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TODIGRA

On Interdisciplinary Embraces in Game Studies

Lina Eklund, Björn Sjöblom, Jon Back

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ABSTRACT

That game studies is an interdisciplinary venture is often stated and yet contested. Indeed, the Nordic DiGRA 2023 Conference was held under the theme: Interdisciplinary Embraces. In this editorial to the conference special issues we delve into the history of game studies as interdisciplinary. Through interviews with some key researchers from the Nordic Region (Annika Waern, Espen Aarseth, Frans Mäyrä, Jesper Juul), we explore some meanings and implications of the interdisciplinarity nature of game studies. We suggest that the success of game studies as a "project" lies in its ability to bring together disparate traditions in interdisciplinary efforts while simultaneously building up a core. Game studies today both is and is not interdisciplinary through a disciplinary gravitational core and an interdisciplinary cloud surrounding it.

Keywords

Interdisciplinarity, game research, transdisciplinary, conference organizing

Introduction

It is often stated that game studies–the study of games as a field of its own–is an interdisciplinary venture (e.g. Deterding, 2017; Mäyrä, 2009; Stenros and Kultima, 2018). Game studies is a meeting between academic subjects in the same way that games themselves are a meeting between a wide range of disciplines (Mäyrä 2009), from engineering and programming to art and storytelling. Yet interdisciplinarity is far from one coherent thing (Light and Adams 2017). What does it mean for a subject such as game studies to be interdisciplinary? And what does it imply in practice? The Nordic DiGRA conference in 2023 was organised under the subtitle "Interdisciplinary Embraces". In this editorial to the conference's special issue, we attempt to chart out some of the current views on the nature of game studies as interdisciplinary, connect it to the emergence of game studies as a distinct field, and further discuss how this mattered for us in organising a conference as well as this special issue. We conclude by suggesting how we can think about game studies as both being and not being an interdisciplinary field. To assist us, we have asked a few questions to four well-known game studies scholars who were there from the beginning in the Nordic Region: Annika Waern from Uppsala University in Sweden, Espen Aarseth from the IT University in Denmark, Frans Mäyrä from Tampere University in Finland, and Jesper Juul from the The Royal Danish Academy in Denmark. They were generous enough to reply to our questions.

In this text, we will first speak briefly about interdisciplinarity and its relation to the study of games, using the term game studies quite inclusively. We draw on both previous literature as well as interviews with seasoned scholars' experiences. We then discuss what interdisciplinarity meant at the 2023 Nordic DiGRA conference before detailing the articles included in this special issue. Finally, we will close with a few words on why we argue that interdisciplinarity matters for the study of games.

INTERDISCIPLINARITY IN GAME STUDIES

While studies of games can be traced back to the late 19th century (Stenros and Kultima, 2018), and several of the texts that form part of game studies' canon are from the mid-20th century, it can be argued that game studies as a distinct phenomenon and academic endeavour did not emerge until the very early 2000s. From its outset, it has been suggested that games, as distinct objects of academic study, need to be approached from multiple angles and that no single traditional discipline (even what that means is contentious) would be able to capture the broad spectrum of what games are and what they mean (Mäyrä, 2009). Games are multi-layered systems that mix many modes of signification and interaction, affording a mix of theoretical and methodological inputs for research (ibid.). Thus, game studies as a field rose from many disciplines coming together.

Despite the many nodes making up the network of game studies research, Jesper Juul details the importance of converging as a field for motivating your work in this description of early game studies:

"[We realized] that there were other researchers around the Nordic countries who were working with the same questions, and we were strategic about making conferences and using the then-newfangled internet to create a distributed community through blogs and mailing lists. In practice, it was the adjacency of video games to technology that then allowed us to get our first jobs at technical institutions."

So, while interdisciplinarity was integral in the establishment of game studies as scholars from various home fields came together it was not a process without friction. According to Deterding (2017), game studies followed a broad developmental path seen in many interdisciplinary endeavours. Roughly, this path is one where a societal phenomenon is identified as important and something that straddles traditional disciplinary boundaries. Interdisciplinary effort is seen as promising for the development of new knowledge in the field, and this area of study can

sometimes emerge as a new field with journals, conferences, and institutional support. As game studies began to form, with conferences and journals, interdisciplinarity was seen as needed. Jesper Juul continues, by pointing out the importance of game studies becoming its own field:

> "This was prior to the emergence of mechanistic journal rankings, so the existence of journals and conferences allowed us to explain to our departments and PhD supervisors that what we were doing was valuable, and it was important to have an audience to write for, an audience that did not require that every paper started with a defense of studying video games. It is impossible to imagine doing the work without that community."

This idea is reiterated by Frans Mäyrä:

> "The wider field where Game Studies operates is indeed very interdisciplinary in contemporary academia. However, Game Studies also needs to be "disciplinary", in order to get funding, recognition and to even continue existing as a discipline with its own concepts, courses, degree programs, journals, associations and conferences."

In 2024 there are indeed journals, institutions, doctoral programs, and scholars who share an affiliation with game studies as a distinct discipline, and in this sense, game studies can be said to have a core set of recognizable features. Yet, this field, and many of the people working in it, stand in an uneasy relationship with the gravitational pull of more established disciplines, where funding, employment, and recognition might be more easily obtained (Deterding, 2017). Deterding further points out that positioning game studies as interdisciplinary, is a core identifier of game studies research. As mentioned, a central part of this is the claim

that games are complex and cultural phenomena that require the integration of several disciplines to make sense of them, as well as packaging this knowledge into the somewhat coherent field of game

studies. This synergy can also be seen in our interview with Annika Waern, where she describes her entry into game studies:

> "Coming from the Computer Science field, game studies opened new perspectives towards the humanities. But primarily, Nordic game studies was the only context where I found scholarly knowledge that included a deep understanding of games and computer games. Knowledge that was in synergy but also in contrast with how games were understood in industry and fandom. I think that this remains a unique quality of games studies: that it is in dialogue with the professional understanding of games and game design."

Several previous studies have pointed out that games cannot be narrowly contained within a single discipline, being sociotechnical assemblages (Consalvo, 2009; Taylor 2009; Prax et al. 2019). Yet, this breadth can be difficult in practice. "Disciplines have survived for so long in the academic world in part because they serve the very useful function of constraining what the researcher has to think about." (Lyall, Bruce, Tait and Meagher, 2011, p 95). This interdisciplinarity is simultaneously seen as both a strength and a weakness for games studies, where synergistic effects from different backgrounds, traditions, and perspectives allow unique knowledge development, while still being the source of contention, strife, and conflict. The excerpts from the interviews show this draw towards disciplinary self-sufficiency, identity, and community. Mäyrä (2009) concludes that game studies, to participate in interdisciplinary dialogues as a viable partner, need to develop a stable knowledge base and identity of its own to form a common ground for a scholarly community. As such, the identity of game studies can both be said to coalesce around common points of reference, while simultaneously finding new nodes in a widening network of research. Game studies may be established as its own centre of gravity in some sense, but it continues to feel both outward pressure from its researchers in finding new avenues for scholarly work, as well as the pull from other disciplines taking

further interest in games as objects for a much wider variety of research.

In conclusion, the field of game studies both is and is not interdisciplinary. It has become something more than the separate fields and domains that went into it, yet it still relies on the participation of researchers, methods, and theories from other fields. Maybe this is what truly defines game studies. Others have argued that it is only in truly interdisciplinary meetings, such as those of game studies, that groundbreaking research can emerge. Interdisciplinarity can be seen as a journey into the unknown, with no maps to guide you (Lyall et al. 2011). To us, personally, game studies often feels like such a journey into the unknown.

Here be dragons!

NORDIC DIGRA

The 2023 Nordic DiGRA theme was interdisciplinary embraces. We chose this theme as we agree with the idea of game studies being a field that is fundamentally interdisciplinary, and that it thrives in and grows out of academic differences. It is a place where we embrace and grow with our different perspectives, theories, and methods, and we do it together. But embraces are also about being physically close, about our embodied selves and the renewed opportunity of proximity and togetherness after the social distancing imperatives of the pandemic.

For us organisers, the first Nordic DiGRA Conference in Stockholm in 2010 was our first DiGRA conference, and even one of our first, academic conferences. We were all young PhD candidates, engaged in doctoral studies in different fields–sociology, human-computer interaction, and child studies. Even though it was by no means the first DiGRA conference, it represents a period where not only our own academic pursuits were formed, but one in which game studies showed its development. That conference played a part, as did the ones that have been organised since (in Visby, Tampere, and Bergen) in the emergence of game studies as both a global and a local

field. And as with us, many who made the journey into game studies did so from other fields. This is different from today when there are departments and PhD programs in game research, and indeed many authors of this special issue have their PhDs in game studies. Yet, there are many scholars in the field with one foot in game studies and one foot in various other disciplines. For us, coming to Nordic DiGRA all those years ago was a little bit like coming home, finding a group of researchers that were familiar with games and gaming as the core phenomena for research, where it was possible to lay domain-specific explanations to the side and focus on the core of the scholarly work. Finding a research community in which games were front and centre felt, as we believe it did for many at that time, as a relief. We did not have to defend that we were studying games, but could instead focus on the real questions we were interested in. Or, as Jesper Juul puts it in our interview: "It was a feeling of 'coming home', but also building the home."

This does not mean that the journey to establish game studies as a field was an easy one. If game studies were constructed as a home discipline for many researchers, there were, and continue to be, areas of contention related to the interdisciplinarity of the field. For example, Annika Waern points to how different publishing traditions between subjects have been adapted for:

> "The differences in scholarly traditions were also difficult to bridge. Early on, Nordic game studies met a challenge in the differences between publication traditions between the humanities and the more technical computer science traditions. This affected in particular how papers were submitted and accepted to conferences. Between years, this would shift back and forth between very exclusive acceptance based on peer review and full papers, and broad acceptance based on abstracts. Neither approach worked very well. Today, we have a number of well-established journals in the area that can serve as a bridge."

The way academia is structured into distinct subjects with their conferences, publication venues, departments, career steps, and so on, makes an interdisciplinary journey a difficult one, as detailed above. With this in mind, we spent much time considering what form the publications of the conference should take. We settled on abstract submissions and full journal papers as a subsequent submission.

In game studies we come together due to our joint, in-depth passion to understand what games are, what makes people play them, how we make them, and everything around them. This shared focus is the first of our many strengths as a field. Despite these similarities, we are all different. In this special issue, we have authors from a diverse set of subjects and academic affiliations. There are theoretical articles and methodological ones. Those that present in-depth case studies from game education or industry. They all come with different methodological toolboxes and various theoretical perspectives, as in game studies at large. These make us ask different questions and focus on different answers. This is our second core strength, this breadth of perspectives which has enriched and made our field grow into something substantial. To further this, we choose to be as inclusive as possible when considering presentations at the conference. We included, rather than excluded. Our reasoning was simply that if someone believes that what they do is game studies or games research, then we should hear them out. While there are certainly limits to what can be recognized as game studies we believe those boundaries should be poked, tested, and permeated. As Espen highlighted:

> "Games are the perfect interdisciplinary object. At the pre-DiGRA conference in Tampere in 2002, I rhetorically asked the audience which university discipline could not be used in game studies. No response. Odontology, I suggested. But of course, there was a dentist in the audience who objected."

That does not mean that interdisciplinarity is easy to reach nor

does not come for free. We are sure most of us have been in conference panels and presentations where people judge the quality of work based on values from subjects not compatible with the work being presented. We have to learn and understand various academic disciplines to be able to build on and engage with research from other paradigms, and sometimes that research is done with ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies that differ wildly from our own training, beliefs, and values.

On the question of interdisciplinary embraces, Espen Aarseth said:

> "It means to have faith in the potential of working across disciplines. It is sometimes hard, and there is never much money in it, so having faith is essential. And trust. And luck. Those are the three chief weapons of interdisciplinarity."

As Aarseth argues, faith, trust, and luck are key to successful interdisciplinarity. We argue that this can be done in practice through small but important means to support interdisciplinary embraces and constructive debate rather than destructive. At the conference, we worked with the key values of respect and kindness. We argue that it is in the small details we set norms and standards for meetings. So we urged seniors to interact with younger scholars, and we reinforced the DiGRA code of conduct, which wonderful people in the international DiGRA have spent time and energy on defining. We also engaged a safety officer to make sure the social climate would be something we would be proud of. We come together in conferences such as these to debate and discuss research and embracing interdisciplinary, for us, is also about respecting differences or acknowledging that we are different, but that this difference is what makes us strong. Yet it requires kindness and an open mind. Trust, as stated above, can be considered a central aspect of the community, fundamental to our capacity to have constructive meetings and dialogue across divisions.

We have to continue to protect the strengths of our field. Our interdisciplinarity is one of these strengths but it requires humility, kindness, and an understanding of one's academic pre- conceptions. That way we can all be part of advancing the field of game studies and continue to make this the inclusive and welcoming field it was for us when we took our first stumbling steps out in academia.

"[A]t the crux of good interdisciplinary research lies not a shallow knowledge of myriad topics but a detailed understanding of how to make different forms of knowledge work together synergistically." (Lyall 2019, p 66)

How we go forward is an open question. On one side we see more calls for interdisciplinarity that is constructive to all, as Lyall et al. (2019) argue in the quote above. Yet increased focus on quantity over quality in scholarship metrics and focus on specific publication venues in certain fields makes it hard to enact in practice. Older, better-established and funded disciplines draw people in and may lead to researchers leaving game studies behind (see Deterding, 2017). As we have discussed here, game studies is both its own field and an interdisciplinary research arena. Nick Taylor, our senior keynote speaker at the conference, suggests one way forward in the post-script to this special issue where he writes on post-disciplinary postures (2024).

Ultimately, if the interdisciplinary project of game studies is to persist, it needs to show its scholarly and societal utility–taken in the broad sense of the word. While we certainly see the upsides of multiple perspectives on games as a phenomenon, it is up to the researchers within this sprawling field to deliver knowledge, insights, and discoveries that cannot be obtained in purely disciplinary settings. This also means that game studies needs to be open to new influences, allowing formulation of novel research problems that might not fit our current formulation of what game studies is, and what it is not. Self-professed members of the game studies collective might be served with reflecting on practices of inclusion, exclusion, and selection.

THE PAPERS

The Uppsala Nordic DiGRA was the largest so far, with 37 presentations plus panels and workshops with almost a hundred participants and representations from all Nordic countries, Denmark, Finland, Norwegian, Sweden, and Iceland. We also had submissions and participants from several counties outside the region. In our interviews, both Espen Aarseth and Frans Mäyrä reinforced that Nordic DiGRA was never without its strong international connection and the field, both regional and international emerged together, something we see in the conference itself.

The high number of participants for a local conference spoke to a need to meet and be physically close in this post-pandemic world we live in. Perhaps, it also spoke to changed habits due to increased climate strains where local conferences will gain in importance as we strive to reduce our climate impact. Meeting is still key for research such as ours, particularly in an interdisciplinary field we need time to misunderstand each other as some have argued (slow-science.org, Berg and Seeber 2016).

This double special issue contains thirteen original studies, this editorial, and a final post-script. All authors who were accepted to present at the conference were offered the chance to submit to the special issue. The submitted manuscripts then went through an additional standard review process with two reviewers. Final papers were selected based on the outcome of this process.

Our papers in themselves are an interdisciplinary mix. They come from a wide range of scholars, active in various departments and subjects. They also enact interdisciplinarity in their subject matter, from looking at or introducing theory or methods from other fields into game studies to studying the making of games and game education to paying attention to the culture around games, rather than games themselves. The issue itself then represents the interdisciplinarity of game studies, while also showing that there are theories and methods that join us together into a field of its own with a strong core identity.

The first issue (Volume 6, Issue 3) begins with theoretically oriented studies which either introduce theory into game studies or studies the process of play. The issue also contains studies which move outside of the games themselves with attention to para-text and context of play.

Marie Dalby's article on "Orientations in Queer Game Studies" begins our double issue. In an on-point analysis Dalby charts the beginning of Queer game studies and explores how a movement away from traditional representation studies in favour of increased attention to materiality, as well as a movement both to and away from fun, can be said to define the emergence of this sub-field within game studies.

Dom Ford's article "Approaching FromSoftware's Souls Games as Myth" explores how a mythological take on FromSoftware's five Souls games can shed light on the commonalities of the worlds and stories told in these games. Finally, Ford links this to the work of the wider community around these games.

In the article "Character-Driven Narratives in D&D5E and Fate: Core System", Joy Kumral and Luis F.T. Meza explore how the rules for character creation in tabletop roleplaying games can take a more active, or passive, role in affecting the narratives being played out, using the two games *Fate: Core System*, and *Dungeons and Dragons* as two opposing examples.

In Nathalie Schäfer's article "1001 Followers in 20 Day: Framing The Playful Use of Fame-Enhancing Bots on Instagram" we see another approach to interdisciplinarity, where the use of bots in Instagram is studied through the lens of transgressive play and cheating. By treating the activity as a playful use of a system, rather than just breaking of the terms of service, a deeper understanding of botting can be gained.

Kati Alha explores gender stereotypes in mobile games in her article "Endure, Join them or Leave? Suffering Women in Mobile Game Advertising". In advertisements for two such games, she finds that women are represented through well-known and absurdly exag-

gerated stereotypes, in need of rescue by the player. The advertisements, however, put the (implied) female player in a position of control and power, providing a counterpoint to the narrative of the game.

In "Gamemasters of the Playground: Exploring Children's Leadership Roles when Programming Hybrid Digital-Physical Outdoor Playground Equipment", Andreas Bergqvist and Jon Back examine children's social dynamics when interacting in and around programmable features of an outdoor playground. Through a thematic analysis, they find that the programmable prototype provides for an emergent game master role, where a child becomes an informal leader of the group, supporting and guiding others in digital-physical play. The authors suggest that this role could be considered in design.

The second issue (Volume 7, Issue 1) contains studies related to teaching game design as well as studies related to the workings of the game industry and political contexts for game development.

Louise Persson and Rebecka Rouse in their piece, "The Game Weavers: A Feminist Approach to Game Writing", explore how a changed approach to how we think about game writing as wearing can spur creativity and increase a sense of identity in a game writing education.

Holger Pötzsch, Therese H. Hansen, Emil L. Hammar and Tobias

B. Staaby's contribution, "Putting the Cybermedia Model into Educational Practice: Expanding the Framework", develops a toolset for educators engaged in using digital games in classroom teaching. This framework provides a set of critical questions both for teaching with and teaching about games, concerning both its sign system and game mechanics, as well as the institutional context in which the game is going to be used, the players using it, as well as the material circumstances of the game's production.

Solip Park studies immigrant/expatriate game developers in Finland. Their article "Embracing Global and Local: How Game Industry Expatriates Work Between Global and Local Game Devel-

opment practices", looks at motivations to expatriate, as well as calls for efforts to encourage cultural competence and tolerance to nurture sustainability and inclusivity in the system.

Mark Staun Poulsen and Hanna Wirman report on an ethnographic field study of a development team in an indie game company in the article "Creative-Rational Tensions in Game Development: A Danish Case Study on Team Collaboration", focusing on collaborative game-making.

Kamiab Ghorbanpour and Patrick Prax study Iranian video games and their relation to nationalism in the article "Seyyed of Cyrus the Great: Iran's Confused Nationalism" in Games, focusing on governmental authority and the role of independent game developers.

In "Noita -A Long Journey of a Game Idea", Annakaisa Kultima, Riina Ojanen and Niklas Nylund trace the development of a Finish indie game over a decades-long period. Their timeline method is shown to be useful both as a representation of complex development processes but is also suggested to be a critical research method.

Our final article is "Zinecraft: Zines as Companion to Games and Research" by Hailey Austin and Mirjam Palosaari Eladhari. The two authors hosted the final event of the conference: a Zinemaking workshop. Through it, and in the article here, they demonstrate how researchers and others working with games can draw on zinemaking as a creative practice to further meta-reflections and stop and think about what they are doing. It is a fitting conclusion to our double issue.

FINAL WORDS

As an interdisciplinary field, game studies draws its roots from a vast network of interconnected traditions, paradigms, methodologies, and theoretical foundations. These intricate connections extend to institutional and personal interweavings, highlighting the complexity and richness of the field. The cultural significance of digital, and non-digital games is paramount, with research permeating various disci-

plines and locations, a reality eloquently portrayed in this special issue.

As Jesper Juul told us:

> "All disciplines probably have a touch of superiority complex, with a hint of believing that all other disciplines are wrong/naive/problematic. To do an interdisciplinary embrace means to accept that others can see or say things that you cannot say yourself."

This balance between inclusion, fragmentation, and isolation is a contentious part of game studies. Openness and inclusion have to compete with the need for community, and identity preservation as the development of disciplinary theory, methods, and canonical studies. At Nordic DiGRA we embraced the breadth of game studies, as exemplified in the articles of this special issue. Yet, that is not to say that we were able to cover the breadth of the field: significantly more technically oriented research is missing. The sometimes uneasy division between technical subjects and more humanities and social science studies is an issue for the coherence of the field (Warpefelt, 2022). Still, other venues for game studies research may take different routes focusing more narrowly on research at the core of games studies, and we recognize that there is a need for both broad and narrow approaches.

In this text, we have highlighted the interdisciplinarity of game studies. Yet, As Nick Taylor (2024) eloquently explores in the postscript to this special issue, interdisciplinary has its problems and implies a constant move by scholars back to their respective disciplines. As we have discussed in this editorial, game studies is both an interdisciplinary meeting, but also has a core that today is a discipline in its own right. This could be something that we can relate to what Taylor calls postdisciplinarity (2024). We argue, that we can understand game studies as a gravitational centre consisting of theories and methods, as well as academic places and people, with a large nebulous cloud of interdisciplinary thoughts, people, and institutions surrounding it. This cloud is ever-shifting and evolving, the centre

gives it focus and stability but also takes inspiration from and is changed by external input. This thought is mirrored in what Annika Waern said:

> "It is important that game studies scholars accept that good research on games ALSO can be done within related disciplines such as e.g. psychology or media studies, and vice versa: scholars in disciplinary subjects must learn to accept that the interdisciplinary approach also is academically valid and worthwhile."

Here we could also return to Aarseth's previous comment on trust. It takes great trust to live in the uncertainty of such a state of the field. To continue to resist stability in favour of the nebulous. As Taylor argues, "postdisciplinarity as an active and aspirational process rather than a state: as a posture, one that may be difficult to hold for sustained periods of time as the gravitational pull of disciplinary structures (such as expectations for tenure and promotion) wax and wane".

Looking ahead, we believe that the field of game studies will need to maintain its interdisciplinary roots while demonstrating its scholarly and societal utility. Having a centre, and relishing in the uncertainty of allowing other fields and disciplines in. To remain open to new influences, continually pushing the boundaries of what game studies can encompass, while at the same time maintaining a sense of a common focus, we argue is a constructive way forward that builds on the past accomplishments of the field. Creating fruitful interdisciplinary conversations does not happen spontaneously. It necessitates the establishment of suitable, open, and inviting environments. Crafting these conducive spaces is a shared responsibility, fostering a culture where diverse perspectives can coexist.

The success of game studies as a "project" lies in its ability to bring together disparate traditions in interdisciplinary efforts while simultaneously building up a core. This collaborative approach has not only led to theoretical and methodological advancements but has also laid the groundwork for the establishment of education in game

design. If game studies as an interdisciplinary effort is to remain relevant, delivering new insights and knowledge regarding games and play, it must continue to be dynamic, adapting to new technological, societal, and scientific challenges. To keep its centre, while nurturing its cloud.

As you delve into this special issue, we invite you to explore the diverse and evolving landscape of game studies. We hope that the insights shared within these pages contribute to the ongoing dialogue in this interdisciplinary field.

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Paulina Rajkowska, you were a great social chair. Thank you for all the entertainment. Andreas Bergkvist, thank you for organising and leading the volunteers. Volunteers, thank you for putting your time and effort into making the conference great! Thank you Kaya Toft Thejls for acting as Safety officer, we need people like you to make our conferences safe.

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1. ORIENTATIONS IN QUEER GAME STUDIES

MARIE DALBY

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the paradigm of *queer game studies*. In order to do so, I employ Sara Ahmed's (2006; 2007) queer phenomenology as a method, which I call a spatial discourse analysis, to trace orientations in the paradigm's foundational texts from 2017-2018. I identify how queer gets meaning in relation to objects via proximity and distance, and present three orientations in queer game studies: representation, materiality, and fun. I argue that representation becomes constituting for queer game studies, in the effort to escape it; that tech-materiality perceived as video game

specific gets articulated as carrying queerness; and finally, that fun is a central site of contention for queerness, both on a gameplay and community building level. I end the paper by bringing attention to the paradigm's internal contradictions, so that scholars might mobilize them in their efforts to further queer research practices and methodologies.

Keywords

queer game studies, queer theory, gender studies, representation, LGBTQ

INTRODUCTION

Aim

In the late 2010s, two collections of articles about queerness and video games were released; Ruberg and Shaw's (2017b) anthology *Queer Game Studies* and Ruberg and Phillips' (2018b) special issue of *Game Studies, Queerness and Video Games.* While queerness and games have never been strangers to each other, the arrival of these two collections changed the academic landscape of queer game studies*:* In the introduction to the anthology, aptly titled "Imagining Queer Game Studies" (Shaw and Ruberg 2017), *Queer* is positioned as a catalyst for a new "paradigm" in game studies (xii). This articulation of a paradigm reflects a shift towards a more pronounced presence of *queer* in game studies, but it also simultaneously constructs *queer game studies*.

What the *queer* of queer game studies refers to, however, varies greatly. This is partly due to the term's elasticity, and partly due to contradictory applications. In this article, I investigate how *queer* is articulated in the two collections. To do so, I employ Sara Ahmed's (2006; 2007) queer phenomenology as a method, which I call a spatial discourse analysis. I identify how queer gets meaning in relation to

objects via proximity and distance, and present three orientations in queer game studies: representation, materiality, and fun. To contextualize the orientations, I build on Margot Weiss's (2022) understanding of queer studies as driven by a core tension. The aim of this paper is to make visible the paradigm's internal contradictions; not to eradicate them, but to enable scholars to mobilize them when traversing the opaque landscape of queer game studies. By doing so, we might further queer research practices and methodologies.

Background

Queer garnered mainstream academic attention around 1990 as "a term that challenged the normalizing mechanisms of state power to name its sexual subjects" (Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz 2005, 1). Since, the term has been employed for analysis of sexual subjects, and as a more open signifier.

In the introduction to the anthology *Queer Game Studies*, Shaw and Ruberg (2017) argue that *queer* is able to disrupt hegemonic understandings of what video games are and how they "should be studied, critiqued, made, and played" (x). Queer theory, they claim, is able to refigure games "as systems of pleasure, power, and possibility, excavating the queer potential that can be found in all games" (x). Because this theoretical framework signifies a radical shift, as earlier game scholarship primarily investigates LGBTQ characters and players (xiv), the "paradigm" (xii) of queer game studies emerges as a counter reaction to existing scholarship, especially research on LGBTQ representation.

According to Shaw and Ruberg (2017), the shift occurs in North America around the mid-2010s. The year 2013, they argue, becomes a turning point for rethinking what it means to do queer work in video games, with the establishment of two new queer conferences and a fan convention. These initiatives are followed by the digitally organized mass harassment event, #gamergate, in 2014, which forces a conversation of how women, especially racialized women, and queer

subjects are treated in the industry, online spaces, and game communities (for further reading on #gamergate see Gray and Leonard (2018)). In this historic context, queer game studies can be understood as a way for marginalized gamers to reclaim the study of games from both non-marginalized gamers and non-gamer researchers, and becomes a project with activist intent.

Theory and Method

Orientation is feminist, queer, and race scholar Sara Ahmed's (2007; 2006) concept, which she uses to explore queerness (2006) and whiteness (2007) in relation to bodies in space. Her theorization builds on the philosophical tradition of phenomenology, and manifests as bodily accounts explained through spatial metaphors. Ahmed's (2007) notion of orientation enables a way of understanding the relation between subjectivities, objects, and spaces, and is considered ideologically significant: "What is reachable is determined precisely by orientations we have already taken. Or we could say that orientations are about the directions we take that put some things and not others in our reach" (152). How we are oriented both relies on, and is directed by, distance and proximity to objects, which Ahmed (2007) calls orientation devices: "...bodies are orientated when they are occupied in time and space. Bodies are shaped by this contact with objects. What gets near is both shaped by what bodies do, and in turn affects what bodies can do" (152). For Ahmed, orientations and objects are tools that show how queerness operates, not as individual constructs, but as complex bodily orientations related to objects in space.

In this paper, I use Ahmed's concept, *orientation,* and her notion of *objects as orientation devices* to conduct a spatial discourse analysis of the queer game studies paradigm. Consequently, I use the term *object* to describe signifiers in the material which function like orientation devices, thus taking the form of signposts. This makes it possible to examine how something gets meaning from being far away or close

to an object, and how this distance facilitates certain practices or modes of being. I call this method a spatial discourse analysis, which enables a reading of how the articles articulate queerness in terms of movements and proximity to certain objects, and consequently enables me to examine the directions the texts are moving in, and the directions queer game studies is urged to move in.

