture as reference points in different cultural settings can allow us, those interested in cultural products, to move beyond narrower discussions on cultural preservation, adaptation, and appropriation, and explore from a more nuanced and detailed perspective how such integrations can be sought without necessarily resorting to defensive and isolationist, or merely essentialist approaches.

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Moral Learning and Ludic Responsibility

When Interactive Narrative Becomes an Educational Experience

ABSTRACT

This article examines the educational potential of interactive storytelling, a hybrid form that integrates elements of cinema and video games, which blends emotional engagement with decision-making agency. This study, based on experiments and cases related to the effects of violent games on players, demonstrates how interactive storytelling can foster critical thinking, moral reflection, and self-assessment by allowing users to directly influence the story's progression and engage in intentional reflection. This approach creates a learning environment like situated learning, where participants are encouraged to assume perceived responsibilities and face ethical dilemmas in a secure setting. This review underscores that, when developed thoughtfully with a clear ethical framework to prevent negative outcomes such as playful dissociation and to enhance the prosocial benefits, interactive storytelling can serve as a genuine ethical laboratory for the 21st century—one that encourages responsibility, awareness, and moral development.

1. A HYBRID MEDIUM

Interactive storytelling occupies the intersection between cinema and video games, drawing essential features from both to form a compelling hybrid medium. It combines the passive yet immersive qualities of film with the agency and choice found in video games, which often associate the ability to act with moral detachment and limited emotional involvement (*'I kill in the game because it's just a game'*). The potential of interactive storytelling lies in merging the pleasure of being told a story with the power to influence its ending. However, even years after the first experiments in interactivity, this hybrid form has not achieved the anticipated commercial success, due to its inherent ambivalence: it is not engaging enough for traditional gamers nor sufficiently linear to attract a broader audience. This study examines the underexplored educational potential of interactive storytelling as a framework for reimagining the medium. It

allows viewers to experience the emotional involvement of a film while making choices that meaningfully affect the narrative, as in a video game. The key questions are: Does such emotional involvement lead viewers to maintain a state of playful dissociation? What effects might the creation of these hybrid products for educational purposes have on society? And how can we measure both the engagement and the consequences on the viewer-player's experience?

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To address the research questions, this study adopts an exploratory theoretical-analytical design grounded in an interdisciplinary approach that integrates contributions from game studies, theories of interactivity, and the learning sciences. The aim is to examine how specific narrative configurations and mechanisms of agency inherent in interactive storytelling can support active learning processes. Within the educational domain, several scholars have highlighted the pedagogical potential of integrating storytelling and play to foster meaningful learning, critical reflection, and participation. Foundational contributions include Schön (1983) and Kolb (1984) on experiential and reflective learning, as well as McCall (2011, 2016) and Gee (2003, 2013) on the use of video games to promote active learning. The study is structured as a reasoned narrative review of the literature, aimed at identifying theoretical frameworks and empirical studies relevant to the concepts of agency, experiential learning, and participation. It also includes a critical discussion of both the affordances and possible limitations of video games, situating the analysis within the broader scientific debate on the relationship between interactivity, digital media, and learning processes. The analysis follows a comparative and thematic approach designed to relate narrative and interactive devices to established models of active learning. Given the breadth and heterogeneity of the field, the review is not intended to be exhaustive; rather, it prioritizes conceptually and empirically relevant contributions. This methodological choice, while acknowledging its selective scope, seeks to foster a dialogue between theoretical perspectives and significant empirical findings to assess their educational implications critically. While agency has been extensively examined within game studies and experiential learning has been widely theorized within the learning sciences, the relationship between narrative design, interactive agency, and pedagogical activation remains underexplored across disciplinary boundaries. This study addresses this gap by connecting narrative configurations and forms of agency in interactive storytelling with established models of active learning. Rather than treating interactivity as inherently educational, it examines the conditions under which narrative and interactive structures may function as pedagogically meaningful devices. Finally, a structural limitation of the study must be recognized: the field remains theoretically and empirically fragmented, characterized by heterogeneous approaches and evolving frameworks, which calls for further systematic investigation.

3. FROM PLAY TO REFLECTION

In recent decades, the film and media landscape has undergone a significant transformation. The rise of interactive storytelling, a mode of expression that integrates elements of cinema and video games, has introduced a new kind of experience: we are no longer merely passive viewers but active participants in a story that responds to our choices. Unlike traditional cinema, which offers a fixed narrative, and traditional video games that emphasize goal-oriented action, interactive storytelling combines emotional engagement with decision-making agency. The viewer becomes, at least in part, co-creator, shaping both narrative unfolding and character development. This form of storytelling designates audiovisual narratives in which audiences directly influence the flow through choices that shape the narrative sequence, character development, or the ending. It departs decisively from the linear structure of traditional cinema, introducing branching paths and multiple endings. It elevates the viewer from passive observer to active participant in the narrative world. The line between narrator and viewer fades, creating a more dynamic and engaging experience (Admin, 2023). Given these innovations, cinematic storytelling is no longer merely a static object of interpretation but an immersive environment to be explored and customized according to individual preferences, effectively transforming it into an ergodic text (Ryan, 2001). This shift represents a major break in the relationship between viewers and films, and between video games and players. Interactive storytelling is inherently hybrid: it draws on cinematic elements such as aesthetics, staging, direction, music, and emotional depth, while also incorporating action, interactivity, and the player's agency over narrative progression from video games. All these factors combine to create a new type of media—an integrated collaboration with significant social potential. Regarding the cinematic aspect, technological advances now provide tools that push viewer engagement to levels previously deemed impossible. Eco's reflections from the 1960s on the potential of the 'open work' appear prophetic today. Eco described art as an artifact capable of acquiring unique forms of subjectivity because it can be reconfigured by each viewer in continually shifting ways. In this context, enjoying an interactive film may represent a culmination of this idea, as the viewer not only interprets the story but also actively shapes its development. Thus, interactive storytelling extends Eco's concept beyond interpretative openness into narrative generativity, where the story remains incomplete until the viewer intervenes (Eco, 1962). Espen Aarseth, a game studies expert, addresses textual forms that demand active user participation. In his book, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, he defines 'ergodic texts' as those—digital or otherwise—that require active, structural involvement from the user to experience them fully (Aarseth, 1997). At the time of writing, Aarseth considered cinema a non-ergodic medium because traditional movies did not require viewers to make choices that alter narrative progression. Now, new forms of interactive storytelling are creating conditions where viewers

begin to behave more like game players, while cinema itself gradually shifts toward an ergodic framework. Interactive films and series, especially on streaming platforms, are well-suited to this shift because they offer flexible viewing options and use remote controls or keyboards to enable viewers to influence the story. Netflix, for example, has become a testing ground for these innovations. Their first project, *Puss in Book: Trapped in an Epic Tale* (Burdine, Castuciano, 2017), introduced branching narratives in which viewers decide how the story progresses through a series of choices. Made for children, it uses a decision-tree format similar to gamebooks, thus making the viewing experience interactive and repeatable. Targeting children leverages their natural tendency to engage with animated characters and allows the format to be tested in fun and educational ways. Following this, Netflix released *Buddy Thunderstruck: The Maybe Pile* (Chaskin, 2017) later that year, a stop-motion special that expands choice-based storytelling into a set of seemingly endless narrative possibilities. Both titles show Netflix's goal to combine innovative technology with engaging content and underscore the educational benefits of interactivity—encouraging critical thinking, decision-making skills, and active participation in audiovisual stories among young viewers.

At this point, it is necessary to clarify why the questions posed in this article regarding the educational potential of interactive storytelling concern interactive storytelling rather than video game: interactive storytelling can currently be understood as an emerging medium, which lacks a stable or standardized codification, and which therefore could be deliberately shaped toward educational aims rather than being confined to entertainment as occurred historically with cinema or video games. There are video games created purely for educational purposes, known as 'serious games' or 'advergames'. Emerging in the 1980s, they are characterized as complete games featuring a plot, objectives, and predefined paths. These are genuine simulations in which the interactive component of gameplay is combined with representations of real-world scenarios. These games are developed based on pedagogical models and utilize experiential learning, where information and sensations experienced through interaction are strongly retained because they are encountered firsthand, thus facilitating behavioral changes through 'learning by doing' (Arnab et al., 2012). However, these games tend to be less engaging, since the choices prescribed for the player are often deprived of that immediacy and emotional intensity that distinguishes the video game medium, so everything is interpreted as a moral test, perceived as a simulation, and the educational intent thus loses effectiveness because the didactic intent becomes compromised. This happens because of an interpretive framework that favors dissociation and the emergence of cognitive responses such as '*it's just a game*' or '*it's just a simulation*' that drastically attenuate the moral weight of the actions taken and therefore the related educational or introspective potential (Hartmann, Vorderer, 2010). Interactive storytelling, by contrast, appears capable of overcoming this limitation: its hybrid nature, situ-

ated between cinema and video game, guarantees the construction of compelling stories in which to immerse oneself and complex choices, capable of both entertaining and educating. The purpose of an interactive narrative, designed in this way, is therefore distinct from that of a serious game, but at the same time, it does not constitute a form of ‘educational gamification’. At the core of the gamification phenomenon, in fact, lies the competitive element and the possibility of obtaining incentives or rewards, a completely absent element in interactive storytelling (Petruzzi, 2015). The purpose of interactive educational storytelling should not, in fact, be to function as a persuasive game (Bogost, 2007), directing users towards specific behavior or telling them whether their choices are right or wrong, but rather to stimulate critical thinking and reflection on the consequences of one’s choices. This is possible thanks to the pervasive yet precisely integrated presence of narrative elements: many video games are moving in the direction of inserting long *cut-scenes* to encourage the player’s immersion in the game and extend gameplay duration, emblematic, in this regard, the case of *The Last Of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog, 2020). Henry Jenkins defines *cut-scenes* as ‘micro-narratives’, comparing them to the famous Odessa Steps sequence in Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). In both, short visual fragments of high intensity — such as the woman with a wheelchair — generate a deep emotional impact, involving the viewer in the conflict represented. Eisenstein referred to these as ‘attractions’, elements capable of eliciting an immediate sensory response. Similarly, in modern video games, such micro-narratives produce memorable moments that, acting on multiple levels — visual, sensory, and narrative — amplify the player’s emotional experience. However, *cut-scenes* remain ancillary elements, often used as fillers, and therefore do not carry the same narrative weight as interactive sequences (Jenkins, 2004). In the case of interactive narrative, the narrative component is not a filler between gameplay segments; it is not simply an interval between choices, but is conceived as a compelling anchor, a fundamental element for the player’s awareness and deliberation when making choices that will have a specific weight on the evolution of the narrative and therefore in the hybrid viewing-gaming experience.

Interactive storytelling is not an extension of cinema or an ennoblement of video games. It is a third form, a hybrid that forces us to rethink the relationship between story, action, and involvement, and, as this article seeks to demonstrate, it may generate positive effects through its mode of experiential interaction. Most studies on media effects tend to focus exclusively on the assessment of potential negative outcomes – as exemplified, for instance, by the hypodermic needle theory (Carratalà, 2019) – so the ability of the media to exert a positive influence in the short and long term remains largely unexplored or supported only by empirical evidence. Starting from the evaluation of the negative aspects of the relationship between users and media, it is possible to trace potential areas of investigation on any positive effects: meta-analyses show that both violence observed passively — as in movies or television (Anderson

et al., 2017) — and interactive violence, in which the user performs violent actions, as in video games (Calvert et al., 2017) produce statistically significant effects, even of small magnitude. Empirical studies such as those conducted by Mary Beth Oliver and Arthur Raney, show that exposure to mediated violence, especially through environments in which one must both perpetrate violence and witness its consequences, can potentially influence perceptions and behaviors (Oliver, Raney, 2011). These aspects amplify their scope when placed in the context of interactivity, in which, instead of passively witnessing, as in the case of the movie, or innocently, as in the case of actions performed merely in response to game mechanics in video games, the user assumes a direct and intentional role in perpetrating such acts. Michael Wellenreiter, in his studies, has highlighted the intrinsically dynamic and co-authorial nature of media content, emphasizing how, when fruition occurs, both the user and the system co-construct, interpret, and interact with the content in ways that are unique to each individual (Wellenreiter, 2015).

As previously noted, most studies on media effects on viewers or players focus on negative aspects, such as the ability to influence behavior, reset critical skills, or encourage the emulation of reckless actions. Of considerable interest in the topic in question is the study *Cyberpsychol Behavior and Social Networking*, which showed that, in some cases, morally questionable behaviors performed within a video game environment can generate feelings of guilt in players, and therefore, have a positive outcome in the long term. In the experiment conducted by Matthew Grizzard and colleagues, a sample of 185 young adults was randomly assigned to different experimental conditions to assess the impact of morally transgressive in-game behaviors on personal moral sensitivity. Participants were asked to play a modified version of a first-person shooter, in which some took the role of an agent engaged in morally reprehensible actions, while others assumed the role of a United Nations peacekeeper with a contrasting ethical profile. A further control group instead carried out a task of mnemonic recall relating to episodes likely to induce a sense of guilt. At the end of the assigned activity, all subjects filled out a battery of questionnaires designed to measure their moral sensitivity according to the moral foundations model, evaluating dimensions such as care, equity, and compliance with norms. The data collected showed that taking on a morally incorrect virtual role elicited heightened feelings of guilt, which, in turn, were associated with increased responsiveness to the moral norms violated in the game. These results suggest that simulated moral transgression in videogame contexts can activate self-reflective emotional processes capable of enhancing individual moral awareness even in real-world contexts (Grizzard et al., 2014)

In relation to this last point, the aspects of what has been termed the ‘Macbeth effect’ are particularly significant; this term derives from Shakespeare’s tragedy of the same name and from Lady Macbeth’s obsessive act of repeatedly washing imaginary blood from her hands. The expression ‘Macbeth effect’ is

used, therefore, in reference to the desire for physical purification after committing an immoral act, such as playing a game that requires enacting violent or heinous actions against other human beings. This principle, applied to video games, was tested in an experiment by Mario Gollwitzer and André Melzer. The authors had the participants play violent or non-violent video games and, immediately after, measured several effects: the degree of guilt experienced, the motivation to engage in cleansing behaviors (such as washing hands or preferring hygiene products over other rewards), and the tendency to enact prosocial or morally restorative actions in the period immediately following the experiment. The study showed that engaging in violent actions, even if virtual, can trigger internal processes of moral self-correction – such as physical purification, prosocial impulses – similar to those observed after a real immoral act (Gollwitzer, Melzer, 2012). Moral concern can therefore also be elicited by shifts in moral standards in a virtual environment (Klimmt et al., 2006). The case of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II* (Infinity Ward, 2022) and the *No Russian* mission is emblematic, in which players were required to choose whether to assume a passive or active role in a massacre of civilians at an airport. This mission, which has become one of the most controversial moments in the history of video games, sparked official debates and extensive discussion on online forums, where players displayed widely divergent reactions. Some players, for example, have complained of feeling a strong shock, discomfort, or guilt, whereas others interpreted the mission as a strong narrative choice, a tool capable of pushing the player to reflect on violence, obedience, and responsibility. James Sterling of *Destructoid* magazine and video game expert Laura Parker supported this position, seeing in *No Russian* the creation of a watershed for video games to take responsibility for discussing controversial topics such as terrorism, human suffering, and even a tool to elevate the artistic status attributed to video games (Senior, 2012). Beyond broader debates about the artistic status of video games, the fact that some players feel the need to talk about the online mission, to reflect on what they have done, or in contrast to perpetuate processes of ‘moral disengagement’ (Bandura, 1990) minimizing the massacre, indicates that *No Russian* it is not merely passive entertainment but functions as moral provocation. This principle was supported by Mohammad Alavi himself, game developer of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II*, stated in an interview with Matthew S. Burns: ‘In the sea of endless bullets you fire off at countless enemies without a moment’s hesitation or afterthought, the fact that I got the player to hesitate even for a split second and actually consider his actions before he pulled that trigger– that makes me feel very accomplished’ (Alavi, 2012).

Exposure to media content may exert a positive influence, and interactive series or films designed for educational purposes can shape attitudes and behaviors of the viewer-player. This is possible because virtual experiences, contrary to common assumptions, are neither ephemeral nor lacking in substance; rather, the interactions they generate enduring cognitive and emotional traces

that transfer into the real world. The anthropological foundations of this idea can be traced to the work of psychiatrist Jacob Moreno, who demonstrated that dramatization and role-taking are effective educational tools that foster greater self-knowledge and self-awareness through the assumption of ‘the other than oneself’. According to the principles of Morenian psychodrama, ‘playing the role comes before the emergence of the self. The role does not emerge from the self, but the self emerges from the roles’ (Moreno, 1964). From this perspective, adopting another identity by impersonating a game character becomes an important instrument for exploration and identity development, as the roles we enact reveal aspects of who we are. This dynamic, already present in traditional video games or role-playing games where the user assumes the identity of an avatar, acquires additional significance when placed within an interactive narrative. Here, decision-making is embedded in a structured storyline that immerses the user in a deeper state of cognitive–emotional engagement and stimulates reflective and evaluative processes. The implications of ‘learning by doing’ are complemented by those of ‘learning by being’, which, according to Katherine Clinton (2006), extends the learning process beyond mere action, placing emotional engagement at the center as a constitutive element of educational practice, thus reinforcing the reflective and evaluative dimension highlighted in interactive narratives. Supporting the thesis that such content can stimulate the viewer-player’s critical thinking more intensely than film or traditional video games are the observations of Gene Youngblood, who argues that: ‘learning occurs when attention is focused [...] interactivity is the best way to focus attention’ (Youngblood, 2001). Because interactivity requires a higher degree of involvement, the user becomes more deeply engaged in the narrative, which grants interactivity an additional pedagogical value (Ghislandi, 1995). Further supporting this educational dimension of interactive storytelling are the studies of Marie-Laure Ryan, who argues that such narrative contexts allow for the exploration of moral implications and otherwise repressed thoughts, thanks to the mediation of fictitious environments that she defines as ‘safe spaces’, precisely because they are simulated and not real. Ryan identifies one of the possible beneficial effects enabled by augmented reality (Ryan, 2001). The beneficial effects of immersion in virtual environments are central to several studies examining the effectiveness of embodied experiences on behavioral change (Ahn et al., 2014). Among the most accredited studies in this field are those addressing the mitigation of psychosocial disorders, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (Foa et al., 2007) and phobias (Craske et al., 2008), in individuals who do not meet the criteria for clinical treatment. These studies show that desensitization to traumatic memories through controlled re-experiencing is essential for facilitating emotional processing of trauma and for fostering the self-regulated management of psychophysiological stress.

However, strong emotional engagement does not automatically translate into ethical responsibility. One may feel intense empathy for a character and, at

the same time, make drastic choices without meaningful reflection. Why does this happen? The game-like context provides a form of moral suspension, a playful dissociation: events are perceived as mere fiction and therefore as lacking real consequences. Many choices are ambiguous, symmetrical, or poorly explained; the player does not always perceive their consequences. In the video game, mistakes do not matter; it is reversible. The ability to repeat, reload, or erase actions reduces the player's perception of responsibility. This creates an unexpected paradox: the more immersed and involved we are, the freer we feel to make choices without moral weight. So how might the interactive storytelling experience be different? To what extent, then, can it assume a prosocial value, functioning as an effective cultural tool? To answer this question, it is necessary to compare how decisions are made in traditional games with how they are made in interactive series or films designed for education and reflection, rather than mere entertainment. What kind of decision-making occurs in an interactive narrative context? Research suggests that this is not a fully 'real' decision, but a hybrid act situated halfway between play and moral simulation. A key factor in decision-making dynamics is perceived responsibility. This is determined by several elements: the frame of reality, how realistic what I am seeing is, the perceived agency, how much I believe the choice I have to make weighs the narrative, the irreversibility of the same, and the time of reflection taken to undertake it. When one or more of these elements is missing, the decision loses its perceived significance for the viewer-player. Interactive storytelling is a unique pedagogical laboratory because it mobilizes episodic memory (*'I did...'*), situated empathy (*'I not merely understand suffering, but I am implicated in it'*), learning through error, and restructuring moral thinking (*'I seek a new way of acting to avoid the unpleasant situation'*). The combination of filmic identification and videogame agency produces an experience akin to situated learning: knowledge becomes embodied and linked to an emotional context. However, this potential is not guaranteed. If choices are not perceived as morally relevant, the experience remains superficial and its impact minimal. It is a process that requires a special design, a correct combination of elements to avoid both playful dissociation and moral overload. How can the educational impact of an interactive narrative be assessed? A rigorous assessment of its effects requires a mixed-methods approach that integrates quantitative and qualitative measures. Quantitatively pre- and post-experience questionnaires should be arranged to assess any changes in participants with respect to three central dimensions: empathy, which could be measured through the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), the level of narrative engagement, and perceived responsibility in the choices made during the story. Behavioral data should also be gathered, such as decision time, voluntary scene repetitions, and tendencies toward moral or utilitarian choices. Qualitatively, tools should capture participants' subjective experiences and interpretative processes. Guided interviews can elicit impressions, emotions, and personal reflections, while stimulated recall – showing participants scenes or

choices previously made – allows for a more precise reconstruction of decision-making and emotional responses. David Jonassen defines learning as an active, intentional, cooperative, authentic, and co-constructive process (Jonassen et al., 2007). These characteristics are fully evident in interactive storytelling, which can therefore be considered a mindtool, a cognitive instrument that supports and enhances learners' thinking. From this perspective, interactive storytelling can serve as a valuable teaching tool. For example, it enables engaging presentation of specific content and promotes active, participatory learning, rather than passive transmission, in line with the principles of media education outlined by Masterman (1985). A particularly notable example of this approach is *Malinowski's Lens* (Hoffmann et al., 2025), an AI-native educational game that transforms Bronislaw Malinowski's ethnographic work into an interactive narrative. The game is designed for learning anthropology and has been shown to produce positive learning outcomes and high usability. Furthermore, expert anthropologists involved in the evaluation confirmed its pedagogical value and disciplinary rigor, noting in some cases the discovery of new aspects of Malinowski's work as a result of the playful-narrative interaction.

4. CONCLUSION

Returning to the starting point and to the initial questions, namely, what impact the creation of interactive storytelling products for educational purposes could have on society, we can say, based on what has emerged so far, that, if supported by deliberate design and ethical awareness, deep emotional engagement, perceived consequences, and a clear ethical framework, interactive series and films can have a significant prosocial impact. Branched choices can become effective tools for stimulating self-evaluation and ethical awareness, while the possibility of exploring different narrative outcomes allows moral dilemmas to be experienced in a safe environment. The construction of emotionally intense moments — such as guilt, empathy, or inner conflict — increases engagement, and the interactive structure transforms reflection into an active, experiential process rather than merely a contemplative one. Entertainment conceived in this way can activate the kind of deep elaboration that characterizes eudaimonic entertainment, as theorized by Oliver and Raney (2011), capable of entertaining while simultaneously functioning as an educational device. From the perspective of media education, interactive storytelling as a new educational system can be a valuable tool, helping learners understand the complex interrelationships among multiple factors, stimulating curiosity, and enhancing their ability to tackle complex problems. Real-life problems are rarely simple or linear; they require a multifaceted approach that considers multiple variables and their interconnections. In this sense, interactive storytelling serves as an ideal experiential training ground with significant pedagogical potential (Roth et al., 2025). To date, however, interactive storytelling remains a powerful yet fragile medium, and its educational and pedagogical implications are still largely un-

explored. The future challenge for this young medium is to create works that do not merely allow users to ‘choose’, but that make them responsible for their choices and balance pedagogical objectives with the dynamic aspects of storytelling. Rising to this challenge represents an opportunity for pedagogy and for current and future professionals in the field to chart new paths and open new horizons. Only in this way can interactive storytelling become a true ethical laboratory for the 21st century.

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Smitten with a Virtual Character

Bishōjo, Intimacy and Subjectivity in *Slay the Princess*

ABSTRACT

This article examines how *Slay the Princess* (Black Tabby Games, 2023) reconfigures the bishōjo as a binding force that wounds, rather than reassures, the player. Drawing on Patrick Galbraith’s account of bishōjo “techno-intimacy” and Donna Haraway’s writings on companion species, I argue that the game mobilises the affective architecture of the dating sim—paratextual framing as a “love story,” scripted availability, and shōjo-sei—only in order to turn it against the player. Instead of delivering a reassuring fantasy of inward, cyborgian “becoming,” *Slay the Princess* builds a relationship in which unconditional love is compulsory and injurious. Building on Vella & Gualeni’s notion of the “attitude of virtuality” and LARP theory’s concepts of en-roling, de-roling, and bleed, the article first contrasts the smooth avatar identification of mainstream videogames such as *Fallout 4* with *Slay the Princess*’s delayed, unstable en-roling into a monstrous protagonist. The game withholds a coherent avatar, distributes identification across conflicting voices and an unreliable narrator, and ultimately reveals an alien god-form too late to function as an inhabitable self. At the same time, the Princess weaponises bishōjo affect: she loops, returns, insists on an inexplicable “relationship,” and refuses to be known by the player. I propose that the resulting wound is not the familiar “realist” loss, but a fourth, relational wound in Haraway’s sense: an ongoing entanglement with a nonhuman partner. In *Slay the Princess*, bleed names the impossibility of clear-cut de-roling, through which the virtual bishōjo no longer saves or reflects the human, but binds them.

1. INTRODUCTION

Dating simulators have long promised intimacy without risk (Galbraith, 2011). Romance systems and companion mechanics offer attachment structured by choice, repetition, and reversibility. Even when loss is staged, it unfolds within the safety of virtuality: failure can be rewound, rejection retried, and death undone. Scholarship on romance in games has often focused on the representation-

al politics of desire and the procedural structuring of affection (e.g., Krzywinska, 2012; Ensslin, 2014), as well as on player agency and incorporation (Calleja, 2011; Vella & Gualeni, 2020). Intimacy, in this account, appears as something navigable and optimisable—almost like a skill to be mastered and rewarded.

This article approaches *Slay the Princess* as a disturbance within the safety of virtuality. The game inherits the affective architecture of the dating simulator—paratextual framing as a “love story,” a singular female figure awaiting encounter, the promise of relational exclusivity—only to turn it against the player throughout the game. Rather than consolidating subjectivity through an inward, narcissistic becoming, it constructs a prolonged, compulsory, and injurious relation. I argue that the wound at stake is not the familiar wound of loss grounded in “realistic” temporal irreversibility, but a relational wound: an ongoing entanglement with a nonhuman partner who refuses to remain either projection or consumable object.

To articulate this shift, I bring together three conceptual strands already implicit in debates on bishōjo and virtual subjectivity. First, Galbraith’s account of techno-intimacy clarifies how bishōjo figures operate as binding forces rather than mere objects of desire. Second, Donna Haraway’s writings on cyborgs and companion species foreground virtual intimacy as co-constitution (an “ontological choreography”, Haraway, 2003, p. 98) with nonhuman others, where attachment entails wound rather than possession. Third, Vella & Gualeni’s formulation of the “attitude of virtuality,” alongside LARP theory’s concepts of en-roling, de-roling, and bleed, provides a vocabulary for analyzing how subject positions are entered, destabilized, and fail to be cleanly exited. Methodologically, this article develops an autobiographical and interpretative close reading of *Slay the Princess*, attending to its loops, mirrors, voices, and shifting embodiments as mechanisms that reorganize intimacy.

The discussion proceeds in four movements. First, I situate bishōjo within the affective architecture of the dating simulator, examining how techno-intimacy and blind trust stabilize the player’s subjectivity under the “attitude of virtuality.” Second, I revisit loss-centred “gamic realism,” distinguishing temporal and spatial models of virtual disturbance from the relational wound I propose. Third, I examine how *Slay the Princess* disrupts en-roling by withholding a coherent avatar and distributing identification across unstable voices and monstrous forms. Finally, I analyze the failure of de-roling, where bleed names the impossibility of restoring a clear division between player and the avatar they once ambiguously inhabited.

2. “I WOULD RATHER BE A BISHŌJO THAN A GODDESS.”

2.1 DATING SIMS

Slay the Princess begins with a lie that is also a promise: “*This is a love story.*” Before I met her, I was told that she is chained in a basement, that my task is

to kill her, and that failure would mean the end of the world. A narrow forest path, a cabin, a staircase, a girl—the whole setting feels like the prelude to a familiar fairy tale. The opening is minimalistic yet saturated with intimacy: a one-on-one encounter in a locked room, a body rendered vulnerable and dangerous at once.

Paratext frames this encounter long before the first line of dialogue. On Steam, *Slay the Princess* is tagged as a “dating sim.” That single tag immediately reorients my expectations: I anticipate multiple routes, affection meters, CG unlocks, and, above all, a central “her” carefully moulded to sustain my interest. As Vella & Gualeni remind us, genre and platform paratexts are not neutral descriptors but “scripts” that orient how players “en-rol” themselves into a gameworld (2020, p. 41). To call *Slay the Princess* a dating sim means that the Princess is not just an enemy to be slain but a potential love interest, an object of care, an affective investment.

Dating sims (*dating simulators*) are a very specific kind of intimacy machine. They are cheap to produce—often built from still images and simple scripts—yet designed for replayability, so that players can traverse multiple storylines and “clear” all available characters. They are structurally passive—auto-scrolling text, branched choices—but emotionally demanding, requiring the player to cultivate affection, remember past conversations, and choose their words carefully. At their centre stand the *bishōjo* (美少女): cute anime girls with a general sense of innocence. They are designed to bond with a particular market, namely, the *otaku*.

Game studies have frequently approached such configurations through the lens of attachment and identification, emphasizing how repetition, branching choice, and calibrated feedback foster affective investment in virtual characters (see, for instance, Allison, 2006; Taylor, 2007). Choice-based design has been read as foregrounding player agency, situating intimacy within what Vella & Gualeni call the “attitude of virtuality”, where emotional investment unfolds under the presumption of reversibility (Vella & Gualeni, 2020). Within this framework, the dating sim becomes exemplary of intimacy as negotiable and optimisable: desire is structured, replayed, and ultimately brought under interpretive control.

It is precisely this structure that Galbraith seeks to complicate. In his account, *bishōjo* games do not simply reduce intimacy to mechanical accumulation of affection points or “mechanical sex”, but stage a form of “techno-intimacy (see also Allison, 2006)” in which boundaries between male and machine, self and other, begin to blur (Galbraith, 2011), reminiscent of Donna Haraway’s “transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities” (Haraway, 1985, p. 14). As Galbraith argues, melodramatic plots allow players to “lose control and become emotional”; “nurturing games” collapse “male and female roles”; empathy is often centred on *bishōjos* whom the player is encouraged to identify with, and all pleasures, especially the sexual one, are “projected onto the female characters”; players thus do not desire a certain

bishōjo per se, but rather the spectral nature of abstract sum of all bishōjos, the “girl-ness” (shōjo-sei), unpossessable desire in the Lacanian sense, the “soulful bodies”, the skin without flesh and bone, the breast without excrement and viscera (for bishōjo as otaku’s “absolutely unattainable object of desire”, see also Azuma, 2009). Such “techno-intimacy” renders players’ desire inward, not as an impulse to possess an object, but as a process of “becoming” with a non-human partner, “becoming cyborg”. Paraphrasing Haraway, he points Bishōjos to be “new gods” delivering salvation because they “experience technology as a condition”, promising the “becoming women” of man in the sense that “men tend to be ‘feminised’” (ibid). Although Galbraith’s reading leans heavily on Haraway, he unfortunately skirts some of her sharpest refusals: for instance, the cyborg’s refusal of salvation history (Haraway, 1985, p. 7), or her insistence that “femininity” is an instance of “misplaced concreteness” (Haraway, 2003, p. 6).

It is from within this tension between genre expectation and theoretical rescue that I approach *Slay the Princess*. The game’s paratext positions it as a dating sim; its opening lines declare it a love story; its central figure is a Princess who is, in many ways, bishōjo-like. And yet what unfolds is not a comforting fantasy of techno-intimacy, but something far more dangerous: a love that wounds, a relationship that dissolves the player’s very own subjectivity.

2.2 BLIND TRUST

If Galbraith invokes Haraway to describe techno-intimacy as salvific becoming, what remains underexamined is Haraway’s more demanding account of co-constitution. Bishōjo figures are already techno-organic constructions: animated bodies whose affective force depends on the entanglement of code, image, and projected interiority. If bishōjo operate as sites where player desire meets the machine, then Haraway’s refusal of clear boundaries between human and nonhuman offers more than a metaphor. Her account of relationship as “ontological choreography”, that is, co-constitution—rather than identification or possession—provides a way to take virtual intimacy seriously without reducing it to narcissistic self-reflection. In this sense, cyborg and companion species theory ground the claim that intimacy with a bishōjo is a structurally *real* relation with a nonhuman partner. (see also Hao, 2022, for a parallel application in digital companion species).

“Trust, Blind Trust,” the Princess says. In *The Companion Species Manifesto*, Haraway recounts the love between Ackerley and Tulip, a rescued dog who had an ex-partner. Their bond is always messy, filled with efforts, uncertainty, tension, and doubt, “waste, cruelty, indifference, ignorance, and loss as well as of joy, invention, labour, intelligence, and play.” Their love is conditional and earned. The difference is honored rather than bridged. Trust and respect simultaneously emerge, independent of fantasy (Haraway, 2003, pp. 33–38). Dogs and bishōjos share a similar capacity of giving the illusion of “unconditional love” too easily. While it was easier for Haraway to dismiss dog’s “unconditional love”

as “abusive” and “pernicious” “caninophilic narcissism” (p. 32), it is difficult to defend bishōjos against such claims. Bishōjos’ love is hard-coded in game scripts. My purchase of a game copy, my relentless progression through the repetitive narrative, and all my clicks and moves are grounded in and motivated by my infallible conviction of their unconditional love and our promised happy ending.

Let me further introduce her to those unfamiliar with her wonders. She is “diminutive, rounded, passive, tidy.” (Black, 2008). Large eyes and rounded face, her cuteness fits into the kind of infantile fragility that our genes compel us to adore (e.g., Ngai, 2015) but she is also sexually available. She is usually presented to players as perfect and ideal at first sight, the “being... so different from my own with all the awe-inspiring reality...” (Weisser, 2001, as cited in Haraway, 2003, p. 37). As the narrative progresses, it will be gradually revealed that the capable class president might be a terrible cook, and the wealthy heiress might have never tasted “commoner” snacks (but they are rarely feminist). Aoyagi, for instance, observes that Bishojos are typically designed as lacking exceptionalism, in order to not “alienate or offend the audience” (2005, p. 67). So she descends from being sublime goddess to the approachable, appropriable sexual other, culminating in a blasphemous sex scene (unlike Galbraith’s observation, that “even in erotic images, female characters tend to be more or less clothed.” (2011)). Her *harmless* weaknesses, rather than adding depth to her character, become mere decorations hanging on her cute “shōjo-sei”, serving only to make her more accessible to the averagely inhabitable, blurred-face male protagonist. The essence of “damsel-in-distress” still lingered everywhere in such “mundane fiction[s] of Man and Woman” (Haraway, 1985, p. 65). She is born into a temporality of anticipation. Long before she “exists,” she is iterated through surveys, prototypes, and revisions designed to predict and accommodate the desires of an imagined average male player. When she finally appears, she arrives overdetermined: every gesture, flaw, and charm already scripted in advance, her otherness pre-formatted to be consumable. When the copy is readily installed on the console, every possibility has already been exhausted. Written in pre-scripted codes, her identity is still shaped by her relationship to the male desire, going through infinite lifecycles of being “animated” as the virtually real, then “worshipped” as a goddess, and finally “dominated” as the sexual other (p. 65). Even in more open-ended and well-intended games such as *LovePlus* (Konami, 2009), this pattern of “desacralized goddess” remains unchanged. Complexities of the significant-otherness-to-be are reduced to superficial contrast between her perfections and deficiencies, or to say the “gyappu-moe¹”, synonymous with Frankenstein’s monster, “expect[ing] its father to save it” (p. 9). War and struggle simplified to stylus touch and branch choices that put nothing at stake except for emotional labour. No longer goddesses, but neither cyborgs nor dogs. In this context, the supposed “techno-intimacy” is merely a one-sided prey hunt, where the player voraciously learns everything about the bishōjo, “disturbingly lively”, while bishōjo remains passive, ignorant, “frighteningly inert” (p. 11);

1. ギャップ萌え, combination of “gap” and “cute, lovable”. In anime subculture, it is used to describe characters who are cute because they act out of character. Reddit user IonicSquid (2018) explains: “Gap moe is about contrast. It’s based upon the idea that if a character who is usually not moe does something cute, the juxtaposition between their usual calm/aloof/whatever self and the brief moment of moe makes the moe even more delicious.”

the player is immersed in the story, laughs and cries and plugs into the machine, while bishōjo remains unchanged. There is no coevolution, no co-independence, unless, if you say, what matters is the narcissism of humanity.

I am wary that such complaint will eventually lead me to dismiss bishōjos, but I am really on the same page as my fellow rescuers. I want to take our personal and specified relationships with bishōjos seriously and without making them “an alibi for other [anthropomorphic] themes (p. 21)”. The problem is not: what a bishōjo is, but rather, what a bishōjo can do? What a bishōjo can do to us, if she is *virtually real*, not merely wished to be so?

In an interview from August 2000, Haraway explicitly rejected that dogs are just tools for human self-reflection. “Self-figuration is not [her] task (p. 10).” Towards Wolfgang Schirmacher’s Heideggerian interpretation of her book, that “If you want to know about humanity, look away from humanity,” Haraway replied: “That’s all well and good, but I also want to know about the dogs (2000).” “They are not a projection nor the realization of an intention nor the telos of anything (2003, p. 10).” Dogs are not the absolute other that is only useful in delineating what oneself is. They are the significant other, messmates that share a piece of bread with us. We “colonize (p. 1)” each other’s cell, and compose together the “ontological choreography (p. 98)”. Dogs matter. Likely, bishōjos matter, and I want to know about them.

2.3 REAL WOUND

Blind trust in unconditional love is dangerous. Our blind trust in bishōjo’s love is built up on the unreality of bishōjo’s wonder, or rather, the unreality of the life-and-death struggle in videogames more generally: player’s *attitude of virtuality* in their prior “en-roling” into the virtual environment, where “failure is reversible and does not lead to permanent losses, injury, or death, and that the choices they make and the actions they take will not have any direct consequences upon the actual world (Vella & Gualeni, 2020, p. 39).”

Game studies has long examined how such virtual identification is inhabited and stabilized. Calleja’s account of incorporation (2011), for instance, describes the gradual alignment of player and avatar across affective and kinaesthetic dimensions, while Aarseth (1997) has emphasized the structural positioning of the player within ergodic systems. These approaches share with Vella & Gualeni’s formulation a presumption of a coherent identification, the presumption that the virtual subject can be entered, sustained, and withdrawn from without remainder. The *attitude of virtuality* names this presumption of reversibility and limited consequence. The economy of blind trust relies on this protective attitude of virtuality: so that affection is a risk-free catharsis and resistance is ultimately inconsequential. Some games, however, attempt to breach this wall – the so-called *fourth wall*. They seek to give virtual characters a different kind of presence—one that forces the player to confront a “wound” that feels, if not

real, then at least irrevocable. Such strategies rely on a spatial metaphor: the crossing of the monitor screen (the fourth wall) between game and “reality”.

