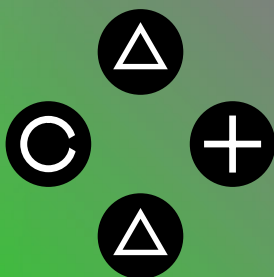




Acta Ludologica

Faculty of Mass Media Communication



Vol. 9, No. 1

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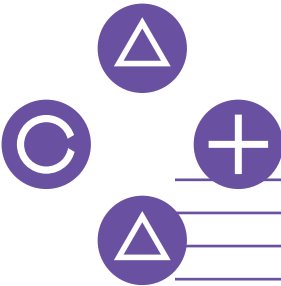
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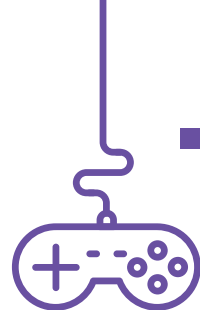
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Journal Orientation



Acta Ludologica is a scientific journal in the field of games and digital games. The journal contains professional scientific reflections on digital games; it also offers academic discourses on games, especially media and digital competencies, creation, design, marketing, research, development, psychology, sociology, history and the future of digital games and game studies.

Acta Ludologica is a double-blind peer reviewed journal published twice a year. It focuses on theoretical studies, theoretical and empirical studies, research results and their implementation into practice, as well as professional publication and scientific reviews of digital games.

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Let's Give People Games!

Since ancient times, humans have been playing games. Play required neither complex technologies nor specialised abilities. Across cultures, games have served as mechanisms of social connection, entertainment, and learning. In certain cases, they also held religious or ritual significance. The Egyptians depicted the deceased playing Senet in wall paintings and they placed game boards in royal tombs. The Aztecs played Patolli, associated with the deity Macuilxochitl, the patron of games, dance, and pleasure. In Mesopotamia, the outcome of throws in the *Royal Game of Ur* was (according to some interpretations) read as an omen.

At present, millions of players worldwide engage with titles such as *Fortnite*, *Roblox*, *Minecraft*, *League of Legends*, and *Counter-Strike*. Contemporary digital games combine technological systems with artistic expressions and narrative structures. Since the earliest experiments such as *OXO*, *Tennis for Two*, and *NIMROD*, game technologies have developed over more than five decades into a global cultural form. Nevertheless, two distinct perspectives persist: those who recognise games as a meaningful cultural practice and those who dismiss them.

For many, games are still perceived as a novelty associated primarily with younger audiences or as a form of entertainment lacking substantive value. Is this an adequate description of the medium? The development of digital technologies has significantly shaped contemporary gaming. Given the complexity of the real world, games selectively transform and restructure reality into systems that support playability – a process known as “ludoforming”. Game-designed worlds are often more structured, dynamic, and navigable, while simultaneously generating complex experiential and narrative possibilities that extend beyond the screen and the medium itself.

Digital games have become a cultural language that carries and reconfigures inherited cultural forms and technologies. In recent years, an increasing number of games have engaged directly with cultural heritage, integrating historical environments, figures, and practices. In doing so, they contribute to the preservation and reinterpretation of heritage within contemporary digital culture. They can reconstruct historical settings and revive cultural contexts that are otherwise at risk of disappearance, thereby engaging contemporary audiences with the past.

Interactive digital environments thus provide new modes of access to history for participants in digital culture. Titles such as *Assassin's Creed* and *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* illustrate how commercially produced games can also function as relevant platforms for the mediation of historical knowledge and the protection of cultural heritage. This provides at least a partial answer to the question

posed above. Games are no longer a novelty. They are not limited to younger generations, nor are they merely a form of entertainment without depth. Digital games function both as an art form and as a laboratory of experience. They constitute spaces of exploration in which logic intersects with emotion, systems with improvisation, and rules with contingency. The past meets the future; the impulse to play meets the impulse to create. The digital game space exhibits a distinctive *genius loci* that emerges only through the player's active participation and co-creation. This is a world of associations structured through the following conceptual framework: action, culture, theory, art, ludicity, understanding, design, observation, literacy, ontology, gameplay, interaction, critique, analysis. This is not a random set of terms but an acrostic embedded in the title of the journal *Acta Ludologica*, symbolically referencing to the conceptual foundations of game studies. It highlights that game studies encompass not only the analysis of game mechanics, but also the study of meaning, culture, experience, and the future-oriented possibilities enabled by games.

In this issue, contributors examine what games have been, what they are, and what they may become. Each game constitutes a mode of understanding the world. Games are embedded in cultural traditions while simultaneously projecting possibilities for the future. *Acta Ludologica* thus provides an academic space in which scholarly inquiry intersects with play and creativity.

The contributions cover a broad range of topics in game studies, including age-based identity and player agency in RPGs, Chinese gold farming practices and game monetisation, and narrative trust in choice-based interactive storytelling. The issue further includes studies on the representation of female characters and sensuality in games, explorations of playful third spaces in academic game research, and the pedagogical potential of FMV interactive narratives. Additional theoretical contributions address the relationship between image and operativity in games, as well as philosophical and psychoanalytic readings of *Bloodborne* and *Elden Ring*, alongside reviews of recent scholarly publications and games. The final contribution reflects on the organisation and role of game conferences in academic contexts, particularly in regions where game studies remain under institutional development.

The issue demonstrates that the need to play pre-dates technology and is likely to persist beyond it. While the world, society, and technology continue to change, the impulse to play remains constant. Let's give people games – not as an escape from the world, but as a way of understanding it better.

assoc. prof. PhDr. Slavka Pitoňáková, PhD.
Acta Ludologica's Advisory Board

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Design, Agency, and In-Game Self: Understanding the Constraints of Age in Digital Games

DB Bauer, Christine Tomlinson

DB Bauer, PhD.

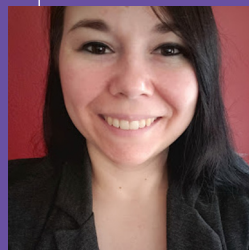
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ABSTRACT:

Age is a fundamental element of identity, yet its impact and role in play experiences remain understudied in digital games. While age is influential in shaping our social experiences and the expectations others have of us – from perceived competence to authority and relational dynamics – it remains largely undefined or only implicitly conveyed in role-playing games (RPGs). To address this gap, this article examines how age is constructed, perceived, experienced, and constrained through game design and play. Furthermore, we explore how these constructions shape player agency, immersion, and identity expression in-game. This qualitative analysis of two recent RPGs analyses data from both game content and online forum discussions, allowing for the conceptual development of age layering and playerage to represent the emergent, situated experiences of age within digital games. We find that age-related cues communicated through game design can contribute to flexible role-playing experiences and, if imposed after being loosely defined, can also disrupt immersion and constrain player agency. These impacts are especially salient in the contexts of character creation and in-game romance. Ultimately, we argue that age can be a powerful design affordance, yet remains underdeveloped in game studies and design. We also outline implications for improving RPG design.

KEY WORDS:

age, *Baldur's Gate 3*, digital games, *Dragon Age*, game design, identity, role-playing games.

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Introduction

Digital games allow players opportunities to explore identity by taking the role of a character and – in role-playing games (RPGs) – do so within the context of a narrative where they encounter many characters whose identities also shape the play experience (Tomlinson, 2021). While many identity-related play experiences and examples of representation have been explored in previous research (namely gender, race/ethnicity, or sexualities), age remains largely overlooked in comparison. This is true in the context of character creation, gameplay, game design, and research on digital games.

We tend to associate age and its study with older adults (Marshall, 2015), but age impacts all of us at every life stage, defining how we engage with the world and one another. It is an ever-present force that influences us throughout our lives. Our cultural associations with age, however, may be a large part of the reason that we do not see many studies exploring age as an identity that impacts experience with digital games in comparison to the multitude of research on other social statuses and identities. This extends to digital games where these identities have been extensively studied (Blackmon & Terrell, 2007; Malkowski & Russworm, 2017; Shaw, 2015), with far fewer investigations into age and its representations (Jones et al., 2025; Kakulla, 2025; Reay, 2021; Rughiniş et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2009).

Given that age is not a singular or purely chronological variable, its influence as a multidimensional construct impacting cognitive development, social roles, cultural expectations, and perceived competencies is essential to explore in depth as part of game design and gaming experiences. Perceptions and cultural understandings of age lead to inferences about abilities, authority, vulnerability, and what interactions may be appropriate (Bytheway, 2011; Hu, 2021; Swift et al., 2021). When combined with digital games, these elements of society and perception interact with game mechanics, narratives, and audiovisual cues, further shaping players' physical world understandings and impacting play experiences. Despite age's influence on a broad range of aspects of everyday life, it has not received the same attention as other social statuses, leaving it mostly undefined in game content. Players then must rely on indirect signals to understand or form perceptions of age in-game, inferring age from indirect signals like voice, demeanour, and role or relational positioning.

Part of the allure of role-playing games is related to player agency, or the player's ability to influence a gameworld and make choices (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2012; Muriel & Crawford, 2020; Stang, 2019). The choices available to players, however, are shaped and defined by what is allowed by the game (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2012; Muriel & Crawford, 2020). The impact that players feel they can have in the game remains important (Stang, 2019) and can help players feel more connected to their character (Li et al., 2013). Players do become heavily invested in the gameworlds they explore as their avatars (Murzyn & Valgaeren, 2016) and engage in role taking as their characters to exist in these worlds and navigate in-game relationships (Tomlinson, 2021).

Agency and influence on the gameworld are also related to immersion and flow. The ability to relate to the playable character enhances this flow experience, or immersion that allows players to effectively ignore the outside world during play (Soutter & Hitchens, 2016). Identifying with an avatar is influenced by several variables that can support flow states (Li et al., 2013). Despite some previous work exploring a lack of need to identify with characters (Shaw, 2015), players do appear to feel a stronger connection with characters that they can identify with, map themselves onto, and/or customize in some way, therein enhancing their play experience. More agency through character customization also improves players' bonds with their own characters (Szolin et al., 2023). In some cases, however, input is mainly aesthetic and the character, customized or not, becomes "flattened" and shaped by a default "cookie-cutter experience" (Chang, 2017; Lo, 2016; Howard, 2019). For these reasons, player immersion and experiences of digital games are shaped by age and necessitate further study and consideration.

Age and its definition may initially seem obvious, given that we tend to think of age as a product of the passage of time, but it is also linked to social expectations and identity (Bytheway, 2011). The social constructions of age as an identity also inform concepts of power and access in society (Marshall, 2015; Pickard, 2016). Age has a significant impact on us in our daily lives, defining social pressures and expectations (Bytheway, 2011), as well as how people interact with us (Hu, 2021; Swift et al., 2021). It also impacts and influences us at all life stages, highlighting the importance of understanding age as a social vehicle (Marshall, 2015). Because of age's importance in daily life and as an element of the media we consume (Edström, 2018), expanding these understandings to digital games provides a media-specific mode to explore how age is manifested in both game design and the play experience, as well as the nuances and impacts of age within the human experience generally.

Psychologically, age serves many functional purposes driven by cultural understandings. Visual cues about age allow for a rapid assessment of others, from presumed cognitive capacities and physical capabilities (Kwong See & Heller, 2004) to understandings of social roles (Marshall, 2015; Pickard, 2016). These assumptions can drive

expectations, with social pressures related to and misperceptions about age potentially causing conflicts or discomfort (Ho & Yeung, 2021). Beyond social perceptions, however, individuals also must negotiate their own age identity throughout the course of their lives, aligning with, resisting, or otherwise confronting expectations associated with chronological age (Westerhof & Tulle, 2007; Jetten & Pachana, 2012). As with other identities, digital games provide a space to explore and examine elements of age, allowing players to role-play and position themselves within new age-related perspectives.

The aim of this study is to examine how age is constructed, perceived, constrained, and experienced in the context of game design and role-play. Further, we explore how these constructions interact with player agency, immersion, and identity expression. Through a qualitative analysis of game content and online player discussions, we introduce concepts of *playerage* and *age layering* to emphasize how players negotiate and understand age-related meaning within bounded systems of play. We explore these elements of role-play experience through a comparative analysis of both *Baldur's Gate 3* (Larian Studios, 2023) and *Dragon Age: The Veilguard* (BioWare, 2024) to highlight how design decisions that imply or reference age can support or disrupt play experiences. We find that age-related content and associated experiences are complex, relating to design cues that convey messages about age, the ability to role-play, and engagement with game narrative.

Methods and Data

This qualitative project draws from direct analysis of game content (e.g. text or content analysis) of both *Baldur's Gate 3* (hereinafter referred to as BG3) and *Dragon Age: The Veilguard* (hereinafter referred to as DAV), and analysis of observational online forum data. Analysis of game design and content is based on a collective 442 hours of gameplay for BG3 from August 2023 to November 2025 and 96 hours of gameplay for DAV from October 2024 to November 2025. These games were chosen for their recency, as BG3 was released in August 2023 and DAV in October 2024, in addition to being similarly-set RPGs (e.g. high fantasy settings) with similar player input (e.g. creating a character and impacting a narrative). Because there are multiple branching narrative possibilities for game content, some of this has been supplemented with online review of gameplay videos.

Additionally, the analysis of online conversation includes the largest hubs for each of the games on both Reddit and in official forums, meaning that the BG3 conversations are centred specifically on BG3 spaces, while DAV conversations are linked to broader discussions of the *Dragon Age* (BioWare, 2009-2024) series. Online forum conversations for BG3 were observed for approximately two years between August 2023 and August 2025, while online forum conversations for *Dragon Age* draw from approximately ten years of observation between May 2015 and August 2025, with an emphasis on observation closer to DAV's release in October 2024. These conversations were observed as part of larger, ongoing projects, but highlighted important elements of age-related play experience. Although these are publicly available forums, exact locations and usernames have been removed and quoted player conversations have been slightly reworded to reduce the likelihood of identification of individual players (for more on ethical guidelines for online research, see Franzke et al. [2020]). Forum data are explored as observational and contextual, rather than quantitative and representative of all player perceptions and experiences, to provide insights into players' perceptions, understandings, and engagement with age in the context of the selected games' design elements and their broader impacts.

For both gameplay and online forum observations, notes were taken during and after data collection, relying on a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006) to allow themes to emerge from analysis, rather than collecting data with specific hypotheses in mind. Themes were derived directly from content, allowing us to highlight conversations about age in various contexts (including desires for character creation, in relation to romance, and in the context of narrative experience) in an organic way. A comparative analysis of these titles and players' conversations reveals similarities and differences across these games in how age manifests in game design and how designers' decisions regarding age relate to player agency and the play experience. The examples below were selected from both game content and online conversations for their emphasis on age as part of game design and player conversation, representing the themes that emerged during analysis.

Analysis and Findings

Age interacts with player agency in unique ways, particularly through character creation. While age typically remains within players' imaginations, it can sometimes be confronted through design, creating a sense of destabilized play when one's imagined identity for their character is called into question. Age itself often remains conveyed through various cues of design, whether these are direct or indirect, to indicate a particular age or life experience of a character. Taken together, players must work within personal, imagined, and in-game frameworks to make sense of their own in-game age and the ages of characters they encounter. We highlight this process of understanding age as a unique experience of building, framing, and reworking age as an inherent but often subconscious part of digital gameplay.

a) Agency, design, character creation, and role-playing

One element of the intersection between design and play appears in character creation and in the selection of dialogue options in-game that can help shape a character's personality. While we tend to associate digital games with agency due to their interactivity, the heavily defined agency that exists (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2012; Muriel & Crawford, 2020; Stang, 2019) can become relevant and impactful in different ways and to varying degrees. Players' ability to create their character is a major point of interest in RPGs (Turkay & Adinolf, 2010). For BG3 alone, 15% of players' time is spent in the character creator (Ngan, 2023). This makes sense because it can be so important to immersion and the ability to relate to the character one is playing as (Li et al., 2013; Soutter & Hitchens, 2016).

Both DAV and BG3 allow players to build their characters, a central element of Western RPGs. While both games allow for a precise definition of many elements of identity, including specifically selecting gender and pronouns, defining the character's body, and selecting options for the character that impact how they explore the world and relate to other characters (e.g. backgrounds and alliances), neither allows for engaging with or selecting age beyond superficial facial features. The player character's age remains a purview of the imagination, without options to establish a specific age or age range through character creation.

Outside of establishing age, BG3 allows for an array of character-building options. Players may play as several pre-made characters, or they may create their own customized character by selecting gender components and pronouns (corresponding to male, female, and non-binary), in-game race or species (e.g. elf, tiefling, drow, human, etc.), class (e.g. barbarian, bard, cleric, etc.), and physical appearance. Players can edit physical

appearance by adding scars, freckles, tattoos, or piercings. Players may also indicate age by adjusting *maturity*, a slider that increases wrinkles on the character's face.

In BG3, the character creation process begins with a default character, whose maturity slider is set to zero and which must be dialled up by the player to adjust the character's appearance. Other visual elements that relate to notions of embodied aging, specifically 'greying' of the hair, are separated from maturity. Here, the choice to name the addition of facial wrinkles as maturity stands out from the naming process of other categories. For instance, scars could be termed 'physical trauma'. The superficial addition of maturity falls short of the term's nuanced meaning and is used as a euphemism for age through surface-level physical appearance (i.e. 'wrinkles'), as opposed to the other more impactful identity categories, such as species, class, and gender.

Similarly, in DAV, players have an array of in-game identities to choose from and establish. They can select their *lineage* (e.g. species as an elf, qunari, human, or dwarf), appearance, pronouns and gender (again corresponding with male, female, or non-binary), class (e.g. rogue, mage, or warrior), and game-specific factions that define a player's relationships to other characters and histories. Within appearance, there are also choices for skin tone, complexion, hair, and body build, among other options. In complexion, players can choose from several options that impact how the player's character looks, including age-related elements. Older-seeming options are obscured but appear behind 'rugged' or 'weathered' labels (contra 'youthful' complexions), as they add more age-related markings to the face of the character. Here, the age of the player character is yet again left open and adaptable, but the game does not specifically react to player input regarding age (e.g. unique dialogue or interactions that adapt to the choices the player makes for their character's age), an area that could be developed in-game in more detail to create more immersive and meaningful experiences of age while better reflecting player agency in character creation.

To some degree, age can become very complicated in each of these games, in part due to the lore and histories involved in having numerous species with different age ranges and possible lifespans. As an elf in BG3, which draws from the TTRPG *Dungeons & Dragons* (hereinafter referred to as D&D), for example, one might be up to 750 years old. Further, the game does not allow players to input a specific age as they may do on both the paper character sheet and the guided character creator on the official D&D Beyond website (Wizards of the Coast, n.d.) when preparing to play a tabletop version of D&D. *Dragon Age*, on the other hand, acknowledges that elves once had much longer lifespans until in-game events blocked their access to the full power of magic and its impact on age, thereby giving all in-game races or species similar lifespans.

Beyond these elements, other game mechanics shape the dynamics between player-constructed and game-imposed identity, including whether the player-character is voiced, which further conveys identity cues including those linked to age. For instance, in both BG3 and DAV, players select a voice for their character during the character creation process. BG3 offers eight voices that are used only during world-exploration for party banter and various reactions. As an interesting departure, all dialogue, which makes up a major part of the game, is not voiced. DAV offers two 'feminine' and two 'masculine' voices that can each be of a higher or lower pitch. In the game, all player-character dialogue is voiced, such that the personality of the player-character is heavily shaped by the character's personality as imbued by the chosen voice actor. Here, though voice has a deep impact on character perception, the level to which players can customize their character and have agency over role-playing varies.

Players have several decisions to make and options to choose from when establishing their character. Many of these choices, like faction in DAV or species in BG3, impact

gameplay, including unique dialogue options or pre-established relationship dynamics between characters. Age, however, remains mostly background noise. While players may be able to customize their character through some in-game options (e.g. adding wrinkles and grey hair), these inputs often have no impact beyond an aesthetic 'wrapper' or surface appearance, and have no influence on dialogue, narrative, character performance, and so on. In these cases, the age of one's character, customized or not, recalls the 'flattened', 'cookie-cutter experience' discussed above (Chang, 2017; Lo, 2016, as cited in Howard, 2019).

b) Age cues, juggling age layering, and confronting age misalignment

In many ways, age is experienced in layers for players, calling to mind their planned age for their character, their own age in the physical world, and their imagined alignment with other characters that they encounter. While character customization is one element of what we are defining as part of *age layering*, where these perceptions and experiences of age come together in the play experience, others manifest through the player-character's positioning in relation to or interaction with other characters. As players learn about characters, they create mental maps of who these characters are, including imagined ages. We cannot know a character's age with complete certainty if the game does not give us this information, but nonetheless, we form opinions and ideas around how we perceive age for both player characters and non-player characters (hereinafter referred to as NPCs) (Bytheway, 2011; Swift et al., 2021).

These realities, though at least partly subconscious (Nicholls et al., 2018), can cause issues for immersion when players are confronted with in-game information that is incongruent with their perceptions and interpretations, which is particularly impactful in traditional RPGs that not only allow for, but moreover, encourage and centralize the player's agency to shape their character. Because of this significance, players may be particularly caught off guard when in-game details do not match up with perceived in-game realities, or rather, a disconnect exists between a player's own understandings and definitions of their character and game-imposed age.

Echoing social interactions in the physical world, players rely on various cues, both direct and indirect, to understand age. These cues are design decisions made to convey information to players, with *indirect age cues* including physical features that we associate with age (Bytheway, 2011; Gilleard, 2023; Marshall, 2015; Pickard, 2016) and *direct age cues* that give us hints about age including personal histories and established ages (Marshall, 2015). These more social elements of in-game understanding also link to forms of player capital or knowledge that players form from experience outside the game (Ferdig, 2014) and information and experience inside the game (Tomlinson, 2023). Specifically, players draw from physical world understandings of these cues and their meanings and combine this information with in-game knowledge (e.g. if one is dealing with a character with white hair, like Astarion in BG3, does that indicate older age or is this a result of his status as a vampire spawn?). Ultimately, players must juggle this information to understand what we identify as age layering – the complex messages and information about age that culminate from varied sources – in game design, drawing from knowledge about the gameworld, specific characters, lore related to different in-game cultures and groups, and relationships between the player character and NPCs, all while balancing this with their physical world knowledge of age.

These games provide both direct and indirect cues regarding age in overlapping and disparate ways. Most often, players learn about age through indirect cues. This may come by way of personalities, energy levels, facial features, hair colouration (e.g. salt-and-pepper), and references to characters' pasts (e.g. referencing training in the distant past,

recent conscription, or prior experiences as a vampire), which culminate to guide players' understandings of how old other characters are and their own characters' relations to them.

Though indirect age cues are more common, direct references to other characters' ages or the aging process may arise in game dialogue. In one scene with Astarion, the player can engage with the idea of age. While Astarion observes himself in a mirror – despite being unable to register a reflection because he is a vampire spawn – the player can approach him and have, depending on the player's choices, the following conversation:

Player [option 3]: It's for the best, you're not exactly ageing gracefully.

Astarion: Ageing? What do you mean 'ageing'? I'm a vampire – forever young.

Player [option 2]: So is the tadpole causing all the sagging skin, or...

Astarion: What are you talking about? My skin isn't... is it? [he checks his face with his hands] ...Excuse me. (Larian Studios, 2023)

While many pieces of information about age are sent to players from age cues, there are also direct possibilities of engaging with the idea of age and ageing. While most of this remains the purview of imagined role-playing, sometimes age is directly encountered in each of these games. BG3 tends to use age and ageing for comedic effect, while DAV incorporates direct dialogue and interactions around age as more dire, as will be discussed more below.

Perceived in-game age can become fraught when design elements begin to hint at or confront age directly in ways that may challenge a player's agency and perceived in-game identity when it comes to less explicitly defined elements like age. Often, these experiences appear in the context of in-game romance, where players can enter optional romantic relationships with companion characters. As one example, players may find their expressions and perceptions constrained and pulled away from the realm of imagination in DAV if they enter a romantic relationship with the companion character Taash.

Various indirect cues imply that Taash is a younger companion who is also discovering who they are, expressing angst, and slowly developing a sense of self, which appears to signal young adulthood ranging from late teen years to early 20s. The player watches and often supports this process through dialogue choices between Taash and their mother, particularly as Taash confronts their mother's long-held authority. The player is also put in a position where their age is again conveyed in very direct ways, serving as a mentor to this younger party member and guiding them through their journey of self-discovery, implying that the player character is older and more experienced despite the fact that the player may be going through similar experiences, a similar age to Taash, or playing as a character that they believed was closer to this companion's age.

Diverging from DAV, BG3 fosters players' agency in the context of locating in-game age within romance options, despite age cues of romanceable characters. For instance, the romance-based dialogue options between potential romanceable characters and the player-character do not break age-related role-play and immersion with imposed-age cues, as discussed above. Despite the direct and indirect cues embedded into the game that players (often unconsciously) process in real time, BG3's companions and other characters, through various relationships (friendly, antagonistic, romantic, sexual, etc.), appear to create a more agential, immersive role for the player, specifically in regard to their perceived in-game ages. The narrative, engagement with other characters, and in-game interactions do not establish the player's age-related location in relation to others, allowing the undefined player character's age to remain intact within the player's imagined in-game self. These differences further impact player agency, the unfolding story,

character relations, worldbuilding, and the play experience. When games like DAV do directly engage with age and begin to shift players' perceptions, however, this can become an immersion-breaking event.

Because players internally construct their understandings of their character, with immersion relying, in part, on the ability to maintain a consistent identity or sense of in-game self in RPGs, suddenly anchoring a character's age in dialogue or relational positioning to other characters can disrupt this internalized sense of in-game self. This challenges players' ability to maintain their immersion and produces potential cognitive dissonance. These discrepancies also pull players' perceptions and attentions to apparent design constraints, disrupting the flow state and making seemingly flexible elements of identity unexpectedly rigid.

c) Player perceptions and experiences with in-game age

Despite the understudied status of age in digital games, both in game design and as a psychological process of play, and its frequently subconscious influence, age becomes a point of discussion among players in unexpected ways. The three primary elements of age that come up in everyday conversation among players are: discussions of characters' ages, age in the context of romance, and the player character's age. In many of these discussions, players are attempting to make a mental map to better understand the characters they encounter and adjust their perceptions accordingly. In other cases, however, the focus of these discussions is on immersion breaks, feelings of constrained agency, and in-game self-expression.

Many of the conversations across the games studied try to calculate the ages of companion characters who are, in each case, often also romanceable. Players try to understand the positions of characters and their potential to relate to them via perceived or established in-game age. In these discussions, players use direct and indirect game cues that convey age while meshing these together with their own interpretations of characters. In one such conversation among *Dragon Age* players from around the time of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*'s (BioWare, 2014) release, players note:

OP: Do we know how old [characters in the game] are? I feel like some of their ages are easy to guess, with Sera probably being younger (maybe early 20s) and Cassandra potentially being early 40s, but are we just guessing or is there any information?

Player 1: Some of them we have to guess on, but there's information for some characters. There's a post [the player links to another discussion on a different forum] where someone figured out possible ages.

Player 2: Cassandra doesn't look 37, maybe more like early 30s and Leliana doesn't look anywhere near 40. [The player then tries to extrapolate ages based on how long *Dragon Age: Inquisition* takes place after *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare, 2009)]. Apparently the [main character in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*] is supposed to be in his [sic] late 20s or early 30s.

These kinds of conversations are not uncommon as players try to hone their in-game player capital (Tomlinson, 2023), while using their player capital based on their knowledge from outside the game (Ferdig, 2014) to help them guide their opinions and shape the meaning of interactions between their characters and NPCs. Because of age's influence on how we perceive and engage with one another, even if these processes are subconscious (Nicholls et al., 2018) during most play, players use online forums to discuss and debate the ages of characters that they encounter. This can help players locate themselves in the context of the game.

Some players express a desire to have more control over the in-game age of their characters. This can be related to interest in role-playing as a character different from oneself, but also aligns with being able to relate to specific characters or to see oneself reflected in game content. Often, romance becomes part of this discussion, with romantic relationships between the player-character and companions making age feel more salient than during general play. In one BG3 forum conversation, the original poster declares that they want to play as an old character, begging Larian to provide this option. In part, this is a desire to role-play, but it sparks a conversation about age and in-game constraints:

Player 1: I could get my character pretty close to middle age in the character creator. But when you get too far over a “perceived age” the story could get weird. I’d say Larian thought the game through pretty thoroughly.

OP: How do you mean weird?

Player 1: Well, first of all, with romance. I’m older, so not an issue for me, but it could be for some [players]. There’s probably some ageism involved with adventuring. There would probably be some dialogue asking, “Aren’t you too OLD for this?” and if there wasn’t then it would be silly. That aside, I do think Larian should add it and the possibilities that an old [player character] might go through. I was more referring to why they probably didn’t.

Although many of the processes that we experience when acknowledging age are subconscious, age in digital games can become a point of interest in direct conversation for players. Because age is so socially integral to many of our experiences and interactions, it makes sense that players would be interested in having, or at least attempting to determine, this information in order to better understand their in-game identity, relationships, and positioning, particularly for role-playing games.

Shortly after the release of DAV, these elements of play and in-game identity became increasingly salient for players, as game design challenged the undefined age often experienced in RPGs. During gameplay and review of online conversations, the researchers’ own thoughts and experiences with age-related perceptions mirrored many of the experiences and complaints appearing in online conversations about DAV. The most common example comes from pursuing a romance with a companion named Emmrich, which resulted in an immersion break for many players. This character has a number of in-game age cues to help the player locate him and his relation to the player-character. He has greyed hair and a long history of study as a necromancer. This establishes his relative age, but the game also imposes age through dialogue with Emmrich, triggered by his romance.

As a major romantic plot point, Emmrich suggests that the player-character would die long before he would, forcing players (including one of the researchers) to suddenly be consciously aware of the age framing of their character and making them confront their perceived in-game age in the context of game-imposed age. Emmrich’s preoccupation with his age and the looming threat of death causes him to tell the player, “Even under the best circumstances, you will outlive me, Rook. You’ve... grown to mean much to me and... I care for you, Rook! Deeply. But there are such years between us, I shouldn’t heap you with that burden” (BioWare, 2024). Regardless of the facial features or imagined backstory that players have given their characters, they will always encounter this piece of dialogue in their relationship, firmly establishing the player-character’s in-game age as far younger than Emmrich, who appears to be in his 50s.

The sense of immersion breaking due to this direct confrontation of age, suddenly foregrounding what is typically an imagined element of in-game identity, was a common player reaction after the release of DAV. In one such conversation, players grapple with being confined to a specific age range due to pursuing Emmrich. The original poster in the

conversation below mentions that having a young Rook feels ‘violating’ for both characters due to the imposed age gap, and acknowledges that the dialogue clearly establishes Rook’s age in relation to Emmrich, despite any age-related intentions from the player for their character. The poster asks if changing factions makes a difference, to which other players respond:

Player 1: Pretty sure it doesn't matter. If you pursue a relationship with Emmrich, the game consistently portrays Rook as younger. Apparently, this decision was established before players had the ability to design an older-looking Rook during character setup, and once that feature was introduced, the existing dialogue couldn't be changed to reflect it.

Player 2: Unfortunately, [it stays that way]. I really wanted to make an old grizzly grandpa Rook for Emmrich, but it couldn't be. I can invest in the side romance between Strife [an older NPC] and Emmrich because Strife is basically who I wanted to be in the game.

Here, the imagined age of this character was now called into direct question, with another character establishing an age gap that may not have otherwise existed in many players’ minds. This is a design decision that directly confronts age in ways that RPGs typically do not, bringing age to the foreground and challenging many players’ agency in creating their character’s identity. Further, considering that the average age of players is now early 40s (Entertainment Software Association, 2025), some players may not be or feel significantly younger, while others may in fact be older than Emmrich. For older players or players role-playing as older, their immersion is now potentially broken by the game’s inherent design, and they are confronted with the typically unspoken reality of age.

To a lesser degree, players also needed to confront their experiences with Taash, the companion in the middle of the self-discovery journey discussed previously. These conversations were fewer in number in comparison to the discomfort of confronting age in Emmrich’s romance, but the position of Taash created age-related tensions in play as well. Because the game defines a mentorship role for the player character in relation to Taash, the ability to romance this companion communicates that the player’s character is not a surrogate parent, but simply an older connection. As this imposed relational age cue is established over time through Taash’s narrative and character development, one researcher had a similar experience to players discussing online: that a romance option with Taash was off the table, as being defined as a trusted role-model and mentor by the game rendered any potential romantic relationship inappropriate or uncomfortable.

Players’ own physical world ages, and therefore their life experience, can make in-game romance more complicated, especially when game design imposes an in-game experience of age that is misaligned both with their perceived in-game age and with their experienced physical world age. In one discussion of Taash as a romance option, the original poster notes specifically seeing Taash as too young to romance, being more of a “friend or younger person” that the player is mentoring while they figure themselves out. Other players echo these sentiments, noting that:

Player 1: ...it felt somewhat weird having this type of intense, possessive romance focused on the youngest member of the group. They tried to make Taash both bold and a bit intimidating, yet mixed in hesitation and youthfulness. The growling is [cringe-worthy]. It comes across like they're still in their teens.

Player 2: If I was playing as a younger [version of the character], it might have worked for me? But it just came off as a young person trying to be sexy and confident. I get it, I used to be like that, but I'm older now and I'm not trying to romance someone who's still at that point. I like them as a character a lot, even the stuff people feel like is off

putting because it felt so familiar for how I was in my early 20s.... I just want to hug them platonically and tell them it's gonna be okay.

In this sense, the choice-making in romance options is confined by imposed age and impacts how the player chooses to relate to, through romance or otherwise, other characters. In some cases, these are realistic constraints. Taash's positioning as younger and Rook's as a mentor makes the relationship feel more constrained by identity-related or authority-related factors. At the same time, however, the use of indirect age cues with Taash or direct age cues and dialogue for Emmrich also constrain players into specific age-related positions and perceptions that can cause them to lose immersion and deviate from their in-game or even physical world selves. It is worth noting that though player discussions highlight challenges that they encounter when their perceptions of age are at odds with game-defined age, not every player will experience anchored age information as disruptive.