Material

This paper's material is the anthology *Queer Game Studies* (2017b) and the articles published in the 2018 special issue of the online journal, *Game Studies*, volume 18 issue 3. They are significant in two ways. First, the anthology calls into being queer game studies as a paradigm, a practice the special issue builds on, and second, the collections constitute a substantial contribution to research on queerness and games, providing a solid foundation for scholars to build on.

The respective introductions to the two collections, Shaw and Ruberg's "Imagining Queer Game Studies" (2017) and Ruberg and Phillips' "Not Gay as in Happy: Queer Resistance and Video Games" (2018a), are particularly central in constituting the paradigm. As an anthology of articles, *Queer Game Studies* is organized around different ways of discussing queerness and video games, which manifests as five different parts: "Defining queerness in games", exploring definitions of queerness in games; "Queering gameplay and design", how we might actively queer play and game design; "Reading games queerly", exploring how game texts themselves might be analyzed queerly; "Queer failure in games", exploring the concept of failure, both in and out of games; and finally, "Queer futures for games", looking at the relationship between growth and queer theory.

FINDINGS

The following section presents three orientations I have articulated by performing a spatial discourse analysis of the texts: represen-

tation, materiality, and fun. I show how the texts provide different directions for queer game studies in relation to these three themes, which all shape the paradigm.

Representation

Representation is an important concept in queer game studies, which is oriented both towards and away from representation. The orientation *away* from representation guides Shaw and Ruberg's (2017) introduction to *Queer Game Studies*, which is simultaneously the introduction that establishes queer game studies as a paradigm. The text constitutes representation as an important term that helps facilitate this establishment:

> ...this volume calls in part for a break with existing trends in LGBTQQ game scholarship. The key distinction we are making here is between scholarship that takes as its primary focus LGBTQQ topics—from LGBTQQ players or designers to games with LGBTQQ representation—and work that seeks to understand video games through the conceptual frameworks of queerness (xiv).

The break with previous trends is explicitly articulated as a break from representation. Representation as an object, when understood as an orientation device, becomes something to move away from, and this moving away from becomes a constituting element of queer game studies, and representation becomes something it is not. However, the break with representation is challenged by several articles that make up the bulk of the paradigm, as these texts are oriented *towards* representation, or seek to go *beyond* representation.

The texts moving towards representation are, from a disciplinary perspective, no break from previous studies on representation, in terms of method or how representation is utilized as an analytical tool – the difference, however, is where these representations occur. Instead of LGBTQ characters in AAA games, they are concerned with

representation of gender queerness in fan fiction: "This research began with the intent to further understand how queer players react to and interpret representation of queerness in video games as represented through fan fiction" (Dym, Brubaker, and Fiesler 2018, 4); representation of queerness in Easter eggs: "I analyze the historical relationship between Easter eggs and current efforts to increase queer representation by AAA developers" (James 2018, 2); and representation of daddy figures in a dating simulator: "I offer a close playing of Dream Daddy to analyze how the game works with and against representational trends of daddy figures" (Schaufert 2018, 2). While these authors themselves position their studies as studies on representation, they stand apart from studies on characters in AAA games. The method remains the same, but the target of analysis is different.

The paradigm also seeks to go *beyond* representation. Moving beyond something is different than moving away and moving towards. A movement beyond is following the same direction, but going past. Using the term *beyond* to signify this desire is not coincidental. Bagnall (2017) summarizes a talk from Joli St. Patrick and Avery McDaldno at the queerness and games conference in 2013 titled "Beyond Representation". This is significant, as this specific conference is used by Shaw and Ruberg (2017) as part of their argument to date the emergence of queer games studies to around 2013. Bagnall (2017) argues that the presentation "outlines many features of queerness and queer life, as related to games, including uncertainty, change, fluidity, and complicated multilayeredness" (140). The preposition *beyond* designates a specific orientation: Representation as an analytical tool is insufficient to move queer game studies forward; only by moving beyond do we grasp the complexity of games. Or, in Bagnall's (2017) words: "...how we might, by looking beyond character representations and stories, understand games as digital artifacts bound up with naturalized, patriarchal constructions of gender and sexuality" (135). By looking beyond representation, we can understand games differently, as digital artifacts. Character representation and stories are here articulated as obstacles in the way; obstacles we

must overcome to understand the complexity of games. The introduction to the special issue reiterates this perspective:

> [The special issue] also represents a call to question, challenge, and ultimately move beyond the neoliberal rhetorics of representation and inclusion that continue to surround games and LGBTQQ issues. Each of the articles in this issue explores queerness in games in modes that move beyond representation" (Ruberg and Phillips 2018a, 2).

What becomes evident, however, in this orientation of moving beyond representation, is how representation still lingers and is stretched out into the beyond, both as an analytical tool and as a definitional boundary. Chang (2017, 18) makes a distinction between flattened representation and representation that informs and is informed by mechanics. This is a critique of how the games industry conceptualizes queer difference, and the crux of their argument is how representation is articulated as not enough on its own. In this article, mechanics as a signifier is used as a modifier, enabling a movement towards representation, as queer game studies can be oriented towards representation, if this movement is simultaneously towards mechanics: "Representation must inform mechanics, and mechanics must deepen and thicken representation" (18). Only by moving beyond an old notion of representation, towards one that is more medium specific, do we pave the way for worthwhile representation. Representation figures as a key concept, yet becomes a loosely defined "thing" that needs to be understood in a relationship with mechanics: "I advocate moving further from representation as the end-all category of queerness in games and more into an investigation of mechanics" (Welch 2018, 8). Mechanics has an impact on the movement away from and beyond representation, which becomes synonymous with a move away from the previous debates about representation solely focused on visual elements. This is done by moving closer to the materiality of games, and in this way, the orientation beyond representation (or away

from representation) depends on the orientation towards materiality.

This connection to materiality is a repeated tendency. Pozo (2018) argues for a design philosophy where representation reaches beyond characters and narratives, but this "beyond" is not articulated as the relationship between representation and mechanics, but as queer experience communicated as affective familiarity, facilitated by haptics (8). Haptics, connected to sensory inputs and hardware, are activated as queer sites. This approach of considering representation as part of a larger system is likewise explored by Phillips (2017), who uses the term *gamic system* to encapsulate an idea of assemblage. Phillips (2017) discusses how, if game studies were to have a term similar to film studies' "the gaze", it could be "a matrix of recursive vectors of desire among the elements of a gamic system: human, hardware, software, rules, narrative, and representation" (121). This invention of a gamic system emphasizes the media specificity of games underlying most of the critique of representation in the beyond orientation. Representation, previously understood as characters and narratives, is insufficient in discussing games.

In a twist of language, Freedman's (2018) text urges 'us' not to go beyond, but to look underneath: "We must not look beyond the representation, we must look underneath it to find its coordinates – seeing the mappable body as a physiognomic system and a mechanical system" (12). This rally to go *beneath* evidently entwines with the materiality orientation; yet, looking underneath to the mechanical system, to the code, simultaneously benefits the politics of representation. Instead of moving beyond, we are urged to move under, to strengthen what is above. While beyond and underneath makes for two different narratives, in praxis the analysis becomes similar; representation alone is insufficient to articulate what happens at the intersection of queerness and games. The language of looking underneath, as a way of moving beyond, continues a conversation from Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea Russworm's introduction to their anthology *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender and Sexuality in Video Games* (2017). Freedman (2018) writes:

> "To push representational politics forward, we must understand its many origin points. This is not an either/or proposition, of studying code or image. Malkowski and Russworm note that representation is tethered to software and hardware, but this dependency does not negate the politics of the image (which in the public arena is often of greater immediacy and consequence); rather, they suggest we must situate computational and representational code side by side, and understand their specific discursive (and functional) histories" (14).

The introduction is called "Identity, Representation, and Video Game Studies Beyond the Politics of the Image". This title simultaneously emphasizes the desire to move beyond, and reiterates the politics of representation and the image as central signifiers in game studies. Moving beyond representation becomes a proposed direction for queer game studies, and this moving beyond becomes intertwined with game studies' discourse around game ontology and defining representation. There is thus a certain tension around representation, coming both from queer studies and game studies, which queer game studies has not quite managed to release.

Materiality

The second orientation I have articulated in queer game studies is materiality. A significant number of articles are oriented *towards* objects like hardware, design, systems, game engines, code, mechanics, and mods (Bagnall 2017; Chang 2017; Freedman 2018; Phillips 2017; Shaw and Ruberg 2017; Welch 2018; Yang 2017), and while these terms are defined to a highly varying degree, they nonetheless function to direct the texts towards tech materiality, while simultaneously directing queer game studies away from previous debates and conversations about gender and sexuality in games and gaming.

Shaw and Ruberg (2017) and Ruberg and Phillips (2018a) negotiate both the ontology of the object (video games) and the subjectivity it is interdependent and reflective of (the scholars). As shown in the

following reference, this negotiation happens through a continuous return to video games' medium-specific attributes, and through arguments of queer subjectivities laying claim to, and re-claiming, video games.

> Queerness has emerged as a focal point in the push to diversify both games culture and games critique. Providing a valuable framework for interrogating the very systems that structure the medium, queer thinking has the potential to simultaneously destabilize and reimagine video games themselves (Shaw and Ruberg 2017, ix).

Queerness is positioned as a potential and powerful key to transform video games, able to interrogate their very ontology as a unique, separate medium. Additionally, this potential is not only located within the medium itself, but is something made possible via attachment and ownership to/of the medium: "The frameworks of queer theory offer lenses through which to reclaim the medium, giving voices to the experiences of queer player subjects and bringing to light the fact that games are queer (or at least queerable) at their core" (Shaw & Ruberg 2017, xiii). Queer theory can help queer subjects to not only claim but reclaim video games, and queer game studies then becomes a way of moving away from the medium's past, a past both aligned with hegemonic forces, but also a past always already queer.

Hardware and code are introduced as central to queer game studies as objects to orient towards, beyond, or below, but while they share a function of signifying computational technologies, they also differ slightly in the analysis they enable. For Ruberg and Phillips (2018), hardware serves as an important object to nuance the field: "Addressing these complexities in video games requires attending to many layers of gamic systems, including but not limited to representation, procedural logics, hardware, player communities, and economic concerns" (4). This focus on hardware relies on and plays with the cultural notion of the hardcore gamer: "The classic preoccupations of the "serious gamer," such as overclocking graphics cards

and reducing latency through manipulation of hardware settings, become moot in queer temporalities of play" (Knutson 2018, 5). Instead, Phillips (2017,

121) ties hardware to desire, and names it an integral part of a so-called gamic system, whereas Bagnall (2017) discusses hardware in terms of normativity and queerness. Queer technologies are central to his text, and he writes how queer gaming hardware "must question and transform patriarchal paradigms. The design and functions of this hardware must enable subversive play strategies" (40). Like Phillips (2017), this text discusses controllers and their sexual implications. The standardized controllers and control schemes are implementations of heteronormativity, patriarchy and masculinity, and the joysticks allude to phallocentric design ideals.

In investigating a script file in *Dead Island* (2011) with a notoriously sexist name, Yang (2017) looks at code and how it exposes misogynist practices within game companies: "...this incident highlights sexism in game development as a systemic bias from a technical as well as cultural perspective: a bias engineered directly in the game- play systems, user experience design, and the workflow of the game engine itself" (97). Technology and culture become an assemblage in Yang's analysis, but most relevant for my analysis, is the last articulation of the game engine itself. Freedman (2018) explicitly links queerness to game engines and coding, calling code a "method to distribute norms" (16), while game engines are articulated as foundational elements delimiting mutable processes, "as an engine is built and versioned, the otherwise latent potential of code, found in its modularity, is readily sealed over" (3). The article thus understands engines as concretizations of code promoting a language gap, and as binding code in normative structures. In Chang's (2017) article on queergaming, code is something below: "After all, what is a game but a matrix of code, power relations, and constraints? . . . In other words, games always constrain players via normative narratives and mechanics" (16). Games are here articulated in their simplest forms as matrix of code intertwined with power, which manifest as

constraining narratives and mechanics. Code appears free flowing but arrested in normative structures facilitated by the engine.

Reading these discussions of hardware and code in relation to the following citation from the introduction to *Queer Game Studies*, queerness can be understood to enable access to the very fundamentals of games, their essential free structures: "Rather than restricting themselves to the study of a game's narrative or even rules, [the authors in the anthology] seek out the queer implications of its hardware, of its code, of the individual experiences of nonnormative subjects as they play" (Shaw and Ruberg 2017, xvi). Hardware and code are positioned opposite the restrictiveness of narrative and rules, and queerness is positioned in close proximity to these non-restrictive objects, enabling a leaving behind of the traditions of narratology and ludology and their limiting frameworks. Consequently, this can be read, not only as an orientation towards hardware and code and away from narratives and rules, but also as an orientation away from former confines within game research, former debates, and conversations, that queer game studies, with this orientation towards other objects, can distance itself from.

Technology, perceived as video game specific, gets articulated as carrying queerness. Thus, being close to it becomes important. This needs to be understood in the context of disciplinary tension within game studies around visual representations, as well as significant political tensions in games culture and an ongoing othering of sexual and gender minorities in the games industry, in academia and in games themselves (notably the infamous #gamergate event). This climate facilitates an enhanced necessity of positioning queerness in close proximity to medium-specific objects, discursively constituting games as "queer (or at least queerable) at their core" (Shaw and Ruberg 2017, xiii), to convincingly and inarguably claim belonging in the industry, academia and the games themselves. The orientation towards tech- materialistic objects like hardware, controllers, game engines, and code, provides closeness and places queerness and queer game scholars in proximity to games.

Fun

Queer game studies is oriented both *towards* and *away* from fun on multiple levels of game design, gameplay experience and community constituting discourse. In game studies, fun is a contested signifier in research pertaining to game design and gameplay experience, in large part because defining what makes a game fun is difficult (Koster 2014; Lazzaro 2012). Designers have tried to use less contested terms, notably Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept "flow", when designing an "ideal" gameplay experience (Cowley et al. 2008). Simultaneously, in a different vein of game studies, fun can be related to the argument by Johan Huizinga ([1938] 2016) and Roger Caillois ([1961] 2001) that games happen in a magic circle, and are played without consequences to real life. This simultaneously aligns with a dominant discourse that popular culture is *just for fun*, and politics belong elsewhere. Queer game studies is in dialogue with these prior conversations, and as my analysis shows, queer gets meaning in relation to fun in mainly two ways, towards and away from fun.

In the orientation towards fun, fun itself is either something that can be queered, for instance queer fun (Chang 2017), or something worth keeping in proximity to queerness, for instance designing for queerness without losing the principle of fun (Burrill 2017). Chang (2017) articulates a mode of playing oriented towards fun, a fun that itself can be queer: "Like Galloway's call for a radical countergaming, queergaming is stepping out of "the rigid conceptualization that is a straight present" into "a collective temporal distortion" into queer fun, fantasy, even ecstasy" (22). AAA fun is rigid, but queer fun can be made possible via queergaming, a disruption of seamlessness and the notion of immersion. Burrill's (2017) argument is slightly different, as it is not fun itself that is queered, rather: "Queer games should be collective, shared, productive, and liberating, a means of celebrating difference without sacrificing fun" (31). For Burrill (2017), moving towards fun is indeed a desirable orientation, but while it is desirable, it is not what makes the orientation queer.

Queer games are not queer, despite, or because of, being fun, but

they *should* be fun. In this way, by having fun be a travelling companion in this queer orientation, contrary to Chang's (2017) argument, queer is compatible with core design principles of designing for fun, and thus placed in proximity to game studies proper.

The orientation towards fun also works through enjoyment and video games' connection to childishness. Stockton (2017) articulates queerness by way of lateralization and jouissance, and centers her argument around the subject of the child. The concept of sideways growth, or lateralization, is tied to pathologization of the homosexual figure as suffering arrested development, but also to queer temporalities and lifelines not organized around heteronormative milestones (227). She argues the connection to children goes beyond inhabiting the same non-adult position or not participating in heterosexual reproduction, as "homosexuals" were often categorized together with pedophilia. And yet: "All these assumptions, funny enough, fed the public imagination of gay life as a wild hedonism, truly over- pleasure, painful in its excess" (227). Stockton (2017) thus attributes the queerness of gay subjects to sideways growth and excess, painful over-pleasure. But queerness slides, and she now maps this terminology onto gaming

(227). Goetz (2017; 2018) builds on Stockton's work using the concept of sideways growth to reclaim the pleasures of indulging in AAA games. The Lacanian terminology employed by Stockton (2017) and Goetz (2017; 2018) make possible an orientation away from productivity and legitimacy, and towards frivolous fun. These texts are oriented towards fun through the figure of the child, and negotiate how the medium is understood differently via its proximity to adults and children.

Cross (2017) and Clark (2017) are oriented towards fun via discussions of productivity. Clark (2017) advocates for unproductive play, which she links to the notion of fun, as a site of queer resistance. Dismantling the conflict between inclusivity via representations of LGBTQ characters in AAA games and queerness, she argues the threat of inclusionist logic lies not with assimilating queer subjects into big game franchises, but with assimilating games themselves

into capitalist society. This entanglement of productivity and affect likewise orients Cross (2017), but in a different way: "As gamers, we will have to learn how to develop a critical community that does not mistake acidic rage and hatred for the kind of productive passion that has so often led to great games" (Cross 2017, 184). For Cross (2017) there is something like productive passion, implying the existence of unproductive passion. Clark's (2017) discussion about how one should be wary of channeling fun into productive goals gets another dimension here, where productivity tied to affect can be a good thing, if this affect is directed towards something "great". This orientation should be understood in a context where it is continuously debated if video games should outgrow their childish nature and become productive members of society (Shaw and Ruberg 2017, xxvii).

Urging queer game scholars to contemplate what is lost in the effort to make games legitimate forms of art, Clark (2017) moves away from an antagonistic relationship between the study of representation and queer game studies, looking for tension elsewhere, and primarily finding it in consumerism and assimilation, not of subjects, but of games themselves. This moves the conversation away from fiction and towards the function of games in a neoliberal capitalist society. The resistance of assimilation being resistance to legitimization and co-option of games for productive means thus circumvents the concerns about assimilation connected to politics of representation. In my reading of Clark's (2017) text, queerness seems to coalesce around resistance to consumerism and productivity, dwelling on pleasure and leisure time – moving towards fun. This orientation makes possible a queer Marxist strand of queer game studies, but also enters queerness into a complicated arena, as free time and leisure are concepts intrinsically linked to capitalism. The attempt to move the problem of assimilation away from representation and towards productivity risks remaining centered on individual subjects to the detriment of the social and political whole, while also maintaining the consumer's individual play experience as epistemologically privileged over the worker experience by disregarding the means of production necessary to facilitate this anti-productive fun.

While the previous texts are oriented towards fun, some texts are oriented directly away from it. This orientation negotiates fun both at the level of game making principles and gameplay experience, and in relation to discourses pertaining to gameplay experience and the cultural purpose of games.

The rejection on a gameplay level is expressed by Shaw and Ruberg (2017) as something that can shape queer play experiences: "Ruberg, for example, has addressed queer failure as a game play mode and elsewhere reframes play experiences that reject "fun" as queer world-making opportunities." (2017, xv). Failure and the rejection of fun on the level of gameplay experience is articulated as the queer element. Marcotte (2018) and Schaufert (2018) both draw on Ruberg's notion of no-fun, focusing on design and experiences. Marcotte (2018) explicitly advocates for "reflective" design, a critical design practice challenging game design principles around fun, notably the concept of flow: "Through failed or negative affects and experiences, queer design practices can problematize the flow state and similar "seamless" states" (7). The argument is to use game design practices to deliberately disturb a player's flow state experience, because flow is perceived as discouraging reflection and relying on subjugation, which is connected to control: "Many of the best practices concerning control in games relate to encouraging this flow state [...] Therefore, it is also a key concept that must be queered to disrupt the status quo" (7). The no-fun orientation here is thus related to core game design principles and finding the critical queer potential in challenging these.

Related to these design questions, is the discourse around the status of games as art and the purpose of play. In queer game studies, these questions tie into practices of constructing subjectivities around who gets to play games just for fun. If queer fun is not necessarily different fun, it is however dependent on which subjects get to have access to the fun, and which subjects do not, as discussions around community building (Alexander 2017; Ruberg 2017; Ruberg and Shaw 2017a) make visible. Alexander (2017) links fun to specific subjectivities among both players: "ultimately, they're just for fun, say

gamers when they've run out of defenses against the mainstream industry's embarrassing, stagnant homogeneity" (59), and game makers: "veteran game developers are masters of creating "fun," and understandably they lead the charge against the idea that games can or should be anything else" (59). The subjectivities interpellated by this quote are constructed around their proximity to fun, and placed in connection to the gamergate movement and more generally associated with sexism, racism, ableism, trans- and homophobia. In this way, fun becomes a central point of contestation for both gaming and game making communities.

This connection between fun and politics is made visible in Shaw and Ruberg's (2017) text, as they tie fun to a larger discussion about games as cultural products, understood in a post gamergate context: "Those who rail against critiques of games often insist that games should be understood as fantasies— just "for fun"— and therefore impervious to scrutiny. To the contrary, as queer studies knows well, fantasy is always already political" (Shaw and Ruberg 2017, xxi). The phrasing *just for fun* points to a dominant discourse in public games discussions, where some elements (like queer subjects) get politicized, and others naturalized. The elements deemed political are then proclaimed to not belong in games, as they are meant to be *just for fun*. In the quote above, the authors link a rejection of fun to opposition of this discourse, framing the rejection of fun on a gameplay level in a way where this too can be read as a reaction to not only core game design principles centered on fun, but the dominant discourse de- politicizing games through the notion of fun.

While Alexander (2017) expresses similar arguments, opposing the dominant *just for fun* discourse, they also tie the movement away from fun to cultural legitimacy: "The idea that, at the end of the day, games are obligated to serve the purpose of "fun" above all others has been the main wrench in the works of the gaming industry's machinations for legitimacy" (Alexander 2017, 59). Thus, moving away from fun, and away from the gamergate *just fun* rhetoric, is also beneficial for the status of the medium as legitimate: "if video games want cultural legitimacy, designers will have to concede that it's not all

about fun" (Alexander 2017, 55). In this way, queerness oddly gets placed as a way of creating cultural legitimacy. If Clark (2017) offered a direction for queer game studies towards fun, questioning legitimacy, then Alexander (2017) moves away from fun, and advocates for legitimacy.

To conclude, fun is an object queer game studies both moves towards and away from on different levels. The movement towards fun works through different objects in different lines, but what they have in common, is that fun either is in itself, or related to, radical norm critical potential. The orientation away from fun rejects fun, either because no-fun game design is an opportunity for queer affective disturbance on a gameplay level, or because this orientation challenges a dominant discourse that games are *just for fun*, and therefore should not be *political*.

DISCUSSION

I have shown how representation becomes constituting for queer game studies, in the effort to escape it; that technology perceived as video game specific gets articulated as carrying queerness, and being close to it becomes important, and that fun is a central site of contention for queerness, both on a gameplay, game experience and community building level. In the following discussion, I put these orientations in dialogue with queer studies through Weiss' (2022) summary of the field, which they argue is characterized by a core tension; an oscillating movement to and from proper objects (7). By proper objects, not to be conflated with Ahmed's (2007; 2006) definition of objects, Weiss (2022) refers to the typical object of study in queer theory, sexuality, and gender transgression. Moving away from this means to decenter these as the key interest of queer theory. This reading of a core tension in queer studies can help facilitate an understanding of some of the contradictions I have found in my analysis of queer game studies.

Representation as Constitutive Other

Queer studies within Western academia was articulated as a break with gay and lesbian studies and the study of the lives of gays and lesbians. Queer game studies positions itself similarly. Shaw and Ruberg's (2017) introduction bears resemblance to Teresa de Lauretis introduction to the special issue of *Differences* in 1991, where she popularized the term queer theory as a counter to gay and lesbian studies. In this context, the introduction to the anthology *Queer Game Studies* and its proposed break with LGBTQQ topics mirrors that of this introduction to queer studies as a break from gay and lesbian studies, and representation serves a key function in paradigmatization and as constitutive other to queer games studies. The difference between gay and lesbian studies and queer theory, as articulated by de Lauretis (1991), is about politics and which questions one's research wishes to ask. Around the same time as the conference and de Lauretis' article, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* ([1990] 2011) addresses contemporary feminist debates about representational politics and its limitations:

> "The domains of political and linguistic "representation" set out in advance the criterion by which subjects themselves are formed, with the result that representation is extended only to what can be acknowledged as a subject. In other words, the qualifications for being a subject must first be met before representation can be extended" (2).

Questions around representation have thus been an integrated part of the early formation of academic queer theory, both regarding analytical possibilities, and as demonstrated here by Butler, regarding ontology and subjectivation. In queer game studies, this conflict with representation is combined with game studies' disciplinary debates around game ontology, and how to understand representation in relation to games. This creates a double dilemma, where representation is negotiated via two disciplines, in crisscross ways, and as a result

becomes incredibly difficult to understand. As my analysis shows, representation figures as a central part of queer game studies, both in studies explicitly dealing with representation and as a term that keeps appearing, despite the expressed wish to escape it. Regardless of orientation, representation becomes a boundary-drawing object for queer games studies, and the away orientation, which is prominent in establishing the paradigm, establishes representation as a constitutive outside.

I suggest detangling these discourses through scholarly clarity, achieved through separation and acceptance of contradiction. Ida Kathrine Hammeleff Jørgensen (2020) shows how games can be understood as representational artifacts consisting of multiple modalities. Her way of understanding games as qualified media lets us research them as objects of sense making. If queer game studies can accept this ontological definition, that games are representational artifacts, we are free to discuss queer methodologies as different from cultural studies of representation, without having to re-negotiate game ontology. Drawing on Weiss (2022) we might reorient the tension queer game studies has with the notion of representation. By articulating the core tension in queer theory as a movement towards and away from proper objects, Weiss (2022) makes it possible to perceive the field dialectically, instead of dualistically. If we accept this premise, then we also accept that gender and sexuality, and how these concepts are acted out in games or manifested via narrative and characters, are not in opposition to queerness, but can be understood as integral to queer theory's inherently contradictory workings – this contradiction can enable us to obliterate the heteronormative meaning-making processes games facilitate. When the core tension is articulated in relation to proper objects, it frees up cultural studies of representation to do their own thing, while not pretending queer methodologies are not invested in subjectivities, as they are visually expressed in games as representational artifacts.

Materiality as Disciplinary Closeness

Disciplinary tensions within game studies are, like in most trans/interdisciplinary fields, rife – not in the least in relation to existing literary and screen theory (Anable 2018). At the same time, the field has to reckon with political tensions in games culture, and an ongoing othering of sexual and gender minorities in the games industry, in academia and in games themselves, which manifested in the 2014 gamergate event. This climate facilitates an enhanced necessity of positioning queerness in close proximity to medium specific objects, discursively constituting games as "queer (or at least queerable) at their core" (Shaw and Ruberg 2017, xiii), to convincingly and inarguably claim belonging in the industry, academia and the games themselves.

I read the orientation towards materiality as an attempt to both decenter the subject and depart from queer's proper objects (Weiss 2022, 3) and find queerness, not in characters or players' sexuality and gender or narratives dealing with these themes, but in games themselves. Material objects like hardware and code become imbued with queerness, and the implication is a notion that games as tech objects are queer in and of themselves. But this means, paradoxically, that the focus on materiality has the effect of de- centering queer subjectivity, but centering specific queer identities by making the subjects of queer game studies (the researchers, authors, and designers) inextricable from game studies and games, through this inarguable belonging and closeness. In this way, the material turn obscures epistemology, yet reinstates the liberal subject's centrality, as the orientation towards materiality becomes about scholarly belonging, a crucial academic survival strategy.

Fun as a Contested Signifier Between Subjectivities

The last orientation, fun, is a central site of contention for queerness. In the orientation towards fun, fun itself is either something that can be queered as queer fun (Chang 2017), something worth keeping in proximity to queerness, (Burrill 2017), or linked to

anti-productivity as a place of anticapitalistic resistance (Clark 2017). The orientation away from fun builds on Ruberg's (2015) work on no-fun gameplay as opportunities for "queer world-making" (Shaw and Ruberg 2017, xv), while challenging the dominant discourse that games are apolitical and just "for fun" (xxi). The orientation away from fun targets fun both at the level of game making principles, gameplay experience, and discourses pertaining to the cultural notion of the function and purpose of games.

On the one hand, queerness is linked to anti-productivity as a place of resistance and fun, and a frivolous waste of time. This expansion and usage of queer aligns with the tradition of using queer outside of its proper objects. Simultaneously, orientation towards queer fun draws back to circle queer's proper objects, as the experience of subjects (players) performatively constituted as queer through non-heterosexual practice and gender transgression becomes the primary analytical object. The orientation away from fun likewise circles back to queer's proper objects, but this time by re-centering queer artists and designers. Fun thus exemplifies the core tension Weiss (2022, 2) articulates, as this movement of reaching beyond queer's proper objects, simultaneously draws us back in. The orientation towards and away from fun can therefore be understood as a negotiation of belonging through affectual ties to games and game communities.