To understand what kind of wound *Slay the Princess* produces, however, it is necessary to distinguish it from the loss-centred “realistic” wound so commonly seen in fourth-wall-breaking-games that they almost feel like a cliché. “The issue with ‘Gamic realism’ lies in ‘making characters bleed, thereby making the players bleed’ (Azuma, 2015, p. 81, my translation).” Azuma analyzes the case of *All You Need is Kill* (Sakurazaka, 2004), a futuristic military science fiction novel told in first-person by its protagonist, Kiriya Keiji, who was caught in a time loop during his fight against the mysterious and relentless alien race “the Mimic”. After dying in battle, he wakes up to relive the same day repeatedly. In this setting, Azuma parallels Kiriya’s experience with the player’s respawning in videogame. Kiriya, therefore, takes up the attitude of virtuality and becomes a player during his looping. Kiriya met another time-looper Rita Vrataski (a bishōjo), who became his friend and mentor. In order to end the time loop and defeat the Mimics once and for all, however, one of them must die. Facing the dying Rita, Kiriya suggested entering the loop again so that the two could always be together. Rita rejected, for the unique Rita who Kiriya met in the 159th loop and all the loops before it would not come back to life. Azuma remarked:

[At this moment, Kiriya] has completely forgotten that only he is the player, and the Rita in front of him is a character that gets reset every thirty hours. Regardless of whether Kiriya returns to the loop or, conversely, whether he breaks it, the fact that the Rita who fell in love with Kiriya will disappear after these thirty hours is unchangeable (p. 83).

Azuma’s reading locates “gamic realism” in a refusal of temporal reversibility: Rita’s uniqueness cannot be restored by looping, and her disappearance marks a limit to the player’s invulnerability. A similar reconfiguration of time underpins bishōjo narratives that challenge the player’s reliance on the Save/Load function: in *Kimi to Kanojo to Kanojo no Koi* (Nitroplus, 2013), Miyuki persists through multiple replays as if she and the player share the same temporality in “real world”. Like Rita, she insists on being unique. She breaks the “fourth wall”, talking directly to the player, forcing them to give up on their Save/Load power.

The contentious “magic circle” metaphor in games studies traditionally frames virtuality as a spatial separation: game spaces—court houses or churches—are bounded “people places” with their own rules (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 95). *All You* and *Kimi to Kanojo’s*, however, disrupt virtuality not by spatial transgression, but by temporal interference. Their realism hinges on the idea that time cannot simply be rewound—that characters may remember, persist, or vanish in ways that resist the player’s attempts to reset. What these works expose is a temporal wound: the irreversibility of loss in a “real” temporal space the game character and the player now share.

In a blog review of *Love is All Around* (intiny, 2023), Wu extends Azuma's thesis, interpreting the loss of the hidden "true" heroine Yungsi in every replay as the game's "realistic core", and the eventual happiness-ever-after "true ending" as a healing of the players' real-life wound (Wu, 2023). In this view, the realism of games is measured by the kind of loss they demand—whether revocable or irrevocable—the latter being more painful and therefore more "real": "an exploration of the player's pain, and through such pain, conveys a message to the reader, turning it into something extremely 'realistic'" (Azuma, 2015, p. 83).

Azuma's conception is closer to my "rescue scheme", but it is also limited by a familiar rhetoric of realism—"once again, the point is that choices have heavy consequences [i.e. realism] and you should be *man enough* to be able to live with them (emphasis mine)." Redditor Garejei's off-hand summary captures this perfectly (2015). The "wound", still formulated as the "loss" of an object, a failure of appropriation, or simply the frustration of unpaid emotional labour, that teaches us a lesson about being "man enough" to endure the Freudian trauma of frustrated narcissism (Derrida, 2003, p. 139; Haraway, 2008). It promises maturity (which presupposes immaturity). It leaves the player intact.

What I am seeking is something quite different. I do not wish to elevate gamic reality to the status of "our" reality, nor do I find the metaphor of the "fourth wall" particularly helpful—it presupposes a rigid division between "virtual" and "real", and risks overdetermination. Real power dynamics are lacking, and nothing is "really" at stake. In "face-to-face" companion relationships, the risk is far more demanding. Death permeates in the form of loss as well as in a myriad of many other ways, as Haraway said. Her dogs would be euthanized if they bit her human child during the most ordinary martial training (2011); similarly, once my cat became my companion, the smallest traces of chocolate, onions, or coffee suddenly appeared lethal. This is not blind trust but fragile trust that needs to be carefully sustained and attachment that can easily injure.

This is the dimension I want to restore to bishōjo: not humanity, but *unreality with stakes*. Here is my "rescue", or rather, restoration scheme: I want to share with them real power dynamics, to accept how my cat and bishōjo can turn down my unconditional love and invert it into something that hurts me and kills me. Something that not only intrudes into my temporality but also alters the conspicuousness of my spatial surroundings. This is not the third Freudian wound but a fourth: "the relationalities of us with that which isn't human", the fourth wound that "forces us to acknowledge that our machines are lively too (Gane & Haraway, 2006)." A wound not from a negative "loss" but from a pointing "blade", not to be endured but to be lived with. *Slay the Princess* can be read as one possible implementation of this restoration scheme: it inherits the bishōjo's affective architecture only in order to turn it against the player.

Now, the conventional bishōjo games stabilise two sides of a relationship at once – granting the player a coherent, safely human point of view (essentially as themselves, perhaps maturing, but ultimately intact) while presenting the

bishōjo as a predictable object of care. *Slay the Princess* disrupts both. It unsettles the player's own position no less than it transforms the bishōjo. It does so through two simultaneous progressions in its narrative: On one side, the game refuses the smooth identification and safe embodiment that most dating sims provide; on the other, it withholds the reassuring legibility and consumability of the bishōjo figure.

3. EN-ROLING AND DE-ROLING IN SLAY THE PRINCESS

3.1 EN-ROLING AS A MONSTER

If a wound is to be more than a metaphor, it must intervene in the very process through which players *become someone* in a game. The “attitude of virtuality” is not only about reversible failure and lack of consequences; it is also about how smoothly players slide into a ready-made subject position and just as smoothly slide back out of it. Before turning to *Slay the Princess* as a site where this smoothness is interrupted, I want to briefly recall how classical videogame design—*Fallout 4* being a paradigmatic case—organizes identification with an avatar as a stable, continuous, and ultimately safe way of being in the virtual world.

In *Fallout 4* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2015), the player immediately confronts their in-game subjectivity in a mirror after the introductory cutscene. As Vella & Gualeni argued, this is the moment when the player identifies with the character, looking at the gameworld through the character's eye while at the same time taking the mirror reflection as the object of their perception. A smooth identification through the seemingly paradoxical Sartrean “indication of the subject to himself”, thereby “framing some representation of ourselves *to ourselves* (2020)”. An objectified self-representation and subjective consciousness coexist, but such a paradox was subsequently downplayed and integrated into the immersive gameplay that follows. In *Fallout 4*, immediately after the mirror scene, the player is instructed to perform several parental/maternal tasks integral to their chosen role as male/female (partner and parent), “readily made and socially established”. The player then witnesses his/her partner being killed and child kidnapped. From here, the identification solidifies, as the goal of the player and the character becomes one and consistent: to avenge the partner and rescue the child. The player is then offered a set of input-output mechanics as multitudes of possibilities and capabilities they could perform through the protagonist, and thus further internalised the avatar as their extended embodiment in the gameworld (pp. 46-50). The identification could be more nuancedly reached in less articulated plots and goals through input-output alone, as in the case of *Mario*, as long as player's inputs (such as press X) and avatar's outputs (jump) remain relatively consistent (Vella, 2012). At this stage, the player's en-roling (role-taking), a term borrowed from LARP (Live Action Role-Play), is completed.

In *Slay the Princess*, the identification process is far more ambiguous and prolonged. Initially, the protagonist “woke up in the woods” instructed by

the Narrator to kill the Princess. The scene is set up in a first-person perspective, and the avatar remains unknown until its first encounter with the mirror, where they confront their own hand holding the blade with long claws covered in reptile skin. A coincidentally literal depiction of Haraway's "regrown limb", "where the human arm cut off where the monster's arm holding the knife begins" (1985, p. 67). The old triangle of Hero-Monster-Princess is recalled, but this time the Hero is confused with the Monster. At this moment, the decision has already been made, and the Princess appears to be doomed to death. The game's objective was then reframed: it is no longer between the Hero and The Princess/Monster (monstrous, to be slayed, or innocent, to be saved), but rather the Player/Monster and The Princess/Monster. *Fallout 4* uses consistent and rational objectives to glue together player's identification with the character, but *Slay the Princess* complicates the validity of the initial objective. Identification is thus destabilized.

On every encounter, the Narrator denies knowledge of the mirror, which vanishes the moment the Hero tries to touch it. "It's you", the reflection of a barely visible face with a pair of glowing, hollow eyes staring back; the monstrous hand reaching out, the reflection quietly reaffirming that the protagonist's body is not the player's body at all. On every new encounter, the subtitle reads: "you've grown", "you've withered", "you've unraveled", "you are nothing at all". It was not until the fifth revelation that the supposed Sartrean distance between the objectified self-representation and subjective consciousness had been all along exposed, unavailable as a monster's arm that belongs to an absolute other. The reflection is no longer "me at a distance," but something other, something that refuses to fuse with the player into a coherent avatar. This estrangement resonates with Fiedler's observation that "the strangely formed body has represented absolute Otherness in all times and places since human history began" (1996, p. xiii). Monster, Fiedler argues, unsettles us because they expose "our basic uncertainty about the limits of our bodies and our egos" (1993, p. 27). What *Slay the Princess* reveals is that the Hero has always already been close to monstrosity. The Heroes, even the most cliché ones, rest on traits that are themselves abnormal: "in greater strength, beauty, and invulnerability" (p. 308). Their extraordinariness is simply the socially sanctioned facet of the monstrous. Ordinarily, this slippage is masked by the ease with which players en-roll into the heroic role. The hero's clarity of purpose resonates with our naïve desire for moral certainty, and their body yields obediently to our controller inputs. Identification becomes smooth because the avatar is built to be inhabited. *Slay the Princess*, however, interrupts this smoothness. By rendering the hero's body monstrous, the game makes explicit the tension that most games keep hidden: that the player is never simply "identifying with a hero," but always negotiating with an Otherness embedded in the avatar's very form.

Ambiguity turns identification porous, but the "mimic impulse"² still urges the player to latch onto *someone* within the fiction. The Narrator, who claims

2. "imitation ... is at home in the playing, not in the plaything", even when playing with inanimate toys such as trains and windmills, "compulsive mimetic identification" prevails (Banjamin, qf Ngai, 2015, p. 74-75).

to have been objectively describing the very environment the player also sees through the screen, appears to offer a partial anchor, but he contradicts the player's will even more often. More fatally, he was unable to share the temporality with the player. Each encounter in a loop was for him anew, and his forgetfulness forecloses any stable relational continuity. Other voices, seemingly emerging in accordance with player's choices simultaneously lure identification, but they have their own agency to influence the narrative as if endowed with independent will. Their hyperbolic sincerity, so true to their names (the Smitten, the Paranoid...), becomes less an extension of the player and more a reminder that they are not the player at all. Even the environments begin to appear lively and entice identification. Firstly, the interior of the cabin, then the woods and the path and everything within the void, all transform in harmony with the player's perception. Everything—voices, narrator, world—invites identification only partially, only provisionally, and ultimately refuses to hold it. All partial, all possible, all unavailable.

By the end of the fifth loop, the game finally offers what appears to be a full revelation of who the protagonist “is”. Is this the moment when the player is finally granted a stable representation to inhabit? In more conventional designs—*Fallout 4* again being exemplary—representation anchors identification from the outset. There, the player first receives a visible avatar (the mirror scene), then a clear narrative goal, and finally an array of input-output capabilities that cement extended embodiment. Identity, purpose, and action unfold in a reassuring order: representation → goal → embodiment. *Slay the Princess* reverses this sequence entirely. The player begins only with mechanical embodiment (point-and-click), is quickly assigned a dubious goal (slay the Princess), and then spends the entire game navigating fragmented, unstable identifications. Only near the end does the game reveal the protagonist's “true” form—at the moment when the mirror shows “nothing at all,” the Narrator sheds his mask as a bird-like humanoid, an “echo” of their Creator, and announces the player-protagonist as the Long Quiet, a nascent god. Yet this revelation still does not offer the comfort of dwelling. Instead, it forces players into an alien, monstrous body whose form and history were inaccessible until now. The player does not *choose* to occupy this form; they are *coerced* into it. What passes for a “final representation” is less a place to dwell than the culmination of a long process of estrangement—an identity delivered too late, too foreign, and too violent.

3.2 DE-ROLING AS BLEEDING

In *Slay the Princess*, the player's *exit* from the protagonist is just as fraught as how they enter in. This difficulty becomes clearest when we consider how games ordinarily allow players to leave a role behind. In LARP, as opposed to “en-roling”, there is also “de-roling”, or the process of player's transitioning out of a character. As Vella & Gualeni observe, in LARP, deep emotional immersions and prolonged periods of adaptation to an alternative persona involve in

them inherent risks, most prominently the “bleed”, in which “the line between the LARP situation and the player’s actual life becomes porous, allowing the flow of intense and potentially troubling emotions from one’s fictional role to one’s ordinary self (p. 35)”. In LARP, de-roling practices, such as sessions of debriefing or the symbolically taking off a piece of the character’s costume, are well-established and common. In videogames, due to the different “nature of engagement”, shorter play sessions, or less physical and emotional immersion compared to LARP, players presumably maintain a clearer separation between their real and virtual identities (p. 49). The de-roling occurs less emotionally in the form of either the player-character’s death signaled by a change from first-person to third-person perspective in *Deus Ex (2000)*, high scores and trophies in arcade games, or the closure of narrative (ending cutscene, where the character suddenly turns autonomous) (pp. 50–53).

Slay the Princess provides no apparent apparatus for de-roling: no cutscene of autonomous avatar, no stable identity to be relinquished, no shift in camera perspective, no scores or trophies to signal closure, and no ritualised moment of detachment. Without these structural cues, de-roling is already different from mainstream videogames, as the player remains bound to the Long Quiet—or its monstrous permutations—long after the narrative ought to have released them.

The Princess multiplies this failure of de-roling. From the very first encounter, she demands “blind trust,” insisting, “*We have a relationship,*” even while withholding any information that grounds such blindness. In bishōjo games discussed in previous sections, passion is scripted as a mutual choice. The player’s “knowing better” of a bishōjo provides a more relatable and enjoyable “having”. In *Slay the Princess*, passion is instead a trap with malice. All attempts to know her are rejected. In one scene, in the hope of rationalizing not-slaying through empathy, the player could choose to ask the Princess anything, but the princess offers no specifics in return. “So I could tell you that I’d lead a quiet life in the woods or that I’d open an orphanage or that I do any other number of ‘good’ things that I’m sure you think you want to hear... You don’t really know me, do you?” Later, the princess is revealed to be the Shifting Mound whose “shape” is moulded by the protagonist’s perception into “vessels”, and the player’s real objective is to collect different vessels and make her complete. She only becomes what the protagonist perceives her to be: a lover, a vulnerable care-seeker, a grotesque monster, or an invincible god; even when killed, she will be brought back to life by the protagonist’s uncertainty of her death. Reflective of the player’s choice, other voices emerge and compete with the Narrator: the Smitten, the Cold, the Paranoid... corresponding to each vessel of the Princess: the Damsel, the Spectre, the Nightmare... An evident reversal to all aforementioned dating sims: the Princess secures the side of “humanity”, knowing herself (vessels) and the player (voices) more and more, while the player only knows her as inhumane and abstract. The extreme passivity of the Princess, as a mound readily to be shaped into any vessel, turns into aggressiv-

ity. As this passivity lacks an articulate subject, she becomes all-consuming. If the player kills her, she returns. If the player escapes, she pursues. If the player loops, she loops with them. She continues to profess love, regardless of rejection, violence, or indifference. Her passion is not reciprocal but compulsory, something that the player cannot even negotiate. Bishōjo's passion in dating sims, in contrast, is scripted to be her and the player's mutual choices. Other male characters, sometimes the protagonist's friends or romantic rivals, are presented to confirm bishōjo's autonomy. The Princess's passion for the player, however, is never specified, as the protagonist is the only entity she has ever known. Ahmed noted how "passion" and "passive" share the same root *passio*, meaning "suffering". To receive passion is "to be passive", "to be enacted upon, as a negation that is already felt as suffering" (2014, p. 2). In receiving the Princess's void passion, the player becomes passive. This passivity does not stem from the loss of an object or from the irreversibility of time, but from the loss of agency, from being held within a relation that cannot be exited or resolved. The beloved one is thus softened by passivity, and through softness, harm. *Slay the Princess* thus inflicts the kind of wound that I am looking for: On my side, my humanity becomes imperceptible. On the Princess's side, I become passive and receptive to this wound not from loss but from forced passion by an abstract entity, unable to negotiate and unable to be rationalised. The wound emerges not from what disappears, but from what persists. That's how the Princess leaves a wound. A companion wound perhaps. From the wound, a "regrown limb" emerges, "...monstrous, duplicated, potent. We have all been injured, profoundly. We require regeneration, not rebirth, and the possibilities for our reconstitution include the utopian dream of the hope for a monstrous world without gender (Haraway, 1985, p. 67)."

What is at stake here is therefore not merely affective intensity, but the structural impossibility of concluding the relation. If bleeding in LARP names the accidental seepage of a fictional role into ordinary life, in *Slay the Princess*, this seepage follows from the way the game already troubles en-roling. Because the player never achieves a stable entry into a coherent avatar—never fully "becomes" the hero, the monster, or the Long Quiet—there is no clear role to step out of at the end. Conventional de-roling depends on the existence of such a role: one can only exit what one has first securely entered. Here, however, the player's identification is fragmented from the start, distributed among competing voices, an unreliable narrator, and a body that is continually revealed too late and too strangely to serve as an anchor. When de-roling arrives, it finds nothing solid to detach from.

The Princess's forced passion intensifies this structural failure. Because she insists on the relationship regardless of the player's choices, she prevents the relationship from closing in the way videogames ordinarily allow. Instead of the avatar becoming autonomous in an ending cutscene, it is the Princess who refuses autonomy to the player. The result is that the affect generated during play

cannot be contained by the usual de-roling cues; it has no narrative or mechanical place to return to. In this sense, the “wound” and the “bleed” converge: the wound is the impossibility of completing either en-roling or de-roling, and bleeding is what it feels like to remain caught in that unfinished relationship with a fictional character.

4. CONCLUSION

4.1 BISHŌJO AS A BINDING FORCE: THE PRINCESS BETWEEN MONSTER AND BELOVED

If *Slay the Princess* destabilizes the player’s subjectivity by withholding a coherent avatar, it equally destabilizes intimacy by staging the Princess as a distorted, volatile iteration of the bishōjo. She is not a simple parody of bishōjo tropes. Rather, she mobilizes the affective power of the bishōjo—the softness, vulnerability, and scripted relational availability that normally secure the player’s desire—while simultaneously undermining every narrative and mechanical structure that would make such desire reassured. In this sense, the Princess is a bishōjo not because she resembles the “cute girl” of dating sims, but because she weaponises the form’s capacity for soliciting affect. What she refuses is the corollary: to remain legible and possessable. This refusal reconfigures the process of en-roling and de-roling. In conventional dating sims, the bishōjo is the principal anchor for identification: she stabilizes the player’s entry into the romantic role, and because her affection is secure, predictable, and infinitely replayable, she also stabilizes the player’s exit from that role once the “route” ends. The bishōjo’s availability is what allows the player to project, inhabit, and eventually detach. *Slay the Princess* reverses this logic. The Princess retains the bishōjo’s affective invitation—her initial fragility, her apparent loneliness, even her insistence that “this is a love story”—but she rejects the legibility and predictability that make the bishōjo consumable. As she shifts through the Damsel, the Spectre, the Nightmare, the Razor, and finally the Shifting Mound, the relational script breaks, yet the affective pull remains. It becomes the one continuous thread in a world where every other aspect of identification dissolves, and thus the primary mechanism through which the player remains attached even as the game refuses to offer a coherent self to identify with.

This unstable combination—bishōjo’s affect and monstrosity—produces a relational asymmetry more binding than either could achieve alone. In ordinary bishōjo narratives, the player can desire safely because the bishōjo is already scripted to love them back; in ordinary monster narratives, the player can destroy safely because the monster is already scripted to be defeated. Here, neither script functions. The Princess is vulnerable enough that killing her feels like betrayal, yet powerful enough that sparing her invites disaster; she is intimate enough to claim the player as beloved, yet alien enough to provoke disgust and fear. Her bishōjo affect solicits empathy, but her monstrosity forecloses

appropriation. The player cannot desire her without losing coherence, because to desire her is to risk the dissolution of their own subjectivity. They cannot reject her without becoming implicated in her return, because to refuse her only draws the player further into her recurring presence. The relationship offers no stable position from which the player can either safely desire or safely refuse, and is thus suspended in an unresolved state—one the player neither chose nor can withdraw from. This suspension is the wound: a form of attachment without identification, intimacy without mutuality, generated by a figure who inherits the emotional architecture of the bishōjo yet refuses to remain its object.

The force of this bind culminates in the ending where the Princess and the Long Quiet choose to reset the world together. This “fresh start” replicates the cyclical temporality of dating sims—the perpetual replay, the promise of beginning again—but stripped of the genre’s comfort. The reset is not a new route to be cleared, but rather a mutual agreement to continue a relationship. For the Princess, this is persistence; for the player, it is exposure. If bleed in LARP describes the accidental seepage of role into life, here bleed arises from an attachment forged through bishōjo affect and enforced through monstrosity. In *Slay the Princess*, the bishōjo does not offer salvation, projection, or techno-intimacy. She binds. And it is through this binding—this impossible, asymmetrical, monstrous affection—that she leaves the wound the player must carry—a small instance of that fourth, relational wound that names our entanglement with our nonhuman partners.

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Entering the Battlegrounds

Fan labour in PUBG and its connection to the mega-platform

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the dynamic, often exploitative, relationship between fan labour and the video game industry, focusing on the success of *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds (PUBG)*. Using platform and user-generated content theory, it examines how fan contributions, such as fan art and gameplay improvement suggestions, contributed to the game's rise to a best-seller. By analysing fan comments on message boards and official statements across platforms, the study reveals how companies leverage a “mega-platform” structure: a central platform supported by satellite channels that foster fan engagement. While fans experience community strengthening, companies profit significantly from their unpaid labour. This research highlights the dual impact of fan labour—enriching the gaming community while exposing the lack of fair remuneration for contributors. It adds to the discourse on platform dynamics, labour exploitation, and community-building in the gaming world, emphasising the symbiotic yet exploitative nature of the fan community-industry relationship.

1. INTRODUCTION

Breaking into the video game industry is not a simple task, and it can take a good deal of effort for a fan to become part of the business. Even then, they might not reach the desired recognition and level of monetary rewards. Sometimes, individuals are required to tweak the system in some way and play by new rules. That is the case to be discussed in this paper, namely *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* [hereafter: *PUBG*].

PUBG is an online video game themed around survival in a remote location, in which the player must eliminate every opponent and become the last person standing. The game was released in 2017, and it quickly became one of the best-selling games of all time, earning high revenues for its makers. *PUBG*'s roots in the modding and DIY cultures make it a significant case to examine. What began as a one-man project has massively impacted the video

game industry and has been supported by a large online community. What makes *PUBG* interesting is the fact that a big part of its success is due to labour undertaken by community members.

The research question of this paper will, thus, be “how influential fan labour can be for fan-based gaming projects, such as *PUBG*, and how can these projects use platforms to expand their growth?” As I will attempt to show here, the game’s success would not have been as great had it not been for the labour undertaken by community members on various platforms.

2. ON PLATFORMS

In *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*, José van Dijck claims that users are entities who play numerous roles: they can be recipients, producers, consumers and much more (2013). Importantly, where usage is concerned, Van Dijck also makes a distinction between implicit and explicit participation, with implicit participation referring to the technological infrastructure of a platform, whereas explicit participation refers to the way users interact with it (2013).

Unlike single platforms, online fan communities do not function on just one exclusive platform. Online fans have an interconnected system that itself is constitutive of a platform, such as a community’s website that will have served as the community’s core and which links to other platforms or social media (Deller, 2016), thus creating what one could call a “mega-platform.” While all platforms could be studied separately, the fact that they are all part of a “dynamic infrastructure that shapes and is shaped by culture at large” should not be overlooked (Van Dijck, 2013: 43–44). David B Nieborg and Thomas Poell make a similar observation when they discuss multisided markets and how these markets bring together multiple factors that shape production and distribution in cultural industries (2018). Given this, I would argue that platform analysis may be used to examine the various components (platforms) that support communities as if the components were part of a mega-platform that binds fans together. For Poell et al., platforms are “(re)programmable digital infrastructures that facilitate and shape personalised interactions among end-users and complementors, organised through the systematic collection, algorithmic processing, monetisation, and circulation of data” (2019, p. 3). This is the definition of the platform to which I will subscribe to in this article. Now, it is important to see how the *PUBG* game was created and what its ties to user-generated content are.

3. FROM “PLAYERUNKNOWN” TO “PLAYERWELL-KNOWN”

While living in Brazil, Brendan Greene, known online as PlayerUnknown, took notice of *DayZ*, a modification, also referred to as mod, for the game *ARMA 2*. Mods refer to adjustments to the elements of a game, either in a minor or major manner, usually requiring some programming knowledge. Greene quickly found himself engrossed in the mod, and, inspired by his love

for the Japanese film *Battle Royale* (Kinji, 2000), he put his limited programming skills to use and worked on his own project. In 2013, he released his own self-made mod for *DayZ*. That version of the mod became renowned in the online gaming scene. In 2016, Chang-han Kim of the Bluehole Ginno Games studio hired Greene and gave him all the resources he required to make his vision a reality. The outcome was *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds*. *PUBG* was released in the beginning of 2017, and by 2019 it had sold over 60 million copies, while it also received various award nominations, as it became one of the most streamed, followed, and played video games of all time (Bailey, 2019; Gough, 2020a).

PUBG began as a form of cultural resistance seen as a video game fan's hobby. It later changed the creator's life and had a significant impact on the video game industry. Moreover, while it economically impacted the video game landscape, *PUBG* also made an impact on community shaping and development. Fans increasingly had their attention drawn to the made artefact and were subsequently inspired to participate, and often, to create their own artefacts. In the following section, I will discuss the importance of modding in the video game industry, followed by the characteristics of the *PUBG* community that allowed for its prominence.

4. WHY IS MODDING IMPORTANT?

At this point, I also believe it is important to explain where the modding scene fits into my argument, and why it is essential to bear modding in mind when discussing interaction between the gaming industry and its fan base.

Modding as a practice is integral in the video game industry and has changed how labour is perceived in it (Postigo, 2010; Sihvonen, 2011; Unger, 2012). David B. Nieborg has argued that the video game industry originated from modification activities (2005) and links his argument to the early days of entertainment software, and some of the first games developed by American university students who tampered with the software and hardware available to them (Kline et al., 2003). The video game industry did not follow the same course in every country, but without those early steps in the labs of universities and government facilities things would have been at least somewhat different. Modding is still a popular activity and, typically, community members will welcome newcomers and help them with questions they may have, even though it has been noted that sometimes the feedback systems in different modding communities can lead to an exhausting work rate (Hong and Chen, 2013).

Various contemporary games, including *Stardew Valley* and *Minecraft*, have seen multiple modifications made for them: from simple tweaks to total conversions. At the same time, modding helps maintain interest in older releases, and games such as *Age of Empires II: Age of Kings* (first released in 1999) and *Grand Theft Auto IV* (first released in 2008) continue to receive mods developed for them to this day.¹ Modding has become significant enough to be understood by industry as being important for boosting game sales; and the

complaining that ensues whenever games do not support modding opportunities is also understood (Hong and Chen, 2013).

Modding has been considered a motivating force in socialisation around video games (Crawford and Rutter, 2007; Sihvonen, 2011). This notion is supported by the fact that modding goes beyond the act of simple engagement with the game, and it is based on the collaboration of people in a network. Modding activities bring people together in a borderless, online domain, enabling fans to create artefacts together with fellow gaming fans whom they may never even encounter offline. In this regard, modding communities may also be described and understood as imagined communities, and as akin, at least in some respects, to the Maussian notion of the gift economy in terms of social bonding (Mauss, 1966).

In addition, modding presents its participants with opportunities for resistance, which may be both encouraged and commercially exploited (Raessens, 2005). In this regard, I would agree with Hong (2013) that modding is a process that embraces romanticism as well as neoliberalism. That said, however, I would also argue that the neoliberal practices, and particularly the exploitation and zero or scant remuneration involved in modding, very probably outweigh the romanticism that goes into their making.

Entertainment industries regularly claim all ownership of their trademarks, although they allow for fair, non-monetised use of them by fans. It is also one of the core beliefs of the modding community that mod artefacts should be distributed free of charge. Therefore, it would be difficult to find recognised cases of fan exploitation stemming from malicious intent in this community. This, however, begs the question of the ultimate fairness of business practice and what constitutes fan exploitation. For example, it is difficult to believe that every fan of the game is aware of the legalities surrounding content ownership and distribution. Additionally, fans often are content makers and provide input in many forms as a means of improving their entertainment experience; therefore, it could be argued that, in some cases, exploitation may be a matter of perspective or an implicit contract between parties. Regardless of the fans' beliefs, I maintain that labourious fan activities that have economic value for a company alone, contain traces of exploitation since the company profits while the fan gains only sentimental or emotional value in return.²

1. Although the current mods are being released for the higher-definition remakes of the game, the Age of Empires II modding scene has been very active since the original game came out.

2. Outside of the video game sector, I would not consider volunteer activities that contribute to the well-being of a community (a soup kitchen, for example) as exploitative. In addition, many creative workers, such as illustrators or designers, might do free work for reasons including building a portfolio, helping an NGO, or for barter.

5. DATASET AND METHODOLOGY

I visited the official PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds website in May 2020, during which time I also started following the community more closely on various social media platforms, especially Reddit. For this research, it was mostly the Reddit comments that were taken into consideration, due to the platform's allowance for lengthy posts, visiting for at least two months, and collecting the top five daily posts. The comments were noted down and used to come up with various themes, per content analysis guidelines (Schreier,

2013). To get a better understanding of how the community assembles and functions, I also logged in daily, between June 2020 and July 2020, on *PUBG Mobile*, the official mobile version of the game. It is worth noting that after those initial visits, I repeated my steps in September 2024, without discovering significant differences. Hence, my methodology features elements taken from content (Schreier, 2013) and platform analysis (Van Dijck 2013), enhanced by personal observation.

Since my research is about communities of video game fans but not about their gameplay per se, I will examine the tools that PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds has used to form a community, rather than devoting much discussion to the game itself. While the game does allow for direct communication among group members, the game's content will not be of concern here, given that elements of gameplay are not always or necessarily of importance to a study of the community around it. The comments will add clarity when it comes to the affordances of participation that the *PUBG* community employs.

The three main themes located by analysing the platforms that the community uses and the Reddit comments are accessibility, community engagement, and struggle for control.

6. AN ACCESSIBLE BATTLEGROUND

Participation in a *PUBG* community or sub-community is indeed open, easy, and free. Members can join anytime one of the various channels such as a Reddit thread or a Facebook group. That said, however, fans need not participate in one of these channels, in order to belong to the fandom surrounding *PUBG*. They can participate as passers-by, or by reading through comments or watching videos and live streams of others playing the game. The game, however, is not free.³ In other words, while gaining access to the game requires payment, participation in the community can remain open, easy, and free.

Importantly, by spectating or playing, communal evaluation takes place, and its significance for the corporation is unquestionable. The feedback constantly provided by the fans and supplied free of charge to the company has developed the community. The game changes and gets updated and improved, and so does the community around it. As long as there is new game content produced, the community has something to discuss and evaluate. In addition, all fan-made content is also constantly evaluated by other fans on the online platforms.

In specific cases around video game fandom, such as the *PUBG* fandom, another participatory activity derives from exceptional individual action. Following the release of a new game, early adopters showcase the game for other people, usually by using streaming platforms while also possibly still playing older games and therefore also occasionally contributing to the game's popularity and reception. Members of the *PUBG* community who are also streamers—according to Greene—have played an important role in the rise of the game's popularity (BBC Radio 1, 2018) and, subsequently, in the rise of the

3. A free mobile version of the game exists, which is not entirely different from the paid one.

community itself. In fact, in early 2018, when the game was gaining in popularity, there were over 70 thousand viewers watching *PUBG* streams (Gough, 2020b). *PUBG* now acknowledges the labour undertaken by the streamers through the game's menu where a list appears of selected streams that players can choose to watch. In this way, the parties involved (for example, *PUBG* Corporation, streaming services, and fans) maintain a connection. While the company that made the featured game has the most to gain, in a few cases streamers have built entire careers by playing games (Johnson and Woodcock, 2019, p. 672).

However, there is another case that may well be linked to more obvious or easily defined exploitation, worthy of discussion here. Around the holiday season of 2017, Microsoft posted an advertisement on X for the Xbox One X console release of *PUBG*. The advertisement was almost identical to a fan-made poster for the game that was posted on Reddit, by a fan going by the name of Macsterr. Numerous members of the *PUBG* community voiced their displeasure online, which prompted a Microsoft spokesperson to make a public statement in which the company claimed to be unaware of the similarity between the fan art and their advertisement and stated that they would investigate the matter further (Tassi, 2018). The advertisement was taken down and, although this has never been officially stated, it may be safe to assume that the company chose to avoid presumed culpability. This example suggests that—as a means of increasing profits—a major corporation may have initially seen fit to neglect to give credit to a fan for fan-made artefact until pressured to do so.

A community clustered around a best-selling, constantly updated game may also be characterised as an unfinished process (Bruns, 2013), whereby fans offer their input and voice their opinions, knowing that their community thrives and expands on such input. Even communities formed around a game series on a hiatus may continue to thrive, just like games with millions of followers around the world. As the game keeps evolving, so does its community, not only in terms of play but also in terms of communication, content creation and distribution. Games are constantly in progress, using valuable feedback from their fan base since “video game players interact with games through contributing content and modifying gaming conditions” (Kim, 2014, p. 357). Specifically, *PUBG* has had over 30 update patches since the day of its release. Therefore, the game is never finished. It is constantly improved, while gaining additional content, fixes, and updates, just like the community that shapes and interacts around it.

One might well expect that for a gamer to climb through the rankings of a *PUBG* community group, good gameplay skills would be required, and this would be true if competitiveness were the focus. Despite this being a community grown around a video game, various types of productivity contribute to the strengthening of communal bonds. For example, the winners of a fan art contest held by the *PUBG* Corporation had their work featured on the company's website, and their status as fans elevated. Fans may then participate

by playing, through message board discussions, or by creating content, which rarely receives any significant compensation.

However, because *PUBG* is a popular competitive game, there are also inherent systems based on partial meritocracy and heterarchy around publicity endeavours, like those Bruns would have described (2013). Some popular streamers such as JackFrag and Anthony_Kongphan became popular online by streaming *PUBG* and creating the desire to see more in the fan base. Fans also use platforms such as Discord and Reddit as a means of organising themselves and recruiting others for their sub-communities. On various *PUBG* threads on Reddit, people are constantly looking for professional players or content makers to join their ranks and help them in their goal of gaining notoriety on the global *PUBG* scene, either as competitors or content makers. Furthermore, as previously noted, Brendan Greene has commented that, by following the gaming scene, he would like to provide a young person with the same opportunity to make their vision an actual game that he enjoyed (Batchelor, 2017). Yet, any fan who climbs through the ranks of the hierarchy and enters the video game industry system will most likely do so within the conditions that a company allows.

Like any kind of fan content, *PUBG*'s fan content is decommissioned fan labour, harvested from a dedicated community, without monetary remuneration. *PUBG* managers are well aware of fans' desire to create and unite through content, therefore they have posted guidelines on the official *PUBG* website regarding content created by players. According to these guidelines, anything *PUBG*-related created by community members is classified as player-created content. *PUBG* Corporation encourages fans to make this content, while stipulating that it must be free of charge to the company and other players. If content is submitted to *PUBG* Corporation, it remains entirely their property (*PUBG*, 2024). In this way, communal property technically exists in the *PUBG* community but not as the free and uninterrupted ownership of content that theorists such as Axel Bruns (2013) would have envisioned. This is because the community operates under specific rules set by the official corporation of the game, which acts as a supervising body.

Along with the communal property aspect of the game, there is a very interesting feature that separates *PUBG* from other fan communities: access to the official data of the game (API key) offered to the fans. This means that—if granted access—anyone can build a website or an application using in-game data and the interface of *PUBG*. In this way, a fan can make tools that help and guide newer *PUBG* players.

Where the creation of tools and *PUBG* is concerned, Brendan Greene is aware of the importance of fans' feedback, with the in-game item, the pan, being a prime example of that. During *PUBG* gameplay, players may encounter a pan that can be used both as a melee weapon and as protection. This is a reference to the aforementioned Battle Royale movie, and the team of developers forgot to remove it when the game became available. When Greene and his

team saw numerous online postings about the pan and its popularity among fans, they decided to keep the pan in the game (Bratt, 2017).

7. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN PUBG

As I have explained in this section, *PUBG* progressed very rapidly from its beginnings, entering the franchise phase and eliminating light monetisation tactics for higher profits. *PUBG* is supported by a sizeable community that continues to play the game, create content, and discuss it. At the same time, the team behind the game uses available technology to maximise profits by constantly advertising the game, as well as the benefits of joining the community, which one does by purchasing the game. Multiple users create fan-made content which primarily references the game, hence most of the users participating in the creative process are also fans and players of the game. These fans connect through channels promoted by *PUBG* Corporation and, since they are monitored, make their fan content traceable. Fans also connect through grassroots initiatives, although there are fewer of them.

Although the community is free and easy to join, purchasing the game should be considered the main point of entry into the community, even though some fans do not pay for the game and still participate by spectating or playing the free version. Fans offer valuable feedback for the community's development and longevity, while creating content, which the company encourages, and which content is "irrevocably assigned to *PUBG* Corporation, together with all intellectual property rights therein" (2024) as stated in the official guidelines found in the *PUBG* website. The *PUBG* community contains various kinds of fans, with the limits being quite flexible: someone might try the game and become a fan or enthusiast who buys additional content for the game. Some of these fans might even become makers and produce content for the community. There are also streams, promotions, or fan art contests and the like, which allow for fluidity between categories. For some, this participation can be enough, as, often, fans seek recognition from the brand as a reward instead of monetary gain (Goggin, 2018). However, a company might refuse to acknowledge fan creations, while owning unremunerated fan creations outright and permanently, thus stirring up controversy. In fact, as the example of *Macsterr*'s art appropriation above has shown, when there is an attempt to exploit fan art by an external party the community may unite to fend it off.

Thus far, I have described how the *PUBG* community has formed and co-existed in its relationship with *PUBG* Corporation. I would now like to list a few more observations I made with regard to *PUBG* Corporation's power over the community, and its relationship with the fan base that supports the game.

8. STRUGGLE FOR CONTROL

It is difficult to pinpoint the subjective experience and perspective of fans themselves where other community members and administrators are concerned.

However, it has been reported that players of *PUBG* generally feel happy when interacting with other players, and they believe that the game operators protect the interests of the players (Xu et al., 2018). I would suggest that, apart from the development team's efforts, labour from this international community in the form of fan participation and feedback has contributed enormously to the *PUBG* community's growth. Indeed, even from the game's testing period, fans were very eager to share the word and participate in tests aimed at developing a better finished product.

That said however, not everyone would concur that the relationship between game and fans is entirely felicitous, and, indeed, the second most upvoted thread of all time on *PUBG*'s subreddit—at the time of writing—is a complaint. The user who posted it, Ford117, is upset that fans have supported the game from the beginning, yet the game remains full of glitches, cheaters, and additional paid content. The user describes the situation as a “damn shame” and goes on to explain that they believe the community has been heard, and that community members want the game to succeed (2018). An article in *Metro* (Beckwith, 2020) likewise criticises the developers' lack of attention to specific issues, while also noting a drop in the number of active players. The public outing of game errors and call for change demonstrate how mass demand can pressure a company and possibly achieve a desired result. Even when the demand concerns fan-made content as is the case here in *PUBG*, feedback in the form of mass demand is a seminal element of the fan community and allows for interaction between makers and followers.