Understanding the In-Game Self Through Playerage

Our analysis highlights two internalized processes related to age that players encounter during RPG play. Because these games emphasize role-playing, identity is a central element of the play experience. Our concepts of age layering and playerage describe distinct analytical levels of this process. In age layering, players integrate multiple sources of age-related information during play, including their physical world age and understandings of age, their imagined character age, indirect and direct game cues about the ages of those they encounter in-game, and design-imposed constraints that define and contain concepts of age. Age layering helps to expand on physical world age understandings and definitions, incorporating processes through which players come to view age as embedded within social contexts, player imagination, game systems, and narrative design. Playerage builds on this by highlighting the emergent experiential outcomes of these understandings. The player's situated understanding of in-game self creates a concept of age anchored within the gameworld and play experience. Age layering, then, is a dynamic aspect of play, while playerage helps to define how age is experienced, embodied, and enacted during play.

Based on game design around age as a part of in-game identity and how players perceive, engage with, and become interested in age as an in-game dynamic, it is important to better understand how these processes come together to create specific experiences of play as it relates to identity. As with other kinds of agency (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2012), identity expression is also 'bounded' by the design of the game. We therefore offer a new way of thinking about design, character creation, and possibilities for role-playing in the context of players' perceived in-game identities and bounded in-game expression. The available options for establishing who one's character is are generally expansive and provide many options for determining a character's background, capabilities, and identities. This is important for player experience, as evidenced by the conversations among players noted above. A primary issue when it comes to ill-defined in-game identity expression is that challenges to players' perceptions or identity imposed by the game can interrupt flow states and immersion, drawing players out of the game when they encounter content that breaks from their ability to relate to the character (Soutter & Hitchens, 2016).

Because of the importance of age in understanding the self both inside and outside of digital games, we draw from the concept of *playersexuality* to understand these processes. Although the concept of playersexuality developed organically among players, and has been observed across online conversations about games with romance, it has only recently gained scholarly attention in academic research (see Tomlinson, 2024; Wysocki & Shook, 2025). Our proposed model of playerage draws from this concept, in which romance mechanics (Howard, 2019; Tomlinson, 2024) and player agency intersect to create a specific experience and perception of play and in-game self. In games that use playersexuality for romance, romanceable NPCs respond specifically to the interest of the player, rather than through their own sets of individual, self-constructed identities and conceptions, effectively responding to a button-press expression of romance (Adams, 2015).

When romance options are controlled by the player in this way, playersexuality shapes romance options in games like *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe, 2016), BG3, and DAV, wherein any potentially romanceable characters will engage in consensual romantic relationships with the player character if the player expresses or initiates romantic interest. In other games, game-imposed limitations on romance allow some player agency and input, but NPCs are designed with their own identities and preferences. In these cases, characters react to player input less uniformly, such that some characters will only accept romance from player characters with specifically defined identities and expressions, such as the case in *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt Red, 2020) (e.g. Judy only dates characters with female body types), *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (e.g. Dorian only dates male characters), or the *Mass Effect* (BioWare, 2007-2017) series (e.g. Kaidan only dates female characters in the first game, but, if he survives, becomes available for bisexual romance options in the third game).

Drawing from this understanding, playerage incorporates not only game mechanics, affordances, and design, but also the factors involved with how players experience and perceive their characters and NPCs. Further exploring this relationship of co-construction, the experience of age in digital games relies on several pieces of information from both players themselves and in-game content, including design and information provided through the game to players. We can understand this as, in part, an interplay between forms of player capital: information *external* to the game, relying on players' physical world knowledge and experience (Ferdig, 2014) and information *internal* to the game, relying on players' understandings of the gameworld (Tomlinson, 2023).

This information also draws on cultural and social inclinations toward identifying and categorizing people based on various cues, which extends to age as a primary social status (Pickard, 2016, Swift et al., 2021). For instance, when people see someone, they automatically sort them based on various attributes, both physical and behavioural, to understand how to engage with them. This is a kind of social background noise that we may not always be consciously aware of (Nicholls et al., 2018), and varies from person to person, but impacts how people perceive and engage with others. These processes are also present when we play digital games.

How players understand and express age in digital games is multifaceted and incorporates an array of experiences, perceptions, and assumptions. We propose the concept age layering to identify how various pieces of overlapping, dynamic information, drawing on external and internal player capital, come together to inform players' opinions and experiences, impacting how players make decisions and take actions in the game. With age layering, a player simultaneously and dynamically experiences their own physical world age, their character's age, the game bounds that constrain and foster how age can be expressed and understood, and varying context clues to make sense of their own

character, NPCs, and relations among them. Together, these form the playage experience that combines players' perceptions of self, their playable characters, and how they engage with NPCs while exploring a gameworld.

Conclusions

This study identifies age as an important and consequential – yet frequently undefined – element of identity within role-playing games. Through our comparative analysis of BG3 and DAV, we have explored an overlooked element of game design, representation, and player experience. We show that players explore these games with an imagined sense of self that can become challenged by suddenly shifting game parameters, particularly when it comes to the ill-defined element of age as part of defining a character. Implicit cues, explicit design, and player-defined perceptions can both shape and challenge player agency, immersion, and in-game relational positioning between characters. Our introduction of the concepts of age layering and playage provides new conceptual tools for better understanding these experiences and their impacts, emphasizing how players negotiate age-related meaning within bounded systems of play and how disruptions to these negotiations can result in immersion breaks or constrained self-expression for players.

Because of this importance, this article begins to explore the implications and impacts of age in digital games to expand upon the handful of qualitative (Rughiniş et al., 2015) and quantitative (Jones et al., 2025; Kakulla, 2025; Reay, 2021; Williams et al., 2009) studies currently available. Drawing from the content of two recent RPG releases, we develop new terminology drawn from our analysis of game content and player experiences with this content to better identify, discuss, analyse, and design issues related to age in digital games. Because of age's consistent presence and influence (Bytheway, 2011; Marshall, 2015; Pickard, 2016), and the impact that digital game design can have on players (Soutter & Hitchens, 2016; Szolin et al., 2023), this project takes a first step toward understanding the importance of age as an element of game design, play, and player perception, particularly in terms of agency and play experience. Our introduction of age-related terminologies and applied analysis provides a foundation for further study of age in games.

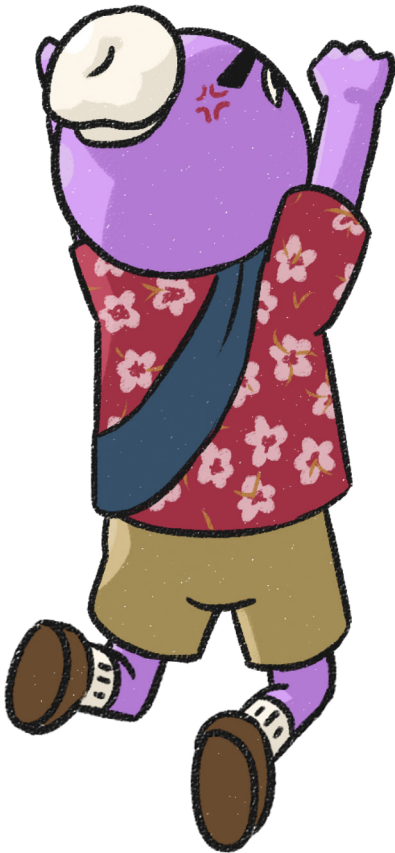
Beyond its value to scholarly research, a better understanding of the significance of age in digital games has the potential to impact games themselves through its adoption and development by game makers. These perspectives contribute to the knowledge base that allows for continued improvement in design to create compelling games that reach a broad and continually shifting range of players (Entertainment Software Association, 2025). For game designers, our findings highlight the interplay between agency and the co-construction of games and suggest that age can function as an important and powerful game affordance. If age is left flexible, it supports player agency and role-playing. When age becomes imposed after being ill-defined, without consideration for how players engage with in-game identity, it risks undermining both immersion and player self-expression. Game mechanics and content that are responsive to player inputs regarding age present new ways to deepen player immersion and improve overall player experience while offering designers new paths to explore across storytelling, character design, mechanics, and worldbuilding. Finally, understanding how age functions within games is particularly significant due to their substantial and growing role in human expression, the arts, and (popular) culture. More generally, this focus further reveals how age functions in society and its impact on the human experience.

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Pay-to-Win Power: Chinese Gold Farming and the Trend of Game Monetisation

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ABSTRACT:

This paper examines the structure of Chinese gold farming studios, the detailed process of gold farming, and the industry's impact. The popularity of online games has driven the rise of global gold farming, and China has produced mature industrial gold farming that influences the global game industry. While much of this influence is viewed negatively, the industry has also created substantial profits and employment opportunities, contributing to the Chinese economy and becoming a vital foundation of its gaming sector. Understanding this industry is therefore essential, particularly in terms of how it might be regulated to mitigate its potential impact on the global gaming ecosystem. Drawing on interviews with multiple gold farming participants and integrating existing research, this paper outlines the industrial mechanics of gold farming in China. It adopts both a macro-level perspective on the industry's structure and a grounded, participant-centred view of gold farming experience to interpret the broader, irreversible trend of game monetisation in China. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive picture of this industry, offer a close look into its operation model and inspire future studies.

KEY WORDS:

Chinese game industry, digital games, game companies, gold farming, government, grinding, monetisation, real-money trading.

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Introduction

As an emerging medium genre, the digital game industry has its own special cultures and communities, and its existence provides a foundation for related industries and subcultures. Due to the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the rise of the Chinese digital game industry was delayed until the 1990s. This situation prompted China to skip the golden age of arcade games and move directly into the age of computer games. However, China was still poor, and most families could not afford a personal computer. According to the Chinese National Bureau of Statistics, China's computer penetration rate was 5.649% in 2006, whereas in the U.S. it had reached 80.328% ("13-17 Personal computer", n.d.). This meant that 94% of Chinese people could not afford a personal computer at that time. Thus, Internet cafés, where people could spend very little money to rent computers for a certain time for gaming or working, became popular in China. As a result, Internet cafés are the backbone of the Chinese gaming industry, supporting the popularity of online games, and also contributing to many subcultures, such as the gamer and esports communities (Zheng, 2025).¹

1 Remark by the author: It is important to clarify the gaming terminology used in the study: *gold* refers to in-game currency; *farming* (more generally known as *grinding*) denotes the repetition of certain actions, often to accumulate resources or experience; *carry* describes the powerful assistance provided by one player to others; *dungeons* are cooperative challenges typically requiring a five-player team, whereas *raids* involve larger groups of 10 or 25 players; *auction houses* are in-game marketplaces where players trade items with others.

Gold farming, an emergent industry that relies on online games, has also become popular in China. Moreover, it has developed a mature industrial structure and culture. Gold farmers usually trade in-game currency with players for real money. Moreover, games without a currency mechanic can also be monetised by selling services, such as gear farming, power levelling, and achievement grinding. Indeed, this action goes against the rules of game companies and is punished if discovered. This paper examines the gold farming industry and explores its role in the Chinese gaming industry. It is based on interviews with four Chinese gold farmers from *World of Warcraft Classic* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2019) in North America. The interviews were conducted via WeChat, one of the most widely used social media platforms in China. They included questions designed to elicit perspective data, with all items phrased neutrally to ensure accuracy. For example, one question asked participants about their strategies for selling in-game currency, while another explored their responses after being caught by game companies. All data are stored in a password-protected folder on the researcher's computer. The personal information of these gold farmers are not disclosed in order to maintain their anonymity. To do so, they are called Shizizuo (the owner of a gold farming studio), Joker (a worker at a gold farming studio), Rou (an owner of a digital hardware shop who works as a solo gold farmer for spare money), and Tian (a customer service representative at a large gold farming company).²

This paper's topics covers the structure of gold farming in China, including its industrial process, benefits, and problems. Here, the term 'gold farmers' refers to players who operate in-game avatars to farm gold, not those who use scripts or cheats. This paper analyses the structure of gold farming studios, the detailed process of gold farming, and its impact. It aims to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1: What is the Chinese gold farming industry?
- RQ2: What impact does gold farming create in China?

Literature Review

Multiple scholars have stated that online games have dominated the Chinese game industry for decades (Feng et al., 2023; Zhang & Fung, 2013; Kshetri, 2009). This domination provided a stable foundation for the development of Chinese gold farming. Some scholars noted that gold farming in online games had become a significant support for the Chinese gaming industry (Yu, 2018; Jin, 2006; Heeks, 2008; Tai & Hu, 2018). Most research viewed gold farming as a critical issue for the global gaming industry. Still, it has failed to comprehensively examine the structure of gold farming and understand the root of this situation.

Heeks (2008) provided a detailed analysis of the global gold farming industry and offers valuable models to analyse it. His research interpreted this industry structure in general, with some cases from China, and defined the game monetisation caused by gold farming. Although his research did not delve deeply into the details of this industry in China, it inspired the research adaptation and direction of this paper. Thirteen years later, Fickle (2021) pointed out that:

Reinserting gold farming into the picture is, however, stymied somewhat by the limited amount of reliable, English-language scholarly work on the topic, exacerbated by the false perception of gold farming as a brief and bizarre blip that died out by 2010. (Fickle, 2021, para. 5)

² Remark by the author: All interviewees have provided their permission for the content of the interviews, including quotations, to be published in an open-access scientific journal, while maintaining their anonymity.

Fickle (2021) discovered that gold farming has become a core aspect of promoting Chinese eSports and is deeply ingrained in Chinese society. Though she viewed this issue too negatively, neglecting its positive significance to Chinese society, her discovery shows the need to further investigate and interpret the rapidly expanding Chinese gold farming industry in order to offer academia a comprehensive model to resolve the issue of limited amount of reliable scholarly work on the topic.

The above research takes a top-down view of the industry, so it cannot offer an objective interpretation of the industry. For example, Internet cafés offer a great place for solo gold farmers, and Heeks (2008) stated that small gold farming studios usually relied on Internet cafés. This statement was not accurate because small studios were becoming more commercial and formal as Fickle (2021) presented. One key reason was that the IP address bans of game companies could significantly impact Internet cafés. Heeks (2008) said to IP banning that “companies may block logins from certain IP addresses they believe have been associated with prohibited actions” (p. 48). It was logically in conflict with the operating model of Internet cafés. Thus, it is important to understand the experience of gold farmers to comprehend the gold farming industry, especially since some data can only be represented from the participants' perspective. Zhu presented how the people at the bottom in Sanhe lived by doing day-pay jobs and gold farming in Internet cafés (eMuseTV | EMUSE PICTURES, 2018), and Hou (2024) also described the hard life these people lead. Dibbell (2007) took a close look at gold farmers through interviews and offered vivid descriptions of their working processes. Chew (2022) provided a comprehensive summary of research on Chinese gold farming, reiterating its significance to Chinese society. Zhang and Fung (2013) also stated that Chinese gold farming was a naturally occurring phenomenon in the current Chinese social environment and criticized the lack of research on gold farmers. This paper aims to integrate previous research, outline the industrial process of Chinese gold farming, and resolve the research gap mentioned by Fickle (2021). Based on interviews with various gold farming participants, this paper employs both a comprehensive perspective to analyse the industrial structure and an objective perspective on the gold farming experience of participants, to confirm and interpret the significance of this structure to both the Chinese gaming industry and society.

The Introduction of Gold Farming Studios

In 1995, the first Chinese Internet café opened in Shanghai, marking the beginning of an era in which computers became an integral part of people's lives as a form of universal entertainment. Even though people needed very little money to play digital games in Internet cafés, some teenagers still could not afford the price. However, this situation created an initial opportunity for gold farming. According to the interview, Rou mentioned that although they did not have enough money to rent a computer, they often went to Internet cafés and watched others play games. Sometimes, they would be hired by players to grind gold, gears, or levels. He said this kind of deal was very common in Internet cafés, and many of their friends were doing it to earn some money. This experience made them realize that they could make money by playing games for other players, inspiring them to pursue it as a career.

At the start of the 2000s, online games became popular globally, and gold farming, which relied on online games, also emerged. Heeks (2008) stated “this activity has been

large enough to call an economic sub-sector – employing tens of thousands in developing countries and with global trade worth hundreds of millions of dollars – since at least 2003” (p. 7). The rise of gold farming was not an accident. It provided more income, jobs, and skills to help develop the global gaming industry. China, in particular, developed a mature industrial gold farming sector, which has had a significant influence on the global gaming industry. Jin (2006) notes that although multiple countries have gold farming industries, none approach the scope and scale of China’s. This raises questions about the general structure of industrial gold farming within the Chinese gaming industry.

Heeks (2008) defines the internal value chain model of gold farming as consisting of marketing, customer handling, operations, delivery, and after-sales service. This is the model most gold farmers follow. The Chinese gold farming industry generally consists of three scales: solo gold farmers, small private businesses, and large *real-money trading* (hereinafter referred to as RMT) companies. Solo gold farmers work independently. They must manage the entire chain model on their own and have no insurance to support them. These farmers can work anywhere with a computer, but many cannot afford one. Therefore, the low cost of Internet cafés provides a great space for gold farming. Reports on Chinese gold farmers and Internet cafés described the difficult living conditions of solo farmers, and Internet cafés were noted as one of their primary workplaces (Jou, 2012; “Gaming in China”, 2022).

Small private gold farming studios are more organized. The owner assigns work to employees. According to Shizizuo, his studio has five employees. He supervises employees and is also responsible for finding customers, making deals, providing customer service, and farming gold when available. Many small studios are in small apartments, where employees can eat and sleep if they choose, but they are responsible for covering their own living costs. Shizizuo does not provide computers for his employees, so they must bring their own laptops.

Job divisions are more detailed in large RMT companies. Tian works in customer service for an RMT company. It is a business with more than 20 employees. A recent job posting by a similar company is seeking office clerks responsible for human resources, financial affairs, and administration, offering a monthly wage of 1,000-1,500 USD (“Xiamen Zhengchen”, 2020). As a registered business, the company has a tightly organized structure and specific job roles for each node of the value chain. It has office and workspaces in a commercial building and provides the necessary equipment. Some RMT companies even run their own websites, such as Eldorado.gg and PLS173.com. Thus, regardless of size, gold farming studios in China operate with structures and job divisions that resemble those of standard businesses, following the same chain model.

Interestingly, the educational backgrounds of gold farmers do not seem to affect their participation in the industry. Rou and Shizizuo hold junior high school degrees, while Joker has a college degree. Dibbell (2007) describes Wang Huachen, a 22-year-old *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) gold farmer, who completed his university course in law but chose to farm gold instead. Yu (2018) also stated:

A closer look at the profile of Chinese gold farmers will find that they are educated and well-off (college graduates and university students from middle-class families). They play online games (typically WoW) full-time or part-time to get paid for selling virtual goods to Chinese and Korean markets more than the Western ones. (Yu, 2018, p. 9)

According to the interviews, Rou, Shizizuo, and Joker chose this job because they love playing games, and gold farming allows them to earn money while doing so. Joker reports a monthly wage of around 480-950 USD, while Rou and Shizuo earn around 1,300 USD. Data from the Chinese employment website 58.com indicates that the average

wage for *Genshin Impact* (miHoYo, 2020) gold farmers ranges from 700 to 1,000 USD (“Zhengzhou film”, n.d.). According to the official report, the national average monthly wage is 500 USD (“Residents’ income”, 2025). Gold farmers, therefore, earn significantly more than the national average. Because the industry requires only a computer and can be operated from any low-cost city, gold farming presents a low-barrier, potentially profitable career path. As such, it opens the door for many Chinese workers to enter the gold farming industry.

The Operation of Gold Farming Studios

a) Customer acquisition

Finding customers is the first goal gold farming studios need to consider. The final goal of gold farming studios is profit, so if farming gold cannot earn enough profit, the entire industrial process becomes meaningless. As Keynes’ Law states, demand creates supply because changes in aggregate demand cause changes in real GDP and employment (“Keynes’ Law”, n.d.). From this point, a sufficient customer base that demands gold will guarantee profits and motivate gold farmers to work on the gold supply.

The approaches to finding customers may vary based on the size of the studios. Solo farmers must post information in game chats to find customers, because they lack an organization to provide customer resources, and it is challenging for them to build trust. Rou says that solo gold farmers sometimes choose the Marketer’s methods to find customers, but they prefer selling gold to RMT websites for safety because they do not have enough funds to afford the risk of being banned. Small studios have an advantage as they can connect with frequent visitors. Being a small organization, they can also provide some insurance for the trade. For example, Shizizuo’s small studio only works on one North American server of *World of Warcraft Classic*, and its target customers are Chinese players and Chinese guilds on that server. Shizizuo and his employees will create many characters and separately join different Chinese guilds to find customers. Then they will look for potential customers who may want to buy gold, and message them. If Shizizuo is familiar with the masters of guilds, his studio may be able to cooperate directly with these guilds, and some masters may offer help. Zhang and Fung (2013) present that some guilds in online games have become formal gold farming guilds.

Large RMT companies do not need to handle those details. Because large gold farming companies and RMT websites do not focus on only one server, they usually create plenty of low-level characters as Marketers to advertise their gold farming businesses to random players. However, this approach is risky because these marketers risk being reported for harassment or RMT, so their accounts are easily banned, but it is considered a necessary cost.

b) Gold farming process

The methods of gold farming are diverse, and farmers must be skilled enough to earn gold efficiently. However, not every gold farming studio produces gold itself, as they can outsource the gold farming process to solo farmers. Large RMT companies often take this approach, acting as middlemen to profit from the difference between purchasing gold from farmers and selling it to customers (Heeks, 2008). RMT companies usually cover a wide range of games, and each game often includes multiple servers. This makes the cost

of hiring workers to farm gold or provide services on all servers too high. Therefore, co-operating with solo gold farmers, who typically have limited customer sources, becomes a win-win situation for both RMT companies and those farmers. As mentioned earlier, gold farmers' roles may vary based on customer demand, so the farming approaches can be classified according to service types:

- *Gathering loot and materials for sale.* Gold farmers spend significant time killing and looting NPC mobs and usually gather manufacturing materials. They then sell what they collect for gold. For example, Joker says his avatar can command a pet to kill mobs while he gathers herbs nearby. The advantage of this approach is that the profit is proportional to the amount of time spent farming. As long as the farmers work hard, the profit tends to be relatively stable.
- *Power-levelling service.* Gold farmers use high-level characters to carry customers' low-level characters through dungeons, repeatedly killing mobs to help them level up. Customers pay them gold in return, meaning that gold is essentially being farmed from other players. Like material gatherers, these farmers' profits are often proportional to their time investment; however, customer demand also plays a significant role in determining their profits. To avoid a lack of customers, these farmers must be skilled at running multiple dungeons, enabling them to quickly switch based on shifting demand. Therefore, although both loot/material gatherers and level boosters perform mechanical labour, the latter requires more operational skill.
- *Gear-boosting service.* This service involves customers acquiring valuable equipment during the carry process. To satisfy customer demand, gold farmers must be skilled enough to complete a dungeon or raid that the customer cannot finish alone. This makes the activity more difficult. Moreover, raids in *World of Warcraft* typically require at least ten players, which makes it nearly impossible for small studios to offer this service. For instance, Shizizuo's studio, which serves over 200 customers on his server, only consists of six members, making raid organization infeasible. As a result, this service is usually offered by large RMT companies. However, it is less common because it requires specific conditions. If customers want this service, it usually means they lack the skills to obtain certain gear on their own. If they lack time, the next service applies instead.
- *Substitute service.* Gold farming studios offer substitute services when customers lack time. Farmers temporarily take over customers' accounts to improve their avatars, either for gold or real money. This service can include level boosting and gear boosting, as gold farmers are familiar with the most efficient methods to complete such tasks by operating the accounts directly. However, this service is costly because it requires full attention to a specific account rather than using optimized methods for gold farming. It is also risky, as customers must share their login credentials. Consequently, substitute services are less popular than the others.
- *Producer and middleman.* This gold farming model differs from the previous methods because these farmers do not interact directly with customers. They will buy raw materials, craft them into goods, and sell the final products for gold. Some gold farmers even manipulate in-game economies. They monitor prices in the auction house and buy goods when prices drop due to oversupply or weak demand. Once cheap items are purchased and removed from the market, scarcity drives prices back up, and they resell for profit. These gold farmers rely heavily on economic knowledge and the Law of Supply and Demand. Although this approach is complex, it does not involve intense mechanical gameplay, making it appealing to strategically skilled farmers.

In general, gold farming methods fall into two categories: farming gold from the game or farming gold from other players. Regardless of the approach, both require labourers to invest time and energy into the process.

c) Providing service, selling gold

After finding customers and securing a gold supply, the next step gold farmers must consider is how to complete the transaction. It is essential to clarify the ultimate goal of gold farmers before continuing, i.e. converting in-game currency, resources, or services into real money. To achieve this, gold farmers employ multiple approaches:

- *Selling gold for real money.* The method of selling gold varies depending on the size of the gold farming operation. For small studios or solo farmers, direct trade is the most common approach. Customers looking to buy in-game currency, such as gold in *World of Warcraft*, contact gold farmers directly and negotiate unit prices. As Joker, Rou, and Shizizuo noted, the unit price is typically determined by the rates listed on RMT websites. These platforms dynamically update gold prices on a per-server and per-game basis by tracking the supply from gold farmers and demand from customers. Robischon (2007) describes how Sony Online Entertainment's Station Exchange system formalized this kind of real-money transaction. This reliance on RMT websites means that small gold farming studios and solo farmers generally follow the same pricing model. Once the price is set, customers use digital payment platforms such as WeChat, PayPal, or Alipay to transfer real money. Afterward, the gold farmers deliver the in-game currency directly to the customers through a trade in the game. This method, however, is impractical for large RMT companies, as they do not have dedicated gold farmers on every server for every game. Instead, they act as intermediaries, sourcing gold from numerous solo farmers. Customers place orders through a company's website and pay via digital payment systems. Once payment is confirmed, the company contacts solo gold farmers offering the best rates and instructs them to fulfil the order. In this process, large RMT companies operate as formal online marketplaces, overseeing the transaction to prevent fraud and ensure customer satisfaction. For example, Tian notes that the Zhengchen Company uses the mobile app Remitly for handling international trades. Though large RMT companies take a commission from each order, this model benefits all parties involved: customers gain a secure way to purchase gold, solo farmers access a reliable customer base, and companies generate revenue to sustain operations.
- *Selling services for real money.* Despite the term 'gold farmer,' many such workers provide services rather than just gold. The payment process for services – whether through solo farmers, small studios, or RMT companies – is similar to that of gold sales, with one key difference: in-game currency is not used as a medium of exchange. Instead, customers pay directly for services like power levelling or substitute services through digital payment platforms. Customers may deal directly with individual farmers or small studios, or they may place orders with large RMT companies. In the latter case, the company assigns tasks to appropriate gold farmers and monitors the process to ensure secure and successful service delivery. Heeks (2008) explains this through the example of power-levelling:

Payment is again made via a website but this time the gold farming firm is provided with the purchaser's game username and password. Their staff then 'play' the purchaser's character in the game, building up its levels (of combat or other skills). Once the character has reached the agreed level, it is handed back to the purchaser. (Heeks, 2008, p. 5)

Because no in-game currency is exchanged, such service-based transactions are harder for game companies and game masters to detect, making them relatively safer for both gold farmers and players.

d) Risks and after-sales service

The risks associated with the gold farming industry primarily stem from two sources: enforcement by game companies and the potential for fraud. Game companies view gold farming as a significant threat because it distorts in-game economies and disrupts the gameplay experience of regular players. As a result, they actively seek to suppress these activities. One common enforcement tactic is tracking suspicious in-game currency transfers, especially large transactions that lack a clear, legitimate purpose. However, gold farmers often evade detection through techniques such as using in-game auction houses to 'launder' gold by selling low-value items at inflated prices, which allows them to pay a cut to the system via auction house fees. This mirrors real-world money laundering tactics: "Buyers are often paid in small amounts, possibly to reduce the risks of detection, just as drug dealers pay lots of small amounts into legitimate bank accounts to avoid detection" (Bell, 2006, as cited in Heeks, 2008, p. 60). Moreover, the popularity of Internet cafés in China further complicates enforcement. Chinese solo gold farmers can operate from the cafés, where they can constantly rotate IP addresses and accounts. This makes it more difficult for game companies to issue effective bans, especially compared to their success in suppressing gold farming in other countries.

Fraud is another persistent risk within the gold farming ecosystem. Customers may not receive the gold they paid for, and gold farmers themselves are frequent targets of scams. For example, Shizizuo shared that he once lost 230 USD after delivering gold to a customer who immediately logged off without completing payment. Fraud targeting gold farmers is not unusual. Heeks (2008) mentions that Aiken discusses cases in which individuals boast about defrauding multiple gold farming firms. While large studios can reduce the risk of fraud by acting as trusted intermediaries, complete protection is impossible. Large RMT companies mitigate fraud by leveraging their informational advantages. As intermediaries, they coordinate transactions between buyers and sellers, manage risks, and ensure smoother operations. Their reputations also lend credibility, reducing perceived risk for customers and solo gold farmers alike. These centralized systems reduce the need for individual parties to perform extensive background checks or price comparisons.

In this situation, small studios and solo gold farmers who sell gold directly to customers place significant importance on personal reputation. As Shizizuo noted, he is willing to refund money if a customer cancels a deal. Rou similarly offers discounts to returning customers. This emphasis on trust and customer loyalty is essential for sustaining business in a highly competitive and risky environment. On the other hand, large studios and the solo farmers who sell gold to them generally lack such personal connections with end customers. Their services are facilitated through RMT platforms like PLS173.com and Eldorado.gg, which typically offer basic protections and standardized return policies. These platforms clearly state that they do not offer refunds if a customer's game account is banned following a transaction, emphasizing that they are only intermediaries ensuring a secure process. As Heeks (2008) notes, their after-sales service usually consists of limited follow-up, typically just checking in to see whether the client is interested in making another purchase.

Gold Farming, Game Industry, and the Government

a) Competition

Competition among gold farmers is inevitable. Rou, Shizizuo, and Joker all noted that they initially learned gold farming techniques through publicly accessible resources, such as videos or live streams. The low barriers to entry and relatively easy training process encourage more individuals to join the gold farming industry. However, this influx of new labourers contributes to intensified competition, and gold farming studios have little power to reverse this broader industry trend. As a result, studios are forced to improve service quality and lower their prices to remain competitive.

In addition to healthy competition among human-operated gold farming operations, a more controversial method exists that significantly harms both traditional gold farmers and game developers: the use of script-controlled robots. Joker described frequently encountering bot-controlled avatars farming in the same locations as him. Similarly, Rou and Shizizuo reported that their businesses had been negatively impacted by these automated players. Heeks (2008) mentions that bot use is common in the industry, particularly in the contexts of gold farming and power levelling.

Human gold farmers typically view these bots as harmful competitors. Unlike human players, bots can operate continuously without rest, drastically increasing the supply of in-game currency. This artificial inflation devalues gold and reduces profits for human-operated studios. Interestingly, this shared opposition to bots unites game companies and human gold farmers. While game developers seek to eliminate bots to preserve game balance and user experience, human gold farmers oppose them to protect their livelihoods. Reflecting this mutual interest, Rou, Shizizuo, and Joker all stated that they routinely report suspected bot users to game administrators. This act of whistleblowing underscores an unusual alignment between gold farming studios and the companies whose rules they routinely bypass, as both groups attempt to curb the influence of automated farming systems.

b) Game companies' methods

Because RMT can negatively impact the in-game economies and overall player experiences in online games, many game companies actively attempt to suppress gold farming. One common approach is account banning. Solo gold farmers, however, often mitigate this risk by working from Internet cafés. Heeks (2008) explains that "companies may block logins from certain IP addresses they believe have been associated with prohibited actions" (p. 4). This means that once an account is banned, any subsequent accounts logging in from the same IP address may also be flagged and banned. Solo gold farmers working from Internet cafés can circumvent this issue by simply moving to a different cafe, leaving the consequences of the IP ban to the previous establishment. Moreover, Internet cafés offer essential infrastructure for gold farming – multiple computers, food and beverage services, and comfortable seating – making them ideal environments for solo gold farmers.

In contrast, small gold farming studios are more vulnerable to punishment. These studios typically operate out of centralized locations, such as apartments, where multiple accounts share the same IP. When an IP ban is issued, all associated accounts are at risk. Shizizuo shared that his studio recently experienced such a ban, resulting in the loss of six accounts – a direct financial setback. In addition to these account losses, studios

must secure new IP addresses to resume operations, halting work in the interim. This increased operational risk highlights the precarious position of small studios. Heeks' suggestion that many Internet cafés double as small gold farming studios is therefore not entirely accurate. When cafes functioned in this way, the risk of IP bans jeopardized their core business: renting computers to customers. If a ban were issued, all customers, many of whom were not involved in gold farming, might also face account suspensions, which would harm the café's reputation and revenue. Consequently, modern Internet cafés are less likely to allow sizeable gold farming on their premises. However, Internet cafés cannot effectively monitor every customer's gameplay, particularly when solo gold farmers behave indistinguishably from regular players while mechanically repeating farming tasks.

Gold farmers rarely appeal their bans. Unlike regular players who might appeal wrongful punishments, gold farmers recognize that they have violated the game's terms of service and assume that any appeals will be denied. Similarly, when fraud occurs – either to customers or gold farmers themselves – there is usually no effort to report it, as both parties were engaged in unauthorized RMT activities. In contrast, large RMT companies and platforms are rarely impacted by game company punishments. Because they function as intermediaries and do not typically use in-game accounts to farm gold themselves, they offload the risk of being banned onto the solo gold farmers who supply them. As a result, unless formal legal action is taken, these companies remain largely untouched by in-game enforcement efforts.