CONCLUSION

My aim with this paper is to critically examine the paradigm of queer game studies to understand how queerness and games intersect. In doing so, I have articulated three orientations: representation, materiality, and fun. Queer game studies is paradoxically oriented both towards, away from, and beyond representation, and representation serves a key function in establishing the paradigm. The materiality orientation directs queer game studies away from previous conversations about gender and sexuality in games and gaming, simultaneously as the orientation towards tech-materialistic objects

provides closeness, and places queerness and queer game scholars in proximity to games. Fun becomes, regardless of orientation, a site of battling subjectivities through affective belonging. My spatial discourse analysis creates a mental map of queer game studies: *Representation* is the constitutive outside, *materiality* that which anchors subjects to the inside, and *fun* facilitates which subjects belong.

My analysis shows that queer game studies is deeply invested in subjectivities. Nevertheless, it is precisely where I suggest that this transdisciplinary and delightfully messy field should direct its future attention. Queer theory has enabled gender studies to explore subjectivity and the politicization of desire for decades. This history shows us that how we conceptualize queer subjectivity greatly affects the politics of our research: Do we, in our digital joy, accidentally reconstruct and celebrate the queer, free, transgressive subject; consequently making other forms of queerness invisible? A logic of othering ultimately benefitting the white, liberal nation state, as Puar (2017) warns us. Or do we perhaps sometimes conflate, as Edenheim (2020) critiques, a "symbolic position of non-reproduction with positions of vulnerability" (30)? How we theorize the subject and queerness matters in terms of the research it allows, and determines where the radical potential becomes located. In short, if queerness and especially queer subjectivity is not backed up by theoretical and methodological sharpness, a big risk is always that queer collapses into a transgressive new liberal subjectivity in its seductive fluidity and elusiveness.

Queer game studies expands far beyond the anthology *Queer Game Studies* and the special issue of *Game Studies.* While the two collections established the notion of the paradigm, the orientations they make possible have been, and continue to be, tremendously important for research on queerness and games. For this reason, they warrant critical attention. This paper identifies multiple orientations, where queer gets meaning in relation to various objects in a dissonant network of signification. It would be antithetic to queer theory to propose one streamlined way of understanding queerness and games; indeed, this dissonant array of potential orientations can itself

be argued to compose the queer of queer game studies. However, my goal with formulating these orientations is precisely to allow for scholars to be able to consciously and critically engage with these multiple and contradictory ways queer gets meaning in relation to games, to strengthen the theoretical and methodological positions we write from. Providing care for, and showing attention to our tools, is a vital strategy for sustaining critical research, and queer remains a most crucial instrument in our feminist kits.

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2. APPROACHING FROMSOFTWARE'S SOULS GAMES AS MYTH

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ABSTRACT

FromSoftware's *Souls* series comprises five separate fictional worlds, and yet is considered a series with a 'spiritual' connection. Although the games share the same developer, special attention has been paid, both in popular discourse and in research, to the distinctive character of FromSoftware's world-building and storytelling. I argue that a mythological approach allows us to better outline, analyse and put into relation the elements of these games. Mythology is understood as a *model for understanding the world*, following the work of Frog (2021) and Roland Barthes

([1972] 2009). This builds on *mytholudics* (Ford 2022), which adapts this understanding for the study of games. Through this, I examine three aspects of a potential *Souls* mythology: desire and purpose, godhood and divinity, and fire and dark. Additionally, I consider how the *Souls* community negotiates the *Souls* gameworlds, relating it to the role of folkloric storytellers in communities.

Keywords

myth, folklore, discourse, narrative, FromSoftware, *Demon's Souls*, *Dark Souls*, *Bloodborne*, *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice*, *Elden Ring*

INTRODUCTION

Since the release of *Demon's Souls* in 2009, Japanese developer FromSoftware has found global success and acclaim. In particular, the success of *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware 2011) spurred a movement in digital games, sparking what is now considered the 'Soulslike' genre.[1] Soulslikes are typically third-person action- adventure roleplaying games with a high level of difficulty, whereby the player is expected to die many times, and in which the currency for levelling up falls to the ground upon death, and is lost if the player dies again before collecting it. They are often set in a dark fantasy world without much of a clear narrative.

It is this last point regarding narrative that I am concerned with in this paper. Here, the *Souls* series refers, in chronological order, to the FromSoftware games *Demon's Souls* (2009), *Dark Souls* (2011), *Dark Souls II* (2014), *Bloodborne* (2015a), *Dark Souls III* (2016), *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* (2019) and *Elden Ring* (2022).[2]

These seven games represent five separate fictional universes

1. Following the example of previous genres named after highly influential games, such as Metroidvanias, roguelikes and even *Doom*-clones.

2. With *Demon's Souls*, *Dark Souls* and *Dark Souls II*, the series was referred to as the *Souls* series. With the release of *Bloodborne*, it became known as the *Soulsborne* series. With Sekiro it became the Sekisoulsborne series. The Frankenstein title could not bear

(with only the *Dark Souls* titles sharing the same world). And yet, these fictional universes bear striking similarities to each other. Yes, this can largely be explained by them having a shared developer and (with the exception of *Dark Souls II*) creative director, Hidetaka Miyazaki. But what is more interesting to me is precisely *how* these titles occupy distinct fictional worlds in which one can hear echoes of the others. Experienced FromSoftware game players can often predict the trajectory of the quests in a new *Souls* title. New characters feel familiar.

Many have attempted to describe FromSoftware's distinctive style in both popular and academic discourse.

For popular discourse, Erik Kain (2012) outlines *Dark Souls*' "archaeological" storytelling; Jon Richter (2021) describes the "'Soulsian' approach to storytelling" as an "ambiguous" narrative that favours "lore" over "plot"; Mike Worby (2021) discusses the "art of obscure storytelling" in *Dark Souls*; and Cian Maher (2021) argues that "the main thing [the *Souls* games prior to *Elden Ring*] all have in common ... is ambiguity" and that the "fragmented narratives" of the games rely on "environmental storytelling".

In research, Felix Schniz (2016) describes *Bloodborne*'s "cryptic ludonarrative"; Franziska Ascher (2014) uses the frame of "environmental storytelling"; Andreas Theodorou (2020) explores the "cryptic and fragmented nested narratives" of FromSoftware games; and Madelon Hoedt describes the *Soulsborne* games (until *Bloodborne*) as "moving away from more traditional, linear models" of narrative, in which "the game's narrative is instead dispersed, found in cutscenes and dialogue, hidden within item descriptions and visual details, scattered around its world" (2019, 3).

I argue that a framework of narrative is ultimately limiting. Often, either crucial aspects of the games and their worlds are ignored (because they are non-narrative), or the concept of narrative or story is stretched so far that it becomes imprecise and unhelpful.

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the addition of Elden Ring, and so here I revert to referring to them all as the Souls series.

Instead, I propose that a framework of myth helps us to best grasp the ways in which FromSoftware games are seen to share a common core. Building on an approach that I outlined, called *mytholudics* (Ford 2022), I instead argue that we can better understand FromSoftware games by conceiving of the connection between them as a common *mythology* in the sense of a *model for understanding the world*. This manifests in narrative structures as well as themes, motifs, architectural styles, spatial configurations, characters, events and so on. This framework helps us more precisely identify what it is that gives FromSoftware games (and perhaps Soulslike games more broadly) a sense of spiritual continuity.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND METHOD

The understanding of mythology used here is derived primarily from Frog's (2021) work on *mythic discourse analysis*. For Frog, mythology is "constituted of signs that are emotionally invested by people within a society as models for knowing the world" (2021, 161). Mythic discourse then "refers to mythology as it is used, transmitted, and manipulated in a society" (2021, 161). Frog's method allows for the production of a *symbolic matrix*, which has the advantage of "providing a consistent framework for addressing narratives of different genres, rituals, taboos, and so on" (2021, 161). Adapted for digital games, rules, systems, gameplay mechanics, quest structures and so on can all fit into this consistent framework.

Crucially, as suggested by the name of the method, Frog distinguishes between myth and mythic *discourse*. This provides some distance from previous structuralist approaches (most notably Lévi-Strauss 1955). Mythic discourse analysis performs the more specific task of analysing the ways in which a mythology is "used, transmitted, and manipulated in a society" (Frog 2021, 161), rather than claiming to reveal some fundamental truth. However, this is complicated in games, as I explain later.

I apply Frog's approach to games, and combine it with an emphasis on the work of Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* ([1972] 2009),

in particular his ideas of *naturalisation* and *tautology*. In a sentence, mythologies are models for knowing the world that have become naturalised and self-justifying within a particular society or context. Centring on a 'model' is important for a few reasons. First, it establishes that stories, rituals, superstitions, customs of behaviour and so on are all expressions *of* a mythology, rather than the mythology itself. Second, models are predictive: once the logic of the model is internalised by an adherent, new information and situations can be quickly parsed and decisions can be made on the basis of what the model suggests the consequences will be.

I argue that games can be analysed *as* mythological models (Ford 2022). The elements that make up the gameworld habituate the player into a particular model for knowing the (game)world. As players, we learn over time what is and is not meaningful within the gameworld. Once we are habituated, we make predictions and inferences about, for example, quest structures, how to defeat a new boss, how to navigate a new area, what the consequences of certain choices will be.

Games are particularly powerful in this regard in that they are also *simulations*. When playing a game, the player cannot choose whether to adhere to the mythological model: it is enforced (particularly in digital games where it is enforced computationally). When I play *SimCity* (Maxis Emeryville 2013), I am forced to accept that there is an optimal income tax rate, and it is approximately 12%.

This approach to mythic discourse can be applied to games: rather than considering the mythic discourse of a particular community, it can be used to describe how a gameworld is structured and upon what premises it is built (Ford 2022). However, this is complicated by the dual simulational/representational function of digital games – and, indeed, of computers themselves, being both a simulation *and* a representation of (a part of) reality (Agre [1997] 2014, 131).

A gameworld can be seen as a representation of the world or of ideas about the world. Work on the simulatory qualities of games also suggests that we cannot *only* consider games as representational in the same way as other media forms (Aarseth 2007; Köstlbauer 2013;

König and Rusch 2007). We are not only presented a world, we are given a world to inhabit, to act within. I argue that it is our similarly dual status as both inhabitants of the gameworld but also as people who exist outside of it that allows us to see games as mythic discourse, even though, when analysed from this perspective, treating the game as discourse also describes how it functions as a simulation, as an emulated reality. This is why I suggest we view games both *as* and *through* myth, with the former being about taking the gameworld on its own terms, and the latter about looking past the gameworld to trace the broader influences that led to that gameworld. This extends into the complex interplay between gameworlds as emulated realities, but also as discourse of a kind, and the discourse that then surrounds the gameworlds themselves: discourse on discourse.

At this point I must caveat my approach – particularly my later points regarding folkloric storytelling. FromSoftware is a Japanese developer with a global following. I cannot hope to cover such reach adequately and representatively, and so this article should be understood as my perspective from my viewpoint, playing the English-language versions of the games and viewing the online, Anglophone discourse surrounding the games (and not, for instance, Japanese-language discourse). I also stop short of a deeper look at how a potential mythology of FromSoftware games emerges from FromSoftware's history and position within contemporary Japanese society and culture.

This also represents one of the drawbacks of this approach. In part because it focuses on the connections between elements, and in part because of the global distribution and reception of these games, my approach here cannot get into the nuances and specificities of FromSoftware games' cultural situatedness. There is an interesting and long discussion to be had about the 'Japaneseness' of FromSoftware games, combined with their open use of Western signs, symbols and traditions (made explicit in interviews, see, e.g., Sliva 2015), but that would represent a later step than is covered in this work. My analysis here forms a basis on which to understand FromSoftware games as having a shared mythology, and *then* we could move

forward to understand more thoroughly the origins of such a mythology.

Frog's mythic discourse analysis works by identifying *integers*, and putting them into relation with one another in *equations*, represented by the use of small capitals. An integer is "a distinguishable unit (of whatever sort) ... An indicator that something is an integer is precisely the ability to talk about it as a unit" (2021, 169). This definition is intentionally ambiguous, because what constitutes an integer is identified from an emic perspective.

Frog categorises integers as the following:

Image: Comparable to a noun; an image can refer to a specific entity, like the eponymous playable figure Sekiro (a *centralised* image), or a general type of entity, like dragon (a *decentralised* image) (Frog 2021, 172).

Motif: A dynamic relation between two or more images. These can also be centralised or decentralised (Frog 2021, 175): Sekiro slays Genichiro compared with playable.figure slays boss.

Partial: Elements that are closely associated with another integer, to the extent that either the integer can be recognised by reference to the partial, or the partial need not be stated and is simply presumed of the integer already. In Scandinavia, one-eyed is a partial because it is an integer that is particularly emblematic of the integer Odin (Frog 2021, 173–74).

Theme: A more complex construction consisting of "regular constellations of images and motifs" (Frog 2021, 182). This can be a narrative theme, but it can also be a branching 'if, then' pattern, a ritual, and so on.

Frog lays out other types of integers, but they are not referenced in this article.

In this paper, I apply this mythological approach to FromSoftware games. The goal is to examine whether there is any common mythology that runs through the *Souls* series, and if so, how it is structured. With this, we can more precisely describe why the *Souls* series have such congruent gameworlds despite being from (mostly) different fictional universes.

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THE *SOULS* SERIES

The *Souls* series comprises eight core games (plus downloadable content, remasters, etc.). The *Dark Souls* games share a fictional universe, while *Demon's Souls*, *Bloodborne*, *Sekiro* and *Elden Ring* each have their own separate world. I will begin with a brief overview of each game world.

Demon's Souls

King Allant's pursuit of Soul Arts has awakened The Old One once again, and now Boletaria is consumed by the Deep Fog and demons destroy the souls of the living. The player controls an adventurer who enters the fog to defeat King Allant and lull the Old One back to sleep. The player may finally choose to help the Maiden in Black lull the Old One back to sleep, or they succumb to the temptation of power and kill the Maiden in Black.

Dark Souls

The player controls a Cursed Undead who escapes the Undead Asylum to Lordran. There, they must find the city of the gods where they are instructed to succeed Lord Gwyn. Gathering the four Lord Souls, the player must defeat Gwyn and then decide whether to succeed him by linking the flame, or let it die out and usher in the Age of Dark.

In *Dark Souls II*, the player is also an Undead. They travel to the fallen kingdom of Dranglaic to try to break the Undead Curse. Guided by the Emerald Herald, the player finds Queen Nashandra, who instructs them to kill the king. However, it becomes clear that Nashandra is the cause for the kingdom's destruction due to a war with the Giants. The player must access the memories of the Giants,

defeat the Giant Lord, absorb its power, and defeat Nashandra. In the *Scholar of the First Sin* version (FromSoftware 2015b), the player may choose to ascend the throne, continuing the cycle of the Age of Fire and Dark, or abscond it, with unclear consequences.

Dark Souls III is set in Lothric. With the Age of Fire dying, Prince Lothric has abandoned his duty to link the flame. The player controls an Undead who failed to become a Lord of Cinder. They must defeat each of the Lords of Cinder, travel to the Kiln of the First Flame and defeat the Soul of Cinder, an amalgamation of all those who have linked the flame in the past. They may then choose to link the fire, extinguish the flame and usher in the Age of Dark, or take the flame for themselves and become the Lord of Hollows.

Bloodborne

Set in the gothic, Lovecraftian Yharnam, the player controls a Hunter. The Hunter travels to Yharnam seeking a cure for the Pale-blood, an unspecified illness. The city, however, has been overrun by a plague that transforms Yharnam's citizens into beasts. The Hunter seeks a cure for the plague, and in doing so discovers that the residents of Yharnam worship eldritch gods known as the Great Ones. The player finds the source of the nightmare in the form of Mergo. Once Mergo is dead, the player may awaken from the Hunter's Dream, refuse to and become bound to it, or (with additional steps) become an infant Great One themselves.

Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice

The only FromSoftware game that explicitly references real-world locations, *Sekiro* is set in Japan after the Sengoku period (from 1476 CE to somewhere between 1568 and 1638 CE). In Ashina, the player controls Wolf, a *shinobi*. Isshin Ashina is elderly and infirm, while the Interior Ministry invades. Isshin's grandson, Genichiro, seeks to

preserve Ashina by using the blood of the immortal Divine Heir, Kuro. Kuro asks Wolf to perform the Immortal Severance ritual, which would kill Kuro but also prevent people from fighting over his blood. The player must collect the ritual ingredients and perform the ritual.

There are three other endings. In the Shura ending, Wolf sides with his adoptive father, Owl, who also seeks Kuro's blood, and kills Emma, Kuro's doctor, and Isshin, with the bloodlust turning Wolf into a demon. In the Purification ending, Wolf works with Emma to instead discover a way to sacrifice himself instead of Kuro. In the Dragon's Homecoming ending, a complex series of steps leads to Kuro's corporeal form dying, but his spirit form living on.

Elden Ring

Elden Ring is set in the Lands Between. After the shattering of the Elden Ring, the demigod children of Queen Marika fight over the shards, which hold power in themselves as Great Runes. The player controls a maidenless Tarnished of no renown who must follow the Guidance of Grace to the Erdtree in order to become the Elden Lord and repair the Elden Ring.

Six endings are possible. Four involve the player becoming Elden Lord, but with different Mending Runes, colouring the world they will rule over. In the Lord of the Frenzied Flame ending, the player becomes the Lord of Chaos and burns the world to a primeval state. In the Age of the Stars ending, the player instead helps Ranni the Witch to end the Golden Order and usher in a new order.

MYTHOLOGY OF THE *SOULS* SERIES

Here I outline four aspects of a potential *Souls* mythology and explore how each game relates to these and to each other. These four aspects are not exhaustive.

Desire and Purpose

The necessity for *purpose* and yet also its dangers seem key to the *Souls* series. The games are replete with cautionary tales of those who were fuelled by an excess of desire.

In *Dark Souls*, Seath the Scaleless is a dragon born deformed and blind. As his name suggests, he was born without scales, unlike the rest of his brethren, and it is dragon's scales that grant them immortality. This lack prompted an obsession for Seath with gaining immortality by other means, leading to him betraying his kind. For his betrayal, Seath was awarded a dukedom, and with that power he amassed an extensive library. He became obsessed with increasingly dangerous research into immortality, and the pursuit drove him mad.

In *Sekiro*, Genichiro's obsession with the heretical arts in pursuit of Kuro's immortality drives him to become a furious husk. "I will shed humanity itself", he remarks in a cutscene.

In *Elden Ring*, Rykard, once leader of a company of inquisitors for the Golden Order, "fell from lofty ambition into gluttonous depravity" according to an item description ('Gelmir Knight Armor' 2023), offering himself up to the God-Devouring Serpent so that he too could devour the gods (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Rykard, Lord of Blasphemy appears from the belly of the God-Devouring Serpent, offering the player to join them in gluttony.

From these examples, we can consider the broad decentralised motif agent desires power as followed by agent consumed by:desire. Examples of this in the *Souls* games include:

Game	Agent	Desire	Outcome
Demon's Souls	King Allant	Power (via forgotten soul arts) and ultimate peace	Old One is awoken, beginning the end of the world
Dark Souls	Solaire of Astora	His "very own sun"	Either madness, controlled by Sunlight Maggot parasite, or depression, despair
Dark Souls	Big Hat Logan	Power (via Seath's magical advancements)	Madness
Dark Souls	Seath the Scaleless	Immortality	Madness
Dark Souls II	Aldia, Scholar of the First Sin	Break the Undead Curse	Horrifying experiments on others; became a monster
Dark Souls II	Queen Mytha	Beauty, immortality	Becomes a monster
Bloodborne	Master Willem	Insight	Great Ones destroy Byrgenwerth
Dark Souls III	Slave Knight Gael	The Dark Soul	Madness, becomes a monster
Dark Souls III	Oceiros, the Consumed King	Immortality	Madness, becomes a monster, hallucinates a child
Sekiro	Genichiro Ashina	Immortality	Becomes a monster, sheds his humanity
Sekiro	Doujun	Immortality	Madness, increasingly heretical and vile experiments
Sekiro	Wolf/ Sekiro	Wrath, immortality	Becomes a *shura* (a demon or demigod obsessed with killing)
Elden Ring	Rykard	Devour the world	Madness, consumed by serpent
Elden Ring	Preceptor Seluvis	Collect 'puppets' (magically frozen people)	Becomes a puppet himself

Table 1. Examples of characters in each Souls *game whose desire has been their downfall.*

These examples show that a monomanic pursuit of a desire – particularly a desire seen as *excessive*, such as devouring the gods or obtaining immortality – leads to one's downfall, most typically becoming monstrous and/or mad. In its decentralized form, we could see it as the following:

- A1. agent desires unobtainable
- A2. agent fails to:obtain unobtainable
- A3. → agent goes:mad~becomes:monster
- B1. player slays mad~monster.agent

Of course, not all of these examples follow this structure exactly. Some of the consequences of their desires change, for example. But the consequence is always self-destructive. Two other aspects of this also come to the fore.

First is that the agent can be anyone: a nonplayer character (NPC) with whom all interaction is optional like Solaire; a central boss like Rykard or Genichiro; a dragon like Seath; or a god like Gwyn. Even the playable figure – in *Sekiro* – can fall prey to an excess of desire.

Second is that the fate of these agents is almost always to be killed by the player. Some of them are non-optional bosses – such as Seath, Rykard, Genichiro – others are optional – like Oceiros or Gael. Others are NPCs like Solaire or Doujun whose side quests involve the player assisting them in obtaining their prize, but ultimately end either in tragedy or with the NPC becoming hostile towards the player.

Figure 2: Solaire finds his "sun": a parasitic Sunlight Maggot, which turns Solaire hostile and he attacks the player.

Together, these establish *excessive desire* as a crucial part of *Souls* mythology. Within this model for knowing the world, striving for the unobtainable leads to doom. Myth works tautologically, and so at the same time, we can infer from those consequences of doom that that agent's desire was *unobtainable* and their drive for it *excessive*. When we see Seluvis turned into a puppet himself, we infer that his desire for an ever-increasing puppet collection was excessive and unobtainable.

Madness and monstrosity are the most common consequences of this excess, perhaps because these are, in a sense, constructions *of* excess. For example, Bridget Escolme notes that in early modern medicine (in the British context, at least), "excessive passion *was* madness and was caused by the same humoral imbalances as the passions. Mad figures in the early modern drama are excessive subjectivities" (2013, xxxv). Similarly, monstrosity is often thought of as a manifestation of excess (Oswald 2010, 6; Arumugam 2020, 47). Notably also, many of the examples I have listed are monstrous gods. Indira Arumugam argues that the sacred may be fundamentally monstrous: "first, as an insatiable appetite that exceeds ritual satiation and a profuse fury when defied and, second, as a sovereignty that

exceeds attempts to conceive of let alone neatly categorize them" (2020, 57). The *Souls* series seems to play with this idea of excessive desire, monstrosity and divinity. I consider divinity more closely in the next section.

However, a *lack of desire* is shown to be equally ruinous in the *Souls* games. For example, a character called the Crestfallen Warrior tellingly appears at the beginning of both *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls*. As the name suggests, he is deeply cynical and pessimistic about the situation of the world:

In *Demon's Souls*:

> You came for Demon Souls? Or to save this land, and be remembered as a Hero? Bah, it's all the same. You're just another prisoner of the Nexus. We're welcome here as long as we keep slashing up Demons. Hahahahah... (FromSoftware 2009)

In *Dark Souls*:

> Well, what do we have here? You must be a new arrival. Let me guess. Fate of the Undead, right? Well, you're not the first. But there's no salvation here. You'd have done better to rot in the Undead Asylum... But, too late now. (FromSoftware 2011)

In both games, the Crestfallen Warrior eventually goes mad or becomes a Hollow, indicating that this pessimism and lack of motivation the player is introduced to at the very beginning is also ruinous. Further examples abound. Vendrick (*Dark Souls II*) fails to stop Nashandra, and becomes doomed to wander the crypts as a Hollow. Hawkwood the Deserter (*Dark Souls III*), having abandoned his goal of finding the Lords of Cinder, welcomes the player by saying "ahhh, another one, roused from the sleep of death? Well, you're not alone. We Unkindled are worthless. Can't even die right" (FromSoftware 2016). It is worth noting, however, that this appears markedly more pronounced in *Demon's Souls* and the *Dark Souls* series than in *Blood-*

borne, *Sekiro* and *Elden Ring*. These worlds still ooze a certain cynicism and pessimism, but it is less overt, less central.

Figure 3: If the player kills the Sunlight Maggots before Solaire arrives, he is saved from insanity, but instead falls into despair.

This sense of a need for purpose can then be linked to the games' core gameplay loop and notorious difficulty. Each *Souls* game has broadly the same loop organized around a number of key aspects.

First is the combat, which is unforgiving. Chiefly, this is because animations cannot be cancelled, as in many other action-adventure games. Once the player has begun swinging their weapon, they are committed to it. Combined with the stamina system whereby attacking, dodging and blocking all consume the same resource, a total lack of which leaves one mostly helpless, and hard-hitting enemies, this makes the combat system feel punishing.

Second is the consequences of death. The player collects a resource (souls in *Demon's Souls* and the *Dark Souls* games, blood echoes in *Bloodborne*, experience in *Sekiro*, and runes in *Elden Ring*) which is lost upon death. The player may retrieve their lost resources if they can return to the spot at which they died. However, dying again before retrieving their corpse renders the resource perma-

nently lost. And, of course, the spot at which the player died is usually quite a dangerous one.

Third, each game features intermittent checkpoints at which the player may rest, heal, restore resources such as healing flasks, and spend their resources to level up. These are Archstones in *Demon's Souls* (which work slightly differently), bonfires in *Dark Souls*, lamps in *Bloodborne*, Sculptor's Idols in *Sekiro*, and Sites of Lost Grace in *Elden Ring*. However, resting at these checkpoints also resurrects all slain enemies.

Together, these elements form the core of the gameplay: the player battles from restpoint to restpoint, trying to avoid death but (often) failing. There is risk and reward: do you battle on, exploring an area more thoroughly, but risk dying even further from safety? When do you call it quits and return to the restpoint, giving up on reaching the next? An excess of desire will lead to the loss of vital resources, while a lack of purpose will mean no progress is made at all.

This may seem like stretching the metaphor a little, but it's a common sentiment amongst *Souls* players to relate the experience of playing the game to the concept of hollowing in *Dark Souls*. For example, writer and YouTuber Hamish Black has talked about *Dark Souls* as resonating strongly with his severe depression for this reason:

Black felt he'd found a game that understand [*sic*] what he was going through. He was like the Chosen Undead, surviving and thriving in a world indifferent to his presence. "Having a game reflect that idea to me was one of the biggest reasons I feel I've avoided a relapse," he said. (Black quoted in Gault 2016; see also Writing on Games 2016)

Giving up on the game due to its difficulty is thus equated with the player themselves 'going hollow' because they lack the drive of purpose in a world which *requires* it.

Godhood and Divinity

Being fantastical games, it is unsurprising that each *Souls* gameworld contains a set of higher powers. What is interesting is whether and in what way each gameworld's structure of godhood is similar.

Demon's Souls	God, The Old One, Archdemons, Monumentals
Dark Souls	Gods and Lords
Bloodborne	Great Ones, Kin(?)
Sekiro	Buddhist and Shinto deities, Divine Dragon
Elden Ring	The One Great, Outer Gods, Gods, Empyreans, Demigods

Table 2: *The structures of gods and higher powers in each* Souls *game.*

Three similarities stand out. The first is that each world is polytheistic; the second is that the gods are always fallible; the third, relatedly, is that the category of 'god' is usually not well- defined and can be the subject of debate even within the diegetic gameworlds.

It is not unusual for gameworlds to be polytheistic (Bainbridge 2013, 66). William Sims Bainbridge (2013, 82) argues that this is, in part, a way to represent competing factions and to justify the many different quests. This is clear in *Elden Ring*, for example, in which players do not have to excavate much lore to find competing factions whose quests are embarked upon in the name of different higher powers, such as the Greater Will or the Frenzied Flame. But the *Souls* games also tend to show polytheism not as a unified pantheon, but as a fracturing.

Again, this is explicit in *Elden Ring* in the event called the Shattering, which began after Ranni the Witch forged godslaying knives and plotted the assassination of Godwyn the Golden on the Night of Black Knives. As a result, the Elden Ring, which seems to define the

fabric of the world, was shattered, leaving the gods to fight over the shards.

In the *Dark Souls* games, there are many gods who play greater or lesser roles in the games. In the first game, for example, the player is told that the gods lived in Anor Londo, but fled after Gwyn, Lord of Sunlight, entered the Kiln of the First Flame. Only the Dark Sun Gwyndolin remains, alongside an illusion of Gwynevere, Princess of Sunlight. Other beings claimed Lord Souls, such as Gravelord Nito and the Witch of Izalith, granting them great power. The Anor Londo dynasty scattered, the player, seeking the Lord Souls, must defeat a number of these higher powers in battle, including a Hollowed Gwyn as the final boss. In *Dark Souls III*, few of these gods remain, and instead the player finds Aldrich, Devourer of Gods in Anor Londo. Clearly, this is not a united pantheon.