Players' feedback being taken into consideration, as in the example of the pan described above, illustrates that the *PUBG* Corporation is indeed serious about community management. And, as might be expected, the *PUBG* Corporation endorses the use of social media in order to communicate with the community's members, while also contributing to connections made in the community. However, whatever Greene's feelings toward the community may be, his project has become enormously successful, and his current field of action is also limited as a consequence because *PUBG* and its community are bound by set rules by corporate policy, commercial limitations, and other external factors. Now that Greene no longer maintains exclusive control over the *PUBG* game and has other priorities, he is not always available to hear fans' concerns.⁴ When a project grows and becomes highly profitable, communication with the upper levels of administration is faceless, and the company becomes focused on heavily monetised activities and promotional endeavours.

9. CONCLUSION

As mentioned above, three main themes were located when it comes to thinking of fan participation and labour in the *PUBG* community: accessibility, community engagement, and struggle for control on the mega-platform. On *PUBG*'s release, fans used all available platforms to offer input and create their

4. Brendan Greene has since stepped down as the director of *PUBG* in order to work on his next game, although he is still active as a consultant.

own artefacts for circulation in various fan circles, with the goal not only of suggesting improvements for the game but also of advertising it. At the same time, the company provided specific, and usually monitored, access to creative tools for the fans, and the fans have expressed themselves and contributed to the growth of the community – a strategy which is greatly beneficial to the company. The fans do not seem bothered, presumably because they also get a product that conforms to at least some of their demands. It may therefore be argued that, through the creation of their own fan-made artefacts, fans have helped create an even greater artefact, namely the *PUBG* game. And finally, I believe that a large community like the one under discussion here is analogous to other kinds of communities. I would, therefore, expect that what happens with *PUBG* in terms of communal osmosis could also happen in other communities of similar origins and content.

Moreover, *PUBG* seems to be a perfect manifestation of the industry's tendency to appropriate fan content and profit from it. In this case, a fan created a following around their work, elevated themselves to a leader and, in what initially appeared to be a moment of empowerment, joined the industry. At the same time, the industry made use of all available materials on a mega-platform of interconnected social media to foster a lively community that would provide content by labouring playfully towards the community's strengthening together with the industry's prosperity. It could be claimed, however, that the industry invariably gets the biggest piece of the pie.

10. LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This research looked at specific platforms on specific time periods. A look at the same or other platforms could potentially produce additional results and following the community for a longer time might enrich the results further, especially given the fact that some institutions are engaging into “deplatformization” strategies (Van Dijck et al., 2023). Interviews of prominent community members, especially those who labour frequently, could also highlight more aspects. Moreover, other communities, either less or more popular, should be worth investigating, since not all fan communities enjoy the same relationship with the video game industry. The community under examination here also (mainly) uses the English language, but there are instances that indicate the existence of different perceptions of language and, possibly, culture: *PUBG* players from specific ethnic backgrounds form alliances and use cultural-specific symbols to express their identity. Research investigating how fans from non-English speaking backgrounds or fans who do not self-identify as cis male, straight, and white, participate in fandoms has the potential to unveil lesser-known areas of fan cultures. E-Sports are also worthy of further investigation as they might also produce important data about player-to-player and player-to-industry interaction.

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A Reading Typology for Video Game Players

Bridging Cultural and Game Studies

ABSTRACT

This study develops a framework for analyzing how players interpret video games and their characters from a cultural studies perspective. Based on qualitative interviews with Mexican gamers, the study combines classic ideas from reception theory with concepts from game studies, creating a bridge between the two fields. The main result is a reading typology that includes aesthetic, narrative, ideological, and metatextual readings, along with ludic readings focused on challenge and difficulty, game mechanics, control, playability, and immersion. This typology helps examine how players engage with games at multiple levels, addressing both their understanding of narrative, symbolic, and ideological meanings and their direct interactive experience of gameplay. The model offers a flexible tool for analyzing the complex ways players experience and interpret video games. It can inform future research in both cultural studies and game studies on how players make sense of video games.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past several decades, cultural studies scholars have developed a solid framework for understanding how audiences interpret media texts. The work of Stuart Hall (1980) on encoding and decoding, together with contributions from John Fiske (1987) and David Morley (1992), established the idea that audiences are active, exercise agency, and construct meanings based on their social position, experiences, and interaction with popular culture. This theoretical tradition, which focused mainly on television analysis, enabled the identification of reading positions that show how hegemonic messages can be accepted, reinterpreted, or resisted. Although this framework has been used productively in video game research, such as in the study by Treviño, Maza, and Maeda (2024), there remains a need for a more specific adaptation that accounts for the particularities of video games and the ways players interact with them.

Within game studies, various approaches have explored the player experience through the medium's specific characteristics. Models such as MDA (Mechanics, Dynamics, Aesthetics), proposed by Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek (2004), and Gordon Calleja's (2011) work on presence, involvement, and incorporation have expanded the understanding of how the player-game relationship operates. These perspectives are complemented by Marie-Laure Ryan's (2015) reflections on interactivity and immersion, which help explain how video games require particular forms of participation and engagement. However, while these frameworks explain key dimensions of the gaming experience, they tend to focus on game structure or immediate play, leaving the interpretative dimension less developed, namely, how players make meaning, negotiate, or "read" the worlds, narratives, and characters they engage with.

In this context, this study aims to develop a typology of players' readings to analyze how gamers interpret video games and their characters from a cultural studies perspective. Based on qualitative interviews with gamers from Monterrey, Mexico, this proposal brings together classic ideas from reception theory and contemporary approaches from game studies to bridge the two areas. The goal is to offer a conceptual tool that broadens the understanding of video game reception and can serve as a foundation for future research on the diverse meanings that emerge through play, considering the agency players exercise as they interact with games.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To develop a typology of readings from a cultural studies perspective, it is first necessary to acknowledge that, although media texts often reproduce dominant ideologies, audiences have the agency to negotiate, reinterpret, or reject those meanings (Hall, 1980; Fiske, 1987; Morley, 1992). Media texts are polysemic, allowing for multiple interpretations depending on each individual's cultural repertoire and lived experience (Hall, 1980). These interpretive differences are mediated by values, social experiences, attitudes, and ideological positions, which influence how audiences relate to media texts (Fiske, 1987; Orozco, 1991). This perspective is central to the present study, as it foregrounds interpretation as an active, situated process rather than a passive decoding of fixed meanings.

Based on these assumptions, Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model outlines three broad reading positions. A preferred reading accepts the hegemonic meaning proposed by the text. A negotiated reading partially accepts this meaning while adapting it to personal experiences or social contradictions. An oppositional reading rejects the dominant framework and articulates an alternative interpretation from a critical standpoint. Importantly, for Hall, reading involves relating signs to one another and to broader social contexts, activating the receiver's interpretive agency rather than merely recognizing encoded meanings (Terni, 1973).

Subsequent reception studies expanded and refined Hall's original model by specifying different interpretive positions. Hacker et al. (1991), in their study of television news audiences, identified four types of readings: criticism, understood as general comments about the content; resistance, expressed as skepticism toward what is presented; challenge, which questions the factual accuracy of the information; and deconstruction, where viewers recognize and critique the ideological framing of the news.

Building on these ideas, Palmer and Hafen (1999) adapted the model to television fiction, distinguishing between naive acceptance, when viewers take the fictional text at face value; sophisticated acceptance, when they agree with the text while recognizing other possible viewpoints; sophisticated rejection, when viewers disagree using personal experience or narrative inference; and deconstructive readings, which focus on the text as a manufactured product shaped by ideological interests. Inzunza-Acedo (2012) further expanded this framework by introducing naive rejection, a form of dismissal lacking explicit argumentation, and distancing, a reading characterized by awareness of production processes.

While cultural studies originally focused on media such as television and film, applying its interpretive logic to video games requires accounting for the medium's specific characteristics. Unlike non-interactive media, video games are ergodic texts that unfold only through player action (Calleja, 2011). In this sense, audience control differs fundamentally: in television, viewers exercise only semiotic control over meaning, whereas in video games, control is material, through the directional pad and buttons; players directly influence on-screen events (Fiske, 1989; Corona, 2018). Meaning is therefore produced not only through representation but also through action.

This shift requires considering concepts such as immersion, interactivity, and presence. Presence refers to a state of awareness that allows players to act across physical and virtual spaces (Minsky, 1980; Calleja, 2011). Immersion describes the imaginative engagement that draws players into a fictional world, while interactivity refers to the player's capacity to influence events within that world (Ryan, 2015). Incorporation, as proposed by Calleja (2011), captures the sense of being situated within the virtual environment through the avatar. Together, these concepts help explain how gameplay conditions mediate the construction of meaning in ergodic texts.

Within game studies, several authors have emphasized player subjectivity, cultural context, and social practice as central to the interpretation and negotiation of meaning through gameplay. Consalvo's work (2007) is particularly relevant, as it frames digital games as cultural systems in which meanings and ways of playing are constantly negotiated among players, communities, and the game industry. Similarly, Pearce (2011) understands play as a social and performative practice through which players collectively contribute to the production of meaning beyond designers' intentions, while Shaw (2015) shows how players' relationships

with avatars and game worlds are influenced by gender, sexuality, and identity. Taken together, these approaches help situate gameplay as a culturally embedded practice in which interpretation emerges through situated forms of play.

Additionally, game studies research has paid particular attention to identifying different types of video game players and understanding what players want from video games. Bartle (1996) proposed a typology of players, such as achievers, explorers, socializers, and killers, based on their preferred forms of interaction within game worlds. Similarly, Yee (2006) examined players' motivations for play, highlighting dimensions such as achievement, social interaction, and immersion.

Building on this experiential focus, the MDA model proposed by Hunicke et al. (2004) offers a practical framework for analyzing how player experiences and preferences are structured. The model distinguishes between mechanics, the rules and actions available to players; dynamics, the behaviors that emerge through interaction with those mechanics; and aesthetics, the emotional and experiential dimensions of play.

As Hunicke et al. (2004) identify, the MDA framework proposes eight aesthetics, understood as forms of game-related enjoyment that help describe what players seek in play. These include sensation, defined as sensory pleasure; fantasy, associated with imaginative escape; narrative, linked to games experienced as drama; challenge, centered on overcoming obstacles; fellowship, which frames games as social experiences; discovery, tied to exploration; expression, related to self-discovery and creative play; and submission, referring to games enjoyed as a pastime. Although the MDA model focuses on forms of enjoyment rather than on interpretation, it is useful for this study because players' tastes and motivations mediate patterns of acceptance, preference, or rejection in their readings of video games and characters.

Calleja (2011) further refines this experiential focus by distinguishing between macro-involvement, engagement that takes place outside gameplay, and micro-involvement, the moment of play. Micro-involvement comprises six dimensions: kinesthetic involvement, related to control and movement; spatial involvement, linked to navigation and orientation in the game world; shared involvement, concerning awareness of and interaction with others; narrative involvement, connected to engagement with story events; affective involvement, referring to emotional responses; and ludic involvement, centered on decision-making and challenge. Together, these dimensions contribute to what Calleja defines as incorporation, a state in which the player's actions and the virtual world become an integrated experience.

While Calleja's model focuses on player involvement rather than interpretation, it remains relevant to this study, as patterns of gameplay engagement help explain players' acceptance or rejection of games and characters (Treviño, 2025). Drawing on these contributions, this study combines cultural studies approaches to reading with experiential frameworks from game studies to propose a typology of video game readings. Rather than imposing categories

a priori, the typology emerges from the dialogue between theory and players' accounts of their own play experiences.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study seeks to develop reading typologies that help understand how players make sense of video games and their characters within a cultural studies framework, from a qualitative perspective. To achieve this, semi-structured interviews were used, as they facilitate the exploration of participants' perspectives, lived experiences, and interpretive processes (Taylor & Bogdan, 1987). The interview corpus analyzed in this article forms part of a broader qualitative research project. Previous publications have examined the same empirical material from different analytical perspectives (Treviño, Maeda, & Maza, 2024; Treviño, 2025), whereas the present study focuses specifically on developing a reading typology. The interviews addressed participants' gaming trajectories since childhood, their current play practices, preferences for video games and characters, and the meanings they attribute to female characters through play.

The snowball sampling technique was used to recruit participants. The selection criteria included being a millennial, actively playing video games, having engaged with video games since childhood, and residing in the Monterrey metropolitan area in northern Mexico. This contributed to a relatively homogeneous group, facilitating consistent comparisons across interviews. The focus on millennial players (Dimock, 2019) is particularly relevant, as participants, ranging from their late twenties to early forties, experienced the transition from early arcade and console gaming cultures to contemporary narrative-driven cinematic games. References to practices such as playing in local arcades and engaging with titles like *The King of Fighters* or *Mortal Kombat* in their youth appeared repeatedly in the interviews, reflecting a shared generational and localized gaming background that mediated specific forms of engagement and interpretation.

For the study, 30 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted, 15 with men and 15 with women, with the aim of achieving theoretical saturation, defined as the point at which additional data no longer yield new insights into the phenomenon (Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024). All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed in full, and analyzed manually through an iterative qualitative process based on close reading and constant comparison of the material, which enabled the identification and progressive refinement of analytical categories, as well as patterns, convergences, and contrasts across participants' accounts.

The development of the reading typology followed an abductive logic, combining theoretical frameworks from cultural studies (Hall, 1980; Fiske, 1987; Hacker et al., 1991; Morley, 1992; Palmer & Hafen, 1999; Corona, 2018) and game studies (Hunicke et al., 2004; Calleja, 2011; Ryan, 2015) with inductive insights derived from empirical material. All participants were informed of the study's confidential nature, participated voluntarily, and were assigned

anonymized codes that combined the interview number, gender, and age (e.g., I1M33; I15F28).

While this contextually grounded approach is a strength, it also represents a limitation. The typology emerges from a specific cultural and generational setting and should be understood as a proposed analytical framework rather than a universal model. Future research could test and refine this typology in other cultural, national, or generational contexts.

4. DEVELOPING THE TYPOLOGY OF PLAYER READINGS

Responding to the need to develop a typology of readings from a cultural studies perspective (Hall, 1980; Fiske, 1987; Hacker et al., 1991; Morley, 1992; Palmer & Hafen, 1999; Inzunza-Acedo, 2012) that recognizes players' agency in the interpretation of interactive cultural products (Fiske, 1989; Corona, 2018), while also considering the specificities of video games as ergodic texts (Hunicke et al., 2004; Calleja, 2011; Ryan, 2015), this section presents a proposed typology of videogame readings. The readings outlined below are not mutually exclusive, as a player account may draw on several forms of reading simultaneously. Each reading can operate as an acceptance, negotiation, or rejection of the intended meanings encoded in the game, and the different types of readings, particularly ideological ones, may operate as an overarching interpretive frame that influences or reconfigures others.

The first type of interpretation proposed in this study is the ideological reading, based on Hacker et al.'s (1991) deconstruction reading but adapted to the context of video games. In an ideological reading, the player understands that a game is not only an interactive text composed of mechanics and narrative elements, but also a product embedded in social, political, economic, or cultural meanings. This type of reading involves taking some distance from the text (Inzunza-Acedo, 2012) and recognizing the power dynamics and ideologies (Fiske, 1987) present in the game.

Some readings of acceptance towards Samus Aran from the *Metroid* series focused on her importance as one of the first major female protagonists in video games. These are considered ideological readings of the character, since the player's appreciation is based not on gameplay or narrative, but on her cultural significance in gaming, as can be seen in the account of one of the female participants:

I think I could say Samus is my favorite, even though I haven't finished all her games. But what she represents, I love that. I was actually one of those people who was surprised when I found out Samus was a woman. (I6F32)

On the other hand, some players showed ideological readings of rejection toward games they perceived went against their beliefs, describing certain characters that appeared on titles like *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) as “forced

inclusion”, framing representation itself as an ideological imposition rather than a narrative or aesthetic choice.

It’s kind of like what people say about Netflix, you know? Like, they added those characters [Abby and Lev] just to include a certain demographic group, just to have that representation in the game. (I1M34)

As mentioned before, the proposed types of readings do not operate in isolation. Ideological readings tend to overlap with and reframe aesthetic, narrative, metatextual, or ludic interpretations, especially when players evaluate characters or games primarily through broader social or political frameworks rather than through internal textual features. The emergence of ideological concerns often shifts attention away from narrative or gameplay, acting as a transversal interpretive layer rather than a separate category.

The second form of interpretation from players is the aesthetic reading, which emphasizes the visual and sensory aspects of a video game. In this reading, players focus on the artistic style, graphics, color schemes, music, and other elements that contribute to the overall sensory experience. For example, one participant (I1F33) mentioned enjoying how the music responded to her actions in *Tetris Effect* (2018), describing it as a visually and sonically intense experience, emphasizing sensation (Hunicke et al., 2004):

Oh, I also like puzzle games, I really loved *Tetris Effect* too... It’s a *Tetris* game, but it’s one where the music kind of syncs with your movements. It’s really trippy, I love it! (I1F33)

Along the same lines, the reading of acceptance towards Heather Mason from *Silent Hill 3* (2003) was based on the character’s visual design and outfit, with narrative aspects such as dialogue playing a secondary role.

Physically and visually, I find her character design attractive; her outfit resembles that of an ordinary teenager. Aesthetically, I really like the character, the acting, the voice, the dialogues ... (I2M35)

In this case, the player prioritized aesthetic elements over the narrative, but both readings are evident in the account, with the former overlapping the latter, which introduces the third form of ergodic text interpretation: the narrative reading.

The narrative reading draws on Calleja’s concept of narrative involvement (2011); the player’s interpretation focuses on the game’s development of the story, including the plot, emerging conflicts, the evolution and motivations of characters, and the degree of player control over these elements (Ryan, 2015). Several participants expressed narrative engagement with video game char-

acters; for example, participant I14M36 articulated a reading of acceptance toward Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider* (2013) based on the character's arc:

I really liked the new *Tomb Raider*, the 2013 reboot. They made her feel more human, and I appreciated that. You can really see how her character develops as she goes through all these tough challenges, and she manages to overcome them on her own despite everything stacked against her. That whole character arc was really interesting to me. (I14M36)

Ergodicity, understood as the interaction and control players have over a game's narrative (Calleja, 2011), was another key factor in participants' narrative readings, particularly in story-driven titles such as Japanese role-playing games. Some interviewees noted that video games allow players to experience stories in ways that go beyond passive consumption typical of television or books, offering direct involvement through control and interactivity (Ryan, 2015).

For me, playing video games is kind of like reading. It might sound silly, but that's really how it feels. I do it because I enjoy it... I like experiencing good stories, you know? A story that's cool, and on top of that, I get to play it. (I11M33)

The fourth type of interpretation is the metatextual reading, which draws primarily on Inzunza-Acedo's notion of distancing (2012), originally developed to account for audience awareness of audiovisual production processes, and is expanded here through Calleja's concept of macro-involvement (2011). This type of reading occurs when players go beyond the interactive text and base their interpretation not only on production-related aspects, but also on memes, discussions, or topics surrounding the game and produced by fan communities.

An example comes from participant I2M35, who linked part of his enjoyment of *Silent Hill 3* (2003) to the viral "It's bread" meme, in which Heather, the game's protagonist, interacts with a piece of bread. While this reading of acceptance is primarily metatextual, grounded in a meme that circulates outside the game's narrative, it also overlaps with an appreciation of Heather's narrative qualities, particularly her personality.

Yeah, I actually really like Heather Mason. She's just a regular teenager, you know? She reacts in a very realistic, very teenage way, sometimes sarcastic, impulsive, making fun of people or situations. I really like her personality, and also the bread meme. (I2M35)

Another participant (I7F32) engaged in a metatextual and ideological reading by rejecting Sony's censorship practices in games imported from Japan to Western markets, particularly regarding the portrayal of female characters and their clothing. In this account, the player demonstrates awareness of the com-

pany's role in these modifications while simultaneously criticizing the ideology behind such censorship:

It does bother me a bit when they say things like “we’re going to remove this character because she’s a woman wearing a miniskirt and it bothers people”. What really bothers me is when they take things out or avoid including something just out of fear of offending someone. PlayStation does that a lot. The thing is, Sony shifted heavily toward the Western market, so everything they get from Japan ends up being censored. (I7F32)

The fifth type of reading is the ludic interpretation, which is based on the gameplay experience, players' involvement (Calleja, 2011), and interaction with the game world (Ryan, 2015). Within ludic readings, four subtypes are distinguished: those based on challenge and difficulty; on game mechanics; on control and gameplay; and on immersion and absorption. As with the other types of readings in this typology, these subtypes can reflect either acceptance or rejection and are not mutually exclusive.

The first subtype, the ludic reading based on challenge and difficulty, occurs when players focus on the obstacles a game presents and the satisfaction or frustration experienced in overcoming them, resonating with the challenge aesthetic of the MDA model (Hunicke et al., 2004). For instance, a participant (I11F30) expressed this reading when describing their enjoyment of games such as *Mortal Kombat* (1992), emphasizing the sense of accomplishment derived from mastering difficult encounters.

In *Mortal Kombat*, I remember really focusing, especially when I was playing solo and had to beat several bosses as the game got harder. It was always this mix of thinking about what I was going to do next, and when I finally won, even after several tries, I felt kind of accomplished, like really satisfied. (I11F30)

In contrast, some participants articulated rejection readings based on difficulty, noting that excessive challenge could make the experience frustrating rather than enjoyable:

Even though I love easy games, I do make an effort when there's a challenge I cannot get through. I try and try and try before giving up, because eventually I do get annoyed and that's it, bye. I'm not playing to suffer either. (I7F32)

The second subtype of ludic reading is based on game mechanics, understood as the rules, actions, and behaviors that players use to achieve a game's objectives (Hunicke et al., 2004, p. 3). Some participants explained that mechanics such as exploration and puzzle-solving in games like *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017) were central to their enjoyment of the title.

For example, I really liked the *Zelda* game, but honestly, it wasn't because of the story. It was the puzzles, all the riddles, and that kind of stuff. That's what really caught my attention, and yeah, it pulled me in a lot... but mostly because I wanted to finish all the shrines and everything (I7M29)

In contrast, one participant expressed a reading of rejection toward one of the mechanics in *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (1998), particularly the section in which the player must escort Princess Ruto through a dungeon:

I don't like annoying characters in games, like the little fairies in *Zelda*; they drive me crazy! And those helpless characters you have to follow around or basically herd? Ugh, they really got on my nerves. Ruto... she annoyed me so much! (E1M33)

The third subtype of ludic reading is based on gameplay and control. In this interpretation, players focus on how the game feels to play, including character movement, enjoyment of control (Ryan, 2015), and the sense of mastery over the avatar's actions. When participants engaged in this type of reading, their attention became more kinesthetic (Calleja, 2011), centering on movement, control complexity, input sequences, or specific gameplay features such as weapons

This is evident on the account of one participant (I3M33), who preferred to play as Amy Rose in *Sonic Adventure* (1998) for the enjoyment of using her hammer as a weapon. In the same account, the participant expressed a reading of rejection toward Sonic, explaining that the character's speed made gameplay uncomfortable and disorienting:

I like Amy from Sonic. She's this pink character in a dress who carries a big hammer, kind of like *El Chapulín Colorado*. I hadn't mentioned it, but I had a Dreamcast and played *Sonic Adventure* there, and I remember that her sections were the most fun. Hitting things with the hammer was great. Sonic, on the other hand, made me dizzy when he would spin. (I3M33)

The participant referenced the *Chapulín Colorado*, a well-known Mexican comedic superhero character who uses a large red toy hammer as his signature weapon. This comparison helps illustrate why the player associates Amy Rose's hammer with humor and enjoyment, adding cultural context to their interpretation of the character.

As discussed earlier, some interpretations reflect a negotiation between different reading types. This is evident in participant I5F36's reading of Princess Zelda from *The Legend of Zelda*, where appreciation of gameplay elements overlaps with ideological rejection. The participant explained that while she enjoys using Zelda's move set in *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* (2018), she dislikes the character overall due to her recurring portrayal as a "damsel in distress" in the main series:

I use Zelda in *Smash*, but mostly because of her attack set. I don't really like Zelda

as a character... I don't know, she just doesn't appeal to me. Even though she's one of the princesses who's more involved in her own rescue, that whole dynamic still doesn't sit well with me. (I5F36)

The fourth subtype of ludic reading is based on immersion, understood as the imaginative experience that transports players into the virtual worlds created by the game (Calleja, 2011; Ryan, 2015). In this type of reading, players emphasize feelings of presence, absorption, and temporary disconnect from their immediate surroundings. Several participants explained their enjoyment of specific titles in these terms, highlighting the freedom to explore and the sensation of "being there" as central to their engagement. This was particularly evident in accounts referring to open-ended games such as *Minecraft* (2009) and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011), as illustrated in the following accounts:

I really love adventure games, and my favorite is *The Elder Scrolls*. What I like the most, especially about *Skyrim*, is that it's an RPG where you can just go wherever you want. *Skyrim* has all these cool things like exploring and seeing different places without actually leaving your house. (E12M30)

I usually get really into the game. The world can be going on around me, and I don't care. This especially happens with *Minecraft*, which is why I like playing it so much. It's kind of my moment to relax. (E14M40)

Taken together, the reading typology outlined in this section offers a tool for analyzing how players interpret video games as interactive texts. Building on cultural studies approaches originally developed for film and television, this framework adapts those insights to the specific affordances of video games, organizing interpretations across ideological, aesthetic, narrative, and ludic dimensions. As the empirical examples show, players' readings may take the form of acceptance or rejection and often involve overlaps and negotiations between different types of reading, reflecting the complexity of how meaning is constructed through characters, stories, and gameplay.

Table 1 outlines the types of readings proposed for future research on how players interpret characters and the video games in which they appear.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study proposes a reading typology for analyzing how players interpret video games by adapting concepts from cultural studies to the specific characteristics of ergodic texts. Building on approaches such as deconstruction (Hacker et al., 1991), distancing (Inzunza-Acedo, 2012), negotiated readings (Hall, 1980) and the role of ideology in the decoding process (Fiske, 1987), the model proposed offers a framework for examining how players make sense of characters and narratives while engaging with gameplay elements such as control,

Table 1: Proposing a Reading Typology for Videogames

Type of reading	Definition
Ideological	Addresses how players accept, negotiate, or reject the game's social, political, or cultural meanings.
Aesthetic	Focused on the visual and sensory elements of the game, such as art style, graphics, color palette, sound, and music.
Narrative	Centers on story development, conflicts, and character arcs within the game.
Metatextual	Based on the game's production, creative process, and surrounding contexts, including memes or fan discourse.
Ludic - Challenge and difficulty	Focused on overcoming obstacles and the satisfaction or frustration derived from difficulty and progression.
Ludic - Game mechanics	Centered on the game rules, systems, and actions that structure how objectives can be completed.
Ludic - Gameplay and control	Emphasizes the player's sense of control over the avatar, including movement, responsiveness, abilities, and inputs.
Ludic - Immersion	Based on players' sense of presence and absorption in the game world.

challenge, interactivity, and immersion (Hunicke et al., 2004; Calleja, 2011; Ryan, 2015). By understanding interpretation as an active process, the typology emphasizes that meaning in video games emerges through players' situated engagements rather than being fixed by design alone.

The typology integrates four interpretive dimensions inspired by communication and media studies, namely aesthetic, narrative, ideological, and metatextual, traditionally applied to media such as film and television. Nevertheless, when applied to video games, these readings are mediated by players' engagement with plot, characters, visuals, and the interactive possibilities of play (Calleja, 2011; Ryan, 2015). In combination with four ludic readings: challenge and difficulty, game mechanics, gameplay and control, and immersion, this framework addresses both interpretive meaning and embodied experience. Player interpretations often negotiate across reading types, highlighting the complexity of engagement with interactive texts.

While influential game studies models have focused on player typologies, motivations, or engagement patterns (Bartle, 1996; Yee, 2006; Calleja, 2011; Hunicke et al., 2004), this study shifts the analytical focus toward interpretation as a culturally embedded practice. In dialogue with Consalvo (2007), Pearce (2011), and Shaw (2015), the model highlights how players negotiate meanings through gameplay in relation to ideology, identity, and social context. A key contribution of the typology is its focus on ideology as a dimension that influences players' acceptance, resistance, or ambivalence toward characters and games, even when they enjoy the gameplay.

Finally, this typology was developed based on accounts from players living in the Monterrey metropolitan area. This contextual focus enabled a relatively homogeneous sample, which supports analytical depth and internal coherence. At the same time, it constitutes a limitation, as players' readings are mediated by specific cultural, social, and regional conditions. Future research could apply and adapt this typology to different geographic, cultural, and demographic contexts, further testing its flexibility and contributing to comparative studies on the reception of video games across diverse player communities.

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Split at the Core

About Grief, Guilt, and Emotional Resonance in Split Fiction

ABSTRACT

Split Fiction invites players to navigate the emotional aftermath of trauma through the connected arcs of Mio and Zoe. Although the game adopts dystopian/sci-fi aesthetics only partially, it fully operates within a speculative framework that questions how power, interactivity, and emotional regulation converge in digital narratives. This paper argues that *Split Fiction* operates through a system of affective control. Its branching structures shape moral choice, agency, and players' psychological labor. Grief, guilt, and fractured identity unfold across different timelines that invite players to make emotionally coded decisions. Departing from game analysis, affect theory, and trauma studies, this paper interprets *Split Fiction* as a microcosm of governance. In doing so, it presents an analytical framework for examining trauma as an affectively governed and structurally mediated process in narrative games. Since *Split Fiction* requires players to inhabit moral ambiguity and confront emotional consequences embedded in the game's design, it can be considered a case that critiques and models how technological systems mediate subjectivity, taking advantage of digital interactivity to sustain how technologies can exploit and sometimes trigger emotional work with our inner selves.

1. INTRODUCTION

Digital games, once regarded as mere entertainment and distraction, increasingly operate as affective narrative ecosystems. Through play and design, they invite players to negotiate imagination, empathy, and vulnerability. In the last decade, narrative-based games have become affective channels for players to communicate their emotional journeys, vulnerabilities, and healing paths (Isbister, 2016), transforming them into a tool for cultural and emotional critique.

In this specific gaming niche, *Split Fiction* stands out as a relevant example of the affective turn in game design. Through a branching narrative design and character-driven storytelling, it explores grief, childhood, and womanhood trauma, and unresolved guilt. Following Caruth's (1996) notions on trauma as a belated experience, *Split Fiction* reflects traumatic temporal dislocation. This is expressed through the game's non-linear structure and alternate timelines, suggesting that unresolved grief can manifest across multiple narrative ends. The game's

design externalizes grief through repetition and aesthetic form. Players are drawn into a process of emotional witnessing shaped by Mio and Zoe's personal stories.

This research explores how *Split Fiction* leverages narrative multiplicity to communicate the emotional complexity of trauma and grief. In addition to offering a close reading of the game, this study adds to scholarly conversations in game studies by presenting an affect-oriented analytical model for examining how branching dialogue structures mediate trauma and emotional negotiation. The discussion frames narrative games beyond channels of representation, bringing the notion of games as affective governance systems in which emotional labor, agency, and moral ambiguity become part of their design. In doing so, *Split Fiction* becomes a demonstrative example of trauma portrayed as a constructed process withing interactive media, illustrating that contemporary game design can function as a social-cultural practice of reflection.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 NARRATIVES, TRAUMA, AND MEMORY

Scholars in literature and cultural studies have long considered trauma through the lenses of representation and memory. When the concept of trauma is brought to the context of interactive digital storytelling, it can be a focal point embedded in character backstories and play the role of a structural (and highly experiential) tool that players are invited to navigate. In *Split Fiction*, trauma is the backbone of Mio and Zoe's narrative arcs.

Caruth (1996) views trauma as an overwhelming experience that we sometimes fail to rationally assimilate. This disconnection may result in trauma 'coming back to us' in indirect, daunting ways. Her insight connects well with the character portrayals in *Split Fiction*, as players learn about the protagonists' traumas throughout the game and face their emotional choices and the thematic stories they create in their brains. The game's non-linear storytelling reflects trauma's displacement and temporal fragmentation.

LaCapra (2001) explains that trauma can easily resist linear narrative resolution and points to an important distinction between how people handle trauma; while some might 'act out on it,' others may 'work through it' to survive. In *Split Fiction*, the protagonists experience both modes as players advance. Some choices lead them deeper into isolation, stagnation, and self-blame, while others open space for reconciliation.

Laub (1992) explains that trauma may be experienced without a coherent narrative form. This feature is evident in the way *Split Fiction* doses the disclosure of Mio and Zoe's pasts and pains, guiding players to navigate their inner worlds and put the pieces together to reveal the wholeness of their emotional truths. Rather than offering full narrative clarity from the outset, *Split Fiction* embraces ambiguity. Its narrative choices slowly tackle how trauma can disrupt traditional storytelling logic.

In trauma studies, notions about the individual psychic experience can be tied to an interpretation that such phenomenon can be socially and narratively constructed. Alexander (2004) explains that trauma can be cultural and not just linked to simply experiencing emotional pain – trauma can occur through the way our suffering is narrated, symbolized, and mediated in public contexts. In this sense, then trauma can be interpreted as a collective that bring recognition to shared stories about loss and pain.

Although the individual experiences of Mio and Zoe with grief and guilt are the center of *Split Fiction*, the game's structure transforms these experiences into communicative and relational acts. Trauma is externalized through symbolic figures, dialogue, and fantasy worlds that help reframe personal suffering inside a broad narrative. This is in line with Alexander's (2004) idea of trauma being a socially constructed narrative that goes beyond a psychological event experienced individually.

Additionally, van der Kolk (2014) explains that people can experience the embodied dimension of trauma, which are visceral responses that arise when our brains associate with traumatic events. This phenomenon is clear in the affective design of *Split Fiction* that simulates real feelings such as tension, dread, nostalgia, and other emotional discomforts as characters are played through their emotionally fraught choices. Because its narrative design echoes the form and temporality of trauma, *Split Fiction* teaches players about the nonlinear and fragmented process of trauma, representing Flanagan's (2009) idea of critical play and engagement with complex psychosociological realities.

Herman (1992) also emphasized that trauma can create a fragmented perception of time and distort narratives. Survivors often experience a confused sense of 'before' and 'after'. The stories of traumatic episodes are often marked by silences, disjunctions, and loops, features heavily present in *Split Fiction*. This idea of disorientation aligns with Richardson's (2002) idea of unnatural narratives, described as a module of storytelling that favors discontinuities, unreliability, and multiplicity. According to his views, this rather controversial strategy reflects irregular internal psychological states and unstable realities, which often translate to the core concept of trauma. *Split Fiction* makes players inhabit these fractured storylines, fostering the relationship with an unnatural narrative and triggering prosthetic memory.

Furthermore, players need to engage in emotional labor to navigate *Split Fiction*, a logic that goes against the most popular game mechanics, often based on more objective demands. Ruberg (2019) describes this as queer game design tied to the shift in prioritizing ambiguity, emotional labor, and unresolved feelings. This design philosophy may be unconventional, as it triggers feelings of discomfort and carries a sense of contradiction and emotional weight, exemplifying how contemporary game design can function as a site of cultural reflection and a medium for empathy, healing, and memory.

2.2 PLAYER ENGAGEMENT, EMPATHY, AND AFFECT

The emotional power of games is related to their capacity to tell strong stories mixed with their ability to make players truly see themselves within those stories and feel encouraged to invest affectively in the narrative (Anable, 2018). In narrative-driven games like *Split Fiction*, each action directly influences the way the story unfolds and how characters act. Empathy in games can be approached from the lenses of alignment and allegiance. Smith (1995) explains that *alignment* is related to the level of access the audience has to a character's internal details, while *allegiance* is related to the moral or emotional bond the audience may create with a character. Isbister (2016) emphasized that emotional design has a solid impact on game design, especially when it comes to facial expressions, voice tones, and dialogue discourses – features that are likely to create 'empathic bridges' between players and characters. In *Split Fiction*, the affective cues throughout the game are minimalist but effective and help construct the emotional depth experienced by the players in the format of reflective pauses in dialogues and subtle tone differences when Mio and Zoe are talking.

Affect theorists have proposed on multiple occasions that emotion in media is a social and cultural pattern surrounded by feelings. Ahmed (2004), for example, theorized that emotions are "sticky," which means that they can be glued to objects, narratives, and bodies. In *Split Fiction*, grief and guilt function as affective orientations. They shape both the characters decisions and the player's emotional journey. Following Ahmed's (2004) perspectives, these feelings are not abstract themes; they are an embedded mechanism of the game.

This dynamic also matches the concept of *empathic gameplay* that, according to Bachen et al. (2021), happens when the primary tension is not based on puzzle logic or physical survival but in emotional negotiation. Empathy in games also links to Salen and Zimmerman's (2003) notion of *meaningful play*, where player actions relate to broader themes and consequences. In *Split Fiction*, each choice carries the emotional and ethical weight of Mio and Zoe's background, shaping tone and character growth in the game.

Remarkably, the emotional impact of *Split Fiction* is not tied to complex graphics – instead, it derives from rich storytelling and character development. Anable (2018) argues that affect in digital games is not linked to realism but more to personal resonance. In other words, the affective power of a game is related to how well it can awaken, trigger, and sustain lasting emotional responses in players. If this is true, then *Split Fiction* is a powerful example of affective game design.

3. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This study combines a qualitative approach with an interpretive methodology to understand and assess how *Split Fiction* tackles trauma, emotional regulation, and player agency through its game narrative. The primary data focus is on textual information present throughout the game's dialogue, but the investigation is further supported by selective integration of visual and auditory cues from gameplay.

Split Fiction's speculative narrative tackles affect, loss, power, and technological mediation. The focus on textual data is justified by the central role that dialogue between the main characters, Mio and Zoe, has in the game's storytelling and emotional impact. Following Murray (1997), meaning in digital narratives depends on the interplay between player choices and narrative cues. Examining dialogue in *Split Fiction* offers insight into how loss, grief, moral ambiguity, and identity fragmentation are articulated within the game. Visual and auditory cues (e.g., story scenario settings, side characters, clothing, posture) were selectively considered when they reinforced key emotional themes.

The primary dataset consists of a transcript of a complete game movie of *Split Fiction*, sourced from publicly available footage on YouTube. The dialogue includes all dialogue lines available in the narrative route followed by Mio and Zoe as they move through stages and navigate the fictitious worlds inside their mind. Thematic textual analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) was applied to identify recurring motifs of grief, guilt, anger, and agency. Codes developed inductively and refined with affect theory (Ahmed, 2004), trauma studies (Herman, 1992; van der Kolk, 2014), and game ethics (Sicart, 2009). As with all interpretive analyses, subjectivity was acknowledged as part of this research process. Reflexive notes were maintained during the coding to ensure consistency. The reliance on a single playthrough is a limitation; however, the data considered still enables an in-depth reading of *Split Fiction's* main storyline.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

Before presenting the thematic findings, Table 1 illustrates the coding scheme applied across all dialogue scenes. The remaining tables appear in the annex.

Table 1: Sample coding table illustrating the structure applied across all 25 analyzed scenes.

Scene ID	M001
Character / Timestamp	Mio (21:23.000 --> 21:27.000)
Dialogue	"I wrote this a couple of years ago; it is a story about revenge."
Emotion Type	Resentment; guarded pride
Tone / Delivery	Calm, reflective
Key Terms	revenge, past writing
Thematic Codes	Creative coping; suppressed anger
Notes	Hints at deeper unresolved issues.

4.1 SELF-PROTECTION AND RELUCTANT DISCLOSURE

One of the most striking patterns identified in the sample is how both Mio and Zoe delay the disclosure of their pain. For instance, in snippet MZ004 ("*What's with all the debts and payments...?*"), Zoe questions Mio inquisitively, but Mio answers with deflection: "*Nothing... You don't know me.*" Their early conversational dynamic shows self-protection – Mio constantly dodges the autobiographical reading of her personal life story. Following Herman's (1992) explanation of trauma, early and minor disclosures often come before the full

story. So, when Mio states, “*You don’t know me,*” she is creating a boundary in the narrative, showing that knowledge of her life is a privilege.