Another tactic employed by game developers to curb RMT is the implementation of official in-game purchase systems, designed to redirect transactions away from gold farmers and toward the companies themselves. For example, *Fantasy Westward Journey* (NetEase, 2001) introduced non-player character traders who exchange gold with players, and *World of Warcraft* offers the WoW Token as a sanctioned way to purchase gold. While these systems can suppress RMT activity, they do not completely eliminate it. As long as there is a financial incentive, gold farmers are likely to undercut official pricing and continue offering services. Some companies have responded by removing player-to-player trading systems entirely from their newer games, effectively eliminating any openings for RMT. For instance, *Genshin Impact* (miHoYo, 2020) monetises through gacha mechanics for rare characters and items, while *Dungeon Fighter Online* (Neople, 2005) agented by Tencent, sells legendary gear directly via in-game purchases. This design shift transforms game companies into the most prominent participants in RMT themselves, reorienting RMT from an illicit activity to a built-in, profit-driven game mechanic. Ironically, this trend has worsened the very problem companies originally sought to eliminate, introducing pay-to-win systems that arguably erode the player experience more than traditional gold farming.

c) Government support and impact

According to multiple studies and media reports, Internet cafés in China have served as both living spaces and workplaces for gold farmers. When Internet cafés first appeared in the 1990s, China was undergoing massive layoffs. Following Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms, most government-owned work units were dismantled, pushing millions into the open labour market. Between 1997 and 2000 alone, 21 million workers lost their jobs (Moskowitz, 2013). These cafes became informal hubs for the unemployed, and the low barrier to entry in the gold farming industry motivated some of them to join the industry. Besides, gold farming heavily relies on labour rather than means of production, so it does not compete much for resources with existing industries. This implicit connection benefits both Internet cafés and gold farmers. The rise of gold farming thus helped ease the burden of unemployment, and the government passively supported its expansion. As a result, the Chinese government recognized gold farming as a legitimate profession.

As Jin (2006) explains, “this industry has developed to such a level that the Chinese government is looking for ways to tax and regulate it” (para. 3). With tacit approval, gold farming flourished rapidly. Chew (2022) states that gold farming helps alleviate poverty among Chinese people. Some digital companies, such as the Zhengchen Company, were registered specifically to provide RMT services. Consequently, the government’s attitude has left game companies to tackle this issue independently.

The push and pull between gold farmers and game companies, regardless of which side profits more, often overlooks the most essential stakeholders: the players. For both gold farmers and game developers, profit is the main concern, which discourages addressing this issue. From the perspective of RMT users, the seller’s identity is irrelevant as long as the price is reasonable and the transaction is secure. For many players, purchasing in-game currency or services has become a normalized part of gameplay. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism once reported that “7.4% of middle school students strongly agree that ‘real life is just like in games – as long as you spend money, you can get things done’” (“China Internet cafés,” 2008). This kind of RMT-centred gameplay undermines the experiences of ordinary players.

These regular players seek to enjoy the content of games, such as grinding for gear or currency, as a form of relaxation and personal achievement. However, RMT allows others to bypass these efforts entirely, diminishing the value of in-game accomplishments. In competitive games like *CrossFire* (Smilegate Entertainment, 2007), normal players often feel compelled to engage in RMT themselves just to stay competitive. At the same time, game companies benefit financially from this system. In 2024, an indie game titled *Chinese Online Games* (648 Studio, 2024) satirized the negative consequences of RMT and its overwhelming impact on the lives of Chinese players. Nevertheless, RMT-based monetisation has become a dominant business model in China. This pay-to-win paradigm not only distorts the gaming experience but also stifles market diversity. Even more, strict censorship and poor localisation prevent many high-quality foreign games from entering the Chinese market. This leaves players with few alternatives, indirectly supports the gold farming ecosystem and makes normal players familiar with RMTs. Thus, within this web of mutual interests, the government, gold farmers, some game companies, and RMT players all derive benefits, while ordinary players and the broader game market suffer. Enabled by governmental tolerance and fuelled by RMT-focused game design, the Chinese gold farming industry continues to generate significant profits and exert growing influence on the global gaming landscape. Additionally, the industry has given rise to new service branches.

The Playmate service is a recent evolution of gold farming, emerging in response to the growing desire among Chinese gamers for companionship during online gameplay. Rather than selling in-game currency, this service monetises social interaction itself, becoming a new core of the RMT process. Players can hire gaming partners through voice chat platforms. Hired playmates follow the client’s instructions to play specific games while engaging in real-time conversation. The service generally caters to two main types of consumer demand: some customers seek emotional companionship, while others are looking for highly skilled players to help them overcome difficult in-game challenges. Regardless of the motivation, the goal is to provide an enhanced gaming experience through paid companionship. This service gets rid of the reliance on and potential risk of in-game currency systems, so many gold farmers have switched their service type to it, which expand the popularity of RMT atmosphere in the Chinese game market. As the most popular 2025 game in China, *Delta Force: Hawk Ops* (Team Jade, 2025) has reached 20 million daily active players, and 42% players have chosen to purchase the playmate service (“Bixin App releases”, 2025; Delta Force project team, 2025). Thus, the Chinese game market and players have been deeply influenced by the RMT atmosphere.

Much like traditional gold farming, entry into the playmate industry requires minimal qualifications. Companies rarely demand formal education, professional training, or even proven gaming skills. Instead, they provide a platform where customers browse and select playmates based on profiles or advertised capabilities. These companies function primarily as intermediaries, profiting from service fees and platform usage without directly managing the playmates themselves. As a result, the industry is poorly regulated. Despite being marketed as a form of in-game companionship, the lack of oversight allows employees to offer a broad and ambiguous range of services to satisfy customer demands. This regulatory gap poses risks to social stability and has attracted growing scrutiny. Chew (2022) mentions that female playmates sometimes flirt with their male customers. Chinese state media have raised concerns about the darker sides of the playmate industry. *Xinhuanet* reported that certain playmate services were involved in illegal activities, and *People's Daily* exposed Bixin – the largest playmate service provider in China – for allegedly facilitating prostitution under the pretence of late-night companionship services. Following these revelations, the government ordered Bixin to suspend operations for internal rectification (Han & Wang, 2023; Liu & Chen, 2020).

Although both gold farming and playmate services fall under the umbrella of RMT, they are treated very differently by the Chinese government. While gold farming is detrimental to the gaming industry, it does not directly conflict with the state's broader goals of promoting social harmony and public morality. In contrast, playmate services – especially when they cross over into inappropriate or illicit activities – pose a more visible threat to these values. As a result, companion services are subject to much stricter regulation and enforcement than gold farming, despite sharing a similar foundation in RMT within the digital economy.

Finally, gold farming remains an inherently unstable profession. Its survival is tethered to the lifespan of the online games it exploits. When a game's popularity declines or it is shut down, the accompanying gold farming economy collapses. Solo gold farmers and small studios are disproportionately affected in such cases. As customer demand diminishes, these workers are forced to abandon their accounts, discard the game-specific skills they have developed, and search for new opportunities, often starting from scratch. In contrast, large RMT companies and websites are not as vulnerable. Because they act as intermediaries rather than direct participants in the farming process, their operations are not tied to any single game. When a game becomes unprofitable, they simply remove it from their platforms and shift focus to emerging titles, recruiting new suppliers and customers as needed.

Conclusion

This paper outlines the industrial mechanics of gold farming in China. It adopts both a macro-level perspective on the industry's structure and a grounded, participant-centred view of the gold farming experience to interpret the broader, irreversible trend of game monetisation in China. This paper provides a comprehensive picture of this industry, offers a close look into its operation model and inspires future studies. Although the gold farming industry can significantly undermine both the profits of game companies and the gaming experiences of regular players, its societal value remains considerable. In China, the industry generates substantial economic benefits by creating employment opportunities, offering competitive average wages, requiring minimal educational credentials, and demanding only basic training. Despite existing within a regulatory 'grey' zone of the Chinese

gaming industry, gold farming has evolved into an indispensable foundation of that ecosystem. However, individual gold farmers and small studios must work hard and contend with significant risks, whereas large RMT studios benefit from the industry while remaining largely insulated from these challenges. This capital model appears across many different markets, making Chinese gold farming a useful case for future interdisciplinary analysis.

From a global standpoint, the Chinese gold farming industry has reshaped the demographics of online gaming. Based on research by Woodcock (2008) and Kushner (2007), of 50 million online game players worldwide, 20 million participate in monthly subscription-based games, and approximately 1 million of these are gold farmers. This means that gold farmers account for 5% of the subscription-based player base. Over the past two decades, this proportion has likely grown as gold farmers have expanded their services beyond currency farming to include substitute services and playmate offerings, targeting a wider range of games, including those without traditional currency systems. However, the lack of quantitative research and statistics on the contemporary market requires future data collection and analysis.

Gold farming has become an irreplaceable sub-sector of the global game economy. Lehtiniemi (2007) estimated that gold farming generated approximately 1.6 billion USD in gross revenue. Although there is a lack of updated data beyond the report, the 42% of Chinese players currently engaged in the RMT industry has proved its value. The elimination of gold farming would consequently result in the loss of a significant economic engine, making its removal highly unlikely. This prediction suggests a valuable future research direction that requires greater attention to data collection.

As game monetisation continues to evolve as an irreversible trend, the global gaming industry now faces a critical challenge: how to effectively regulate gold farming while mitigating its harmful effects and preserving its economic benefits. Developing a regulatory framework that addresses this tension will be a crucial next step for both policymakers and game developers worldwide.

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Narrative Trust in Choice-Based Games: Rethinking Emotional Immersion Through Twine and AAA Dialogue Trees

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ABSTRACT:

This paper investigates *narrative trust* in choice-based interactive digital narratives (IDNs). Not to be confused with literary notions of the narrator's reliability, narrative trust is a form of emotional engagement where players believe not just in characters, plot, or outcomes but in the systems that shape them. Drawing from player surveys and close readings of four games – *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, *Detroit: Become Human*, *Depression Quest*, and *With Those We Love Alive* – the study explores how emotional reliability is constructed, felt, and sometimes broken. Trust, we argue, emerges not from the number of endings or the complexity of branching but from the system's ability to register intention with coherence and weight. Through structural analysis of design mechanisms like responsive hesitation, we show how narrative systems earn or lose credibility. When players feel misrecognised as the system responds with silence, flattening, or didactic funnelling, trust collapses. But when a system hesitates, absorbs, or simply listens, even refusal can feel like recognition. This paper calls for design that values resonance over spectacle, showing that emotional mechanics are not soft features but central engines of narrative play.

KEY WORDS:

digital games, game studies, interactive digital narratives, narrative choice-based games, narrative studies, narrative trust, player agency, structural design.

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Introduction

I trusted Connor to make the right decision, even if I wasn't holding the controller.
– Survey response #26, *Detroit: Become Human*

This paper begins from a moment that game studies does not always hold onto for long: the shift from evaluation to belief. At this point, the player engages the game as a structure that can carry intention and sustain uncertainty over time. Trust, here, settles at the level of the system. Moments like this remain difficult to account for within existing frameworks of agency and interactivity, where emphasis has tended to fall on choice, outcome, and system design rather than on the player's sustained belief in the system itself.

Choice-based digital games have long been central to discussions of agency and interactivity in narrative form. Early accounts of ergodic literature and cybertext position meaning as something produced through traversal rather than reception (Aarseth, 1997). Later work on procedural narrative and participatory storyworlds extends this view, arguing that digital environments require players to interpret both narrative content and the rules that organise it (Murray, 1997; Ryan, 2006). Within this framework, interactive digital narratives (IDNs) can be understood as systems in which progression depends on player action and interpretation. Most scholarship approaches IDNs through the architecture of choice. Attention has been given to branching structures, moral decision systems, and the distribution of agency within rule-based environments (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). In large-scale games, these processes are often externalised

through flowcharts, morality indicators, and outcome summaries that render system logic visible. In text-based and independently developed works, particularly those created using Twine, choice operates through constraint, repetition, or refusal embedded directly into the narrative structure (Friedhoff, 2013; Harvey, 2014). Across these forms, choice remains the primary site through which narrative meaning is organised.

However, player accounts tend to linger elsewhere. They return to moments where system response feels inattentive, delayed, or difficult to interpret in relation to intention. Outcomes arrive without sufficient signal, and systems track behaviour quietly and disclose their logic only after the fact. These moments do not point to a lack of agency. Rather, they suggest instability in how the system holds and translates player input over time. Narrative engagement begins to hinge on whether responses remain legible across the duration of play.

This paper develops the concept of narrative trust to describe this condition. Narrative trust refers to the player's sense that their actions are being registered in ways that remain emotionally and structurally intelligible as play unfolds. The term draws from literary discussions of narrative reliability, where readers assess the credibility of a narrative voice (Booth, 1983). In interactive media, attention shifts toward the system as the site of that assessment. What matters is how it responds, how it delays, how it holds or releases consequence.

This study examines narrative trust across four choice-based interactive digital narratives: *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red, 2015), *Detroit: Become Human* (Quantic Dream, 2018), *Depression Quest* (The Quinnsspiracy, 2013), and *With Those We Love Alive* (Porpentine, 2014). These works differ in platform, aesthetic, scale, and production context, yet emerge within a relatively concentrated period of contemporary interactive narrative design. This allows for comparison across divergent forms without foregrounding graphical fidelity or budget, instead focusing on how systems organise response across interaction. The analysis proceeds through qualitative, interpretive methods grounded in structural reading, supported by anonymised survey responses. These materials are used to situate how players describe recognition, dissonance, and moments of withdrawal in relation to system behaviour. The argument that follows treats narrative engagement as a function of system responsiveness. Emotional immersion depends on whether the system continues to register intention in ways that can be read over time. Narrative trust takes shape through coherence, resistance, and delay which thins out when response becomes opaque, generic, or difficult to trace. In this sense, narrative trust operates as a structural condition of meaningful play.

Theoretical Framework

Work on interactive digital narratives has consistently returned to the relationship between player action and system response. Early formulations of ergodic literature position the reader as an active participant whose traversal produces meaning through effort and decision (Aarseth, 1997). This shift places interpretation within a structured environment, where the organisation of paths, constraints, and outcomes shapes the conditions under which narrative can be encountered (Nitsche, 2008). Murray (1997) extends this understanding by framing digital environments as spaces structured by procedural affordances, where agency emerges through interaction with rule-based systems. Ryan (2006) further develops this line of thought by emphasising that players interpret not only storyworlds, but also the logic through which those worlds respond. Here, agency has

often been treated as the central organising concept. Studies of branching structures and decision systems tend to focus on the availability of options, the visibility of consequence, and the distribution of control within designed environments (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). Ethical approaches to gameplay refine this discussion by examining how systems assign weight to player action and frame decision-making within moral structures (Sicart, 2009, 2013). These approaches establish vocabulary for understanding how systems organise choice and consequence while also foregrounding the importance of coherence, even when outcomes remain uncertain or delayed.

Alongside this focus on agency, scholarship on affect and embodiment has shifted attention toward how interaction is felt across time (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010). Calleja (2011) describes player engagement as a process of incorporation, where the boundaries between player and system become less distinct through sustained interaction. Massumi (2002) approaches affect as a pre-conscious intensity that circulates through action and response, shaping experience before it is articulated. Bruner (1990) and Freeman (2010) situate narrative meaning within the processes of memory and interpretation, where experience is structured retrospectively through patterns that hold across time. These perspectives frame interaction as something that unfolds gradually, shaped by accumulation, delay, and variation rather than by discrete moments of decision.

Moreover, Twine, an open-source tool for creating hypertext-based interactive narratives, has become closely associated with independent interactive fiction and small-scale digital storytelling practices. Twine-based works typically operate through text-driven interfaces, limited computational infrastructure, and a focus on accessibility (Anthropy, 2012), allowing creators to produce narrative systems outside commercial development frameworks (Alexander, 2014). Within this context, design practices often prioritise constraint and minimalism. Rather than expanding choice, these systems frequently restrict it, using repetition, denial, or limited interaction to shape player experience (Friedhoff, 2013; Harvey, 2014). Constraint operates as a structural condition that directs attention toward how systems respond, rather than how many options they provide. This approach situates meaning within pacing, tone, and the modulation of response.

Across these strands of scholarship, a shared concern emerges around how systems register and organise player input over time. What remains less explicitly addressed is how players come to sustain belief in the system itself as an ongoing narrative presence. Existing frameworks account for action, consequence, and interpretation, yet they rarely isolate the conditions under which system behaviour is experienced as credible, attentive, or coherent across extended interaction.

Several games foreground this question through their design. *Eliza* (Zachtronics, 2019) structures interaction through constrained dialogue, where the player's role is limited to reading pre-scripted therapeutic responses. Meaning, here, emerges through restriction, pacing, and the accumulation of context across sessions. *The Beginner's Guide* (Everything Unlimited, 2015) organises its progression through a guided sequence that controls access to interpretation, shaping how players engage with authorship and intent over time. In *Heaven's Vault* (Inkle Studios, 2019), interpretation is embedded directly into system response, as translation choices alter both narrative understanding and future possibilities. *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2019) distributes decision-making across internalised dialogue systems, where competing voices respond to player input with varying degrees of persistence and contradiction. These works do not rely on the expansion of choice. Their systems maintain engagement through modulation, memory, and responsiveness. Player input is absorbed, delayed, reframed, or returned in altered form. The emphasis, thus, shifts toward how systems sustain continuity across interaction, allowing players to interpret present moments in relation to prior actions and emerging patterns.

The concept of narrative trust builds on these theoretical foundations by focusing on how system behaviour is experienced over time. It directs attention toward responsiveness, coherence, and the conditions under which player intention remains legible within the unfolding structure of the game. Rather than centring the availability of choice, this framework examines how systems hold, transform, and return player input across the duration of play.

Defining Narrative Trust

Trust, in this context, refers to a player's ongoing sense that their actions are being registered in ways that remain intelligible across the duration of play. It operates at the level of system behaviour. Players continue to act within a narrative environment when responses retain coherence, even under conditions of ambiguity, delay, or restriction. This coherence does not depend on favourable outcomes. It depends on whether the system sustains a readable relationship between intention and response.

Existing work in narrative theory and reception studies has addressed related questions through different conceptual frames. Reader-response theory, for instance, situates meaning within the interaction between text and reader, emphasising interpretation as an active process shaped by expectation, memory, and context (Iser, 1978). In game studies, this line of thinking extends into discussions of agency, immersion, and procedural authorship, where player experience is understood as emerging through interaction with designed systems (Murray, 1997; Ryan, 2006). Ethical approaches to gameplay examine how systems assign weight to decision-making, often focusing on consequence, responsibility, and moral framing (Sicart, 2009, 2013). Work on affect and embodiment further shifts attention toward how interaction is experienced across time, emphasising intensity, incorporation, and the role of the body in meaning-making (Massumi, 2002; Calleja, 2011).

These approaches account for interpretation, action, and experience, yet they do not isolate the player's sustained belief in the system as an object of analysis. Agency describes the capacity to act. Immersion describes the depth of engagement. Ethical frameworks describe how actions are evaluated. None of these terms fully address how players come to rely on system behaviour as something that can be read, anticipated, and trusted across extended interaction. Narrative trust focuses on this condition of reliance, where engagement is shaped by the perceived continuity and responsiveness of the system over time.

The concept draws from literary discussions of narrative reliability, where readers evaluate the credibility of a narrative voice and the consistency of its account (Booth, 1983). However, interactive systems reorganise this relation where evaluation shifts toward the system, which structures response through rules, pacing, and the distribution of consequence. Players interpret these responses as they unfold, forming expectations about how the system will continue to behave. Trust develops within this interpretive process, shaped by repetition, variation, and the accumulation of prior interaction.

Moreover, work on ergodic literature situates the reader as a navigator who traverses a structured space in which paths and outcomes are only partially revealed (Aarseth, 1997). Ryan (2006) emphasises that players interpret procedural logic alongside narrative content. Murray (1997) describes digital environments as spaces in which agency is enacted through interaction with systems that respond over time. These accounts establish the conditions under which players engage with interactive structures, while leaving open the question of how system behaviour is experienced once patterns begin to stabilise. Further research on ethical gameplay and procedural design examines how systems assign weight to action and structure consequence (Sicart, 2009, 2013). Decisions

acquire significance through the way systems absorb, delay, and return them. Consistency across these processes allows players to form an understanding of how the system operates. This understanding does not require full transparency. Instead, it relies on the persistence of patterns that can be recognised and interpreted as play progresses.

Narrative trust develops within these conditions of pattern recognition. It takes shape as players begin to anticipate how the system will respond, adjusting expectations in relation to prior outcomes. This process unfolds gradually. Early interactions establish a baseline for how decisions are acknowledged. Subsequent responses either reinforce or destabilise this baseline. Systems that maintain continuity across these moments allow players to interpret outcomes within an evolving framework. Systems that shift without signal or remain unresponsive disrupt this process, producing uncertainty that cannot be resolved through further interaction. I place particular emphasis on responsiveness rather than on the quantity of available choices. Systems may offer limited options and still sustain trust when responses remain legible across time. Systems with extensive branching structures may generate instability when responses fail to align with the patterns they establish. The issue centres on how systems hold player input, how they return it, and how these processes accumulate into a readable structure.

Narrative trust, therefore, operates as an interpretive condition that emerges through sustained engagement with system behaviour. It is shaped by pacing, memory, feedback, and the modulation of consequence across time. Players remain engaged when these elements maintain continuity across interaction, allowing intention to persist within the unfolding structure of the game.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology focused on the analysis of narrative systems and their behaviour over time. Narrative trust is approached as an experiential and structural phenomenon that emerges through interaction, rather than as a variable to be measured. The analysis therefore combines close structural reading of game systems with contextual player discourse, allowing for an examination of how system response is encountered, interpreted, and evaluated during play.

The primary method employed is close structural analysis. Games are treated as expressive systems in which meaning is produced through the organisation of interaction (Fernández-Vara, 2014). Attention is directed toward decision pacing, feedback timing, moments of hesitation or refusal, the visibility or opacity of consequence, and the ways in which systems register or disregard prior player input. The aim is to identify recurring patterns through which systems acknowledge, delay, or fail to recognise player intention. These patterns form the basis for evaluating when narrative trust is sustained and when it begins to weaken.

The study examines four choice-based interactive digital narratives: *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, *Detroit: Become Human*, *Depression Quest* and *With Those We Love Alive*. These works were selected to reflect variation in platform, scale, aesthetic, and production context. Two are large-scale, commercially produced titles that externalise system logic through visible structures such as branching flowcharts, relationship indicators, and outcome summaries. The other two are Twine-based works that operate through constrained interfaces, textual presentation, and limited choice sets. This selection allows for comparative analysis of narrative system behaviour across differing design traditions, while maintaining a shared emphasis on player choice as a structuring mechanism.

To situate structural analysis within player experience, the study draws on an anonymised qualitative survey conducted by the author in June 2025. The survey was distributed through online game-related communities and academic networks. Participation was voluntary, and no personally identifying information was collected. A total of 138 respondents completed the survey, each indicating familiarity with at least one of the selected games. The survey consisted of seven prompts addressing continuity, coherence, feedback legibility, outcome interpretation, authorial transparency, narratorial cohesion, and emotional credibility. Responses included both scaled selections and open-ended reflections. Only open-ended responses are cited in this study. These are used illustratively to provide insight into how players articulate experiences of recognition, confusion, or disengagement in relation to system behaviour. It is important to note that the survey material is not treated as representative or generalisable data. Rather, it functions as contextual discourse that supports interpretive analysis rather than as evidence for statistical claims.

All responses were anonymised at the point of collection and are cited by response number. The study adheres to standard ethical research practices for minimal-risk, anonymous data collection. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and consented to the use of their responses for academic analysis. No sensitive personal data was requested or retained.

Publicly accessible online discussions were also consulted during the research process to identify recurring patterns in player language surrounding choice, consequence, and system responsiveness. These materials informed the analytical framework but are not directly quoted or treated as citable sources within the study. Their role is limited to contextual orientation.

This methodological approach positions narrative trust as a function of system behaviour rather than player psychology. The focus remains on how systems respond across time and how those responses are interpreted as coherent, opaque, or misaligned with player intention. By combining structural analysis with situated player discourse, the study maintains analytical traceability while preserving the interpretive nature of the phenomenon under examination.

Narrative Trust in Practice

Players place narrative trust in systems that sustain coherence under pressure, where consequences feel traceable to prior action and intention. Trust, then, forms gradually through patterns of response that remain legible across time, even when outcomes are difficult, ambiguous, or irreversible.

In *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, narrative trust emerges through accumulation rather than spectacle. Outcomes are rarely immediate, and the system does not foreground causal logic through explicit feedback. Instead, consequence is distributed across time, often surfacing after extended narrative distance. The Bloody Baron questline, for instance, unfolds through delayed consequence and dispersed narrative resolution, where key outcomes emerge outside conventional cutscene framing. One respondent describes encountering its conclusion not as a staged event but as part of the environment itself: “The fact that the last time I saw the Baron wasn’t in a cutscene but rather including him in the scenery made this moment much more impactful. It allowed me to come to my own emotional understanding and resolution, rather than the game telling me how I should feel” (Survey response #29).

The system does not direct emotional response or provide closure through cinematic framing. It allows the player to register consequence through absence and environmental continuity. This produces a form of coherence grounded in recognition rather than instruction. Players are not told what their choices mean, yet they are able to reconstruct meaning retrospectively. Narrative trust is sustained because outcomes remain intelligible, even when they are painful.

In *Detroit: Become Human*, system logic is made visible through flowcharts, relationship meters, and branching summaries. Scholarly work has framed this visibility as a form of ethical education, where consequence is externalised through a butterfly-effect structure (Magová, 2020). In practice, this visibility produces moments where trust depends on whether the system appears to remember prior intention in meaningful ways. Connor's deviation arc provides moments of hesitation as staged through slowed time and suspended action, allowing accumulated decisions to shape future behaviour without immediate resolution. A respondent reflects this sense of continuity directly: "I trusted Connor to make the right decision, even if I wasn't holding the controller" (Survey response #26). Here, trust extends beyond individual choices and attaches to the system's ability to sustain a coherent trajectory of behaviour. The player recognises that prior decisions have been absorbed into the system's structure. Trust emerges through this continuity, where the system appears to carry forward intention rather than resetting it at each decision point.

Not all systems, however, sustain trust through accumulation or visibility. In *Depression Quest*, trust operates through constraint. The game restricts available choices by presenting options that cannot be selected, foregrounding limitation as a structural condition. Player responses consistently describe recognising intended actions while being prevented from enacting them, and interpreting this restriction as aligned with the experience the game represents (Survey response #112). In this case, trust emerges from alignment between system behaviour and thematic condition. The system does not expand possibility but reinforces limitation in ways that remain legible. Constraint becomes meaningful because it corresponds to an internal logic that players can recognise and interpret.

A different configuration appears in *With Those We Love Alive*, where the system minimises feedback and removes visible consequence tracking altogether. Rather than signalling outcomes, the game situates meaning within ritualised interaction, including embodied actions such as drawing sigils on one's skin (Bem, 2014; Larose, 2017). Player responses describe this experience as "personal" and interpretive, closer to reading than to conventional gameplay (Huang, 2017), where meaning is sustained without explicit system acknowledgment (Survey response #124). Here, trust operates without overt feedback. The system does not confirm or evaluate action, yet maintains coherence through tone, pacing, and sustained address (Katherine, 2022). Silence does not register as absence but as continuity of form (Louise, 2015).

Narrative trust, therefore, cannot be seen to depend on the number of choices available or the visibility of system logic. It emerges through the consistency with which systems register intention, whether through accumulation, constraint, or minimal response. Different design strategies produce this effect, yet they converge on a shared condition: players are able to interpret how their actions relate to the system's behaviour over time.

When Narrative Trust Collapses

Players do not place narrative trust in spectacle. They place it in systems where consequence feels earned rather than imposed. This trust depends on whether the system's response can be understood as part of an ongoing structure.

In *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, some of the most affecting moments sustain narrative trust through accumulation rather than dramatic revelation. The Bloody Baron questline, for instance, unfolds through delayed consequence and environmental resolution, where outcomes emerge within the world rather than through cinematic closure. This design approach allows players to encounter consequence as something embedded in the world rather than delivered to them.

This form of distributed consequence recurs across player accounts. Respondents frequently emphasise the way outcomes feel connected to earlier actions, even when those actions seemed minor at the time. As one player notes: "Every choice I made mattered. It spawned a different world based on choices that seemed minuscule" (Survey response #2). The system does not foreground its logic through explicit markers. It allows meaning to accumulate across time. Trust emerges through the perception that the world continues to respond in ways that remain internally consistent, even when those responses are harsh.

In *Detroit: Become Human*, system responsiveness is made visible through flowcharts, relationship indicators, and outcome tracking. Scholarly work has framed this visibility as a form of ethical education, suggesting that consequence is externalised to encourage reflection (Magová, 2020). Player responses indicate that this visibility can both support and complicate narrative trust. When feedback aligns with emotional pacing, it intensifies engagement. Moments involving Connor are frequently described in these terms. One respondent notes that decision-making within his storyline created a heightened sense of involvement, as they "liked his story the most so it hooked me, therefore making me feel more engaged both emotionally and in terms of wanting to play" (Survey response #5).

At the same time, the system's transparency can introduce tension when outcomes appear to follow an evaluative logic. Some players describe moments where moral expectations shaped their decisions in advance, producing a shift from expressive play toward anticipation. In such cases, the system remains highly responsive, yet that responsiveness is interpreted as selective. Trust becomes contingent on whether the system appears to recognise a range of intentions or privileges a narrower set of outcomes.

Depression Quest approaches trust through constraint rather than expansion. Its crossed-out dialogue options present actions that are visible but unavailable. This structure has been widely read as a representation of depressive experience (Steffen, 2014). Player responses reflect a similar interpretation. One respondent describes how the restriction itself produced immersion, noting that "I was unable to cheat my way out of the choices I've made and actually understand what this person is going through." (Survey response #124). The system acknowledges intention without fulfilling it. Trust here emerges through alignment between constraint and thematic condition. The refusal makes sense within the framework the game establishes.

In *With Those We Love Alive*, narrative trust is shaped through absence rather than feedback. The game does not track consequence in visible ways. It relies on pacing, tone, and embodied interaction. Trust is sustained through continuity of address and the sense that the system remains present, even when it does not respond in explicit terms.

Across these works, narrative trust does not emerge from the number of choices or the scale of branching structures. It takes shape through the relationship between intention and response as it unfolds over time. Systems that sustain trust register player action in ways that remain legible, whether through accumulation, hesitation, constraint, or silence. Differences in form and scale do not determine the presence of trust. What matters is whether the system continues to respond in a way that can be read.

Design Ethics for Narrative Trust

Narrative trust develops through sustained interaction between player intention and system response. It is not a fixed attribute of a game, nor a by-product of narrative complexity. It emerges through patterns of behaviour that remain legible over time. Systems that sustain this form of engagement do so by maintaining attentiveness, even when response is delayed, constrained, or withheld, as well as in forms of environmental and affective storytelling where systems organise emotional response through atmosphere and world design (Verheul, 2025). The following principles outline a set of design considerations grounded in this condition.

a) Read intention, not just action

Player input carries more than selection. It conveys hesitation, repetition, refusal, and tone. Systems that respond only to discrete choices reduce interaction to mechanical exchange, where meaning is derived from outcome rather than engagement. More responsive systems register how a choice is made, not only what is chosen.

Work on interactive drama has long suggested that systems operate alongside the player, shaping experience through timing, framing, and interpretation (Mateas & Stern, 2005). Within this framework, narrative trust develops when players perceive that their stance is being recognised. This does not require complex modelling or extensive tracking. It requires consistency in how the system interprets patterns of behaviour. When response reflects intention rather than isolated input, interaction begins to carry continuity.

b) Keep it coherent

Branching structures alone do not produce meaningful consequence. Systems that multiply outcomes without establishing an internal logic risk fragmenting the relationship between action and result. Coherence depends on whether outcomes can be traced back to earlier interactions in a way that remains interpretable. In *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, consequence emerges through accumulation rather than immediate feedback. In *Detroit: Become Human*, coherence is sustained unevenly, with certain arcs maintaining continuity while others narrow interpretive range. In *With Those We Love Alive*, coherence is maintained through tonal and structural consistency rather than branching variation. These examples suggest that coherence is not tied to scale or visibility. It is produced through alignment between system behaviour and the patterns it establishes over time.

c) Make constraint do something

Restriction can sustain engagement when it remains responsive. Denied options, limited pathways, and enforced pauses can register intention without resolving it. Their effectiveness depends on whether they evolve in relation to continued interaction.

In *Depression Quest*, restricted choices establish a clear relationship between intention and limitation. This structure holds as long as constraint continues to signal variation in tone or pacing. When restriction remains static, its expressive force diminishes. Constraint becomes background rather than response. Systems that employ limitation effectively allow it to shift, linger, or intensify. The absence of action continues to carry weight when it is shaped by context.

d) Let the system remember

Narrative systems do not need to record every variable to appear attentive. They need to behave as if prior interaction matters. This impression can be produced through small adjustments in dialogue, pacing, or tone that reflect earlier states.

Games such as *Disco Elysium* and *Heaven's Vault* demonstrate how interpretive continuity can be maintained without exposing underlying systems. Player responses shift the texture of interaction rather than redirecting it entirely. In more constrained works such as *Eliza* and *The Beginner's Guide*, memory operates through framing rather than variation, where repetition and withholding create a sense of accumulated experience. In each case, the system sustains presence by responding in ways that acknowledge prior engagement.

Conclusion

Narrative trust operates as a condition of sustained belief in how a system responds over time. It shapes how players interpret consequence, how they remain engaged, and how they make sense of outcomes after interaction has ended. When this trust holds, players continue to read the system as coherent, even when it produces loss, ambiguity, or refusal. When it weakens, interaction shifts. Decisions become instrumental. Attention moves from interpretation to prediction.

This study has examined how narrative trust forms and unravels across four choice-based interactive digital narratives: *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, *Detroit: Become Human*, *Depression Quest*, and *With Those We Love Alive*. These works differ in scale, interface, and design logic. Each presents a distinct way of organising interaction. Across them, a consistent pattern emerges. Trust develops when systems maintain a readable relationship between intention and response. It weakens when that relationship becomes difficult to trace.

The analysis has shown that this condition is not dependent on the number of choices or the visibility of branching structures. Systems that distribute consequence across time can sustain trust without explicit feedback. Systems that make their logic visible can support engagement when that visibility remains aligned with narrative pacing. Constraint can register intention without resolving it. Absence of feedback can maintain presence when it carries form. These variations suggest that narrative trust is tied to how systems behave, rather than how much they offer.

The integration of player responses has further clarified how these dynamics are experienced. Moments of trust are often described in relation to continuity, where outcomes feel connected to prior interaction even when they are not anticipated. Moments of breakdown are described through disorientation, where players are unable to reconstruct how their actions have been interpreted. These accounts do not function as generalisable data. They provide insight into how system behaviour is read over time.