In *Bloodborne*, the Great Ones are multidimensional Lovecraftian deities whose thoughts and motives are unfathomable to humans (and those who do begin to fathom them become monstrous Kin). There is not as much focus on their combat between one another (though a note found in the Lecture Hall suggests the Moon Presence wants to kill the others), but the Great Ones are nonetheless fractured. For example, a Great One, Kos, is killed, leaving behind a frenzied Orphan of Kos. Their reproductive difficulties are also highlighted. For example, the item description of the 'Third Umbilical Cord' states that "every Great One loses its child, and then yearns for a surrogate" ('Third Umbilical Cord' 2020).

Sekiro is markedly different. The only *Souls* game that explicitly references real-world religions (except God in *Demon's Souls*), *Sekiro* is set in Japan, rather than an invented fantasy world. It is replete with Buddhist references in particular (Genovesi 2021, 37), as well as Shinto. 'Gods' are far more distant than in other *Souls* titles, but that does not mean divinity is not present. Kuro, Sekiro's ward and the focal point of the game, is the Divine Heir, whose bloodline bestows immortality. This is related to a boss in the game, the Divine Dragon. While not as factional or combative as other *Souls* games, it is notable that divinity in the game is not depicted as altogether *good*. The

game's central goal is to *sever* Kuro's immortality, for example. And the same ability that grants Kuro immortality, and Sekiro the ability to resurrect, spreads a sickness known as Dragonrot, which nonplayer characters become gradually more inflicted by each time the player dies (Figure 2).

Figure 4: Emma tells Sekiro that the power of the Dragon's Heritage also spreads the Dragonrot.

What is also notable about *Souls* games is that divinity and godhood are always questioned and challenged. In *Demon's Souls*, while Saint Urbain impresses the presence of the Christian God in the world (for example saying, "God has chosen you"), other characters such as Sage Freke imply that Urbain's "God" is, in fact, the Old One. It is unclear in the *Dark Souls* games whether 'god' is just a label Gwyn gives himself, or the status the bearers of the Lord Souls have. In *Bloodborne*, powerful Kin who have attained godlike powers are often mistaken (both within the gameworld and by players) for Great Ones. In *Elden Ring*, assisting Lightseeker Hyetta reveals the suggestion that the Greater Will is in fact only a fractured part of the One Great.

If fictional religions in gameworlds function as "world-building infrastructure" by drawing on our already-existing conceptions of

real-world religions (Gregory 2014, 134), or as "allomythic" metaphors for religion (Anthony 2014, 40), then this would appear to be a deeply cynical view of religion. Gods in the *Souls* games are fallible, killable (often by the player) and untrustworthy, if not either indifferent or wholly evil. The gods are flailing against seemingly inevitable apocalypses like everybody else – they just have more weight to throw around. The world with diminished gods is not necessarily shown to be *better*, but nor do the gods seem to bring about peace and prosperity.

This is supported by the fact that a number of these gods are also bosses: player/boss=protagonist/god is a common diagrammatic relation which puts the player in an antagonistic relationship with the games' higher powers. Lars de Wildt argues that religion in games often entails that "players from different (non-)religious beliefs take on different worldviews while role-playing the (non-

)religious Other" (2023, 118), and this seems true of the *Souls* games, but in a qualified way. When replaying *Elden Ring*, for example, we may 'try on' being a fully-fledged adherent of the Flame of Frenzy, or a devotee of Ranni. These tryings on lead us to different parts of the gameworld and to different endings and cosmic outcomes.

Crucially, however, moral truth is never afforded us. Higher powers, from whom we may in other religious gameworlds (or real life, of course) derive meaning, are still fallible and untrustworthy, even if we choose to side with them. This is reinforced by the games' endings being almost always ambiguous and Pyrrhic. In *Demon's Souls*, the Old One is put to sleep again, but with the ever- present threat of its reawakening, as well as the fact that so many have already lost their souls. In *Dark Souls*, prolonging the Age of Fire is depicted as futile, but it is not clear that the Age of Dark will be better. In *Bloodborne*, each ending is ambiguous. *Sekiro* ends with death, demonisation, or mystery. *Elden Ring*'s many endings each have dark implications too.

This diversity of ending options (common to all games of the series) in itself underscores this point, as well as their specific

contours. The player is never 'told' whether the higher power they chose to trust has made the world ultimately a better place, just that it has made it a *different* world. And yet each ending *is* coloured and defined by those higher powers in some way. A plurality of fallible, competing gods seems to be a defining feature of *Souls* games, even as their legitimacy, authority and power is perpetually undermined and questioned. This leaves an ambiguous, tense relationship between the player and divine powers.

Fire and Darkness

> In the Age of Ancients the world was unformed, shrouded by fog. A land of gray crags, Archtrees and Everlasting Dragons. But then there was Fire and with fire came disparity. Heat and cold, life and death, and of course, light and dark. (FromSoftware 2011)

The opening cinematic of *Dark Souls* impresses the importance of fire and dark in its gameworld. Typically, light and dark are strongly associated with good and evil (Le Guin 1975, 145; Thompson 1955–1958): light/dark=good/evil. But in the *Souls* games this dichotomy is more ambivalent.

It features most prominently in the *Dark Souls* games in which the Age of Fire is not taken as an unalloyed good. It is Gwyn's unnatural extending of the First Flame that causes the decay we see. Darkness – and the Age of Dark – is more associated with humanity. Darkstalker Kaathe tells the player that the ancestor of humans, the Furtive Pygmy, possessed the Dark Soul, and that their destiny is to end the Age of Fire. But what the Age of Dark, and Humanity, entail remains ambiguous.

In *Demon's Souls*, Saint Urbain refers frequently to fulfilling God's will by cleansing the world of dark souls, yet we are led to mistrust God.

Bloodborne is divided into three phases: evening, night and blood moon, linking the nightmarish dream in which the game takes place

with the darkness. The 'standard' ending has the playable figure killed, awakening from the dream to finally see a sunrise over Yharnam. What the day entails, however, and whether the day is not itself the dream and the nightmare reality, is unclear.

In *Elden Ring*, one of the very first NPCs the player encounters is White Mask Varré, who asks the player if they are familiar with "grace ... the golden light that gives life to you Tarnished. You may behold its golden rays pointing in a particular direction at times. That is the guidance of grace. That path that a Tarnished must travel" (FromSoftware 2022). However, the same Varré later in the game doubts the guidance of grace and attempts to convince the player instead to ally themselves with Mohg, Lord of Blood. As the player explores the gameworld, the bright, towering Erdtree is rarely out of sight, the source of grace, and a clear reference to mythological worldtrees like Yggdrasil. But this too is debated and challenged. The Golden Order, with whom the Erdtree is most closely associated, is regularly questioned, and an optional area of the game features the Haligtree, a rival worldtree.

Sekiro would appear to be an exception. While themes of light, dark and fire are present – for example, the game progresses from morning to noon to evening to night after certain major events – they do not seem to be a significant *cosmological* force.

As with the gods, then, in the *Souls* games (perhaps excepting *Sekiro*), fire and dark are meaningful images, but ambiguously so. So, typically:

light/dark = sun/moon = fire/shadow = good/evil

But in the *Souls* games we are left without the final moralistic association; the dichotomy simply *exists*:

light/dark = sun/moon = fire/shadow

This aligns with the conception of divinity, which likewise poses countervailing forces but denies any clear guidance. Indeed, guid-

ance provided is undermined, such as *Elden Ring*'s Grace, or Kingseeker Frampt's guidance in *Dark Souls* being later challenged by Darkstalker Kaathe.

Folkloric Storytelling

The notion of *discourse* in mythic discourse analysis is crucial. Mythology is not static, but always in flux, and so Frog stresses that "mythic discourse refers to mythology as it is used, transmitted, and manipulated in a society", and that this method "provides a platform for exploring what happens when mythologies are manipulated, when they interact in contact situations, and when they develop in historical change" (2021, 161). As such, it is important to examine *how* the themes, motifs and structures I have discussed so far have been transmitted and discussed throughout the community.

Many have observed the "archaeological" quality to narrative in the *Souls* games (Dodd 2021; Kain 2012; Caracciolo 2022; Smith Nicholls and Cook 2022), because, as journalist Erik Kain writes, each game "asks you to dig its story from the ruins and learn it on your own" (2012). But, in practice, we don't learn it on our own. We learn it from others. Alexander Jenkins argues that "the complexity lends itself to a narrative experience that invites, maybe even necessitates, participation in paratextual discussion by players" (2020, 134). Kevin D. Ball describes this process in *Bloodborne* as "lore hunts" among fans, in which players "collate in-game and intertextual resources to theorize *Bloodborne*'s story" (2017, para. 1.2).

Interestingly, Ball also notes that "these conversations often take the shape of speculative fiction" (2017, para. 1.2). This is demonstrated clearly by some of the most popular 'lore hunters' of the *Souls* community, such as VaatiVidya, Zullie the Witch, The Lore Hunter and Redgrave. These lore hunters not only collate and configure the games' lore from disparate item descriptions, dialogue and so on, but they typically describe it in a story format. For example, Redgrave's *The Paleblood Hunt* (2015) tells *Bloodborne* as a novel, and VaatiVidya

makes short films out of *Souls* lore and footage in his 'Prepare to Cry' series.

This is made possible by the internet, where the elements of *Souls* mythology can be collected, dissected and organized on forums, wikis, chatrooms and video platforms. This aligns the practice of discovering and discussing *Souls* lore with what Eric Newsom calls *Participatory Storytelling and the New Folklore of the Digital Age* (2013). Newsom argues that applying a folklore perspective to online phenomena such as Slender Man shows that such participatory storytelling has far more in common with traditional folkloric storytellers than with modern mass media. This has also been called the "open-sourcing" of fiction (Chess and Newsom 2015, 63), whereby there is no clear, distinct authorship and little in the way of authority over the text (complicating discussions of 'canonicity').

Rather than chaos, however, this more folkloric mode of storytelling leads to a balance between stability and flux. Chess and Newsom write that "while the myth is certainly not ossified and still has the capacity to shift and mutate, consistent functions have been established through the telling and repetition of several important iterations" (2015, 36). Elsewhere I have applied metaphors of ossification and fossilization to the percolation of mythology (Ford 2022): while a mythology is always in flux, over time certain aspects may solidify through repetition such that it becomes definitional or metonymical to the myth.

Applied to the *Souls* games, there is a tension. The *Souls* games have a distinct author – FromSoftware and, often singled out specifically, Hidetaka Miyazaki, creative director for all *Souls* games except *Dark Souls II*. This means that it is assumed there is a 'true' lore: "the lore is Miyazaki's 'puzzle'" (Ball 2017, para. 3.4). And yet, as Ball analyses, conflicts between lore hunters demonstrate that "individual lore hunts hold their own authorial charge" (2017, para. 3.4).

In this way, the example of VaatiVidya and other community lore hunters shows that *Souls* games are treated *as* mythology, but qualified. While Chess and Newsom's (2015) example of Slender Man represents a much 'purer' form of modern digital folklore, *Souls*-as-

folklore has the problem of authorial authority, while still demonstrating a similar *mode* of storytelling, one which is more akin to traditional folklore than to modern, author-centric mass media.

CONCLUSION

Can we see the *Souls* games as sharing a mythology, even if they do not share a fictional universe? To an extent, yes. There is no doubt variation, as with any mythology, but some core features can be identified. In this article, I have described three of these core features: desire and purpose, gods and divinity, and fire and darkness.

Desire and purpose perhaps form the most consistent set of motifs across the series, though it is more pronounced in the *Dark Souls* series and *Demon's Souls*. Again and again, both an excess and a lack of purpose is shown to be ruinous. Specifically, an excess tends to lead to madness, monstrosity or both, while a lack ushers a kind of zombification.

The games are all suffused with godhood and divinity in various forms. Indeed, divinity is closely linked to the previous theme of purpose, showing the gods themselves to be prone to both maddening excess and zombifying lack. This underscores the central tenet of divinity in the *Souls* games: powerful but not all-powerful (the non-divine playable figure slays many gods), fallible and largely self-interested. There is often an indifference towards humanity and other non-divines. Gods are not ultimate moral arbiters or sources of truth, but powerful competing interests. *Sekiro* incorporates in particular a scepticism of divinity, but stands out notably as drawing explicitly on real-world religions, in particular Buddhism and Shinto.

Finally, light and darkness, fire and shadow, sun and moon are all central images in the *Souls* series. Crucially, however, the typical association of these dichotomies with good and evil is assumed but subverted and undermined. The player typically begins following the path of light, but is given cause to mistrust the light and seek the dark. Fire has the dual purpose of casting light but also burning things down. The Erdtree being burned down in *Elden Ring* seems

like the light's betrayal of itself. The dichotomy exists, but is never granted a moral or cosmological finality, leaving it ambiguous.

I have also considered the mode in which the *Souls* games communities construct, configure, debate, determine and negotiate the games' mythologies. I argue that the often-narrative output of 'lore hunters' echoes the traditional role of storytellers in folklore, who use narrative as a tool for conveying the principles of a mythology to the folk.

While the *Souls* games are often considered and discussed separately according to their five separate fictional worlds, the links between them are also discussed, extending even to attempts to theorise a shared fictional world (e.g., Fox 2022; McCollum 2021; Siegle 2022; Chapman 2022; Duckworth 2022), and also to the FromSoftware series that are not examined here, like *King's Field* (Ellis 2022). Writers and videomakers often observe commonalities in FromSoftware's worldbuilding. My goal here is to suggest a method by which we can conceive of these similarities, identify differences and divergence, and analyse what the implications are of examining game series as mythology.

This is not intended to be exhaustive – I also considered, for example, the notion of the *chosen one*, which seems both commonly found in *Souls* games but also ambivalently deployed. Rather, in this article I aimed to outline an approach and demonstrate how it might work with the *Souls* games. Future work could extend the analyses here, and consider further categories, other FromSoftware series, and/or the Soulslike genre, for example.

Likewise, it is important to stress again that such a mytholudic analysis is always an analysis *from* a particular perspective, and which can only consider a certain amount and certain kind of discourse. I am a Western player playing a Western-fantasy- inspired Japanese game; my exposure to the discourse surrounding *Souls* games incorporates only Anglophone content on the internet and not, for example, Japanophone discourse. Mythic discourse analysis would be well-suited for examining potential differences between Anglophone and Japanophone discourse on YouTube. Do certain integers take on

different significance? Are particular motifs interpreted differently? Are there significant differences in what becomes canonised through folkloric storytelling?

With mythology as an analytical framework, and borrowing from folklore studies as a discipline, we can better compare these disparate elements of space, world, history, gameplay, dialogue and art, without assuming or requiring narrative continuity or linearity. With a mytholudic approach, we can identify whether there is a shared mythological model that binds each *Souls* game and, if so, what constitutes it.

My analysis demonstrates some of that connective tissue, but also highlights exceptions. *Sekiro* appears to be the most divergent title of the series. While it does incorporate many of those same elements, it often does so in a qualified way. *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls* seem to be closest to the 'orbital centre' of the mythology, which perhaps reflects their position at the beginning of the series, thus establishing many of the core features. However, it may also be because of my own bias: myth is always perceived from one's own particular vantage point. If my understanding of a *Souls* mythology begins with *Dark Souls*, then of course it will also be central in my analyses.

Regardless of centrality, we can conceive of some form of shared mythology across *Souls* games, in the sense that each fictional world operates on many of the same principles, although they may manifest differently. Crucially, even if some parts of this mythology are more or less emphasised or present in particular games, those games do not *replace* or *contradict* those principles. There is no *Souls* game in which light and dark *do* map onto good and evil straightforwardly, for example, but there are *Souls* games in which the light–dark dichotomy is less important.

We may also think of *Souls* games not as products of the *same* mythology, but as variations of mythology. Mythology is never static or fixed but alters over time and space. Contemporaneous communities in different locations diverge mythologically, just as one community's mythic discourse changes over time. This may be a useful way of thinking of the mythology of the *Souls* games: not the *same*

mythology but *variants* which show divergence anchored by a strong core, where some features ossify, but others come and go and change.

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3. CHARACTER-DRIVEN NARRATIVES IN D&D5E AND FATE: CORE SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

What if the characters we create in games could shape a game's storyline, making our character creation choices the driving force behind unforgettable narratives? This study explores character- driven narrative design in tabletop roleplaying-game (TTRPG) rulesets, aiming to identify features that lead to character-driven narratives. With consideration of the complexities of interactive mediums we use narratological ideas presented by Eladhari, Chatman, Todorov and others to compare the features of *Dungeons & Dragons 5th Edition* (Wizards of the Coast 2016) and *Fate:*

Core System (Evil Hat Productions 2013). We present a promising approach for TTRPG design, and argue that *Fate: Core Systems* active approach to using character traits to generate conflict leads to more character-centric narratives when compared to the Inspiration mechanic that many *Dungeons & Dragons 5E* players are familiar with.

Keywords

DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS, *fate: core system*, tabletop, roleplay, character, character driven, narrative

INTRODUCTION

The study of character and its impact on storytelling is essential for understanding interactive media's ability to provide meaningful narrative experiences. Tabletop roleplaying games, as a longstanding form of interactive media, excel in generating character-driven narratives. In this article, we compare *Fate: Core System* and *Dungeons & Dragons 5th Edition* (*D&D5E*) with the objective to clearly present the features that contribute to the former's effectiveness in developing narratives centered on character development and player agency. This focus is critical when considering the design of immersive platforms that rely on character-driven storytelling experiences.

Interactive media's capacity for character-driven storytelling depends on the support that the underlying systems give the participant to exercise creative freedom, to make choices, and to uniquely develop a character. This is especially relevant in tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs), which Zagal and Deterding refer to as "arguably the common ancestor of all forms" of roleplaying games (2018, 27). We focus on the well-known *D&D5E*, a system that has been near-ubiquitous within CRPG design, and present *Fate: Core System* as an alternative model.

We delve into the core mechanics, rulesets, and the methods they employ to facilitate narrative progression in these two systems.

D&D5E tends to rely on systems of probability and numerical skill differentiation. While it enables vast player autonomy by means of a class-based character development, it often constricts more situational narratives, driven by encounters and challenges predefined by the Game Master (GM). In contrast, *Fate: Core System* offers a flexible system that prioritizes narrative over mechanics, which results in a stronger emphasis on individual character narratives and an overarching story. It encourages players to help shape the world and the plot, thereby strengthening the connection between character development and narrative progression.

Throughout this article, we will dissect these two systems, explore how their rulesets impact storytelling, and underscore the factors contributing to *Fate: Core System*'s success in promoting character-driven stories and enhancing player agency. Our goal is to offer insights into the design and development of immersive interactive narratives, which depend heavily on the richness and consistency of character narratives. This understanding is essential in the face of a rising trend in media that emphasizes user input, cooperation, and active engagement in the co-creation of experiences.

RULESETS AND STORIES

TTRPGs are unique media objects that foster collective narrative experiences. Players, gathered around a table, roleplay their characters, constrained by a set of rules (a ruleset) that is administered and regulated by a game master (GM). This structured yet dynamic process defines the flow of a narrative that emerges organically during the play session. Zagal and Deterding comprehensively describe TTRPGs as follows:

> "Players typically each create and then control a fictional character within a shared fictional game world, maintaining character information (possessions, specific abilities, etc.) on a piece of paper commonly called a character sheet.2 Player characters' abilities are generally quantified (e.g. strength is 15, driving skill is 12). One special

> player – called the referee, game master, judge, dungeon master, or something similar – is the arbiter and manager of the game. The referee enforces the rules of the game, enacts the fictional world by telling the players what their characters perceive and what the non-player characters (NPCs) do. Players verbally describe what they want their characters to do, and the referee tells them the results of those actions – typically using a combination of improvisation and the game's rules, where dice are often used to determine the outcome of certain actions" (Zagal and Deterding 2018, 27).

While individual players drive the narrative through their characters by responding to structured prompts, the collective creativity and improvisation result in intricate, shared journeys that can be (in retrospect) understood as stories.

A ruleset, typically presented as published material, defines a TTRPG by describing the game system, and providing guidance to the GM. The systemic parts of the ruleset – the rules – directly influence play. These can include a list of possible player actions, combat mechanics, the calculation of numerical bonuses, or the progression of character skills. Essentially, the systemic ruleset creates a structured playing field, determining the constraints of the characters and shaping the way in which they can affect the narrative world. For example, in the *Player's Handbook* the rules in chapter nine delineate the actions that players are allowed to take during combat. These are the concrete actions that players can take during a combat scenario to affect the narrative world by attacking enemies, or casting spells (Mearls and Crawford 2014, 189-198).

In addition to the systemic rules, rulebooks commonly offer the GM guidance concerning creative writing, narrative pacing, conflict resolution, and managing player dynamics. This advice assists GMs in the facilitation of engaging and dynamic play sessions, which allows them to improvise when the mechanical rules don't cover specific scenarios. For example, in the *Dungeon Master's Guide,* chapter three offers suggestions about the type of challenges that can be introduced to players to create a compelling adventure or story

(Mearls and Crawford 2014, 71-81). Although this ultimately crafts the more immersive narrative experience, this essay distinguishes between the two forms of material.

While the mechanical rules provide a standardized framework for in-game interactions and decisions, GM advice allows for adaptability and creativity, catering to the diverse range of narrative possibilities and player choices inherent in TTRPGs. However, analyzing GM advice introduces an additional layer of complexity because it requires considering the GM's skill as a variable in the discussion. The influence of GM skill on narrative can vary significantly, making it challenging to isolate the impact of the ruleset on storytelling. Conversely, the systemic rules offer standardized methods for players to interact with the world across multiple sessions. The rules provide a consistent base for character behavior, which, in turn, shapes narratives in quantifiable ways. Thus, we primarily focus on the systemic rulesets, while acknowledging that GM advice and skill play a significant but more variable role in the narrative development.

CHARACTER-DRIVEN NARRATIVES

Chatman's analysis of narrative underscores the necessity of both events and existents for a story to be constructed. In his view, a narrative cannot exist with events alone – without existents it loses its shape and structure (Story and Discourse 1978, 113). Events are further divided into actions and happenings, categories that provide a useful semiotic lens for understanding narrative dynamics. In the words of A.J. Greimas, "whereas action is dependent only on the subject concerned with the organization of his activity, [happening] can be understood as only the description of this activity by an actant external to action" (A. Greimas 1990, 176). We may exemplify the dichotomy in the sentences 'Alex killed the dragon' and 'The dragon died', where the former is an 'action' driven by Alex's murderous nature, while the latter is a mere 'happening' in a world that may (or not) include murderous Alex.

Eladhari provides another perspective to our understanding of

narratives, differentiating between impositional and expressive narratives. The former refers to narratives where the main story arc is predetermined, and the player character's involvement is primarily reactive to pre-set events. The latter, expressive narratives, are emergent and adaptive, with the game system dynamically responding to the actions and expressions of the interactors. Following our previous example, an impositional narrative dictates the dragon's death, where an interactor playing Alex as a character must find motivation to kill the dragon (experience points, want for treasure, fulfill a quest). In contrast, an emergent narrative might allow a player to play Alex as a more compassionate individual.

In the context of TTRPGs, we introduce the idea of 'character driven narrative' to refer to narratives where the character's 'actions', rather than mere reactions, shape the course of events. The level of 'character drivenness' is evaluated based on the affordances that rulesets provide players. In our comparison of *D&D5E* and *Fate: Core System*, the emphasis is on determining how expressive the player-controlled agents or characters can be within these rulesets. This expressiveness, following Eladhari, is determined by the extent to which a player acts "in a performative role, adding to the fiction or character of a game [...] world" (Eladhari 2018, 69).

Characters in TTRPGs, as described by Aldred, serve multiple functions, including representing the player in the game world and advancing the narrative. They not only serve as cursors within the gaming universe, but are also pivotal to shaping a story. As players immerse themselves in the constructed narrative of a TTRPG, their perception fluctuates between identifying personally with their characters, and viewing them as separate entities (Aldred 2014, 355). This blurring of boundaries enriches the narrative immersion. Zagal and Deterding highlight, "we negotiate the narrative by taking action and making meaningful decisions, and we are also made aware that 'what happens next' may well depend upon us, upon our decisions, our actions, our values and motivations" (2018, 275).

The intricate relationship between player and character sets the stage of a deeper examination of how character traits shape narrative

in this context. Todorov makes a distinction between psychological and apsychological narratives. This distinction helps ascertain whether an event reveals a character trait, or if a character's internal motives and thoughts drive the plot forward. In both instances, the narrative events are intrinsically linked to specific characteristics or traits of the character (Todorov 1977, 66-69). The presence of these qualities incites characters (in both print literature and games) and players (in games) to instigate events within the story, highlighting the importance of clearly defining the idea of 'trait'.

Chatman tells us that "a trait is a personal quality of a character that remains consistent and belongs to a character for the narrative section that it is assigned to" (Chatman 1978, 125). While this definition might be good for static media such as literature and film, the more interactive quality of TTRPGs requires more specific determinations that include mechanical elements to facilitate narrative construction. This construction, Fullerton highlights, finds its heart in the resolution of conflict (Fullerton 2008, 43). Our comparison of *D&D5E* and *Fate: Core System* therefore focuses on the two rulesets' approach to character traits and the way in which they affect conflict resolution.

To summarize, we understand 'character-driven narrative' in the context of tabletop role-playing games as narratives that are significantly shaped by character's actions, guided by their inherent traits. In contrast to traditional impositional narratives, where events are pre-set, this structure leans towards expressive narratives, providing characters and players with the autonomy to influence the story's progression. Character traits, defined as consistent qualities that inform their actions and decisions, are pivotal in this dynamic narrative structure, since they kindle conflicts and create engagement, contributing to an intricate psychological narrative where a character's internal motives and thoughts guide the story.

DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS 5E

Dungeons & Dragons 5th Edition (*D&D5E*) is designed to support a

variety of game types, which are hereby detailed. An in-depth look will be taken into Player Character (PC) construction, with a focus on the Active and Reactive traits shaped by Ability scores, Race, Class, Personality and Background elements. The relationship between the Inspiration mechanic and the PC's Personality and Background will be explored, underlining the potential for character expression within this ruleset.

Dungeons & Dragons was created by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, who published their first book in 1974, thus birthing the entire genre of TTRPGs (Zagal and Deterding 2018, 68). The game's fifth edition, released in 2014, was led by Mike Mearls and Jeremy Crawford, and sets out to be a "game about storytelling in worlds of swords and sorcery" (Mearls and Crawford, Player's Handbook 2014, 5), with an apparent emphasis on medieval fantasy. It balances elements of both a universal system and a house system, indicating an intended flexibility and adaptability to accommodate different settings (Zagal and Deterding 2018, 71). The number of various settings and genres of game can be seen through the many published setting books. *Spelljammer: Adventures in Space* sets the game in a pulp style sci-fi space exploration. *Eberron: Rising from the Last War* sets the game in a war-torn noir style adventure. *Van Richten's Guide to Ravenloft* sends the players to the spooky hills of Barovia where the game becomes a gothic horror narrative. The variety of settings show that *D&D5E* has an adaptable ruleset.

However, it is notably rules-intensive. The foundation of these rules is laid out in *The Player's Handbook* and the *Dungeon Master's Guide*, but numerous other publications expand on it. Titles such as *The Monster Manual, Mordenkainen's Tome of Foes, Xanathar's Guide to Everything* and *Tasha's Cauldron of Everything* introduce additional, diverse, and optional rules to enrich the gameplay experience. The *D&D5E* system determines its dice rolls by using multiple types of die, but the main dice used throughout the play is the d20, as this dice is used for everything from skill checks, to attack roll, to various other rolls (Mearls and Crawford, Player's Handbook 2014, 6-7). In the system, the dice are rolled and then a bonus (based on the character's

skill values) is added and compared to the difficulty of the roll (DC), and then a binary success or failure is assigned based on the result (Mearls and Crawford, Player's Handbook 2014, 7). This roll may also be granted Advantage or Disadvantage, which is the system whereby a player will roll two dice and take the higher or lower result respectively for any skill check, attack roll, or saving throw (Mearls and Crawford, Player's Handbook 2014, 173). The Advantage/Disadvantage mechanic is important as it later plays into rewards for characters and becomes the main way players can gain bonuses or penalties.

The mechanics that compose PCs are the basis for the systemic ruleset. These can be divided into Reactive traits and Active traits. Ability scores, Race, Class, and Background all fall under Reactive traits. We define Reactive traits as character traits that grant abilities, bonuses, or other mechanical ways for characters to overcome or exacerbate a present conflict. For example, if a character is faced with a door they cannot open, they might use these abilities to try and get through. The PCs in the system are primarily made up of five traits: Ability scores, Race, Class, Background and Personality traits (Mearls and Crawford, Player's Handbook 2014, 11-15). Ability scores, Race, Class and Background fall under the category of Reactive traits while Personality traits compose the players Active traits.