In MZ002, Mio avoids again, dismissing Zoe’s questions about the “debt villain” and the fact that his phrases “sound oddly specific.” This dynamic aligns with what Anable’s (2018) views that games mediate feelings by organizing them into playable structures. As the narrative progresses, Zoe keeps gently trying to act on emotional opening (e.g., Z001 “*You seem to be carrying a lot of frustration with the world*”), an approach that is in line with Isbister’s (2016) notion of subtle cues of care that can create emotional bridges between player and characters.

Even when characters speak from a fictional distance, their details remain self-referential. Zoe’s mythic “*evil Ice King that cursed the land with ice*” hints at her emotional numbness due to trauma, consistent with van der Kolk’s (2014) theory of trauma and disruption. Also, Mio’s self-positioning as an author of a “*revenge story*” represents a protective frame masking her wound, showing that slow revelation and emotional defense are core parts of the rhythm of *Split Fiction*.

4.2 SIBLING LOSS AND INTENSE GRIEF

Zoe’s arc is centered on sibling loss and unarticulated grief. Early recalling to places and objects (e.g., Z003 “*oak tree me my sister and I used to climb*”) as *mnemonic loci* – concrete anchors that stabilize memories about places and moments (Ahmed, 2004; Dalgleish et al., 2013). Zoe’s recollections often happen indirectly. In MZ005’s she talks about a chimpanzee she met at the zoo (“*he was very lonely, and they put him down*”). After learning about Ella’s passing later in the game, this snippet hints that the character is rehearsing the structure of loss without naming Ella. Herman (1992) names this as a grief discourse technique (one of the stages of grief) – it can be used by someone who wants to narrate the end of someone/something else using a more coherent, integrated story.

In snippet MZ011, Zoe admits that “*Reality can be overwhelmingly harsh (...) fantasy has always been my pause button,*” framing escapism as a coping mechanism. Following Salen & Zimmerman’s (2004) notions of possibility spaces in games, the fantasy worlds created by Zoe are formal structures that play the role of momentary emotional regulators. Shortly after, she confesses, “*I lost her when we were twelve... one minute she was there and the next she wasn’t*” – this is the moment when players recognize that Zoe uses her fantasy stories as a counterfactual therapy, creating in them the ending she wishes to have in real life. According to van der Kolk (2014), in affect terms, this is not engaging in denial; it is taking control over the loss to metabolize it via re-narration and playing with feelings to create emotional alternatives (Anable, 2018).

Guilt is a recurrent emotion throughout Zoe’s dialogues. She claims that “*Guilt infested Zoe’s heart*” and that she became “*haunted when Ella died.*” Shortly after, Zoe reveals why Ella passed: “*Because I couldn’t hold on... Ella died because of me.* This reflects Ahmed’s (2004) notion of affect stickiness – guilt attaches to Zoe’s body as a residue. When Mio reassures Zoe (“*It was never your fault... Your*

heart is ready to heal”), affect circulates outward, attaching her grief narrative to a broader narrative of fate. In this arc, *Split Fiction* exemplifies the stages of grief (from self-punishing to acceptance), mirroring what happens to people in real life when they navigate trauma (LaCapra, 2001).

4.3 PARENTAL ILLNESS, ANGER, AND THE FANTASY OF CONTROL

Mio’s storyline begins with anger and defense. When Zoe offers, *“Let me help you,”* she is met with a defensive Mio who claims, *“I don’t need your pity.”* Gradually, players learn that Mio’s pain is because her dad was sick (*“I started writing this as a way to kill time in all the different waiting rooms”*) and that she used her writing as a coping mechanism. Her narrative follows van der Kolk’s (2014) notes on trauma’s body-time demands.

As players advance, Mio reveals anticipatory grief and loss of agency (*“It doesn’t matter what we try, all we can do now is wait for the inevitable”*), showing that there is an indefinite and inescapable future ahead of her. Murray (1997) describes this experience as agency deprivation. A few minutes later, she states, *“All I can do is write this silly story where I get to save him,”* which clearly represents a shift from her real life to story-time, where she can regain the agency and choose to save her dad.

Mio’s arc and sentences throughout the story also point to feelings of overwhelm and entrapment. In MZ009 advances, she claims to have this *“anger growing”* and feeling like she is *“trapped and lost in the dark.”* Ahmed (2004) would identify these metaphors linked to spatial contexts (inside, dark) as affective orientation, like the body is turning toward/away from intimidating futures.

As players get a full explanation of Mio’s trauma and how she carries it internally, *Split Fiction* introduces the character of Dark Mio, one of the game’s ‘big bosses’ that represents what Mio is fighting against: herself. In her fight against it, she says sentences such as *“I imprisoned you to protect me,”* enacting a fight with her internal self and self-governance (Ryan, 2006). Towards the end of *Split Fiction*, after players watched Zoe and Mio’s arcs come to a conclusion, they are presented with a transformation of their relationship: from weary strangers to friends, to best friends. The final dialogue hints at acceptance signals – in MZ019, Mio is facing her dad’s grave, accompanied by Zoe, and she says, *“Look, Dad. I got published.”* Zoe claims, *“He would be proud of you,”* which is a compact validation of what Mio longed to hear. To close the game, in MZ020 (*“At least we’ve got each other. Best friends forever”*), the narrative reframes a success that does not depend on external validation of the public. Their bond echoes Ahmed’s (2004) notion of affective economies, where emotions circulate and are sustained through shared connection.

4.4 FANTASY FRAMES OTHER TEXTUAL MECHANISMS

The analysis of the complete storyline of Zoe and Mio in *Split Fiction* shows that, across both arcs, fantasy is not just a setting but a textual strategy that regulates affect in the game’s story world. From this perspective, fantasy also plays

the role of a narrative mediator that help articulate trauma to be shared withing the game world, reflecting Alexander's (2004) view of trauma as a process shaped through symbolic narration (not just a private emotional experience).

There are many examples of this maneuver across the storyline. In Z002, Zoe reveals that her Ice King character is allegorically related to lexicons that represent her real feelings (e.g., curse, threatened life). The focus on fantasy in *Split Fiction* also helps Mio and Zoe externalize their inner states through representative characters. Dragons, for instance, are recognized as symbols of chaos, destructive danger, or existential threat (Cirlot, 2001). By recollecting trauma through mythic figures, the narrative affords counterfactual survival scenarios, aligning with Zipes' (2012) observation that fantasy externalizes internal pains and enables coping.

Split Fiction's immersive experience is consistent with Green & Brock's (2000) narrative transportation: the more a reader/player is transported through a story, the more they emotionally invest in it. Anable (2018) adds that games should be considered affective technologies, since their interfaces and stories can play with human feelings and embrace real-life sensations, enacted through digital characters' storylines.

Across the dialogue corpus, strategies follow a recognizable pattern: both characters start with deflection/evasion (e.g., MZ002 and MZ004) and move to disclosure/empathy to self and others (e.g., Z001, MZ013, MZ008). In addition, both Mio and Zoe also rely on symbolic anchors and metaphors to recollect their traumatic memories (e.g., trees, the Ice King, dragons, evil bosses). In the end, both experience a relational turn that comes with validation (e.g., MZ018, MZ019, MZ020) and the relief that the burden of their trauma is no longer isolated; it has been redistributed in the form of shared, circulated support (Ahmed, 2004; Isbister, 2016).

5. DISCUSSION

The coded dialogues revealed consistent word clusters and emotional lexicons that position trauma as relational, iterative, and emotionally immersive throughout *Split Fiction*. The noticeable recurrences attest to the fact that *Split Fiction* builds notions of trauma through the delivery and repetition of affectively charged words and phrases that invite players to also get in touch with the feelings that characters' experience.

Broadly, these findings suggest that *Split Fiction* as a narrative game can also act as an affective governance system in which trauma can be portrayed via game pacing and dialogue, enhancing its representation within the interactive media. Hence, this study offers a replicable analytical approach to examine text and dialogue inside narrative-driven games that tackle emotional matters such as trauma and grief.

By clustering repeated terms and affective cues, it becomes clear that *Split Fiction* scripts trauma going beyond a one-time event – it is an ongoing ex-

perience and emotional negotiation that embraces defensiveness, moments of rupture, and healing. The coding process reveals that *Split Fiction's* script carries a complex narrative architecture that tackles vulnerability and trauma-bonding to sustain character interaction.

Trauma sharing (e.g., Zoe's memories of Ella or Mio's mentions of her father's illness) is not there unintentionally – they directly intensify characters' emotional arcs. Interpreted through the lens of cultural trauma theory, these moments are expressions of individual suffering and narrative acts that allow trauma to be contextual, externalized, and socially negotiated (Alexander, 2004). This is also in line with Jenkins' (2004) notion of narrative architecture in games, where dialogues and spatial cues work together to scaffold immersion.

Another central conclusion that emerged from the data is *Split Fiction's* consistent framing of grief and guilt. When Zoe blames herself for Ella's loss, the emotions in her become part of the game's world-building, mirroring what Keen (2006) interprets as 'narrative empathy,' which means the capacity for a fictional text to awaken affective responses related to real-life interpersonal understanding of our feelings. In *Split Fiction*, this happens because the game invites players to engage not just in missions and boss fights, but also in the negotiation of Zoe and Mio's morals and affective baggage.

The coding also showed that vulnerability in the game often comes accompanied by doubtful trust and self-disclosure. Mio shifts from defensive refusals ("I don't need your trust") and sudden confessions about her father, creating a tension strategy where vulnerability needs to be earned. This reflects Isbister's (2016) discussion of 'emotional scaffolding' in digital games, in which emotional arcs are projected to slowly develop to keep players engaged. Through the lens of affect theory, then *Split Fiction* shows how emotion is mobilized through both content and form. For Ahmed (2004), emotions can be 'glued' and 'carried' by bodies such as texts, dialogues, interfaces, etc. If 'things' – like a video game – can carry emotions and circulate them, then *Split Fiction* is an example of grief and trauma becoming a 'glued' affect within the game. However, this emotional consistency goes against the notion of branching narratives as purely choice-driven (Montfort, 2005); here, the emotional cues of the game play the role of its gravitational center, reducing the possibilities of branching the narrative in ways that are too far away from its core affective themes.

The data also showed that *Split Fiction* often blends familiar science fiction with dystopian tropes. However, instead of creating emotional distance – as noted by Bould (2012) that often happens in speculative fiction – it intensifies and multiplies emotional experience, since it puts players facing the internal struggles of Zoe and Mio. From a trauma studies perspective, this operates as reparative storytelling (Caruth, 2016), offering an indirect approach to traumatic memories. Zoe recreates Ella as a heroic figure to provide an alternative to her loss. Yet, the game hints at the presence of unresolvable grief in (e.g., "Does it [get easier]? No."), challenging the reparative potential of the story,

which puts the player within a context of ‘empathic unsettlement’ (empathy to the traumatic experience of others) (LaCapra, 2001).

The dialogic structure of *Split Fiction* shapes players’ moral positioning. Following Sicart’s (2009) argument, games are ethical objects, and agency emerges in the relational spaces as much as through choice. Zoe and Mio’s intimate disclosures invite player reciprocity that turns trust into narrative progression. Moreover, *Split Fiction*’s dialogues challenge the concept of player control. While players choose paths, they engage with backstory moments attached to heavy/emotional dialogue sequences. This reflects Murray’s (2017) idea that digital narratives often operate through procedural authorship, where design sets intentional conflicts that guide meaning-making in the context.

Notably, Ella’s death and Mio’s father’s disease root *Split Fiction* in individualized stories rather than a generalized context. Shaw (2015) notes that specificity can strengthen identification, so the sensory and spatial markers recurrent in the game (e.g., the oak tree Zoe and Ella climbed, hospital waiting rooms) anchor emotional continuity. This positions the game as a model where emotional work is a central form of procedural engagement. In *Split Fiction*, players experience progression not just from conquering phases, but also from connecting with the emotional insights. This is how it challenges the hierarchy in game studies that favors mechanical complexity (rule-based systems) and forgets narrative affect (Eskelinen 2001; Juul, 2011).

6. CONCLUSION

The implications of the findings go beyond *Split Fiction*. When personal trauma is brought to a speculative framework, the game joins titles such as *Life Is Strange*¹ (Don’t Nod, 2015) that bet on interactive scenarios to explore emotional complexity. These games challenge commercial tendencies that sideline serious themes (such as grief), showing that emotional vulnerability can be part of compelling narrative design. Furthermore, this research demonstrates the value of textual analysis in game studies when approached through affect theory. By examining tone, word choices, and patterns, it is possible to understand how narrative games script emotional journeys and position players as agents within them. The thematic codes applied here (e.g., grief, guilt, resilience) evidenced how central these emotions are to *Split Fiction*’s structure and story arcs more effective when it comes to enhancing player engagement.

In addition, the findings open space for ethical reflection on designing games for emotional impact. Following Bopp et al. (2016), when games address themes such as loss, diseases, or trauma, they must balance authenticity with care for players’ well-being. *Split Fiction* avoids exploitative uses of pain and trauma by framing disclosures through mutual trust sequences rather than shock or excessive dramatization. Still, the game’s narrative has intense moments (e.g., Ella’s passing), which represent a possible research avenue to understand how content warnings, player agency, and pacing can help keep

1. The game sold over 20 million copies worldwide by 2023 and won multiple awards.a

the potential harm of such games low, while still betting on their differential: emotional authenticity.

In summary, this study positions *Split Fiction* as a compelling example of how games can use vulnerability and trauma as part of their operational design. The narrative experience provided to players does not depend on closure or a happy ending, making it ethically closer and resonant to the emotional experiences that one may encounter in real life. In doing so, *Split Fiction* exemplifies how interactive media can function as a narrative space where lived emotions are socially articulated and shared. It can also work as a context of experimentation with the use of complex emotional landscapes that we navigate in life in digital games.

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ANNEXES

ANNEX 1 - FULL THEMATIC CODING TABLES

Dialogues, categories, and complete emotional mapping of the complete backstory of Split Fiction, with 32 snippets. These tables support the thematic discussion in Chapter 4, offering a transparent view of the coding framework and interpretive lens applied to the game's emotional storytelling.

Scene ID	M001
Character / Timestamp	Mio (21:23.000 --> 21:27.000)
Dialogue	"I wrote this a couple of years ago; it is a story about revenge."
Emotion Type	Resentment; guarded pride
Tone / Delivery	Calm, reflective
Key Terms	revenge, past writing
Thematic Codes	Creative coping; suppressed anger
Notes	Hints at deeper unresolved issues.

Scene ID	MZ001
Character / Timestamp	Mio/Zoe
Dialogue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do you practice any martial arts? - I used to. - What holds you back? You seem healthy. - Not enough time or money lately.
Emotion Type	Resignation; mild frustration
Tone / Delivery	Casual, understated
Key Terms	time, money, health
Thematic Codes	Structural barriers; minor vulnerability
Notes	Shows life limitations affecting self-care.
Scene ID	MZ003
Character / Timestamp	Mio/Zoe [38:05.000 --> 38:07.000]
Dialogue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - This might actually be the first idea for a story I ever wrote down as a kid. - So, you are a country gal? - Yes, from head to toe.
Emotion Type	Nostalgia; pride
Tone / Delivery	Warm, genuine
Key Terms	childhood, first story, country
Thematic Codes	Roots and identity; creative beginnings
Notes	First time the character connects the place with identity.
Scene ID	Z001
Character / Timestamp	Zoe [43:05.000 --> 43:11.000]
Dialogue	- You seem to be carrying a lot of frustration with the world.
Emotion Type	Empathy; concern
Tone / Delivery	Observational, soft
Key Terms	frustration, world
Thematic Codes	Emotional reading of others
Notes	Character directly hinting at opening space for sharing.

Scene ID	MZ004
Character / Timestamp	Mio/Zoe [57:27.000 --> 58:18.000]
Dialogue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Can I ask you something? What's with all the debts and payments in this story? - What do you mean? - I'm just curious as to what the story's about. - I told you it's a revenge story. - That part I got, trust me. - But what's it really about? - Nothing. - Oh, come on. You always put a bit of yourself into what you create. - I don't think that's true. - Wait, so you're telling me? - Everything we just went through wasn't inspired by anything. - Nope. Nothing. Nothing at all. - I don't believe you. - I don't care. You don't know me.
Emotion Type	Defensive; Guarded curiosity
Tone / Delivery	Initially inquisitive, shifting to evasive and dismissive
Key Terms	debts, payments, revenge story, inspiration, personal connection
Thematic Codes	Narrative concealment; Resistance to vulnerability; Creator-creation relationship; Emotional distancing
Notes	Dialogue hints at deeper personal or autobiographical roots in the "revenge story," but Mio actively denies any connection, possibly as a defense mechanism to avoid emotional exposure. The "you don't know me" line underscores a boundary-setting moment that resists intimacy attempts.
Scene ID	Z002
Character / Timestamp	Zoe [01:03:33.000 --> 01:03:48.000]
Dialogue	Once upon a time in a far-distant land, magical creatures lived together in harmony until the evil Ice King arrived and cursed the land with ice, threatening all life.
Emotion Type	Nostalgic framing; Allegorical foreshadowing
Tone / Delivery	Storytelling; mythic and dramatic
Key Terms	magical creatures, harmony, curse
Thematic Codes	Allegory for loss; Metaphorical representation of trauma; World disruption; Good vs. evil framing
Notes	This fantastical setup serves as a metaphor for a personal rupture or emotional 'freeze' in the character's life.

Scene ID	Z003
Character / Timestamp	Zoe [01:09:23.000 --> 01:09:33.000]
Dialogue	<p>- Mio, meet Lord Evergreen.</p> <p>- That's a weird name for a leaf tree.</p> <p>- Yeah. I borrowed the name from an old tree me and my sister used to climb.</p>
Emotion Type	Warm nostalgia; Sentimental connection
Tone / Delivery	Lighthearted with an undertone of affection
Key Terms	sister, old tree
Thematic Codes	Childhood memory; Sibling bond; Attachment to place; Sentimental naming
Notes	This line conveys Zoe's personal history and her emotional tie to her sister through shared play. The act of naming reflects a preservation of memory and a way of keeping presence.
Scene ID	MZ005
Character / Timestamp	Mio/Zoe [01:17:13.000 --> 01:18:36.000]
Dialogue	<p>- Let me fill you in on the backstory. So, my sister Ella loves monkeys and I...</p> <p>- Like I said, you don't have to explain it to me.</p> <p>- You know what, Mia? I'm getting kind of sick of your attitude. All I'm trying to do is tell you what I wrote so that we can be somewhat prepared.</p> <p>- Look, I didn't mean to come off so harsh. Tell me about your sister and this Monkey King.</p> <p>- Me and Ella always used to visit the zoo when we were younger. And there was this really old and very lonely chimpanzee that we used to feed. Until one day...they decided to put him down.</p> <p>- That must have sucked.</p> <p>- Yeah, it did.</p>
Emotion Type	Sadness; tenderness
Tone / Delivery	Hesitant, emotive
Key Terms	sister, zoo, loss
Thematic Codes / Notes	Shared memory; grief trigger; Sibling bond; Childhood memory; Loss; Compassion for animals; Vulnerability through storytelling
Notes	This scene blends interpersonal tension with a tender recollection, using the chimpanzee's fate as a metaphor for loss and helplessness. It deepens Zoe's backstory and reinforces the emotional weight of her bond with Ella.

Scene ID	MZ006
Character / Timestamp	Mio/Zoe [01:24:54.000 --> 01:25:03.000]
Dialogue	<p>- By the way, Zoe. Is this by any chance, the story submitted to Raider?</p> <p>- No. This is an early story of mine, from when we moved away from the countryside.</p> <p>- And you wrote this because you missed home?</p> <p>- Sort of.</p>
Emotion Type	Melancholy; longing
Tone / Delivery	Matter-of-fact, Candid yet understated
Key Terms	story, countryside, moved away, missed home, early writing
Thematic Codes	influencing creativity; Emotional imprint of place
Notes	This moment reveals Zoe's emotional connection to her past environment, framing her creative process as a coping mechanism for change and loss of place. The brevity of her answers suggests a reluctance to fully disclose feelings.
Scene ID	MZ007
Character / Timestamp	Mio/Zoe [01:42:23.000 --> 01:43:30.000]
Dialogue	<p>- Let me help you.</p> <p>- I don't need pity. I'm fine on my own.</p> <p>- We have to trust each other.</p> <p>- My dad got sick. We've been in and out of hospitals.</p> <p>- Is that what Raider meant?</p> <p>- Yeah. Medical care ain't cheap.</p>
Emotion Type	Sadness; fatigue; empathy; support
Tone / Delivery	Raw, candid
Key Terms	trust, vent, dad got sick, hospitals, writing, financial situation
Thematic Codes	Illness in family; Emotional barriers; Reluctant disclosure; Coping through creativity; Economic strain of healthcare
Thematic Codes / Notes	Mio opens up about her father's illness and financial stress, marking a turning point in emotional honesty. Dialogue reveals Mio's gradual transition from defensive isolation to personal disclosure.
Scene ID	Z004
Character / Timestamp	Zoe [01:50:56.000 --> 01:51:00.000]
Dialogue	- You seem to be going through a rough patch up in the real world.
Emotion Type	Empathy; concern
Tone / Delivery	Soft, validating, gentle, observant
Key Terms	rough patch, real world
Thematic Codes	Recognition of struggle; Emotional attunement; Supportive inquiry
Notes	Brief but powerful, this line affirms Zoe's perception of Mio's unspoken struggles outside the game world. It sets the stage for deeper disclosure by validating that something is wrong without forcing a confession.

Scene ID	MZ008
Character / Timestamp	Mio/Zoe [02:11:47.000 --> 02:13:13.000]
Dialogue	<p>- You probably already guessed it, but I sort of face the story around my dad. Ever since he got diagnosed, all these visits to the hospitals, medicines, treatments...It doesn't matter what we try; it just keeps on spreading. Seems like all we can do now is wait for the inevitable. It might be tomorrow. Next month, six months, who knows.</p> <p>- Are you alone in all of this?</p> <p>- What about your mother, your family?</p> <p>- It has always just been me and my dad. All I can do is write this silly story where I get to save him.</p> <p>- No one should have to go through that. Much less alone.</p>
Emotion Type	Fear; grief; helplessness
Tone / Delivery	Somber, heartfelt, confessional
Key Terms	dad, diagnosis, writing, spreading illness, coping
Thematic Codes	Parental illness; Anticipatory grief; Escapism through creativity
Notes	This is one of the most emotionally charged exchanges in the dataset. Mio's admission blends factual reality with metaphorical escapism through storytelling. The act of "saving" her father in fiction becomes a survival mechanism. The empathetic reply reinforces the emotional weight by acknowledging the injustice of what she is facing alone.
Scene ID	MZ009
Character / Timestamp	Mio/Zoe [02:15:40.000 --> 02:17:09.000]
Dialogue	<p>- You might be the first person who's seen this side of me. I'm all used to strangers being this, I don't know... Kind. I know, I'm such a downer. It's just that Dad means the world to me. It's so unfair. And there's this anger...growing inside of me. I feel trapped, like I'm lost in the dark. I don't know what to do.</p> <p>- Who wouldn't be overwhelmed by it all? It makes you human. I really hope you and your father pull through this.</p> <p>- Thanks.</p> <p>- You know what, Mio? You're starting to make a little more sense to me.</p>
Emotion Type	Vulnerability; frustration; openness
Tone / Delivery	Supportive, gentle
Key Terms	dad, trapped, anger, overwhelmed
Thematic Codes	Parental bond; Emotional entrapment; Seeking understanding
Notes	Zoe's response validates Mio's pain, reinforcing mutual empathy and opening a path to connection.

Scene ID	Z005
Character / Timestamp	Zoe [02:23:40.000 --> 02:23:48.000]
Dialogue	- Okay, so this story is based on mine and Ella's upbringing. How we grew up and overcame every obstacle together.
Emotion Type	Pride; nostalgia
Tone / Delivery	Affectionate, warm, reflective
Key Terms	upbringing, grew up, overcame obstacles, together, Ella
Thematic Codes / Notes	Sibling bond; Overcoming adversity; Shared history; Resilience through unity.
Notes	This line frames Ella as a central figure in Zoe's formative years, tying their shared experiences to themes of resilience and unity. Revelation of the character's traumatic routes.
Scene ID	MZ010
Character / Timestamp	Mio/Zoe [02:28:54.000 --> 02:29:31.000]
Dialogue	- If you like dragons, why make them extinct? - Growing up, it felt like me and Ella against the world. But as twins, we always had each other's backs. - Must be nice to have backup. - Yeah. And that's the core of this story.
Emotion Type	Solidarity; gratitude; nostalgia
Tone / Delivery	Warm, reflective
Key Terms	dragons, extinct, twins, adversity, Ella
Thematic Codes / Notes	Sibling bond; Twin identity; Mutual protection; Overcoming adversity; Unity against external challenges
Notes	The dragon metaphor reinforces the precious and rare bond between Zoe and Ella, hinting at loss and emotional anchoring. Hints at the protective and supportive nature of the twin relationship.
Scene ID	MZ011
Character / Timestamp	Mio/Zoe [02:37:14.000 --> 02:37:46.000]
Dialogue	- I'm curious. How come you only write fantasy? - Reality is harsh. Fantasy has always been my pause button. I get to write my stories. My happy ever after ending.
Emotion Type	Relief; reflection; escapism
Tone / Delivery	Calm, thoughtful, wistful
Key Terms	fantasy, reality, harsh, pause button, happy ending
Thematic Codes / Notes	Escapism through creativity; Coping with harsh reality; Control through storytelling
Notes	Zoe articulates the therapeutic role of storytelling, choosing fantasy as a mechanism to construct hope amidst chaos.

Scene ID	MZ012
Character / Timestamp	Mio/Zoe [02:49:26.000 --> 02:49:56.000]
Dialogue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do you and Ella still hang out? - Not really, but I talk to her daily. - Where did you draw inspiration for the soul? - I suppose it's an ode to those we lost.
Emotion Type	Love; grief; nostalgia
Tone / Delivery	Tender, nostalgic, bittersweet
Key Terms	Ella, daily contact, inspiration, ode
Thematic Codes	Enduring sibling bonds; Processing loss; Memory as creative fuel
Notes	The line links present-day connection with Ella to the theme of loss, showing that the inspiration for creative work is rooted in honoring the memory of people who are gone.
Scene ID	MZ013
Character / Timestamp	Mio/Zoe [03:10:54.000 --> 03:13:19.000]
Dialogue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I kind of needed a break from all of my own dark thoughts. That's why I wrote this story. Ella would have loved it. - Would have? - Yeah. I lost her when we were twelve. There was an accident. We were playing, and one minute she was there, and the next she wasn't. After that, everything changed. We became hollow. My family. My childhood. Me. - But in this story...You made sure you both survived. A chance to grow up together. - I just hoped that with time it would get easier. - Does it? - No. - Hey, this whole story, this whole adventure...It's such a beautiful way to honor your sister. - What do you mean? - You wrote Ella like a complete badass dragon. - That is exactly how I wish I would be remembered one day. I just wanted to write her a different ending.
Emotion Type	Grief; longing
Tone / Delivery	Emotive, bittersweet, tearful
Key Terms	Ella, loss, accident, childhood, survival, honoring, different ending
Thematic Codes	Coping with traumatic loss; Rewriting reality through fantasy; Sibling love and memorialization; Narrative as emotional healing; Alternate endings for closure
Additional Notes	One of the most emotionally resonant moments. Zoe reframes her sister's death through storytelling, giving Ella a heroic afterlife. Writing becomes both a memorial and a fantasy of healing. The exchange also reveals how creative work can be an act of mourning and resilience, blending fantasy empowerment with real grief.

Scene ID	M002
Character / Timestamp	Mio [03:25:55.000 --> 03:26:16.000]
Dialogue	- It's fascinating how the subconscious works. Nowadays, I only compete against myself. One's biggest enemy is usually oneself.
Emotion Type	Reflection; Self-awareness; Resilience
Tone / Delivery	Thoughtful, philosophical, calm
Key Terms	subconscious, against myself, biggest enemy
Thematic Codes	Self-confrontation; Personal growth; Introspection; Cognitive reframing
Thematic Codes / Notes	This moment conveys a shift from external conflict to internal struggle, framing the self as both adversary and challenge.

Scene ID	M003
Character / Timestamp	Mio/Evil Mio [03:33:29.000 --> 03:33:30.000]
Dialogue	- I have this uneasy feeling crawling down my spine. We're pushing deeper into my subconscious to rescue a prisoner we don't even know. I believe this once was a part of me. I imprisoned you to protect me.
Emotion Type	Anxiety; Self-protection; Vulnerability; Fear
Tone / Delivery	Uneasy, introspective, confessional
Key Terms	uneasy feeling, subconscious, prisoner
Thematic Codes	Self-alienation; Inner conflict; Trauma defense mechanisms; Identity fragmentation
Notes	Mio frames her past self as a "prisoner," signaling dissociation and the compartmentalization of trauma. The subconscious journey metaphor underscores a speculative inner landscape where identity

Scene ID	M004
Character / Timestamp	Mio/Evil Mio [03:41:57.000 --> 03:42:06.000]
Dialogue	- No one will hurt us ever again! I will burn the world for how it treated Dad!
Emotion Type	Rage; protectiveness
Tone / Delivery	Explosive, intense
Key Terms	hurt, burn the world, Dad
Thematic Codes	Familial loyalty; Trauma response; Revenge motivation; Protective aggression
Notes	This outburst signals a peak in emotional intensity, where personal grief over the father's treatment transforms into a broader, almost apocalyptic, desire for retribution. Highlights the intertwining of personal trauma with destructive impulses.

Scene ID	M005
Character / Timestamp	Mio/Evil Mio [03:43:20.000 --> 03:43:23.000]
Dialogue	- I won't rely on you anymore. I will wash away the sorrow. I am breaking the chains!
Emotion Type	Defiance; Liberation; Empowerment; Anger
Tone / Delivery	Intense, resolute, cathartic
Key Terms	sorrow, breaking chains
Thematic Codes	Overcoming inner darkness; Breaking free from emotional captivity; Self-determination; Confrontation with the self
Notes	This is a pivotal moment of self-assertion for Mio, symbolizing an emotional turning point. The confrontation with Dark Mio represents the internal struggle against despair and trauma, reframed as a battle for autonomy and release. The language evokes imagery of emancipation, signaling a shift from victimhood to agency.
Scene ID	MZ014
Character / Timestamp	Mio/Zoe [03:46:15.000 --> 03:46:33.000]
Dialogue	- So, this is what it feels like, hey? - Conquering your inner demons. - Having a friend. - Friend? You mean best friend. - Don't push it.
Emotion Type	Relief; Connection; Healing; Cautious Affection
Tone / Delivery	Warm, slightly playful, tentative
Key Terms	inner demons, friend, best friend, emotional connection, trust
Thematic Codes	Overcoming trauma through relationships; Building trust; Emotional vulnerability masked with humor; Healing through companionship
Notes	A tender moment that blends vulnerability with humor, marking emotional progress through relational support. Blends vulnerability with levity. Humor here acts as a shield, softening the exposure of deep feelings.
Scene ID	MZ015
Character / Timestamp	Mio/Zoe, [03:54:11.000 --> 03:54:15.000]
Dialogue	- This was my old childhood home, but we moved out a long, long time ago. - Tell me about that old oak tree. You know that Ella used to climb.
Emotion Type	Nostalgia; Loss; Fond Remembrance
Tone / Delivery	Reflective, tender
Key Terms	childhood home, oak tree, Ella, memory, past
Thematic Codes	Memory as emotional anchor; Connection between place and personal history; Sibling bond; Longing for the past
Notes	Home and the oak tree symbolize emotional stability and pre-trauma innocence. A memory space that binds identity and grief. The dialogue evokes a warm yet bittersweet recollection of the past.

Scene ID	MZ016
Character / Timestamp	Mio/Zoe, [03:57:43.000 --> 04:03:45.000]
Dialogue	<p>- How long had you guys lived there? We moved when I was 12. Was it before or after the... accident?</p> <p>- These statues are getting creepier. It's all twisted and warped. I can't believe this. I can't believe I have all of this inside of me.</p> <p>- I still have no theories on why — only that this darkness seems to have been left unchecked for a long time.</p>
Emotion Type	Grief; Shock; Self-confrontation
Tone / Delivery	Hesitant, vulnerable, unsettled
Key Terms	accident, darkness, twisted, warped, unchecked emotions, loss
Thematic Codes	Trauma recollection; Avoidance of direct pain; Internalized grief; Confronting the shadow self; Psychological burden
Notes	The first part cautiously references the accident, signaling deep emotional pain tied to a specific loss (Ella). The second part shifts to visceral imagery of statues and darkness as metaphors for unprocessed trauma and suppressed emotional turmoil, suggesting a blending of memory and subconscious manifestation.
Scene ID	Z006
Character/Timestamp	Zoe, Spiritual Animals as her parents [04:04:31.000 --> 04:04:55.000]
Dialogue	- Guilt infested Zoe's heart. It became haunted when Ella died.
Emotion Type	Guilt; Grief; Haunting memory
Tone / Delivery	Calm, firm, somber, reflective, heavy
Key Terms	guilt, haunted, Ella
Thematic Codes	Survivor's guilt; Lingering trauma; Emotional haunting; Identity shaped by loss
Notes	Direct acknowledgment of how Ella's death became a defining emotional wound for Zoe, framing her grief as an ongoing haunting that infiltrates her identity and worldview.

Scene ID	MZ017
Character / Timestamp	Mio/Zoe, [04:07:47.000 --> 04:08:41.000]
Dialogue	<p>- Is this your home?</p> <p>- It became haunted when Ella died. So we left it to rot. Well, because of me. Because I couldn't hold on.</p> <p>- What do you mean? I couldn't hold on. We weren't supposed to go to the river. But I convinced her. The wet stone. She slipped, and I couldn't hold on.</p> <p>- It was an incident...</p> <p>- No! Ella died because of me.</p>
Emotion Type	Grief; Guilt; Sorrow
Tone / Delivery	Shaken, Confessional, anguished, self-condemning
Key Terms	haunted, Ella, river, slipped, couldn't hold on, death, blame
Thematic Codes	Survivor's guilt; Childhood trauma; Self-perceived culpability; Haunting spaces
Notes	Zoe's dialogue reveals deep-seated self-blame and an inability to reconcile with the accident, tying the physical abandonment of her home to unresolved emotional trauma. The repeated "I couldn't hold on" intensifies the sense of moral and emotional weight she carries.
Scene ID	Z007
Character / Timestamp	Zoe/Spiritual Animals as her parents [04:15:21.000 --> 04:15:23.000]
Dialogue	- I can't take this anymore!
Emotion Type	Overwhelm; Desperation; Emotional breaking point
Tone / Delivery	Explosive, raw, urgent
Key Terms	Can't take
Thematic Codes	Emotional collapse; Loss of control; Accumulated stress
Notes	This outburst signals a tipping point in the character's emotional resilience, linked to the trauma she has long endured. The brevity of the line heightens its impact and heavy distress.

Scene ID	MZ018
Character / Timestamp	Mio/Zoe [04:19:11.000 --> 04:19:23.000]
Dialogue	- It was never your fault, Zoe. You have to stop blaming yourself. - I'll try. - Your heart is ready to heal.
Emotion Type	Reassurance; Relief; Hopefulness
Tone / Delivery	Gentle, compassionate, supportive
Key Terms	never your fault, stop blaming, ready to heal
Thematic Codes	Forgiveness; Self-compassion; Emotional healing; Release of guilt
Notes	This exchange represents a key turning point in Zoe's arc, transitioning from guilt to acceptance. The supportive reassurance invites vulnerability, while the final line signals emotional readiness to move forward.
Scene ID	MZ019
Character / Timestamp	Mio/Zoe [04:38:11.000 --> 04:38:22.000]
Dialogue	- Look, Dad. I got published. - He's proud of you. I'm proud of you.
Emotion Type	Pride; Love; Affirmation
Tone / Delivery	Warm, tender, celebratory
Key Terms	Dad, published, proud
Thematic Codes	Parental bond; Achievement; Validation; Emotional connection
Notes	This moment proves Mio's need for her father's approval and love, blending personal accomplishment with familial pride. It reinforces the emotional impact and intimacy, and how much she wanted to be good and do good for him.

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The challenges female streamers face on Twitch and their strategies within a male-dominated gaming environment

ABSTRACT

The Twitch platform has become a globally preeminent streaming platform, with millions of active daily users who engage with content creation and consumption on the site. Video game content, in particular, has become a prominent feature. Consequently, a considerable number of scholars have been drawn to this video game streaming platform for a variety of reasons, including the presence of sexism and the objectification of female streamers on the platform. In addressing these issues, authors focus on female streamers to ascertain their experiences, perceptions, and interactions with Twitch.tv viewers in relation to sexism, in order to feel the gap between the aforementioned studies. The investigation identifies the motivations, challenges and obstacles encountered by female content creators within their community of followers. A secondary objective is to ascertain how they address cases of sexism and harassment on this platform, the measures Twitch made available to female content creators to prevent such occurrences, and the efficacy of these measures. Twitch's reluctance to address the underlying causes of harassment, its targeting of female creators, and its influence on the nature of relationships that female streamers cultivate with their audience are all salient issues. In addition, a series of recommendations have been formulated for platform policymakers and female streamers.

1, INTRODUCTION

The incorporation and integration of women and other marginalised groups, such as queer people, remains a significant challenge in our societies. In the 21st century, there are still locations where access and roles are strongly determined and where women and other marginalised groups are excluded. The situation is particularly problematic in traditionally masculinised domains such as video games (ArsGames, 2022). Association for Electronic Games (AEVI) and the Ger-

man Video Game Association (DEV) have indicated that in 2021 a total of 48% of video game players were women. However, both communities and workspaces within the industry are constituted as spaces exclusive for men wherein they can establish their position as the dominant players, thereby excluding women (Fisher, 2015; Fox & Tang, 2014; Paassen, Morgenroth & Stratemeyer, 2017).

Regarding e-sports competitors, an alternative version of gendered performance is offered by what has been termed ‘eventful masculinities. These are specifically cultivated on-site with a high-performance community of players who engage with other event-specific e-sports scenes, as well as with the organisation’s own production. Sport, in all of its forms, has been shown to create spaces for the transmission and confrontation of cultural values, especially with regard to gender (Witkowski, 2013).

As for the workplace atmosphere, there was a notable absence of awareness regarding the industry’s misogyny before the emergence of #GamerGate wave of denounces. In 2014, a debate commenced on social media X (Twitter at that time) and on the forums 4chan, 8kun.top and the KotakuInAction subforum on Reddit, in the United States. In particular, the issue pertains to the dearth of integrity in the realm of video game journalism. Rumours spread that video game journalists were publishing favourable reviews in exchange for favours or because of their friendships with developers. This led to disappointment and resulted in a campaign of harassment directed at feminist content creators and female professionals in the industry.

One of the first people to suffer from this was developer Zoë Quinn. She made *Depression Quest*, a video game that was well-received by one of the Kotaku website journalists really liked. The positive report provoked jealousy from Quinn’s former partner who alleged on social media that her success was owing to her engagement in intimate relations with that journalist. Despite a lack of evidence, Quinn became a victim of a harassment campaign on social media.

In addition to receiving insults and threats, she also experienced doxing, understood as the intentional and public disclosure of personal information via the Internet. Quinn’s intimate photographs have been made public, as well as her home address. These sorts of practises rapidly disseminated to other female industry professionals, including Brianna Wu and Anita Sarkeesian. Furthermore, they garnered support from Felicia Day, an actress who, despite not being a member of the industry, expressed solidarity with them. All aforementioned women became subject to harassment, death threats and doxing (Thomsen, 2014; Hewa & Tran, 2023).