The concept of narrative trust contributes to existing discussions of agency, procedurality, and ethical gameplay by shifting attention toward the credibility of the system itself. It frames interaction as a process of interpretation in which players assess not only what a system allows, but how it responds. This perspective opens space for further work on how different design strategies shape long-term engagement, particularly in contexts where choice is constrained, delayed, or withheld. The study also identifies a set of design considerations grounded in attentiveness. Systems that sustain narrative trust tend to read intention rather than isolated input, maintain coherence across time, allow constraint to function as response, and create the impression that prior interaction matters.

Narrative systems do not need to explain themselves in order to be trusted nor do they require large scales or complex branching. They need to remain interpretable. When players continue to read system behaviour as meaningful, engagement persists beyond individual decisions. Trust follows from that continuity.

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Between Empowerment and Objectification: Female Character Sensuality in Garena *Free Fire*

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ABSTRACT:

The rapid growth of digital gaming has transformed games into interactive environments shaping meaning, identity, and social interaction. This study examined the representation of female character sensuality in *Garena Free Fire*, and how such representations were interpreted by players. Using a qualitative approach, this research combined Fiske's semiotic analysis to identify how visual elements such as body proportion, costume, and character design construct meanings of femininity and sensuality, alongside Hall's encoding/decoding model through semi-structured interviews with five active players. Findings revealed that female characters were consistently represented through standardised visual patterns emphasising slim bodies, aesthetic attractiveness, and sensual elements, even when narratively positioned as strong and competent. This reflects the persistence of the male gaze in game design, where female bodies function as objects of visual consumption. Audience responses were not uniform, as male players interpreted these representations as neutral aesthetic elements, while female players were more critical, associating them with broader social implications. These results affirm that meaning in digital games is not fixed but negotiated through interaction between media texts and audiences. This study contributes to communication research by bridging visual representation and audience reception, demonstrating that digital games operate as dynamic spaces where ideology, aesthetics, and user experience intersect.

KEY WORDS:

audience reception, digital games, female representation, male gaze, semiotics, sensuality.

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Introduction

The development of digital technology over the past two decades has significantly transformed the way people interact with media, including in terms of entertainment consumption and daily communication practices. In Indonesia, this transformation has been heavily influenced by the increasing use of Android-based smartphones, which enable easy access to various digital platforms, including online games. Games are no longer understood as merely recreational activities but as interactive communication spaces where individuals engage in the exchange of meaning, identity formation, and social interaction within a virtual environment (Deuze, 2013; Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Jin, 2017).

This phenomenon is supported by statistical data showing the high penetration of online gaming in Indonesia. At least 52 million Indonesians actively play online games. As many as 82% of players state that they play because they can connect with others virtually, while 62% spend between one and three hours per day playing. Additionally, 69% of users prefer smartphones as their primary device for gaming (Bungin, 2022). Data from We Are Social & Meltwater (2023) also indicates that 46% of internet users in Indonesia engage in gaming activities, while another 36% enjoy game-related content, such as watching gameplay. These figures demonstrate that games have become an integral part

of digital culture, as well as a communication medium with a strong influence on shaping users' experiences and perspectives (Jin, 2017).

Unlike conventional media such as television or film, games possess an interactive nature that allows users to be not merely spectators, but active participants in the world constructed by the medium. This interactivity creates an immersive experience that strengthens players' emotional and cognitive engagement. Thus, games can be understood as a communication medium that not only conveys messages but also shapes perceptions, values, and social reality constructions. In this context, visuals become a primary element in conveying meaning, as character design, environments, and visual aesthetics function as a sign system that shapes players' interpretations (Deuze, 2013; Chandler, 2017).

One prominent aspect of game visuals is the representation of women. Female characters in games are often designed according to specific visual standards, such as a 'slender body', tight or revealing clothing, and visually appealing expressions. This representation cannot be understood merely as an aesthetic choice, but rather as part of a visual communication practice that carries ideological content. In communication studies, this phenomenon can be analysed through the concept of the *male gaze* introduced by Mulvey (1975), which explains that visual media tend to represent women as objects of gaze from a heterosexual male perspective. In the context of digital games, this concept is relevant because character design and visual elements are often aimed at creating visual appeal oriented toward the pleasure of looking (Mulvey, 1975; Gray, 2014, 2016; Gill, 2016).

However, this approach cannot be understood in isolation. Contemporary feminist studies indicate that the audience plays an active role in interpreting media representations. Women are not always passive objects but can interpret, negotiate, and even reject the meanings presented by the media. Therefore, an analysis of the representation of women in games must consider not only visual aspects, but also how such representations are received and interpreted by players (Hall, 1980; Gray, 2014; Richard, 2016; Kafai et al., 2016).

In this context, *Garena Free Fire* (111 dots Studio & Garena, 2017) serves as a relevant subject of study, since it is one of the most popular battle royale games in Indonesia, and features various characters with diverse backgrounds and abilities. Developed by 111 dots Studio and published by Garena for Android and iOS, the game places up to 52 players on an island where they must search for weapons, gear, and supplies, while surviving a shrinking safe zone, with the goal of being the last player or team standing. A central element of the game is its character system, in which each character possesses a unique special ability that players can select and combine strategically, depending on the game mode. The game is played from a third person perspective and is notable for its fast-paced matches, typically lasting 10-15 minutes, making it particularly well-suited for mobile play.

Overall, the representation of female characters in *Garena Free Fire* reveals a consistent pattern of presenting the female body as the visual focal point. Although female characters are portrayed as strong and capable figures, their visual construction continues to emphasise sensuality. This suggests that the representation of women in games is not only related to empowerment, but also to the reproduction of visual standards that have long been present in the media (Richard, 2016; Gray, 2014). Previous research has shown that female characters in digital games are often commodified through visual designs that emphasise physical attractiveness. However, most of this research has focused on visual analysis, without linking it to the audience's experience. In fact, in interactive media such as games, meaning is shaped not only by visual design but also by how players interpret and respond to these representations during gameplay (Hall, 1980; Deuze, 2013).

Based on this, this study aims to determine how the sensuality of female characters is represented in *Garena Free Fire* and how these representations are interpreted by players. Grounded in a domestic feminist perspective, this study foregrounds the socio-cultural context of Indonesian society, in which norms surrounding femininity, bodily representation, and gender expectations shape both the production and reception of media content. By combining semiotic analysis and an audience perspective, this study is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between visual representation, ideology, and communication processes in digital media (Fiske, 2010; Chandler, 2017). In doing so, it contributes to the growing body of feminist media scholarship in Indonesia, offering a locally situated analysis rather than relying solely on Western feminist frameworks.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach aimed at interpreting the meanings embedded in the visual representations of female characters and understanding how those meanings are constructed and perceived by players. The qualitative approach was chosen because this study does not seek to measure causal relationships quantitatively, but rather to examine the phenomenon in depth through the interpretation of signs, symbols, and users' subjective experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In this study, analysis is conducted through two complementary main approaches: semiotic analysis and audience reception analysis. Semiotic analysis is used to examine how meaning is constructed through visual elements in character design, such as costumes, body shapes, expressions, and visual styles. This approach draws on Fiske's (2010) framework, which views media as a system of signs operating through cultural codes. Through this analysis, female characters in *Garena Free Fire* are understood as visual texts containing denotative and connotative meanings, as well as reflecting specific values and ideologies in gender representation (Chandler, 2017).

Meanwhile, to understand how these meanings are received and interpreted by players, this study employs an audience reception approach, based on the encoding/decoding model proposed by Hall (1980). From this perspective, the audience is not positioned as a passive recipient but as an active subject capable of engaging in dominant readings, negotiation, or even opposition to media messages. This approach allows the study to examine how gaming experience, social background, and gender position influence how players understand the representation of female characters' sensuality (Hall, 1980).

The research focuses on five female characters out of a total of around 60 game characters in *Garena Free Fire*: Laura, Kapella, A124, Moco, and A-Patroa (Table 1). Character selection was conducted purposefully, considering popularity levels, visual design clarity, and the diversity of character backgrounds. Thus, these characters are considered representative of general patterns in the representation of women in this game (Richard, 2016; Gray, 2014).

The data in this study were obtained from two main sources. First, visual data in the form of in-game character appearances and official promotional materials, analysed using a semiotic approach. Second, qualitative data obtained through semi-structured interviews with five respondents who are active *Garena Free Fire* players, consisting of two women and three men. Respondents were selected purposefully based on the criteria of having sufficient gaming experience and being able to articulate their perspectives on in-game characters (Fiske, 2010; Chandler, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Table 1: Demography of selected Garena Free Fire characters

Character	Gender	Age	Cultural/national background	Occupation
Laura	Female	29	Western/European	Special agent
Kapella	Female	21	East Asian (Korea)	Singer, influencer
A124	Female	18	N/A (inspired by Western/Euro- pean type)	AI battle robot
Moco	Female	20	Latin American	Hacker
A-Patroa	Female	28	Latin American (Brazil)	Runs a music store

Source: own processing based on character details published on the Garena Free Fire website ("Laura", n.d.; "Kapella", n.d.; "A124", n.d.; "Moco", n.d.; "A-Patroa", n.d.)

The interviews were conducted using open-ended questions aimed at exploring players' perceptions of female character design, their in-game interaction experiences, and their views on the elements of sensuality within those characters. This semi-structured approach allowed for flexibility in exploring the respondents' experiences, resulting in data that is both more in-depth and contextual. Data analysis was conducted in several stages. The first stage was a visual analysis to identify patterns of sensuality representation in character design using a semiotic approach. The second stage was a thematic analysis of the interview results to identify patterns of interpretation emerging from the respondents. The third stage involved integrating the results of these two analyses to examine the relationship between visual representation and audience interpretation (Fiske, 2010; Chandler, 2017).

Through this approach, the study not only reveals how sensuality is represented in female characters, but also how such representations are understood and responded to within the communication practices occurring in the game. Thus, this methodology enables a more comprehensive analysis of the relationship between media, ideology, and the audience within the context of digital games.

According to Banet-Weiser (2018), representations of women in contemporary popular culture often present a paradox between empowerment and commodification. Women are presented as strong, independent and confident, but at the same time they are still constructed through standards of beauty and sexual attractiveness that benefit market logic and industrial media. In the context of female characters in *Garena Free Fire*, character sensuality can be understood as a form of 'popular feminism' that offers an image of empowered women, but at the same time maintains the purpose of the female body as a visual commodity.

Sarkeesian (Feminist Frequency, 2016a, 2016b) argues that representations of women in digital games are often shaped through various tropes or representational patterns that position women as visual objects for players. In many games, female characters are not only designed to fulfil specific functions within the game's narrative, but also to fulfil aesthetic expectations that emphasise beauty, sensuality, and sexual attractiveness. As a result, women's bodies often become the primary focus of representation, rather than their own characteristics, abilities, or the complexity of their identities.

In the context of *Garena Free Fire*, female characters are depicted as figures with fighting skills, intelligence, and active roles in the game. However, the use of costumes that emphasise body shape, visually appealing character poses, and certain beauty standards indicate that sensuality remains a significant element in character design. Sarkeesian's (Feminist Frequency, 2016a, 2016b) perspective helps explain how such representations can create conditions in which women appear empowered, while simultaneously being constructed as visual objects consumed by players.

Portrayal of Selected Female Characters in Garena *Free Fire*

The selected female characters in Garena *Free Fire* – Laura, Kapella, A124, Moco, and A-Patroa – are portrayed as strong figures who play important roles in the game (Picture 1). However, behind this narrative lies a relatively uniform visual pattern in body representation and aesthetics:

- Laura is portrayed as a professional sniper with exceptional combat skills. Narratively, this character embodies strength, resilience, and strategic intelligence. However, from a visual perspective, her costume is designed with cuts that accentuate her body shape, such as tight-fitting clothing and details that highlight specific body areas. This indicates a tension between the representation of women as strong subjects and a visual construction that continues to position the female body as an aesthetically appealing object, consistent with Gray (2014, 2016) and Richard (2016), who argued that female characters in games are frequently designed to prioritise visual appeal over narrative agency, reinforcing gendered stereotypes despite their heroic roles.
- Kapella is depicted as a singer with the ability to heal teammates. This character embodies gentleness, empathy, and emotional support. However, her visual design still incorporates elements of sensuality through form-fitting attire and visually appealing expressions. The sensuality in this character is not explicitly portrayed but rather conveyed through a more subtle approach, such as a cute style and soft expressions, which continue to draw attention to the visual appeal of the female form.
- These findings correspond to the view of heroines described by Gray (2014, 2016) and Richard (2016), who argue that female characters in games, despite being framed as powerful or technologically advanced, continue to be designed with idealised body proportions and sexualised aesthetics that conform to male-oriented visual standards. As seen in A124, whose cyborg identity conceptually suggests a transcendence of traditional gender constructs, her visual representation nonetheless retains an exaggerated female body shape and revealing clothing, reinforcing the notion that even futuristic or post human female characters remain constrained by conventional beauty and bodily norms rather than being defined by their power or agency.
- Moco is portrayed as a smart and independent hacker. This character represents intelligence and technological prowess. However, her visual design still features elements of sensuality through clothing that reveals certain parts of her body. This demonstrates that even characters focused on intellectuality are still constructed within a visual framework that emphasises physical attractiveness.
- A-Patroa is a character who embodies self-confidence and cultural identity through collaborations with public figures. However, her visual design still highlights sensuality through clothing choices and poses that reveal more of the body. This demonstrates that even culturally based representations remain within the same aesthetic framework.



Picture 1: Selected female characters from the game Garena Free Fire: Laura (top), Kapella (middle-left), A124 (middle-right), Moco (bottom-left), A-Patroia (bottom-right)

Source: own processing based on official visuals published at the Garena Free Fire website ("Laura", n.d.; "Kapella", n.d.; "A124", n.d.; "Wallpapers", n.d.; "A-Patroia", n.d.)

Results and Discussion

The representation of female characters in *Garena Free Fire* demonstrates that visual design functions not merely as an aesthetic element but as a system of signs that actively produces and disseminates meanings regarding femininity, the body, and attractiveness within the digital space. Through an analysis of the characters Laura, Kapella, A124, Moco, and A-Patroa, a consistent visual pattern can be identified, in which the female body is constructed through specific aesthetic standards that emphasise slender body proportions, clothing that follows the curves of the body, and visual expressions designed to attract attention. Within Fiske's (2010) semiotic framework, these elements can be understood as signs operating at the denotative level – as character design – and the connotative level – as representations of what is considered the *ideal female body* in contemporary visual culture (Chandler, 2017).

At the denotative level, the character Laura is portrayed as a professional sniper with high proficiency in strategy and combat. However, at the connotative level, Laura's slender body and tight-fitting costume shift the focus from function to the visual form of the body. This indicates that representations of female strength are not entirely detached from aesthetic demands regarding the body. Within the framework of the male gaze, this condition reflects how women remain positioned as visual objects even when they hold a strong narrative subject position. In other words, female power in games does not stand alone but is framed within an aesthetic that can be visually enjoyed by the audience (Mulvey, 1975; Gill, 2016).

Kapella exhibits a more subtle yet no less significant form of representation. As a singer and healer, she is not associated with physical strength but rather with gentleness, empathy, and affection. However, her visual design still features a proportionate body with clothing that follows the curves of her body and visually appealing expressions. In this context, sensuality is not present in an explicit form, but through an aesthetic that is 'soft' and 'alluring', which still directs attention toward the female body. Gill (2009) refers to this phenomenon as a form of sexualisation within postfeminist culture, where objectification is no longer displayed in a vulgar manner, but through an aesthetic that appears natural and is even regarded as an expression of individual choice.

The character A124 adds a more complex dimension by combining human and technological elements. As a cyborg, A124 has the potential to represent a body free from biological limitations and traditional gender constructs. However, its visual design still adheres to the ideal standards of the female body, with clothing that accentuates certain body parts. This indicates that even in a futuristic context, the representation of women remains bound by the same aesthetic norms. Thus, technology does not function as a tool to liberate the body from social constructs, but rather becomes a new medium for reproducing established body aesthetics (Richard, 2016; Gray, 2014).

Lynch et al. (2016) found that the representation of women in digital games has changed significantly over time. Modern female characters tend to be depicted as stronger, more independent, and more active than in previous periods. However, sexualisation remains a significant part of female character design. This finding suggests that the increased representation of women as competent figures is not always accompanied by a decrease in the objectification of women's bodies.

A similar pattern is evident in the character Moco, who narratively represents intelligence and technological prowess. As a hacker, Moco should emphasise intellectual aspects and digital competence. However, her visual design still emphasises physical appeal through clothing and a visual style that reveals the body. This indicates that within the

game's visual construction, even a woman's intelligence is insufficient to serve as the central focus of representation without being accompanied by bodily aesthetics. Thus, the body remains the primary focal point in the production of meaning, while other aspects such as intellectuality function as supplementary elements that do not displace visual dominance.

A-Patroa demonstrates how sensuality is also linked to the commodification of culture. This character not only represents women but also carries elements of cultural identity through associations with public figures. However, its visual design still emphasises the body through revealing clothing and attention-grabbing poses. This indicates that cultural identity does not eliminate the logic of objectification; rather, it is integrated into visual strategies aimed at enhancing the character's appeal. In other words, the female body serves as a medium where various elements – aesthetics, culture, and commerce – converge and reinforce one another.

When viewed as a whole, these five characters reveal a homogenisation in the representation of the female body. Despite having different backgrounds and abilities, they are still constructed within relatively uniform visual standards. This indicates that narrative variation is not accompanied by variation in bodily representation, thus limiting the concept of femininity within a specific aesthetic framework. From a communication perspective, this condition reflects how media not only convey messages but also regulate the boundaries of representation deemed 'normal' or 'ideal'.

However, the meaning of such representations is not deterministic. Interview results indicate that players do not uniformly accept these representations: "When I play a female character, sometimes other players immediately comment on my character's appearance, even making over-the-top jokes. I think this shows that female characters are perceived differently than male characters" (Participant #1, woman, 18 years old). "I feel like the female character designs in *Free Fire* are more visually appealing. However, sometimes that makes other players focus more on the character's appearance than my playing ability" (Participant #2, woman, 22 years old). Female players tend to have a higher awareness of the social implications of character design. They report experiences of receiving inappropriate comments or being treated differently when using female characters in the game. This suggests that visual representations have a tangible impact on communication practices, particularly in player-to-player interactions.

Consalvo and Paul (2019) explain that digital games are cultural products that represent various social values, including the construction of gender identity. Through character design, gameplay mechanics, and player interactions, games serve not only as a means of entertainment but also as a space where social norms and meanings are produced and negotiated. In the context of Garena *Free Fire*, the representation of sensual female characters can be understood as part of a digital cultural practice that shapes how players interpret femininity, attractiveness, and female power within the gaming environment.

Conversely, male players tend to view character design as part of the game's aesthetics that has no significant impact on social reality. They see female characters as neutral visual elements that do not influence their views of women in the real world. This difference indicates variations in the process of meaning-making, which aligns with Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model. In this model, the audience is not positioned as a passive recipient, but as an active subject capable of producing dominant readings, negotiations, or oppositions to media messages.

In the context of this study, the dominant interpretation was observed among players who accepted the depiction of sensuality as something normal and unproblematic. A negotiated interpretation emerged among players who were aware of the sensual

elements but still accepted them as part of the game. Meanwhile, an oppositional reading is evident among female players who associate such representations with negative experiences in social interactions. Thus, the meaning of sensuality in the game is determined not only by visual design, but also by players' experiences and social positions.

These findings indicate that *Garena Free Fire* functions as a space of communication where meanings regarding gender and the female body are not only produced but also negotiated. Visual representations do not remain mere texts but become part of social practices that influence players' interactions, perceptions, and experiences. In this sense, the game serves as a medium through which ideologies operate, not only via representations, but also through the communicative practices taking place within it.

On the other hand, it is important to acknowledge that representations of sensuality are not always interpreted negatively. For some players, the aesthetics of the body can be understood as part of an appealing visual design or even as a form of identity expression. This demonstrates that digital media opens up space for various interpretive possibilities. Nevertheless, the dominance of certain visual patterns still indicates a structural tendency within the gaming industry that continues to place the female body at the centre of attention.

Thus, the findings of this study indicate that the representation of women in *Garena Free Fire* exists in a tension between empowerment and objectification. Female characters are portrayed as strong and competent figures, yet at the same time remain constructed within an aesthetic framework that emphasises sensuality. This tension reflects broader dynamics in digital media, where representation cannot be simply understood as a form of domination or resistance, but as the result of complex interactions between industry, culture, and audience in the communication process (Richard, 2016; Gray, 2014).

Shaw (2015) argues that gender representation in digital games is not solely related to the presence of female characters, but also to how gender identity and sexuality are constructed and interpreted by players. The presence of strong female characters does not automatically result in inclusive representation if those characters are still shaped by narrow standards of beauty and sexual attractiveness. This perspective helps explain how female characters in *Garena Free Fire* can be viewed as both symbols of empowerment and visual objects constructed to attract players' attention.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the representation of female characters in *Garena Free Fire* cannot be understood merely as visual elements in game design, but rather as part of a communication process that produces, disseminates, and negotiates meanings regarding femininity, the body, and attractiveness within the context of digital media. Through a semiotic analysis of the characters Laura, Kapella, A124, Moco, and A-Patroia, it was found that the visual design of female characters consistently features slender bodies, attractive aesthetics, and elements of sensuality integrated into costumes, poses, and visual expressions. This pattern indicates that the female body is central to visual construction, while also serving as the primary medium for conveying meaning (Fiske, 2010; Chandler, 2017).

Within the framework of the male gaze, these findings indicate that women in games are still frequently positioned as visual objects designed to attract attention and generate aesthetic pleasure. Although female characters are portrayed as strong, competent figures with significant roles in the game, their visual construction still aligns with specific

aesthetic standards that emphasise physical attractiveness. This highlights a tension between narratives of empowerment and representational practices that remain tied to a visual logic of objectification (Mulvey, 1975; Gill, 2016).

Nevertheless, this study also demonstrates that the meaning of such representations is not singular or deterministic. Interview results reveal that players have diverse perspectives on interpreting female characters. Male players tend to view character design as part of the game's neutral aesthetics, while female players are more attuned to the social implications of such representations, particularly regarding in-game interaction experiences. This difference indicates that audiences do not merely accept the meanings produced by the media but actively interpret, negotiate, and even reject those meanings in accordance with their experiences and social positions (Hall, 1980).

Thus, this study confirms that digital games such as *Garena Free Fire* function as dynamic spaces of communication, where representation and interpretation occur simultaneously. In this context, the concept of the male gaze remains relevant for explaining the visual patterns that emerge, yet it must be understood within a broader framework that accounts for the audience's role as active subjects. The integration of semiotic analysis and audience reception approaches in this study contributes to bridging the gap between visual representation studies and user experience – an area that has often been separated in previous research (Mulvey, 1975; Hall, 1980; Fiske, 2010; Gill, 2016; Chandler, 2017).

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of communication studies by demonstrating that representations in digital media operate not only at the textual level, but also within communicative practices involving user interaction. By combining semiotic and audience reception perspectives, this study expands our understanding of how media meaning is not only produced by content creators, but also shaped through audience experience and interpretation (Fiske, 2010; Chandler, 2017).

Practically, these findings have implications for the gaming industry, particularly in character design, to better consider the diversity of representations of women's bodies and identities, and to reduce reliance on homogeneous aesthetic standards. More diverse representations can not only enhance the quality of the user experience, but also contribute to the creation of a more inclusive digital environment that is sensitive to gender issues.

However, this study has limitations, particularly regarding the relatively small number of respondents and its focus on a single specific game. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve more participants with more diverse backgrounds, and expand the scope of study to other games to determine whether the same representation patterns also emerge in different contexts. Additionally, further research could explore the dynamics of in-game interactions more deeply, including how visual representations influence broader communication practices within the player community.

Overall, this study demonstrates that the representation of women in *Garena Free Fire* exists in a tension between empowerment and objectification, as well as between the production of meaning by the media and interpretation by the audience. This tension reflects the complexity of digital media as a space where ideology, aesthetics, and user experience interact to shape meaning in everyday life (Richard, 2016; Gray, 2014). Bateman (2021) explains that characters in digital games are narrative instruments designed to convey specific identities, motivations, and experiences to players. Therefore, the visual aspects of characters, including costumes, expressions, and physical appearance, are inseparable from their inherent narrative functions. In the context of *Garena Free Fire*, the sensuality of female characters can be understood as a design strategy that contributes to the formation of character identity, while strengthening the narrative's appeal to players.

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How to Design a Game Laboratory to Study Games: Theory and Case Study of a Playful Third Space

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ABSTRACT:

Multidisciplinary game studies is a uniquely challenging type of academia to implement, for a variety of ideological and practical reasons. Diverse forms of research are widely seen as desirable with clear benefits but also challenges for the research community. Contemporary work has called for more techniques to overcome these challenges and reap the benefits. This paper proposes a promising technique that is understudied – playful third spaces in universities where multidisciplinary education and research may be conducted. This text proposes this tool, through the lens of pluralist game studies, and discusses a case study for a multidisciplinary playful third space that encourages games research and pedagogy. Three components of this space and how it influences research projects hosted will be explained for their interdisciplinary benefits: playful infrastructure, comfort-design, public-private availability. In summary, playful third spaces are a promising multidisciplinary intersectional tool for future pluralistic game studies laboratories and research groups.

KEY WORDS:

game laboratories, playful third spaces, pluralist game studies, third space.

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Introduction

Since its inception, game studies have held great hope and promise for being a *multidisciplinary* (Mäyrä, 2008) field. Inside this promise was the belief by scholars that applying a diverse set of research approaches improves our understanding of games. As Consalvo (2012) argued, “no one discipline or field should (or can) have control over game research or theorization, and the study of games is enriched by multiple paths of inquiry” (p. 8). The approach of openness to different fields of inquiry has seen some powerful benefits, enabling new theoretical developments to terms like game (Stenros, 2017) or the playful relevance of parties (Masek & Stenros, 2024), to even entirely novel approaches to games such as queer game studies (see Ruberg et al., 2017).

There are however major disagreements about how to practically coordinate a diverse group of researchers on the topic of games-related phenomena. Some scholars argue game studies should unite under a new codified discipline (Malazita et al., 2024) whereas others have argued each scholar should have a “home discipline”, which they then bring into the cross-disciplinary game studies spaces (Consalvo, 2012). Several texts harshly criticize the current state of interdisciplinary game studies calling it a pyrrhic victory (Deterding, 2017), reducing diverse voices (Malazita et al., 2024), or being in need of changing its identity to “play studies” (Gekker, 2021, p. 79) or “game design studies” (Deterding, 2017 p. 534). Criticisms range from disciplinary systems giving scholars better career rewards than multidisciplinary spaces (Deterding, 2017), to theoretical views that without active tools, game researchers will just talk over other scholars with diverse viewpoints (Williams, 2005). In this way, there is a dual situation in game studies, where scholars generally agree on the goal of diverse approaches to games but disagree on the

methods of how to reach it. This frames the sticky question of this research project: How do we practically support the valuable diversity of research on games, while enabling these diverse scholars to interact with each other as a community of practice?

This work offers a solution by analyzing a research tool that has practically brought together diverse scholars and students with a singular institutional investment – *playful third spaces*. This text unpacks the idea of playful third spaces and their history, discusses a larger framing ideology of pluralist game studies, and unpacks a case study of one such space being used for diverse research on games and play at a mid-sized university in Finland. In conclusion, specific essential criteria for how to set up such a space to support diverse scholarship with games will be presented for future games researchers.

Theoretical Framework

The study builds upon the ideological concept of *pluralist games studies* (Masek, 2025). This approach seeks to reinforce past discourses on multidisciplinary game studies, which have often focused on theoretical discussions of, for example, diversity of methods that study games (Lankoski & Björk, 2015) with additional discourse on practical institutional tools to support multidisciplinary. It asks meta-institutional questions on how to make diverse, intersectional, scholarly conversations institutionally accessible and beneficial for those doing it? In order to contextualize the current contribution, the text will discuss the problem that pluralist game studies aims to solve. It will explore past solutions and why they are probably insufficient, and then it will build on this approach to propose a new technique – playful third spaces.

As previously mentioned, there are major disagreements about how game studies should be organized as a research community. Most commonly, scholars have argued for one of two major ideologies present in game studies: *factionalist* game studies, and *unified disciplinary* game studies (Masek, 2025). Factionalist game studies as typified by Consalvo (2012) argues that game studies scholars should and do each have a “home discipline”. Then cross-disciplinary scholarly spaces studying games will bring together these diverse scholars. In contrast, *unified disciplinary* game studies, as typified by Malazita et al. (2024) argues that this is insufficient and that game studies needs to enable deeper conversations between diverse members. They propose that game studies should be a singular and new discipline typified by “constructive friction”. This is an important question as ideologies about discipline alter the way academics embody teaching and research in practice (Fanghanel, 2009).

A newly proposed solution, termed pluralist game studies (Masek, 2025), asserts that both factionalist and unitary ideologies are valuable but flawed at the same time. Pluralist game studies argues that game studies needs to develop tools for scholars to be trained in “home disciplines”, including any new disciplinary game studies while also having systems for cross-disciplinary contact to enable novel approaches. It argues that if we do not normalize direct contact with different disciplines game scholars will always be, de facto, unprepared to interact with contrasting disciplines to their own.

The techniques proposed are categorized as *anti-disciplinary*, *anti-qualification*, and *anti-exclusionary* space practices. Anti-disciplinary tools are systemic practices that enable scholars with differing research methods to directly interact with each other. Anti-qualification spaces are specific zones where individuals with different career-phases are working together, performing similar tasks rather than e.g. “doctoral consortiums”. Anti-exclusionary practices involve reducing monetary barriers to entry for career pursuit

in academia. These tools work in different ways to mix different disciplinary thinking methods and scholars with differing career backgrounds. In mixing these things explicitly, those who are less disciplinarily connected can reap more status rewards, and scholars will naturally be exposed to more diverse scholarship (Masek, 2025).

Whereas Masek (2025) focuses on publication venues, journals and conferences, there is another key element of academia that can be analysed and possibly made more sustainably diverse through the lens of pluralist game studies: research labs. How to practically structure diverse games research contends with practical pressures of labour, capital, and research institutions. The way groups of researchers organize their work effects the type and quantity of work they produce (Carayol & Matt, 2004), which Wenger (2011) calls a community of practice or a research laboratory. Guidelines for setting up effective research communities and labs exist in several disciplines such as computational biology (Kaiser, 2024), political science (Weinschenk, 2021), and pedagogy (Sanchez et al., 2022). In game research, there is only a limited set of publications on what tools may be beneficial for setting up an effective game studies research laboratory. This is a major gap, as games researchers face a widely agreed upon unique challenge related to the degree of research diversity that their colleagues may practice (Klabbers, 2018).

This text argues that a pluralist approach to a game studies research lab has been taken before, and has shown value through the creation of playful third spaces that house games research. Third spaces are post-colonial theory, generally based on thinking of Bhabha's (2012) location of culture. It builds on the work of Turner (1992), to understand how cultural meanings can be reinterpreted, transitioned, or resignified. As Kalua (2009) described, it is not an overdetermined space but one loaded with ambiguity; it represents an act of unleashing that post-dialectical moment when people reject structures and hegemonies and occupy any one of the heterogeneous spaces where they negotiate narratives of their existences as well as of particular spaces of meanings and different identities. (Kalua, 2009, p. 25)

In this way, third spaces, will (in this text) refer to spaces that are intentionally open to the ambiguous meanings that are required when a non-hegemonic space is being sought. This philosophical concept has practical value in a variety of ways having been used to understand how sporting associations (Ruddock, 2005) and bars (Law, 2013) are spaces of civic engagement. This idea has some similarities with third places (Oldenburg, 1997), which are defined as being neither home nor workplaces. Third space theory has been applied to certain types of work environments, especially in academia as "a way of exploring groups of staff in higher education who do not fit conventional binary descriptors such as those enshrined in 'academic' or 'non-academic' employment categories" (Whitchurch, 2015, p. 1). They have also been studied for how they increase student retention and sense of belonging (Hughes et al., 2021), as a tool for embodied critical learning (Gutiérrez, 2008), and as a framework for transdisciplinary research in general (Veles & Danaher, 2024). In this way, third space theory seems promising for the pluralist approach to game studies as it already seems oriented towards transgressing conventional boundaries of hegemonic control, in this case, often based on disciplinary practices. The current work will propose playful third spaces as a novel version of this kind of space, oriented specifically to game studies.

Playful third spaces are thus typified by the ideological premise of the non-determinism and openness of third spaces, with a focus on supporting the analysis of playful behaviour writ large. Playful behaviours may include the playing of traditional video games, puzzles in the space, chatting with friends, while not disallowing working or sleeping in the space. In alignment with Third Spaces bringing together people with differing identities, they also can host talks with a variety of playful experts, game designers, scholars etc.

Playful third spaces have been applied previously in promising ways to the nearby context of games development and design. Past third spaces have been studied for how they integrate games and game expertise specifically. The Oulu Game Lab in Finland uses “providing re-skilling and re-education opportunities for unemployed ICT professionals and equipping them with business and employment bonds with regional game industry companies” (Pokidina et al., 2023, p. 40). This program had a pedagogical program, split into two sections - LEAD and LAB sections - which focused on re-educating Information and Communication Technology professionals on how to make digital games, and then on how to pitch or acquire funding for their digital game companies. This space demonstrates how these spaces can be effective ways to mix different stakeholders, such as industry and academia.

The playful by design initiative (Pintar & Bievenue, 2024), in contrast, set up an interdisciplinary community for designers and educators of games. This cross-campus initiative at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign aimed to bring game design faculty into closer contact with game studies faculty through workshops, symposiums, courses and an active third space. It resulted in the development of a master’s degree and a set of notes about how to mix disciplinarity, local faculty, and status hierarchies to better develop more interdisciplinary game studies.

While the above two projects show great promise, they also focus on a different element of games than the current text. Both analyse spaces for creating games and enabling contact between industry game designers, design academics, and students. Pintar and Bievenue (2024) discuss how their project had goals for supporting interdisciplinary research, including a symposium for example, but the discussion of research is brief. This is not a criticism, so much as a sign that it is valuable to discuss these spaces specifically for their practical and diverse research uses. This paper will analyse one such third space conducting multidisciplinary games research at Tampere University in Finland, called Oasis. This lab has operated for ten years, has been utilized for a variety of game research projects and novel pedagogical programs on research. In performing these functions, several key elements of this space are important for its sustainable ability to contribute to diverse scholarly thinking on games.