In *D&D5E* each PC has a set of six Ability scores which represent their competence in a particular ability, these are Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma respectively (Mearls and Crawford, Player's Handbook 2014, 12-13). Using these Ability scores, players define the prospective abilities the character has and how good they are at a certain task. The PC's race further augments these scores.

Each character also belongs to a certain fantasy race, which can be anything from a normal human to a Tolkien-inspired elf. This earns the player a bonus Ability score and also gives the player some special abilities that they can use (Mearls and Crawford, Player's Handbook 2014, 11). For example, players who choose to play as an Elf will find that their Dexterity score increases by 2 and they can see

comfortably in the dark (Mearls and Crawford, Player's Handbook 2014, 23). Yet, the trait that defines a PC in *D&D5E* is their Class.

At the time of writing, there are 13 official Classes; each with a multitude of specialized subclasses (D&D Beyond n.d.). These Classes and subclasses give the PCs abilities and define their systemic powers in the game. For example, a Fighter receives the ability to attack twice in a turn of combat, while a Bard can cast healing magic. This determines the main way the PCs interact with the system and the world.

Similar to Class, a character's Background grants a few additional abilities that PCs can use, and also provides a narrative backstory of what they did before they gained their Class levels (Mearls and Crawford, Player's Handbook 2014, 125). This backstory detailing however, has no systematic implications to it and merely acts as suggestion for a player. A PC's character's narrative traits end up being defined by their Personality, which constitutes the Active traits that a PC possesses.

The traits that determine the mannerism and behavior of a character in *D&D5E* are Personality traits. Each PC is expected to have a series of Personal Characteristics; these are: Personality traits, Ideals, Bonds, and Flaws. These form the basics of the character's personality, who they are, their connection to the world, and their character flaws. Personality traits are minor aspects of a PC, such as likes and dislikes. Ideals are moral and ethical principles that drive a character, such as beliefs. Bonds are a character's relationship to the world around them through specific characters and places, such as family members, rivals, or mentors. Flaws are problems that a character must grapple and deal with, such as vices or fears (Mearls and Crawford, Player's Handbook 2014, 123-124). These act as Active traits as players make their characters behave according to their various Personality traits. We define Active traits as character traits that motivate characters to act and create a new conflict. For example, a greedy character might want the treasure on the other side of the door, and thus may attempt to use their Reactive traits to get through the door. These Personality traits motivate

players to act according to these traits by rewarding them with Inspiration.

Inspiration is a boon that the GM can grant a player if they determine the player has acted according to these defined Personal Characteristics. It is measured by points, and these remain in the players possession until they decide to use them. Players can only possess one Inspiration point at a time. Players may spend points to give themselves Advantage on the next roll (Mearls and Crawford, Player's Handbook 2014, 125). By getting an Advantage, the player rolls two dice, and takes the higher one, granting them a higher chance of success. This bonus to their Reactive traits is an incentive to act according to their own character's Personality traits, but players are never forced to do this. This makes the feature optional: The player can choose to act according to these traits, and cause conflict or other difficulties for their character, but they may also choose to remain passive and reactive.

While these Personality traits serve as a cornerstone for the character-driven Inspiration mechanic, their role in driving the narrative experience beyond providing roleplay guidance appears somewhat limited.

We conclude with the thought that *D&D5E* excels at doing what Barton contends it was originally designed to do: provide players with the ability to experience immersion in worlds that are heavily based on the work of J.R.R. Tolkien (2019, 18), in which most of the character actions could be argued to be reactions to wonderfully crafted existents and events. This results in a system that facilitates the creation of impositional narratives, leaving adaptation and expression as optional features that heavily depend on the creativity and skill of both GM and player. While this model has had incredible success, we present Fate: Core System as a model that offers more guidance to construct expressive narratives.

FATE: CORE SYSTEM

Fate: Core System is designed for versatility, and can be used in a

variety of narrative settings. This system employs unique dice and ladder mechanics that classify successes and failures along a range of outcomes. Central to the game are the Aspects and Fate Points (FP) mechanics, which enable the activation of descriptors that influence the narrative by means of a game currency that is more complex than *D&D5E's* Inspiration Points. These systemic rules facilitate the dynamic emergence of narrative during gameplay.

Fate: Core System was created by Rob Donoghue and Fred Hicks in early 2003, and the newest edition, *Fate: Core System*, was released in 2013 by Evil Hat Productions. It aspires to be a flexible and streamlined TTRPG ruleset for players to use in a multitude of differently-themed game worlds (Balsera 2013, 71). Some examples include an ancient Roman noire world (*Eagle Eyes*), a Jane Austen inspired Victorian steampunk setting (*Romance is in the Air*), a sci-fi themed exploration of the benthic frontier (*Deep Dark Blue*), and a gothic vampire infested Wild-Western America (*Blood on the Trail*). This adaptability makes the systemic portion of the ruleset less strictly mechanized.

Characters within *Fate: Core System,* just like *D&D5E,* are composed of Reactive and Active traits. Reactive traits are mechanics such as skills, stunts, stress, and consequences. These traits can be considered reactive as they are used by players to obtain a goal, overcome a challenge, or react to an attack. These skills do not particularly motivate the characters to act. Motivation is structured by the unique Active trait, Aspects.

Aspects, alongside Fate Points (FP) and the Compel mechanic are the defining features of *Fate: Core System*. They are defined as "a phrase that describes something unique or noteworthy about whatever it's attached to" (Balsera 2013, 56). In this system, characters, objects, locations, events, and the themes of the game session itself are assigned various Aspects (Balsera 2013, 57). This means that Aspects are involved in anything that happens in the game. Barring special cases, such as having the Aspect 'Ruthless Killer' in a murder mystery game, where Aspects must be kept secret, all Aspects are known to all the players at the table.

Each PC in Fate is made up of five unique Aspects. These Aspects

are a High Concept, a Trouble, and The Phase Trio, which is made up of three Aspects (Balsera 2013, 30). The latter determine the main ways in which players act within the diegetic world and the narrative. It is through these Aspects that players are encouraged (if not forced) to be proactive and participate in a "tabletop roleplaying game, about proactive, capable people who lead dramatic lives" (Evil Hat Productions n.d.). Moving forward, we explore these five Aspects.

The High Concept of a character in Fate is what defines them in a short phrase. It "sums up what your character is about – who he is and what he does. It's an aspect, one of the first and most important ones for your character." (Balsera 2013, 32). Examples of these include: 'Detective for Hire', 'Soccer Mother of 4', or 'Overworked Academic Scribe'. This aspect creates the image of a person in players' heads and is the primary tool used to communicate the players' assumed identity and role within the narrative construction process.

The next Aspect is the Trouble Aspect. This Aspect defines a part of the character that makes life difficult for them in the narrative. This aspect can be anything from personal struggles emotional or physical, or relationships with family members (Balsera 2013, 34). This Aspect is unique; if it is Compelled by the GM, a player must spend an FP to reject this. This makes it a harder Aspect to mitigate, since players must use an FP to avoid this complication. Eventually the player runs out of FP and will be forced to act accordingly.

The Phase Trio are Aspects of secondary importance, but they add more intricacy to a character. These are related to Personality traits or relationships developed during three adventures (Balsera 2013, 38). Along with the other two, they can be invoked by players for systemic advantages if they are related to a situation presented by the GM as play develops (Balsera 2013, 68). For example, if a character has the Aspect 'Always dressed to kill' they may more easily impress another character with their appearance if the Aspect is invoked during play. Aspects that are invoked must be relevant to the scene in which they take place. These Aspects are invoked using FP.

FPs are a non-diegetic currency the players can accumulate and spend to activate Aspects. Each player receives a set amount of FP at

the start of every game session, and they can be regained if another player Compels an Aspect. This allows for an exchange of players Compelling and using FP to dramatically change the direction the narrative takes. For example, the GM can Compel a player's Aspect to introduce a complication in the scene, such as a problematic NPC from the character's past. The player gains an FP from this, and uses it to Compel a different characters Aspect to introduce more complications into the scene. This makes the narrative construction process more cooperative, as it gives the players ways to introduce dramatic scenes into the game. Though the GM still acts as enforcer and arbiter, players can also act as storytellers rather than just actors.

Compelling is the main mechanic that allows characters to be active character-driven participants of the narrative. "If [the PC is] in a situation where having or being around a certain aspect [means their] character's life is more dramatic or complicated, someone can compel the aspect" (Balsera 2013, 71). Compelling an Aspect is an action that another player or the GM can do non-diegetically. A player, whose character's Aspect is Compelled, must take a relevant action to generate conflict for their character.

There are two different types of Compels: event-based Compels, which cause problem scenarios to arise; and decision-based Compels, which force characters to pursue certain Aspects (Balsera 2013, 71-77). As an example of an event-based Compel, a character with the Aspect 'Missing Father' might run across their father, find a clue relevant to their father's location, or meet the character that kidnapped their father. As an example of a decision- based Compel, the same character might decide to break into the building where they think there might be a clue, get enraged at a discussion going on about the great relationship an NPC has with their father, or leave a scene to look for their father.

The Compel mechanic allows the PC to actively seek encounters, or have the willingness to act within a scene. In combination with Aspects that list the major traits of a character, FPs that reward players for accepting Compels and Compelling other PC's aspects,

and a system that creates conflict relevant to the character *Fate: Core System* allows Active traits to play a significant role within the game.

Distinguishing the Compel mechanic from comparable game features is essential for its comprehensive understanding, especially when considering similar features in other rule sets. In *D&D5E* there are certain abilities that allow players to take control of other characters in a similar way. For example, the *Charm Person*, *Compelled Duel*, and *Dominate Person* spells all force a character to make decisions based on what another PC or NPC commands (Mearls and Crawford, Player's Handbook 2014, 221-235). These force characters to make certain decisions and get themselves into conflict, however, these are all diegetic and not choices the characters made themselves, or dramatic scenes that the players forced upon them. These types of abilities would be considered reactive, as characters use these abilities to overcome a challenge or accomplish a goal, and characters are simply being affected by an ability.

We conclude that *Fate: Core System* is a universal system suitable for any kind of diegetic world or story. Characters within it, just like in *D&D5E,* are composed of active and Reactive traits but the defining feature of the system are Aspects. Aspects are short phrases that define traits about characters. These Aspects can be activated using Fate Points, a non-diegetic currency. Once activated they can either be used for a mechanical bonus through Invoking, or they can be Compelled. Compelling an Aspect allows the GM or player to introduce a complication into the scene or force a character to act in a certain way that gets them into the conflict. This allows character-driven narrative generation, as players, to Compel Aspects to use their PC's traits to drive a narrative. We believe this system to be a guide to generating more expressive narratives, as it turns narrative construction from a reaction-based process into a more active one.

CONFLICT GENERATION IN D&D5E AND FATE: CORE SYSTEM

So far, we have established that character traits are the engine of

TTRPGs, driving events and shaping stories, and that characters exist as distinct, yet crucial entities within the narrative fabric through which they participate in a construction process in active or reactive ways. These relationships give birth to what we refer to as 'character-driven narrative,' where the personality and qualities of PCs generate and drive conflict. Both *D&D5E* and *Fate: Core System* facilitate such narratives, leveraging their unique rulesets. By examining and evaluating the effectiveness in which each system deals with conflict, a clearer understanding of their respective roles in generating narratives centered around character development can be presented.

As Fullerton explains, conflict emerges from elements such as challenges, opponents, puzzles, or dilemmas. Players are tasked with navigating and resolving these conflicts using the rules of the game (2008, 77). Though this idea is specific to ludic environments restricted in stringent rule systems, it works from a narrative perspective as well. As explained in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, conflict in a narrative refers to the opposition that arises between characters or ideas (Abrams and Geoffrey 2008, 265). Conflict tends to arise when clashing goals appear within a text. This applies to TTRPGs, in the sense that, when PCs are faced with challenges that they must overcome that prevent them from getting to their goal, conflict is created.

D&D5E Reactive traits are used to overcome, or exacerbate, an already existing conflict. Racial traits or abilities are used to overcome challenges that the GM has prepared ahead of time. There is no overlap between the reactive traits and the Active traits within *D&D5E,* as none of the Reactive traits generate narrative moments. For example, a player having a low Strength score might find themselves being unable to climb a cliff face. However, this trait did not systematically generate this challenge: the existence of the cliff face was entirely the responsibility of the GM, and the motivations of the character for climbing this cliff face were determined in other diegetic nonsystematic way.

In *D&D5E,* the GM typically crafts conflict ahead of time and then introduces them to players. Players, however, are able to spark conflict through Active traits. Personality traits serve as roleplaying

guides that can trigger in-scene conflicts, and this is incentivized with Inspiration Points. Yet, the effectiveness of this incentive can be undermined by the system's reward structure. The advantage granted by spending Inspiration Points, which improves a single roll, isn't a unique reward – many other in-game scenarios, such as assisting another character, also provide this advantage (Mearls and Crawford, Player's Handbook 2014, 173). This lack of uniqueness may fail to motivate players to act according to roleplay in this way, as the reward they would receive for doing this can easily be obtained in other ways. Consequently, players might not feel encouraged to fully utilize their characters' traits.

Fate: Core System, similar to *D&D5E,* has Reactive traits and Active traits. A difference between the two systems is that, in *Fate: Core System,* the Aspect mechanic works both as a Reactive and as an Active trait. This is because, though Aspects can be used to overcome or exacerbate conflict, it can also create an entirely new conflict. This is performed either by Compelling a decision or an event-based Aspect. This forces the scene to be relevant to the character's direct traits and forces them to take action relevant to their traits. It directly uses a mechanical rule system to generate a conflict based on a PC's traits. *Fate: Core System*, through Invoking and Compelling mechanics, narrows down the endless possibility of narratives, and focuses on specific traits that PCs possess, making the game, by necessity, character-driven. This does a much better job than *D&D5E* at consistently generating character-driven narratives.

There are, however, some potential problems with *Fate: Core System*'s approach to generating narratives. The events that are triggered, and decisions that are made, become limited, as players are heavily motivated and often forced to act according to five Aspects determined by character creation. This can limit the freedom to explore other sides of characters by boiling down multiple traits into small phrases. Similarly, if characters, as they are in *Fate: Core System,* are immediately forced to act upon their traits, it deprives that character of choice and makes them direct functions of plot, as is the case with apsychological narratives.

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CONCLUSION

In this analysis, we have discussed the concept of 'character-driven narrative' as it relates to tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs), distinguishing it as a process of narrative construction that is significantly influenced by character actions motivated by their inherent traits. Unlike traditional impositional narratives with predetermined events, character-driven narratives lean towards an expressive style, offering players a degree of control over the story's progression. Herein, character traits are identified as consistent qualities that inform 'action' and play a pivotal role in structuring narrative by kindling conflict and fostering engagement.

Our comparison of the two popular TTRPGs, *Dungeons and Dragons 5th Edition* and *Fate: Core System*, showed how each system approaches character-drivenness in their narrative construction process. *D&D5E*, a rules-intensive system, embraces a medieval fantasy aesthetic, and relies on binary success-failure outcomes derived from dice rolls. Although the comprehensive character creation process affords deep customization and the defining of unique Personality traits, the role of these traits in driving the narrative seems limited. They predominantly serve as a basis for the Inspiration Point mechanic, but the limited use of Inspiration Points is a poor motivator. Thus, *D&D5E* excels in constructing impositional narratives, with characters reacting to intricately crafted existents and events. Yet the potential for adaptability and expression in this system heavily relies on the creativity and skill of both the GM and the player.

Conversely, *Fate: Core System* presents a universal system apt for any story setting. Its key feature, Aspects, are short phrases that define character traits, and they can be activated using a more complex system, Fate Points. Activation can result in either a mechanical bonus through Invoking or Compelling, where a complication is introduced into the scene, or a character is forced to behave in a way that triggers conflict. This mechanic enables character-

driven narratives by allowing players to participate in the narrative creation process by using their character's traits, thus fostering a more communicative process.

The difference between the two systems is evident in their approach to rewards. In *D&D5E*, the ubiquitous nature of Advantages may lead to a reduction in player motivation to role play, and therefore a reduction in character-drivenness in the resulting narratives. On the other hand, *Fate: Core System* utilizes mechanics like Invoking and Compelling to manifest specific character traits in several possible ways, making the game intrinsically character-driven.

Both systems have their merits and niches, depending on the desired narrative experience, however. *D&D5E* fosters a more controlled setting with its very well delineated array of rules. *Fate: Core System* offers a framework that promotes expressive narratives, centered around character traits. In both cases, the way in which both rulesets define traits is the basis of player interaction with the fictional world, as they define their active participation and the joint crafting of an experience.

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4. 1001 FOLLOWERS IN 20 DAYS

FRAMING THE PLAYFUL USE OF FAME-ENHANCING BOTS ON INSTAGRAM

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I investigate the use of fame-enhancing bots on Instagram, a practice called *botting*. Based on the playful use of social media and online identity construction through self- presentation, I want to explore the notion of transgressive play and cheating within the Instagram community. The bot provider, Instazood, serves as a primary case study and object of study to examine and analyze the practice. Therefore, I compare their services with Instagram's Terms of Use and the Community

Guidelines, as well as the project's findings on whether, and how,

it affects other users and community members. I conclude that one can speak of a playful use of Instagram, and consider the practice of botting as a form of transgressive play that, to some users, is perceived as cheating the community on a moral level. Examining social media practices within the scope of the ludification of culture reveals further insights into being human in a platformized society, the notion of playful behavior of Instagram users, and the platform's rules of play, to the DiGRA community.

Keywords

LUDIFICATION OF CULTURE, playful identity, visibility game, Instagram, fame-enhancing bots, cheating

INTRODUCTION

"Influencers converge on the belief that they must play the game to attain influence—that influence is the goal of the game" (Cotter 2019, p. 912). The paper by Kelly Cotter addresses the practice of playing the visibility game, and how digital influencers and algorithms negotiate influence on Instagram. Since 2016, algorithmic ranking has determined which user and what form, or practice of use, gains visibility on the platform. As a result, users observe and mimick successful posts and profiles, assuming that Instagram's content moderation algorithms will possibly reward their imitated strategy with visibility. Cotter observes that "influencers' pursuit of influence on Instagram resembled a game constructed around rules embedded in algorithms that regulate visibility" (2019, p. 896). The supposed factors that increased visibility were increased engagement and followers.

"95 Millionen Bots: Der große Instagram-Schwindel"[1] was the headline of an article published in the German online journal *Focus*

1. 95 million bots: the great Instagram hoax (transl. by the author).

in July 2018. The author claims that bots and fake accounts appear in large numbers on social media platforms to interact automatically with other accounts, and spread spam content or advertisements (Erxleben 2018). This article discusses the phenomenon of large numbers of fake accounts. Investigating the scandal, I found another dubious practice on Instagram, involving fame-enhancing bots. These automation services can also be used as account management tools, or a service that does some of the work. In this respect, the bot is not simply programmed to act like a human for commercial purposes, but as a tool for ordinary Instagram users to manage their accounts, or boost their popularity. Instazood[2] is a provider of purchasable software that aims to generate "real" interactions and followers instead of simply buying fake ones. Therefore, the bot can like, comment, follow, and unfollow on behalf of the account holder's name (Instazood 2016). One strategy for playing the visibility game is using these automation services and bots. The German media scholar Oliver Leistert (2017) introduced the terminology of fame-enhancing bots. In everyday speech, their use is called *botting* (Tabora 2018). In this respect, I call users of fame-enhancing bots *botters*. Researching the practice of botting, it becomes evident that playing the visibility game with this strategy is not limited to influencers trying to gain influence. Ordinary users of various Instagram communities also use fame-enhancing bots.

The literature on bots has yet to address this specific form of botting on Instagram. This paper aims to explore and analyze the botting process to frame this practice. It is the first published article on fame-enhancing bots that describes the practice in detail, introduces terms, and reveals processes of use, and the perception and classification by the platform Instagram and its users. The paper presents fundamental work on which further research can build. Following a brief introduction to the social media platform, I will use

2. In the meantime, Instazood discontinued its bot service and reduced its service to a blog on social media marketing. Furthermore, they changed the company's name and web address to *izood.net*.

Timmermans' (2014) and Gergen's (2014) works, in which they speak of a ludification of culture and, a playful use of social media platforms, like Instagram, as a theoretical framework. How can its use be an example of the ludification of culture? In this article, I want to explore the strategy of botting in the visibility game as a playful use of Instagram. How does the practice of botting function, and how "successful" are automated interactions? To answer these questions, I carried out an autoethnographic project that comprised running and using a fame-enhancing bot by Instazood. Since the platform's affordances determine its users' possible actions, I argue that Instagram affords a playful use of the platform if we consider it a "performance of the playing self" within the scope of a ludification of culture. It could also afford a way of cheating (Gergen 2014). The confrontation of the botting practice with the platform's Terms of Use and Community Guidelines as Instagram's rules of play showed that it breaks its rules. The botting project's outcome uncovered the effects of the botting practice that are partly connected to identity construction by maintaining a profile on a social media platform. Therefore, I compare the botting experience to the notion of cheating. I finish my analysis by asking how botting affects the Instagram community.

The theoretical framework and an interdisciplinary approach enable studying everyday culture on social media platforms, like Instagram. The phenomenon of fame-enhancing bots and their use by ordinary users on these platforms is located at the intersection of various disciplines, such as social media studies, internet studies, sociology, and cultural techniques research. The interdisciplinarity of the research object calls for an interdisciplinary approach and methodology. As a scholar trained initially in music, film, and media studies, as well as art history, and working in the fields of internet research and media studies, analyzing the practice of botting from a game studies perspective can contribute to a better understanding of playful everyday cultures and their practices on social media platforms.

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PLAYING WITH INSTAGRAM

I briefly introduce the platform and delineate its use, addressing specific purposes, strategies, and practices. Instagram is a popular application for visual social media culture, and was initially created for iPhone users only. It was launched in 2010. Since then, it has developed into a platform with over 2 billion users worldwide (Leaver et al. 2020). On Instagram, users create and run one or multiple accounts where they set up a profile, including a profile picture and a short bio with the information they want to share about themselves or the content of their postings. Instagram users create content in the form of (moving) images, which implies editing and putting filters on them. They can publish their content as a post remaining on their profile, or as a story showcased for 24 hours unless they save it as a highlight. The posts on the timeline contain captions, including a set of hashtags. Users can perform specific interactions, such as following profiles or hashtags, liking and commenting on posts and stories, or directly messaging other users.

In addition to creating and maintaining a profile on Instagram, we also construct an identity. This identity construction is closely linked to, and constructed by, images. It functions as a visual, personal self-expression and, therefore, as an expression of self- identity (Serafinelli 2018). Like every other social media platform, Instagram has its own "styles, grammars, and logics" and affordances that contribute to the platform's vernacular, which is "also shaped by the mediated practices and communicative habits of users" (Gibbs et al. 2015, p. 257). On the one hand, it extends a particular use that the platform had in mind during the app's development. On the other hand, it is not solely directed by the platform. Still, it evolves dynamically by establishing new user- led practices "which employ the technical and communicative possibilities of the platform" (Leaver et al. 2020, p. 65). In Instagram's Terms of Use, the platform claims that its purpose is to connect users with brands, products, and services that are important to them. For that reason, all platforms owned by Meta, including Instagram, collect users' data, to show them advertisements, special offers, and other sponsored content. These platforms

explain that this service is as important to them as providing "all the other experiences" on Instagram (Instagram 2023b). Apart from that, platforms expect users to behave "authentically" and link it to their imagination of online identity construction (Matamoros-Fernández et al., in press). They do not specify their definition of "authenticity" but keep it ambiguous and narrow (Hallinan et al. 2021).

As Leaver et al. (2020) point out, influencers make up a significant amount of Instagram's user population. They also represent the dominant culture on the platform. According to Djafarova and Trofimenko (2018), social media platforms have spawned a new type of celebrity, called micro-celebrity. They are characterized by their popularity on social media, especially on Instagram, and by the high number of followers who recognize, admire, and aspire to emulate them. As Alice Marwick (2013) further outlines, being a micro-celebrity can be seen as an online performance and something that someone *does* rather than *is* in comparison to traditional definitions of a celebrity.

Due to their potential to influence their followers, micro- celebrities are often wooed by companies for advertising purposes linked to the various fields they promote on their accounts, such as fashion, beauty, motherhood, or specific hobbies. Their road to success is gaining as many followers and interactions as possible to grow their fan base. To reach a high status in the social media community, one needs to have many followers and a high engagement to one's content through likes and comments. This development led to the term *instafamous* (Djafarova and Trofimenko 2018, p. 3). Furthermore, Instagram's algorithms reward increasing engagement with visibility because it generates data they can sell to marketers and use it as a "proxy measure for user satisfaction" (Cotter 2019, p. 910). Besides the influencers, other types of communities and cultures exist on Instagram. They are organized around hashtags, interest groups, or follower communities. Interest groups are profiles of content creators according to a specific theme or hobby, including all sports, art, photography, pets like dogs and cats, lifestyle, beauty, and environment.

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EXPLORING the Playful Use of Instagram

In this section, I want to elaborate on the notion of playfulness that lies in the interaction with social media platforms, and argue that Instagram has an inherent ludic dimension that is connected to medium-specific qualities like multimediality, virtuality, interactivity, and connectivity (Frissen et al. 2014, p.10) and is characterized by a playful use of the platform. Drawing on Jeroen Timmermans' work, "Playing with Others: The Identity Paradoxes of the Web as Social Network," I analyze the playful characteristics of Instagram. In his paper, he states that:

> "Social network sites resemble games, because acting on them is characterized by a playful mood and has playful elements to it (humor, competition, teasing), but also because they constitute a world on their own. A world in which we can experiment a bit with our identity, without suffering immediate and direct consequences outside of the cybersphere." Timmermans 2014, p. 289.

Instagrams platform governance and the platforms affordances, as well as, user practices and their platform culture, found a playground for experiments with one's identity, as I have already pointed out. The history of the platform and how people act on it show various playful characteristics—first, the development of the app has roots in game design. In January 2011, three months after Instagram launched, Kevin Systrom talked about the genesis of the application. His basic idea was to combine some aspects of *Foursquare* and *Mafia Wars* (Zynga 2009). The first version of Instagram was called Burbn and featured location check-ins, future check-ins, awards for spending time with friends, and the ability to post pictures. After test-running it, Systrom and Mike Krieger simplified the app and concentrated on fewer features. Burbn was limited to posting photos, commenting, and liking, and was then renamed Instagram (Systrom 2011). According to its website, the platform, as we know it today, has

one mission: To bring its users "closer to the people and things they love" (Instagram 2023b). In this respect, the initial idea was to combine playful elements with some location-based and photo-sharing features.

Another playful element is the conception of social media platforms, since they induce playfulness and create worlds of their own where users can play with their identities. According to Jansz (2014, p. 269), personal identities manifest in communication. That is to say that communication between users' accounts impacts the actant and the interactant. Timmermans (2014) goes as far as to say that online identities are playful identities. He generalizes that these platforms "provide[s] the perfect stage for people to apply playful, light, and frivolous self-presentation as a way of dealing with utter seriousness and social pressure underlying the process of gaining status and the building of group identities" (p. 287-8). By quoting Raessens, he claims that it is this self- presentation, enabled by mobile telephones and social media, that contains playful elements. According to Raessens (2010, p. 8), these sites offer users the possibility to playfully express who they think they are and, more importantly, how they can be seen as more attractive in the eyes of fellow users. That means one can design and create a profile as a social identity as one wants to be perceived by others (Djafarova and Trofimenko 2018, p. 4).

Timmermans (2014) speaks of the ambiguous behavior of people in times of modern, mediated identities that become evident through their use of Facebook. On the one hand, they follow their interests, longing for self-expression and personal growth. On the other hand, they depend on communication and the extension of their community network. These ideas are adaptable to Instagram's platform. The individual interest of its users is, in the first place, to create content by editing and posting photos and videos. The content's creational process and moderation require specific playful handling of the audiovisual material. One tries to create an attractive profile to provoke interactivity. This is an action of self-expression to reach and interact with other users and the Instagram community, and to extend one's network. Content creators are, in that sense, dependent

on their community. Engagement and feedback through follows, likes, comments, and messages affect the content creation process in the way that users try to please their community.

Regarding the visibility game, users depend not only on communication with their community but even more on visibility through algorithmic ranking as a precondition to this communication. This public self-expression through the construction of personal profiles leads to interactivity among the users, and, as Timmermans (2014, p. 288) says, a "reflexivity [that] reflects on users' identities." The interaction with the community becomes as essential as the self-presentation on the platform. Due to its feedback structures and the resulting reflexivity, it influences the user's self-understanding and the construction of identity. High follower numbers and quantitative likes and comments function as rewards for a successful and admirable content creation that is simultaneously crucial for the visibility game. This leads to social competition: the amount of interactivity and followers that users' content provokes indicates status, and impacts user behavior to mimic and follow up on other, more successful users.