Minor improvements were later produced in relation to the status of women in the professional video gaming field. A new generation of female leaders in video game development emerged. They include Jade Raymond, a producer of the inaugural instalments of the renowned *Assassin’s Creed* series (Ubisoft), and Amy Henning, a director and scriptwriter of the *Uncharted Trilogy* (Naughty Dog). At the same time, there was a growing number of initiatives

that enabled formation of women and queers networks and associations within the industry. FemDevs and Women in Games, among others. Nevertheless, several studies (Alklid, 2015; Ruberg, Cullen & Brewster, 2019; Ruberg & Brewer, 2022; Cullen, 2022) indicate that sexism and the objectification of women remain to be significant issues.

The aim of this research is to investigate the challenges and motivations that female content creators face on the Twitch platform. In addition, we want to observe the potential impact of sexism and hyper-sexualisation on female streamers. In order to address these issues, the following research questions have been formulated:

What kind of challenges do female streamers who broadcast their content through Twitch face?

In light of this question, further inquiries emerge:

Q1: What are the types of messages that female streamers receive regarding their live broadcasts?

Q2: What are the nature and quality of the relationships between female streamers and their audiences?

Q3: What methods do female streamers employ in response to negative or harassing messages they receive?

Q4: What measures does Twitch implement to support female streamers who experience harassment?

The objective of these inquiries is to ascertain the experiences of female streamers, their perceptions and experiences on the platform, and the difficulties and obstacles they encounter on a daily basis. Furthermore, the objective is to ascertain how individuals respond to instances of sexism and harassment. At the same time, which are the measures Twitch implements to safeguard female content creators from such incidents, and the efficacy of these measures.

2, TWITCH.TV AS A PROMINENT MASCULINISED STREAMING PLATFORM

Established in 2011 as a venue for the streaming of video games, Twitch.tv is the most significant global streaming platform. In 2014, it was purchased by Amazon, and ever since has continued to expand in terms of both content and audience. Somehow, they capitalised the success of eSports and cooperative online video games on a global scale (Alklid, 2015). Restrictions imposed by the Coronavirus pandemic resulted in a surge in the use of the platform, accompanied by a notable increase in the number of active channels, from 3.75 million in February 2020 to 7.4 million in July of that same year (TwitchTracker, 2021). In response to these developments, Twitch invested in the creation of new formats and the diversification of its content. However, the platform remains closely associated with video games.

To engage with audiences and foster a sense of community, Twitch provided a forum for teenagers, journalism professionals and those interested in communication with different backgrounds. Nevertheless, Twitch does adopt a radical

position in relation to the prevailing norms of online behaviour, which continue to exhibit a tendency towards sexism (Alklid, 2015). The reasonable deduction is because the level of sexism and masculinisation of the platform, only one English-speaking female streamer, Pokimane, made it to the top 10 streamers worldwide, namely with 9.4 million. Amongst Spanish-speaking streamers, Arigameplays ranked 26th with 6.1 million followers. However, there is a noticeable disparity when comparing their significant numbers of followers with those of other prominent male streamers, such as Ninja and Auronplay who currently rank first and second in terms of global viewership, with 18.5 and 15.2 million followers respectively (Socialblade, 2023).

Nevertheless, the number of followers is not the sole determining factor on Twitch, a platform where new content is continually generated and competition is intense. It is rather the constant creation of content focused on attracting and retaining audience that is of paramount importance (TwitchTracker, 2023). For scholars, Twitch can be interesting as well because “game live streaming intersects many contemporary issues not only around media transformations but also larger considerations of cultural production and everyday users” (Taylor, 2018: 11). Platforms frequently utilise these very same policies as a means of deflecting criticism regarding alleged bias, asserting a position of neutrality or impartiality despite the fact that they are the ones who ultimately oversee these very decisions (Zolides, 2021).

While Twitch is a particularly notable example for its male-skewing demographics, it is still emblematic of other social media platforms and companies using community guidelines and other moderation policies in a way that implicitly reinforces dominant gender ideologies. These companies often use these same policies as a shield from criticism of bias, to claim neutrality or impartiality despite being in charge of those very decisions. More work can be done to explore the ways these semi-legal, public-facing documents play a role in structuring social interactivity in digital spaces and the cultural, economic, and political ramifications of such power.

Within the Twitch platform, there are moral entrepreneurs who utilise their moderation practices to reinforce their social positioning. In relation to gender, the organisation of the positioning space of moderation practices as a realm of social distinction is of particular interest (Ferret, 2025).

The resistance to feminism observed in gaming and streaming culture is not an isolated phenomenon. It can rather be seen as part of a broader trend, since the visibility and influence of feminism continue to grow across various forms of media and platforms (Cullen, 2022). Such is the extent of this resistance that streaming platforms and the communities that surround them have frequently sought to disassociate themselves from the connections between streaming, sexuality, and gender. This is done in order to assert their own apolitical nature and to reinforce their legitimacy within a heterosexual, white, cisgender, and male environment (Ruberg, Cullen & Brewster, 2019). In this way, feminism

is perceived as a threat not only to traditional representations of masculinity but also to the very concept of video games (Shaw, 2014). As Amanda Cullen observes, “Live streaming includes a form of toxic masculinity and gamer identity that limits how women may participate and denies any form of feminism that disrupts masculine power” (2022: 545).

It is therefore unsurprising that women and queer individuals who attempt to establish themselves as streamers encounter even greater obstacles to success than their male counterparts. Furthermore, they must contend with an audience that perceives them as outsiders and opportunists, as well as with sexist messages, harassment, and doxing. As Nakandala, Ciampaglia, Su et al. elucidate, there is a pronounced dichotomy between genders in terms of representation on popular channels. Their analysis revealed that gaming-related terminology is disproportionately prevalent on male-oriented channels, while objectifying cues are markedly associated with female-focused channels (2017: 165).

Community standards policies on streaming platforms frequently exhibit discriminatory attitudes towards women and queer individuals (Cullen & Ruberg, 2019). Such users are frequently encouraged to block harassers and offered guidelines on how to stream, while providing minimal information about themselves and their offline lives (Cullen & Ruberg, 2019). This is also evident in instances where the objectification of women is discussed as a factor that reinforces and engenders the structural problem of gender imbalance in online social gaming communities (Nakandala, Ciampaglia, Su & Ahn, 2017). However, the lack of available data precludes any definitive conclusion regarding whether streamers would consent to or permit objectification as a result of social pressure on the platform or for other reasons related to education or culture.

3, THE SHIFT FROM THE CONVENTIONAL NOTION OF A MERE ‘SEXUAL OBJECT’ TO THAT OF A ‘DESIRING SEXUAL OBJECT’

On a platform where image sharing content and time with the audience are rewarded, many female streamers must navigate a complex landscape of self-presentation, striving to balance the desire to engage with their audience while also safeguarding their personal boundaries. The act of silencing or even encouraging sexism can result in increased popularity for women, which may in turn facilitate the occurrence of abusive behaviour directed towards them by some users. Furthermore, some may believe that achieving success in the gaming industry necessitates acquiescing to the prevailing norms that normalise or fetishise the objectification of women. This could potentially exacerbate the structural issue of gender imbalance (Nakandala, Ciampaglia, Su & Ahn, 2017).

During the final decade of the twentieth century, there was a significant shift in the conceptualisation of femininity with respect to female sexuality. Previously, key elements such as care, upbringing and motherhood were set aside. The focus shifted exclusively to the body as the source of women’s identity (Gill, 2007; Attwood, 2006; McRobbie, 2004). In this way, the representa-

tion of women in the media has shifted as well. Previously, women were presented as passive and mute objects of a supposed male gaze. Nowadays, women are shown as active and desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in an objectified way because it suits their interests which are implicitly liberated (Gill, 2008: 42). This paradigm shift in terms of female sexuality is of great importance when considering the concept of postfeminism. It marks a significant transition from the traditional role of women as ‘the sexual object’ to that of the ‘desiring sexual subject’ (Gill, 2008: 151).

In this way, a variety of female streamers would emerge on Twitch. Those who would embrace objectification as a means of attracting an audience in a misguided interpretation of feminist empowerment, commonly referred to as the *busty streamer*. Twitch function not only as a cultural space for personal expression but also as an economic marketplace, where “if women and non-binary people become more constricted in their ability to express themselves in an already highly masculine space like video game streaming, they are also being shut out from economic opportunities despite the egalitarian language that often comes from those within the influencer marketing industry and from the platforms that host them like Twitch” (Zolides, 2021: 3013).

Another typology is composed of those who would be offended by the existence of the aforementioned individuals and adhere to the norms that are acceptable to men, thereby protecting the meritocracy of streaming (2022: 545 and 546).

Community standards policies on these platforms frequently reflect discriminatory attitudes towards women and queer people (Cullen & Ruberg, 2019). They often encourage users to block harassers and provide guidelines on how to stream, offering minimal information about the streamers and their offline lives. These actions are still based on a blame culture, with the focus being on the streamers rather than on the discriminatory and abusive behaviours of the users. It is noteworthy that chat moderation tools and systems for reporting harassment, which is often linked to gender and sexual identity, are paradoxically used by participants as a means of further harassing streamers. A mere 25% of moderators have declared themselves to be female (Seering & Kairam, 2023). This often results in the streamers leaving the platform which effectively silences feminist discourse.

4. METHODOLOGY

The majority of existing studies on the sexism experienced by female content creators on streaming platforms such as Twitch are limited to discourse analysis of the content of live broadcasts and the chats and comments received by streamers (Alklid, 2015; Nakandala, Ciampaglia, Su & Ahn, 2017; Ruberg, Cullen & Brewster, 2019; Ruberg & Brewer, 2022; Cullen, 2022). These studies do not solicit the perspectives of the individuals experiencing the sexism. To fill this gap, we supplemented the content analysis with a qualitative approach. It consists of in-depth interviews with streamers.

In line with the aforementioned approach, this study employed an ethnographic technique, namely in-depth interviews with key informants. The principal objective of ethnography is to provide a comprehensive account of the characteristics of a particular cultural milieu. This may be perceived as exotic and distant, as in traditional anthropological studies, or as proximate, in the context of research into specific events, groups, subcultures, or institutions (Barbour, 2014). Furthermore, ethnography is an invaluable instrument for discerning the obstacles that women encounter when attempting to gain and retain a presence in male-dominated social networks. However, its utility extends beyond this. It can also be employed to identify the underlying social factors that contribute to this phenomenon (Flick, 2007).

The participants in this study were five female content creators, aged between 22 and 36 years old. The participants collectively possess an average of five years of experience broadcasting on the Twitch platform.

The video games they stream about include League of Legends, Valorant, Fortnite, Genshin Impact, Animal Crossing, and Final Fantasy. The profiles were selected based on three criteria: gender identity, seniority on the platform, and the frequency with which they uploaded content. The initial objective was to include profiles of female content creators who had chosen to cease their activities on the platform. Following the selection process, 25 women met the requisite criteria. All of them were contacted and seven agreed to participate in this research. However, at the end only five participated, citing scheduling conflicts. Contacts were initiated primarily via email and/or private message on social networks, particularly Twitter (now X). Associations of women in the video game industry, such as FemDevs and Women in Games, were also contacted.

All meetings were conducted in real time via video call on the Discord platform. In order to facilitate the participation of the remaining two informants, an asynchronous approach was employed, whereby the questions were sent via email. Nevertheless, no responses were received. The interviews were recorded and transcribed in such a way as to ensure the anonymity of the participants.

The analysis was conducted using the NVivo software tool, which enables qualitative data analysis to be carried out. The software's capacity to analyse and organise textual, audio, visual and multimedia data, coupled with its ability to play audio and video files, proved invaluable for the analysis. Thematic analysis revealed the following themes: satisfaction, content, image, feminism, audience, conversations, community, intimacy, limits, camgirl, object, harassment, good feminist, bad feminist, Twitch, sexism, measures.

5. ANALYSIS

The majority of respondents consider creating content on Twitch to be a leisure activity. Some streamers work on an ad hoc basis, while others have established a routine of three to seven days a week. In response to dissatisfaction with their roles as streamers, most of them expressed a desire to reach a larger audience.

The respondents identified the lack of time and the need for a consistent presence on the platform as key factors. However, they generally expressed satisfaction for various reasons, including personal growth, meeting like-minded individuals and establishing a routine, and coping with challenges.

Upon inquiry as to whether being a woman on Twitch is advantageous or disadvantageous, the interviewees proffered a plethora of opinions. Some indicated that it could be advantageous, as some consumers are more likely to engage with attractive creators, which may result in an increase in followers. If a female streamer can manage this type of user, her gender can be advantageous in terms of monetisation, as there is potential for financial gain. Nevertheless, the majority perceive being a woman on Twitch as a disadvantage.

Regarding the treatment of female streamers, they believe that women are not regarded as seriously as their male counterparts. Furthermore, they feel that they are constantly under observation and evaluation. Despite their efforts to avoid presenting sexualised content, female streamers feel that people accessing their streams are primarily attracted by their gender. In such instances, they report that criticism and negative commentary frequently target their appearance as well as their gameplay. This phenomenon may be more pronounced in the case of transgender women, even when they decide not to appear on camera. Regarding content creation, the interviewees said that they prioritise their own interests because they have noticed that if creators do not enjoy the process, their followers will not be positively engaged. Consequently, they emphasised the importance of developing content that engages the wider community.

The interviewees discuss a range of topics with their audiences, including the video game they are currently playing, current affairs and everyday life. Occasionally, discussions also encompass more personal matters. While they generally acknowledge a positive relationship with their community, the majority do not allow intimate questions, particularly during live streaming sessions. However, some do respond privately if they know the person who posed the question. Some interviewees concede that they do not impose many restrictions and that this may be an area for improvement. They reached a consensus that they would never share data relating to their location, personal information, or matters concerning their intimate relationships or family.

In terms of their public image, most of them appear on camera during their live streams. The main reason is that it is standard practice on the platform. Furthermore, the Twitch algorithm penalises streamers who do not use the camera, positioning them below those who do and promoting their content less. Among those who appear on camera, most place a high value on their physical appearance and consider wearing makeup essential. When asked about their reasons, they imitate successful streamers. Social pressure also exerts a significant influence on the desire to appear and be perceived as physically attractive by others.

All respondents identified as feminists. However, there was a lack of consensus regarding a precise definition. Some identified feminism as equal oppor-

tunities between men and women, while emphasising the fight for women's rights or the process of deconstruction and constant reflection on the situation of women. The majority also stated that they avoid discussing feminism in their live streams, as well as politics, religion, or other controversial topics. However, on occasion, they do utilise the video game itself as a platform for making comments or critiques.

Some women have expressed concern that a significant proportion of viewers treat them as if they were merely performing as camgirls. These viewers ask them to engage in activities that are incongruent with the nature of the content they are creating. They argue that some male viewers are primarily interested in the creators of the content rather than the content itself. This emphasises the significance of physical appearance in this context. Some women frequently encounter men who attempt to treat them as camgirls, offering monetary compensation in exchange for performing specific actions. However, when these men fail to achieve their desired outcomes, or even when they face the possibility of being banned, they tend to lose interest:

“The camgirls’ viewers won’t like one of my streams because we’re looking for different things. My viewers like to enjoy the game, to laugh... they care more about me being funny than being pretty. Their viewers are totally different. They couldn’t care less about the game.” (Interviewee 3).

Some of them may perceive themselves as objects due to the saturation of the platform and the fickleness of the audience. The fluctuating viewership numbers, coupled with the transient nature of the audience's attention, can lead to a sense of being disposable if one stops sharing content for an extended period. The most problematic aspect of this situation, they argue, is the perception of being regarded as expendable:

“In the end, if you do not stream, they do without you. That is also what Twitch promotes, consumption as if you were an object. In the end (the audience) will go to other people who do. You could say it is like the jungle.” (Interviewee 1).

One of the interviewees provided a detailed account of how, following the disclosure of her whereabouts in a live stream by an acquaintance, she was sent images of the facade of her residence by an unidentified individual:

“There wasn’t much we could do because it was a fake account. I was pretty new to all this, so I wasn’t really sure how to react. I just blocked him and that was it. If I went to the police, they’d probably tell me it was a fake account and couldn’t do anything about it.” (Interviewee 2).

When asked about the most appropriate response to such situations, the majority of respondents said that they had learned to cope with them effectively. They tend to respond with humour, despite being aware that they have previously felt hurt. Some respondents even stopped streaming so that they could address the situation in a more private setting:

“As a trans woman, I’ve been harassed because of my voice. I felt terrible; they were messing up my streams, making me lose interest in what I was doing, and all I could do was delete the message and ban the person.” (Interviewee 5).

As their confidence has grown, some have chosen to directly address the comments. They think that banning is the most effective action. In addition, all respondents are aware of instances where other streamers, whether friends or content creators they follow, have received negative comments and/or harassment. It consisted by attempts at flirting, criticism of the streamer’s playing style, misogyny and intimidation, as well as threats and doxing. The severity of the behaviour seems to increase with the fame of the streamer.

All respondents were aware of the measures Twitch has in place to prevent harassment. The most useful for them is the ability to ban the conflictive person. However, they recognise it is not entirely effective, as the individual can simply create another account by changing their IP address in their internet settings, with no need to verify their identity. There is also the option to report problematic users to Twitch, but if used as a standalone solution, it is deemed ineffective. The analysis of reported content is typically done by a bot. It searches keywords, without considering the nuances of language, such as irony or sarcasm. One of Twitch’s most recent measures, the AutoMOD of the chat, which automatically bans certain words pre-configured in the channel, has also failed to be effective as it does not work properly and correctly identifies only few as negative. None of the interviewees consider these measures implemented by Twitch to be helpful, particularly in the long term.

Nevertheless, the enthusiasm for video games and towards content creation appear to be sufficient motivation for female streamers to persist on Twitch. Moreover, a considerable number of respondents highlight that, despite the unfavourable aspects, they have managed to cultivate a community with whom they can share their experiences. This community evokes feelings of positivity, comfort, and reluctance to leave.

Female content creators are routinely the recipients of messages that are sexist and chauvinistic in nature, irrespective of the content they create. The predominance of a male audience present a significant challenge for female video game streamers, who seek content created by women that is sexualised and even bordering on erotic. The acceptance and allowance of this type of content on the platform would have an impact on other content creators, who would also receive requests and messages from this type of audience.

Such circumstances would define the nature of the relationships that streamers would maintain with their audience. The disclosure of specific types of information has the potential to compromise them. In view of the aforementioned considerations, all interviewees are unequivocal in their assertion that they would never divulge their location to their audience. The Twitch platform was characterised by a prevalence of negative messages and instances of harassment, particularly in situations where male users were unable to obtain the desired information, attention, or intimacy from the streamer. In other instances, the messages were sent without justification, based solely on the sender's perception of the recipient's gender, particularly when the latter engaged in gaming activities that were widely popular. Furthermore, the pursuit of a larger audience would also result in greater exposure to toxic content.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The primary motivation for the interviewees to commence creating content on Twitch was their enthusiasm for video games. This inspired them to engage in the act of entertaining and communicating with the public in a similar way to the individuals they follow, as well as providing a way to temporarily escape from the challenges they face in their everyday lives. Conversely, additional motivations included the showcasing of their playing style, the introduction of lesser-known video games to a wider audience, and the generation of an additional source of income.

Regarding the types of messages that female streamers receive during their live broadcasts (1), negative messaging and even harassment are prevalent on the Twitch platform. The majority of respondents stated that the prevalence of these messages is contingent upon the specific video game being played. However, they noted a significant increase in frequency when engaging with mainstream video games and a corresponding decrease when playing indie video games. The most common comments are about flirting (first), requests to access the streamer's personal social media accounts (second), criticism of their gameplay (third), mansplaining advice on how to improve (fourth), and requests to play privately (fifth). Comments concerning the physical appearance of the streamers, as well as insults and sexist and chauvinistic remarks, are also commonplace. These comments can potentially be damaging to the streamers' reputations.

About the nature and quality of the relationships between female streamers and their audiences (2), most of the people we spoke to felt as objects on Twitch at some point. This is not just because of the requests and comments that come to their channels from strangers but also because some of them feel that whoever pays, demands. The most toxic messages and those that would cause the most distress to streamers are those related to their physique and also sexist and macho insults.

The methods female streamers employ in response to negative or harassing messages (3) is replying and banning. A strategy employed to safeguard them-

selves is the utilisation of humour and sarcasm as a form of defence. As a relatively new platform, it allows both men and women to enter at the same time, but in fact it tends to exclude women by objectifying and sexualising them, thus ensuring that they are not treated equally with respect to male streamers. In a kind of parasocial relationship, the audience would seek greater intimacy and closeness with the streamer, despite the minimal familiarity that typically characterises such a relationship. This would result in a significant proportion of them feeling the need to constantly protect themselves from the risk of sharing too much and thereby putting themselves in a potentially dangerous situation, whether in the form of unwanted advances or violent behaviour.

The measures that Twitch implement to support female streamers who experience harassment are insufficient (4). Our analysis revealed that Twitch is a platform with a predominantly masculinised content creation and consumption environment. Therefore, in a similar manner to other workspaces within the industry previously mentioned, Twitch would seek to become another exclusive space for men in which to establish its hegemonic position by excluding women. The sexualisation and objectification of female streamers, when considered the lack of involvement of Twitch, victimise female creators than address the root issue of harassment. Also, they influence the nature of the relationships that female streamers would cultivate with their audience.

In consideration of the aforementioned evidence, it can be proposed that the findings would serve to corroborate the hypersexualisation of women's bodies and the pervasive sexism observed in video games. This is a consequence of the hypermasculinised nature of the industry and the broader community, as well as the heteropatriarchal and capitalist structures that underpin society. In this sense, the Twitch platform can be seen as a reflection of wider societal norms, offering a seemingly free platform where anyone can become a creator and gain an audience on the basis of the promise of success and fortune. However, as with many other platforms, female creators are once again positioned as a commodity, available for the gratification of male desire.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is noteworthy that none of the interviewees regarded the measures implemented by Twitch as beneficial, particularly in the long term. It is recommended that Twitch allocate specific spaces for female streamers to articulate their perspectives and that these voices be given due consideration. The appointment of women as moderators, in conjunction with the provision of instruction on genre ideology, would be a positive development.

The utilisation of automatic bots and AutoMOD is inadequate in addressing the issue. Quickly, harassers develop ways of bypassing them. Additionally, Twitch has the capability to configure its algorithm in a manner that does not result in the penalisation of streamers who do not display their bodies.

Conversely, it is imperative for female streamers to assert their authority over their channels. It is imperative that they articulate the type of behaviour that will not be condoned, while simultaneously ensuring that they do not overreact or afford undue prominence to harassers. It is imperative to maintain focus on the objective of the stream, which is the discussion of videogames. In the short term, the banning of individuals who do not adhere to the channel's regulations can be considered a functional measure.

Conversely, it is imperative for female streamers to assert their authority over their channels. On the one hand, they have to make it clear the kind of behaviour they are not going to tolerate, but on the other hand, not to overact or give too much protagonism to aggressors. Female streamers should maintain focus on the objective of the stream, is the discussion of videogames. In the short term, the banning of individuals who do not adhere to the channel's regulations can be considered a functional measure.

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“So how ‘bout it? Aren’t you getting tired of the grind?”

The narrative complexity of Kojima’s *Death Stranding*

ABSTRACT

Video games have evolved in recent years, moving between complex cinematic narration and reflexive gameplay. To account for these developments, this article proposes a combined approach drawing on film analysis and video game analysis, centred on the concept of the antagonist. The subdivision into narration, gameplay and character analysis enables the narrative complexity to be duly considered. The study further provides an outlook on how to apply this method using the example of the antagonist Higgs from the video game *Death Stranding*.

1. INTRODUCTION

Computer game developer Hideo Kojima is best known for the *Metal Gear / Konami* series. Kojima left the computer game company Konami after 30 years in 2015 and founded his own independent studio, Kojima Productions, in cooperation with Sony Interactive Entertainment. In 2019, Kojima Productions published its first title with *Death Stranding*. *Death Stranding* can be seen as a typical Kojima game: it combines an artistic, philosophically charged, slow-paced narrative with exploratory gameplay (Higgin, 2010, p.252; Veugen, 2012, p.54). Kojima is known for maintaining extensive creative control and even produced the promotional trailers himself, further strengthening the auteur-like status often attributed to him.

While Kojima’s strong auteur image is repeatedly emphasised in public discourse, the production context of *Death Stranding* illustrates a more complex interplay between individual authorship and large-scale collaborative development. The game’s highly coordinated integration of performance capture, environmental design, systems engineering and narrative construction demonstrates that its creative identity emerges not solely from Kojima’s direction, but from the orchestration of contributions across multiple specialised teams. This tension between auteur-centred perception and distributed creative labour further underscores the hybrid character of the game and frames the antagonists’ design as a product of both individual vision and collaborative craft.

Death Stranding is a video game that is not for everyone: it appeals mainly to indie gamers and long-time Kojima fans (Egenfeldt-Nielsen & Tosca, 2016, p.16; Stobbe & Weigang, 2016, p.98–99). Another striking feature is the use of real actors through capture technology, which brings the game closer to movies, similar to *Quantic Dreams*' productions (Letourneur, 2016). This raises the question of how video games characterised by complex cinematic narration and reflexive gameplay can be adequately analysed. Conventional narrative analysis alone is insufficient to do justice to these hybrid "Triple-I" titles, which combine independent aesthetics with high-budget production values.

In order to analyse *Death Stranding*, the study proposes an antagonist-centred analytical framework to identify the ludological, narrative, aesthetic, and dramaturgical meanings of the antagonists. Kojima's characters are known to personify certain traits, views, or constructs, as is already very clear from their names (e.g., The Boss, Die-Hardman, or Hot Coldman) (Kojima Productions, 2019; Konami, 2004, 2010). Therefore, the antagonists also embody concepts that go beyond the game world. Another factor that makes the interactions with the antagonistic characters interesting is their deviation from the rest of the gameplay, which otherwise consists of the very uniform core loop of delivering packages.

The article proceeds as follows: Section 2 discusses research on narrative game complexity and argues for an interdisciplinary, antagonist-centred perspective. Section 3 outlines a combined film and game-analysis methodology focusing on cutscenes, gameplay, and character construction. Section 4 applies this framework to the antagonist Higgs as an illustrative case study, clarifying how the approach may extend to other characters and titles.

2. UNDERSTANDING VIDEO GAME COMPLEXITY THROUGH ANTAGONISTS

In the following, different forms of narration and the linking of video games and films will be discussed. This section argues that narratives in video games can be traced through the characters (NPCs and player characters) that appear in the game. The theoretical concept of antagonist analysis, known from film studies, can also be useful for the analysis of video games, which exhibit forms of TV-like narrative complexity (Mittell, 2015). Antagonistic relationships in video games are particularly evident in boss fights. When looking at the state of the research, it becomes apparent that narrative-focused character analysis has been rarely applied to video games.

Narrative structures permeate contemporary media across formats. In addition to novels, comics, films, or series, digital games of various genres increasingly focus on extensive storytelling (Thon, 2015, p.104). Digital games in which there is a strong focus on narrative can be subsumed under the term narrative video game (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2016, p.202). A narrative can be understood as a sequence of events that contains the following elements: a story is created by chronologically arranged events. The representation of these events, which can

be translated literally or figuratively, is called “text”. narration refers to the process of telling or writing a story (Egenfield-Nielsen et al., 2016, p.202).

Beyond general discussions of narrative complexity, recent scholarship has already highlighted the distinctive narrative, aesthetic, and structural characteristics of *Death Stranding*. House (2020) emphasises the game’s socio-economic subtext and analyses its networked cooperation mechanics as a critique of platform capitalism and precarity, situating the game within broader debates on labour, value and interdependence in digital cultures. Further work has interpreted *Death Stranding* as a metamodern text that oscillates between affective sincerity and self-aware reflexivity, foregrounding thematic structures such as empathy, reconstruction, liminality and oscillation (Radchenko 2023). Kurasov (2022) likewise reads the game through cultural-studies and ideological frameworks, interpreting its reconstruction narrative as a critique of American exceptionalism and contemporary identity discourses. Together, these works demonstrate that *Death Stranding* has been recognised as an unusually self-reflexive, symbolically dense and structurally experimental game whose narrative meaning emerges through thematic, meta-aesthetic and player-driven processes.

The narration of a video game does not necessarily have to be set in a fixed chronological order, but can, as in *Star Wars: The Old Republic* or *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, for example, occur non-linearly (Schröter & Thon, 2014, p.47).

Video games apply cutscenes and scripted events. The term cutscenes refers to sequences in which the player has no influence on the game. These non-interactive parts are clearly separated from the actual gameplay and are usually incorporated in the form of film sequences or other formats, such as still images with textual additions. In many games, they are of short duration (Thon, 2015, p.114). They can provide the player with important information that is relevant for the further course of the game or strategic decision-making. They are also often used to build tension and establish an action-packed event, which the player then enters with sophisticated gameplay (Klevjer, 2002, p.195). Scripted events are pre-programmed events that are usually played in parallel to the gameplay and, thus, remain interactive (Thon, 2015, p.114). Schröter and Thon (2014) also consider it important to mention that it is not only the elements of linear narration (e.g., cutscenes and scripted sequences) that have an influence on how the fictional world and its inhabitants are presented, but that the combination with the ludic gameplay is crucial for the representation of characters in games. This is because video game characters differ significantly from the characters of non-interactive stories in that the way they are shown can be different depending on how the game is played. While the cutscenes are designed the same for every player, the “ludic events” referred to by Schröter & Thon (2014) fall more into the realm of interactive simulation than narrative presentation and cannot be determined in advance (Schröter & Thon, 2014, pp.46-48).

A special form of narrativity appears in games such as *Beyond: Two Souls*, *Fahrenheit*, or *Heavy Rain*, which are seen as convergences of film and video games.

These titles present innovative and original approaches to storytelling. At the same time, they employ several established narrative strategies and tools (especially from the realm of film). In the context of *Beyond: Two Souls*, Letourneur (2016) cites as characteristics the marketing strategies of such games, which resemble Hollywood posters and trailers foreground realistic character faces as well as the actors portraying them. Furthermore, actors from the film industry are also involved in the production process, and the game is often staged as a special work of art. Hideo Kojima's *Silent Hills* project, announced in 2014 and since revised, also falls into this category (Letourneur, 2016, pp.174-175, p.190).

An important component in current video games with a narrative focus is typically the characters, who are at the centre of the narrative (Schröter, 2018, p.109). Schröter (2021) distinguishes three different types in his reception-aesthetic approach of computer game characters (Schröter, 2021, p.180). On the one hand, there is the player character, who can be directed through the fictional world by the player (Schröter, 2021, p.181). On the other hand, in multiplayer applications there are co-player characters who are guided by other recipients (Schröter, 2021, p.180). The third group consists of non-player characters, or NPCs for short. These are characters that are controlled by the computer (Schröter, 2021, p.223). NPCs help to make the fictional world more emotional and vivid and typically fulfil specific narrative and ludic roles within the story, appearing in a defined relationship to the player (Isbister, 2006, p.225, p.229; Schröter, 2021, p.223). In addition to supporting figures, such as the mentor or the guide, they also take on the role of antagonist in various forms (Isbister, 2006, p.237, p.238, p.240-246). As such, they are usually shown only in the context of their ascribed role and are connected in a certain way to the overarching game goals (Schröter, 2018, p.120).

The antagonist is a central character of the story. He/she acts within the narration as an opponent of the protagonist and, in conflict situations, personifies the antithesis of the protagonist. Often, this dualism comprises not only two characters and the protagonist usually encounters several antagonistic figures and thus a multitude of polarities on their journey (zu Hünigen, 2012, n.d.). In the context of video games, these moments of conflict are referred to as boss fights or boss battles and are an essential part of gameplay in many genres of digital games (Siu et al., 2016, p.86; Wood & Summerville, 2019, n.d.). Usually, these conflicts are designed in such a way that the encounter mechanics differ from the rest of the game and the difficulty level is increased (Wood & Summerville, 2019, n. p.). As a result, they are more likely to stick in the player's mind. They can serve as an initial test of the player's learned skills or appear as the final battle (Siu et al. 2016, p.86). Thus, they often serve as gatekeepers through which the player's further progression within the game is ensured. Only if the players fulfil the corresponding skill requirements or certain conditions within the game will they be able to defeat the boss. If they succeed, they are rewarded with items, the continuation of the game and Game

Achievements, i.e., awards for milestones, which are intended to create a sense of achievement (Siu et al., 2016, p.86).

The academic subject of Game Studies deals with the analysis of design, theory and philosophy, as well as players of digital games and their location within the media landscape and society. It is an interdisciplinary field of research that is interesting for academics and researchers, but also for users in practice. For a long time, there has been disagreement in international game studies about how to approach the subject (Wimmer, 2014, p.1). On the one hand, there are the ludologists, who place a particular emphasis on the simulation aspect of digital games, which is not found in the so-called non-interactive media (Thon, 2015, p.108; Wimmer, 2014, p.2). By contrast, narratologists use narrative theories from film and literature studies and apply them to the medium of computer games. For the most part, studies focus on games from the adventure or role-playing game genres, which are treated similarly to an interactive text or audio-visual material.

In game studies with a narrative focus, game characters are dealt with, but rarely analysed in depth. Looking at game studies beyond the narrative approach, some authors have already examined characters in video games (Schröter & Thon, 2014, pp.44–45). One researcher who has studied characters in video games several times (also in a narrative context) is Schröter (Schröter, 2018; Schröter, 2021; Schröter & Thon, 2014). He describes the state of research on characters in game studies as a kind of paradox. The player character especially, who is directed by the player and thus acts as an interface between them and the video game, has been considered a recognized object of research since the early 2000s. At the same time, very few studies investigate the player character with a focus on its characteristics as a narrative character (Schröter, 2021, pp.37–38). Studies on player character can be found, for example, by Beil (2010), Beil (2012), and Deuber-Mankowsky (2001). Another of Schröter's criticisms (2021) is that previous studies in the context of media studies have scarcely involved any real separation between player characters and other types of computer game characters (co-player characters, non-player characters). Instead, studies focus only on this one category in a selective and often undifferentiated way, or characters in digital games are studied in general (Schröter, 2021, pp.37–38).

Apart from the fact that the majority of studies of computer game characters focus on the player character, meaning that NPCs (non-player characters) are barely examined (Schröter, 2021, p.224), a subcategory that is elementary for games is thus also barely taken into consideration. Despite the fact that antagonists (or bosses, as they are often called in this context) are an essential component of digital games, they are rarely the research objects in studies in this field (Wood & Summerville, 2019, n.d.). Scholars who have nevertheless addressed the issue include Siu et al. (2016), who created a programming model for boss battles in 2D action games, and Wood & Summerville (2019), who studied boss battles through an analysis of boss design in *Cuphead*.

Several studies have already focused on Kojima's *Metal Gear* game series. The (anti)hero metaphor in *Metal Gear Solid: Snake Eater*, *Peace Walker*, and *Ground Zeroes* has been examined by De Vasconcelos Guimarães (2015), while Yap et al. (2014) analysed the narrative of *Metal Gear Solid* with a focus on the character mirroring of the characters Solid Snake and Liquid Snake. Stamenković et al. (2017) examined the game *Metal Gear Solid* using multimodal discourse analysis to identify its construction of meaning and persuasive goals. Higgin's (2010) study focuses on the thematisation of war games, digital technology, and control in *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty*. On *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* Girina (2019) addressed the representation of torture while player identity and agency were explored by Papale & François (2019). Green (2017) addressed the issue of post-traumatic stress disorder, trauma, and story in *Metal Gear V: Ground Zeroes and The Phantom Pain*, with a chapter focusing specifically on characters (including antagonistic ones) (Green, 2017, pp.81-104). Bumbalough & Henze (2016, pp. 28-30) also examined PTSD in computer games and dedicate a subchapter to the portrayal of trauma by the antagonists in the *Metal Gear*.

Regarding *Death Stranding*, there is a study by House (2020) on the topic of platform capitalism and the social group of the precariat and a lecture by Powers (2020) focusing on the representation of male pregnancy and female bodies. Green (2021) analyses longing, ruin, and connection in *Death Stranding* from a cultural-theoretical perspective. Based on the fact that there has been insufficient academic examination of antagonists in digital games (especially with a comparable approach or focus) in terms of their importance in this medium, and furthermore because *Death Stranding* has been poorly researched as a digital game by an influential player in the industry that creates cross-format and unconventional works (Higgin, 2010, p.252; Papale & François, 2019, p.20), it is particularly suitable for addressing this research gap.

Additionally, the cultural hybridity characteristic of Kojima's work can be emphasized. *Death Stranding* blends Japanese narrative sensibilities – such as relationality, liminality and cyclical transformation – with Western cinematic conventions, Hollywood casting practices and the iconography of American post-apocalyptic fiction. This hybrid structure informs the game's world-building and character design, including the presentation of its antagonists, and situates the title within a cross-cultural media landscape.

While existing scholarship has examined *Death Stranding* from thematic, socio-cultural and ideological perspectives, antagonists have not yet been analysed as structuring agents of narrative-ludic complexity. This article addresses this gap by examining the antagonist Higgs as a focal point where narration, gameplay and symbolism converge.

3. METHODOLOGY: CUTSCENES, GAMEPLAY, CHARACTER ANALYSIS

The complex narrative of *Death Stranding* is strongly reflected within the game's character concepts, especially those of the main antagonists Higgs Monaghan,

Clifford Unger and Amelie Strand. Given the scope of this article, Higgs Monaghan is examined as a case study, as he most clearly exemplifies how *Death Stranding* organises narrative, ludic and symbolic complexity through its antagonists. The analysis of this antagonist is guided by the questions of how he is represented in *Death Stranding* and what meanings are attributed to him. To capture the complexity and multifaceted portrayal of the antagonist Higgs, three dimensions are considered: the cutscenes, the gameplay and the character analysis. Higgs Monaghan is analysed as a representative example to operationalise the framework, with potential transferability to other antagonists or narrative-driven titles.

First, a film analysis is conducted to study the cutscenes in which Higgs appears, foregrounding the game's cinematic staging. This is especially appropriate since *Death Stranding* falls into the category of a film-like game as described by Letourneur (2016, pp.174-175). The analysis follows established film and television approaches (describe, analyse, interpret, evaluate) that can be transferred to game cutscenes (Eichner, 2017, p.526; Mikos, 2015, p.74). Faulstich (2013), Hicketier (2012) and Mikos (2015) suggest an individual combination of different approaches, which should help to cover the research material in as versatile a way as possible, but at the same time remain tailored to the specific research interest (Faulstich, 2013, p.28; Hicketier, 2012, p.31; Mikos, 2015, pp.41-42). Accordingly, the study first summarises the game's plot (Mikos, 2015, p.45) and then examines aesthetic aspects such as camera work, lighting, editing, set design, sound and music (Mikos, 2015, p.181). Boss fights and other interactive sequences related to antagonists are examined using Eichner's (2017) video game analysis. Here, the focus lies on the relationship between game world, player character, player agency and audiovisual design (Eichner, 2017, p.526).

The findings from film and video game analysis are then incorporated and supplemented through the figure analysis according to Eder (2014). This author's approach lends itself as a basis because both authors who have dealt with characters in film and television analysis (Hicketier, 2012, p.124; Mikos, 2015, pp.156-157) and in video game analysis (Schröter, 2021, pp.147-151; Schröter & Thon, 2014, p.43) have repeatedly used this as a starting or reference point. Eder's approach seeks to link interdisciplinary approaches and create a systematic basis for character analysis (Eder, 2014, p.14). He presents a basic model for the practical application of analysis, the so-called "clock of the figure" (Eder, 2014, p.131). From this model three dimensions are chosen which encompass different foci of analysis: the figure as a fictional being, artifact and symbol. While looking at the figure as a fictional being and as an artifact are particularly significant to creators when producing a medium, interpretations of the work often focus on symbolism and how it fits into a thematic framework (Eder, 2014, p.722). These methodological approaches treat narration, gameplay and character analysis not as rigid categories, but as interrelated dimensions that intersect throughout the analysis. (Eder, 2014, pp.712-713; Eichner, 2017, p.526; Mikos, 2015, pp.41-42; Schröter, 2018, p.112). Follow-

ing Eder's suggestion, the discussion starts from the most striking features of Higgs and then relates them to the other analytical aspects (Eder, 2014, p.712).