Methodology

To best understand how a public playful third space can be designed, a case study of one such space will be analysed. Case studies are a subset of field research that investigates a phenomenon as it occurs with a detailed analysis, concluding with a bottom-up theoretical understanding. In this way, the text aims to support two forms of knowledge, a “comprehensive understanding of the event under study but at the same time to develop more general theoretical statements about regularities in the observed phenomena” (Fidel, 1984, p. 274). The current work composes its argument on two forms of data: longitudinal observation by one recent responsible runner in the space and a review of past studies published using the space.

The authors of this text are the primary organizer of the research group within the space, and two research assistants who participated in the program. In this way, their analysis of the space comes with both strengths and biases. On the one hand, they have intimate awareness of practically important elements of several studies conducted in the space. On the other hand, their views are subjective in nature as is common in case study research.

Case studies are a valuable, yet limited, method of research. Notably, there are limits to how generalizable their claims can be. In this way, if one undertook a larger study comparing multiple such spaces, new and important findings would likely appear. As there are only a few such spaces that exist, we view the current work as an important contribution towards a larger understanding. To support the validity of the findings of this work, each interpretation will be based on multiple kinds of evidence from different studies conducted in the space, as recommended by Diesing (2017). Limitations of the space will also be unpacked in the hopes of providing value for future scholars interested in implementing the framework presented.

Case Study: Oasis

In 2014, Tampere University opened Oasis, which was intentionally designed to be a playful space in the university with a large variety of ways it could be used, including comfortable seating, bright colours, open access to digital games on several consoles, and a variety of changing interactive toys, puzzles etc. (Kultima et al., 2014). Oasis was furthermore designed as a “social learning and research space” (Kultima et al., 2014, p. 10). It has four publicly available computers, gaming consoles, projectors, other playful objects, such as Lego, and a game focused multimedia library. The space is open access during the day and can be reserved for private events during the evenings. Oasis operates these activities through a 20-40-person student group called the “Keymaster group”. This group is an accredited course which is available for 1.5 credits and is responsible for “facilitating and organizing events, taking care of technology and the game and book libraries, and supporting research conducted in the space” (“OASIS key masters”, n.d., para. 1). This is broken down into a variety of different tasks that Oasis maintains, such as upkeeping the digital game collection/interfaces, extending and maintaining the game-research library, running and managing public/private events, often five nights a week, and finally pursuing and conducting research.

Oasis was also organized for a research project investigating “the experience of playfulness and the incentives and thresholds of adult play at the workplace” and “comprised three playful experiments involving staff members” (Nummenmaa, Savolainen & Kultima, 2015, p. 5). These three research projects were an interactive *playful art installation* (Kultima et al., 2016), a gamified intervention to increase workplace social connection (Nummenmaa, Kultima, et al., 2015), and a series of workshops on conceptions of play in the workplace (Nummenmaa, Savolainen & Kultima, 2015). It has also been reported on in a variety of manners. It hosted a hybrid play seminar (Paavilainen et al., 2018) and a study on the effects of playful seating on work meetings (Nummenmaa, Tyni, et al., 2015). It has also been discussed in past texts as an example of a hybrid university environmental design (Ninnemann et al., 2020) and playful architecture (Poutanen, 2018). Oasis has also been studied for how it, as a coworking space, is inhabited by students as regards their behaviour and resulting wellbeing (Masek et al., 2024). Finally, it has been used to bring strangers together to study how Nintendo Party Games may facilitate social connection (based on the own unpublished research).

In this way, Oasis has hosted a diversity of disciplinary types of research. Oasis has housed playful interactive art installations in such a way that it is easier to record participant involvement and may increase their playful participation (Kultima et al., 2016; Nummenmaa, Tyni, et al., 2015). Oasis has also been used as host location for interventions (Paavilainen et al., 2018; Nummenmaa, Kultima, et al., 2015; Nummenmaa,

Tyni, et al., 2015; Masek et al., 2025). Finally, Oasis has been studied for its design, and the ways that design may affect its users in their normative behaviours (Kultima et al., 2014; Masek et al., 2024). In this way, we can see how the space has been used for a variety of different research goals, embodying the ambiguity of third space theory and anti-disciplinary practices of pluralist game studies. Whereas these past reports are useful in their own rights, the space has not yet been analysed for how its design directly enables a diversity of research forms. In addition to these research goals, Oasis also teaches students how to conduct diverse research in a way that embodies the anti-qualification recommendations of pluralist game studies.

Pedagogical use of Oasis

Oasis is a living lab that involves student-researchers in praxis-based education for conducting games research. Praxis-based education is a larger pedagogical concept applied by several intellectual traditions for integrating direct experience with theoretical knowledge. This concept has Aristotelian roots (Papastephanou, 2013), later development by Bourdieu (1977), and more recent applications (Ritchie, 2023). In this case, praxis refers to both students' learning theoretical knowledge about research projects, methods, and writing, while simultaneously directly engaging in a research project themselves. Of note, this research project has a target learning outcome of enabling independent researcher thinking, which is usually seen as a doctoral level research goal (Gardner, 2008). This rather difficult learning target is paired with the reality that it is a pass/fail participation-oriented class. The pedagogical aim is to thus construct a strongly facilitated learning community (Pyhältö et al., 2009) for the students, where through this facilitated research group of students they learn how collaborative group research functions.



Picture 1: The 2-year cycle of Oasis Research Group

Source: own processing

Oasis Research Group is the resulting praxis-based pedagogical researcher group. It is a 2-year research cycle pedagogical group (Picture 1), where, predominantly master's students, go through the process of designing, implementing, writing, and publishing an

academic research project, with the assistance of a PhD level facilitator. The open ability for master's students to directly guide and influence a research project with a doctoral-level researcher is a representation of the pluralist technique of anti-qualification or "'gradient spaces', where the career stage of a scholar does not define the access they have to participate in the space" (Masek, 2025, p. 2). In this way, Oasis represents not only a research-oriented space, but a pedagogical space for games research. Beyond the goals of this kind of space, there is also a value behind discussing the design choices that enable this kind of goal to be successful.

This pedagogical program has run for three years, with three research studies implemented. These three datasets have resulted in the following publications: two extended abstracts (Masek et al., 2024; Masek et al., 2025), one accepted conference paper (Masek et al., 2026), one journal article currently under review (TBA) and the current text. In total eleven students have participated in the program and received publication credits in top venues in the field of Game Studies.

Designing a Third Space for Games Research

There are three critical design choices for how Oasis has influenced the research projects conducted inside it: 1.) Oasis is a space which houses *playful infrastructure* including games, puzzles, etc.; 2.) Oasis is a *comfortable space*, both socially and physically, with an accessible location, welcoming community, and furniture that can be rested on.; 3.) Oasis is a publicly available yet privately bookable space. This text will explore these three features of Oasis, how they have affected the diverse studies conducted in the space and how they may be used as design recommendations for scholars or departments interested in creating their own public games-research spaces.

a) Playful infrastructure: Games, puzzles, toys, technology

The first category for how the design of Oasis impacts studies within the space is playful infrastructure. Playful infrastructure refers to investments that enable play within the space that might be difficult for individuals to access on their own. This might refer to VR headsets, projectors, consoles or other expensive playful technologies. It also might refer to decorative Hama beads or small puzzles that are readily available in the public space and would be some level of difficult for an individual to bring regularly on their own to a university. This infrastructure is helpful for a game-studying space for two reasons: one studying how students emergently use such playful options and their effects, and secondly, this infrastructure enables researchers to conduct experiments requiring such technology, as it is pre-purchased and accessible. The presence of playful infrastructure also might act as a cognitive priming, enabling students to more easily engage playfully with public participation events/studies/cultural probes. This priming effect is at least partially supported by users of Oasis reporting more perceived playfulness than in other similarly located co-working spaces that did not intend playful design (Masek et al., 2024).

Oasis is in part defined by its playful infrastructure and a team of student volunteers who ensure that those games, puzzles etc are working and accessible (Kultima et al., 2014). Oasis is seen in its design as inviting participants to engage in playful activities in addition to work (Kultima et al., 2018). These playful offers have been studied as affecting the types of behaviour that users show emergently while in Oasis (Masek et al., 2024).

Masek et al. (2024) found that participants saw themselves as regularly engaged in using this playful infrastructure e.g. playing on the game consoles. Playful infrastructure, in this way, opens a door for the naturalistic observation (Angrosino, 2016) of play behaviours. Without Oasis' investment in an open access space, these types of observations would not be possible in the same way.

Several past research projects also utilized playful infrastructure for intervention studies. Masek et al. (2025) brought together strangers to play Nintendo games on a Nintendo Switch. This console is an example of an infrastructural investment that was made easier by the public game space already having it. An ongoing study similarly has used VR headsets to study user experiences. In another way, this playful infrastructure can take less traditional forms, such as designed playful seating for the space (Numenmaa, Tyni, et al., 2015).

This playful infrastructure also supports public interactive arts research projects by cognitively priming (Schacter et al., 2004) participants for playful behaviour. Students immersed in a space they find playful may make them more playfully engaged in general. There have been several such interactive research projects in Oasis (Kultima et al., 2016). For example, in winter 2020, *Mental Health: The Game* was a public interactive piece intended as a form of cultural probe (Gaver et al., 1999) and artistic provocation (Hannula et al., 2014). Students were asked to make a graffiti wall of memes or other such playful responses “as launching pads, as tools” (Hannula et al., 2014, p. 17), answering serious mental health questions. For instance, an active discourse between memes answering the question: “What is a good friend?” The first text was “There are no better friends than dogs”, followed by the response “Wrong: Cats are Better”. The memes then continue in conversation clockwise (Picture 2). While, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, this research never materialised into a publication, it still represents an artistic methodology, ideology, and pedagogy that is uniquely facilitated in a living lab and play space.



Picture 2: Example of a Graffiti wall with some meme responses

Source: own processing

It is very possible that in a less playful space, the answers gathered would be less playful. Other studies in Oasis benefited from a cognitive priming of playfulness, such as the interactive exhibit *There Are No Rules*, which aimed to be an “invitation to play” (Kultima et al., 2016, p. 404) with a large pool of coloured dice. This phrase represents a general view that by having many play affordances available, people in the space may well

be generally invited to occupy the space playfully. This playful infrastructure being used for such different disciplinary approaches to game studies also represents how to implement the value of anti-disciplinarity in pluralist game studies. To further support such a goal, authors recommend intentionally mixing scholars with different backgrounds and conducting studies with different methods, as much as possible, in curating research projects within the space. Brought together, we can see a valuable component of the design of Oasis and how it affects specific approaches to studying games/play.

Summary: Access to video games, toys, puzzles and other playful objects can enable a variety of research. It can result in students naturally using such playful options, which can be studied. The infrastructure can be used for controlled studies. Finally, it may act as cognitive priming for cultural probes/artistic provocations, encouraging playful responses from those inhabiting the space.

b) Comfort-design: Soft furniture, open social environment, non-stressful and low threshold

Another important design feature of Oasis that is helpful for any future group wanting to create a game-studying third place is designed comfort. This comfort is both physical, such as having mixed comfortable seating, chairs, bean bags, etc., and also a socially designed sense of comfort. Oasis's social comfort is intentionally supported by its organizers with public signs describing it for users as "open for everybody!" ("OASIS is a social", n.d., para. 1). This sense of comfort is useful for conducting a variety of studies, as students occupy the space in restful ways and then choose to participate in studies or other activities. Comfort is thus also important for enabling more casual participation between users of the space for games research and events, etc.

Comfort, both physically and socially, is a foundational design goal in Oasis. In its formal design report, one of the key requests by students when the space was built was "a simple request from all three groups is to have more comfortable sofas to sit while waiting for the next lecture or discussing with peers" (Kultima et al., 2014, p. 62). This type of physical comfort is embodied in the space by a mixture of chairs, tables, but also by bean bags and couches. The lighting of the space also offers different levels that may enable more restful behaviours/control over the visual comfort in the space.

Social comfort is also a critical value of the space, as can be seen in the design reports' description that "Oasis is designed as an open, social environment. Oasis encourages open culture, informal learning and casual information sharing" (Kultima et al., 2014, p. 8). This type of social comfort is enacted in Oasis in part by its Keymaster program. The Keymasters are a social group in Oasis who run the space as a course for credits at the university. They often number 20-40 students and create a wide variety of people who are experts in the space. These student-keymasters have an explicit goal of being welcoming to any users in the space, and enable a general level of relaxation in the space. If anyone has a problem there, there is a high chance that a keymaster is in the room and can help. This supportive social community is possibly one of the most critical design components for this kind of space to be sustainable.

The comfort in the space is important for a number of studies and research pursuits that have happened in Oasis. The naturalistic study of Oasis users found that one of the primary activities that students had in it was resting (Masek et al., 2024). Artistic provocations benefit from having casual comfortable users watching for a time and participating partially. In one artistic provocation in the space, the most common way participants interacted with it was called "Fiddling: activity that is noncommittal in nature and lacks a definite goal or purpose; playing around with the dice; can be secondary to some other simultaneous activity (e.g. done while talking to someone)" (Kultima et al., 2016, p. 406).

One can imagine how this noncommittal interaction not only sometimes escalates in to more full participation, but also normalizes interacting with the playful piece. In addition, a variety of research talks, events, etc. have benefited from users in the space resting inside it, and then accidentally joining a research event. This represents the general goal of many mixed-use coworking spaces, called informal or accidental learning (Emelo, 2012). In addition, these resting individuals were also recruited from for intervention studies that occurred in Oasis (Masek et al., 2025). This design tenet can also be seen as the experiential requirement for anti-exclusionary practice in pluralist game studies (Masek et al., 2025). In order to further support implementation of that goal, the authors would recommend explicitly advertising an open-use policy and avoid prescribing how users are supposed to occupy the space. Brought together, we can see a valuable component of the design of Oasis and how it affects specific approaches to studying games/play.

Summary: Creating a space that is comfortable to rest in is valuable for games research. This social and physical comfort enables more casual participation in all forms of research, such as observing an artistic provocation, and accidentally learning or being given more opportunities to participate further.

c) Publicly known but privately usable

The final critical component of Oasis as a scientifically active third space is its mixed usability as both a public and private space. It is generally public and a glass room, so the space is visible for students/staff walking through a major central hub of the university. In this way, users know clearly where it is and often spend time there. In contrast, the space is also lockable, bookable and can be used, in private, for specific research purposes, especially at times that are not its normal opening hours. This is useful in a few ways, firstly recruiting individuals for a variety of studies from the public users. In addition, studies that occur in Oasis are uniquely benefited by participants having a clear sense of where the study would be and decreasing the stress associated with joining.

Oasis has been used in past studies in both functions, both public and private. Publicly, the space has been observed for natural play behaviours by university students (Masek et al., 2024), and also hosted specific public playful provocations which public users were invited to engage in (Kultima et al., 2016). Oasis has also been used as a positivist-controlled environment (Park et al., 2020) where a singular, repeatable event can occur with the minimization of bias, distraction, or outside influence (e.g. Masek et al., 2025; Nummenmaa, Tyni, et al., 2015).

In some studies, participants were also recruited through Oasis (Masek et al., 2025), and were thus probably more comfortable with joining a research project due to their familiarity with the space. While the participant sample is biased by the self-selection of participants to those who would occupy Oasis and play games and by the space itself being playful rather than neutral, this bias is also a bit of an opportunity to study specific social groups who are interested in games. Brought together we can see a valuable component of the design of Oasis and how it affects specific approaches to studying games/play.

Summary: Having a publicly available space, in a central and visually obvious part of the University, enables emergent behaviours by users to occupy the space. These users can also be recruited from for future studies. In addition, having the ability to turn the space into a private one is useful, especially for controlled interventions.

Discussion

Taken together, specific components of multi-use games research and pedagogy third spaces are critical for implementing a diverse research group on games. Firstly, playful infrastructure, including game consoles, VR headsets, puzzles etc. have two valuable research uses. Scholars who wish to study how people experience these games/play acts can use them for their own interventions. Secondly, by leaving these systems publicly accessibly, users of the space itself will exhibit play behaviours with those objects. This natural play behaviour will have interesting particularities to it, and can be studied for its own sake and for its consequences on those individuals. While not in the above studies, this kind of access to games can enable scholars, as well as doctoral or master's students access to those games/game systems that they may be unable to afford themselves. Secondly, a comfortable space enables individuals to rest, observe studies, possibly increasing later playful engagement. Thirdly, a publicly known but privately controllable location was essential, both for enabling users to come and use the space, but also for it to be a site easily known for intervention-use:

- *Playful Infrastructure*: Games, play objects, monitors, projectors.
- *Comfort-design*: Multiple seating/resting/laying seats, supportive social culture.
- *Public/private*: "In the middle" of university spaces, a glass-wall showing its location, advertisement, public use. Also, closeable and bookable for private purposes.

As the variety of methods present in the case studies demonstrates, Oasis is notably flexible in its research affordances. It can be used as an open-access space priming audiences to engage in playful imaginaries, a home for naturalistic research of young adult play behaviour, and as a controlled location for a game-based intervention. Each of the above studies represents different approaches to research both in method and key components of ideology. Oasis also has additional potential for appropriation by scholars from a variety of even more diverse backgrounds.

This space has several interesting characteristics through the lens of pluralist game studies. Its playful infrastructure has supported contrasting disciplinary methods, from arts to design to controlled intervention. The users of the space are explicitly welcomed in a free, non-pre-defined manner, supporting anti-exclusionary practice. Finally, the research group itself brings together scholars at different phases of their research career with similar goals, supporting a gradient-space between scholastic levels.

Multi-use game spaces can accommodate a broad range of research. It can be used to study both physical and digital games in both natural or guided settings. In this way, they offer an effective multi-tool for a game lab, accommodating diverse researchers with varying research goals, or conceptions of research. This value is present on every stage of the research maturation process, from student pedagogy to researcher projects.

The lens of pluralist game studies is a valuable way to unpack the value of such a space in a university. Different disciplinary approaches to games have been studied in Oasis, embodying the desire to bring together.

Limitations

While this kind of open access play space has many promising components for hosting and facilitating games research and education, it has several limitations as well. This

type of space requires curation and support to produce relevant research. In addition, some aspects of a multi-use space conflict directly with each other. Most notably, loud play behaviours, such as groups playing popular video games, may disrupt those attempting to use it as an academic workspace. These tensions are not necessarily 'flaws' of the space but rather tensions that may be beneficial or problematic.

It seems to be a pragmatic reality that play/playfulness in a multi-use space is often disruptive to other behaviours including 'rest' and 'work'. While this may lead certain readers to believe that multi-use spaces are therefore not worth investing in, a contrasting point should be highlighted. To achieve an open-access inclusive space, possible conflicts between diverse users must be allowed. The author sees this as *flexibility* and *inclusion* conflicting with certain forms of *comfort*. The exact way to navigate these conflicts is not simple, as comfort is one of the key design elements for a successful space. These conflicts are probably worthwhile, though as pluralism argues, at least some conflict is worth the benefits of diversity (Masek, 2025).

Another concern to discuss is whether a mixed-use space, especially mixing work and play as an intention for a space is unethical (e.g. Abend et al., 2021). There can be concerns of exploitation, especially if the playful space is set up by an employer to encourage higher levels of labour. This is usually an off-topic criticism for many free to use multi-use game spaces, as the space does not leverage playfulness to induce additional labour for itself. However, this concern has come up in several academic conferences, and it is an important topic for designing these spaces.

This paper wishes to reframe this question. Rather than viewing the space as possibly nefariously "mixing" work and play, this text would encourage the reader to see it in the opposite way - some users may wish to work in publicly available spaces and others may wish to play in them, and it is important to respect these diverse users. Inclusive multi-use spaces are thus more flexible than a more tightly controlled space. There are spaces at universities that prioritize single uses, such as one such room just down the hall from Oasis. This room is intended exclusively for game researchers to play a set of games that are under lock and key. This space also lies empty on most days, and if it is used, it is used by at most a handful of people. Oasis on the other hand, which is maybe twice the size, regularly houses many more users, thus presenting a different type of benefit for researcher and student communities.

There are important design choices though that can be made to avoid potential fears around mixing work and play. Game spaces should put in effort to ensure the engaging-playful atmosphere of a multi-use space does not result in a sense of pressure to over-work. One such effective design choice is intentionally creating the opportunity to rest in the space: for example, by filling it with sleep able bean bags. Another choice that might help this is not trying to place 'motivational' play posters/designs in the space. Whereas a traditional coworking space may have a variety of inspirational-engaging slogans to make work seem more playful, we encourage these spaces to be playful *not* on the topic of work, while also enabling students to choose to work in them if they so wish. This goal also aligns with general workplace wellbeing studies that argue that work, play, and rest form an important trifecta of behaviour for resilience (McMurtie & Crane, 2020).

These conflicts are an expected result of a pluralist approach to game studies. This larger theory already assumes there will be conflict between people with differing views. In a pluralist framework this seems like a *good* sign that there is a successful mixing of differing views. It is valuable to confront at least some conflicts for the goal of diversity.

Another critical limitation and consideration for such a space is the resource investment required for it. The above program was embedded inside of a long-established games research lab, with a 20-40-person undergraduate student volunteer network

helping it function. These student volunteers receive credits for supporting the space, so it is possible that that reward may be replicable in other institutions. There are sizable up-front costs for purchasing the relevant infrastructure needed for the lab, but this is also probably true of most scientific laboratory set ups. In addition, the pedagogical and research endeavour was run by a PhD-volunteer, with no substantial monetary compensation. This system, while cost effective for the lab, at under 1,000 euro paid for the three-year implementation, is not likely to be long-term sustainable. Indeed, after the third year of operation this program has entered hiatus, as no funding was obtained to continue it, and there were no leading volunteers for an unpaid fourth project. In this way, if an institution wished for such a lab to be sustainable, they would probably need a funded individual supporting its operation, as is realistically required of all professional research institutions. This kind of lab however, still creates a fertile territory for supporting a PhD-level or post-doctoral research project, internally or externally funded, leveraging the benefits of the space. In some ways, the intentional disciplinary openness is an economic benefit for such a space, as fixed term researchers can be invited to mould their project to fit their background.

Conclusion

This work describes the theoretical value behind public-access playful third spaces for games pedagogy and research. It does this by clarifying the concept, expanding on past studies looking at this kind of space for game design, and unpacking a case study at a mid-sized Finnish University. In this case study, three critical features were analysed as critically influential for the research and pedagogical projects housed there. These projects come from a wide methodological background, from artistic, to observational, to intervention studies, which represents critical value for contemporary game-studies research centres aiming to be pluralistic. As game studies is and continues to be interdisciplinary, it will benefit from more tools on how to implement the difficulty of multiple disciplines working with each other. Future research groups, labs, schools, or institutions may benefit from creating publicly accessible, yet privately controllable, comfortable locations that also house playful infrastructure.

This work aims to add clarity to a sticky question in game studies: How do we practically support the valuable diversity of research on games, while enabling these diverse scholars to interact with each other as a community of practice? It uses the theoretical tenets of pluralist game studies (Masek, 2025), and describes how a playful third space can practically support diverse research through this ideology. This case study has limits, and has not solved the problems of multidisciplinary, especially criticisms that narrower disciplinary work tends to receive higher economic rewards (Deterding, 2017). Despite these limits, it is still a valuable tool, ideology, and pedagogical approach for future game studies research organizers to consider.

These spaces have unique characteristics that are valuable for conducting a variety of games research studies: Firstly, participants may be primed for playful attitudes increasing their willingness to engage with cultural probes and artistic provocations. Second, playful spaces are naturally occupied by a variety of playful behaviours that are fundamentally relevant for study. Thirdly, these spaces present easy access spaces for material games and other play objects facilitating the study on those objects in a variety of manners. Finally, it is a known public space that people may be comfortable in.

While designing, upkeeping and coordinating research in such a space requires a substantial level of labour, taken together it appears to have been worth it for Tampere University. The space has been academically published on several times, and the options and benefits are far from being fully leveraged. This work has aimed to unpack some of the unique ways the space has been used and to describe certain tensions, both useful and problematic.

There are also promising ways this kind of space could be leveraged for other diverse types of research. Firstly, scholars can use these spaces as locations to conduct close readings of video games, a common technique in game studies (De Angeli & O'Neill, 2020). Secondly, these spaces could host research through design projects (Zimmerman et al., 2010). These spaces may be ideal for such work, as they have an audience experienced with games, who are primed to participate, and the space has an easeful ability to track behaviour and thus is a promising mixture for an interactive design process to occur with that public.

Oasis research group is also a unique pedagogical program that demonstrates the value this kind of space can provide for teaching diverse approaches to games research. This praxis-based pedagogy was heavily reliant on the benefits of a multi-use game space as a rich supportive structure for conducting a variety of projects.

In this way, third spaces hosting games offer practical contributions to game scholars as a community of practice. As with any diverse groups, scholars have different goals, methods and needs for research. These types of multi-use spaces are a practical example of a tool for how diverse scholars can be benefited by a single investment by a university or research group.

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From Spectator to Storyteller: FMV Interactive Narratives in Media Production Classrooms

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ABSTRACT:

This study examines the pedagogical value of interactive full-motion video (FMV) narratives in media production education, where cinematic storytelling and interactive game mechanics converge to develop students' creative, technical, and collaborative competencies. Five exemplary titles – *Late Shift*, *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*, *Her Story*, *Telling Lies*, and *The Complex* – were integrated into a semester-long interdisciplinary course at Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv ($n = 55$). A mixed-methods design combined Likert-scale questionnaires ($\alpha = 0.81$) with open-ended reflections to assess engagement, learning outcomes, and collaborative dynamics. Mean item scores ranged from 4.3 to 4.6 on a 5-point scale, indicating strong positive reception across all dimensions. Perceived enjoyment of FMV-based learning correlated positively with students' willingness to undertake future interactive projects ($r = .72$, $p < .01$). Drawing on these findings, the study articulates the Collaborative Agency in Narrative Design (CAND) framework – a heuristic lens conceptualising learning effectiveness as emerging from the interplay of disciplinary integration, creative autonomy, and narrative ownership. The results extend scholarship on game-based learning and position FMV narratives as a pedagogical bridge between cinematic storytelling and computational thinking in higher education.

KEY WORDS:

audience agency, digital games, full-motion video, game-based learning, interactive film, interactive storytelling, interdisciplinary collaboration, media production education, narrative design.

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Introduction

Interactive digital storytelling represents a fundamental transition from passive media reception to co-authorial agency, where audiences directly influence narrative trajectories. *Full-motion video* (FMV) interactive narratives are at the centre of this shift, merging traditional cinematic production with the computational logic and branching architectures of digital games. This study evaluates a university course that utilized five pivotal titles – *Late Shift* (CtrlMovie, 2017), *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (Slade, 2018), *Her Story* (Barlow, 2015), *Telling Lies* (Barlow, 2019), and *The Complex* (Wales Interactive, 2020) – to explore the pedagogical potential of these hybrid forms.

While *interactive films* often refers to viewing-centric formats (like those on Netflix) and FMV games share roots with arcade and console history, both fall under the broader umbrella of *interactive narratives*. These forms blur the boundaries between games and cinema, necessitating the development of new analytical frameworks (Matt, 2021). By granting audiences the “satisfying power to take meaningful action” (Stang, 2019, p. 6), FMVs transform students from passive analysts into active creators of real-time narratives (Heggstad, 2021).

A core component of this research is the interdisciplinary *trading zone* (Frey et al., 2019) established between 35 audiovisual production students and 20 computer science

students. This collaborative environment allowed screenwriters and directors to work alongside programmers and interaction designers.

Guided by constructivist learning theory and situated learning perspectives, the study hypothesized that collaborative FMV prototyping would provide a fertile common ground for developing professional competencies. Through this shared practice, students move beyond their individual disciplinary silos to co-author complex interactive experiences that integrate creative vision with technical execution.

Interactive Narratives: From FMV Games to Educational Engagement

Interactive narrative media have evolved along a trajectory spanning early digital games, contemporary streaming content, and immersive virtual reality experiences. Full-motion video (FMV) digital games, which incorporate pre-recorded live-action footage as their primary visual medium, first achieved mainstream popularity during the 1980s and early 1990s through LaserDisc arcade titles and console releases such as *Dragon's Lair* (Advanced Microcomputer Systems, 1983) and *Night Trap* (Digital Pictures, 1992). These pioneering works demonstrated the technical feasibility of merging cinematic sequences with player choice, though contemporary critics often dismissed them as gimmicky novelties limited by the technological constraints and storage capacities of their era (Gwaltney, 2018). As gaming hardware advanced and three-dimensional computer graphics achieved increasing sophistication throughout the late 1990s, FMV-centric games largely receded from commercial prominence.

The 2010s witnessed a resurgence of interactive movies, driven by digital platforms, a nostalgia for narrative-driven gameplay, and mainstream interest in hybrid media. Contemporary FMV titles, such as *Late Shift* and *Her Story*, have innovated the genre while proving its viability. *Late Shift* presents viewers with timed choices for the protagonist as the film continues uninterrupted. The work contains 180 decision points, leading to seven endings, which maintains cinematic flow (Reseigh-Lincoln, 2018). *Her Story*, by Sam Barlow, took a different approach: players search a database of police interview clips using keywords, building narrative through nonlinear exploration. Barlow described this 'desktop thriller' as employing database narrative structure rather than traditional branching logic (Stark, 2019), an approach that aligns with Manovich's influential concept of *database logic* as a distinctive form of cultural expression in digital media (Heggstad, 2021).¹

Black Mirror: Bandersnatch, an interactive film released through Netflix, introduced interactive storytelling to a massive global streaming audience. *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* presented interactive narratives to viewers unfamiliar with gaming conventions, blurring distinctions between television and digital game experiences (Matt, 2021). Viewers make choices via a remote control or touchscreen, guiding a game designer through a branching storyline that explores themes of free will and creative control. As a Netflix Original Event, it incorporated meta-commentary on its interactivity, with certain pathways

1 Remark by the author: Manovich (1999) introduced the concept of database logic as a dominant cultural form in new media, contrasting it with traditional linear narratives. In this view, interactive works like *Her Story* exemplify database-driven storytelling, where meaning emerges not from a fixed sequence but from user-assembled fragments.

acknowledging the viewer's role in controlling the protagonist. Netflix developed a content management system (Branch Manager) to handle *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*'s narrative structure, showing significant investment in interactive content (Roettgers, 2018).

Following *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*'s critical and commercial success, additional interactive films and FMV games have expanded the genre's presence across streaming catalogues and gaming platforms. *The Complex*, developed by Wales Interactive, places viewers within a biotech lockdown scenario that requires them to make ethical decisions with relationship and outcome consequences, resulting in eight possible endings (Hoffmeyer, 2020). The continued development of such titles signals ongoing convergence between film and game media, with contemporary interactive movies employing sophisticated combinations of cinematic production values, professional acting performances, and literary screenwriting alongside game-like branching logic, conditional variables, and software engineering.

A defining characteristic of interactive narratives is the agency they afford audiences. Interactive films and games transfer degrees of control to viewers, potentially transforming passive recipients into active participants or co-authors sharing responsibility for narrative outcomes. This transformation can heighten engagement and personal investment, as viewers must pay closer attention, anticipate consequences, and recognize that their choices genuinely influence the story's progression. Research in game-based learning has found that shifts from passive viewing to active participation can increase both cognitive engagement and emotional investment (Chang et al., 2017). In educational contexts, such heightened engagement correlates with deeper learning, as students not only absorb content but also make decisions, hypothesize about consequences, and reflect on outcomes.

The extent of player agency in interactive narratives is often debated, as choices frequently remain illusory and bounded by design parameters (Stang, 2019). While works like *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* and *Late Shift* offer predetermined pathways, they generate a 'sense' of control that exceeds actual meaningful action (Cannavò et al., 2024). Nevertheless, this phenomenological agency is valuable in education, as it encourages active engagement with narrative causality and decision-making.

This personalization can enhance memorability and emotional impact. From a media production teaching perspective, exposing students to co-authorship dynamics challenges them to reconceptualize narrative design, not as crafting singular linear tales but as engineering systems of story elements and choice architectures – shifting professional questions from "How do I tell a story to an audience?" to "How do I enable audiences to tell stories with me?" This framework reconceptualizes the audience as co-authors, aligning with Barthes' (1974) concept of the *writerly text*, a notion recently revisited in pedagogical contexts (Gray, 2025),² and Hayles' (2008) theories on narrative construction through digital archives. In non-linear works such as *Her Story*, players construct personalized interpretations through unique discovery sequences. For media students, this necessitates a shift from crafting linear tales to engineering complex 'choice architectures'.

Meta-analytic research confirms that game-based learning (GBL) produces moderate to large positive effects on cognitive and social outcomes (Chiotaki et al., 2023). Narrative-driven GBL has been shown to yield superior engagement and learning results compared to traditional video-based instruction (Perrotta et al., 2013; Gordillo et al., 2022). Despite implementation challenges, the focus on inclusive, gender-aware curriculum design (Valdés-Argüelles et al., 2024) remains critical, as the gamification sector is projected to reach 42.46 billion USD by 2028 (Tegon, 2024).

2 Remark by the author: Hayles (2008) further expanded this by emphasizing the reader/player's role in co-constructing narrative through interaction with digital archives.

FMV Narratives in Education and Collaborative Creation

Educators across various disciplines have begun experimenting with interactive narratives as tools for teaching and developing creative skills. In language and creative writing education, digital storytelling projects have leveraged interactive games to stimulate student creativity through direct engagement with nonlinear forms. Lee (2019) employed *Her Story* in a university creative writing course to inspire students' narrative imagination: after playing through the game's fragmented crime investigation, 25 students were tasked with reimagining and composing their own narrative conclusions. The study documented that the game's deliberate ambiguity and open-endedness served as a productive 'springboard for creative writing', with students engaging deeply with narrative possibilities while developing critical thinking as they addressed story gaps. Lee (2019) reported notable improvements in originality and narrative structural sophistication in student work following the intervention.