In Gergen's (2014) writing on "Playland," he speaks of a ludification of culture that augments through the playful use of social networks. According to him, a playing self is emerging who performs in a cultural life of game-like activities. Gergen categorizes three different forms of play; the first is called "social play." He considers it the constitution of most communication on social media platforms, and adapts it to the playful ambiance. The second form, "spectator play," is characterized by identifying with the subject and losing the sense of authentic being. According to Djafarova and Trofimenko (2018), it is expected that Instagram users are trying to imitate the success of their favorite celebrities, and long for a comparable positive engagement with their profiles.

The "competitive play" immerses the player into the play's world and invites them to become, as Gergen calls it, a "second-order self" (2014, p. 57). He concludes his argumentation with three different states of mind, depending on the form of play: "Activities in social

networks invite playing with one's identity, while spectator activities invite the imitation of players and with competitive games, one indeed does become a player" (2014, 63).[3] As the previous analysis has shown, all these forms of play take place on Instagram. The boundaries of the three categories are fluid and can be applied to the interaction of an Instagram user with the platform. Considering the interactive function to follow other accounts, and the rise of microcelebrities, the user also becomes a spectator being pushed to imitate the influencers' behavior, for instance. As I have already mentioned, the hunt for followers and interaction with other users, and playing the visibility game on Instagram, have competitive dimensions. This may imply an extreme competitive behavior that tempts to cheat. With the aim of boosting one's popularity on Instagram, one is likely to consider botting as a form of cheating.

PLAYING WITH *INSTAZOOD*

Due to their design of mimicking human behavior, and the resulting invisibility on the platform, fame-enhancing bots are difficult to trace and observe. Since Instagram shut down its APIs and cut researcher access to data on the platform, it has become difficult to collect data and research social media platform culture and practices (Leaver et al. 2020). To uncover botting and understand its practice processes, I chose autoethnography as a method, and ran Instazood's Instagram bot myself. The botting project serves as a case study to underpin the argument that botting is a form of play on Instagram. "Get followers on Instagram with our Instagram bot" was the slogan and main point of Instazood's advertisement of their product, along

3. René Glas (2013, p. 5) slightly distinguishes between player and user in his analysis of a playful use of Foursquare as an example of a ludification of culture: "The line between being a player and being a user is, of course, thin." Adapted to Instagram, one could think of a dual experience of Instagram as a game or photo-sharing app, since not everyone is playing the visibility game. Considering the argument of an inherent ludic dimension and the playful use of the platform, there is no distinction between Instagram users and players, only distinguished forms of play.

with the following message: "Start your growth today and get more Instagram followers easy, fast, and safe with Instazood" (Instazood 2016a). This company provided automated bot software that helped customers promote their Instagram profiles. Instazood's idea, similar to that of other bot providers, was to generate "real" followers through interaction: If one follows and interacts on other peoples' accounts, there is a high probability that they will interact with and follow back, in return.

Methodology

STUDYING a technological research object that is programmed and used to operate invisibly is a methodological challenge. There are no computational methods to retrieve data about interactions on Instagram. Interactions performed by a fame-enhancing bot are not distinguishable from those of human users, unless its preset comments contextually lead to the assumption, that a comment was not written by a human user but by a bot. Therefore, they are almost impossible to observe. For that reason, I could not find botters to interview. Consequently, the need arose to study fame- enhancing bots and their use with an autoethnographic approach, and become a botter myself.[4] This required not only using a bot, but also becoming a creator of content that may interest future followers. Autoethnography provides a different perspective based on personal experience that, according to Adams et al. (2017), complements or fills gaps in research that contradicts or offers alternatives to established research narratives. In this case, autoethnography, in the first place, enables access to the field and a method to study the practice of using fame-enhancing bots on Instagram. Another purpose of autoethnography

4. Snickars and Mähler (2018) ran a comparable project on Spotify to find out what happens when bots mimic human listening behavior on Spotify to the extent that it becomes impossible to distinguish bots from human behavior. Therefore, they programmed bots for various tasks and used them as research informants that generated empirical data.

is to "articulate insider knowledge of cultural experience" (Adams et al. 2017, p. 3). Using a fame-enhancing bot, I could reveal its functions, affordances, performance, and some implications to other Instagram users. The autoethnographic approach further allows one to experience and describe everyday practices and user behavior on Instagram in mundane settings. To evaluate the findings and frame the practice, I combined autoethnography and a close reading of Instagram's Terms of Use, as well as its Community Guidelines.

The botting project started by creating a new account, setting up a profile, and deciding on a specific theme for its content. For simplicity's sake, I created an online identity for my dog, having enough material to regularly post photos and videos of her. Every two days, I posted audiovisual material about my dog that my soon-to-gain followers could be interested in. The postings came with a caption that contained up to ten hashtags related to the content and everyday life with a dog. In a second step, I purchased a month of botting for ten euros via the bot provider, Instazood, and ran its bot between October and November 2018. Instazood provided several services such as post and comment management tools, the option of purchasing likes and video views, or becoming a franchise partner, of which the Instagram bot was the leading service. They considered the essential goal of their service to be to find real and active followers.

Therefore, the bot could be triggered to engage with specific targets the user has set. These targets could be other pages, hashtag owners, hashtag lovers, or particular locations, with the possibility of modifying the activities (likes, comments, and follows on that target) of each. In my case, I set targets on hashtags, profiles, and locations linked to my dog's breed, a popular hobby of dog owners, and where most of the photos were taken (e.g., the Thuringian Forest in Germany). The bot's engagement consisted of automatically following, liking, commenting, and unfollowing other profiles and their content. The latter action was significant, since Instagram has limited the number of followees to 7,500 (Instazood 2016b). For this reason, the bot kept following and unfollowing, to interact with more profiles

than the limitation allowed. During the project, I observed the interactions of my bot, the follower number, and the engagement with my account. I collected screenshots of my profile and interactions with users who engaged with it. On the twentieth day of running the bot, I checked the Instagram account, and the number of followers had increased to 1001. After 32 days of use, the statistics showed 1368 generated followers. During that time, the Instagram bot had followed 12,761 and unfollowed 9,790 accounts. It commented on posts 2,396 times and liked 1,858. At the end of the project, the dog profile achieved 1,456 followers and received 337 likes for the most successful post. The statistics show that the automated interactions attracted attention to the dog profile and gained visibility.

Ethical considerations and limitations of the botting project

As Highfield and Leaver (2015, n.p.) say, "privacy in relation to social media platforms of all types remains an ongoing issue." The definition of perceived privacy can be very different among Instagram users. Furthermore, the sensitivity of the material and the vulnerability of online environment users should inform ethical decision-making (Markham & Buchanan 2012). Instagram has a binary privacy practice in which users set their profile and content to a public or private mode (Marwick 2015). The latter setting needs confirmation of the following request to connect with the profile. In this case study, people either provided their data publicly or actively confirmed the interaction with the created profile. Since I only observed the bot's performance, interactions with my profile, or comments on the bot's engagement, the case study did not violate any privacy concerns related to other users' profiles. To protect the interactants' privacy, all collected data in the form of screenshots of a few private messages and showcased interactions and comments have been anonymized and blacked out to the extent that users' identities are not traceable.

The posted content was real and contained true information on my dog's everyday life to the extent that it did not cause any harm to

other Instagram users by showing sensitive content or setting up a fake identity. The fame-enhancing bot solely performed its interactions. The bot's metrics did not reveal detailed lists of profiles it interacted with. According to the presetting, it interacted with possibly any profile engaging with specific hashtags, profiles, or locations. Therefore, interaction with other users was not limited to particular nationalities, genders, education, or popularity. Interactions performed by the bot could possibly affect other users. Its preset comments were exclusively positive. The perception and implications of interactions on Instagram are generally very diverse in meaning and values. Out of more than 25,000 performed interactions, only two users got back to me to comment on the bot's unfollow interaction, one with sarcasm and the other with anger. Considering the vast amount of research on harmful content and behavior on social media platforms, such as wide-spread hate speech, fake accounts, and trolls manipulating national elections worldwide, the bot's interactions are unlikely to have a negative effect, or profound implications. Furthermore, the two reactions to the bot's unfollow show that these interactants were unaware that a fame-enhancing bot performed the interaction, but ascribed it to me.

Due to the content creation of private audiovisual footage of my dog, it was necessary to adhere to an intentionally set boundary for research and personal effort. Therefore, I allocated a limited duration for running the bot, and a specified effort for posting content every two days, which I had created in my personal life. Another limitation is that the research profile and its content were built beforehand from scratch without any followers, visibility, or reach. The experience could have been different if the bot was run on a more advanced profile with a more extensive content archive and an existing community. The project's setup does not reveal the implications of a fame-enhancing bot to an established profile regarding visibility on the platform and reaction to its interactions, which raises further questions such as: Would other users feel less affected by an unfollow if the profile had been more advanced and less intimate? A participant

with an established profile could repeat the project to compare different experiences and outcomes of the botting practice.

Furthermore, the content creation about the hobbies and interests of dog owners aims at one niche community. The project results could have been different for another themed community, especially if it had been a community such as fashion or lifestyle, where influencers can earn a lot of money. Since many everyday Instagram users also run fame-enhancing bots, I did not focus on them, but chose a niche community according to my hobbies and expertise.

The results were evaluated by comparing them to Instagram's Terms of Use, and Community Guidelines to represent Instagram's rules of play. Future research could consider the user's perspective of the platform's rules and values, and study the community's views of these rules by conducting qualitative interviews. Nevertheless, some project results allow for conclusions regarding rules and values from a user's perspective.

Confrontation with Instagram's Rules of Play

To evaluate the usage of services like the Instazood bot, as described earlier, I wanted to explore whether Instagram permits or supports them. I did this by carefully reading their Terms of Use and Community Guidelines, where the platform specifies "appropriate" user behavior and consequences of noncompliance. Do botters follow the rules, or bend them to achieve the greater good? As Cotter (2019, p. 907) shows, "these documents serve as regulatory devices or the articulation of the platform's 'rules' that Instagram encodes into and enforces with algorithms."

The user has specific obligations towards Instagram in return for the platform's services. One of these is that the user must provide correct and current personal information. Users do not need to reveal their identity, but they must refrain from impersonating other people, or providing inaccurate or wrong information. Further, users are not allowed to register an account for someone else without their explicit authorization (Instagram 2023b). If a user is obliged to provide accu-

rate information, how could one not reveal at least some elements of their identity? From Instazood's point of view, they do not violate this rule, since botters authorize them to act on their behalf. For me, this is an interesting question. I based the content for the botting project on my dog's life.

Firstly, the information provided was not related to my "identity." The contact information contains a nickname for the profile that relates to the dog's name and the account's email address. In this sense, this is rather a hybrid of my, and the dog's "identity", and the information one can gather from the content of the posts. It is unclear whether the interdiction of running an account for someone else includes or excludes pets, but these accounts are indeed accepted or tolerated. Leaver et al. (2020, p. 16) write that, unlike Facebook, Instagram was historically more flexible regarding names, identities, and multiple accounts.

Secondly, it is the algorithm that performs the interactions by liking and commenting being triggered on specific targets, such as hashtags. In this respect, it is not my choice whether I appreciate a photo and, therefore, like or comment on it, but it is the choice of the algorithm, which does not reflect either my or the dog's "identity."

Another rule says that one is not allowed to transmit or even sell parts of one's account to third parties—the same applies to one's rights and obligations without having asked beforehand (Instagram 2023b). To use the services of a bot like Instazood, one must provide access to the respective account on Instagram, including its access data. Otherwise, the bot cannot act on behalf of the botter.

Looking at the Community Guidelines, this exploration becomes more interesting. The first sentence contains the obligation that the platform remains an authentic and safe place of inspiration and expression. Therefore, users ought to support "meaningful and real interaction." Whether we can consider the bot's interaction as "real" or not is questionable. However, it is not "meaningful" in that it spreads likes and comments as feedback on photos, because it is configured to be triggered by hashtags and profile names. Apparently, Instagram wants human users to perform interactions manually

based on their interests and thoughts, which does not apply to automated interactions performed by a bot. Matamoros- Fernández et al. (in press) pointed out that platforms associate authenticity with content and behavior. In this respect, "fake- engagement, repetitive posting, coordination, and scams are largely banned." Further, they suggest that users should "stay spam-free by not artificially collecting likes, followers, or shares, posting repetitive comments or content, or repeatedly contacting people for commercial purposes without their consent" (Instagram 2023a). This is an interesting point because one can assume that Instagram understands botting as artificially collecting likes and followers, and posting repetitive content. They describe the use of bots without clearly defining what they mean by "artificially collecting" likes. One reason could be that there are automated functions that support the management of an Instagram account by simply posting prepared posts at a particular time. In this case, the software does not interact with human agents, but only specified processes and actions in motion. However, the user would also have to provide access to their account. The question arises, would it be regarded as collecting likes too artificially if users interact quantitatively, but manually, to attract attention to their profile?

Another reason is the assumption that tech companies deliberately use vocabulary such as "spam-free" or "inauthentic" to "deflect criticism for nefarious uses of their platforms onto 'bad actors' rather than acknowledging the ways their very own architecture, affordances, and incentive structure actively enable the sorts of practices they delegitimize as 'manipulative' or 'disruptive'" (Matamoros-Fernández et al., in press). Evaluating Instagram's Terms of Use and Community Guidelines, it becomes evident that, from their point of view, botting breaks their rules.

Cheating on social media platforms

Salen and Zimmerman (2004, p. 268) state in their book on rules of play that breaking the rules is an intrinsic part of playing games. Rule-breaking players are a different type of player. According to

René Glas (2013, p. 4), "such players, who play not by, but rather against, the rules, are usually referred to as cheaters." Players cheat when they get stuck at a point where they cannot progress further without help. They break the rules to win the game (Consalvo 2010, p. 27).

De Paoli (2016) has made a strong connection between the use of robotic software in Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) and on social media platforms in his work on "The Rise of the Robots in Virtual Worlds." He, therefore, uses data collections from previous work on cheating in massive multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), in which he proposes a new concept of defining cheating in those games. De Paoli and Kerr (2016, n.p.) summarize their discussion of the various definitions of cheating by claiming that most of the literature looks at "cheating as a practice where someone obtains unfair advantages." The media studies' point of view is that cheating can be seen as a cultural element that mostly has something to do with proof of power. They quote a definition by Brooke et al. (2014) within the context of "Virtual Societies" as "gaining some unfair advantage over other participants" that complies with the definition by Mia Consalvo (2007, p. 87).

In view of this, cheating on Instagram could be considered as all playful behavior and usage of the platform that is against its Terms of Use and Community Guidelines, and obtains an advantage over other users. The analysis results have shown that botting breaks the rules of Instagram. The statistics of the botting project prove an advantage of botters over other users who are physically unable to keep up with quantitative interactions performed by the bot, which is an essential principle of its success.

PLAYING WITH IDENTITIES

What is the effect of cheating on other users? Reflecting on the notion that maintaining a social network profile brings one's identity into being, Glas (2013, p.9) outlines that, following the notion of a ludification of culture, "maintaining profiles like Foursquare's

attribute to what can be considered playing one's identity into being." He further states that through identity construction, players and users are affected if cheaters interfere with their profiles. In her book on celebrity branding in social media, Marwick writes that technologies like Twitter can be used for all types of self-presentation. This also applies to Instagram, Marwick (2013, p.194) further outlines the importance of a strategically created "audience-targeted identity," which she calls the edited self. Using services like Instazood does not only affect the provider and the botter. It also mainly affects other community members, or edited selves, since the bot interacts with their accounts and contents, and, therefore, somehow with their identity.

By experimenting with the bot, I could distinguish two different forms of reactions. The first ones were direct reactions to the interaction performed by the algorithm. These reactions were thankful messages for likes and follows, offers for promotion on other users' accounts or hashtags, or direct answers on the bot's comments on randomly selected posts. Since the bot is triggered on specific targets, the photos it comments on are randomly chosen on that basis and not because of their visual content. I mainly targeted dog-related hashtags and pages to reach the niche interested in dog content. It, therefore, happened that "I" liked and commented on photos with visual content that I did not like at all but happened to have a connection to the same hashtags. Such a comment could have been "the best of the best," for instance. Incidents such as these happened regularly. Some people reacted to this feedback, and I received answers to the comments the bot created.

In some cases, this interaction embarrassed me, since it was neither my choice to comment on that specific photo nor the words I would have chosen related to the content. In these cases, the bot plays with my identity by mediating behavior and a personality that does not correspond neither to my "real" nor my dogs identity. On the other hand, the bot plays with the identity of the other users by giving feedback on their content and, therefore, on their self-presentation and identity. Considering the bot's exclusively positive and

broad comments, one can assume that its impact on the identity of other users is minimal and positive. Only knowledge about the bot and the nature of its likes, follows, and comments seem to devalue the interaction.

The second reaction was to a less obvious action by the bot. Unlike the direct answer on comments or likes, I received a response, not to a specific interaction, but to the bot's disconnection. For instance, one affected user of the follow-and-unfollow policy sent a direct message complaining about that behavior. The user wrote: "DON'T follow me then unfollow once I follow back. SHAME ON YOU. This is not what this platform is made for."[5] In this case, the user felt personally affected by the bot's "behavior." Interestingly, the user noticed the unfollow. Many people, and probably bots, followed and unfollowed my account throughout the project. It was only the fluctuation of follower numbers that caused me to notice that the dog account was probably also affected by bots. I didn't have access to the names or identities of the followers of the dog's profile. This user either knows their follower network or liked the dog content enough to notice the missing connection. Consequently, the person actively searched for the profile to send a message expressing their thoughts about the bot's unfollowing action. Interestingly, the user stated their understanding of the platform's purpose in their complaint, that supposedly users should not aim for high follower numbers, but show "real" interest in each other. Having said that, I must admit that my automated interactions do not mean I wouldn't be genuinely interested in other profiles.

Another reaction to the same scenario was a farewell message: "Bye bye unfollower 😘😘 I lost my time with you !!! I'm happy without you yes 😄😂🤣." This user also noticed the missing connec-

5. There is another set of rules developed in the process of cultivation of platform culture by Instagram users and communities themselves. Salen and Zimmerman (2004, p. 30) call them implicit rules that "concern etiquette, good sportsmanship, and other implied rules of proper game behavior." In a future project, one could conduct interviews with Instagram users to research the implicit rules of a playful Instagram use.

Similar to the other message, this user took the unfollow personally and expressed this effect via a direct message. This user mentioned the loss of their time. Their account was unfamiliar to me, and we never had direct contact. The only interaction could have been a random comment on one of their posts by the Instagram bot, which I could not trace due to the large number of comments the bot created, and the fact that they weren't registered. Nevertheless, they stated that they had lost time, although the dog account was only online for a month, with 26 posts. The unfollow did not meet their expectations regarding connection between profiles, and shows that this user related the unfollow to their personality and identity. Furthermore, this user tried to claim that they were not involved enough to "suffer" from the canceled connection. The contradiction between those two sentences and the fact that they were motivated to send the message shows that it still affected them in a certain way. At this point, it is essential to recall that the affected users do not know that the bot performed the interaction. In this case, the unfollow practice has the potential to influence others, irrespective of whether or it is performed by the user or a bot.

The last reaction also claims that building relationships and connections in this virtual community does not take time or specific qualitative interactions. A reason could be that one feels part of the community or a particular niche, and, therefore, a connection to its members. They share the same interests or hobbies, which seems enough to welcome new members without knowing each other. That could be why it affected these two users, who dealt with the perceived rejection through the unfollow action in different ways and were motivated to let me know. I suppose that all or most users who reacted to the bot's interactions were unaware that a bot had performed the precedent interaction. It follows that a particular behavior on Instagram provokes reactions, and whether the interaction was performed by a bot or by a human user acting like a bot becomes unimportant. The platform fosters bot-like behavior (see Matamoros-Fernández et al., in press). Considering the statistics of

unfollowed accounts, only two out of almost 10,000 unfollowed users acted and conveyed the effect the unfollow had on them.

According to Jansz (2014, p. 271), the relationship between a player and the game character enables them to develop their identities in interaction with the game content. Applied to a playful use of Instagram, can playful identities on the platform also develop in interaction with the app content? Leaver et al. (2020, p. 39) dedicate a whole chapter of their Instagram book on aesthetics, showcasing the development of Instagram aesthetics "that take in both the functions and affordances of the platform and the tropes and practices developed by its users." According to Elisa Serafinelli (2018), the extensive use of Instagram founded and shaped a new mobile visualities aesthetic. In this respect, the interaction impacts one's identity, and the cheating practice, through automated interactions on social media platforms, affects other users.

DISCUSSION

This paper and the project show that botting is perceived as cheating by the platform and by Instagram users who are affected. In future research, it would be essential to include the perspective of botters. The theoretical approach and thinking about playful uses of Instagram allowed framing and describing the practice within the scope of the visibility game. The perception of botting as cheating is an explanation for the rejection of bots, and their ascription of being evil. Instagram users who are playing the visibility game are not limited to the strategy of using fame- enhancing bots. They also perform quantitative interactions to attract attention to their profile manually. Since this is a common practice and it is indistinguishable whether a bot or a human user performed the interaction, shouldn't we judge bots, in general, more objectively? What does the practice reveal about interactions on Instagram, such as the meaning of a "like"? Instagram users like posts, not only because of the image content, but also to attract attention to themselves or to support their content creators. That raises the question of whether a bot like is less

worthy than a human-performed like. What is the difference, and is it important to distinguish them?

Instagram is a virtual space in which we construct an online identity and play with it on various levels. It is essential to acknowledge that this constructed virtual identity represents a specific part of our identity that is reciprocally shaped by ourselves, other users, and the platform. Timmerman frames social media platforms as serious games. The results of the project confirm this. Botting is an answer to Instagram's visibility policy and a strategy of the visibility game. Framing botting, from the perspective of users, as perceived cheating, helps us to understand their reaction and rejection of the practice. Furthermore, the theoretical framework of botting as a form of play has practical implications. Understanding oneself as a player on Instagram can potentially enable users to more effectively handle its negative implications, and take interactions, such as unfollowing, less seriously. Knowledge of botting helps to contextualize the practice from its practitioner's perspective, instead of applying its outcomes to oneself.

CONCLUSION

Creating and maintaining an online identity on Instagram informs various playful use practices such as the visibility game. Playing the visibility game as an example of the ludification of culture produces different strategies like botting. Botters perform automated social interactions to attract attention to their profiles, and gain visibility. Including Timmermans' and Gergen's works, we can speak of the use of Instagram as playful, especially considering that the developer purposely included playful elements. This theoretical framework laid the foundation for further explorations on botting.

Instagram's use has an inherent ludic dimension grounded in the history of app development; it induces a playful identity construction and a playful use. It, therefore, is an example of the ludification of culture. It further and ambiguously generates playful practices like botting through the architecture of its platform and delegitimizes it

in its Community Guidelines simultaneously. According to Instagram's Terms of Use and Community Guidelines, the botting practice as a form of play on Instagram breaks the rules. Since botting impacts higher engagement, followers, and, therefore, greater visibility, botters gain an unfair advantage over other participants. From that point of view, botting is a way of cheating. As De Paoli (2016, p. 80) cited in an article of *Social Media Today*: "No one wants a relationship with a robot." This statement and the abovementioned experience of the bot's follow-and-unfollow policy show that parts of the community do not accept the automated practice of interaction. According to some users and the platform itself, Instagram is meant to be a network with "genuine" interaction among human beings that should not be superseded by automated software. The analyzed reactions to the unfollow-action of the bot have also shown that its use is not only not accepted but condemned by some Instagram users and community members.

Timmermans concludes his provisions with the statement that playful social media platforms are serious games in which users playfully interact with each other. Still, some elements consist of severe social mechanisms:

> "They [social network sites] invite users to playfully interact with each other and with the medium, while knowing the serious social mechanisms that are at play. Social network sites are 'serious games': the line between play and reality is inevitably blurred. Online, all identities are, to some degree, playful identities." Timmermans 2014, p. 290.

In this respect, users play with each other's identities playfully, possibly affecting each other. Therefore, one can speak of botting from the perspective of parts of the community and the platform as cheating on them and their identities or, as De Paoli (2016, p. 80) has called it, "a form of 'unethical and unfair competition.'"

This case study is a starting point for further research on botting on Instagram. In a future project, researchers could interview botters

to learn more about the botting process, its results, and possible detection by Instagram, and what follows detection. There are countless programming projects on Git Hub to program fame- enhancing bots oneself, as well as several other bot providers. Continuative research could analyze different technological functionalities and the scope and impact of their use to produce further knowledge of playful, everyday cultures on social media platforms.

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5. ENDURE, JOIN THEM, OR LEAVE?

SUFFERING WOMEN IN MOBILE GAME ADVERTISING

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ABSTRACT

Mobile free-to-play games need to reach large audiences, yet the acquisition of these players has become increasingly challenging. One of the main ways to reach new audiences is advertising. Some game companies have started to depend on provocative and misleading advertising to gain the viewer's attention and lure players to their games. Especially as these advertisements often have wide exposure, representations in them are an important and interesting target to explore. This study investigates advertisements from two games targeted at women, *Project*

Makeover and *Matchington Mansion*. The results show that, while the advertisements do show some diversity in some areas, the content is heavily stereotypical, portraying women as weak and helpless, and leaving them suffering and appealing to the watcher to help by downloading the game. This leads to questions about consumer protection and the harm these advertisements can cause.

Keywords

MOBILE GAMES, free-to-play, advertising, misleading, gender stereotypes, gender display, representation

INTRODUCTION

As mobile games have become popular and the market oversaturated, game companies are struggling to reach enough new players for the games to be sustainable. While mobile free-to- play games currently generate over half of the digital game market revenue (SuperData 2021), thousands of new mobile games are being published every day (Nieborg 2016), meaning fierce competition for a game to stand out from the mass. One of the main ways to reach new audiences is advertising.

Likely due to the challenges mobile game companies face, advertising has become more aggressive and misleading, and often includes provocative and risky content (Alha 2023). Meanwhile, advertisements are playing an increasingly important role, as they reach wide audiences, including children and teenagers, through mobile and social media (Reid Chassiakos et al. 2016). Mobile game advertising is also an interesting topic of research due to the games being mostly free to download and play, making them possibly less closely regulated compared to advertisements that market paid products. This means that free-to-play mobile game advertisements are getting away more easily with unethical or even illegal advertising practices.

This study looks into the content of mobile game advertising, taking gender representations as the target to explore. A large number of researchers have been studying gender representation in advertisements, often finding gender being portrayed in a stereotypical manner (see Grau & Zotos 2018; Navarro-Beltrá & Llaguno 2012), while studies focusing on gender representation in games have found a clear focus on male representations and sexualization of women (e.g., Kondrat 2015; Lynch et al. 2016; Mikula 2003). However, there has been less focus on gender representation in game advertising. This study investigates advertisements from two free-to-play mobile games targeted at female audiences, *Project Makeover* (Magic Tavern 2020) and *Matchington Mansion* (Magic Tavern 2017). In an attempt to show how these advertisements portray women, this study works as a discussion opener into media content that has been including increasing amounts of susceptible and possibly harmful content.

PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN ADVERTISING AND GAMES

Representation of women and gender roles in media and advertising have been studied extensively for decades (e.g., Belkaoui & Belkaoui 1976; Bretl & Cantor 1988). Women have been portrayed as caretakers of family and home, passively and without decision-making capabilities, and as sexual objects, dependent, irrational, weak, childish, and subordinate (Kang, 1997). Further discussion then considers the stakes or the consequences of these representations, and whether they merely mirror society or also mold it (Holbrook 1987; Pollay 1986, 1987). Understanding how media affects us is difficult and often even impossible. However, advertisements, including the gendered stereotypes in them, may have wide-spread effects, influencing behaviors, attitudes, values, culture, and society, sometimes unintentionally (Dixon 2019; Pollay 1986). Advertisements themselves reflect the society around them, albeit by distorting it (Pollay 1987), making the effects even more complex and difficult to measure.

According to Goffman (1979), advertisements create a "pseudo-

reality" which can be best understood by comparing the depicted male-female relations to those as a parent and a child. Through an analysis of almost 400 advertisements, he suggested that systemic gender differences find their "purest expression" in the world of advertisements and categorized gender displays of *relative size, feminine touch, function rating, family, ritualization of subordination,* and *licensed withdrawal*. Kang (1997) later amended Goffman's categories with two additional categories, *body display* and *independence/self-assertiveness*. In a more recent study, looking at *Vogue* and *Vanity* advertisements, Kohrs and Gill (2021) applied Goffman's framework and found little evidence of most categories being present in the advertisements. Only *feminine touch* was apparent, while they discovered a new trope of *confident appearing*, where women appeared confident, holding their heads high and looking directly at the viewer.

Historically, digital games and their advertisements have also typically employed men as the main and active characters, and women either as non-existent or in secondary or passive roles (Chess et al. 2017; Dill et al. 2005; Glaubke 2001). This disparity follows the lack of diversity in game development companies, with men forming the majorities and holding power positions (Bailey et al. 2019). Recently this has started to slowly change, and both game companies and their products have become slightly more diverse. While White men still hold most of the active roles in digital games, more women, people of color, and other marginalized people have gained more space (Lynch et al. 2016).