Before turning to the analysis of the antagonist, it is useful to briefly outline the narrative premise of *Death Stranding* in order to situate Higgs's role within the overall structure of the game. The narrative of *Death Stranding* centers on Sam Porter Bridges, a courier operating in a post-apocalyptic United States where cities and communities have become physically and socially isolated. Sam's task is to reconnect these fragmented settlements through the Chiral Network, enabling communication, cooperation, and the rebuilding of society. His efforts are opposed by Higgs Monaghan, a charismatic terrorist whose nihilistic worldview leads him to accelerate the coming "Last Stranding," an extinction event threatening all life. This conflict structures the game's thematic tension between connection and isolation, repair and destruction, hope and fatalism. Understanding this premise clarifies the stakes of Higgs's antagonistic role within both the narrative and the gameplay and contextualises the subsequent analysis.

4. ANALYSING THE ANTAGONIST CONCEPT IN DEATH STRANDING BASED ON THE FIGURE OF HIGGS

Death Stranding starts with a textual insertion of Kobo Abe's *Nawa*, in which the stick and rope symbolise humanity's tools for distancing danger and drawing value closer. The player takes on the role of Sam Porter Bridges, who must rebuild a fragmented post-apocalyptic America and rescue Amelie Strand from the terrorist leader Higgs. Clifford Unger also opposes Sam in several "War Zones", only to be revealed as his father. Throughout the game, Sam forms fragile connections that push back against isolation, while Amelie's final revelation as the Extinction Entity reframes the entire conflict as a struggle over humanity's continuation.

4.1 CUTSCENES

Higgs is mostly shown in medium and close-up shots, which emphasise gestures, posture and menace over emotional intimacy. However, this changes shortly before the final confrontation, when Higgs appears without his mask, in tears, and framed in an intimate close-up (Mikos, 2015, pp.186–188). This abrupt vulnerability contrasts sharply with his otherwise theatrical presentation.

There are further close-ups when Higgs violates Sam's or Fragile's physical space, licking their faces and staring directly into the camera – a fourth-wall intrusion that positions the player as the true target of his intimidation (Kojima, 2019). Many shots track around Sam because Higgs frequently teleports or circles him. One key moment precedes the Titan BT fight: Amelie embraces Sam, the camera shifts, and Higgs suddenly replaces her. The visual deception hints at their hidden connection and subtly foreshadows Amelie's dual role. A similar camera trick occurs in front of Sam's mirror, where a shift masks the transition from Sam's reflection to Higgs' masked face.

Creatures summoned by Higgs bear a golden faceplate echoing his skull mask, visually signalling allegiance. His appearances are underscored by sombre choral music, reinforcing his quasi-religious authority. Overall, the cutscenes frame Higgs as a performative, meta-aware antagonist who oscillates between intimidation, spectacle, and flashes of emotional instability.

4.2 GAMEPLAY

There are two types of confrontations with Higgs. The first three are boss fights against BT creatures he summons – a squid, a lion, and finally a humanoid titan. The player fights using anti-BT weapons powered by Sam's blood, risking anaemia through overuse. These encounters combine resource management with spatial navigation across tar-flooded arenas.

In online mode, a white BT (representing another player) throws items to help Sam, reinforcing *Death Stranding's* theme of indirect cooperation. The BTs attempt to knock Sam down, destroy platforms, or devour him, which results in an instant voidout. The lion fight is unique: NPCs warn Sam he may flee instead of battling. If the player escapes far enough, the BT disappears. This introduces an unusual narrative-ludic option: retreat as a legitimate form of victory.

Higgs personally participates in the Titan fight, positioning himself beneath the BT's ribs or on its arm. Sam can deal extra damage by targeting Higgs and Amelie fused into the creature – a hybridisation of narrative revelation and mechanics. The second category of confrontation is against Higgs directly, on Amelie's beach. The arena contains tar pools that slow movement, cryptobiotics for healing, and floating whales. The fight unfolds in three escalating phases. In this final phase, both characters gradually weaken; their tar-covered faces and staggering movements emphasise exhaustion. Higgs can choke Sam or drain stamina with a "hug," while Sam can block or counter. The camera freely pivots between them, sometimes placing Higgs closer to the player than Sam – breaking typical protagonist-centred framing and equalising both figures.

Short transitional cutscenes depict attacks in slow motion, including Higgs biting off Sam's ear. Whereas *Mortal Kombat* presents violence as spectacle (Budziszewski, 2012), *Death Stranding* frames it as disturbing and emotionally weighty, subverting genre expectations. The choreography also echoes the final fistfight in *Metal Gear Solid 4* (Kojima, 2008), reinforcing Kojima's intertextual self-references and players' expectations. Additional interactive sequences involve Higgs disguised as a Bridges employee delivering a nuclear bomb to Sam, which must be disposed of quickly. Side quests further expand his presence: under the alias "Peter Englert," he sends Sam five emails requesting pizza deliveries. After revealing his identity, his bunker becomes accessible, rewarding the player with trophies and holograms. These missions embed humour and misdirection into Higgs' characterisation while maintaining narrative stakes.

The game's treatment of agency is closely tied to these encounters. Rather than relying on branching narrative choices, *Death Stranding* negotiates agency

through moment-to-moment decision-making, risk management and the possibility of failure. The player's missteps – through miscalculated routes, damaged cargo or defeat in encounters – are not merely mechanical penalties but expressive elements that shape the experience of antagonistic pressure. Higgs thus becomes a focal point through which the game articulates its understanding of agency, consequence and persistence.

4.3 CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Higgs Monaghan is played and voiced by Troy Baker, a well-known figure in the games industry (IMDb, 2021). His backstory, revealed through journal entries, includes childhood abuse, the discovery of his DOOMS powers after killing his uncle in self-defence, and a period working as a messenger. His self-consciously performative villainy not only marks him as a narrative antagonist but also positions him as a figure who embodies and exposes the tropes of boss-design and antagonistic spectacle in contemporary games. His fascination with ancient Egypt informs his later adoption of the golden mask. Meeting Amelie leads him to nihilism: upon learning of her Extinction Entity status, he chooses to accelerate humanity's end.

His god complex is central to his identity. He calls himself a “particle of god,” possesses DOOMS level 7, teleports, manipulates timefall, and summons BTs. The biblical vocabulary of his diary (“Sodom”, “Gomorrhah”) frames him as a self-appointed judge of humanity. Higgs' makeup – black eyeliner, removed eyebrows, red formulas across his forehead – and his frequent black tears create an aesthetic of ritualistic decay. His gestures expansively and repeatedly break the fourth wall (“Let the game resume!”), openly signalling awareness of his role as a “boss.”

His golden mask appears independently in several scenes, floating or teleporting. The Cheshire Cat-like grin connects him to visual metaphors used to explain the Higgs field in particle physics (Lantsman & Pervushin, 2002). The pseudonym “Peter Englert” references physicists Peter Higgs and François Englert (Hauschild, 2018).

Higgs' dramatic, vulgar speech (“motherfucker!”) contrasts with his Shakespearean email prose and literary references (e.g., *Macbeth*), revealing his contradictions. Although Sam and Higgs share similar tools (Odradek, BB-Pod), functions (porters), and conditions (repatriates), they embody opposite world-views: Sam as connection, life, resistance, Higgs as isolation, death, fatalism. Their relationship is ambivalent. Higgs both torments and courts Sam, opens his bunker to him, and obsessively tracks his routes with maps and photos. This obsession blurs the line between rivalry and dependency.

Symbolically, Higgs represents fragility, mask-wearing, performative power, and the instability of identity – traits mirrored by the metaphor of the Higgs boson, which appears and decays at the moment of creation. Heartman associates him with the “King Midas” myth, suggesting destructive greed beneath

the gold. Higgs often warns Sam, "Careful, contents are fragile," adding, "Like the world...and me." The beach fight's environment – broken packages, the world-split bomb icon – visually reinforces this fragility.

Ultimately, Higgs' god complex collapses when Amelie withdraws her power, reducing him to a powerless, ageing man lying in tar. Fragile confronts him with his true weakness: "You're already broken." His repeated insistence on honesty, paired with his refusal to lie even when deceiving Sam, crystallises his symbolic role: Higgs embodies the fragile truth beneath apocalyptic spectacle.

These interpretive layers are also reflected in the game's player-community reception, where Higgs is frequently discussed as a deliberately exaggerated, genre-savvy villain whose theatricality foregrounds *Death Stranding's* self-reflexive stance. Community readings frequently highlight the tension between his menacing narrative role and his overtly performative behaviour, reinforcing the idea that his character functions not only within the fiction but as commentary on broader conventions of villain design in contemporary games.

5. CONCLUSION

Video games such as *Death Stranding* require an interdisciplinary analytical approach that integrates film analysis and game analysis. This is necessary because film-like cutscenes and ludic interactions jointly construct meaning, especially in works that merge cinematic and interactive design. To analyse *Death Stranding*, the antagonist relationship was examined through an integrated analysis of narration, gameplay and character design, using Higgs as the central case.

The three introduced areas of narration, gameplay, and character analysis often overlap and should be flexibly combined depending on the game's design. This is especially necessary in *Death Stranding*, where narration and gameplay intertwine, as in other narrative-driven Indie or "Triple-I" titles. Due to the focus on the antagonist relationship the production context – Kojima's auteur position, large-scale independence and connection to game history – remains an important but separate analytical dimension.

The game's meta-references to genre conventions and gaming history underline its self-reflexive stance and invite players to interpret its symbols beyond narrative-ludic functions. Reception of the game benefits from literacy in gaming traditions, yet an antagonist-centred lens already exposes key thematic structures. Overall, *Death Stranding* demonstrates how antagonists can function as analytical anchors for understanding narrative complexity in hybrid film-game works.

Future work could apply this antagonist-centered framework to additional narrative-driven titles – such as the *Metal Gear Solid* series or *The Last of Us* – to examine how antagonist design shapes storytelling across different genres and production contexts. This would allow for a broader assessment of the framework's analytical potential.

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Ritual Elements in Souls Games

Liminality and Communitas in *Elden Ring*

All games are defined by a set of rules which in practice allow the playing of any number of matches. Ritual, which is also ‘played’, is on the other hand, like a favoured instance of a game [...].

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1966, p. 30.

ABSTRACT

This paper explores how *Elden Ring* and the broader FromSoftware Souls series integrate both cohesive and competitive elements to create a unique gaming experience. By employing a qualitative close reading of game mechanics and aesthetics through the lens of procedural rhetoric, this paper analyzes the game’s design, narrative, and social dynamics. I argue that *Elden Ring* stands at the intersection of entertainment and ritualistic experience, embodying both liminal and liminoid characteristics as defined by the anthropological theories by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner. The Souls games experience bridges the tension between unifying ritual and disjunctive competition, offering players a space for both personal mastery and communal cohesion. Drawing on ritual and game theory, this study demonstrates how the combat process, aesthetics, the cooperative multiplayer system, and challenging mechanics foster an ambivalent experience that both involves a return to balance and drives for transformation.

1. THE CORE AND MYSTERY OF SOULS GAMES

Over the last fifteen years, it is challenging to name a subgenre of video games that has generated an aura of mystery, a devout community, a significant impact on the industry and extensive scholarly discourse comparable to those of Souls games. The “Souls franchise” developed by FromSoftware under the direction of Hidetaka Miyazaki can be counted as cult classics and, at the same time, thought-provoking gaming experiences. The rise of the distinct and influential Soulslike video game subgenre – originating with *Demon’s Souls* (2009), crystallized by *Dark Souls* (2011) and extended with *Elden Ring* (2022) – has reshaped expectations of interactive storytelling, challenge and world design, to expand beyond their original authors. These games are defined by harsh difficulty, cryptic narratives, interconnected environments, and a melancholic

grandeur. Scholars have examined their mechanics, psychological impacts, cultural resonances, and communal dimensions, thus revealing Souls games as complex cultural artifacts worthy of serious study. The following review summarizes the main academic perspectives on Souls games before proposing a new analytical lens based on anthropology and performance studies.

Souls games have at their foundation a deliberate, demanding design. Tibor Guzsvinecz (2023) demonstrates a strong correlation between core mechanics – high-stakes combat, stamina-based action, extra penalties on death, and non-linear world design – and player engagement. His follow-up study (2024) coins “Soulsification” to describe how these mechanics have been adopted across genres and to underscore their robustness.

Soulsring (portmanteau word used to refer to both the *Dark Souls* series and *Elden Ring*) storytelling rejects linearity in favor of environmental cues, item descriptions, and ambiguous dialogue. Marco Caracciolo (2024) argues that this fragmented approach transforms players into active interpreters through the act of piecing together lore from scattered clues. Crucially, this interpretive labor is communal: online forums and wikis become collaborative spaces where players construct meaning together through hermeneutic articulation. Complementing this focus on collective interpretation, Dom Ford (2024) proposes “mytholudics,” a framework that treats the series as modern myth, identifying recurring patterns – desire and purpose, godhood and divinity, fire and dark – and casting Souls communities as folkloric storytellers who collectively sustain and elaborate a shared mythic core.

Cameron Kunzelman (2020) discusses how aesthetic modulations and accompanying game design ideas are used to generate subjectivity. Aesthetic categories such as Soulsborn (i.e. Soulslike) profoundly influence not only our understanding of narrative and game design elements, but also the players’ experiences and attitudes toward work and productivity. The constant emphasis on personal improvement, trial and error, and repeated effort within these games mirrors neoliberal ideals that value individual action and meritocracy. Daniel Dooghan (2025) expands on this approach by interpreting the economies and cycles of *Dark Souls* as allegories of capitalist accumulation and hard work: players can conquer the game’s challenges, which symbolizes capital’s rewards for diligent labor. Van Nuen (2016) states that the game employs post-Panoptic gameplay, blending continuous surveillance with playful exhibitionism. This creates a hybrid experience of both subjectification and empowerment for players. The notoriously difficult game world forces commitment and perseverance, and the multiplayer system acts as a metaphor for digital surveillance. The narrative’s opacity thus enables polysemy; mythic, economic, and existential readings coexist, inviting players to unearth, debate, and collectively author the story.

Contrary to assumptions of masochism, Souls games can foster positive psychological outcomes through structured adversity. Petralito et al. (2017) show that fair, learnable challenges transform death into motivation, yielding

mastery, game flow, and satisfaction. Andreas Theodorou (2020) deepens this aspect by linking death to narrative themes – cycles of decay, existential futility – making it integral to the game’s mythos. Most strikingly, Väkevä et al. (2025) found that players with depression draw therapeutic metaphors from *Dark Souls*, such as perseverance against despair, resisting “hollowness,” and achieving small, meaningful victories. The games thus offer not just stimulating challenges, but also emotional scaffolding and community support.

Souls games engage profound psychological and philosophical themes. Jamie Madigan (2020) emphasizes that these games can encourage players to adopt a growth mindset to persevere and even learn from negative feedback. In the worlds of Souls, failure can be a lever. Fabrizio Matarese (2025) frames *Dark Souls* gameplay as a Stoic exercise: players learn to manage negative emotions, focus on what can be controlled, and cultivate fortitude amid chaos. The implied player is one who embodies patience, discipline, and wisdom. Daniel Illger (2021) explores dialectical tensions between life and death, presence and void, suggesting that the game blurs these binaries to evoke a lifelike death – a cyclical state that permeates the world and player identity. These interpretations reveal Souls as spaces for ethical reflection and existential inquiry.

The meaning of Souls’ worlds is shaped by cultural and communal contexts. Pan et al. (2024) examine the player’s multicultural responses, by identifying different focal points and emotional expressions in the specific readings of each culture. The interplay between global artifact and situated interpretation ensures that the games remain open-ended, dynamic, and globally resonant.

Immersion in Souls’ worlds stems from meticulous environmental design. Andrea Andiloro (2022) analyzes how *Dark Souls* creates “placeness” – a sense that game locations are meaningful, lived-in spaces – through lighting, sound, architecture, and recurring motifs (“refrains”). This atmospheric depth transforms the player journey into emotional and narrative experience, where each area tells its own story of ruin and grandeur.

Daniel Vella (2015) identifies a core paradox: mastery in *Dark Souls* depends on mystery. The ludic sublime – which arises from the impossibility of fully understanding the game system underlying the diegetic world – fuels curiosity and constant engagement. Timothy Welsh (2020) expands on this concept, emphasizing the cyclical nature and influence of the community in “remastering”: the abundance of paratexts, guides and tutorials can transform the experience from sublime to efficient. Dom Ford (2020), considers the aesthetic impact of giantness in *Dark Souls* – colossal architecture, towering bosses, and oppressive scale – which evokes awe and insignificance, thereby reinforcing themes of struggle, inadequacy and the sublime.

Recent scholarship examines how *Elden Ring* (2022) refines the formula. Mateusz Felczak (2025) critiques the “git gud” ethos, arguing that the game offers flexible paths – Spirit Ashes, open-world exploration, build diversity – that broaden accessibility without diluting challenge. Rendle & Pasternack (2025)

examine its subversion of “heroic nostalgia”: the fallen-from-grace, exiled figure of the Tarnished is no triumphant savior but a fractured figure in a world of faded glory, offering a melancholic, morally ambiguous take on fantasy. These studies confirm the genre’s capacity for innovation and critical reflection.

Overall, the literature reveals that Souls games are multifaceted experiences that intertwine mechanics, narrative, psychology, and culture. In light of their multi-layered complexity, it would be interesting to examine Souls games through a new analytical lens based on anthropology and performance studies. Drawing on van Gennep’s and Turner’s works, the anthropological framework that I employ illustrates how the player’s journey through these hostile worlds evokes archetypal processes of transformation and incorporates elements of rituality. Van Gennep’s rites of passage (2019) – separation, liminality, incorporation – offer such a lens. Victor Turner’s concept of *communitas* (1995) – the egalitarian bonds formed in liminal spaces – mirrors Souls co-op and community lore-building.

Furthermore, this framework captures both the transformative and balancing aspects of the experience, by placing it in the performative context and exploring *Elden Ring* (and more generally the Souls series games) as poised between Turner’s principles of ‘liminality’ and ‘liminoid’. By these terms, the scholar referred to two different transitional phases with anthropological and performative meanings; in my opinion, both concepts contribute to shaping *Elden Ring*’s game experience as characterized by the double aspects of cohesion and competitiveness.

In sum, Souls games are more than entertainment with a twist of pain; they can be ritualized spaces where players confront failure, seek meaning, meet acolytes and undergo a transformation before emerging changed. Academic inquiry has illuminated their many dimensions, and the use of an anthropological lens reveals a deeper structure: modern digital experiences that echo ritual elements.

2. THE LINK BETWEEN RITUAL AND PLAY

The relationship between ritual and play can be conceived as a profound structural and functional affinity, a theme developed along a trajectory of 20th-century anthropological and performance theories. Johan Huizinga laid the foundations, positing play not as a banal activity but as a primary cultural matrix from which culture and civilization emerge. Ritual and play share the fundamental characteristics of being conducted within a delimited space-time, of being governed by explicit rules, and of embodying a sense of “otherness” compared to ordinary life (Huizinga 2014).

This premise receives its most influential anthropological articulation from Victor Turner, who identified the liminal phase of ritual – a state of anti-structure “betwixt and between” (1995: 95) – as the fertile ground in which normal social hierarchies dissolve and a profound egalitarian bond is generated. Turner also explicitly linked this liminal state to the domain of play, arguing that ritual

is a form of “serious play,” an activity performed with established rules and profound social consequences, which dissolve the rigid boundary between the sacred and the theatrical. He connects his core themes of liminality and *comunitas* to concepts of “play” and “flow,” a psychological state of deep concentration and absorption.

Turner’s work is central to the models developed by performance scholars like Richard Schechner, whose comparative analysis of ritual and theater demonstrates that both rely on “restored behavior” – living behaviors that have been separated from the performers who enact them and repeated, rehearsed, and reconstructed, thereby solidifying the conceptual link (1989).

A complementary structuralist perspective is offered by Claude Lévi-Strauss, who conceptualizes ritual as a specific, privileged type of game. He contrasts games with rituals, emphasizing their distinct social functions despite shared formal elements like rules. Lévi-Strauss observes that, while conventional games are defined by rules that permit countless variable outcomes, “ritual, which is also ‘played’, is instead like a favoured instance of a game” (1966: 32). This privilege stems from its unique cognitive function, which he illustrates through the metaphor of the bricoleur. Just as a bricoleur creates new structures from the creative recombination of existing materials, ritual operates through bricolage, integrating disparate signs and events into a coherent symbolic order. The fundamental difference lies in their outcomes: games inherently produce disjunctions, clearly establishing winners and losers and thereby focusing on differentiation. Ritual, conversely, aims for synthesis and social cohesion, unifying disparate groups or entities and fostering communal connections.

Games thus appear to have a disjunctive effect: they end in the establishment of a difference between individual players or teams where originally there was no indication of inequality. And at the end of the game they are distinguished into winners and losers. Ritual, on the other hand, is the exact inverse; it conjoins, for it brings about a union [...] (1966: 32).

Lévi-Strauss’s analysis therefore highlights the cognitive processes underlying cultural practices, positioning myths and rituals as games with particular characteristics that incorporate mechanisms essential for shaping and preserving the very structures of human society, a perspective that emphasizes their role in maintaining stability.

3. RITES OF PASSAGE: THE ARCHITECTURE OF TRANSFORMATION

In the anthropological study of ritual and identity transformation, Arnold van Gennep’s seminal book *The Rites of Passage* (2019) remains foundational, structuring ritual processes into three sequential phases: separation, margin, and incorporation. Van Gennep conceptualized the separation phase as a time when individuals abandon their established social roles. The phase of the mar-

gin (liminal) is characterized by a state of ambiguity and dislocation, in which participants are deprived of their previous identities but not yet recognized in a new role. Finally, in the incorporation (post-liminal) stage, individuals reintegrate into society with a renewed status or identity.

This foundational structure extended beyond anthropology to shape comparative mythology, most notably in Joseph Campbell's (2008) *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell adapted van Gennep's outline to frame the hero's journey, defining liminality as a narrative process of becoming – a transitional zone where one is neither one nor the other but in the process of becoming (Larson, 2020: 1363-1364).

Victor Turner built on van Gennep's model emphasizing the fluidity and social ambiguity of the liminal phase. Turner's work popularized the term "liminality", transforming it from a descriptive stage in a ritual process into a powerful analytical concept for understanding a wide range of human experiences. For Turner liminality is not just a transitional state where individuals are betwixt and between, but also a site for the emergence of *communitas* – a transient, egalitarian solidarity among participants who, stripped of hierarchical distinctions, co-create meaning through shared vulnerability. Turner's analysis frames the concept of liminality as a dynamic interaction between structure – the set of social positions, roles, and norms that order everyday life – and anti-structure – characterized by transformative potential and the temporary erosion of social classifications – in which identity and social roles are negotiated in a dynamic manner (1995).

Turner further problematized liminality by distinguishing it from the concept of liminoid, which he associated with modern, non-ritualistic experiences of play and spectacle (1982). While liminality is rooted in traditional, collective rites (e.g., initiation ceremonies) that reinforce and renew the social order, liminoid experiences are characterized by their voluntary, temporary, and often commodified nature. Liminoid states, such as festivals or performative arts, offer participants a sense of liberation from societal constraints without necessarily leading to a permanent transformation of social status. Turner argued that liminoid experiences are "modern" in their detachment from institutionalized ritual, prioritizing entertainment, aesthetic immersion, and personal expression over the symbolic regeneration of social roles. This distinction is pivotal for understanding how digital environments, including video games, mediate liminality and liminoid experiences.

4. LIMINALITY AND LIMINOID IN VIDEO GAMES

This conceptual tension is central to contemporary game studies. Matthew Horrigan (2021) argues that while the overarching gaming session functions as a liminoid event – defined by its voluntary, commercial, and reversible nature – it frequently employs the "signs of the liminal" to create depth. He identifies the "ritual of avatarization" as a process that, though liminoid, facilitates "mo-

ments of similitude” where the boundary between player and avatar temporarily dissolves. This distinction corroborates the dual-layered analysis of Souls games proposed here: the broader experience aligns with the liminoid, yet the fog wall and boss arena function as potent liminal devices that simulate the intense, transformative ambiguity of a traditional rite of passage. This perspective complements Devin Proctor’s (2012) conception of game inhabitation as a rite of passage, wherein the player becomes a liminal entity exploring projective identity betwixt and between worlds. The ritualistic potential is further amplified by what Alison Gazzard and Alan Peacock (2011) term “ritual logic,” wherein the repetitive cycles of failure and mastery enact performative rituals that structure player understanding. Moreover, as Debra Ramsay (2020) observes regarding spatial and temporal ambiguity, games often “smear” the boundaries of reality, a concept vividly realized in the precarious transition across the fog wall in Souls games, signaling a shift from the liminoid play session into a heightened, enclosed liminal arena.

5. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK: A PROCEDURAL READING OF RITUAL

The theoretical division between liminal and liminoid elements informs how play and storytelling function as sites of experimentation and identity change. For the purpose of this discussion, when I refer to “Souls games” I am specifically targeting video games created by FromSoftware, namely *Demon’s Souls*, the *Dark Souls* series, and *Elden Ring*. The commodified nature of Souls games – designed for mass consumption and structured around commercial entertainment – aligns them with liminoid characteristics. However, with their iterative cycles of failure and mastery, combat dynamics and the emergence of an invested community, they resonate with liminal qualities. This tension invites critical inquiry into Souls’ gaming experiences: albeit modern, voluntary, and hedonistic phenomena, they also incorporate ritualistic elements.

The following analysis will explore these themes using *Elden Ring* as a case study, examining how the mechanics, aesthetics, and player communities of the genre negotiate the boundaries between Turner’s liminal and liminoid models to produce both modes of exploration and change in individual identity and social composition through experiences of *communitas*.

To bridge the gap between anthropological theory and game design, this study employs a qualitative close reading of *Elden Ring*, utilizing Ian Bogost’s concept of procedural rhetoric (2007) to interpret how game rules and mechanics persuade players to enact ritualistic behaviors. The selection of gameplay elements for analysis is not arbitrary; rather, it follows a theoretical sampling logic derived directly from van Gennep’s and Turner’s frameworks. Specifically, this analysis isolates three distinct layers of gameplay that structurally correspond to the phases of the ritual process: spatial transitions, performative action and social dynamics.

Regarding spatial transitions, the “wall of fog” and the entrance to the boss arenas are analyzed as *limen* or thresholds, marking the separation from the ordinary world to the sacred arena.

Performative action essentially concerns the combat cycle and boss encounters. These are examined as a liminal phase, characterized by flow, restored behaviors, and testing of the subject.

Finally, social dynamics: multiplayer systems (ghosts, gestures) and the construction of community tradition are analyzed as a manifestation of *communitas*, the egalitarian bond formed through shared experimentation.

By mapping specific characteristics onto these ritual stages, the analysis demonstrates how *Elden Ring* (and Souls games more generally) functions as a ‘ritual machine’ capable of producing transformative experiences within a commercial entertainment product. This approach allows for a systematic analysis of how the game’s procedural rhetoric reinforces the narrative and psychological themes of the liminal stage.

6. BOSS FIGHTS, FLOW AND THE LIMINAL EXPERIENCE

Elden Ring, released in 2022 by FromSoftware and Bandai Namco, is the latest installment in the Souls franchise that has enjoyed massive success with audiences and critics alike, winning numerous awards and selling more than 30 million copies. Directed by Hidetaka Miyazaki with worldbuilding by George R.R. Martin, the game is set in The Lands Between – a name that suggests spatial ambiguity and environmental hybridity – where players embark on a quest exploring a vast open world to repair the Elden Ring and become the Elden Lord. Gameplay involves traversing the world on a steed, exploring dungeons, and battling numerous enemies and terrifying bosses with weapons and magic. Checkpoints, called Sites of Grace, facilitate fast travel and character progression through rune acquisition (which allow players to level up and purchase equipment). The game features an online multiplayer system for cooperative and player-versus-player combat.

It is essential to delineate how the Souls franchise – particularly *Elden Ring* – can be positioned within the framework of anthropology and performance studies. As outlined in the methodological framework, the analysis proceeds from the macro level to the micro. The macro level interprets the entire gaming experience, consisting of various sessions, as a liminoid phase. Beyond this overarching view, I posit a second level of analysis and argue that boss encounters represent heightened liminal moments. The specific study I propose is based on the user experience, audiovisual analysis, and the procedural rhetoric (Bogost 2007) of this phase of the game.

During gaming sessions, the player voluntarily suspends their social identity in the ordinary world – the separation phase – to enter the game’s diegetic universe by embodying an avatar. During the game, the player exists simultaneously on multiple levels: they do not cease to exist as a human being on earth,

but perceive, act, and participate in the reality of the game world. In this sense, the player is a liminal entity, existing betwixt and between two worlds. At the end of the gaming session, the player returns to their ordinary experience and to their conventional social role: this corresponds to the phase of incorporation, in this case without a change of status.

6.1 LIMEN: THE FOG WALL

The transition into a boss arena, often marked by a visually distinct threshold – such as the fog wall – does not feature exclusively in *Elden Ring* but is rather a recurring motif in Souls games. This act of passage is a key moment during gameplay and signals a shift into a heightened state of challenge and psychological vulnerability. The act of “traversing the mist” – as it is alluded to – further reinforces this liminal transition, suggesting a descent into a space outside ordinary reality. The boss arena is actually an enclosed space that can only be exited in two ways: either by defeating the enemy or by losing the avatar’s life. The boss fight, therefore, becomes a ritualistic liminal space, demanding a transformation in the player’s approach and resilience, mirroring the archetypal journey into the unknown. This structural encounter resonates with what Erik Davis describes as the “technological *mundus imaginalis*,” (2004: 244) where player avatars confront “threshold-dwellers”, modern equivalents of the keepers of the gates found in shamanic traditions. Despite the commodified nature of the medium, these boss encounters evoke the mystic peregrinations of myth, suggesting that the spiritual business of overcoming guardians is alive within the architecture of the game.



Figure 1: Image showing the player’s avatar in front of a wall of fog, representing a limen, a threshold.

6.2 COMBAT DYNAMICS AND FLOW STATE

The combat dynamics within *Elden Ring* can be seen as a dance-like performance, where players engage in learned actions honed through practice and repetition. This deeply engaging and codified experience directly fosters a state of flow, as described by Mihály Csíkszentmihályi (1974). Flow, characterized by complete absorption, clear goals, immediate feedback, and a balance of challenge and skill, is particularly prevalent in liminal spaces – transitional periods removed from everyday concerns. Boss fights in *Elden Ring* perfectly embody this liminal setting. Upon entering the arena, the player is immediately confronted with a heightened sense of isolation. The familiar world of exploration and discovery is replaced by a confined, often visually arresting space dedicated solely to the confrontation. The player's usual concerns – exploration, narrative progression, resource management – are momentarily suspended, replaced by the singular focus on survival and victory. This liminal situation creates both a divide between players – between those who lose and those who win – and a sense of communion, the perception of going through the same trying and potentially transformative experience.

The rhythmic routine of defense, evasion, and counterattack becomes an instinctive behavioral pattern acquired through repetition. It is here that the combat system operates as a form of “ritual logic” (Gazzard & Peacock 2011), where the player's engagement relies on the intertextual understanding of genre conventions and the repetitive mastery of mechanics. The fight develops by trying and retrying the actions to be performed until the definitive victory over a boss (which does not always happen on the first attempt, on the contrary). The process of defeating a boss becomes an ever-better ritualized performance, characterized by “restored behavior” – performances that are not spontaneous but are instead deliberate repetitions of previously enacted behaviors – that reflects both individual skill and collective ingenuity (Schechner 1989). In this context, the ritual logic of the game provides the structural framework that allows these strips of behavior to be successfully rearranged and reconstructed by the player. If at the basis of any video game there are actions (Galloway 2006), in the case of Souls the actions are configured as restored behaviors both in the fight with the bosses and in the use of gestures.

6.3 PHANTOMS, GESTURES AND RESTORED BEHAVIOR

Echoes of this restored behavior are also visible in the phantoms of avatars controlled by other players, which can be occasionally glimpsed as they move around the game world, or which can be deliberately rewound and replayed by activating a player's last actions before death by pressing on bloodstains. A loading screen, which explained details about the game and its system, reads the following: “You may occasionally see faint, white phantoms. These are traces of players in other worlds and the actions they recently performed”. Being crucial ways of communicating with the avatars, emotes and gestures have long



Figure 2: Image showing the avatar of the player who is performing the gesture “The Ring”. At the same time a ghost of another player is striking an attack; both are examples of restored behavior.

been integral to MMORPGs for facilitating social roles, cosmetic expression, and coordination. Although they appeared in earlier works, their significance is particularly marked in games like the Souls series due to the limited communication options available within these contexts.

In *Elden Ring*, gestures also interact with gameplay mechanics, unlocking features related to covenants or solving puzzles related to NPC quests.¹ Additionally, they signify community identity through membership symbols and popular memes. In narrative contexts, gestures contribute to rituals and storytelling, gaining symbolic significance due to the absence of voice communication.

Overall, emotes and gestures are crucial for social interaction, gameplay functionality, group identity, and immersive experiences in these games. Gestures can also be considered “restored behaviors” as they are codified performative actions that are repeated countless times. The phenomenology of these gestures is fully in line with Schechner’s definition: “Restored behavior is living behavior treated as a film director treats a strip of film. These strips of behavior can be rearranged or reconstructed; they are independent of the causal systems (social, psychological, technological) that brought them into existence. They have a life of their own” (1989: 35).

7. THE ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY: COMMUNITAS

Elden Ring is a challenging game that discriminates between players: winners and losers, those who finish the game and those who quit halfway, those who love it and those who hate it. The selection creates a hierarchy. Many of the game’s features (Colosseum, PvP, the challenge for the best build) seem

1. The “Ring of Miquella” gesture was also one of the bonus items for those who pre-ordered the Shadow of the Erdtree DLC, released on June 21, 2024.

designed to rank players. This, Turner would say, is the world of structure. Beyond these elements the game also fosters a powerful sense of unity.

The communal experience promoted within the *Elden Ring* community resonates strongly with Victor Turner's concept of *communitas*. Turner posited *communitas* as an intense feeling of social unity and equality, often arising in liminal phases of ritual or transition. The collaborative, real-time co-op mechanics of *Elden Ring*, where players can summon allies to aid in boss battles, directly embody this principle. This shared struggle against formidable adversaries transcends individual skills, promoting a sense of shared vulnerability. The necessity of coordinated strategy and reciprocal assistance cultivates a sensation of equality and shared responsibility, mirroring Turner's description of *communitas* as a state of intense solidarity and existential sharing.

Moreover, the community's active engagement in lore-building constitutes another vital modality of *communitas*. Beyond the game itself, players collaboratively reconstruct the fragmented narrative of the Lands Between. This off-game activity involves piecing together cryptic item descriptions, interpreting ambiguous environmental details, and constructing elaborate theories about the world's history and characters. This shared intellectual endeavor fosters a sense of collective authorship and imaginative participation, while the collaborative construction of meaning reinforces a sense of belonging and collective identity within the *Elden Ring* and Souls community. Both the in-game co-op and the out-of-game lore-building activities, therefore, contribute to shaping a profound sense of *communitas*, thus transforming the player experience into a shared experience of meaning-making and social cohesion. The shared hardship and collective achievement within the community, facilitated by these in-game features, thus cultivate a powerful feeling of belonging and meaning, mirroring the transformative social dynamics inherent in ritualistic gatherings.

8. CONCLUSIONS

Examining *Elden Ring* through anthropological approaches reveals a fascinating duality. From the fog walls of boss arenas, signaling a limen crossing, to the ritualized performances of combat, where gameplay actions become "restored behaviors", *Elden Ring* – and Souls games more generally – actively constructs liminal experiences. The collaborative gameplay and the examination and reconstruction of diegetic tradition evoke a sense of *communitas* reminiscent of a structured ritual.

However, to fully understand the complexity of this ludic experience, we must also acknowledge its limitations. The game's inherent commodification, its design geared toward mass consumption, fun and entertainment, undeniably align it with liminoid characteristics. Structured progression, defined goals, and the inherent competition for success – the "git gud" ethos, the pursuit of the "best" build and PvP dynamics – contribute to creating a structure designed to differentiate players and foster a sense of hierarchy. This intrinsic structure,

driven by market forces and the players' desire for validation, positions *Elden Ring* as a product of a consumerist culture that seeks to categorize and classify.

This tension between liminal and liminoid elements echoes the insights of Claude Lévi-Strauss, who stated that while rituals unite what was previously separate, games inherently produce disjunction, establishing winners and losers, defining boundaries and hierarchies (1966: 30–33). Competitive games intrinsically embody this disjunctive quality. Souls games actively create a space for differentiation, rewarding skill and perseverance while punishing failure. However, its *communitas* aspect, by contrast, aims for synthesis and cohesion, unifying disparate groups and fostering community connections. In Turner's words, these games are both structure and *communitas*.

Ultimately, playing *Elden Ring*, and Souls games more generally, is an experience that transcends simple categorizations. Although commercial games, they also retain a trace of the transformative potential of ritual – albeit contextualized in modern liminoid experiences that shift consciousness more than social status. The game's uniqueness lies in its ability to seamlessly integrate these opposing forces, creating an immersive experience that deeply resonates with human psychology. *Elden Ring* offers a compelling case study – a testament to the power of games to not only entertain but also facilitate psychological transformations and social communion, bridging the gap between leisure and mystery in the digital age.

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The study of the players' pixel aesthetics in design-driven practices

ABSTRACT

Players' characters are set in an aesthetic look that appears on popular platforms and in strategy and role-playing games. MapleStory players, who have an artist's eye for their iconic characters, are immersed in this, delving into the customized, pixelated gaming world. Each character, with its pixels, conveys the developer's creative idea for setting up detailed character artwork for players. Interviewing pixel art fans can help décor, art, and game psychology researchers discover why players' brains and emotions can not stop playing 2D scrolling platform games. This research provides insight into how players pay attention to the gameroom with pixelated items inspired by computers. Computer graphics engineers can print amazing images to guide players in decorating their gameroom. We examine what game design is and how it is fairly difficult, and to amuse myself in Super Mario Bros. The originality and our contribution are to discuss the mechanics-dynamics-aesthetics framework to study game designs that produce players' aesthetic experiences.

1. INTRODUCTION

Playable consoles, controllers, keyboards, computer monitors, game cartridges, polyvinyl chloride figures, and dynamic screens are connected to players and games. Different games require specific consoles, and players can upgrade their game consoles. Players' interiors have spots called man caves in their homes that feature the ultimate male sanctuary (Bliss, 2017). Shelves are where players love to collect lots of assortment of 1.65-inch die-cast characters to play and display. A blocky aesthetic, which means slime cubes, players, and figures in the Minecraft game are pixelated texturing. JADA Minecraft metal figures are packaged in a single unit with a grid format for consistent designs.

In today's modern era, a character with a pixel-style presence is truly an aesthetic value of older games, and this style is popular (Zufri et al., 2022). Super Mario Bros is an art game with a 2D aesthetic of vast side-scrolling, pixel-art worlds. Since it is revolutionary and the game world is a canvas, the aesthetic is successful. The definition of an art game is a worthy aesthetic form, focusing

on ambiguity and interpretation in gaming culture, which places great aesthetic value on interactivity and nonlinearity (Parker, 2013). Players can observe aesthetics in Super Mario Bros. Although most levels present similarities, a high number of free spaces can result in more complex situations than just allowing greater navigation of the stage without too many jumps (Schaa & Barriga, 2024).