Research on interdisciplinary student collaboration reveals dynamics relevant to FMV production. Frey et al. (2019) examined the collaboration between journalism and computer science students on a digital interactive story. They found collaboration quality varied from harmonious integration to 'heterogeneous coercion', where one discipline dominated. Successful teams developed mutual understanding through trading zones with shared vocabulary, while less successful teams faced misunderstandings about roles and workflows. The authors identify coordination and mutual respect between disciplines as essential for avoiding breakdowns in interdisciplinary projects. These findings apply to FMV contexts, where production integrates writing, cinematography, acting direction, and interactive systems development.

Educational digital games are increasingly recognized as interactive, user-oriented, and intrinsically motivating learning instruments capable of delivering tailored experiences responsive to individual learner characteristics (Bontchev et al., 2020). The interactive nature of game-based approaches enables educators to foster engaging learning environments where students explore storytelling techniques and directorial decisions through real-time choices shaping narrative outcomes (Gordillo et al., 2022). This methodology aligns with constructivist learning theory, which posits that learners actively construct knowledge through interactive experiences rather than passively receiving transmitted information. This approach is consistent with findings that digital games can effectively develop critical thinking and problem-solving capacities (Holbert & Wilensky, 2014). FMV integration specifically enables the simulation of realistic scenarios in directing and screenwriting, providing students with opportunities to practice and refine their craft in low-stakes environments, where failure carries educational rather than professional consequences (Tokadlı et al., 2018).

Interactive FMV experiences foster emotional investment and empathy, enabling aspiring screenwriters and directors to develop authentic, psychologically nuanced character portraits (Rochat, 2019). By encouraging students to adopt multiple perspectives and predict audience reactions, narrative-driven games significantly enhance creative thinking (Valdés-Argüelles et al., 2024). Furthermore, FMV production facilitates collaborative workflows and peer-feedback environments essential for mastering cinematography, scriptwriting, and editing (Janssen et al., 2015; Chiang et al., 2019). This gamified approach not only boosts student motivation and enthusiasm (Kim et al., 2018; Rais et al., 2025) but also provides a framework for navigating complex moral dilemmas

in storytelling. To be fully effective, FMV curricula must prioritize accessibility (Demediuk et al., 2018) and diverse representation, ultimately fostering the cultural awareness and emotional intelligence required in today's creative industries (Magdalinou et al., 2022).

Methodology

a) Course design and implementation

The study was conducted within the context of a one-semester course titled "Interactive Narrative Design", cross-listed for students on the Audiovisual Art & Media Production and Computer Science programs at Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv. Course enrolment comprised 55 students: 35 from media production programs (25 bachelor's and 10 master's students) and 20 bachelor's students from IT specializations. The decision to combine bachelor's and master's media students into a single analytical category reflected the small master's subset ($n = 10$), which would have limited statistical power for separate group comparisons; additionally, the course was designed as an introduction to interactive narrative concepts that proved appropriately calibrated for both undergraduate and graduate participants in the media cohort. The course aimed to provide hands-on experience with interactive storytelling, using FMV productions as both subject matter for analysis and inspiration for student creative projects.

Students received a systematic introduction to the history and theory of interactive narratives, covering key concepts such as branching story structures, database narratives, user agency, narrative causality, and the integration of filmic language with game mechanics. Over the semester, five FMV titles served as primary case studies: *Late Shift*, *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*, *Her Story*, *Telling Lies*, and *The Complex*. Each title was assigned either as 'interactive screening' homework to be completed individually or in small groups, or as a structured in-class activity with discussion components.

The pedagogical application of FMV case studies highlights a fundamental distinction between branching cinematic models and database narratives. Works like *Late Shift* and *The Complex* emphasize high production values and real-time decision-making, mimicking the uninterrupted experience of film viewing. These sessions enable students to examine how traditional film techniques – including cinematography, editing, and performance – interact with branching structures and mechanical elements, such as 'affection meters', that influence narrative outcomes. Similarly, *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* demonstrates the integration of interactive content into mainstream streaming, using meta-narrative elements to mirror the viewer's role as a controller.

Conversely, *Her Story* and *Telling Lies* introduce the concept of the database narrative (Manovich, 1999; Hayles, 2008). In these investigative formats, students move away from predetermined paths to actively construct meaning by searching through fragmented archives. This shift from a branching matrix to an exploratory, nonlinear investigation requires students to piece together story coherence from multi-character, parallel conversation threads. Comparing these paradigms encourages students to reconceptualize the viewer's role: from a participant in a scripted 'choice architecture' to an active investigator of a digital archive.

Midway through the semester, students formed interdisciplinary teams of four to five members (typically consisting of two to three media students and two IT students per team) for their capstone projects. Each team was required to conceptualize and prototype a short original interactive narrative. Given time and resource constraints, students were not expected to produce full filmed FMV works; rather, teams could create brief filmed

choose-your-own-adventure scenes (a single decision node with two filmed branches as a minimal demonstration), or text-based and visual prototypes using Twine or similar tools. Some IT-focused teams opted for Unity or Ren'Py implementations incorporating minimal FMV clips. Prototyping was complemented by concept documentation, including narrative flowcharts, character descriptions, and technical specifications.

b) Survey instrument and data collection

To evaluate course outcomes and gather research data on student experiences, an anonymous post-course survey was administered during the final week of the course. Participation was voluntary; all 55 students opted to participate, resulting in a 100% response rate, which can be attributed to high engagement levels and the survey's positioning as a reflective exercise rather than an assessment instrument. All participants provided informed consent. The photographs used in this study were taken with the explicit consent of the participants and have been anonymized to protect their privacy.

The survey employed a mixed-method design consisting of two components. The first component consisted of ten Likert-scale statements (using a 5-point scale from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) that targeted key dimensions of pedagogical interest. Survey items addressed engagement ("Using interactive films in this course made the learning experience more engaging than traditional lectures"), narrative understanding ("Working with interactive narrative design improved my understanding of story structure and storytelling techniques"), technical learning ("I learned new technical skills/tools through creating interactive narratives"), interdisciplinary collaboration ("Collaborating with students from the other specialization enhanced the quality of our project"), preference and attitude ("I find interactive storytelling more compelling than linear storytelling"), creative confidence ("After this course, I feel confident I could contribute to designing an interactive narrative project"), future application interest ("I am interested in creating or participating in more interactive narrative projects in the future"), integration challenges ("Integrating film production and programming was challenging," reverse-scored), participant agency ("As a student, I felt like an active storyteller rather than a passive audience during this course"), and overall satisfaction ("Overall, I found the interactive narrative approach to be a valuable learning experience").³

The second survey component consisted of four open-ended questions inviting extended reflection: which specific FMV title was the most memorable and why; what was learned from collaborating with students from different disciplinary backgrounds; what challenges were encountered during the course; and what suggestions students would offer for future iterations. The survey was administered online via the university's Google Forms to facilitate extended written responses while ensuring respondent confidentiality. Students were assured that their individual responses would remain confidential, would be used exclusively for research purposes, and that final course grades had already been determined to eliminate any performance-related response bias.

It should be acknowledged that the survey instrument was developed specifically for this study and has not been independently validated; future research should subject the items to formal psychometric evaluation. The exploratory nature of the current investigation prioritized capturing detailed participant perceptions over establishing validated measurement properties.

3 Remark by the author: The bracketed phrases throughout this section are verbatim quotations from participants' anonymous open-ended responses. All participants were informed in advance and provided written consent for their responses, in whole or in part, to be quoted in published research outputs while preserving their full anonymity.

c) Data analysis

For quantitative survey items, descriptive statistical analyses and exploratory inferential tests were performed. Mean and standard deviation were computed for each item, both overall and segmented by student subgroup (media versus IT). Given the small sample size of the master's subset ($n = 10$), bachelor's and master's media students were combined into a unified 'media students' category for comparison with IT students.

Pearson correlations were examined between selected items hypothesized to demonstrate relationships. For example, the correlation between engagement and improved understanding was calculated to determine whether students who found the experience engaging also perceived greater learning. Correlation between preference for interactive storytelling and interest in future projects was examined as an indicator of attitude-intention alignment.

Independent-samples t-tests were used to examine differences between media and IT students on key items, such as collaboration experience and technical challenges. This analysis aimed to identify whether distinct subgroups perceived interdisciplinary aspects differently – whether, for instance, media students experienced greater technical difficulty while IT students found storytelling aspects more challenging. We acknowledge that Likert-scale data are ordinal rather than interval in nature, and that using parametric tests such as t-tests on such data represents a methodological limitation. However, t-tests were employed as exploratory indicators rather than confirmatory hypothesis tests, and supplementary non-parametric checks (Mann-Whitney U) yielded consistent patterns of results. Additionally, the unequal group sizes ($n = 35$ media versus $n = 20$ IT) warrant caution in interpreting statistical comparisons.⁴ Cohen's d effect sizes are reported throughout to aid the interpretation of practical significance alongside statistical significance.⁵

For qualitative data from open-ended questions, thematic content analysis was conducted. Responses were coded iteratively, identifying emergent themes related to learning experiences, collaboration dynamics, and perceptions of interactive narrative as a pedagogical approach. Representative quotations were selected to illustrate identified themes.

Results

a) Quantitative findings: Engagement, learning, and collaboration outcomes

Overall, survey results support the pedagogical effectiveness of FMV interactive narratives in higher education contexts. Students reported high levels of engagement and perceived learning across measured dimensions. Table 1 presents mean ratings on a 5-point scale for key survey statements, organized by student subgroup (media versus IT), with standard deviations and exploratory t-test comparisons. Effect sizes (Cohen's d) are included to indicate the practical significance of observed differences.

As shown in Table 1, media students consistently reported higher ratings across engagement, learning, and creative opportunity dimensions. The effect sizes for several comparisons were medium to large, suggesting practically meaningful differences in how the two student populations experienced the course. Notably, the largest effect ($d = 1.18$) was observed for perceived collaboration challenge, with IT students finding interdisciplinary teamwork more difficult than their media counterparts – a finding consistent with

4 Remark by the author: The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.81 indicates good internal consistency for the survey instrument, meeting the conventional threshold of 0.70 for acceptable reliability in educational research.

5 Remark by the author: Cohen's d effect sizes are interpreted as small ($d \approx 0.2$), medium ($d \approx 0.5$), and large ($d \approx 0.8$) following conventional benchmarks in social sciences.

qualitative observations that technical students sometimes struggled with the ambiguous creative processes characteristic of narrative development.

Table 1: Mean scores (1-5) and exploratory t-test comparisons for key survey items by student group⁶

Survey item	Media (n=35)	IT (n=20)	t (df=53)	p	Cohen's d
Engagement with the project	4.13 ± 0.46	3.83 ± 0.59	1.93	.062	0.57
Learning about storytelling	3.93 ± 0.44	3.50 ± 0.59	2.85	.007	0.83
Opportunity for creative expression	4.04 ± 0.42	3.55 ± 0.54	3.00	.004	1.02
Value of cross-faculty collaboration	4.07 ± 0.42	3.74 ± 0.67	2.27	.030	0.59
Interest in future use of the medium	4.04 ± 0.44	3.69 ± 0.38	3.12	.003	0.85
Collaboration challenging (rev.)	2.60 ± 0.55	3.22 ± 0.50	-4.32	<.001	1.18

Source: own processing

For the statement “Interactive films made the learning experience more engaging than a regular class”, the overall mean was $M = 4.62$ ($SD = 0.59$). Approximately 89% of students agreed or strongly agreed, with 67% selecting “Strongly Agree”. Many noted in open-ended responses that interactive screenings and decision-making elements kept them “on the edge of their seat” during class sessions – a marked contrast to passive lecture formats. Students also reported that the approach substantially enhanced their understanding of narrative design principles ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 0.86$), with 81% agreeing that the course improved their grasp of storytelling structures and techniques.

The interdisciplinary collaboration dimension received particularly positive evaluation. Students agreed that working in mixed media and IT teams improved project quality ($M = 4.51$, $SD = 0.60$). While both subgroups rated this dimension highly, qualitative responses revealed different emphases: media students frequently expressed appreciation for learning technical tools and computational thinking from IT peers, while IT students valued creative input and narrative sophistication contributed by media partners. The mean difference between groups on collaboration benefits (media $M \approx 4.4$ versus IT $M \approx 4.7$) was not statistically significant, $t(53) = 1.64$, $p = .107$, suggesting broad recognition of collaborative value across disciplinary backgrounds. Only 2 of 55 respondents gave neutral ratings on this item, with none disagreeing.

The aggregated survey results across all five key dimensions are visualized in Chart 1. As the bar chart illustrates, students rated all measured aspects of FMV-based learning positively, with mean scores consistently above the midpoint of the scale and relatively narrow standard deviations, indicating consensus across the cohort.

When asked to compare interactive storytelling with traditional linear forms, students on average preferred interactive approaches ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.94$). The distribution was broader on this item: 45% agreed that interactivity was more compelling, 40% were neutral, and 15% disagreed (with no strong disagreements). This pattern suggests that while many students appreciated the novelty and engagement of interactive narratives, a substantial proportion maintained an equal appreciation for conventional linear forms. Background differences also emerged here: IT students appeared more inclined to favour interactive approaches ($M \approx 4.1$) compared to media students ($M \approx 3.6$). This approximate 0.5-point difference may indicate that students with technical and gaming backgrounds

6 Remark by the author: All items measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Cohen's d: small ≈ 0.2 , medium ≈ 0.5 , large ≈ 0.8 . Source: own elaboration.

possess a pre-existing affinity for interactivity, whereas film-focused students, although engaged, continue to value traditional storytelling highly. Several media students noted in their comments that interactive films should complement rather than replace linear cinema, reflecting nuanced professional perspectives. Overall, the cohort did not unanimously declare interactivity superior; however, a plurality found it ‘more compelling’ due to the participatory immersion it offered.

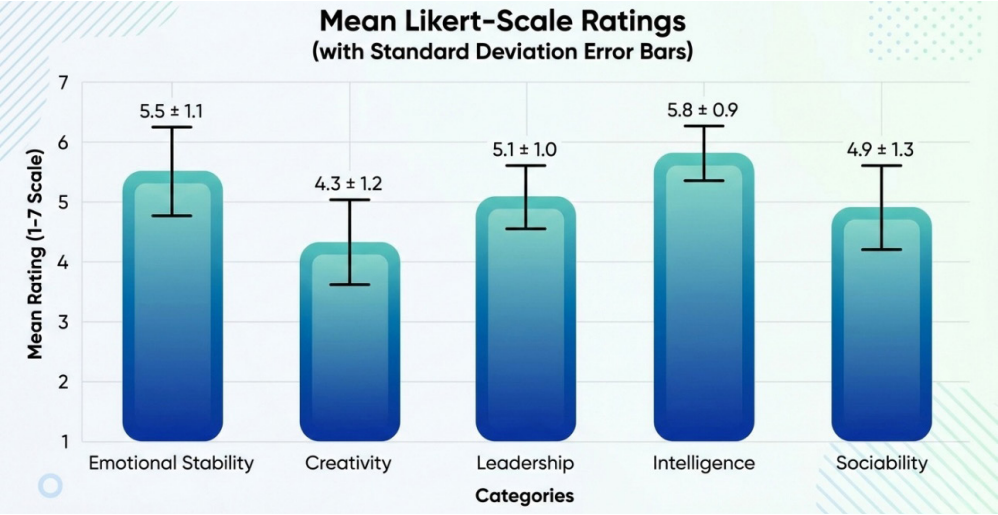


Chart 1: Mean Likert-scale ratings (with standard deviation error bars) for five key survey dimensions
Source: own processing

The course appeared to successfully inspire future creative engagement. The item “I am interested in creating more interactive narrative projects in the future” yielded a mean of 4.24 (SD = 0.84), with approximately 78% of respondents agreeing. This represents a strong indicator that the pedagogical intervention cultivated ongoing interest in the form. Correlation analysis revealed that the perceived enjoyment of FMV-based learning was strongly associated with a willingness to pursue future interactive projects ($r = .72$, $p < .01$). Additionally, students preferring interactive over linear storytelling demonstrated even stronger future interest associations ($r \approx .85$), suggesting reinforcing relationships among enjoyment, format preference, and creative motivation.

Table 2: Perceived skill gains per FMV experience (student self-ratings, 1-5 scale)⁷

FMV title	Reflection	Interactivity	Teamwork	Technical	Narrative
<i>Her Story</i>	4.6	4.5	3.2	3.8	4.4
<i>Telling Lies</i>	4.4	4.3	3.5	4.0	4.5
<i>The Complex</i>	3.8	4.0	4.4	3.6	4.0
<i>Late Shift</i>	3.6	4.2	4.2	3.4	4.1
<i>Bandersnatch</i>	4.0	4.4	3.8	4.2	4.3

Source: own processing

7 Remark by the author: Ratings on a 5-point scale. *Her Story* and *Telling Lies* excelled at promoting individual reflection; *The Complex* and *Late Shift* proved particularly effective for group discussion activities.

Chart 2 displays the distribution of student responses across the five-point Likert scale for each measured dimension. The visualization reveals consistently positive perceptions with notably low variance: 89% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that interactive films enhanced engagement, while 96% affirmed the value of cross-disciplinary collaboration. The interactive storytelling preference dimension showed the broadest distribution, with 40% remaining neutral, suggesting that appreciation for FMV-based pedagogy does not necessarily entail a preference for interactive over linear narrative forms. Students evaluated how each FMV title contributed to specific skill development areas. Table 2 presents mean ratings for perceived skill gains attributed to each work.

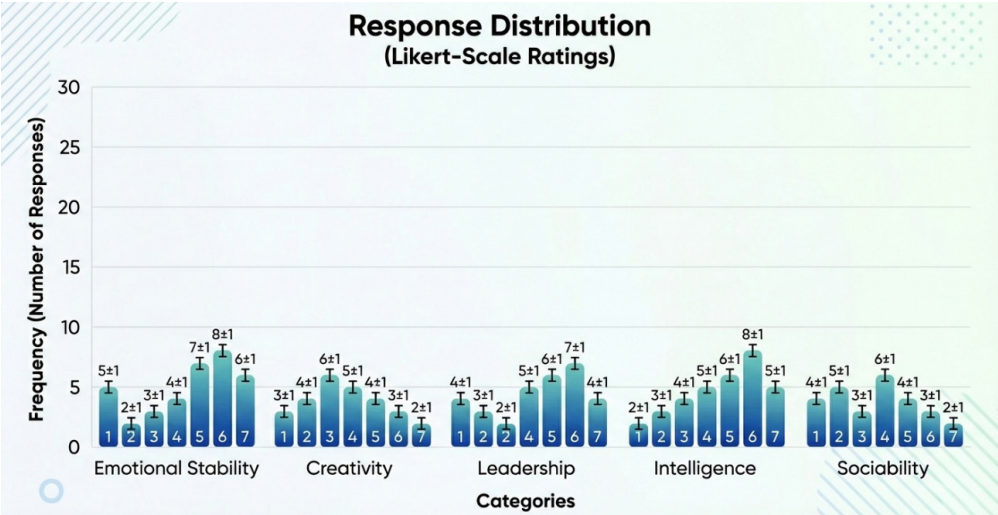


Chart 2: Student perceptions of FMV-based learning across measured dimensions
Source: own processing

b) The Collaborative agency in narrative design framework (CAND)

Drawing on observations from the implementation of the course and an analysis of student experiences, we propose the CAND framework as a heuristic tool for conceptualizing interdisciplinary learning in interactive media production contexts. It is essential to emphasize that CAND is presented as a pedagogical lens and reflective framework, rather than as a testable, quantitative model with predictive or explanatory validity. The framework emerged inductively from classroom observations and student feedback; we did not directly measure its constituent constructs. Relationships between dimensions remain speculative and require future empirical investigation to establish validity.

The CAND framework posits that effective interdisciplinary learning in interactive narrative contexts emerges from the interplay of three conceptual dimensions: Disciplinary Integration (DI), Creative Autonomy (CA), and Narrative Ownership (NO). Each dimension represents an aspect of team dynamics and individual engagement that instructors can intentionally foster through course design decisions.

Disciplinary Integration (DI) refers to the degree to which students from different fields – in this case, media production and information technology – effectively blend their expertise in mutually productive ways. Low DI is manifested when teams operate in disciplinary silos, with scripts simply handed to coders without substantive discussion or technical considerations disconnected from narrative intentions. High DI occurs when genuine mutual influence is present: narrative structures evolve responsively to technological constraints and affordances, while technical solutions adapt to serve storytelling goals. In one

observed case during the course, a team substantially redesigned their branching narrative logic after an IT student proposed a decision-tree implementation that enabled more meaningful player choices than the original linear structure accommodated. To foster DI, instructors can organize early 'translation' sessions where media and IT students explain disciplinary processes to one another, develop shared glossaries of key terms, and create collaborative concept mapping exercises that require integrating both technical and narrative perspectives.

Creative Autonomy (CA) refers to the extent to which students shape the creative vision of their projects, rather than merely executing predefined instructor specifications. High CA environments enable teams to independently select genres, platforms, aesthetic approaches, and design strategies, fostering intrinsic motivation and genuine ownership of creative outcomes. During the course, this autonomy led some groups to develop unexpected project directions – interactive noirs, fragmented memory narratives, and experimental interface designs – that would not have emerged under rigid, predetermined assignments. To promote CA, instructors might adopt flexible, open-ended project briefs with milestone check-ins for guidance, rather than detailed, step-by-step specifications, allowing student interests and emerging insights to shape the final productions.

Narrative Ownership (NO) refers to the extent to which students genuinely believe that projects belong to them – not merely in terms of execution and completion, but also in terms of authorship, creative intent, and responsibility for the audience experience. Teams demonstrating high NO expressed pride in the uniqueness of their stories and showed emotional investment in how hypothetical audiences might perceive their work. These students debated character arcs, the ethical implications of player choices, and narrative outcomes with the same seriousness as professional creators aiming to craft meaningful experiences. To support NO, instructors can encourage reflection journals that document creative decision-making processes, facilitate narrative pitch presentations where students articulate and defend their creative goals, and emphasize the student author role rather than positioning projects as mere exercises.

When employed as a reflective instrument, CAND helps instructors and researchers identify how deeply students engage in co-creating interactive artifacts, shifting analytical focus from isolated outputs (completed prototypes) to integrated processes where storytelling serves as the connective tissue bridging disciplinary perspectives. The framework is not prescriptive but descriptive: it offers vocabulary for discussing interdisciplinary dynamics and suggests intervention points where intentional design might strengthen learning experiences.

Limitations

Several methodological limitations constrain the interpretation of these findings and suggest directions for future research. The study employed a single-course design without a control group receiving alternative instruction. Consequently, we cannot definitively attribute observed outcomes to FMV-based pedagogy specifically, but rather to other course characteristics, such as project-based structure, instructor enthusiasm, interdisciplinary team composition, or novelty effects. Future research should employ experimental or quasi-experimental designs comparing FMV-integrated curricula with comparable courses using alternative approaches.

The sample size of 55 students from a single university limits the generalizability of the results. While adequate for exploratory analysis, this sample may not accurately

represent the diversity of institutional contexts, student populations, and pedagogical cultures across higher education settings. Replication across multiple institutions and cultural contexts is necessary to establish broader validity. Additionally, the unequal subgroup sizes ($n = 35$ media versus $n = 20$ IT) warrant caution in interpreting group comparisons; statistical power for detecting true differences was constrained.

Reliance on self-report survey data introduces potential biases, including social desirability bias, retrospective rationalization, and the inability to objectively capture learning outcomes. Students may have reported more favourable experiences than actually occurred, particularly given knowledge that the instructor was conducting research. Future studies should incorporate objective learning measures, behavioural observations, portfolio assessments, or longitudinal follow-up tracking actual engagement with interactive narrative projects beyond course completion.

The survey instrument was developed specifically for this study and has not undergone formal psychometric validation. While internal consistency was acceptable ($\alpha = 0.81$), a comprehensive evaluation of construct validity, test-retest reliability, and factor structure would strengthen confidence in measurement properties. Validated instruments for assessing game-based learning experiences should be developed or adapted for future research in this domain.

The CAND framework emerged inductively from observations and has not been empirically validated. We did not directly measure Disciplinary Integration, Creative Autonomy, or Narrative Ownership as separate constructs, and relationships among these dimensions remain speculative. Future research should operationalize CAND components, develop measurement instruments, and test hypothesized relationships through structural equation modelling or similar techniques.

Finally, demographic factors beyond disciplinary background were not systematically analyzed. Gender, prior gaming experience, creative confidence, and technological facility may moderate responses to FMV-based pedagogy in ways this study could not detect. Future research should examine potential moderating variables to understand which student populations benefit most from interactive narrative approaches.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates how interactive FMV narratives can transform media production education by repositioning students from passive consumers of content to active co-creators of meaningful narrative experiences. Through systematic engagement with exemplary FMV works spanning diverse structural approaches – from *Late Shift*'s real-time branching to *Her Story*'s database exploration – students developed not only a theoretical understanding of interactive storytelling but practical skills in conceptualizing and prototyping original interactive narratives. The experience fostered deep engagement, productive interdisciplinary collaboration, and the development of professional competencies that bridge creative and technical domains.

The findings align with broader game-based learning scholarship, demonstrating moderate to large effects of interactive approaches on cognitive engagement and motivation. Students reported high satisfaction across measured dimensions, with particularly strong appreciation for interdisciplinary teamwork opportunities and perceived creative agency. The correlation between enjoyment and future interest in interactive narrative projects suggests that positive experiences in structured educational contexts may generate lasting professional interest in emerging media forms.

The CAND framework offers educators a heuristic tool for designing and evaluating interdisciplinary learning environments in interactive media contexts. While requiring empirical validation, CAND provides vocabulary for discussing the dynamics of disciplinary integration, creative autonomy, and narrative ownership that appear central to successful collaborative production. Instructors can draw on these dimensions when designing course structures, forming teams, crafting assignments, and facilitating reflection.

As boundaries between film, games, and streaming content blur, media production education must evolve to prepare students for contexts where these traditions intersect. Interactive narratives represent a significant domain that requires distinctive competencies, which traditional curricula may not develop. FMV works occupy a valuable pedagogical position, combining production values and performance traditions familiar to film students with branching architectures and computational logic central to interactive design. This hybrid nature makes FMV suitable for bridging disciplinary perspectives and demonstrating that successful interactive storytelling requires the integration of technical capabilities with cinematic craft.

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Appendix A: Survey Instrument

Likert-scale items (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree):

1. Using interactive films in this course made the learning experience more engaging than traditional lectures.
2. Working with interactive narrative design improved my understanding of story structure and storytelling techniques.
3. I learned new technical skills/tools (e.g., Twine, game engines) through creating interactive narratives.
4. Collaborating with students from the other specializations (media/IT) enhanced the quality of our project.
5. I find interactive storytelling (with choices and branching) more compelling than linear storytelling in film or games.
6. After this course, I feel confident I could contribute to designing an interactive narrative project.
7. I am interested in creating or participating in more interactive narrative projects in the future.
8. Integrating film production and programming was challenging or frustrating at times. (reverse-scored)
9. As a student, I felt like an active storyteller rather than a passive audience member during this course.
10. Overall, I found the interactive narrative approach to be a valuable learning experience.

Open-ended questions:

1. Which specific FMV title was most memorable for you, and why?
2. What did you learn from collaborating with students from different disciplinary backgrounds?
3. What challenges did you encounter during this course?
4. What suggestions would you offer for future iterations of this course?

Appendix B: Implementation Checklist for Educators

FMV titles used (with pedagogical rationale):

- *Late Shift* (CtrlMovie, 2017): Real-time branching with 180 decision points and 7 endings. Recommended for group viewing to practice collective decision-making under time pressure. Highlights cinematic production values within an interactive format.
- *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (Slade, 2018): Mainstream streaming platform integration with meta-narrative elements. Demonstrates interactive film accessibility and self-reflexive storytelling about agency and control.
- *Her Story* (Barlow, 2015): Database narrative structure with keyword search interface. Ideal for individual play sessions exploring nonlinear discovery and narrative assembly from fragmented materials.
- *Telling Lies* (Barlow, 2019): Multi-character database with parallel conversation threads. Builds on *Her Story* mechanics with increased complexity for advanced narrative coherence analysis.
- *The Complex* (Wales Interactive, 2020): Relationship tracking systems and ethical dilemmas with 8 endings. Demonstrates game-like mechanical elements (affection meters, consequence tracking) within FMV format.

Recommended team composition:

- Team size: 4-5 students. Suggested mix: 2-3 media production students + 2 IT/CS students. Potential roles: Writer/Director, Cinematographer, Programmer, Interaction Designer, Project Coordinator.

Prototyping tools:

- Twine (no-code): Ideal for narrative branching visualization and rapid prototyping without programming experience.
- Ren'Py (Python-based): Suitable for visual novel-style projects with minimal coding requirements.
- Unity (programming experience required): Full interactive development environment for teams with strong technical capacity.

Suggested week-by-week timeline (15-week semester):

- Weeks 1-3: Theory introduction, interactive narrative history, key concepts (agency, branching, database logic)
- Weeks 4-5: *Her Story* lab (individual play sessions, database narrative analysis)
- Week 6: *Late Shift* screening (group experience, real-time collective decisions)
- Week 7: *Bandersnatch* session (mainstream interactive film analysis, meta-narrative discussion)
- Weeks 8-9: Team formation, concept development, narrative flowcharts
- Week 10: *Telling Lies* analysis (advanced mechanics, multi-character complexity)
- Weeks 11-13: Prototype development, iterative testing, peer feedback
- Week 14: *The Complex* screening, final project refinements
- Week 15: Project presentations, peer evaluation, survey administration

Transcending the Limits of Mankind: The Alchemical Opus and the Jungian Individuation in *Bloodborne*

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ABSTRACT:

Jung draws a parallel between the process of individuation, which is the cornerstone of his theory, and the alchemical Opus: to each phase corresponds a pivotal moment in the journey towards becoming oneself. In *Bloodborne*, the main character undergoes a journey of self-discovery shaped by the player's choices, both in terms of the narrative (especially with the true ending) and gameplay. The plot and the world of *Bloodborne* can be understood through the alchemical phases of nigredo, albedo, and rubedo: firstly, the night of Yharnam, then the defeat of Rom and the ensuing blood moon. These stages, which coincide with the encounter with the archetypes of the Shadow, the Animus/Anima, and the true Self, are traversed by the protagonist, who faces both the plague of beasts (Shadow) and a profound understanding of that which is different (Animus/Anima and the Great Old Ones), which ultimately reveal the invisible to them with the blood moon and leads them to the end. The hunter's final steps towards individuation are conditioned by the consumption of the One Third Umbilical Cords, and can consequentially guide them to substantially different paths, based on the player's choice.

KEY WORDS:

alchemy, *Bloodborne*, choices, individuation, Jung, philosophy, psychology.

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Introduction

Bloodborne (FromSoftware, 2015) is a game brimming with stimulating ideas and topics for reflection. In line with the other *soulslike* games FromSoftware, such as the *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware, 2011-2018) series, the plot is fragmented, with several details that leave the door open to interpretations, depending on the approach adopted in the analysis. The player then pieces everything together in this narrative archaeology (Dodd, 2021) by connecting elements that are only seemingly unrelated, but which conceal deeper meanings and connections. From an artistic standpoint, digital games differ from cinema –which is usually considered the medium most closely related to them, given that digital games incorporate various cinematic stylistic devices in their structures (Juul, 2004) – in one of their fundamental aspects: interaction.

Digital games are organized, rule-based formal systems of play. The player engages with them and their choices within these said systems cause verifiable and quantifiable outcomes. Developers create various environments within which the player has agency and can make choices that are going to be impactful to the previously mentioned *quantifiable outcomes* (Juul, 2005).

In *Bloodborne*, the endings are one of these environments: depending on the choices that the player makes throughout the game, it is possible to reach one of three available endings. However, these are inextricably linked to the game's narrative, to the story that the player experiences and which defines their role in this fictional universe. In this sense, the hunter, which is the player character, becomes a digital prosthesis (Fraschini, 2002) of the player, and since their actions and choices are meaningful and feel impactful, the whole experience in the world of *Bloodborne* becomes an expression of the self.

In depth psychology – the branch of the science that explains human behaviour and motivation through the unconscious – there is one psychoanalyst who has devoted his entire research to the discovery of the self and the art of becoming oneself: Carl Gustav Jung. Jung's work has stood out for his dedication and interest towards the relations that the individual establishes with the collective. Jung took a different path than Sigmund Freud the moment he postulated his own conception of the psyche: while Freud (2013) put traumatic experiences at the centre of the psychic dynamics, to explain human behaviour, Jung (2015) transcends that idea with the concept of the *collective unconscious*. The Swiss psychoanalyst believed that the human mind is not a tabula rasa, but that there is a common layer, shared by the whole of humanity as a species, which contains hereditary memories and ancestral ideas. The latter show up in the conscious mind through *archetypes*: models to which each individual resorts in different situations in their lives. Of all the archetypes, there are a couple that are considered the most important. These, related to the personality, are the *Persona*, the *Shadow*, *Animus/Anima* and the true *Self*. Jung (2015) believed that the psychological journey had the objective to help the patient to become oneself, calling this process *individuation*.

But to truly become oneself, it is fundamental to understand that every single individual lives inside a society, and fills a role which inevitably limits the expression of the self. Also, Jung noticed that human behaviour differs depending on the context in which everyone is immersed, with him being the first to do so: the mask worn at work differs to the one that is worn in the personal life, and being with the partner or with friends naturally requires different behaviours.

Following this idea, the endings in *Bloodborne* are meaningful because they represent a definitive choice on what the player decides that they want to be, through the main character. While the endings will be discussed in more detail later in the analysis, it must be noted, that in the whole narrative context that *Bloodborne* develops, which is where the story is enacted, the true ending is particularly interesting from the perspective of Jungian individuation: after the discovery of Lovecraftian Great Old Ones (see Joshi, 2001; Mukherjee, 2023; Fikejzová & Charvát, 2024), people in Yharnam are obsessed with the idea of becoming one of them, leaving humanity and mortality behind to ascend to godhood, but the main character is the only one able to ever achieve this goal which happens only in the third and true ending of the game.

Following the narrative rules that the game teaches to the player on their critical path, this analysis will explore the relationship between Jungian individuation and the story of the player character, which evolves through player actions. This evolution is reflected in the gameworld, which changes after specific bosses are defeated (Vicar Amelia, Rom and Mergo's Wet Nurse to reach the end).