While the media environments have changed, their role in our lives has remained important and currently more ubiquitous than ever, as, due to smartphones and social media, we are constantly exposed to various media content. Even young children often have their own devices, and are therefore often exposed to advertising without the control over, or knowledge of, the content from caregivers. While traditional media can restrict the exposure of certain types of content for underaged audiences, mobile and social media can broaden the exposure to content regulated elsewhere (Reid Chassiakos et al. 2016). Even though audiences, including children, are not

merely passive receptacles of advertisements, environments filled with unwanted advertisements can be demanding and distressing for children to navigate in (Martínez 2019).

ADVERTISING MOBILE FREE-TO-PLAY GAMES

This section discusses mobile free-to-play games as a specific case for advertising and gender representation. While these games have grown to form the biggest market segment of digital games, covering almost 60% of all revenue (SuperData, 2021), individual free-to-play games struggle to become profitable. Free-to-play games are free to access and play, and generate revenue when they are able to convert their players into paying players. Typically, only a small portion of the players end up paying, which means free-to-play games need to acquire large audiences to attract enough paying players (Alha 2020). As thousands of mobile games are launched daily, acquisition of these players has become increasingly difficult and expensive (Nieborg 2016).

One of the main ways to reach new audiences is advertising. Advertisements can be shown in other mobile games and on social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube. Targeting advertisements has also become more difficult, for instance due to Europe's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)[1] and after Apple ended default sharing of the Identifier for Advertisers (IDFA)[2] in 2021. This means that mobile game companies can no longer reach interested audiences as easily, which means a rise in marketing costs or a drop in acquisition numbers. This further puts more pressure on the performance of advertising campaigns, and can mean advertisements becoming more aggressive, provocative, and misleading in order to lure players to download the game – and hope they will stay, even if the game does not match the advertisement. These advertisements

1. See https://europa.eu/youreurope/business/dealing-with-customers/data-protection/data-protection-gdpr/index_en.htm
2. See more: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Identifier_for_Advertisers

can also aim to become viral, as it is more likely they will be shared on social media if the advertisement is provocative (Freeman et al. 2022). Advertising can be outsourced to third-party companies, meaning that the game and the videos advertising the game are made by different parties, widening the gap between the two.

So far, very little action has been taken when misleading or harmful advertisements have breached the policies of, for instance, Google and Apple[3], and even the law in many countries. As app and social network platforms act as intermediaries, advertising campaigns are profitable to them as well, and might thus be an incentive to allow them. While the platforms are rarely at risk (Zanathy 2021), for game companies, misleading advertisements may lead to negative ratings (Mago 2020), which in turn can negatively affect acquisition of players. Complaints about misleading or harmful advertisements could, at least in theory, lead to sanctions or bans. As free-to-play game companies are metrics-driven, a large part of the development depends on data from viewers and players. The effectiveness of advertisements can be tracked and analyzed: how many see, click, or share the ad, install the game, stay loyal, and pay. If the lifetime value of acquired players is higher than the cost for acquiring them, they are profitable. And as an increasing number of mobile games use these misleading advertisements, and many popular games have run them for years, it indicates that the benefits might outweigh the risks. In the end, regulatory bodies have a central role, as they can impose recommendations or actions against misleading or harmful advertisements. Some such decisions have been made, for instance by the Advertising Standards Authority in the UK[4] and the industry self-regulatory body, National Advertisement Division (NAD), in the US. In a recent recommendation by NAD, Magic

3. See for instance https://support.google.com/adspolicy/answer/6020955 and https://searchads.apple.com/policies

4. See an example of a ruling by ASA against harmful gender stereotypes: https://www.asa.org.uk/rulings/higgs-technology-co-ltd-a22-1156682-higgs- technology-co-ltd.html

Tavern agreed to discontinue certain advertisements for *Project Makeover* due to harmful negative gender stereotypes[5].

Advertisements for mobile free-to-play games have increasingly been adding content that attempts to provoke or appeal to audiences (Alha 2023). Online advertisements only have a brief period of time to catch the attention of viewers before they scroll to the next content on social media, or avert their gaze from an unskippable in-game advertisement, making the first seconds of the advertisement important. It is important to note that it is not necessary for viewers to like the content; rather, it is more crucial to draw their attention and cause a reaction. Possibly due to this, advertisements have begun to include increasingly over-the- top, confusing, or even offensive content that makes the viewers watch the whole advertisement – and possibly download the game. This can mean crude stereotypes, sexualized content, violence, and other risky content (Alha 2023). Therefore, it is expected that analyzing mobile game advertisements can reveal not only similar gender stereotypes seen in other media and advertising, but that these stereotypes are taken even further. While the games themselves may be relatively family-friendly, this does not apply to the advertisements. Children and young people are constantly exposed to mobile game advertisements (Martinéz 2019), which raises further questions about the content.

METHODS AND DATA

Project Makeover and *Matchington Mansion* were chosen as the target games as they are both relatively successful and have published a large number of advertisements, making more in-depth analysis and comparison possible. Additionally, the games feature women as their main characters (MC) and display provocative and misleading advertisements. Both games were developed by Magic Tavern, a US-based mobile game company, although it is possible the actual advertisement development has been outsourced to a third

5. See the decision from https://bbbprograms.org/media-center/dd/project-makeover

party. While there is no accurate and reliable public information on actual player populations, according to Udonis[6], 88 percent of *Project Makeover* players are women with an average age of 28, supporting the belief of female-dominated audiences. The advertisements are aimed at a diverse range of audiences, apparently including minors.

The sampling of the advertisements was done by utilizing YouTube playlists, and collecting many of these videos and analyzing a randomized sample of 100 advertisements, 50 advertisements from each game. Almost all of these advertisements depict a young adult woman as the MC. To focus on this, the few cases where the MC was a child (three cases encountered) or an elderly person (four encountered cases) were not included in the analysis. The excluded advertisements were replaced so that the final number of analyzed advertisements reached the target number. In no encountered cases was the main character an adult man. Advertisements in these games sometimes, but rarely, feature men as MCs.

The advertisements were animations of approximately 30 seconds in duration, and followed short, yet dramatic, scenarios in people's lives. The videos typically had no voice-overs, except utterances to convey feelings such as surprise, pleasure, or pain. Some responses by the MC were shown, providing information on what was happening on the screen, for example "My husband!" to signal that the man kissing another woman was the MC's husband. Typical scenarios of each game's advertisements are described in the next chapter.

The advertisements were analyzed based on Goffman's (1979) categories of gender-stereotypic, nonverbal displays, and complemented with Kang's (1997) and Kohrs and Gill's (2021) additional categories. The analysis included additional displays not covered by the framework, and the following categories, which are typical of the female characters in the advertisement types investigated, were added during an iterative analysis process: *romantic interest, unattrac-*

6. https://www.blog.udonis.co/mobile-marketing/mobile-games/project-makeover-monetization

appearance, oppression, tormenting, and *bad ending*. The categories are explained below:

- *Relative size:* Men are stereotypically portrayed as being taller and larger than women, conveying not just biological size but difference in status or power. Based on Goffman (1979).
- *Feminine touch:* Women are stereotypically shown touching people, objects, or themselves, lightly or barely touching, in contrast to more masculine grasping or holding with purpose. Based on Goffman (1979).
- *Function rating:* When men and women are collaborating to complete a task, men are depicted as being in charge and performing the executive role. Based on Goffman (1979).
- *The ritualization of subordination:* Lack of power and superiority are shown through body positioning, such as a head or body cant, lying down, or a bashful knee bend. Power and superiority are connected to masculinity, and the lack of these to femininity. Based on Goffman (1979).
- *Licensed withdrawal:* Stereotypically, women are presented as emotionally removed from the scene, for instance looking away, appearing lost, inattentive, hopeless, confused, or upset. Based on Goffman (1979).
- *Body display:* Women are more likely to wear revealing clothes, or appear nude. This can include, for instance, mini-skirts, exposed cleavage, see-through clothes, lingerie, a towel, or no clothing. Based on Kang (1997).
- *Confident appearing:* More recently, women have also been depicted as being confident or defiant, with heads held high, face forward and looking into the camera, and rarely smiling. Based on Kohrs and Gill (2021).
- *Agency:* Based on Kang's (1997) category of *independence and self-assertiveness*, which evaluates a woman's overall image, in terms of independence and assertiveness. In this

analysis, this category especially focused on whether women have the ability to take action or make their own decisions.
- *Motherhood:* Modified from Goffman's (1979) *family* category. In the *family* category the nuclear family forms the basic unit, often depicting the daughter closer to mother, and the son closer to the father. In the advertisements investigated here, it proved to be more fruitful to look into *motherhood*: how women are represented with their children, or shown to be pregnant.

The analysis was open to new displays not covered by the framework, and the following categories, which are typical of the female characters in the investigated advertisement types, were added during an iterative analysis process:

- *Romantic interest:* The narrative includes the main character's romantic partner or her interest in initiating a romantic or sexual partnership with someone. This aligns with women often being associated with romance in fiction, for instance, stereotypically preferring romantic movies, rather than action movies (Wühr et al. 2017).
- *Unattractive appearance:* The main character is purposefully depicted as unattractive, with tangled hair, worn clothes, dirty skin, and other negative connotations. This differs considerably from typical advertisements featuring women, where they are often depicted as attractive, and conform to traditional beauty standards (see Cortese 2015).
- *Oppression:* A repeating narrative in the advertisements is that the main character is mistreated by the other characters in the advertisement. This can manifest in several different ways: the main character can be, for instance, betrayed, ridiculed, or excluded.

- *Tormenting:* The "player", who is supposed to help the main character (intentionally or unintentionally) to make choices that are harmful.
- *Bad ending:* Due to the combination of oppression and tormenting, the main character ends up in a bad situation, often worse than the original circumstances.

While Goffman's gender displays were originally created from magazine advertisements featuring photo images, the framework has also been successfully applied to video materials, such as television commercials (Browne 1998) and music videos (Wallis 2011). The analyzed mobile game advertisements further differ from these by being animated instead of being portrayed by actors. This means that each look and posture is intentional, and the advertisements can be more prone to exaggeration.

The focus in the analysis was on the advertisements' leading woman, or the MC, and her interaction with other characters. Instead of categorizing the advertisements into mutually exclusive categories, each video was coded depending on whether each gender display was found in the advertisement or not, which can better indicate prevalence of the identified genderisms (Smith 1996). The coding included two states for each category: 1 if it was found, and 0 if it was not present, and for some categories,

-1 if it was found but in a reversed gender display, and N/A if the category was not applicable to the advertisement – namely in the case of function rating if no tasks were completed together or relative size if there were no other characters (see Table 1). Some gender displays were repeated in a single advertisement, and in these cases, they were still coded only once per video. In addition to coding the gender displays, a more qualitative approach was implemented to consider meanings and implications of the situations connected to the coding.

Category	Features	Coding	Origin
		Yes = 1	
		No = 0	
Relative size	MC is shorter or smaller than other characters	Reversed = -1	Goffman 1979
		Not applicable = N/A	
Feminine touch	MC caresses objects or people by barely touching them	Yes = 1	Goffman 1979
	MC delicately touches self	No = 0	
		Yes = 1	
	Other character than MC in a leading or superior role	No = 0	
Function rating	MC is being instructed	Reversed = -1	Goffman 1979
	MC serves other characters	Not applicable = N/A	
	MC lowers herself in relation to others, for instance, bowing		
	MC has a "bashful knee bend" posture	Yes = 1	
Ritualization of subordination	MC tilts herself to a canting posture	No = 0	Goffman 1979
	MC is lying down or crouching on the floor or on a bed		

	MC averts gaze		
Licensed withdrawal	MC shows remorse, fear, shyness, or shock MC covers mouth or face with hand(s)	Yes = 1 No =0	Goffman 1979
Body display	MC wears revealing clothes (showing cleavage, showing skin above knee)	Yes = 1 No = 0	Kang 19
Confident appearing	MC has a confident stance, head held high	Yes = 1 No = 0	Kohrs an Gill 2021
Agency	MC makes a choice on her own MC shows anger or aggression	Yes = 1 No = 1	Original, based on Kang 19
Motherhood	MC has children MC is pregnant	Yes = 1 No = 0	Original, based on Goffman 1979
Romantic interest	MC has a romantic partner MC shows romantic/sexual interest towards a person	Yes = 1 No = 0	Original

Unattractive appearance	MC has unwanted body hair MC has unwanted body shape MC has tangled, scruffy or spiky hair, or no hair MC is visibly dirty MC is visibly smelly MC wears worn or dirty clothes MC has skin problems MC has messy makeup	Yes = 1 No = 0	Original
Oppression	MC is being cheated on or betrayed MC is being bullied or laughed at MC is the target of violence	Yes = 1 No = 0	Original
Tormenting	MC suffers from "player's" actions	Yes = 1 No = 0	Original
Bad ending	MC is unhappy in the end MC is being oppressed in the end MC is in danger in the end	Yes = 1 No = 0	Original

Table 1: *The categories and coding scheme used in the analysis process.*

In addition to the gender displays, attention was drawn to the representations of the MC, considering race, sexuality, class, body

types, and gender expression. According to Shira Chess (2017), games that are aimed at female audiences paint a picture of a White, cisgendered, able-bodied, heterosexual, middle-class mother, and the advertisements mirrored this stereotype. In the following sections, I will highlight the main results of the analysis, starting with typical scenarios in each game, then discussing the presence of the gender displays, and finally considering other representational aspects.

RESULTS

Typical Scenarios

The advertisements for *Project Makeover* are typically about a woman who needs to change to be attractive enough, whether it is to attract a love interest or take revenge on someone making fun of her. Most *Project Makeover* advertisements revolve around a makeover, where "the player" is choosing how to change the MC's appearance. This can involve cleaning her up, removing body hair, adding makeup, and changing clothes, among other things. There are, on average, three choices in each advertisement, where "the player" chooses an item to use (see Figure 1), which can either improve or worsen the situation. The first choice is often successful, while the last choice almost always fails. Despite the steps, the advertisements almost exclusively end up in failures, and the prospective spouse runs away, or the woman is ridiculed even more. A sad or crying woman is sometimes displayed with an appeal to "Help the girl".

Project Makeover shows the MC as unattractive, in embarrassing situations, or being rejected, and the player's mission is to make her look good enough, often for other people. Each time the effort ends in failure, and the MC is embarrassed even more. The beauty standards are very traditional and somewhat toxic. For instance, body hair is unwanted, and in some cases, the only "wrong" thing, in the

end, is having hair that is too short, which can trigger a horrified reaction from a romantic interest. (Figure 1)[7]

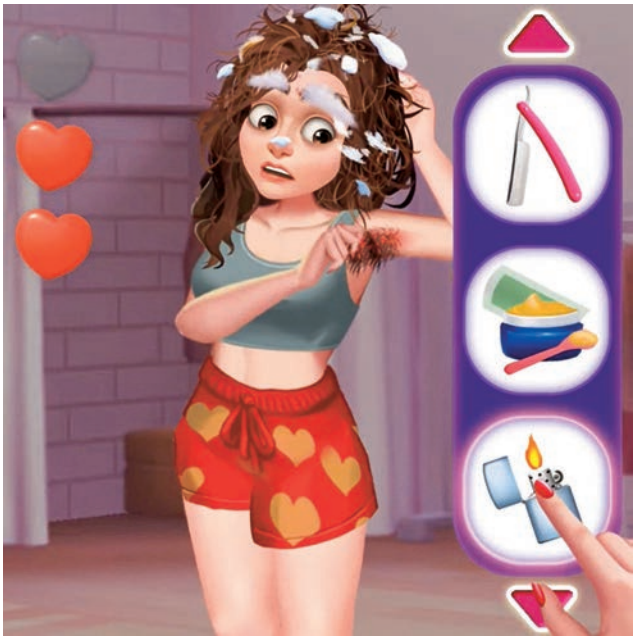

Figure 1: Making a choice how to remove armpit hair in an advertisement for Project Makeover. Screenshot from a YouTube video.

The *Matchington Mansion* advertisement typically features the MC in an unfortunate situation, for instance being thrown out of her home, or finding her partner cheating (see Figure 2). Whether she is kicked out or decides to leave her husband, it is MC who ends up leaving, often freezing in rain or snow, and is then seen in an old, cold house with a broken roof. The "player's" goal is then to make the house warmer and the MC happier. This is usually done by choosing an option that can be used to repair a part of the house. Similar to *Project Makeover*, this usually involves three steps. The first and

7. By user Project Makeover advertisements collection, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jF9s64KdqXI

second step may succeed to warm the place, however, the third typically fails, making the situation even worse. In the end, the woman is seen freezing, with a text "Fail" on the screen.

In *Matchington Mansion* the situations are more severe: The MC and sometimes her children are in danger of freezing, even dying, after leaving her partner, or having been cast out. The player's goal is to make them safer and more comfortable, but the effort fails, with a hint that she is now facing death. (Figure 2)[8].

8. By user Potato Pseudo Gamer, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Z8wKbXstcE

Figure 2: The premise of an advertisement for Matchington Mansion, where a pregnant woman (MC) sees her husband with another woman and being in shock, her water breaks. Screenshot from a YouTube video

Both games try to appeal to the viewer by presenting the MC as a sad, helpless person who is unable to improve her life, and waits to be helped. As the choices made by the "player" are often obviously

wrong (for instance using an iron on hair, or a hammer to fix a window), this may appeal to the viewer's inclination to think that they can do better. The sad expressions, directly at the camera, emphasize her feeling of helplessness. *Matchington Mansion* includes pregnant women or small children as the sufferers, most likely trying to make the viewer feel sympathetic, and help them by downloading the game.

While the focus here is not on a comparison of the advertisements and the actual gameplay of the games, it is worth mentioning that there is a clear discrepancy between the two. The scenarios in the advertisements do not appear in the games, and are clearly more provocative and dramatic than the storylines of the games. The main gameplay mechanics are shown in a misleading way: in the games there are no right or wrong choices, and they only have cosmetic effects, while in the advertisements the choices can potentially "save" the MC – or inevitably torment her. Both games include match-3 levels as their core gameplay, which are either completely missing or shown as overly simplified in the corresponding advertisements.

Gender Displays

Overview and comparison

The coding process resulted in numeric representation of each category. The numbers are shown as percentages in Table 2. A comparison of the presence of the analyzed categories in the two games is shown in Table 3. In the following sub-chapters I will discuss the most interesting findings.

Category	Present	Not present	Reversed	N/A
Relative size	27%	49%	15%	9%
Feminine touch	12%	88%		
Function rating	12%	3%	9%	76%
The ritualization of subordination	43%	55%	2%	
Licensed withdrawal	86%	14%		
Body display	59%	41%		
Confident appearing	12%	88%		
Lack of agency	52%	48%		
Motherhood	38%	62%		
Romantic interest	70%	30%		
Unattractive appearance	72%	28%		
Oppression	52%	48%		
Tormenting	75%	25%		
Bad ending	90%	10%		

Table 2: *The presence of each analyzed category in the dataset (n=100).*

Category	Project Makeover	Matchington Mansion
Relative size	22%	32%
Feminine touch	18%	6%
Function rating	8%	16%
The ritualization of subordination	22%	64%
Licensed withdrawal	88%	84%
Body display	48%	70%
Confident appearing	20%	4%
Lack of agency	54%	50%
Motherhood	4%	72%
Romantic interest	70%	70%
Unattractive appearance	98%	46%
Oppression	46%	58%
Tormenting	78%	72%
Bad ending	84%	96%

Table 3: *Comparison of the presence of each analyzed category in* Project Makeover *(n=50) and* Matchington Mansion *(n=50).*

Power relationship to men and sexualization

Relative size was not an especially fitting way to investigate the gender displays. It was coded as present when other characters looked larger than the MC, and as reversed when the MC looked

larger. However, the situations rarely seemed especially relevant to power positions as originally described by Goffman (1979). In addition, *function rating* was typically not found in the advertisements, as tasks were rarely done together. When present, men were somewhat more often in a position of power in *Matchington Mansion,* while in *Project Makeover* the division was equal. This is similar to Kang's (1997) findings where *relative size* and *function rating* were not prevalent in magazine advertisements.

In addition, *feminine touch* was not often found in the advertisements. While *body display* was found and coded in more than half of the advertisements, typically the clothes were not especially revealing or sexualized. These findings suggest that women in advertisements for games that are targeted at women, are not especially sexualized or submissive in power position displays, which can be explained with the lack of male gaze among the target audience. In contrast, the *ritualization of subordination* was found in various advertisements and especially in *Matchington Mansion*, where it was connected to *licensed withdrawal* (see next section) rather than showing submission related to other characters. These results show how the relationships between male and female genders have changed, at least in advertisements targeted towards women: even when women are suffering and losing confidence, they are not portrayed as submissive to the male gender.

Lack of agency and confidence

Agency was difficult to code due to the video format of the data. All the advertisements featured a lack of agency for the MC, as they were passively waiting for someone else to make decisions regarding their looks, or save them from a precarious situation. However, in some cases the MC also showed initiative by leaving a cheating husband, or by showing anger or defiance when they disliked a choice made by the "player". Even this type of agency was missing from around half of the analyzed advertisements, with only few showing more preva-

lent agency and independence. This mix of lack and inclusion of agency paints an image of a passive, helpless woman.

Confident appearing found in recent advertisements by Kohrs and Gill (2021) was not visible in these mobile game advertisements. Only 12% featured this gender display, and even then, it was almost always only for a moment when something went right before taking a turn for the worse again. The lack of confidence was supported by *licensed withdrawal*, which was prevalent in the advertisements, as the MC was often depicted as demoralized and dejected. Turning her gaze away graphically depicted these feelings, while burying her face in her hands shows strong emotions such as shock and fear.

Suffering and oppression

While the male gaze perspective was missing, the women, instead of being overly sexualized, were portrayed through another lens – as the sufferers. In half of the advertisements, someone in the game was actively harming the MC, whether by cheating, abandoning her, bullying her, making fun of her, or even physically harming her.

While the "players" are supposed to be the savior of the situation, they also participate in tormenting the MC. In *Project Makeover* the "player" could have made the MC's life better by helping her to find herself and her confidence through a makeover, but made the situation worse by burning or shaving off her hair, or dumping a bucket of mud on her. In some cases, the "player" chose the most ridiculous outfit for her, to bully her even more. In *Matchington Mansion* the "player" is supposed to make the environment safe and comfortable for the suffering woman, but ends up damaging the house even more, or setting it on fire, worsening the situation and even escalating it to hint at her approaching death, sometimes including her small child.

Representation

The advertisements paint a very narrow image of a woman, although in some ways, they also break the traditional stereotype. What is blatantly visible is that the overwhelming majority of the women are portrayed as White; only one analyzed advertisement out of a hundred featured a Black woman as the MC, with other races or ethnicities lacking altogether. The stereotyped representation largely follows the depiction by Chess (2017) of the designed identity being a White, heterosexual, cis-gendered, able- bodied middle-class woman who is also a mother. Motherhood is present especially in *Matchington Mansion* where the MC either has small children, or is pregnant in 38% of the advertisements analyzed. Instead of the nuclear family display by Goffman (1979), the family ends up revolving around the mother, with the father of the children ending up being out of the picture. The children are also taken in as a part of the narrative: a pregnant woman or a mother ending up as the sole caretaker with sad- looking children may yield even more sympathy.

In particular, heteronormativity stereotypes were broken; 10% of *Matchington Mansion* advertisements, and as many as 30% of *Project Makeover* advertisements featured queerness, typically lesbian relationships or same-sex attraction. This was a surprising find, especially as the portrayal of these relationships was comparable to the portrayal of heterosexual relationships, without any evident attempt to use queerness as shock value (as in the case of motherhood), to ridicule it (as in the case of physical appearance), or "straighten" the portrayal of lesbians (as in some cases in advertising, see Nölke 2018). While representations of queerness in games is nothing new (see Shaw & Friesem 2016), the wide occurrence of it among the advertisements negates the expectation of heteronormativity (Chess 2017), and may be a part of a larger trend of at least certain representations of queerness becoming more visible in advertising (Grau & Zotos 2016). This might mean queer audiences are seen as a desirable part of the target audience, while simultaneously queer representation is assumed to be less alienating for heterosexual audiences than it was previously (see Nölke 2018). The stereotype of the MC as a middle-class woman was also broken, especially in *Matchington Mansion*,

where the MC ended up being poor in the majority of the scenarios, living in a broken and freezing house, or in some cases, homeless. This emphasized the MC's role as the sufferer. In the case of traditional beauty values, the advertisements, especially in *Project Makeover*, end up showing untraditional representations of women, and simultaneously enforcing traditional beauty values: the MC is often portrayed with body hair, various body types, body odors, worn clothes or messy hair. These, however, were seen as problems that the "player" then tries to (unsuccessfully) fix for the MC. The advertisements follow gender binaries and expression in a similar way: no non-binary or trans characters were identified, and while the portrayed women sometimes had facial hair, this too was seen as a problem to be fixed.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study has revealed the dual representations of women in advertisements on mobile games targeted at women. While they break the norms of having men as the main characters in digital game advertisements (Behm-Morawitz 2017), they represent women with stark stereotypes: as weak and helpless, needing to be rescued. There is a strong focus on the importance of women needing to be attractive to hold their life together. While stereotypical representation of genders is common in advertising (Shaikh et al. 2015), in these advertisements it was especially highlighted, simplified, and sometimes taken so far that it might seem absurd. As animations, body shapes and facial expressions can be exaggerated even more. This seems to be intentional; the provocative and often weird content tempts the viewer to watch and then click the advertisement to see what the game is about. If gender roles find their purest form in advertisements, as Goffman (1979) suggested, they seem to find absurd forms in mobile game advertisements.

Simultaneously, the content breaks some stereotypical power positions between men and women: as the target audience, and thus expected viewers, are women, it is not a man who needs to save the

woman, but another woman. The women are not represented as overly sexualized or feminine. Similarly, while representing a very narrow image of what a woman is like by connecting womanhood with romantic relationships and motherhood, they do break existing stereotypes by featuring queer women. It is also interesting to note that there is no similar development related to race. This might be telling of the assumed audience: Western, White women, but not necessarily heterosexual. The differences between the games are also telling and may reflect the audiences: in *Project Makeover* the situations are more related to romantic interests instead of families or children, possibly attracting an audience of younger women than *Matchington Mansion,* which has a larger representation of mothers.

As companies rarely reveal data about their audiences, targeted advertisements can be a way to find out more about the target audiences and their preferences. It is interesting to consider how the decisions regarding content and representation are made. In addition to intentional design, the efficiency of the advertisements can be measured. Therefore, it can be assumed that the types of advertisements that attract most viewers to the game, and possibly those who stay and spend money on the game, will survive and be repeated. Mobile game advertising also reflects the current trends on social media in general, where the competition for attention is sometimes fought with increasingly absurd content. Mobile game advertisements and their misleading, provocative, and confusing content is a part of larger phenomena, including viral videos, fake news, hoaxes, and clickbait journalism (see Silverman 2015). In a way, mobile game companies not only have to compete in an extremely saturated mobile game market, but also try to be visible among massive amounts of other marketing materials.

Advertisements usually seek to convey a desire to emulate the portrayed woman – to buy the products she is wearing or using. In the analyzed advertisements, the woman is not always to be identified with, but is to be pitied and helped. Therefore, the representation also differs. There is no sexual allure, except the absence of it. The woman is in the center, and stripped of agency and initiative,

she must wait to be helped – first by the fake player and then by the viewer. While the main female characters were the focus of this study, the image that these advertisements portray of men is equally problematic: men are shown as cheaters, cruel, childish, shallow, and aggressive. While they are often depicted in these advertisements with confidence and agency, they also show certain character weaknesses not included by the gendered advertisement framework.

There are two aspects of these advertisements that are possibly unethical: they present a false image of the games they advertise, and they often use stereotypes to show a misogynist worldview with a narrow view of how women are represented. While the misleading advertising is clearly a consumer protection issue, one of the main questions related to the content itself is then, what effects do these repeated narratives and portrayals of women have? As discussed earlier, the effects of advertisements on viewers and society are a complex issue. Nevertheless, many effects have been theorized (Dixon 2019; Pollay 1986). While an individual advertisement might have an insignificant effect, it is important to question the cumulative effect of these repeated scenarios seen in mobile game advertisements and other similar media content.

This paper investigated two games that were developed by the same company, however, similar advertisements are published for various other games, such as *Hollywood Story* (Nanobit 2016), *Family Farm Adventure* (Century Games Pte. Ltd. 2014), and *Solitaire Home Design* (Betta Games 2020). In addition to stereotypical representation that could be harmful in general, some of these advertisements include sexual content, violence, even domestic violence, or sexual assaults. The variety of stereotypes and questionable content is even wider when expanding to mobile game advertisements directed to male and other audiences. This study serves as an introduction to the intriguing, yet still overlooked field of mobile game advertising, combining critical media studies, gender studies, and political economy. In the future, this study can be expanded to look deeper into the connection of platform logics of mobile game advertising and the

content of the advertisements, and also expand the scope to games directed towards male and other audiences.