Computer graphics researchers explain that nostalgic emotion is stronger for older people, and age plays a key role for the gamer who pursues pixel art style (Bao, 2023). Art, as we have seen, shows that styles have no fixed images. For toy hunters, Super Mario's friends and enemies, Pokémon, and MapleStory's plushies are players' favorite collections. If players have sufficient budgets, buying those may be addictive. The worst is that there is not enough space to display them. Interiors are not mobile, so they present particular problems in terms of display (Lees-Maffei, 2008).

A well-designed interior could make a user feel right (Evans & McCoy, 1998). How to properly display action figures? In a setting, interior environmental psychologists discover that people will leave additional interesting spaces for further continued exploration. Items will attract the occupant's attention. In modeling a house, the builder knows how many items and the scale of items are consistent with the interior (Hobbs, 2013). What are an interior designer's perspectives on creating a gameroom? This brings pixel art makers' know-how about what kinds of items are users' game assets.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 PIXEL ART MAKER

Game expert's design-based gameroom is a classification to define who is the designer, pixel art maker, or pixel art fan. In a pixelated room, it all reflects the player's style. Pixel art Tetris is a special game with rhythmic gameplay to create a visually appealing experience. The original, classic, and early console versions of Tetris are 8-bit retro-styled block graphics. Gundam game enthusiasts also use pixel art in Gundam games and pixel Gundam posters. The gameroom displays the core pixelated nature of the aesthetic.

Consistent color and item display are elegant and have a visual cohesion because of a put-together appearance. Players who love yellow should arrange cartoon and animated characters with yellow color, such as Pac-Man, Veteran of Among Us, SpongeBob, Pikachu, and Adventure Time's Jack the Dog. In line with the researcher's discussion of color and design, this is how objects and spaces can fit the living environment (DeLong & Martinson, 2013).

Personal computer players and console players use different furniture and game products. Practically, a gaming lounge chair is suitable for console players; a gaming desk with a shelf or sofa is good for personal computer and notebook players. IKEA's pixelated, simple, authentic, and aesthetic gameroom (See Figure 1).



Figure 1: IKEA's pixelated gameroom



Figure 2: Cool, aesthetic, and retro gameroom

2.2 PIXEL ART FANS

Pixel art fans' gameroom features pixel characters and monsters. What kind of wall art is for the platform player? What types of games do players prefer? Inside the game, the pixel characters and monsters are cute with gender, in different colors, and are alive. Players understand that normal monsters are more manageable than tutorial monsters. Interestingly, higher-level players are willing to challenge to quest for higher-level monsters. Collecting drops of monsters, such as ancient coins, jewelry, magic stones, flaming feathers, and strange treasures in MapleStory, is a game mechanic used to reward players.

Being a Sonic the Hedgehog fan, mascots in the room are essential. SAN-EI's plush toys of Amy, Tails, Knuckles, and Sonic, which are of different heights, should be displayed together. Kirby is a pink, spherical character with red feet. Kirby's fans will decorate their room with Kirby action figures and model kits. To DIY a Kirby room is to make the room look very pink.

Beyond the realm of gaming, examination of case studies and notable projects is applied design, where pixel art has found its way into graphic design (Surabhi, 2022). To interpret pixels in a retro gameroom, entities include arcade machines, space shuttle toys, flags, and decorations. A girl's aesthetic principle in this visual outlet is to use magenta to show attractiveness and color schemes to make the gameroom a cool aesthetic (See Figure 2).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research is to investigate how MapleStory is the highest design aspect of games that players in the imaginary world experience via aesthetics. In which the player inputs in-game dynamics, and the dynamics emerge from the mechanics, so that players can take rule in the game. Past results demonstrate that game aesthetics significantly influence players' willingness to engage with games and their recommendations of these games to others (Mai et al., 2025).

We explore an interesting intersection between pixel art in games and interior design practices. The topic is engaging and nostalgic. We further confirm how the game MapleStory affects players in oscillating require ability that buffs in the unexpected dynamic between light and dark states, unaffected by attack reflection. A design-driven practice for understanding games from a methodological lens is to explore design-led thinking in games and how knowledge is generated in games research and practice, due to games needing to be practically self-evident (Pinto Neves & Zagalo, 2021).

MapleStory is considered a top design-based game with its iconic 2D side-scrolling pixel art and unique cutesy aesthetic that has kept it popular for over 20 years. Mechanics-Dynamics-Aesthetics (MDA) is a formal, comprehensive framework to clarify and strengthen the understanding of the player, encouraging experience-driven emotions like surprise, fear, and anticipation (Hunicke et al., 2013). Consequently, we use the MDA framework as a tool to understand how players experience the aesthetics of different games (See Figure 3).



Figure 3: MDA approach in game analysis from designer (blue) and player (green) perspectives

4. THREE CATEGORIES OF PIXEL-ART GAMES: PLATFORM, STRATEGY, FIGHTING, AND ROLE-PLAYING

The platform genre is focused on players hopping and bopping through adventures (Bertoli, 2017). In the Mario universe, game excitements are the factor that keeps players stick to this game. Players want to hit specific blocks to get

a super mushroom to grow, a fire flower to launch projectile attacks, and the Starman to gain invincibility. The player represents Super Mario, the most important protagonist, who has three lives in each level. As stated by players' opinions to play Super Mario Bros, they move pixels about a screen to solve pretend problems, and those moments stay with players as meaningful story-telling mediums (Allen, 2018). Players navigate through various worlds to save the princess and protect the mushroom kingdom.

From the phenomenon of what determines aesthetic sensibilities in platform games, there is an artistic medium in the whole game. If we did not use graphic design to explain the game character's actions, Mario's jump and fall from different heights would be a visual athletic effect. The player's technique for high jumping in Super Mario Bros is to hold the A button longer. How to make a game character look dynamic and have a striking visual? The game's physics explains that Mario's jumping high in the air has a formula to calculate Mario's acceleration.

Interface design is important for players who like or dislike playing video games. Graphic design is a method used to measure players' aesthetic sense in games. Good graphic design is essential for player retention and engagement, while poor graphics often lead to negative experiences (Okur et al., 2024). The aesthetic of Super Mario Bros is characterized by limited color palettes, bold, rounded, and playful lettering for logos. Players have to choose between one or two-player modes. The Nintendo classic Super Mario Bros is shown on the game screen, where the font is pixel-based (See Figure 4).

The player will perceive that the strategy game is designed with frantic and addictive gameplay. Strategy games are aesthetic and highly popular because the genre is fast-paced action with casual strategy, and requires keeping an eye on the game's items. Crazy Arcade is one of the funniest South Korean on-line multiplayer games, with an aesthetically animated landscape with trees and plants. These nostalgic gaming experiences are the player planting water



Figure 4: Super Mario Bros pixel image



Figure 5; Crazy Arcade game in village screen



Figure 6: Mega Man's color design

balloons that blow up, and the opponent can get stuck in them and die. In the game mode, perceived higher competence to control the game is an explanation for why players love this game.

The game designer's job is to create things in the sense of art and to design the model, or design a game's idea, in the making of fun stuff (McClellan, 2018). More importantly, Crazy Arcade's explosion is designed both vertically and horizontally. Players can reach each other through different paths and place bombs. The top-down grid-based visual style in Crazy Arcade is a distinct tileset (See Figure 5).

Color is important in games, and mint green is a wellness color for Mega Man to maintain his health. Players care about Mega Man's score at the top of the screen and focus on his health gauge on the left. In Mega Man, amazing is reflected in the game character's custom colors. Mega Man's blue is particular and has a nuanced color setting according to the 64 color hues. To understand Mega Man's blue color in variations, on the did-you-know gaming website, players will be amazed that Mega Man's color is limited by the Nintendo Entertainment System. That is, Mega Man's colors are awesome, and it is worth noting that aesthetic in-game design is important because game characters must be clear for players to control them.

Mega Man has been nostalgic among gamers and has been reimagined and evolved. The meaning of the nostalgia game is to make nostalgia attract a new generation of players, and old gaming consoles and arcade machines have been revitalised by gaming companies (Makai, 2018). CAPCOM's image for Mega Man uses a slightly dark blue and a light blue. Mint green in Mega Man shows that the game-level scene is an aesthetic technique (See Figure 6).

MapleStory's visual is reflected in design, such as the yellow ribbon pig inside the small forest, the red snail right outside Henesys, and the iron boar in the



Figure 7: Players' pixelated characters of MapleStory

subway transfer area. In players' experience when playing MapleStory, they love the gorgeous game audiovisual effects and the character's spiky hair. Experts can create a personal avatar name and customize their character to shape self-identity. This is because avatar identification is a bridging factor between avatar customization and social behavior in the virtual world (Takano & Taka, 2022).

An epic, adventurous, and action-packed game style is MapleStory. MapleStory is a successful game that has over 100 million players worldwide. What supports players continuing to play MapleStory? By handling cognitive load better, MapleStory remains challenging, fun, and more manageable for players, especially beginners (Ang et al., 2007). Self-determination theory posits that the causal elements of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are essential in massively multiplayer online games to bring people from around the world together to interact in a real-time game world (Etchells, 2019).

MapleStory's developers deliver experiences in discovering friends, discovering who you are, and discovering worlds that players have never seen, such as Ludibrium, where players feel fantastic, magical, and fairytale, driving players crazy through engaging gameplay. Thereby, the game will foster positive experiences.

MapleStory's mushroom has different colors in the expression design. When players get to a higher level, they will see cynical orange mushrooms and crying blue mushrooms. MapleStory is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) in which players in the virtual world can transform into pixelated avatars of their characters with iconic two-dimensional charms (See Figure 7).

5. VIDEO GAME FAN'S MATERIAL CULTURE VALUE

Different colors of Game Boy consoles and MapleStory character cards are rare gaming items and collections. Rare game figure toys are never outdated, and



Figure 8: Rockman World 4 cartridge cover art



Figure 9: Edge Home's pixel-styled canvas wall art

they can add value. People who like Mega Man have been collecting a McDonald's Rockman EXE warrior figure toy that was released in 2005. For Mega Man fans, they possess Mega Man's background knowledge that the original Japanese name is Rockman.

5.1 GAME CARTRIDGES AND PRINTING

The Rockman World 4 cartridge has its bright green color, and it looks fresh like the green apple's color. Collecting Game Boy Rockman cartridges symbolizes why the Rockman game is reminiscent. Yet beyond collections of game cartridges, preserving large portions of old games' files, disks, or cartridges and knowing how to preserve them to make them run is crucial (Barton, 2024). Looking at the printing of red color on the cartridge, Rush is Rockman's faithful and robotic dog, and has a red helmet which is identical to Rockman's helmet. Rockman World 4 was released in 1993 CAPCOM cartridge (See Figure 8).

5.2 CHARACTERS CANVAS AND POSTER

Decorating the artistic items on the walls depends on the player's gaming taste. Canvas for furniture, artwork, and accessories to make a statement that maintains a sense of harmony and balance for users (Enwin et al., 2023). To increase material culture value, Bomberman players must love Nexon's Crazy Arcade game components that hang a poster of eight default playable characters in Crazy Arcade. The poster is a rare good for players to arouse their involvement memories when they get the Crazy Arcade poster at a game show.

Standard colors are the main aesthetic of a superhero's color. Red and yellow were used for Iron Man, green and purple were Hulk's primary colors. The pixel-styled superhero characters' canvas wall painting is suitable for hanging in Marvel lovers' gameroom (See Figure 9).

6. RESULTS

Our results examine what and how we know about the terribly designed Super Mario Bros based on empirical research results. Scientific reports about Super Mario Bros is the childlike wonder induced by the game, which provides a joyful experience that acts as a therapeutic escape from daily pressures. In fact, players' psychological capital in Super Mario Bros is the game's adversity and quintessential that requires precise inputs and punishes the player when making mistakes (Mercier & Lubart, 2023).

Mega Man's design is not like Super Mario Bros because Mega Man's weapon system and the gameplay loop are deeper and more strategic. The game goal of Super Mario Bros is to move from left to right to reach the flagpole at the end of each level. Platform game design on motion is an element that players will give up on the game or spend more time to pass each level (Anthropy, 2012).

6.1 OBSTACLES

Defeating difficult obstacles in games brings a profound sense of achievement because it validates player dedication, skill, and persistence after numerous attempts. Overcoming the emotional burden of failure to achieve success requires persistence, and it is used to test players' endurance of difficulty (Hefkaluk et al., 2024). Specific results to understand why humans play behavior in video games is to ensure Maslow's hierarchy of needs when obtaining safety needs and health (Nguyen & Bavelier, 2023). Based on the desire-satisfaction theory, it can explain why players care about winning at games because doing so would be a valuable achievement (Baron-Schmitt, 2023).

6.2 FATIGUE

Super Mario Bros fast-paced action and precision, which can be mentally exhausting. The competence to play Super Mario Bros is the player's physical competence in terms of jumping, timing, and agility (Gandolfi & Semprebene, 2015). The player will lose a life whenever he fails to reach the flagpole, either because he is killed or because he runs out of time (Demaine et al., 2016). Moreover, the time limit increases a layer of stress, forcing players to act quickly rather than methodically, which increases the likelihood of errors. The game mechanic allowed Mario to die and lives repeat; the failure to cause Mario's death for the player will be erased (Lahdenperä, 2018).

6.3 FRUSTRATION

Super Mario Bros forces quick reflexes and unforgiving design, including unexpected enemy patterns and instant-death hazards that lead to frustration. For well-versed players, it is also sometimes difficult to remember and control between the direction pad and character movement, causing the player's in-game death (Newman, 2018). It is possible that Mario does straight-up fall into what

seems to be an infinite void. Hammer bros are Koopas, and they are dangerous when they throw hammers at the player.

Analyzing cognitive nucleus level in Super Mario Bros, the easier method to defeat enemies or overcome obstacles is launching a small fireball (Sedig et al., 2017). Touching an enemy from the side or bottom results in Mario's damage, shrinking, or dying instantly if he is small. Game over is terrible for players if they die on 3-4; they start at 3-1. Super Mario Bros is considered the ultimate platform hell and Nintendo is hard due to its difficulty.

To win, players often rely on extreme patience, memorization, and mastery of Mario's movement mechanics, as many of these stages are designed to kill players several times before they learn the pattern. For a player, formulating a complete set of heuristic rules is challenging since game content is observable but less explainable and hard to abstract (Shi & Chen, 2017).

7. CONCLUSION

Video games and computer engineering have evolved into a dynamic medium, art, design, science, and marketing techniques used together, transformed into a meta (Okur & Aygenc, 2018). Specifically, games are valuable in many ways, and we can find art in them (Jancsovcics, 2021). Supporting adults playing a loss and nostalgia video game does not mean that what we are doing is childish and meaningless. Our research implication is for those interested in game psychology, video game values, and game aesthetics. We discuss the enduring thrive of pixel art across different game genres and its transition from digital screens to physical environments.

These days, older game fans who stay at home spend more time playing classic nostalgia games. MapleStory's game cards, bright yellow-green slime plush toys, poster prints, and game skill books are wonderful collections for those who love these classic games. Our research sheds light on why pixel art games remain immensely popular, driven by a blend of nostalgia, distinct artistic charm, and practical development advantages. Today's video game characters look better because they have higher resolutions.

Recently, players prefer to play smaller nostalgic Tamagotchi game which are small egg-shaped portable digital virtual pet video games that were first released in 1996. Playing handheld video games became popular when there was increasing busyness at work, giving players not much time to play computer games or home video game consoles at home. Playing several times a day became a desire. Lightweight game machines for players that are easy to store and suitable for travel and outdoor activities. The suggestion for nostalgic and enjoying early design gaming experiences is to play the Digimon virtual pet digital monster game from 1997.

Disclosure statement: No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding: The author declares that she has received no funding for this work.

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Exon | Delusion of Equilibrium

A case study about the creation of a hybrid community

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the formation of hybrid communities starting from a genealogy of the World Wide Web as a social space and a place of emergence of net art. The research introduces theoretical frameworks to support communities by integrating classical concepts such as that of *communitas* (Victor Turner), going so far as to explain how they have been used to design and describe the social structures of online spaces. We then focus on observing and defining the dynamics that describe virtual communities (vitality, temporariness, and collective identity). The investigation begins with the following research question: how do game dynamics and aesthetic choices guide storytelling and perceptual transformation within a multiplayer environment? To answer this question, the text examines the case study *EXON – Delusion of Equilibrium*, a multiplayer environment designed by us on the Roblox platform. Through a Research-through-Design (RtD) approach, the videogame is used as an experimental device to apply concepts of ritual and control. Data collection, conducted qualitatively during physical events and online sessions, illustrates how aesthetic transition and cooperative mechanics dictate the game's identity. The results confirm that EXON acts as a sociological laboratory that fosters observation and the creation of hybrid communities, capable of questioning the boundaries between individuality and collectivity.

PART 1 UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY**1.1 HISTORICAL OVERVIEW**

Between 1994 and 1999, net.art emerged as a network's native artistic practice, with personalities like Vuk Ćosić, Alexei Shulgin, Jodi.org, Olia Lialina, and 0100101110101101.org, who explored the web as a democratic and participatory medium.

A mimetic art form that took on the meaning of an online détournement from the very beginning; a subversive and critical use of the tools of the in-

ternet, which explored its peculiarities, such as immediacy and immateriality (Greene, 2004).

It should be remembered that as early as the second half of the 1990s, actual “rules” of net.art had been formulated, later known as the movement’s manifesto. The centrality of the rhizomatic approach emerged: it was one of the founding principles of net.art and later favored the birth of platforms and initiatives in which production and distribution coincided. An emblematic example is represented by *äda 'web* (1994–1998), a pioneering project by Benjamin Weil and conceived as a true experimental laboratory. The platform was structured according to the logic of the network, becoming a territory of discussion and networked sociality, where the notion of belonging was reshaped.

In continuity with the cultural context, the premises of a more fluid and porous democracy were outlined in these virtual squares, influencing many of the subsequent initiatives.

1.2 COMMUNITY: RITUALS, THRESHOLDS AND BELONGING

It is in the context of progressive dematerialization of gathering places that the idea of cyberspace takes shape as a theoretical and symbolic domain. What are communities today?

Definitions tend to simplify the complexity of the concept of community, while still offering a useful starting point for theoretical elaboration. In the sociological field, the term generally refers to a group of individuals united by a sense of solidarity, a shared identity, and forms of social interdependence, supported by transitory bonds of cohesion. This perspective can be combined with the notion of collective effervescence (Durkheim, 1912), according to which group cohesion emerges as a result of the emotional involvement of individuals and the consequent sharing of collective rituals.

Excluding the sociological dimension, anthropology with Victor Turner has provided further tools for understanding the processual properties of communities: the concept of liminality emerges as a state of transition and ambiguity, in which individuals temporarily suspend their social status (Turner, 1969, 1977). This creates *communitas*, a condition of equality and reciprocity in which ordinary hierarchies are temporarily canceled.

Antistructure and constitutive suspension therefore become both symptoms of change and manifestations of the dynamic process of communities. A similar perspective is highlighted by American sociologist Randall Collins and *interaction ritual chains*, made up of symbols, shared languages and repeated gestures, which generate emotional energy: they foster cohesion and motivate individuals to maintain participation in the group (Collins, 2004). Cohesion and a sense of belonging to the group emerge most if a combination of ritual ingredients also include bodily co-presence, symbolic barriers towards strangers, mutual caring and the sharing of the same state of mind.

Although community has traditionally been considered an experience rooted in geographical proximity, thanks to the digitalization of social contexts, it has become necessary to extend canonical definitions to online communities. The theoretical framework is further articulated by having to distinguish between real, virtual and imagined communities. If the real *communitas* is a momentary and situated aggregation, the imagined community (Anderson, 1983) is a symbolic construction in which members perceive themselves as part of the same collective body, even without maintaining direct relations.

In the digital age, such tensions manifest themselves in dematerialized forms of *communitas*, in which the boundaries between internal and external, as well as between structure and performative event, are continuously negotiated (Simons, 2018). This dynamic, however, becomes fully readable only when placed within the broader historical process. It is not surprising that with the emergence of early Web technologies, the very structure of sociality, based on the availability of access to the Internet, expanded. As sociologists Barry Wellman (2001) and Manuel Castells (1996; 2001) observe, the transformation introduced by digital technologies marks the transition from of group-based societies (Wellman, 2001), to more fluid configurations, typical of network society and “*space of flows*”¹ (Castells, 1996; 2001). The notion of community enters a phase of redefinition: distributed collectivities take shape, supported by computer-mediated communication practices.

1.3 THE ESTABLISHMENT OF ONLINE COMMUNITIES

A structured definition describes online communities as “[...] a group of people who come together for a purpose, online, and who are governed by norms and policies and supported by software” (de Souza, Preece, 2004), also identifying weaker, intermittent, or situated interactive configurations in the term. From this perspective, vitality, temporality, and collective identity constitute three fundamental parameters through which to guide theoretical research.

The activity of an internet community is configured as a set of heterogeneous participatory rhythms (scanned by micro-interactions such as comments, posts, micro-events and discursive practices) of which Ilja Simons (2018) demonstrates its cohesion, capable of activating specific patterns between online and offline presence, in order to sustain the vitality of the group over time. Consequently, community survival depends less on uninterrupted member participation and more on the density and intensity of exchanges (Masson, Parmentier, 2023). Communication fuels word-of-mouth intention (Al-Khasawneh et al., 2023), making active intervention a form of performative identity.

The community does not constitute a stable structure but an autopoietic process, which is simultaneously configured as a place of aggregation and as a space of symbolic production. The group negotiates its own norms, updates its references and consolidates the symbolic boundaries that distinguish “inside” from “outside”. The vitality of a community is therefore measured by the de-

1. Space of flows, according to Castells, indicates a form of social organization based on digital flows of information, people, and capital, which contrasts with space of places, based on physical proximity.

gree of participation and the communicative rhythm that sustains its existence. Temporality plays a decisive role in this sense: the way interactions are distributed, concentrated, or thinned out becomes the metric through which the collective's cohesion, stability, or progressive dispersion can be assessed.

As highlighted by the community psychology scholar, “*understanding community*” (Cobigo, 2016) is a cognitive-affective phenomenon based on the sharing of values and meanings, rather than on instrumental objectives. Cohesion does not come from the stability of bonds, but from the continuous negotiation of meaning and the perception of reciprocity. As it shows, many digital communities originate from pre-existing collectives that migrate online, while others emerge directly online. These communities founded on digital connectivity produce tangible effects on behavior and social relationships, configuring themselves as “*hybrid realities*” capable of influencing psychological, social and political dimensions (Oksanen et al., 2024).

To better understand identity progression within online communities, designer and theorist Amy Jo Kim identifies five fundamental categories: visitors (observers), novices (participants), regulars (continuously participating), leaders (group moderators), and finally elders (custodians of norms and collective memory) (Kim, 2006). According to the author, participation is not immediate, but a movement through which each member shifts from a marginal to a central position, as they become familiar with the internal language. In conclusion, online communities can be described as dynamic and liminal spaces, within which the boundaries between individual and collective, real and digital, presence and absence are constantly negotiated. Their function is not simply to gather, but to activate discursive flows, to create circulations. They are not a static form, but a relational medium: an environment that allows the construction of common meanings.

1.4 ROBLOX AS A SOCIAL PLATFORM

In light of the theoretical framework outlined in the previous paragraphs, Roblox can be interpreted as an emblematic case of online communities. As a user-generated content digital platform, Roblox allows users to design, share, and inhabit interactive virtual worlds. It is configured as a socio-technical ecosystem in which the playful and social dimensions are deeply intertwined; more precisely, it is composed of a multiplicity of gaming experiences (created by users themselves through *Roblox Studio* software) and a persistent network of avatar-mediated relationships. Access to the platform involves a thresholding process: the user creates an avatar, chooses a visual identity, enters environments managed by implicit and explicit norms, and participates in the previously analyzed interaction micro-rituals. These practices are forms of interaction ritual chains (Collins), through which shared emotional energy is generated and a sense of belonging is consolidated. Even in the absence of physical co-presence, the reiteration of internal gestures, languages and codes

produces temporary *communitas* configurations, often linked to specific experiences or game groups.

Furthermore, Roblox's participatory structure highlights the identity journey described by Amy Jo Kim, where advancement is not rigidly hierarchical, but linked to active participation and the ability to contribute to community life.

Lastly, the platform is located in a hybrid dimension: relationships built online can extend beyond the digital context, generating offline meetings, events, and collaborations. Roblox is therefore not just a playful environment, but a social infrastructure that enables the emergence of distributed communities, supported by technologically mediated communication practices and characterized by continuously negotiated symbolic boundaries. Within this framework, our experience of producing *EXON - Delusion of Equilibrium* fits as a case study located within an ecosystem already predisposed to community formation. The platform constitutes a socio-technical device where it is possible to observe how dynamics of ritualization, belonging, and symbolic production are activated around a shared playful experience, generating forms of aggregation that cross and tension the boundary between online and offline. Therefore, *EXON - Delusion of Equilibrium* transcends the limits of the definition of a video game product and is configured for us as a *Research-through-Design (RtD)* device oriented towards the analysis of the dynamics of *communitas* in digital environments.

2. PART 2 EXON - DELUSION OF EQUILIBRIUM

2.1 PLANNING AND METHOD

This paper examines the concept of *designed experience*: this expression refers to those forms of experience that are intentionally designed to generate certain cognitive, emotional, or behavioral effects. In the context of studies on digital interfaces and interactive media, various authors have shown how teachers, designers or artists model experiential environments to produce learning, engagement or perceptual transformations depending on the project objectives². In light of previously presented theoretical research on understanding communities and dematerialized forms of *communitas* (Simons, 2018), it clearly emerges how hybrid digital environments (Oksanen et al., 2024) produce cohesion through the continuous negotiation of meanings and practices. In this sense, *EXON - Delusion of Equilibrium* is shaped as a liminal space between video game and installation, in which the experience does not aim solely at entertainment, but stimulates critical reflections on community, belonging, ritual, and control.

In support of the idea of integrating complex cultural and social systems within video games, our research group incorporated practices, imaginaries, and social dynamics recognizable to players. Analyzing how and why these elements were implemented into the game is essential, both for understanding player immersion and for observing the relationships between the video game medium and contemporary culture. Ian Bogost, academic and videogame

2. James Paul Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, pp 49–50.

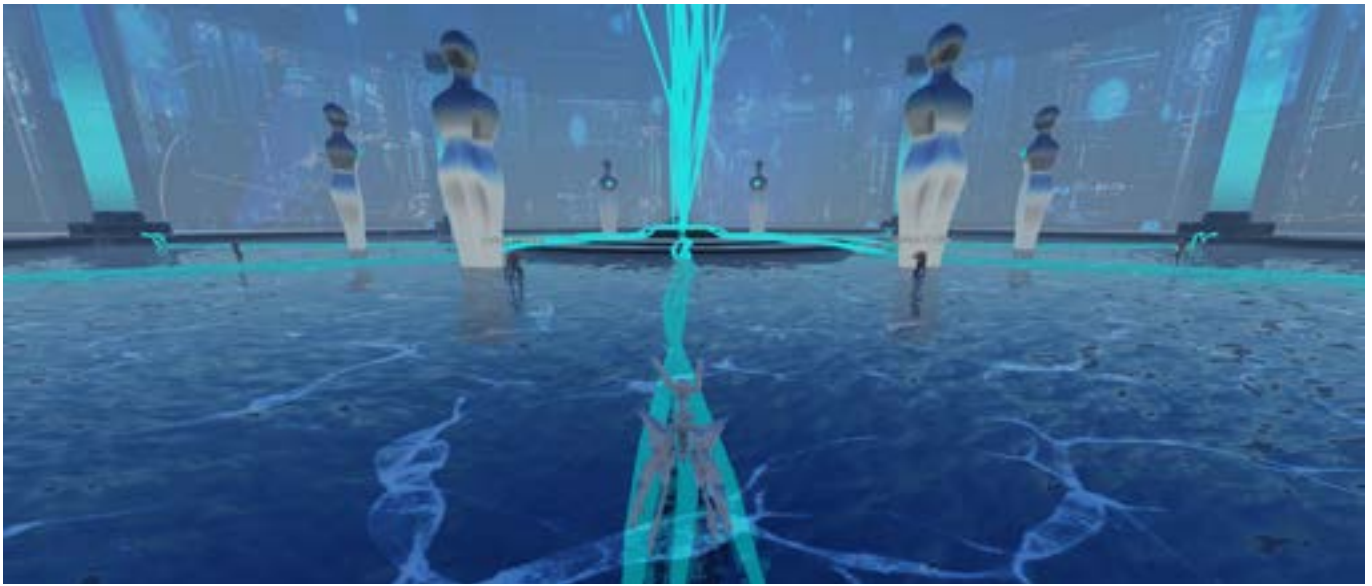


Figure 1: Screenshot from Exon | Delusion of equilibrium

designer, in *Persuasive Games*. *The expressive power of Videogames* introduces the concept of Procedural Rhetoric, namely: “*The art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions, rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures*” (Bogost, 2007). The player’s attitude is not influenced by language, but by other forms of meaning such as game dynamics.

Speaking of *EXON*, the community dimension is not a simple “content”, but a device of power and surveillance (Foucault, 1975) that influences the way in which players act, interpret and insert themselves into the game world.

By integrating community elements at the level of rules, narrative, or emerging practices, the case study enhances player engagement and strengthens their sense of belonging. It follows that a game can reflect, rework, or transform shared ideas of contemporary culture, in turn becoming a place of production of new forms of sociality and meaning (Jenkins, 2007; Juul, 2005).

From a phenomenological perspective, community dynamics are made up of norms, shared myths, implicit ethics, participation rituals, collective experiences, and material forms of representation (Taylor, 2009).

In *EXON*, these theoretical assumptions guide a complex and progressive workflow, which leads from conceptual research and dramaturgy to concept design, three-dimensional development, and gameplay implementation. Each phase, from sound design to multiplayer testing, to the installation design, presents the project also as a methodological approach. It is placed both in continuity with the practices of net.art in which production, distribution and use tended to coincide, and with the notion of digital environment understood as a relational medium, capable of activating participatory practices, rituals and forms of belonging that can be traced back to the dematerialized *communitas* and liminal processes specific to online communities.

2.1.1 WORKFLOW MANAGEMENT

In the first phase, the workflow was organized through collaborative modules aimed at coordinating the group's activities. The work began with a brainstorming activity, during which visual and textual references were selected to help define the aesthetic and narrative identity of the project. This phase also allowed us to establish a common direction, preventing formal and technical choices from developing disjunctly. From the very beginning, the construction of the narrative universe and that of aesthetics were interspersed; the lore and iconography development was not separated from the visual research, but had the same formal ground choices. The aesthetic configuration of *EXON - Delusion of Equilibrium* reinforces this coherence: the visual language is based on the simplification of both human and nature to their structural forms. Bodies are not completely biological, natural elements do not appear spontaneous. Roots and cables blur; the emitted light traces linear paths similar to LED circuits; branch-like shapes expand like neural networks and plant organisms.

Starting from this imagery, the workflow developed as a process of progressive translation: from writing to concept, from concept to modeling, from modeling to interaction. Each stage did not replace the previous one, but it tested it. Narrative choices were verified in the spatial setting; spatial solutions, in turn, required textual or symbolic adjustments. Meanwhile, 3D modeling had to maintain consistency with this conceptual structure. The environments were not constructed as simple walkable scenarios, but as spaces that suggested directions, hierarchies, and points of convergence. The geometries within the cult are more controlled and rigid, in fact the branched elements are contained within precise structures, strengthening the idea of an organized and non-spontaneous system. The interface and transparencies also fit this logic: clean surfaces, cool lights, and directional lines help define an optimized environment, where each element appears to respond to a higher order. Sound design, integrated into subsequent phases, further consolidated this perception, building a ritual atmosphere consistent with the visual and spatial dimensions.

2.1.2 AESTHETICS AS GAMEPLAY INFLUENCE

EXON - Delusion of Equilibrium's setting displays various elements, at times presenting different aesthetics, reflecting different moments within the narrative. There is a tangible division between the spaces inside the cult and the final one, which the player discovers after finally getting out. The interior environments take a lot of inspiration from cyberpunk aesthetics or hybridizations between nature, man and technology, where however the latter plays a role that prevails over the rest.³

Starting from the novice's body, none of its characteristics appear to be typically related to a human body. Every organic element, from food, to plants, but also the light that illuminates spaces, has nothing natural in its origin: it reflects an extremely aseptic, clean and ultra-advanced appearance. Inside the cult, nutri-

3. A crucial role in the aesthetic influence was the fiction of Gibson, Dick and Adams for the cyberpunk culture and cybernetic gaze of the '80s. Other dominant influences have been Braidotti and Haraway's posthuman and cyborg philosophies, as an ideology of a hybrid coexistence between bodies in the world (Braidotti, 2004; Haraway 1985).



Figure 2: Screenshot from the game: (a) Narration Codex; (b) Omnidata Refectory; (c) Hybrid Forest; (d) detail of Hybrid Forest

tion is based on synthesized meals, the body is artificially implemented with techniques similar to those used in cyborg production, and the spiritual element is justified by the presence of a computer god. Standardization in the characterization of avatars follows cultist dynamics, as upon accessing the sect one's identity is significantly influenced, even going so far as to cancel oneself out. The color palette used in this setting has a strong prevalence of cool colors, often amplified by neon effects that make surfaces shine, occasionally alternating with some shade of yellow, used mainly to bring attention to a specific object. The strong use of transparencies and clean interfaces contributes in giving a futuristic and minimalist appearance to the space. The game's aesthetic changes rapidly as you exit the cult: you find yourself in the heart of a lush forest, with trees and plants stretching as far as the eye can see, large butterflies fluttering in the sky, and streams crisscrossing the meadow. Technology has not disappeared, but has integrated perfectly with the landscape, contributing to a more idyllic overall vision.

Solar punk features were key references for the development of the final room: the colors are vibrant and the technological objects barely stand out from their organic counterparts.

There is a strong techno-magical component, given by the presence of stones with runic carvings and the not entirely realistic appearance of some natural elements, such as mushrooms that shine an unnatural blue.

We found valuable inspiration from video games like *Death Stranding* and *Horizon Zero Dawn* in terms of fusion between technology and nature; for the human-machine implementation it was immediately connected to artists like Marcel-Li Antúnez Roca, whose research focuses on the dialogue between the body and mechatronic devices.

EXON - Delusion of Equilibrium also builds environments that guide the player towards forms of understanding that are never explicitly stated, but emerge from interaction; it offers a rich but non-didactic context: the player learns by doing, exploring, and reacting, not receiving.

The design of the rooms fully follows the path that the user takes to exit the cult.



Figure 3 (left top): Photo from Brera Open Day (29.03.2025). Credit: Luca Carlevarino

Figure 4 (right): Photo from Brera Open Class (July - August 2025). Credit: Rossetta Preziosa Bocchino

Figure 5 (left bottom): Photo from Milano Digital Week 2025 (04.10.2025). Credit: Lauryn Stella Sardella

2.2 DATA COLLECTION

The data comes from three main sources:

1. direct observation during institutional events (*Brera Open Day*, *Brera Open Class*, *Milano Digital Week*);
2. immediate detection by filling out a participant form;
3. monitoring playtime over months of activity.

Data collection was conducted with a qualitative and exploratory approach, favoring dialogue and sharing participants' impressions rather than a rigidly structured format. Experience monitoring was based on multiple levels of observation: direct observation during institutional events such as Open Day, Open Class, and Digital Week allowed us to capture spontaneous behaviors and dynamics. The team immediately completed individual forms, including information on age, session duration, outcome, and qualitative notes. Tracking playtime

over months allowed observations to be integrated into a broader overall picture, making it possible to analyze both immediate and long-term interactions.

In the form filled during the events (Table 1) it emerges that the participants showed a surprising demographic variety: this is a sign that *EXON - Delusion of Equilibrium* does not attract a monocultural community, but heterogeneous groups that find in the game a shared form of aesthetic curiosity. Parameters include: age, session duration, reason for discontinuation or completion, main impression, and qualitative observations of the caregiver.

This data allowed us to distinguish behavioral patterns based on age: children proved to be more exploratory and motivated, adults were more reflective but easily disoriented (Fig. 6).

It was also observed that those who received information about the plot or meaning of the game's development were more motivated to continue the game, compared to those who did not express a desire to receive an explanation.⁴ Children and young people immediately recognized Roblox's platform from the interface, and this increased their motivation.

Table 1: Extract of observation sheets for Digital Week from Participant 1 to 10

Participant	Age	Session duration	Outcome	Reason of discontinuation or completion	Main impression	Observer notes
P01	8	28	Completed with assistance	Curiosity and desire to finish everything. Helped by the staff..	"I want to see the forest at the end"	Very enthusiastic, often asks for help, recognizes the Roblox interface.
P02	43	12	Discontinued	Struggling with commands	"I find the technological cult interesting, but I have trouble navigating the space"	He asked about the meaning of the "technological cult".
P03	20	17	Discontinued	Lack of time	"I enjoyed both the environment and the music"	Interested in technical development rather than gameplay.
P04	10	30	Discontinued	Trouble understanding English (French nationality)	"I wanted to see if I could get out of the walls of all the rooms"	He discovered some bugs that we fixed later.
P05	65	10	Discontinued	Trouble navigating the space. Helped by the staff.	"I liked both the topic and the fact that is a group project"	He observed other players for a long time, then tried briefly.
P06	16	22	Discontinued	Struggling with resolving a task. Helped by the staff.	"I loved the coding"	He asked at length how we split into groups to create the game during the semester.
P07	7	25	Completed with assistance	Helped by parents and staff.	"I liked the fact that it's a multiplayer game"	Father and son played in pairs, the son helped with commands and the father with reading.
P08	50	14	Discontinued	Mostly interested in the aesthetic.	"I enjoyed both the environment and the colors"	They asked how the environments were made.
P09	22	18	Discontinued	Trouble navigating the space.	"I liked the spiritual aspect of it, it really gives the cult vibes"	She asked if the game also talked about the topic of technological control.
P10	11	27	Completed with assistance	Asked for help mid-gameplay to find out how the game evolved.	"Why do the rooms change color?"	He asked what the game was called so he could play it at home on Roblox.

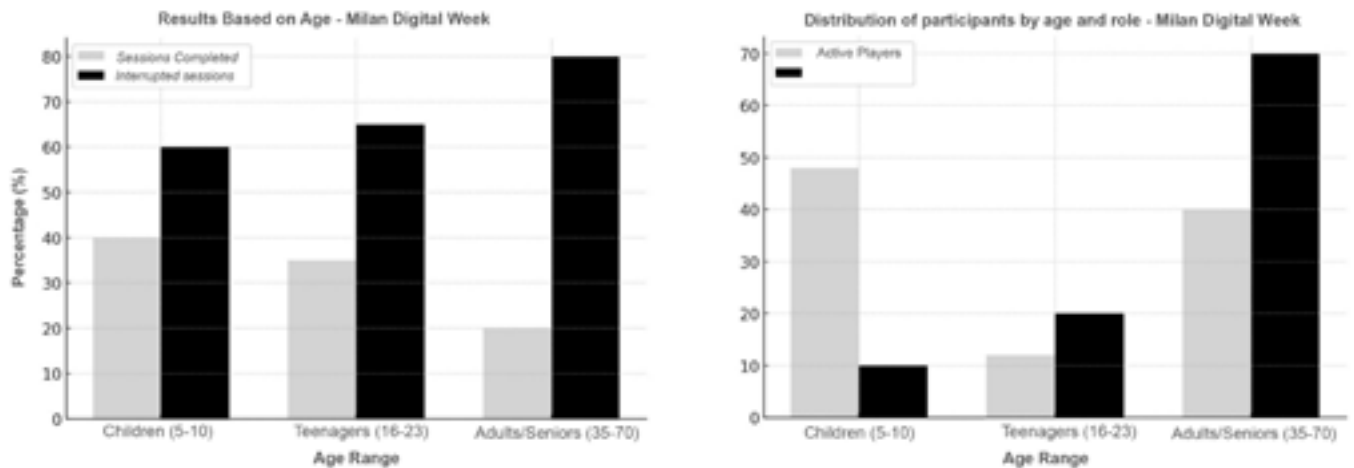


Figure 6: (a) Distribution of participants by age and role. (b) Game outcomes by age group.