To better understand Jungian individuation, it is important first of all to explore the fundamental archetypes mentioned above. To define the mask worn in society, Jung uses the term *Persona*, the origin of which can be found in masks from Greek theatre (Treccani, n.d.). Also, not by chance, in English the term refers specifically to the public image shown to the world (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). The *Persona* is luminous, radiant and positive, but, as previously stated, it represents just a small part of the self. In line with depth psychology, that which is not shown through the *Persona* is suppressed and contained inside the archetype of the *Shadow*, which acts as an unconscious counterpart to it. According to Jung (2015), the *Shadow* corresponds to a negative personality of the *Ego*; it therefore encompasses all those qualities the existence of which is painful and deplorable (p. 10,513).

Jung (2015) believed that, in order to achieve individuation, the first necessary step was to confront and integrate the *Shadow* into the conscious ego, thereby strengthening it. This process, though, requires an inevitable conflict on two different fronts: the inner,

as the darker and unconscious part represented by the Shadow must be acknowledged, and the outer, as by integrating the archetype a divergence from the rules and standards of society is put into practice. By doing so, the individual breaks away from the collective in order to reach a more profound connection with oneself. This, specifies Jung, is not synonymous with being an outcast or a hermit: it is a spontaneous acknowledgment that society has its own rules, based on collective criteria, that do not favour the true expression of the self.

In one of Jung's (2015) late works, "Psychology and alchemy", the Swiss psychoanalyst drew a parallel between the journey towards individuation and the alchemical process, which has in the distillation of the *Philosopher's Stone* its ultimate goal. The alchemical *Opus* consists of four consequential stages. These are: *nigredo*, *albedo*, *citrinitas* and *rubedo*. Black, white, yellow and red which, not by chance, are exactly the colours with which the *Philosopher's Stone* is represented in many famous audiovisual products, such *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (Columbus, 2001) and *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood* (Maruyama et al., 2009-2010).

In later development, *citrinitas* was merged with *rubedo*, as gold is yellow, but a reddish one. In Jung's (2015) idea, each phase corresponds to a specific and important moment in the journey towards individuation. We can take *nigredo* as an example of this parallelism. *Nigredo* is the encounter with one's own Shadow: as the latter evokes a dark imagery, which belongs to a "lower" dimension; the same can be said for *nigredo*. The symbol that is usually associated with this alchemical phase is the crow: a death bringer animal. The crow is black and *nigredo* is the blackness of death: Jung (2015) briefly mentions the phases of *solutio*, *separatio*, *divisio* and, most of all, *putrefactio*. *Nigredo* is, in fact, the destruction of matter. The same kind of darkness that brings suffering is embodied by the Shadow: while it is indeed painful to open up to this part of oneself, it is at the same time essential. It is not by chance that Jung believes that inside the Shadow there is a spark of creativity, one that allows you to make the first important step towards individuation. So, encountering the Shadow corresponds to *nigredo*. According to Jung (2015), the alchemical work begins precisely with the descent into darkness (*nigredo*), that is, into the unconscious (p. 4,787).

Nigredo is the necessary death, which symbolically can be seen as the act of breaking away from the collective and the inner conflict we have to face, before being reborn anew, which is then embodied by *albedo* (Jung, 2015). That same necessary death inhabits Yharnam during the night of the hunt, which is what the player has to face at the beginning of the game. In fact, the three alchemical phases can be seen in the world of *Bloodborne*: after the abovementioned *nigredo*, the player discovers hidden truths in Byrgenwerth, inside the lake of the white moon (*albedo*), where Rom resides. Killing the spider changes the world and, in the end, the user can finally see the world for what it truly is: it is under the red moon (*rubedo*) that the final events of the game unfold, and it is precisely at this stage that individuation, both in Jung's work and in *Bloodborne* with its true ending, is finally reached.

In this essay, we will explore in detail the relationship between Jungian individuation, the alchemical *Opus*, and *Bloodborne*, through an analysis that takes into account the game's mechanics and dynamics and how certain meanings are translated into the digital game's language.

Born by the Blood, Blood-borne: The Physicality of Matter

To begin with, the game starts with a cutscene in which the player's character receives an infusion of blood: this seals a contract with the Hunter's Dream and makes them officially a hunter. After waking up, the player, controlling the player's character, is inside Iosefka's clinic. There is an interactable and readable handwritten note in there that states: "Seek paleblood to transcend the hunt" (FromSoftware, 2015). At this stage, neither the player nor the character knows what this specifically means. However, this is the first objective that the game quietly sets for them and which, throughout the entire first act of the game, drives the plot forward: every non-player character (NPC) the player's character speaks to will guide them towards this mysterious blood and the Healing Church, trying to make sense of it, until they defeat Vicar Amelia.

From a ludic perspective, as happens in other *soulslike* games, the only choice the player has is to move forward, until they reach the beast, which is the first big major roadblock in the experience. As is the case with every game, the opening moments are crucial, because this is where *Bloodborne* teaches us its rules. Right now, the player's character does not own any weapon to face the enemy: it is at a clear disadvantage and, while there is a way to kill the beast for the experienced player who knows how to perform a backstab, it is safe to assume that the developers "intended" this moment to be the first experience of death for the player's character. This, at a game design level, is brilliant: there is a way for the player to express their skill and overcome the obstacle, but at the same time a death here is inconsequential as it directly links to the story and the progression.

In fact, assuming the player dies here, they awaken at the Hunter's Dream and can choose a weapon for their character, which roughly mirrors the playstyle they want to adopt: this is critical, as it is the first form of customization the player has access to and that shapes their own experience in the game. This freedom and the expression of the self, the same that Jung put at the centre of his research, is then consolidated through the whole RPG aspect of the game, and it is what contributes to making each playthrough feel unique. Although, from a narrative perspective, there are fixed points in the plot through which the main character can achieve their Jungian individuation, it is through the RPG element that this expression of the self takes place gameplay-wise.

Once back in Yharnam, the player finds themselves immersed in a city that is devouring itself: people have turned into beasts, and even some of those who appear to be hunters have begun to transform into something else. A distinguishing feature of Yharnam is the presence of death: coffins (some of which are even locked) can be clearly seen scattered throughout the city. The state the city is in reflects the nigredo described in the previous chapter: the situation is dire and it is the consequence of some events which occurred before the game, in which the whole of Yharnam has been infected by an apparently divine blood which would have cured any illness, but instead, caused people to turn into beasts.

Gameplay-wise, once again, the player has only one choice, which is to move forward and engage in combat with these hunters who attack them. From a moral standpoint, the player's actions are weighed on a scale: they cannot ask themselves whether it is right or wrong; they must simply kill these people because there is no other way out. However, this immediately raises a question: does killing these beasts make the player character any

different than any other human turned into a beast, who loses control and succumbs to their instincts? It is as if the game is trying to tell players that there are no other choices than to face the beast plague and accept the consequences of their actions. But this is clearly a never-ending cycle. After all, it is exactly what people around Yharnam did in order to stop the plague: by fighting it, they were slowly devoured by it and became part of it. It is here that the Jungian Shadow comes into play. Jung (2015) defines the Shadow as the sum of all personal and collective psychological dispositions which, due to their incompatibility with the consciously chosen way of life, are not experienced and merge into a partially autonomous personality with unconscious opposing tendencies. With regard to consciousness, the Shadow has a compensatory function, and its action can therefore also be positive (p. 10,044).

When tragedy strikes, the Other, which we openly welcome as a friend, becomes an obstacle in our survival. And so, Yharnam at the beginning of the game embodies death in all of its sides. But how can there be a positive value in integrating our Shadow, if embracing the Shadow means becoming a beast? In this regard, it is Jung (2015) himself who evokes animal imagery by referring to the Shadow as a lower personality, whose lowest level is no longer distinguishable from animal instinct (p. 4,872).

In this sense, the player character finds themselves in a unique position: their connection to the Hunter's Dream grants them advantages that ordinary citizens do not possess, such as immortality and the ability to avoid turning into a beast, so they do not lose themselves. On the other hand, there are people who, having realized the true nature of this cycle, have chosen to free themselves from the Hunter's Dream and can no longer be reborn. One example is the old hunter Djura, who watches over Old Yharnam and has chosen to stop the killing cycle: he has recognized that what the hunters do is inhuman because, after all, what happens in Yharnam is a legitimate form of murder. His side quest revolves precisely around doing something that given what the game asks the player to do, would seem unnatural: stop the killing. Players and the player characters have been so swept up in this constant cycle of killing, in which the game mechanics even reward you for landing yet another blow and healing your wounds through sheer force if you have previously lost Health Points, that Djura's behaviour and life choices make them question whether what they are doing is right. Especially because, at first glance, even whilst listening to his warnings, it is not immediately clear that his life can be spared and that things can end differently from bloodshed. After all, as the Pungent Blood Cocktail item description states: "In Yharnam, they produce more blood than alcohol, as the former is more intoxicating" (FromSoftware, 2015).

By investigating a little further, it is possible to see that the whole game mechanics revolve around blood and, consequently, beastliness as a form of violence. While analysing *Bloodborne*, Hoedt (2019) refers to Sicart's (2008) work: "game mechanics are methods invoked by agents, designed for interaction with the game state" (para. 27). This creates a close link between gameplay and narrative, as blood is a key element in both. Everyone uses blood, including the protagonist, but it is also what the carnivorous beasts seek and are constantly hungry for. This is a common narrative device that can also be found, for example, in vampire stories.

It is, in fact, a never-ending cycle, and this is what Sicart refers to as a closed ethical system: players are not compelled to act in this way, but if they question their own actions, they experience cognitive dissonance (see Sicart, 2009, 2013), as their values would be in stark contrast to the hunting mission. Whether they are immersed in the mission or simply enjoy killing the beasts because it is part of the fun of the digital game, the fact that their actions turn into something increasingly worse (as the boundary between hunter and beast fades and slowly blurs) offers a valid point for reflection.

Coherently with psychoanalysis, the idea behind the integration of the Shadow is to incorporate the contents of the latter into the realm of the conscious Ego to resolve the tension that exists between the conscious and unconscious (Freud, 2013). Relieving this tension helps the individual to become more resilient in dealing with both internal and external obstacles. Djura represents a way for 'ordinary' people to integrate their Shadow, which can also be replicated in the game through the first of the three endings, in which the player chooses to awaken, free from the Hunter's Dream. At this stage of the analysis, this seems the only real and logical choice, but in the game, it is made after taking note of several important plot-related facts, so let us not focus on this aspect for now.

Ironically, at this stage of the game, the only way to replicate Djura's moral choice is to stop playing. Otherwise, the only possible option is to follow what the digital game presents to the player as the sole possible choice: to kill the beasts. Presumably, the Hunter's Dream acts as an anchor for the player character's conscious mind: in line with what we were saying, they can never be completely controlled by their own Shadow and become a beast in every sense.

This is brilliantly represented through a gameplay mechanic known as Beasthood: whilst eating a Beast's Blood Pellet or wielding a weapon called the Beast's Claw, for every hit dealt, the Beasthood status (represented by a gauge) increases. The more we attack, the stronger we become and the more damage we inflict, but at the same time our defences are more exposed, so we strike harder but also take more damage. This mechanic also allows us to conclude our discussion of transformation because, whilst gaining the advantages and disadvantages just mentioned, "you won't literally transform into a beast" (Byrne et al., 2015, p. 13). This is an interesting example of ludonarrative intersection: a narrative idea intertwined with the language of gameplay.

Whilst other games, such as the *Persona* (Atlus et al., 1996-2025) series, explore the integration of the Shadow archetype as a significant stage of growth within the context of the transition to adulthood (Ficano, 2025), *Bloodborne* focuses primarily on just how challenging it can be to confront one's own Shadow. Admittedly, the *Persona* games maintain a sombre tone when addressing these inner struggles and conflicts, but ultimately the focus is on how beneficial it is for each character to listen authentically to themselves: in the process of becoming one's true self, this is described as a source of new strength, an inner force that ignites a new life built on fresh awareness, corresponding exactly to Jung's description. On the other hand, *Bloodborne* emphasizes just how deadly the chain reaction can be – triggered not only by opening oneself up to the Shadow, but by literally becoming it. Due to the nature of this Shadow – which here could be seen as blood and beastly nature – simply interacting with it is enough to lose oneself and transform into something else. This is precisely why blood is so intoxicating: the beast craves more and more of it, and when hunters hunt the beasts, they too catch the scent, triggering the endless cycle we discussed earlier. What we have analysed so far regarding blood in its various meanings (both narrative and ludic) is also a concrete example of what Salen and Zimmerman (2004) observed when they stated that:

players interact with a game in order to make sense of it. Rules guide this interaction, establishing relationships between signs that tell a player what things might mean. Meaning emerges as a player actively interprets the system established by the rules. (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 459)

By exploring Yharnam it is possible to see that some people have become more of a beast than others: some keep walking on their own two legs, while others become four-legged and a beast as a whole. It is at this time that it is discovered that some people, especially those particularly close to the Healing Church our main character is after, become even more of a beast than others. An example, in that sense, is Vicar Amelia, who belongs

to the Healing Church and has transformed in an enormous beast. Killing her represents the first turning point in the story: she is part of the Healing Church the player has been seeking since the beginning of the game and after defeating her, it is clear that pursuing this organization is not the answer to finding the paleblood. However, now the main character has mastered their Shadow, possessing the knowledge of what the beasts are and what beastliness means without succumbing to it. They learn of the corporeality of matter as a whole, and especially after venturing in Old Yharnam, they now know that blood comes in many forms, and paleblood is none of the ones they have come to know.

Mind and Spirit: Transcending the Body to Intellectualize Existence

After defeating Vicar Amelia, the player characters must interact with Laurence's skull, a figure not yet encountered, to trigger a cutscene showing a conversation that took place in the distant past between two characters of crucial importance to the narrative: Provost Willem and Laurence himself, who later became head of the Healing Church. Both insist on a phrase that is key to the plot: "Fear the Old Blood". The story of *Bloodborne* has its roots in a distant past, prior to the time when the player takes control of their character and begins playing. It all began with the aforementioned Old Blood, which turned out to be the blood of the Great Old Ones, mystical beings belonging to the divine realm. Despite fearing it, Laurence believed in the power of the Old Blood and decided to use it. After administering it to all the citizens of Yharnam, selling it for its miraculous and healing properties, everyone slowly began to transform. And so, after some time, the scourge of the beasts began.

But there were also those who rejected the use of that blood. These were the scholars of Byrgenwerth, led by Provost Willem, whose interest lay in the mind rather than the body, or in the spirit rather than the matter: he believed that ascension to godhood could be achieved through the eyes, since sight is one of the five senses and the one through which we can perceive and understand the world. By aligning the mind with the eyes, it would be possible to grasp forbidden knowledge, a deeper truth. In this sense, it is the diametrically opposite approach to the physicality of matter. Indeed, Provost Willem and Laurence stand in contrast to one another, both symbolically and narratively.

Through the mechanics of Insight and Beasthood, this contrast is also reflected in the ludic language. In fact, *Bloodborne collector's edition strategy guide* states that "your character may experience visual and auditory hallucinations at high levels of Insight" (Byrne et al., 2015, p. 13). Also, it is stated that the more Insight you have, the less you'll be affected by Beasthood. In other words, the more conscious you are, the less you can be affected by your unconscious and dark thoughts. This is the fundamental concept of psychoanalysis, as established by Freud (2013), which was briefly mentioned earlier: what is removed from the conscious mind ends up in the unconscious and creates a state of tension. Annexing the contents of the unconscious into the realm of consciousness makes the Ego stronger. And this is precisely what the integration of the Jungian Shadow entails. Death (nigredo) in Yharnam occurs after Laurence administers blood to the entire city, causing the plague of the beasts: an unfortunate side-effect of his hubris. Master Willem had foreseen the consequences of administering the blood and had deliberately

distanced himself from it. In a sense, his wisdom shows he is one step ahead of his former pupil. Precisely for this reason, from both a narrative and logical perspective as well as an alchemical one, the spirit follows the matter. This also means that mind comes after the physicality of the body, insight after beasthood, and albedo after nigredo. And so, after defeating Vicar Amelia, the next step is to reach a deeper knowledge and understanding of this mysterious world.

In the game, players gain Insight when they reach new areas or discover and defeat new bosses: it is clear, therefore, that this value is directly linked to knowledge. At the same time, the greater the player character's Insight, the more they will be able to see the invisible, namely, the Amygdalae scattered throughout Yharnam, which have in fact always been there, but which no one, except "the mad", could see or perceive. In fact, just as Beasthood has a side effect, so too does Insight: the more points of it the player character possesses, the more vulnerable they become to madness, known as Frenzy in the game. Frenzy is represented by a bar: once it fills up, the player character will suffer a wave of damage that could kill them. The higher the Insight, the faster it fills. Interestingly, this structure shows that Beasthood and Insight are linked, as if they were two sides of the same coin. Indeed, Willem proposes an alternative to the use of Old Blood, one which nevertheless proves just as unsuccessful as Laurence's choice. However, both in the alchemical process and in Jungian individuation, albedo follows nigredo and does not represent an alternative path to it. In this sense, we believe that this is to be understood precisely through the path the player follows throughout the experience: first comes the experience of Beasthood (Shadow) and all that it entails (death, nigredo), then one transcends matter to reach the mind, the intellect, the spirit. So, as the player's character ventures into the Forbidden Woods, they discover new answers which, in turn, raise new questions, as is often the case with knowledge. The next turning point in the story comes when the player's character reaches Byrgenwerth and the school at the top of which Master Willem lives. In Byrgenwerth, both players and the player characters are immediately struck by the clear, cloudless sky and the full moon illuminating the landscape and the entire academy.

The moonlight serves as a metaphor, for the clarity and enlightenment of Master Willem, who does not succumb to the same temptation as Laurence to consume Old Blood. After all, in the now suppressed citrinitas, Jung (2014) saw the old age: when the primary drives are no more, wisdom can be reached with more ease, and Willem is indeed an old man. The moon resembles also the second stage of alchemy: albedo. Jung (2015) describes albedo as in a certain sense, dawn; but only rubedo is sunrise. The transition to rubedo consists of yellowing (citrinitas), which, as already mentioned, was later suppressed. By increasing the intensity of the fire to its maximum degree, rubedo rises directly from albedo (p. 6,796).

With this, Jung (2015) enhances a parallelism particularly dear to alchemists: the alchemical Opus is, in fact, a metaphor for the sunrise. After the darkest of nights (nigredo), distinguished by the scourge of the beasts and the endless hunt, the light comes to illuminate the darkness, in the same way the knowledge the player gained through Laurence's skull. However, Jung (2015) states that through the Opus, albedo arises from the chaos of nigredo and its resemblance is now close to the full moon and to the rising of the sun. At the same time, albedo means enlightenment, that is, the expansion of consciousness that goes hand in hand with the Opus, and which is precisely exemplified by the deeper knowledge possessed by Master Willem.

In the Jungian process of individuation, the stage corresponding to the albedo is the encounter with the archetypes of Animus and Anima, which represent the opposite-sex aspect within women (Animus) and men (Anima). The Animus embodies the accumulation of all the experiences a woman has of men starting from birth; the Anima has the same

significance but for men. For Jung, the true expression of the self is achieved through the integration of the various psychological aspects. Jung (2015) refers to the myth of the androgyne as an example of this totality: before being differentiated into the two sexes, the androgyne represents a form of wholeness which, symbolically, expresses precisely the archetype of the true Self, and thus individuation. The aim, therefore, is the assimilation of what is different, an openness to the dimension of the other, because in authentic encounter there is an enrichment that leads to personal growth.

In these terms, the experience of the Animus/Anima is closely linked to interpersonal relationships. However, the profound significance of this discovery of the other lies in its revelatory function of a deeper individuality, which is understood precisely through openness towards that which is different, towards that which is not ourselves. Whilst the Shadow represents the other self, at once familiar and alien, here we move beyond the purely and strictly personal realm. However, a deeper understanding of the world, such as that held by Provost Willem, carries with it the danger of becoming detached from reality and the real world. And this is precisely what we see in Willem who, albeit in a different way from Laurence, also fails in his attempt to ascend to divinity. Willem is blindfolded: this is symbolic, as, probably, he does not need to gaze at the world outside anymore, because he has discovered something far more important. It is a form of intellectualization of the experience, as the cosmic truth seen by Willem makes the material world poor, insignificant and insubstantial.

He sits atop the school and, when the player's character gets there, he points them towards the lake of the moon, indicating them to reach it. Performing an unnatural act, they have to jump into this lake at the point where there is seen the reflection of the moon: instead of diving underwater, they fall into a completely white, secret and different dimension underneath. After all, as the Great Lake Rune item description states, "great volumes of water serve as a bulwark guarding sleep, and an augur of the eldritch Truth. Overcome this hindrance, and seek what is yours" (FromSoftware, 2015).

Within this arcane place dwells a Great Old One, one with whom Provost Willem has managed to make contact: Rom, the Vacuous Spider. Defeating Rom is a pivotal moment, both in the story and in the path towards individuation. Rom acts as a kind of seal, concealing the world's true uncanny nature. The darkness of the nigredo is now washed away (*ablutio*), cleansed (*baptisma*) and purified (Jung, 2015), and with this, the player character begins to see the world for what it truly is. After experiencing the shadowy fierce nature of the beasts, this is the profound understanding of the world that Master Willem bequeaths to the protagonist. Having grasped corporeality, the spirit is now transcended as well: the player's character now knows of the existence of the Great Old Ones. They have experienced two opposing dimensions (Beasthood and Insight) without falling into excess (transformation and madness), and it is this balance that leads to the final stages of the narrative and our analysis.

The white moon of the albedo gives way to the red, bloodstained moon of the rubedo. The boundary between reality and dream begins to blur, and all those Great Old Ones that were previously visible only to those with a sufficiently high level of Insight are now visible to everyone.

Rebis: Becoming a Great Old One

Albedo is the rebirth, the first stage of completion and, as shown above, can be resembled by the moon. The final step in the alchemical Opus is the rubedo, the phase where the Philosopher's Stone (*Lapis Philosophorum*) is distilled and takes shape. The stone is a living being in so far as it possesses body, soul and spirit, but is represented with an incorruptible body (Jung, 2015, p. 7,919). The purpose of the Opus is precisely to produce the incorruptible body, the "thing that does not die", the 'invisible' and 'spiritual' stone, the *lapis aethereus*, the panacea for all ills and the alexipharacum (Jung, 2015).

Jung's (2015) concept of individuation involves a creative synthesis of values, characterised by the integration of the various parts of the psyche. An expression of wholeness: this is what the archetype of the true Self embodies, as previously stated. In alchemical terms, the Lapis is represented by a being with an incorruptible, immortal body, which thus possesses both matter and spirit, both flesh and mind, both Beasthood and Insight. The path laid out now leads us to the rubedo, the blood moon through which the player's character, guided by the player's choices, will transform into this 'perfect being' and complete their alchemical journey and process of individuation.

However, an analysis of the last part of the game should be preceded by a brief discussion of Micolash's role in this context. After defeating the One Reborn, players reach the lecture room of the school of Mensis, and they see many people with hexagonal narrow and long cages around their head. After interacting with the body of one of them, which is distinct from the others, the player character is teleported to the Nightmare of Mensis, in the same way as they teleport to the Hunter's Dream through lanterns scattered around the world. This twisted dimension is steeped in sheer madness, and indeed, the player's character can quickly trigger Frenzy status. The host of the nightmare, Micolash, runs around aimlessly, in the grip of his folly: he states he can attain godhood, but it is clear that he has now lost his mind. After being defeated, as he is about to die, he realizes that he is waking up, forgetting everything and leaving this dream world behind.

Defeating Micolash does not end the nightmare, which means that, even though he was its host, he is not the one keeping it alive. In fact, the solely responsible for this nightmare is the Great Old One Mergo, who resides with his wet nurse in the highest point of the loft, inside this twisted place. After killing the wet nurse, instead of the expression "prey slaughtered", the message states "nightmare slain" (FromSoftware, 2015; see Mukherjee, 2023). With this, the player receives a One Third Umbilical Cord, originally belonging to the Great Old One. Everything now falls into place: the item states that Mensis and his scholars were granted audience with a Great Old One by consuming this cord. So, this nightmarish dimension was crafted by this weird creature as requested by Mensis. The price to pay was "the stillbirth of their brain" (FromSoftware, 2015), which we clearly understood through the cages around their head. His conscience was able to elevate and reach new heights, and the nightmare is evidence of this, but at the same time every one of them paid the price for it.

But there was not just One Third Umbilical Cord: in the game there are a total of four. One of these belonged to Provost Willem, whose idea, as per item description, was "to elevate his being and thoughts to those of a Great One, by lining his brain with eyes" (FromSoftware, 2015), the consequences of this decision we have already examined. A third One Third Umbilical Cord can be obtained in the Hunter's Workshop, the place where Gehrman and the other hunters lived long ago. With this, everything falls into place:

understandably, even the Hunter's Dream, which the player's character has visited since the very beginning of the game, forms part of a contract made by a man with a Great Old One. Indeed, once again according to the item's description, Gehrman used the One Third Umbilical Cord to meet the pale moon, and this gave rise to the Hunter's Dream. At this point, it is clear that for every major character in the story, the reason and motivation behind their choices was to get as close as possible to the Great Old One or, if possible, even to become one: the One Third Umbilical Cords had the role of catalytic agents for the alchemical process. However, Laurence, Gehrman, Willem and the Mensis school have all failed, in different ways: their desire has been partially fulfilled, but it has not led them to happiness or to a higher plane, as they had hoped. Gehrman, in this sense, bears witness to this: within Hunter's Dream, we occasionally see him complaining, asking Willem for help and longing to be freed from the chains of this dream.

After defeating Mergo's Wet Nurse, the player goes back to the Hunter's Dream, to find out that the whole building is on fire. These are the final moments in *Bloodborne*. In alchemy, rubedo also represents the warmth of the sun's fire and the light of its rays; it is a symbol of the new knowledge acquired along the journey, as light 'illuminates' the mind. Starting from the darkness of the night, the player's character went on to slay a Great Old One and came to understand the meaning of their actions. The Lapis represents the elixir of life that grants eternity and, in *Bloodborne*, this strictly intertwines with the three endings with which we are presented, as mentioned in the first chapter. After the Hunter's Dream has been set ablaze, the player's character speaks with Gehrman, who wants them to voluntarily surrender their life so that they may awaken free from the Hunter's Dream, as many others before him have done (such as Djura). This will cause the player's character to forget all memories of the entire gameplay experience and turn them into a normal human being, cured of the blood disease, who survives the night of the hunt. The player character will see the dawn, but will not become the Lapis: in this scenario, they will just be part of a cycle, of a system that began long ago, back in the days of the DLC *The Old Hunters*, and that is destined to continue, as history keeps repeating itself.

If the player rejects Gehrman's offer, he will attack them: it is clear, at this point, that his role is to keep this cycle going, as the host of the dream. Effectively, through the fight, Gehrman is narratively attempting to 'force' the first ending on us. Killing Gehrman makes the Great Old One inside the red moon, known as Moon Presence, but also as paleblood, descend into the Hunter's Dream and face the player's character, as Hidetaka Miyazaki, the director of *Bloodborne*, described in the interview for *Bloodborne collector's edition strategy guide* (Byrne et al., 2015). The Moon Presence will try to control and submit them to their will: if they succeed, the player character will effectively be used as a vessel to host the dream, replacing Gehrman in his work.

However, if the player consumes three of the four One Third Umbilical Cords in the game before facing Gehrman, the player's character will resist the power of the Moon Presence. The Great Old One's only remaining option is to attack them. The catalysing agents have taken effect, and a new entity is ready to be born: body, mind, and spirit, united in perfect balance, in that unattainable ideal of perfection and immortality embodied by the Philosopher's Stone and symbols such as the Holy Grail and Jesus Christ (Jung, 2015).

After being killed, it is not explained exactly what happens, but we see the player's character reborn into something new, a sort of slug that is none other than the coveted Kin, the eldritch being. In a context where every character, in their own way, seeks to become a Great Old One, the player's character is the only one to achieve this status and thus to become themselves, through player's choices.

Conclusions

This study combines Jung's theories with the alchemical Opus and the mechanics and narrative of *Bloodborne*. Although the developers have never explicitly cited Jung's ideas as a direct inspiration for this digital game, certain parallels are a logic consequence, beginning with the fundamental archetypal nature of Jungian concepts, which are thus shared by all of humanity as a species. While Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, was the first to postulate the existence of the unconscious, Jung, through the archetype of the Shadow, outlines a model that embodies the characteristics of this part of the psyche and links it to various aspects, elements, and realities of life. Thus, the darkness and the instinctual, primitive drive of the beasts we see in *Bloodborne* take on new meaning, especially when related to the game mechanics, as we have done in the course of this analysis. The circle closes when, as we have seen, Jung himself draws upon the traits of beasts as a symbol to express the Shadow, and the same applies to the other major archetypes and, at the same time, to the alchemical phases, which have been applied to the game world through an observation of the environment. Similarly, the individuation Jung speaks of - which he links to the unattainable, ideal alchemical Philosopher's Stone - can be achieved through the fiction of the digital game: the rebirth of humanity into something superior, alien, and Kin is realized in the game's true ending. Body (Beasthood, blood), mind (Insight, Frenzy), and finally, symbolically, spirit (the dream and nightmare world understood through eldritch truth) - everything mastered and condensed into a single symbol representing divine imagery (Jung, 2015).

While Jung's individuation concerns the player and their character, the alchemical stages are linked to the game world through elements such as death (coffins), the moon, and fire. They are inseparable from one another, just as gameplay and narrative are in *Bloodborne* and just as Jung drew parallels between psychology and alchemy in the later stages of his thought. At its core, *Bloodborne* is a role-playing game: through the player's character, the player achieves individuation, realizing themselves, from a ludic perspective, through the customization of their character that the RPG part of the game offers, and narratively through the choices that lead to the true ending. Thus, beginning with nigredo and passing through albedo and rubedo, the Philosopher's Stone is distilled: the player's character is reborn as a Great Old One, achieving the goal that so many within *Bloodborne*'s narrative ecosystem had set for themselves but that no one had achieved before.

Through the stories of the characters we have analysed - stories that are directly tied to the plot - *Bloodborne* seems to want to show us the original sin of hubris, which inevitably keeps repeating itself: just as Icarus in Greek mythology flew too close to the sun, so too did Laurence, Gehrman, Willem, and the entire School of Mensis in attempting to attain divinity, only to end up chained to something they had only partially desired. And, although the player character succeeded in this endeavour, it is clear that the entire story being told to us highlights the limits and tragedies that humanity inflicts upon itself with its own hands.

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Playing Through Seeing: The Case Study of the Painting Quests in *Elden Ring*

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ABSTRACT:

This study interprets the active/passive binary of spectating in digital games through the seemingly oppositional relationship between representation and operation. While visibility in games is often treated as an aesthetic surface that conveys meaning hidden beneath at the level of code, Fizek argues that images are inseparable from the computational processes generating them – representations arise from operations, and operations become legible through representations. This study conceptualises this situation as Playing through Seeing. This perspective draws on Walker Rettberg's interpretation of representational and operational images to suggest that what is seen can itself function operationally, as perception triggers and completes game processes. Visibility thus becomes an operational practice, with human perception acting as part of the cybernetic circuit. This theoretical problem is examined through the painting side quests in *Elden Ring*, where images scattered around the world initiate a specific type of quest that can only be resolved by aligning the player's vision with the game's own vantage points. What appears marginal within a combat-focused RPG instead reveals how digital aesthetics render computation visible and actionable. By reframing visibility as operational, the study challenges assumptions about active players and passive spectators and extends these debates beyond art-games to high-budget AAA titles.

KEY WORDS:

digital games, *Elden Ring*, operation, posthumanism, representation, visibility.

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Introduction: Digital Aesthetics of the Algorithmic Spectacle

Fizek's (2022) work represents one of the more prominent posthuman approaches to digital game analysis, particularly in its effort to decentre the human player as the primary subject of agency and meaning.¹ Fizek challenges several entrenched assumptions in game studies, including the myth of interactivity and the notion of player agency as the defining feature of digital games. The book is built around the concept of *mediated distance*, which addresses the paradox of a seemingly immediate and direct medial experience, which is masking the complex mediated reality of the digital game phenomenon.

By foregrounding forms of delegated and automated gameplay or distributed participation between the player and the game, her approach enables a critical reassessment of

1 Remark by the author: Fizek fits within the broader movement of posthuman game studies, a trajectory that has gained prominence over the last decade and can be associated with authors such as Janik (2021) who used the concept of bio-object using the (similarly to Fizek) intra-action perspective, or Keogh (2018), who works with the idea of embodiment focusing on the bodily experience of the player in the interplay between the virtual and physical body.

what constitutes a digital game, and problematises definitions that treat the digital game as a self-evident category. At the same time, this perspective tends to direct analytical attention towards marginal or less conventional genres and practices, which are frequently overlooked or excluded from dominant accounts of games and play.

Even though *playing at a distance* has attracted increased scholarly attention in recent years, there is still a lack of sustained critical engagement with its core concepts. Existing work tends to mention Fizek's (2022) arguments in a rather selective way and for different thematic agendas, rather than systematically exploring the theoretical or empirical inquiries. For example, Nicoll (2024) draws on her account of interpassivity to discuss player experience and shifting modes of agency and player identification in idle games, while Buerge (2024) and Bódi (2024) connect her notion of delegated or automated play to the aesthetics and affective economies of so-called cozy and idle games, focusing primarily on their experiential and affective dimensions for players.

An exception is the work of Ensslin et al. (2026), who draw on a phenomenological perspective of distant-play, idle games and interpassive play in their reading of the game *The Longing* (Studio Seufz, 2020), situating the concept within broader debates on societal conditions under neoliberalism, and interpreting it as a strategy of resistance to the pressures of the attention economy, framed as a form of temporal withdrawal and critical slowness.

Posthuman game studies and *intra-action*, both notable theoretical perspectives discussed by Fizek, are taken up predominantly in more ontological terms, with authors such as Andiloro (2024) situating Fizek's work within broader debates on posthuman subjectivities, whereas Keever (2022) discusses her posthuman position in order to argue for an ideological critique of agency.