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6. GAMEMASTERS OF THE PLAYGROUND

EXPLORING CHILDREN'S LEADERSHIP ROLES WHEN PROGRAMMING HYBRID DIGITAL-PHYSICAL OUTDOOR PLAYGROUND EQUIPMENT

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ABSTRACT

In this work, we explore how programmable playground artefacts can affect social dynamics and power structures in an outdoor play setting. A set of re-programmable artefacts and a graphical programming interface were designed and developed for the study. Twenty children were invited to co-design and explore the interactivity of the re-programmable devices. They tested how they could play with them, and were asked about how they would re-design and repurpose the artefacts and the scripting interface for their way of playing. Through a thematic analysis of the

observations and group interviews, it could be seen that an implicit social role emerged, centered around the use of the programming device. This role took on a guiding and supporting role, rather than a leading role. By deliberately designing for this 'gamemaster' role, this understanding may be useful in future design of technology for public and outdoor play.

Keywords

GAMEMASTER, leadership roles, children, outdoor play, playing out, re-programmable, physical-digital playgrounds, internet of things, IoT, playful IoT.

INTRODUCTION

Digital devices and the Internet of Things (IoT) are becoming more common in many types of activities. This is not limited to professional or adult environments where there is a long tradition of looking at how work is based on technological and social dynamics (Emery & Trist 1960), as children also use technology from an early age (Manches et al. 2015, Konca 2022). By understanding how these types of technologies impact children and the social dynamics of their 'profession', their play, designers will be more able to design for these experiences. In this work, we ask how social dynamics and power structures can be shaped by IoT-enhanced re-programmable playground artefacts in an outdoor play setting. It was part of a larger project where we focused on the relation between the participants, the artefacts, and the programming device. To explore this, we developed three interactive devices, connected through a graphical programming interface, and let 20 children test and play with them in an outdoor playspace. Data was collected through observations of the tests, and interviews with the children, and then thematically analyzed. During the analysis, the themes were seen to center on a leadership role that emerged in play. A set of insights on the social

dynamics and interactions were found, which we discuss in relation to previous studies.

BACKGROUND

While research on emergent leadership is nothing new, there is still a lack of studies on children's leadership overall (Mawson 2011) and even more so on emergent leadership in smaller groups of children (Li et al. 2007, Badura et al. 2021, Cox et al. 2022). Leadership is a socially negotiated role; it is a set of emerging appropriate actions, not a predefined set of duties (McCourt 2012), that others without the role reciprocate (Coutu 1951, Newcomb et al. 1950, Turner 1962). The emergence of the appropriate actions is often a response to the perceived needs of the group (Turner 1962, Li et al. 2007). The acceptance of emergent leadership within the group can be more dependent on expertise shown in the task rather than popularity in the group (French & Stright 1991) or personal traits (Li et al. 2007, Dylan et al. 2020). Early research on emergent leadership among children found correlations between leadership ratings and acts that facilitated tasks and elicited the opinion of group members, and whether these acts were followed by others (French & Stright 1991). When children are given the space to emerge as leaders, they will take it (Li et al. 2007). Li et al. (2007) found that six of 12 groups of children had one group member emerge as the leader during discussion tasks, while in five of the remaining groups the role moved between multiple children. They also noted that most children displayed some leadership actions even if they weren't always accepted by the rest of the group (Li et al. 2007).

It may be pointed out that not all player roles are equal. In some games one player may have a greater opportunity to take a lead role, with greater effect on these framing structures (Zimmerman 2004). In games such as pen and paper roleplaying, the gamemaster is the person tasked with, among other things, being the arbitrator of both social structures and the written rules, as well as being responsible for keeping the narrative flowing (Tychsen et al. 2005). Decisions and

arbitration often end up being a balancing act between eliciting conformant engagement and immersion from the players, while creating an enjoyable experience. When these social contracts are implicit, they are just a set of framing structures to be negotiated, but in these games, the gamemaster role often includes the responsibility to moderate the negotiations of these contracts (Tychsen 2008), and, while the gamemaster and the players have different ways of interacting with the framing structures, they are still a part of the social negotiation that is playing. Similar behavior has also been seen in outdoor play. When Dylan et al. (2020) explored IoT resources in outdoor play, they noted that aside from explicit leadership roles, informal leaders emerged and took responsibility for the play experience in order to improve the experience for others. In their study, the participant with the IoT remote controller, or who created a game around it, adapted to being a temporary leader, even if that person was not assertive or collected enough to act as such otherwise.

A notable example of playful outdoor programming can be found in Scratch nodes (Hitron et al. 2017; Ofer et al. 2019). This consists of a set of graspable devices aimed at structured outdoor play that can be programmed through a Scratch interface. Through these, Ofer et al. (2019) explore how children invent rules for play when given the opportunity to enhance outdoor play through coding and reprogrammable devices. They found that children often focus more on the screens and the programming interfaces, compared to the world around them. Their work assumes a clear division between the creative process of designing explicit rules for play, and the conformant play that ensues. Similarly, other research on children's social dynamics when using screen-based interfaces tend to focus on the conformant interactions with the screen, and not transformative actions or activities that are also taking place in the physical space (e.g., Aarsand & Sørenssen 2021, Fleck et al. 2021). However, Back et al. (2019) points out that the structures that frame play are not constant, as play consists of transformative interactions and negotiations of those structures. The work of Ofer et al. can thus be argued to overlook these transformative engagements that occurs during play, as the

re- programmable devices act as a set of digital-physical framing structures for play with the goal of giving those who play the power to transform and shape their play. In this study, we focus on a less structured style of play, where the participants may transform not only the functionality of the re-programmable devices, but also play itself. By understanding playing as a constant negotiation of not only roles, but also of rule-sets and social contracts (Back et al. 2019), in this work we attempt to remove the separation between programming and playing. We want to bring the programming into the outdoor play environment, in order to let the coding process and scripted functionality be something that can be changed during play. This way we drive to make the devices a part of – and engrained in – the playspace, instead of remaining independent of, and distanced from it.

METHOD

This study is based within the field of human-computer interaction and between the disciplines of research and design (Zimmerman et al. 2007). Our design process followed value-driven design (Flanagan et al. 2008, Back et al. 2021), while the research process focused on the situated activity rather than the design (Waern & Back 2017, Kock 2011, Koskinen et al. 2008). This meant that the design process was grounded in a wide and interdisciplinary set of previous work to support its predefined theoretical values; such as playful IoT (Coulton 2015), tinkering and constructivistic learning (Harel & Papert 1996, Kay 1996, Flannery et al. 2013), social interaction and intersubjectivity (Resnick et al. 2009, Flannery et al. 2013), and appropriation (Dix 2007, DeValk et al. 2013, Flannery et al. 2013, Back et al. 2021). Following the value- driven design process, the field study was explorative to allow describing the depth of whatever activity followed. This meant that the prototype in itself was intended to be an intervention placed in the field, while the study could focus on observing and exploring the particular interactions and activities that followed within and towards the framing contexts (Koskinen et al.

2013, Waern & Back 2017, Back et al. 2019). Through this, the research methodology used the theory-driven process of design science, but without its prescriptive evaluations (Hevner and Chatterjee 2010) and the descriptive field studies of research through design, but without its primary concern with artefacts and process-focus (Zimmerman et al. 2007, Koskinen et al. 2013, Waern & Back 2017).

The design process followed an iterative approach while being grounded in the previously mentioned theoretical values, and while taking inspiration from previous similar work with children's programming (for example Lego A/S 2013, Resnick et al. 2009, Flannery et al. 2013). The early iterations used paper prototypes, which were refined with the help of insights from programmers and parents that tested it, as well as literature on the theoretical values. These were then implemented as a functional prototype through an interface developed in Unity, and the artefacts constructed from papier-mâché and Arduinos.

The design was tested by five groups of four Swedish children aged eight to ten. The children knew each other, having worked together previously as part of the same scout troop. All participants had tried some level of visual programming as part of their primary school education, and most had previously tried ScratchJr.

The participants were briefed by one of the researchers on the functionality of the drag-and-drop interface of the prototype, and were tasked with exploring the prototype and how they could play with the design. During the brief, they were framed as being co-researchers, as they co-designed how the prototype functioned and how it could be played with (Hagen et al 2012, Back et al 2017). Each group was then handed a tablet with the development environment, and given 15 minutes to explore and play with the prototype. The activity was recorded and interactions with the prototype were recorded in log-files, while the researcher observed, took notes, and solved technical issues affecting the prototypes. Lastly, the group was interviewed about their experience with, and thoughts regarding, the prototype.

The data was analyzed through an inductive thematic analysis

(Braun and Clarke 2006). The log-files were compiled to see how the prototypes were used. Interviews were transcribed and coded, using bottom-up coding. With a strong focus on the activity, video files were coded from videos rather than by first transcribing them. The field notes and log-files were used to aid the coding of videos and interviews.

DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

As stated earlier, in this work, we want to explore re-programmable outdoor playground artefacts and their effect on social dynamics and power structures. To do this, a playful design was developed, consisting of a programming interface inspired by Lego Mindstorms (Lego A/S 2013), Scratch (Maloney et al. 2010), and ScratchJr (Flannery et al. 2013). Further, three wireless artefacts were created from a set of sensors and actuators (see Figure 1) that can be programmed through an interface. The programming environment is implemented as an app for a tablet. It enables users to create sequences of logic through a drag-and- drop interface (see Figure 2). These sequences control how the artefacts' sensors affect their actuators. The programming environment updates the physical devices directly, and the graphical drag-and-drop elements showed, in real time, what was happening with the actual artefacts (see Figure 3). When something is changed in the current script, this instantly affects how the physical artefacts behave. This allows the script to be updated in real time while people are playing with the artefacts, and thereby be part of the malleable structures framing the current play.

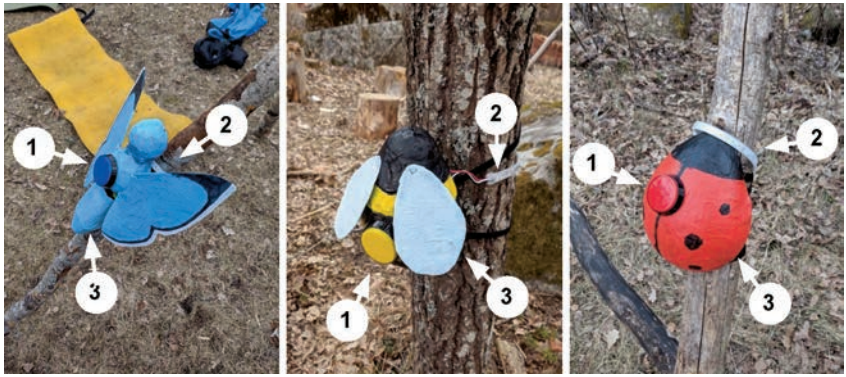

Figure 1: The three artefacts were designed to be visually distinct and reminiscent of different types of insects. Each is designed to be visually distinct, with different shapes, colors, and patterns, as well as semantically distinct by being different types of identifiable insects. Each artefact has 1) a large button on the front, 2) a LED-strip attached to its back, and 3) a buzzer within the papier-mâché shell.

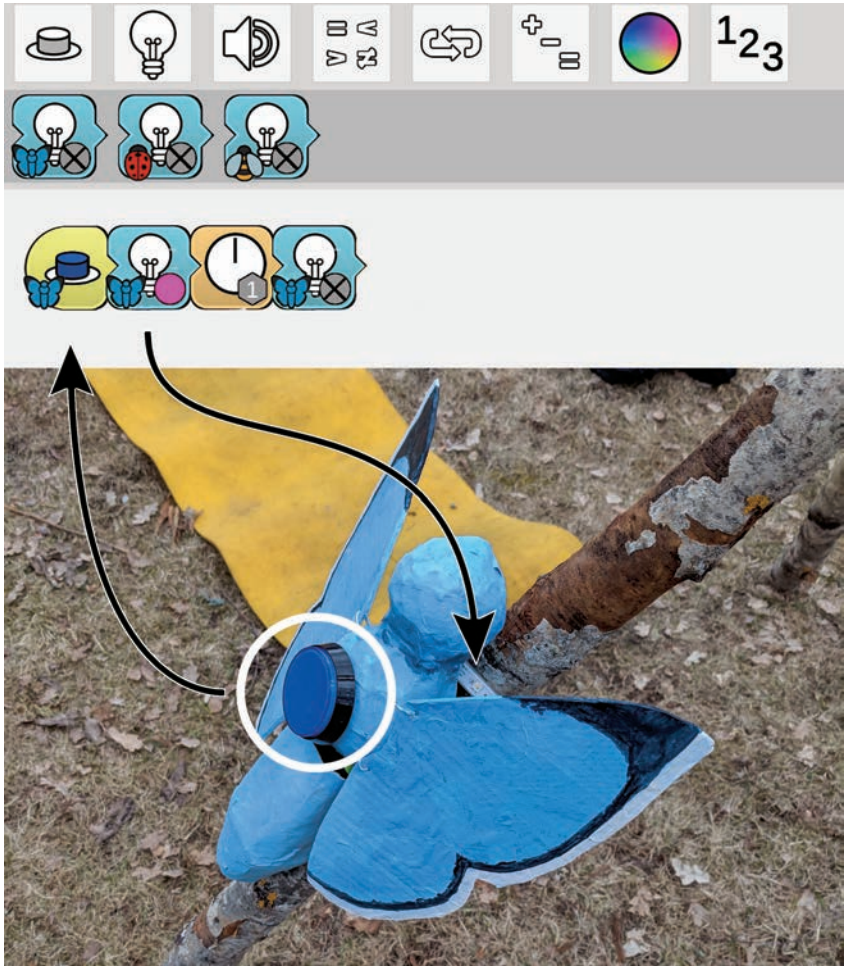

Figure 2: The interface consists of two parts; a tabbed library of logic elements on the top half, and a workspace on the bottom half. By dragging elements from the library into the workspace, it can be used and attached to a script. The bottom left icon on an element shows which artefact it affects. The icon on the bottom right is for adding parameters such as colors, or integers for durations or iterations. The current script in the workspace has two LED-elements; one with the color variable set to pink and the other to no color. Based on this, the current script in the workspace triggers when the button on the butterfly is pressed (as indicated by the leftmost yellow element). At that point the butterfly lights up in pink, waits one second, and then turns off (as indicated by the order of the three attached elements).

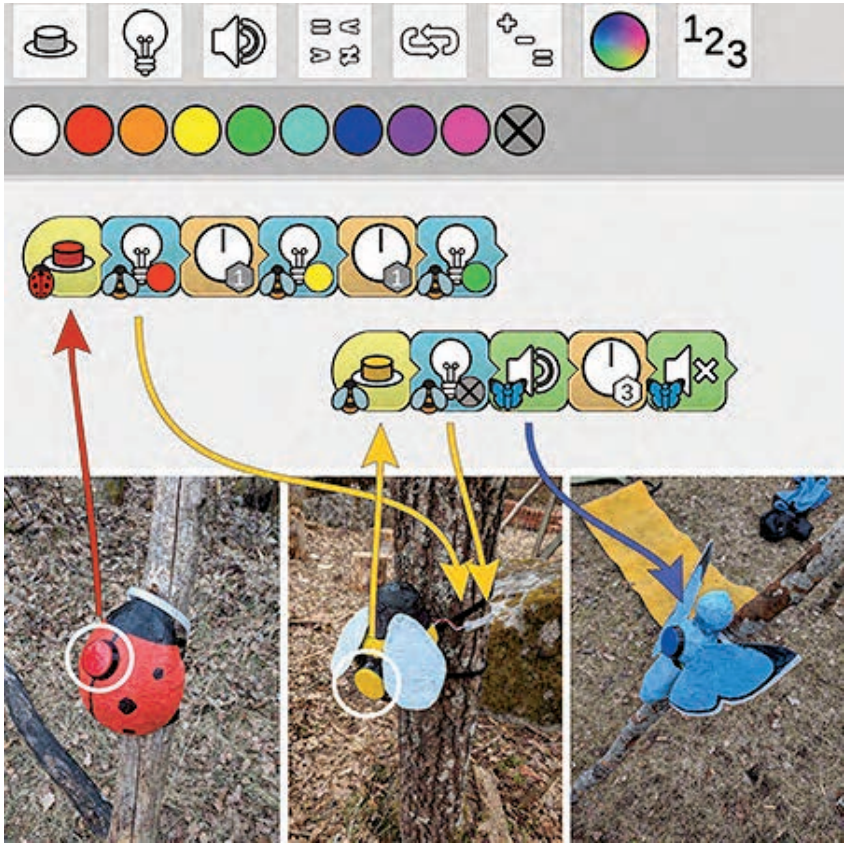

Figure 3: As the artefacts are connected to each other through the tablet, they can be programmed to affect the actuators on each other. The left script runs when the button on the ladybug is pressed. It turns on the LED on the bee and switches its color, as time passes, from red to yellow to green. As there is no element to turn the LED off, it is left on. The right script runs when the bee is pressed. It turns off the LED on the bee and makes the butterfly buzz for three seconds. As the interface only sends one step of the instructions at the time, it can be reprogramed after a button has been pressed to start a script as long as that element has not acted yet. This means that you can remove the element that mutes the butterfly before the three second delay has finished, or change the yellow and green color parameters until the delays that lead up to them finishes.

RESULTS

We observed that most participants approached the design in a similar fashion. When a participant got the device, they had a general

idea of which artefact they wanted to use and what they wanted to do with it. After achieving this by themselves or with the help of another group member, they either thought of something else to do with another artefact, or gave the tablet to another person so that they could try it. Through thematic analysis, five themes were identified; A) social dynamics and power structures around the device, B) actively supporting and including others, C) control over the prototype, D) reflect on themselves, and E) the uses of the prototype. In this work, we will focus on a specific leadership role that emerged that we refer to as the gamemaster. The role related to three of the themes; social dynamics and power structures around the device, actively supporting and including others, and control over the prototype. The last two themes had little to do with this role and will therefore only be detailed briefly. Theme D covered how the participants commonly described their experiences with the prototype in relation to their own lives and backgrounds. It also included how they expressed, or wanted to express, their likes and possessions through the prototype. Theme E covered discussions of how they could have competitions based on it, additional features they would like it to be capable of, and how they sometimes investigated and fidgeted with the artefacts.

A) Social dynamics and power structures around the device

We observed that a participant in each group took on an implicitly defined leadership role. During the field test, the gamemaster role, as well as most social interactions, were focused on the tablet. The participant that acted as gamemaster either held the tablet themselves or followed the person who had the tablet. When a participant used the application on the tablet, most of the other participants gathered around and watched what was done on it (seen in Figure 4), and ideas were sometimes suggested. Every now and then, they ran to press a button or check an actuator, either due to being asked by the participant with the tablet, or on their own accord ("The lights are

still shining!"). The leadership role stayed with the participant when the tablet was passed on, and we observed that they continued to perform actions to coordinate and support the other participants.

Figure 4: (Left) Group 5 gathers around the tablet above the ladybug artefact. (Right) Group 4 gathers around the tablet next to the butterfly artefact. (Bottom) Group 2 following the person with the tablet towards the bee.

During the observations, the tablet engendered a sense of ownership, as one of the more common topics among the participants was about who should use it next. These discussions and decisions were brokered by the gamemaster. In Group 4, as an example, one person kept nagging the gamemaster to be next, agitatedly saying things like "Can I get to do it now?" and "You are the only one to use it!", before trying to take the tablet from the gamemaster (see Figure 5). The gamemaster, instead, reset the prototype and gave the tablet to another participant who had asked for it earlier. While there were discussions about whose turn it was to use the tablet, no participant asked if it was their turn to use the artefacts. Even if each artefact

only had one button, they used the artefacts together (see Figure 3) but they saw the tablet as something that was used by one person at a time; it was either asked for or grabbed out of the current user's hands. On the other hand, the artefacts were never discussed as objects that were owned, but rather seen as a common resource. From our observations, this highlights how the tablet was handled and used differently from the three artefacts. While the artefacts were limited in how they could be interacted with, and were also rigidly placed in the environment, the tablet allowed for a wide set of interactions and was portable, allowing a user to carry it.

Figure 5: (Top) The participant on the right tries to take the tablet from the gamemaster in Group 4. The gamemaster gives it to the participant on the left who asked for it earlier. (Bottom) The gamemaster in Group 1 using the tablet while two in their group listens to the prototype.

B) Actively supporting and including others

The leadership role was not only about overseeing and directing, but also about helping, as seen in the participants' actions. This was, for example, seen in how they took responsibility when others in the group had issues understanding the programming language or proto-

type (which is further detailed in Theme C, Control over the prototype), whose turn it was to use the device next ("[Name], now you can try this one" – gamemaster in Group 1), and organized the group by instructing participants to press buttons ("Wait, wait, press THE BEE!" – gamemaster in Group 4, see Figure 6), or to check the states of the actuators. During the follow- up interviews, the role extended outside of the group as three gamemasters suggested independently that it would be good if the prototype was made available to others. The gamemaster in Group 2 suggested that it should be placed at a height where both "little children and adult children" could reach it. Similarly, the gamemaster in Group 3 also said that the placement was good, since smaller children wouldn't be able to use it if it was lower. That person also suggested that the artefacts should speak and invite people to program them ("Sort of speaking like this, 'Hi, you are sort of welcome to program me,' or something like that" – the gamemaster in Group 3). The gamemaster in Group 1 instead suggested public screens so that even children without touch devices could use it.

Figure 6: The gamemaster in Group 4 prompts the group to go press the button on the bee instead of the ladybug.

C) Control over the prototype

The leadership role was identified in the participant in each group that was first to show the group that they had enough understanding of, and control over, the prototype. In four of the five groups, it was the first participant who picked up and tried the prototype, managed to use it, and continued to act according to the role. In Group 2, the first person to pick it up didn't understand how to use it, and handed the tablet to another participant who figured it out and acted in a leadership role (see Figure 7). The participants who took the role also used their knowledge of how the prototype worked to support other participants who had difficulty, and they also assisted their fellow group members who asked them for help. This was seen in two ways. First, they helped others to use the scripting language ("We should probably remove your little butterfly [...] and add a clock" – gamemaster in Group 1), and they were asked by others to help them ("How do you remove the color?" or "How do you make it stop?" – other participants to their group's gamemaster). The second way they helped was by providing a structure of how to approach the prototype and its capabilities ("Which one do you want to press to make stuff happen?" – gamemaster in Group 1). In some of the groups, these gamemasters also sought to expand their understanding of how it worked and what it could do. The gamemaster and a participant in Group 1 tried to find the largest number that can be contained as variables ("Sorta ten times fifty, sorta five hundred or something?" – another participant to the gamemaster in Group 1, who responded, "Yes, yes! I want us to get it up to ten thousand, and we will try..." before starting to laugh at the size of the number). The gamemaster in Group 2 came to the researcher after testing the prototype and asked why the artefact didn't make any sounds as they had coded it, and curiously watched as the researcher attempted to troubleshoot the prototype to solve the issue.

Figure 7: (Left image) The person on the left is the person in Group 2 who picked up the tablet first and is seen here trying to use it. (Right image) As they didn't get it to work, the tablet is instead given to the person who started acting as a leader.

DISCUSSION

In Theme A, we present a leadership role related to the tablet. This role was implicit and related to help and support, rather than oversight. This role could be described as a gamemaster, coordinator, and lead programmer. We can compare this to how a role-playing gamemaster guides and supports the player group, rather than leading them (Tychsen et al. 2005). Further, such a gamemaster is not mainly a neutral interpreter and judge of rules, but instead works together with the group to create an interesting play opportunity. Emergent leadership requires both appropriate emergent actions towards a group (McCourt 2012), and those actions must be accepted by group members (Turner 1962). This gamemaster role had both. Emerging leaders performed timely actions as needed to support their group to structure the activity and assist with programming, to navigate turn taking and social dynamics, and by asking others to act. These actions were accepted by group members, who received the support and followed the instructions and social arbitration.

Theme A also highlights the differences in our observations of how the device was used, compared to the artefacts. Something in the tablet or the design of its interface caused individuals to take

possession of it, while the artefacts' design resulted in them being seen as communal items, and did not cause conflicts about who should use them. There are a variety of design choices and affordances that could partially explain why the different designs were used the way they were. The single device was portable with a touchscreen, which limited how many could interact with it at once without covering the screen. This forced the participants to group closely to observe what occurred on it. The complexity and possibilities of the scripting interface afforded more choices and agency in the interaction with it, which made participants choose how the artefacts would behave, and also caused them to instruct others to press buttons or check actuators. A less complex or screenless interface would likely have been less interesting for the group to gather around. Neither Dylan et al. (2020), Hitron et al. (2017), nor Ofer et al. (2019) mention participants gathering around their screen-less controllers with physical buttons. In contrast, Ofer et al. (2019) noted that participants got stuck with their heads down and eyes glued to the screen, dealing with complex scripting interfaces. The three artefacts, in comparison to the single device in this study, were mounted in place with large physical buttons and audio and LED actuators. The artefacts could not be moved, and the buttons were big enough to be pushed together, and multiple participants could listen for sound and check the color of the LED at the same time. Other than that, the artefacts lacked depth and choice in how to interact with them outside of what was decided by the participant with the device and possible rules of play. While considering these differences, it is important to remember that the design is just one of the framing structures that the play activity is situated in (Zimmerman 2004). This is even more relevant for installations in outdoor public spaces, where the designer has no control of social and physical framing structures that change over time. If non-personal, low complexity, and screen-less interfaces in playgrounds are not the center of the activity, they instead allow players of transformative play more freedom to decide what that center should be. However, personal, complex and screen-based interaction can still

be used, provided it was deliberately designed to produce the role that emerges from it.

From this study, it is difficult to know to what extent the role emerges due to a natural leader taking the tablet, or whether the tablet creates the leader. As we didn't look into the participants' personal traits or role in the group, it is not clear whether they were natural leaders to begin with. However, as access to the handheld device in this case was temporary, and it was not personally owned by the participants, the prototype appears to have affected the outcome. The person that first managed to successfully interact with the tablet emerged as the gamemaster of the group. And, they then kept this role, even when they didn't have the tablet. With only one tablet available to the group, the gamemaster gained an initial edge over both the playground and the framing structures, compared to other group members, and they retained this edge throughout the experience. They thereby continued to act as the system expert for the duration of the play session and into the follow-up interview. This is similar to findings of previous research, which showed that emergent leaders are often selected after demonstrating expertise in a group task (French & Strigt 1991). Alternatively, with their experience with the prototype, the gamemaster could have chosen to act as a leader to fill an observed need for a leader of their group's actions (Turner 1962). This gamemaster role is different to the leader role that Dylan et al. (2020) noted regarding their IoT-enhanced play artefacts. In their work, the role was temporary and only subsisted while the game controller was held, or while running a game that they themselves had created. The game controller provided agency over the game, as it directly actuated other artefacts in their play environment. In comparison, the gamemaster in this work outlasted the direct interaction with the touch device, and this persisted while the group explored the prototype and discussed it. Also, the participants did not create games, and as such it is likely they did not have the same sense of ownership of the activity. Lastly, the agency provided by the programming interface was deeper, but less direct; it controlled how the inputs of the artefacts functioned, but could not directly affect

actuators. Then, based on our findings and these differences, we would be able to design for the nature of the emerging leadership role, if the design affects its nature. As all acts of leadership require being acceptance by others for the person to be an emergent leader (Turner 1962), gamemasters in roleplaying games are accepted by the players playing along, and through explicit decisions, or the set operations of the game's rules (Tychsen et al. 2005). Similarly, the gamemaster of the playground's actions needs to be accepted by their peers as well. Without explicit decisions or formalized game rules, players need reasons for accepting the emerging gamemasters. Based on this study and the work of Dylan et al. (2020), examples of such reasons can be the gamemaster showcasing their expertise in the task, designing the game that is played, being in direct control of the artefacts in the playspace, or defining the rules on which the playspace functions. The reasons cause different leadership actions to be accepted, and only those deemed appropriate will be seen as deserving of the role (McCourt 2012; Turner 1962). The reasons are also affected by how they are supported by the design. As an example, being in direct control requires continuous use of a device, which gives control over the playspace, while only momentary use the device is needed to showcase expertise to the group. For this reason, we suggest that it is possible to design for the nature of emergent leadership roles in digital-physical playspaces.

CONCLUSION

This study looked at how social dynamics and power structures can be shaped by IoT-enhanced re-programmable playground artefacts in an outdoor play setting. When children played with the re-programmable playground artefacts, one specific dynamic came into focus; a leadership role that emerged during play. The gamemaster played a multi-faceted role as they led the game and the group, and also directed the code. By being the expert of the digital system, they applied structure to the coding practices and the digital rules, and by being a leader in the group, they also applied structure to the social

rules around the objects of the design. In this way, the gamemaster used their understanding of the design and how the device worked as the structure for how group members should use it and how to think about the coding practice. It was repeatedly seen that the other group members conformed to the gamemaster having control over the structures of play, as they listened to, and followed, the gamemaster's instructions, and at the same time the gamemaster held up their end of this relation as they continued to enact the role.

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