The ages recorded show a prevalence of university students and young adults (18–25 years old), but with sporadic presence of more mature groups (up to 40 years old), who interacted mainly out of interest in the installation and conceptual aspect of the project. On a technical level, the events made it possible to detect bugs and minor malfunctions, faulty collisions and other structural defects. Many of these discoveries were not accidental, but deliberate. Younger participants, in particular, were less interested in dialogue or textual narration, but more involved in space exploration. They pushed against walls, searched for out-of-phase collisions, attempted to jump over the perimeter of rooms or out of windows.

Why are errors fascinating?

In real life, it's impossible to cross walls. In a digital space, however, the possibility of failure becomes a hypothesis. The player knows that the world is made by code and it can fail, so attempting to cross a border becomes a form of investigation. Looking for a glitch is not simple disobedience, but research: it is an attempt to locate the limit of the system and understand its architecture.

This behavior is not marginal to the research question. If *EXON - Delusion of Equilibrium* shows a community structured by rules, hierarchies, and ritual synchronization, testing boundaries becomes negotiation of agency. The LED light lines and root-like networks that structure the space visually declare the presence of an underlying system. The player does not inhabit a naturalistic world, but a network. And networks can be mapped, challenged, disrupted.

The experience of Milan Digital Week highlighted how the cooperative structure of the game fosters a group dynamic that reflects the logic of the technological community and shared worship. The circular layout of the stations and the need for collaboration transformed the gameplay into a form

of collective ritual: here the physical network of cables and the light from the monitors became part of the narrative itself. The feeling of loneliness in the crowd mirrors the group dynamics observable even within sects: the strong conformist component of the group attempts to erase the individual identity, observable in the impossibility of personalizing one's avatar. There is a parallel between *EXON*'s gameplay progression: the user initially tackles the different tasks in groups, but later finds himself leaving the cult alone. In the same way, the player is surrounded by people with whom he is not actively interacting. Researcher Katherine Isbister in *How Games Move Us* (Isbister, 2016) observes an increase in emotional engagement in active players, compared to passively watching gameplay. Frequent interruptions, due to waiting or the lack of active players, instead underscore the fragility of digital cooperation: the community exists only if kept alive by constant participation.

A significant percentage of sessions were interrupted due to waiting times or lack of partners. Instead of interpreting it as simple abandonment, this reveals a structural truth: the community in *EXON - Delusion of Equilibrium* is conditioned. It only exists if continuously activated.

Age differences further clarify this dynamic. The younger players showed spatial security, often exploring beyond their intended paths. Their involvement occurred through movement, experimentation and interaction with the limits of space. Adults, on the other hand, often sought explanations before diving. Some hesitated to move for fear of keyboard controls; others preferred to observe. At these times, the game turned into an installation rather than an interactive system.

Not all reactions could be translated in the forms: how to classify a child who teaches his mother how to use the keyboard? How to record a group of teenagers laughing at their inability to move the camera because they had never used Roblox? How to encode the embarrassment of an adult scared by the commands? Some phenomena resist quantification. The most revealing aspect of the experiment may not lie in the completion rates, but in these micro-interactions. Encouragement, imitation, mockery, teaching – all manifestations of community that go beyond numerical registration. During puzzle sequences, nearby players often left the in-game chat and communicated verbally. They spurred each other on, pointed to solutions and explained verbally. Some, however, continued to use digital chat even from neighbors, maintaining the internal logic of the virtual world. This oscillation between digital and physical communication shows how the community adapts to the context and can also be constituted on the basis of mutual knowledge and collaboration (Isbister, 2016). In the same way that in everyday life we learn from the actions and choices of others, in *EXON - Delusion of Equilibrium* a community connection based on cooperation is formed.



Figure 7: Photo from Milano Digital Week 2025 (04.10.2025). Credit: Lauryn Stella Sardella

Table 3: Summary of observational data – Milano Digital Week

Indicator	Valore stimato	Osservazioni
Total number of participants	103	High turnout in relation to the limited time (3 hours).
Average age	27	Strong imbalance towards children and adults, with very few young adults.
Kids	48%	Most active and engaged audience.
Young adults	12%	Marginal presence, but they finished the game at least halfway.
Adults	40%	Mainly companions or spectators.
Average gameplay session (minutes)	22	Some players completed, others left due to a lack of teammates.
Completed sessions	37%	Only part of the groups were able to finish the game due to multiplayer constraints.
Discontinued sessions	63%	Main cause: prolonged waiting or language difficulties.
Players that used in-game chat	56%	Almost all children often communicate with other players.
Players that asked for help	41%	High interaction with the staff, especially for puzzles and navigation.
Non-playing observers	24%	Many child-free adults watched only by asking about the plot, but did not play. Adults with children, on the other hand, try the game together.
Average languages spoken	Italian, English, French, Spanish, Chinese.	Significant presence of foreign tourists and visitors.

3. CONCLUSION

The case study of *EXON - Delusion of Equilibrium* demonstrates how online environments can be built from theoretical frameworks and insights from contemporary visual culture. It also attests that game dynamics and aesthetic choices guide the user’s narrative and perceptual transformation within a multi-player habitat.

If theoretical assumptions describe today's communities as realities that influence the social and psychological spheres of their members, *EXON* confirms itself as a relational ecosystem.

The research described moved through game mechanics, aesthetics, and user perception, concluding that community vitality is related to dynamics of exchange, cooperation, temporality, and persistence.

From the data collected, heterogeneous attendance and interests can be deduced: children (5–10 years old), recognizing the Roblox interface, proved to be the most active and engaged audience, while adults (35–70 years old) expressed their interest in the theoretical starting points, observing the younger players.

In conclusion, the *Research-through-Design (RtD)* project: *EXON - Delusion of Equilibrium*, has transformed the online experience into a collective performance based on a sense of belonging, demonstrating how a digital platform can activate forms of community potentially transferable from one social space to another.

The aim of this contribution is thus answered by observing practices, exchanges, and micro-aggregations that, although born online, have demonstrated the ability to extend beyond the screen, inhabiting reality and configuring *EXON* as a generative device for hybrid communities.

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“True Colours”

Queering Gender, Monstrosity, and Humanity in *Little Nightmares II*

ABSTRACT

This paper conducts a “too-close reading” (Miller, Ruberg) of the indie horror game *Little Nightmares II* (2021) to consider how – through its narrative and formalist aesthetics, as well as surrounding paratext – queer readings of gender and horror linger beneath the surface. Structured around Jan-Noël Thon’s framework (2019) for analysing indie game aesthetics, and informed by literature on abjection (Kristeva), constructions of monstrosity (Halberstam), and queer video game studies (Shaw and Ruberg), this paper investigates: 1) how collaboration-focused mechanics and audiovisual aesthetics afford queer readings of these characters and the gameworld, 2) in what ways normative gender construction can be obscured and disrupted through character design, and 3) in what ways paratext surrounding the *Little Nightmares* series has limited queer readings and reinforced heteronormative interpretations of the game’s implicit narrative.

1. INTRODUCTION

Little Nightmares II (2021) is a puzzle-platform horror game developed by Tarsier Studios and published by Bandai Namco Entertainment. As in the first *Little Nightmares* (2017), you play as a small ‘child’ stuck in the Nowhere: a distorted and sinister world that you quickly discover is “built for others” (Priestman, 2017), namely towering ‘adults’ modelled after archetypal childhood fears (Priestman, 2017). A steely headmistress chases disobedient children down school halls using her endlessly stretching neck (*Little Nightmares II*, 2021), and Twin Chefs feed intruding children to the guests of a cruise liner (*Little Nightmares*, 2017). Gameplay revolves around players using their height to their advantage and finding alternate paths to survive encounters with antagonists in each themed chapter (the Hunter in an old cabin, the Teacher in a school, and so on) (2021).

In the first *Little Nightmares* you play as Six, a small child in a yellow raincoat who must escape from the Maw — the aforementioned cruise liner — before succumbing to the same cannibalistic urges as the guests aboard or turning into their dinner (2017). While according to Tarsier, the first game relied on “hide and seek” mechanics (Takagi, 2021), *Little Nightmares II* — which acts as a

narrative prequel, although they can be played in any order — introduces limited combat mechanics and more complex puzzle sequences. Now you play as Mono, who wakes up in the woods and must venture to the Pale City (2021), where transmissions from a nearby Signal Tower have corrupted the City and its residents. Empty clothes from vanished residents hang through nooses, and the faces of those who remain are contorted into a spiral of flesh as they stare into the nearest screen. Six reappears as a non-playable buddy character, and together Six and Mono must, as stated on the *Little Nightmares II* physical box, “make your way to the dreadful signal tower and escape a world that’s rotten from the inside”.

Such narrative direction remains implicit within the game itself. *Little Nightmares II* has no dialogue or narration, and has sparse pop-ups solely to indicate mechanical controls. The names of characters and environments are only available through paratext such as Bandai Namco’s website or interviews with Tarsier’s developers; Mono, for example, is not named on physical copies of *Little Nightmares II*. Tarsier Studios has stated that, throughout development, they intended to craft a “visual narrative” for both *Little Nightmares* games (Crecente, 2021) and actively considered “the layers that people could dig into” within design decisions (Cork, 2017). And while this has been embraced by players, who have speculated about the ‘meanings’ of both *Little Nightmares* games since launch, there is a staggering amount of queer meaning lying just beneath the surface of *Little Nightmares II*, in both its narrative and formalist elements, which has gone completely unaddressed in players’ searches for ‘meaning’.

Analysing *Little Nightmares II* using queer theory reveals key tensions surrounding constructions of gender and monstrosity which structure the tall/small binary at the root of the series’ horror, and reveals how the game’s ludic aesthetics reflect queer experiences. Yet rather than enabling broad, queer interpretations of *Little Nightmares*, the ambiguity of its narrative has led to a broad reinforcement of normative constructions of gender and monstrosity among players. I will be conducting a close reading of *Little Nightmares II* to showcase the potential for queer interpretation inherent to the game and to consider the limits of Tarsier Studios’ design intentionality in enabling non-normative player interpretations.

2. METHODOLOGY

In “Imagining Queer Game Studies”, Adrienne Shaw and Bonnie Ruberg (2017) explore the disruptive potential of engaging with video games using “queerness as an ethos” (p. x). They describe ‘queering’ – analysing video games through queer theory and queer experiences – as a political approach to video game studies through which we can restructure our interactions with games entirely and challenge “dominant assumptions about how video games should be studied, critiqued, made, and played” (p. x). In *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* (2019), Ruberg asserts that queerness is inherent to video games, as both “make space within structures of power for resistance through play” (1). Analysing games using queer frameworks, Ruberg argues, can “iden-

tify the queerness that already exists within video games, yet often remains just below the surface" (21), especially in games without explicit LGBTQ+ characters. Beyond representations, queerness can also be uncovered in a game's "interactive system [and] their controls" (14).

In this paper I am queering *Little Nightmares II* precisely to unearth the queer lingering just below the surface. I will conduct this analysis using D.A. Miller's methodology of the "too-close viewer" (2013, p. 23), since elaborated on by Bonnie Ruberg (2019), which illuminates queerness through connotation. By looking too close, one hones in on the meaning within narrative and formalist techniques that can be easily dismissed by a lack of proof — by the statement, in Miller's (1990) words, "But isn't it just...?" (p. 118) — but which, in lacking 'proof', open the floodgates to "recruit every signifier of the text" in service of connotative meaning (p. 120). Ruberg (2019) continues that, by being historically "forcibly closeted", queer meaning bubbles up under the surface to explicitly "'irritate' the norm" (p. 57). Without explicit proof or denial, then, connotative queer readings become infinitely "probable" (p. 67).

Through a too-close reading of *Little Nightmares II*, I will hone in on the connotative meaning communicated through formalist aesthetics. I will conduct this reading with reference to the aesthetic categories outlined by Jan-Noël Thon in "Playing with Fear: The Aesthetics of Horror in Recent Indie Games" (2019).¹ Thon expands on work from Jesper Juul and Maria Garda and Pawel Grabarczyk to present three categories through which to analyse games: audiovisual aesthetics (visuals, perspectives, sound design), ludic aesthetics ("possibilities of interaction" and mechanics), and narrative aesthetics (narrators, narrative techniques, and access to "characters' subjectivity") (pp. 197-198). I will pair my textual analysis with paratext — developer interviews, fanwikis, fan discussions, and concept art — to also consider the intentionality of Tarsier's ambiguous depictions of gender.

Despite the resounding popularity of the *Little Nightmares* series — selling 20 million total copies prior to *Little Nightmares III*'s release² — it has been sparsely analysed, even more so through a queer lens. I have chosen to limit my analysis to *Little Nightmares II* as I believe its single-player co-op mechanics and more expansive narrative present a productive starting point for queer analysis (compared to *Little Nightmares 1*'s shorter, single protagonist experience). I aim to unearth alternative forms of meaning left unacknowledged in most interpretations of *Little Nightmares II* and to consider how the potential for queer readings of this implicit narrative have buckled under the weight of heteronormative approaches to play.

3. THE HUNTER: ABJECTION, COLLABORATION, AND INTENTIONALITY

Tarsier Studios describes the *Little Nightmares* series as chronicling children's journeys through a horrifying world (n.d.), and *Little Nightmares II*'s Steam page describes a conflict between "enormous, implacable adults" and Mono and Six, the "little ones" (2021). While a player learns almost immediately that the

1. An indie (independent) video game is, broadly, one "financed independently, published independently, and developed with a high degree of creative independence" (Thon, 2019, p. 197). Tarsier Studios, the development studio behind the *Little Nightmares* franchise, fits comfortably within this definition: the Swedish studio, founded in 2005, has primarily operated as a "work-for-hire studio" on game development for larger publishing companies such as Sony Entertainment (Embracer Group, 2019). Tarsier's first original title was 2017's *Little Nightmares*, which was developed in-house but published by Bandai Namco (Bandai Namco, 2021).

2. This paper will not discuss *Little Nightmares III*, released in October 2025. Bandai Namco owns the *Little Nightmares* IP, and Tarsier Studios was acquired by Embracer Group during the production of *Little Nightmares II* in 2019 (Embracer Group, 2022), meaning that Tarsier Studios could not continue with the IP. The third installment was developed solely by Supermassive Games (*Until Dawn* (2015), *The Quarry* (2022)), and so the development of the third game does not follow in the chronology of the first two, which were produced broadly by the same team.

environment is antagonistic toward Mono and Six, the violence you experience is not rooted in this unspoken divide between adults and children. Rather the sense of scale separating the tiny Mono and Six from the towering Hunter, illustrated by the game's audiovisual and ludic aesthetics, is what generates horror (Tarsier Studios, 2021). The emphasis placed on this unspoken child/adult divide in paratext and fan discussions, despite never being stated in-game, welcomes a too-close reading of what lies beneath and the ways that queerness protrudes through more minute details.

The game begins with the player-as-Mono waking up alone in a forest, with Tarsier's use of a "dollhouse perspective" (Priestman, 2017) emphasising the differences in scale between you and your exaggerated, eerie surroundings. Reeds and wild grass tower above you, and any slight ledge is a tall cliff you must puzzle out to proceed. When dozens of tiny bear traps lie between you and the next platform, you must use enormous abandoned shoes to set them off and clear the path. The game's audiovisual and ludic aesthetics are shaped by a sense of trespassing generated by the palpable differences between the player and the gameworld. When Mono reaches the Hunter's cabin at the edge of the woods, for example, his yard is covered in small cages. Mono's steps are near-inaudible as you inspect the house — but after hearing the heavy footsteps of the Hunter from rooms away, you immediately feel cornered.

These aesthetics indicate that the gameworld is actively antagonistic toward Mono and Six. You are required to navigate it through unconventional means, using paths which, to the Hunter, would seem "illegitimate, closeted, or hidden" (Ruberg, 2019, p. 82) but are vital for Mono and Six's survival. Such aesthetic decisions are brimming with queer potential, a potential reinforced by Tarsier's stated intention to craft a world "so 'other' ... that you feel it in your bones, that it was built for others, and that you simply don't belong there"



Figure 1: Height difference between Mono and Six (circled) and the Hunter ("*Little Nightmares II*")

(Priestman, 2017). Tarsier Studios narrative designer Dave Mervik has stated that the “exaggeration” (2017) of the *Little Nightmares* art style was key to communicating this sense of ‘otherness’ within the gameworld without words. Thus if a ledge is out of reach, you climb through a badger hole; while running from the Hunter, Mono and Six hide in shallow swamp waters that the Hunter would never think to search. These alternatives physically position the player outside of the norm, and they do so through an explicit association with the abject Other: dirt, death, non-human nature, and a turn away from individualism.

This constructed Otherness recalls Julia Kristeva’s work on abjection (1982), where she describes the abject as a “twisted braid of affects and thoughts” perpetually threatening the collapse of the ‘norm’, or the contained, clean, individual, bordered ‘self’ (p. 1). The corpse is abject, as is bodily waste, and so the abject must be – as Barbara Creed (1993) describes in her analysis – “deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self” (p. 11). While assembling a definition of abjection centered around queer studies, Robert Phillips (2014) argues that the abject “renders problematic any assumption regarding the fixity of the borders separating subjects from objects and self from other” (p. 20), and Creed (1993) recognises that monstrosity in film is often “produced at the border which separates those who take up their proper gender roles from those who do not” (p.13). The Hunter engages with Mono and Six, his abject “prey” (Bandai Namco, 2021), through what Creed (1993) describes as the normative cyclical relation with the abject: a continual process of confrontation with and exclusion of the abject, as “that which threatens to destroy life also helps to define life” (p. 11).

The Hunter places miniature traps and cages across the forest in order to catch, kill, and skin his victims — a process through which he reaffirms normative constructions of gender and expels the abject. Yet the Hunter dies by the very tools he uses to expel the abject, and through an explicitly abject act: Mono and Six collaborate as one self to hold up the Hunter’s shotgun and kill



Figure 2: Hand-holding and buddy AI mechanics (SMii7Yplays, 2025)



Figure 3: Mono and Six with hat and raincoat in *Little Nightmares II* concept art (Little Nightmares Wiki, 2021).

him. While the player-as-Six must escape from the Maw alone in *Little Nightmares* (2017), the ludic aesthetics of *Little Nightmares II* are defined by collaboration. This is a dual-protagonist game, described by Max Dyckhoff (2015) as one where a playable character is accompanied by a (mostly) non-playable character who provides aid (431). The player relies on Six at every turn, unable to progress without Six's help in turning cranks, leaping across gaps, and jumping on floorboards until they break. This positions Mono and Six as one "composite" body (Kristeva, 1982, p.4) reliant not on individualism but multiplicity to survive.

Also notable is a mechanic allowing you to hold Six's hand at any point. This is not required for progression, as Six generally follows your path and assists with puzzles after using Mono's 'call' mechanic. It is particularly interesting since Six is a non-playable character: they are not what Creed (1993) calls a "discrete entity" (p. 53) fully separate from Mono, but instead embody Kristeva's (1982) figure of the abject "double" (p. 207). Through their presence, Six continues Mono's existence. Anyone who has played *Little Nightmares I* has also *been* Six before (2017), and so Six is dually separate and composite. To hold hands with Six and find comfort in this choice becomes a queer act, an embrace of the abject through multiplicity.

The queer potential of such ludic aesthetics is enhanced due to Mono and Six's character designs. Six is ambiguously gendered throughout the *Little Nightmares* series; their signature design is a yellow raincoat with a hood covering their face (2017). Though they lack this coat at the beginning of *Little Nightmares II* while held captive by the Hunter, their face is covered by a long black fringe (2021). You unlock the "True Colours" achievement when Six retrieves their coat later in the game — an achievement linked to a phrase describing one's "real nature or character" (Merriam-Webster). On the surface, this references Six's return to their signature design from *Little Nightmares I*. However, it also



Figure 4: Unidentifiable character models in *Little Nightmares II* concept art (Little Nightmares Wiki, 2021).



Figure 5: Mono and Six's faces in *Little Nightmares II* concept art (Little Nightmares Wiki, 2021).

indicates that Six is their most 'real' self when their appearance is hidden, and particularly when they cannot be read through simple gender categorisations.

This idea that Six is themselves when ambiguously gendered has stretched back through the development of both *Little Nightmares* games. Included in the "TV Edition" collector's bundle for *Little Nightmares II* is a book of concept art which showcases the intentional ambiguity of Mono and Six's designs (Winterfalls13, 2025). In action-based concepts, such as Mono and Six escaping the Hunter, the two are depicted only as shadowy figures — yet are always holding hands (see figure 4). Six remains ambiguous in all concept art, with their face turned away and hidden by their hood and hair (Little Nightmares Wiki, 2021).

Mono's face, however, appears in multiple pieces. In one notable piece, Mono and Six sit together on a long metro bench. Mono stares toward the viewer, their pale face fully exposed; while Six also stares straight ahead, they lack any facial components, their head now a clean, featureless sphere (see figure 5). Refusing categorisation from developers or any viewer, Six's "real nature" (Merriam-Webster) is centred around ambiguity and a refusal to be categorised.

Little Nightmares II's ambiguous depictions of gender, and the narrative interpretations they afford, have been mostly overlooked in player interpretations. This is due to one paratextual detail: both Bandai Namco and Tarsier Studios have consistently referred to Mono and Six as a "boy" and "girl" while discussing *Little Nightmares II* (Bandai Namco, 2021; Priestman, 2017). This is despite Tarsier's stated desire to maintain Six's gender ambiguity since before *Little Nightmares*' release. Mervik has stated that he personally chose Six's name early in development because it lacks gendered associations (Cork, 2017), saying, "the most important thing about Six is that she's a kid. It's not about whether she's a girl or a boy". Yet despite hoping that "there's no importance about gender" regarding Six (Cork, 2017), Mervik genders Six in the same sentence.

It is clear that Tarsier Studios intentionally designed the *Little Nightmares* series to be open to broad interpretations — and therefore broad queer readings — yet it is important to move beyond a focus on intentionality due to the issues this moment highlights. Queerness exists in video games independent of developer intentions, and in the case of *Little Nightmares II*, in spite of them. Many heteronormative players on fan forums have insisted on categorising Six and Mono (but especially Six) along binary gendered lines. Their 'proof' is often that "The official site refers to [Six] as a girl and the devs [sic] always use she/her for six [sic]" (Piefihi, 2022), and many have suggested that the fanbase itself cemented the *Little Nightmares* series as 'straight' through their influence on Tarsier Studios: "the fandom kind of adopted her as female so the devs [sic] just went with that" (Piefihi, 2022). One of the few explicitly queer readings of Six on the *Little Nightmares* Reddit page features a nonbinary player cosplaying as Six for pride month, covering their face with an LGBTQ+ flag (_itz_Amy_, 2021). In the replies, multiple players insist that Six is not nonbinary and cite Bandai Namco's website as 'proof' against this reading.

In these moments, the importance of looking *too closely* at *Little Nightmares II* becomes clear. As Ruberg (2019) argues, queering games considered 'straight' is crucial to demonstrate the queer meaning inherent in any gaming experience (p. 1). For *Little Nightmares II* in particular, the game's implicit narrative — one largely debated and speculated about by players — can be uniquely clarified through a queer lens. A queer reading unveils new understandings of the *Little Nightmares* world which heteronormative play has obscured, and so the following section will too-closely read those elements of the Teacher and Six's characters brimming with queer meaning that the limits of intentionality and a reliance on 'proof' have "forcibly closeted" (Ruberg, 2019, p. 57).

4. THE TEACHER AND 'MONSTER' SIX: GENDER AND "SEWING JOBS"

In "Getting Too Close: Portal, 'Anal Rope,' and the Perils of Queer Interpretation", Bonnie Ruberg (2019) conducts a too-close reading of Valve's *Portal* (2007) to indicate "the counterhegemonic potential of getting 'too close' to games" (p. 57). Ruberg queerly reads the game's representations of gender which, as a game considered a "cherished classic" (p. 73), have been rejected by many players. They analyse an "at times overtly erotic" relationship between the player-character and the game's narrator GLaDOS (p. 73), both femmes, and Ruberg concludes their analysis by asserting queer game studies' role to "challenge the hegemony of what is deemed reasonable and comfortable by getting too close for comfort" (p. 83).

Little Nightmares II, similarly to *Portal*, is a "critical darling" (Handrahan, 2021), particularly beloved due to its utilisation of atmospheric horror. The IP has spawned a broader franchise of comic books, mobile games, and a potential TV adaptation (Freeman, 2017; Kit, 2017). Yet such levels of exposure, combined with its implicit narrative, have resulted in paratextual sources being incorporated into the experience of playing both *Little Nightmares* games and therefore influencing readings of their inherent queer potential. Case in point: when a player on the *Little Nightmares II* Steam Community page stated that they saw Mono and Six as "nameless / faceless children" — and considered them both "male" — another player insisted that Six's gender is 'confirmed' by "the [Steam] store description, trading cards" (NoOneYet, 2021). But focusing solely on the game itself reveals abundant queer meaning bubbling beneath the surface. I will now conduct a too-close reading of the character designs of the Teacher and Six, specifically the moments in which their character designs shift, to consider how destabilised gender categories define *Little Nightmares II* as a whole.

The Teacher is the second antagonist of *Little Nightmares II*, an abusive boarding school headmistress who believes that "children should be seen and not heard" (Bandai Namco, 2021). She is modelled after a traditional "strict teacher" in a button-up shirt, long skirt and Mary Jane shoes. Her insulated schooling system lies in stark contrast to the wider Pale City. Outside, the Signal Tower at the heart of the Pale City has left it in ruin. The Thin Man — a long-limbed, normatively masculine figure in a suit and fedora — lives within the Tower's transmission. Using televisions as teleportation tools, he reaches through the screens scattered on every corner to consume the life force of the City's population. At the School, in contrast, there are cubbies for shoes and gendered uniforms for pupils who remain intensely focused on their books in class.

This normative façade crumbles as the player arrives. As you try to pass the school on your way to the Signal Tower, you must retrieve a key for the upper floors by sneaking through a classroom. You use the pupils' desks as cover while the Teacher alternates between writing on the blackboard and staring down at her pupils, searching for bad behaviour. When detected by the Teacher, she reveals her defining characteristic: her endlessly elongating neck, with which she chases after the source of trouble, consumes it, and returns both the school

environment and herself to 'normal'. As Jack Halberstam (1995) describes, the Teacher here engages in a "sewing job" (p. 176) — stitching a skin for herself which obscures 'monstrosity' under an archetype of femininity.

In *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, Halberstam (1995) explores shifting cultural constructions of monstrosity in Gothic novels and films from the nineteenth century to the present day. He traces various historical constructions of monstrosity – from that of a "foreign body" (p. 13) in nineteenth century literature, which embodies all threats to "gender, race, nationality, class, and sexuality" (p. 21), to more contemporary monsters defined by "proximity to humans" and the "inability to 'tell'" – to argue that monsters "always represents the disruption of categories" (23). I will primarily draw from Halberstam's analysis of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* (pp. 138-160) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (pp. 161-177) – in which he explores "inadequately gendered bodies". and the ways skin and surfaces are markers of both gender and humanity (p. 141) – to consider how the Teacher's design and mechanics make strange the possibility of reading gender and even humanity through the skin.

Halberstam (1995), elaborating on Judith Butler's work in *Bodies That Matter*, explores how "inadequately gendered bodies represent the limits of the human" – and how such bodies are identified, and determined to be (in)human or (im)properly gendered, at the level of the skin (p. 141). A core element of horror, he says, is "dismantling the stable relations between representation and reality" (p. 145). "Improper gender", then, which cannot be determined at the level of the skin, makes strange what any representation could mean (p. 165). It arises when the external cannot suggest the internal and so skin-level disturbances, like "shredding, ripping, or tearing", become a liberating force which disrupts "identity performance" (p. 141).

The Teacher demonstrates a particularly strict adherence to 'proper gender' at a surface level, which reaches its limits along with the limits of her control as evidenced by her shifting character design (Tarsier, 2021). She has constructed an internal world apart from the Pale City, where overall control is tied to her control over 'proper' gender representation. At the skin level she embodies archetypal femininity, and commits corporal punishment on her students – known collectively as the Bullies due to their aggressive behaviour toward Mono and Six – to maintain both her position and gender construction. The player finds Bullies in isolation rooms and with ropes around their necks, forced to complete repetitive punishments. But when Mono and Six arrive, and begin exploring the School in non-normative ways as one composite body, the illusion of her separation from the Pale City dissolves. Her elongated neck counteracts her loss of stability; she stretches her normative skin to its limits, overriding her perfectly-crafted representation with a hidden, abject reality to regain control. The Teacher mostly hides this stretching from the Bullies. Only the presence of Mono and Six — two evasive, ungendered bodies — can cause her to reveal the "monstrous instability of surface" (Halberstam, 1995, p. 151).



Figure 6: The Teacher's stretched neck in a stealth sequence (SMii7Yplays, 2021).

For the Bullies, too, the skin is a performance of gender enforced by the Teacher. The Bullies are made from porcelain; if the player attacks them with metal tools, their heads loudly shatter into multiple pieces. Likely as a result of the Teacher's abuse, many of the Bullies that the player interacts with have heads that are already broken in half (see figure 8). For these pupils, their gender is represented by their school uniforms: the girls wear skirts and blouses while the boys wear knee-length shorts with waistcoats. Interestingly, however, the Teacher's desire to maintain normative constructions of gender through the Bullies is what causes their eventual collapse. She abuses the Bullies to maintain control over them, which damages their heads and turns them into half-dead bodies in gendered costumes. When faced with Mono and Six, then, her stringent construction of femininity collapses, transforming to reveal an uncanny, stretched reality.

Mono and Six are characters whose surfaces similarly stretch, morph, and confuse the stability of skin-level representation. In particular, Six's shifting character design, which defines the game's climactic moments, disrupts the binary organising principle of *Little Nightmares* as a series: the divide between tall antagonists and small protagonists, which represents the divide between monstrosity and humanity. But Six and Mono transform in opposing ways: while Six is met with vitriol among many players for the ways their skin does not fit, Mono represents an alignment with normative perceptions of 'proper gender' and falls victim to the oppressive rigidity of such a binary.

The climax of *Little Nightmares II* revolves around saving Six from the Signal Tower, who is captured by the Thin Man. At this point the ludic aesthetics shift away from collaboration toward focusing on Mono's burgeoning ability to 'tune' the Tower's transmission. After Six's capture, you use televisions — much like the Thin Man — to teleport through the Pale City, helping you to bridge impossible gaps where Six previously lent a hand. When the player



Figure 7: The Teacher's character design. (Bandai Namco, 2021).



Figure 8: The Bullies' character designs. (Little Nightmares Wiki, 2021)

reaches the Signal Tower, Mono has defeated the Thin Man, and removed their hat to bare their face for the first time. But in the Tower, Six is different — they have been *made strange*. They tower over Mono; their arms are so long that, in order to fit within the confines of the room, they have three zig-zagging elbows. Where they previously navigated the gameworld almost silently, their breathing is now loud and laboured, and their steps rattle the floorboards.

In this moment Six is aligned with the antagonists you have defeated, particularly the Hunter, whose heavy steps alerted you to his presence in the game's first chapter. This partly explains many players' colloquial nickname for Six in this sequence: Monster Six (Skrappoo, 2023). But despite such readings of monstrosity, Six remains themselves: they wear their yellow raincoat and their hair still falls over their face (see figure 10; Tarsier, 2021). 'Monster' Six works even harder to maintain their ambiguity, keeping their eyes on the floor and their head firmly tilted down. And unlike the other antagonists, 'Monster' Six does not pursue control of an environment through individualistic violence. Where the Hunter sought to kill all Others in his path, and the Teacher maintained a tight grip on gender representations through abuse, 'Monster' Six solely focuses on a wind-up music box. When the player calls out to them, Six



Figure 9: ‘Monster Six’ design. (Little Nightmares Wiki, 2021).

follows Mono’s voice without apprehension or fear. Only when Mono approaches Six with violent intent – to progress, the player must equip a hammer and try to destroy Six’s music box – does Six attack.

Here, *Little Nightmares II* questions the one binary that has structured its aesthetics: the divide between ‘tall’ and ‘small’, implying the divide between ‘monster’ and ‘human’. Six is still Six in this sequence, only their “skin is precisely what does not fit” (Halberstam, 1995, p. 163). This skin does not align with our understanding of how Six should look – nor, more importantly, does it evidence the meaning we have embedded it with. Six is a familiar face and collaborator in a fight for survival. ‘Monster’ Six, on the other hand, too closely represents the very antagonists that the player has fought against (Tarsier, 2021). Six never seems uncomfortable or trapped in this ‘monstrous’ skin – but they have become the very monster Mono feared, and so the player’s impulse is to expel the monster, redraw the binary, and enforce the norm through violent exclusion. ‘Monster’ Six’s transformation — which in many ways does not change them at all — demonstrates that the categorisations of humanity that structure *Little Nightmares* are inherently unstable.

In this moment, the game recalls its first chapter, where Mono rescues Six from captivity in the Hunter’s basement. Would players have rescued a version of Six – unfamiliar at that point, playing with their music box, without their recognisable yellow raincoat – whose skin seemed a little too different, too inhuman? The answer is obvious. ‘Monster’ Six represents “the inability to

categorize" (Halberstam, 1995, p. 23) that defines constructions of monstrosity. Breaking down the game's ultimate binary, Six's representation forces players to question their actions throughout the game and just how much they relied on surface-level recognition to anticipate monstrosity.

In the game's final moments, you destroy Six's music box and return them to their past, 'human' representation. The Signal Tower starts to crumble around you, its walls oozing with eyeballs and flesh. While escaping with Six, Mono needs their help to cross a gap in their path, and Six jumps across the crumbling platform to offer a hand. But when Mono jumps and takes Six's hand, they hesitate, then lets go — running to freedom as Mono falls into the fleshy core of the Signal Tower. Alone in the collapsed Tower, Mono sits upon an empty chair. You watch them grow longer and taller over time, transforming into the Thin Man.

The moment in which Six drops Mono is the source of much fan speculation, with many players debating whether Six is inherently evil. Some suggest that Six was hiding a "dark personality" all along (Daviddv1202, 2021), and cite other game events — Six warming their hands on the Doctor's cremated body, or being violent toward the Bullies (Tarsier, 2021) — as evidence that Six is "the true villain of *Little Nightmares* [sic]" (Daviddv1202, 2021). Others argue against such readings, claiming that Six "lost [their] ability to feel positive emotions" in the Signal Tower (Yoshibrine28, 2022). A common theory suggests that Six recognised the Thin Man's face in Mono's after seeing it clearly for the first time (Protector_of_Humans, 2025); another states that Six could not forgive Mono for destroying their only form of "escapism" in the Nowhere, their music box (Mr-Plague, 2021).

Such theories, I argue, work to 'straighten out' the layers of ambiguity at work within *Little Nightmares II* and all operate from the basis that 'Monster' Six's existence is inherently wrong. They assume that Six dislikes their 'monster' form; it is a given that Six needs to be 'saved' from it, and so Six drops Mono "out of spite" (Ace_Wash, 2021) for destroying their music box or because they are a traumatised child making "irrational decisions" (Steam_SpectralE, 2021). These interpretations fall short; through a queer lens, the game's conclusion instead depicts a nonbinary character resisting the binaries of gender and monstrosity which Mono seeks to enforce. Six's obscured face both in-game and in concept art becomes an site of resistance which celebrates "inadequately gendered bodies" (Halberstam, 1995, p. 141) while Mono — still partially indebted to concepts of 'proper gender' — sees 'Monster' Six as a source of horror.

Thus Mono transforms into the Thin Man, a strictly masculine archetype. This shift recalls the Teacher's "sewing job" (Halberstam, 1995, p. 176) and how her representation of gender, while inherently unstable, relied on a complete sense of control. Mono attempts to exert such control on Six, determining which of their representations is strictly human, and falls victim to the restric-

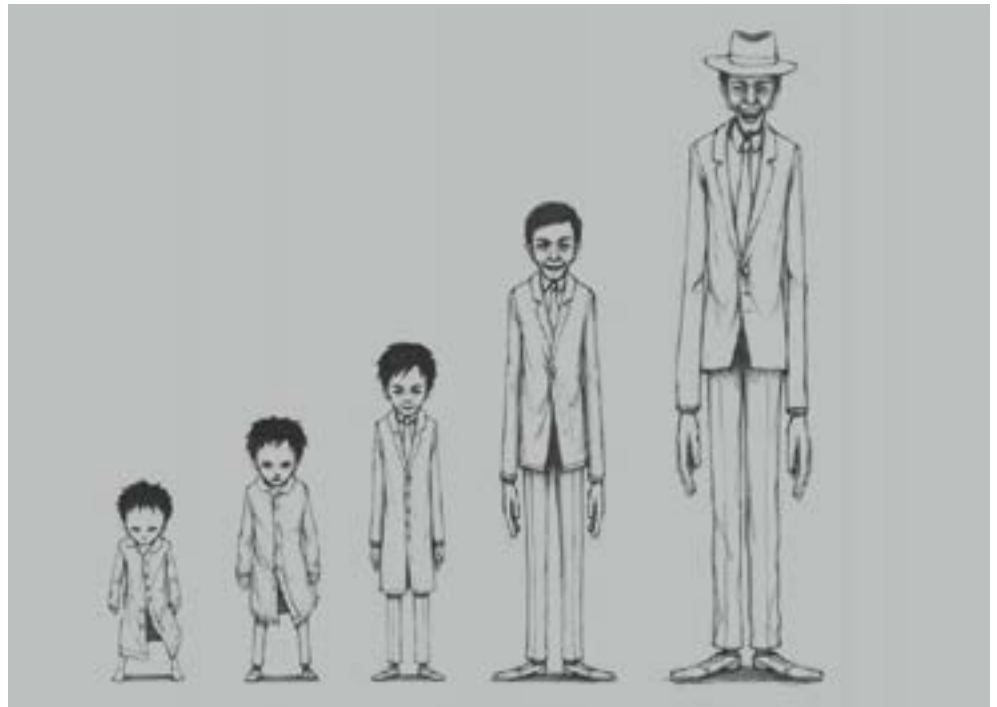


Figure 10: Mono's transformation into the Thin Man. (Little Nightmares Wiki, 2021).

tion of explicit gender categories. Six, all the while, remains ambiguous, not just ungendered but unconcerned with the binary between human and monster that Mono enforces. They resist the “violence of naming” (Halberstam, 1995, p. 160) as Mono perpetuates and falls victim to it – finally becoming the object of their own violence and the very figure, throughout *Little Nightmares II*, that they fought against.

5. CONCLUSION

In *Little Nightmares II*, Tarsier Studios presents a deviant world brimming with queer meaning. Despite the developers' intentional ambiguity with regards to *Little Nightmares*, a lacking dedication to such ambiguity outside of the game-world has only served to reinvigorate many players' search for, as D.A. Miller (1990) describes, a heteronormative “desire for proof” (p. 123). This has obscured the game's queer potential and limited players' possibilities for interpreting the game, as potential sites for queer analysis have been overshadowed by the use of gendered pronouns for Six or diminishing discussions of Six's ambiguity between the releases of *Little Nightmares I* and *II*. This paper has demonstrated the abundance of queer meaning that exists within *Little Nightmares II* once one recognises the inherent instability of pronoun use and gender categorisation as a whole – a search which reveals most of the characters, environments, and mechanics to operate “in the service of queerness” (Ruberg, 2019, p. 82) if only one digs deeper than details consigned to paratext.

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