By contrast, the visual dimension of digital games, which Fizek (2022) addresses most explicitly in the chapter on *spectated play* and earlier reflections on delegated and spectated play (Fizek, 2018), has so far been discussed rather indirectly.² This tendency becomes apparent for instance in discussions of interpassivity applied to spectatorial practices in Let's Play videos, where these are compared to forms of delegated engagement characteristic of idle games, highlighting different modes of distance and participation in game consumption (Gekker, 2018). Additionally, the concept of interpassivity and ambient play is present in analyses of operational ambience and background play (Oldenburg, 2024), where it is used to question interactivity to be a defining quality of digital games and to provide a conceptual basis for design-oriented explorations of autonomous and self-playing systems aimed at contemplative and affective experiences. Although both authors make use of concepts related to visibility in their discussions of spectating Let's Play videos and observing operational ambience, the theoretical and analytical implications of these concepts remain underdeveloped.

As the preceding overview shows, existing engagements with Fizek's (2022) work tend either to mobilise her framework in support of specific arguments or to use it as a starting point for lines of inquiry in which her concepts remain relatively marginal, often aimed at interpreting the role and experience of the player-subject or posthuman subjectivities. Furthermore, the mentioned lines of thought tend to overlook the possibility of visibility playing any specific systemic role, other than mediating the effects of the distance aesthetically.

This study addresses this research gap by shifting the analytical focus towards the operationalisation of these subjectivities, examining how they are enacted through the visual and systemic organisation of digital games. The perspective takes Fizek's (2022) ideas expressed in *spectated play* as a starting point and develops them further by focusing

2 Remark by the author: This indirectness is reflected mostly in citation practices, where Fizek's (2022) work often appears as a supporting or listing reference, whereas the opportunity to use it as the primary analytical framework is missed.

specifically on the operational status of the player's visual engagement, the operational role of aesthetics and the function of the cultural context of visibility in a digital game.

A persistent implicit division in game studies visible in recurring debates about what counts as a game or who counts as a player can, as Fizek (2022) argues (alongside other posthuman game-studies scholars), be attributed to one of the most prominent dilemmas in the Western philosophical tradition – the Cartesian dualism. This division is traceable in theoretical approaches that treat technical operation and visual representation as separate analytical domains. This distinction can be seen especially clearly in the work of the early pioneers of game studies.³

While such a distinction may be useful for descriptive analyses of game systems and mechanics, it tends to strengthen the idea of discrete game elements that merely coexist with one another. The problem with this approach is that the analytical separation of these elements presupposes and implies a corresponding separation of their effects within the gaming situation in general. A typical manifestation of such a line of thought is evident once the discussion is centred around hierarchical layers or underlying infrastructures. These are then treated as mutually exclusive to the mere decorative meaning at the representational level of a game. This already implies a problematic conceptual division between how digital games function, what they allow the player to do and how they appear on the surface level of visual representation.

Against this view, Fizek (2022) argues for a perspective that reconnects what has traditionally been divided. She challenges the assumption that game visibility is primarily decorative or representational, and also the notion that active player control should function as the primary criterion of what constitutes a digital game. Instead, she calls for closer attention to acts of seeing, observing, and spectating as often overlooked but essential modes of engagement with a game.

This perspective shapes her concept of the algorithmic spectacle, which she understands as a configuration of multiple inseparable layers of representation and computation. Fizek (2022) illustrates this position through her analysis of the art installation/game *Emissaries* (Cheng, 2015-2017), in which she identifies different modes of vision. These modes are conceptualised as layers of spectated meaning.

The layers are activated depending on the duration of the spectator's exposure to the visual material. Another significant characteristic of the installation is that there is no way to interact with it, closing the spectators out of the cybernetic circuit. What initially appears as a purely representational image gradually reveals its operational dimension through sustained engagement, allowing the spectator to perceive not only what is shown, but how the image functions. In this way, prolonged spectating transforms visual experience into a form of operational seeing. It can also be concluded that the visibility of the game constructs what the observer actively interprets.

Following Flusser (2011), Fizek (2022) argues that digital game imagery can be understood as a visible manifestation of code rendered for human spectators. Grasping what such representations mean ultimately requires examining the technical circumstances of their production: the logic of the system that generates them, including engines, algorithms, and other tools of game development. Consequently, she suggests that the meaning of digital game images should primarily be studied at the level of source code, which ties back to the representation. Such a move enables the full extent of the entangled meaning to be revealed. Fizek herself acknowledges that relatively few scholars have pursued this approach though (see, e.g. McKeown, 2018).

3 Remark by the author: Fizek cites several authors who tend to operate with this division, including among others Aarseth (2011) and Bogost (2006).

All Images Are Operations

The central concern in Fizek's (2022) treatment of visibility in digital games is an aesthetic one, in which the object of the analysis must inevitably point back to a certain subject – the human actor – sooner or later, as the recipient of the spectacle. Rather than treating images primarily as an entry point to code-centric analysis, it may be productive to reverse the relation between input and output implied in Fizek's framework. This raises the question as to whether the algorithmic spectacle requires a central spectator at all, or more precisely, whether the spectator is necessarily an isolated human subject. In contrast to Fizek's approach this study argues that theories of Flusser (2011) and Farocki (2004) already find direct expression within the representational structures of gameplay itself.⁴

Fizek briefly theorises the possibility that representations can be read in terms of their operative qualities, namely in the already discussed example of the game/art installation *Emissaries*. However, she does not fully theorise the operational status of perception itself. This is where our argument departs from hers. We suggest further broadening the definition of what a digital game operation is, by including more than just technical criteria, to ultimately position the player within the cybernetic circuit of the game.

To support this claim, we draw on Walker Rettberg's (2023) account, which approaches the distinction between representation and operation from a different angle. Like Fizek, she distinguishes between representational and operational images, but argues that all images can, to some extent, be understood as operational, insofar as representation itself functions as a trigger for processes of image recognition through human cognitive faculties.

In digital games, two modes of imaging intersect. On one hand, games generate images for human players that presuppose recognition and interpretation by perception. Such images are intrinsically bound to cultural pre-understanding encoded both on the side of the player and within the conventions embedded in code. On the other hand, game systems also operate with images that are purely functional in a technical context, forming part of computational processes that remain inaccessible to the player. For the purposes of this study, however, the crucial point is that representations can themselves be considered operations (Walker Rettberg, 2023). This perspective allows digital game images to be analysed not only in terms of their technical foundation, but also as cultural techniques that organise perception and attention.⁵

While Fizek (2022) addresses the cultural qualities of technicity when theorising the "layers of spectated meaning", conceptualising operational spectatorship as a cultural technique that renders technical processes visible and thus culturally intelligible, her emphasis remains on how representations can be seen operatively. By contrast, we understand human perception itself as a cultural technique that completes gameplay operations, meaning that representations function operatively because they require active perceptual participation.

4 Remark by the author: Flusser (2011) and Farocki (2004) both reconceptualise the digital image as a new kind of image in which representation no longer refers to an external object. While they share this starting point, their approaches diverge significantly. Flusser (2011) focuses on the elementary components of such technical images, understanding them as approximations or models of realities that do not yet exist. Farocki (2004), by contrast, theorises what he calls *operative images*, images that do not depict the world but actively participate in its transformation. These are images, are no more intended for human sight and are part of an operation. More on the nature and implications of such images particularly in regard to the human actor is elaborated by Charvát (2023).

5 Remark by the author: The concept of culture techniques (originally Kulturtechniken) stems from German media theory and refers to the idea that media operations are always preceded by specific culture techniques. fundamental human practices such as reading, writing, counting or drawing, which enable media to function in the first place (Siebert, 2016).

Understanding representations as a function of an operation conversely creates conceptual space for tracing technicity of the image as a cultural expression, rather than treating it as a hidden infrastructure (even if acknowledging the interconnectedness of representation and the underlying computation) belonging to the realm of studying the code creation circumstances. In this context, representation and operation function as intertwined aspects of a single process, where the technical is inseparable from the cultural (Manovich, 2001).⁶

What requires clarification, however, is the hermeneutical shift implied by this perspective. Fizek (2022) rightfully emphasises that digital game images, unlike Farocki's (2004) military operational images, are intended for human sight. She thereby recentres the player importance in a more aesthetic approach. While Fizek elsewhere in her book advocates a posthumanist and fluid approach that blurs the boundaries between passivity and activity, and thus between the player and the game, her chapter on spectated play still tends to conceptualise the player as an autonomous observer with an aesthetic distance. This study goes in a slightly different direction by suspending this strict analytical distinction between game and player. This shift towards a more consistent posthuman reading of visibility enables a functional analysis of representations without the need to loop them back to human experience.⁷

The approach advanced in this study operates on a functional level, where the player becomes part of the game's operation. Following Walker Rettberg's (2023) account of *machine vision* as an assemblage in which humans and technologies mutually depend on each other, games incorporate perceptual and cognitive functions including vision, recognition, and observation. Vision does not merely receive the output of the system, but functions as a technical peripheral (Pias, 2011) of the cybernetic circuit, through which the operation is successfully completed.⁸

Rather than imposing an independent agency or consciousness (even if only shared with human agents) on the part of the machine – this model allows the game to function as a situation in which technical, visual, and cultural processes become tightly interwoven. This in turn allows the system's operational logic to be enacted by human perception. Through this recalibration, the concept of the algorithmic spectacle is methodologically reworked. It is not primarily understood as an aesthetic tool, but as a complex operational environment, where the aesthetic qualities of the image become a medium.

In this configuration the player's centrality remains aesthetic, but in favour of a functional conception of the image. This specific operationalisation of algorithmic spectacle is what we call Playing through Seeing. The overall posthuman perspective is thus deployed mainly to move beyond ontological inquiries, towards a description of the operational function of representations.⁹

6 Remark by the author: This line of inquiry is very briefly mentioned by Fizek (2022) herself, when citing Manovich's (2001) claim, that computer processes are in fact a derivative of human organisational principles. However, this perspective is not further conceptualised as part of the operational logic of a game.

7 Remark by the author: It is true that posthuman approaches in game studies have been criticised for never fully moving beyond the centrality of the human actor, even if this is the declared aim of such approaches. This goal fails particularly insofar as interpretation ultimately remains a human task (Keever, 2022). This is also true particularly in relation to the intra-action logic which Fizek (2022) borrows from Barad (2007), and which heavily influences the book, where a whole chapter is dedicated to this theory. This can yet (even if more implicitly than in the chapter about intra-action) be traced in her approach to representation and computation, which relies on the logic of intra-acting, thus distancing the player from the game.

8 Remark by the author: We draw on Pias's (2011) characterisation of the player as a "peripheral device" within a circuit of synchronisation between human and machine.

9 Remark by the author: In this sense, the player-game relation can be understood in a Deleuzian way as a pragmatic connection of "human-game-machine". This connection is a temporary assemblage in which perceptual and computational operations form a single, distributed circuit (Deleuze & Guattari, 2010).

Before analysing the painting side quests in *Elden Ring* (FromSoftware, 2022), it might be useful to consider a model example that illustrates the proposed convergence of representation and operation as well as the player and the game. The save icon, which is one of the most basic and frequent visual elements in digital games, provides such an example. It visually represents an ongoing technical process while simultaneously functioning as an instruction addressed to the player, who not only recognises and interprets the meaning of the image but enables the system to safely operate at all.

The icon does not merely inform the player that the game is saving data, it also demands a specific form of activity from the player, in this case the need to stay passive. The player is instructed not to intervene, not to turn off the system or to interrupt the process, under the threat of data loss. In this regard, the save icon operates simultaneously as a representation of an operation, as an operation in itself, and as a technical image that is activated by human sight. The game herein delegates a limited but crucial action to the player: waiting, suspending switching of the system.

While the reception of this technical instruction might not typically be interpreted as triggering active participation from the player, the player in this situation must still remain alert and conscious, which means that passivity and activity become inseparably intertwined, just as the relationship between operation and representation is fundamentally entangled.

This model example demonstrates how digital games make their technicity not only visible, but also crucial to their playability. The image communicates operational logic while integrating the player as a technical peripheral, as an observing part of that operation.

Although the save icon example works on a non-diegetic level, representing an operation and nothing other than itself, the logic of this example anticipates the more complex dynamics of the painting side quests in *Elden Ring*, which work in a more abstract diegetic context.

Playing through Seeing: Analytical Framework

We build on and critically reinterpret the concepts developed by Fizek (2022). She examines the complex relations between the visual and computational dimensions of digital games, as well as between the player and the game. When Fizek analyses the act of seeing, observing and spectating digital games, she emphasises that digital game images cannot be understood independently of their computational foundations and vice versa. This study further develops this line of inquiry by examining how digital game visuality can acquire operational force. We argue that in specific gameplay situations the act of seeing becomes an act of playing, as visual representations structure attention, direct action, and help complete gameplay operations through the player's perception. Methodologically, this is a conceptual study developing an analytical framework termed "Playing through Seeing", which is later applied to a focused case study of the painting side quests in *Elden Ring* through a close analytical reading of their operational and cultural dimensions.

Combining a cultural perspective on digital game operations with a posthumanist view that situates the player within the operational circuit provides a productive way of grasping the relation between the game's visuality and its underlying computations. Playing through Seeing refers to gameplay situations in which visual perception of the player

becomes a necessary condition of gameplay progression. As we have shown, the framework is tied to a broader reframing of what counts as a digital game operation and consists of two analytical dimensions:

First, it considers representations as operations, which means that images can trigger, shape and drive gameplay processes, with human perception functioning as part of the game's operational circuit. In practice, several criteria can help distinguish such phenomena. This mode of play is especially visible when gameplay progression depends on the visual environment as a whole, rather than on preprogrammed buttons, or specific actions explicitly required from the player. Another identifier is found in situations in which vision is acted upon as a synchronisation device, for example, when representations operationalise mental capacities such as recognising patterns and similarities in order to match or complete a partial or distorted image. Instances in which in-game aesthetics take on a functional role, organising and suggesting the very condition of operability of the image are also considered to be part of this process, where the representation acts as an operation.

Second, it approaches vision as a cultural technique of such representational operations, emphasising that the operational role of images depends on the player's ability to interpret and use them in culturally and contextually specific ways. In other words, when the image communicates how to be seen correctly, it is the act of seeing and recognising them that makes vision a cultural technique of operation.

Practical identifiers of this second dimension are the dependency of the operation on the player's acquired general gameplay knowledge. The successful completion of the operation may depend on the player's contact with fan-made materials or on the exchange of knowledge within the online and offline gaming communities.

What follows in the final section is a qualitative case study demonstrating how the presented framework – Playing through Seeing – can be used as a tool for analysing certain aspects of digital gameplay. This framework is applied to specifically limited material to show a detailed proposition on how to understand the relation between what is seen and what is actionable through its core ideas. The study therefore has an interpretative character and is based on close gameplay analysis of the selected quests.

The case study is organised to resemble the two dimensions proposed. In relation to the painting side quests in *Elden Ring*: first, the operational qualities of the paintings and their aesthetics, and secondly their cultural and contextual conditions will be analysed.

The Case Study of the Painting Side Quests in *Elden Ring*

Images in digital games have traditionally served as visual representations of fictional worlds. Digital images do not simply represent a pre-existing object; they construct it and complicate the relationship between what is seen and how it is put together. In digital games, the function of images therefore exceeds a merely aesthetic or narrative role: they can themselves become mechanisms within the gameplay experience.

One of the most striking examples of this is the series of painting side quests in *Elden Ring*. *Elden Ring* falls under the umbrella of the so-called *soulslike* genre, which is in many respects a unique phenomenon. These games are defined by a high level of

difficulty and frequent player death. On a narrative level, the game is highly symbolic and complex, oftentimes suggesting rather than narrating the lore of the world directly, for example through descriptions of items found in the inventory or through cryptic conversations with the numerous non-player characters (NPCs) encountered throughout the world (Caracciolo, 2024).

Unlike its genre predecessors, *Elden Ring* takes the form of an open world. It is this new spatial twist introduction into the genre that encourages the players to explore its vast lands, which is enabling for a different kind of play: a slower-paced form of engagement that requires an observational approach.

The series of side quests are organised in such a way that the player gradually encounters a total of seven paintings scattered across The Lands Between. Each of them depicts a specific landscape from the game world. These paintings do not function merely as accompanying aesthetic elements, but as triggers for a specific type of quest. When the player finds a painting and interacts with it, they 'activate' it, which initiates the quest.

The goal is to locate the place depicted in the image – more precisely, to find the exact spot from which the painting was originally captured. Once the player reaches this location, the ghost of the painter, the author of the original image, appears and then vanishes, leaving behind a reward that closes the quest on a narrative level.

a) Representations as operations: The player as a technical peripheral

A crucial aspect of the design of these quests is that they enable a distinct mode of play: Instead of relying on direct confrontation with enemies or the execution of mechanically complex tasks, progress is grounded in the perception of visual relations within the game space. The moment in which the player's gaze aligns with the game's gaze marks the completion of the task.

This kind of quest is neither a case of pure in-game action, which would reinforce the dominant conception of the player as being in control of the game, nor is it a simple cutscene to be passively observed, pointing back to the save icon example, where the active and passive conceptions collide. Already at this stage, the mission contains an element of spectacle in its own right, which informs the player about an upcoming operation of the image.

The painting and its re-contextualisation within the dynamic game world constitute two layers of spectated meaning, to rephrase Fizek's terminology. The act of seeing and recognising a seemingly static representational object ultimately enacts that object as operational. In this configuration, the player is spectating while still remaining part of the cybernetic circuit. It is playing through seeing, which from a posthuman perspective makes it possible for the game, in a sense, to see and observe itself through human perception and cultural pre-understanding accessible exclusively by and through the player.

In this respect, the situation represents an inverted logic of the screenshotting practice: whereas in a screenshot, according to Möring (2023), an originally operational image becomes de-operationalised, *Elden Ring* presents the opposite dynamic. Here, the initial encounter is with a representation that only becomes operational once examined spatially. In other words, the quest reveals that no digital game representation is possible without the computational operation that continuously recalculates perspective so that the world appears static. It can be understood as a metacommentary on this condition.

It could even be argued that the landscape itself shifts from an implicit operationality, where actions in the game world are typically enacted by manipulating interactive elements, to an explicit operationality, in which the landscape as a whole becomes the object of manipulation. The player must carefully consider spatial navigation and perspective adjustments as pieces of a puzzle. What usually serves as the background for action is

here foregrounded as the primary field of operability, while the usual interactive elements recede into a backdrop for a larger representational logic that unfolds only when the pictorial mode of spectating is replicated.¹⁰

The entire process can be understood as a commentary on the nature of the static image, which at no point functions merely as representation, whether it is in the openly operative spatial configuration or in the initial state of operation 'on hold'. The key takeaway is that aesthetics have proved to have a direct influence on the game's operational logic. On a functional level, the digital aesthetics of the game world enable the algorithmic spectacle to unfold.

It is also *Elden Ring*'s artistic stylisation that foregrounds the constructed nature of the game's visual world. This aesthetic abstraction makes the image recognisably artificial, which in turn facilitates its operational role, thus the player is made aware that what is seen must be worked with rather than looked at, further suggesting the line between playing and seeing to be porous.

The painting quests cannot be completed without the player actively processing visual information. To solve them, the player reconstructs the depicted viewpoint by aligning environmental features, adjusting perspective, and navigating space accordingly – a perceptual operation structurally comparable to the save-icon example, where the visual sign delegates a technical task which reveals the operability of the represented world visible without being technical. In this sense, playing through seeing is a mode of synchronisation. The player adopts the image's logic by re-enacting the act of capturing the image, temporarily functioning as a perceptual component within the game's operational circuit.

b) Vision as a cultural technique of operation

The painting quests in *Elden Ring* demonstrate that technically understood vision (recognising visual elements generated by code) is not sufficient for successfully completing a gameplay operation. Identifying the landscape and retaining it in memory is not enough unless the player is able to apply vision as a rule of action.

This operational dimension exceeds the mere localisation of the paintings that activate the quests. The player must possess a cultural competence that allows them to recognise that they are confronted with a specific mission type and that a particular mode of action is required.

In other words, vision here functions neither solely as a technical-cognitive process nor merely as an aesthetically coded experience, but as a cultural technique that converts representation into operation. Only through this competence is the visual representation integrated into gameplay function.

Soulslike games exhibit a structural elusiveness that renders the meaning of the game always partially out of reach (Vella, 2015). Anderson (2025) notes that there is no definitive meaning inscribed either in the actions or in the narrative. One consequence of this opacity is that players seek clarification in sources outside the game itself to help render the narrative meaningful, but also guide the player's ludic actions.¹¹

When the player discovers the painting and activates the quest, they may not know what to do or where to go. It is precisely in the moment of uncertainty that the limits of individual perception become visible, revealing the necessity of transforming representation into actionable knowledge, which simultaneously unlocks visibility into the operation.

10 Remark by the author: This shift of perspective might be also considered an extension of a concept described by Fizek (2022), when discussing the so-called *operational ambience*.

11 Remark by the author: Anderson (2025) calls this practice *hyperlinking*.

What is traditionally perceived as extra-ludic player practice (consulting guides, forum discussions, wiki pages, or video walkthroughs) re-enters the operational loop of gameplay and becomes the very condition for these quests to work. The cultural technique of vision is what integrates both layers of vision – the technical in-game perception and external cultural input, enabling the player to see the gameplay function.¹²

Therefore, the in-game operation is cultural as well: it externalises its own prerequisites through collectively shared knowledge across the player community. This duality is not a side effect but part of the operational function of representation: the cultural context enables the conversion of representation into action.

The more knowledgeable a player is regarding FromSoftware's design tradition, the more automatically learned strategies are applied. When the player reproduces expected actions, they become a functional component within a wider human-technical-cultural assemblage of digital game operation.

Without cultural pre-understanding, the paintings would remain recognisable as aesthetic objects but would not activate any operation at all. Cultural context thus enables what Walker Rettberg (2023) describes as the hybridity of representation and operation: culture cannot be separated from how representations function. The cultural technique of vision becomes technologised and integrated into the machine operation through the player being positioned as a technical peripheral within the system.

Conclusion

This study has proposed an alternative way to analyse digital game visuality by treating representations as components of the operational circuit of games rather than as purely aesthetic surfaces. To develop this perspective, Fizek's (2022) concepts of speculated play and related notions, most notably the concept of the algorithmic spectacle, were introduced.

Building on Walker Rettberg's (2023) account of representational and operational images, the study shifted attention from what images mean to what images do, how they organise perception, how they require recognition, and how they become actionable through the player's perceptual and cultural participation.

The framework of Playing through Seeing was defined through two dimensions. First, representations can function as operations that are directly shaping the gameplay progression. Second, vision can be understood as a cultural technique of such operations, since seeing in games is never merely optical, but depends on genre knowledge, conventions, and extra-ludic practices of interpretation. Additionally, this conceptual shift reframes the relationship between humans and machines, understood here as an assemblage in which perceptual, technical, and cultural processes mutually depend on each other, ultimately positing the player's cognitive capabilities as a functional component of the game's cybernetic circuit.

The case study of the painting side quests in *Elden Ring* demonstrated how this framework can be applied to a concrete gameplay situation. These quests do not rely primarily on combat, explicit waypoints, or textual instructions, but on the player's ability to reconstruct a visual relation between a painting and the game world. The static painting becomes operational only when the player identifies the depicted landscape, navigates

12 Remark by the author: It can also be theorised, that this is not exclusive to soulslike games, but to the whole digital game medium, which as all media forms rely on a kind of general experience and exposure to the medium. As Fizek (2022) notes, how we look is highly situational.

towards the correct location, and aligns their perspective with the viewpoint implied by the image. Progress therefore occurs through a synchronisation of the player's gaze with the game's visual logic.

The first dimension of the analysis showed that the paintings are more than merely aesthetic objects. What appears to be a visual surface becomes a condition of gameplay progression. The second dimension showed that this operation depends on cultural and contextual knowledge, and in some cases, extra-ludic sources such as guides, forums, or community knowledge. These elements ultimately re-enter the gameplay circuit as conditions that allow representation to become actionable.

While the study was primarily focused on the painting side quests in *Elden Ring*, the proposed framework is not limited to this particular case. Playing through Seeing can also be applied to other gameplay situations in which visual perception, perspective, or synchronisation structure player action. This may include mechanics of aerial vision, such as "Eagle Vision" for example in *Assassin's Creed Origins* (Ubisoft, 2017), environmental scanning in *Death Stranding* (Kojima Productions, 2019) or photographic modes more generally. The potential for further development of this framework suggests that debates on representation and operation can be extended from experimental or indie games to AAA titles, by focusing on subtle and specific moments of visual player engagement that might otherwise be overlooked or dismissed as marginal.

The study has argued that spectating is not necessarily external or passive, and that players are not simply positioned outside the operations of digital games. In the painting quests, seeing is itself a form of play as well as a game function. This allows Fizek's (2022) notion of games that play themselves to be reformulated from the perspective of our reading of digital game visuality: by playing through seeing, the game can be said to observe itself through the player. The spectator is therefore part of the operation and becomes the medium through which the game's visual logic is completed.

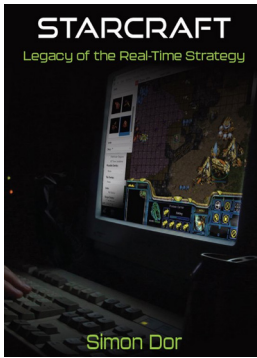
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STARCRAFT: LEGACY OF THE REAL-TIME STRATEGY

Dor, S. (2024). *StarCraft: Legacy of the Real-Time Strategy*. University of Michigan Press.

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Real-time strategy (RTS) games have played an irreplaceable role in the history of digital games. Despite their importance, RTS games have been largely overlooked in the history of digital games, with the exception of their inclusion in the esports segment. With this publication, Simon Dor has made a valuable contribution to a long-neglected area. The RTS genre includes several popular titles, many of them older than the *StarCraft* series (Blizzard Entertainment, 1998-2015), but despite this, the author has sufficiently justified the relevance of his selection in the publication. The significance of the publication is also demonstrated by its inclusion in the *Landmark video games* book series published by the University of Michigan Press, which takes a detailed and in-depth look at the history of digital games through the study of historically significant and influential examples that have become an important part of popular culture.

In five chapters, Dor examines the issue through the prism of a different area, starting with the professional theory proposed for understanding planning and tactics in digital games, through the dominant masculine culture in the series itself, cultural-political-technological differences, to the player experience. Each of these areas provides sufficient content for separate publications, so the condensed treatment may evoke the need to expand on individual sections. However, their compilation into a single work reflects the broad scope and need to both evaluate and examine works from broader contexts.

In the first chapter, “Decoding and foreseeing”, the author goes through the processes of the same name, which later became the basis for esports. The author demonstrates and explains these paradigms using the example of a selected esports match between 2009 and 2010. It is not just a theoretical definition of the issue, but also its practical implementation. This approach of demonstration using a specific example is further applied throughout the publication. For readers familiar with his previous scientific work, Dor (2014) specifies that these are the same paradigms labelled ‘decryption’ and ‘prediction’ that he introduced in 2014.

In the second chapter, “A distinct purity of form”, he places the series in a more complex picture with other strategic digital game titles. The author describes in detail the narrative of selected passages and missions from the game, demonstrating a masculine ‘gamer culture’ based on archetypes that visually depict women as fairies or monsters. He defines female roles in the *StarCraft* series as supporting ones. The author also takes a critical view of the game’s lack of innovation, which he puts into context with delays in its release. Dor also does not overlook the works that inspired the *StarCraft* series, such as the tabletop game *Warhammer 40,000*.

In the third chapter, the author aims to explain how cultural and technological conventions that seem obvious in electronic sports today were very unusual in RTS games in 1998. This chapter, entitled “No rush,” focuses on a rule characteristic of *StarCraft* in the late 1990s, which was not built into the game by its creators but was subject to agreement

between players. Rush is defined as an attack in the first minutes of the game with the aim of taking out worker units. To balance the early stages of the game, players agreed on a certain time during which they would not attack each other. With this demonstration, the author emphasizes that “video games are cultural objects” (p. 60), which must be taken into account in the broader contexts of social reality. Dor demonstrates that game rules are not exclusive content created solely by game designers, but also reflect gaming culture and its characteristic values, conventions, and emphasis on compliance.

As part of a comprehensive view of the sociocultural phenomena that influenced the development and transformation into esports, the author also deals with Blizzard Entertainment’s fight against game software piracy, the technological limitations of the time, patches, the emergence of gaming tournament culture, and the first professional esports teams. He thus completes the mosaic of the era and contexts that accompanied the development, and allows us to understand how the discourse around Blizzard Entertainment and its products was shaped.

The fourth chapter, entitled “Path of ascension,” can be considered the most valuable, as it focuses more explicitly on broader localisation specifics that significantly influenced success. As Swalwell (2021) points out, locality represents a blind spot in the history of digital games. Geography has generally been ignored, with the implication that the reception of digital games was the same everywhere. Unlike the dominant North American or Japanese perspectives, Dor focuses on the specifics of South Korea. From historical contexts, such as relations with Japan after World War II leading to restrictions on imports of media products from Japan to government decisions to develop the technology sector and the 1997 financial crisis.

The author guides the reader through the differences between the South Korean market and the rest of the world, explaining that Japanese consoles were illegal in the country for a long time, which led to computers becoming the established platform for gaming. Government-supported technological development, in turn, promoted the rapid growth of broadband connections and internet cafes. He discusses how a specific model of cafes using a ‘pay-per-hour’ model, in which customers had a software license included in the price, supported the popularity of the game. Finally, he moves on to the golden age of Korean esports, in which *StarCraft* played a significant role until the arrival of Battle.net, which restricted uncoordinated online gaming.

On a more implicit level, it emphasizes the importance of locality, its specifics enabling development in a certain direction, and especially the need to define the discourse that accompanied this development. It thus expands not only the theoretical foundations of the strategic games’ subgenre, but also the topic of historical research at the local level. Dor’s work proves that the same game can be discussed in completely different ways at the same time. This is also reflected in the focus of the fifth chapter, “Distinct purity of essence,” which metaphorically expresses the author’s vision of *StarCraft* in the history of digital games.

Right at the beginning of the chapter, the reader senses the author’s emotions and personal experiences, and he further develops the metaphor through a narrative example from the game, criticizing Blizzard for rewriting history by claiming that *StarCraft* has always been an esports. Based on his own experience, the author argues that his first experience with the game in the late 1990s was not related to competitive gaming at all, but rather to map creation, which was easier on a single computer at a time when the internet was not yet widespread, and teenagers gathered in one place to come up with activities to do together. He further develops these basic ideas in broader contexts, discussing other important genres – MOBA and tower defense – which emerged thanks to editors in games, whether map or campaign editors.

In conclusion, the author summarizes key ideas such as the undeniable relevance of *StarCraft* games to the development of esports, the different approaches to playing these games in the 1990s and today, and the overestimation of innovation in the context of historical relevance. He emphasizes the study of games as cultural objects, which means understanding their role throughout history and not just at the time of release. The author takes into account national diversity and specificity, which in the case of *StarCraft* played a key role in its establishment in esports. The author draws on his own experiences, which he describes in detail, and allegorically transfers his ideas to the narrative parts of the game. After all, creativity is also evident in the book's cover, which depicts the author's custom map from the game *StarCraft* (pp. 100-101). The entire publication is a valuable source of information for researchers and an exemplary example of research into the changing history of digital games, which depends on a number of social and cultural factors. The publication presents a condensed concept of the areas defined by the author, which can be used as inspiration when examining the history of digital games, their audiences, and changes in their monetization and evaluation.

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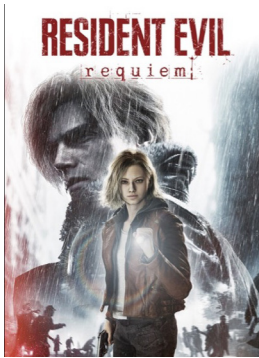
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RESIDENT EVIL REQUIEM

Capcom. (2026). *Resident Evil Requiem* [Digital game]. Capcom.

[Diwakar Gautam](#)

Resident Evil (Capcom, 1996-2026) has long stood as the definitive antithesis to the phrase “trust thy neighbours”. As the pinnacle of the horror-action genre, its heart beats within the claustrophobic confines of situational survival horror – an alienating experience that forces its protagonists to define themselves through courage, compassion, and, most poignantly, trauma. In *Resident Evil Requiem*, or *Resident Evil 9*, the franchise finally grants fans the return of Leon S. Kennedy after a 14-year hiatus from the primary timeline. It is a return that has clearly resonated; the game has already moved 6 million copies, a testament to the global demand for Leon’s presence, which had been relegated to whispers and mentions since his divisive, action-heavy appearance in *Resident Evil 6* (Capcom, 2012). For the hardcore audience, *Resident Evil Requiem* is more than a sequel; it is a long-awaited reckoning with the ghosts of Raccoon City.

The narrative relies heavily on the tropes of false information and the heavy price of atoning for past sins. Now a weary agent of the Department of Security Operations (DSO), Leon meets FBI agent Grace Ashcroft at the Rhodes Hill Chronic Care Center. This setting – a place intended for healing, turned into a house of biological decay – is where Grace is kidnapped by the mutated Dr. Victor. The plot centres on the release of Elpis, a new viral strain. While initial reports might suggest a more contemporary origin, the true horror lies in its heritage: Elpis was the final, desperate creation of the Umbrella Corporation’s founder, Oswell E. Spencer. The name is a direct pull from Hesiod’s (1914) *Works and days*, where Elpis was the sole spirit remaining in Pandora’s jar after all the other misfortunes escaped:

Only Hope remained there in an unbreakable home within under the rim of the great jar, and did not fly out at the door; for ere that, the lid of the jar stopped her, by the will of Aegis-holding Zeus who gathers the clouds. (Hesiod, 1914, p. 9)

The reveal of Oswell’s confession to Alice Ashcroft, Grace’s mother, reframes the entire mission. He admits that in his final days, consumed by the guilt of his biological legacy, Spencer created Elpis not as a weapon, but as an attempt at atonement, giving Grace to Alice as a final act of mercy before his will to survive evaporated. Alice asking if Grace is the key to Elpis, to which Spencer replies, Grace is simply a ‘normal child’ he hoped to save – nothing special, just a human life. This archetype of releasing something hopeful into a dark world is a storied narrative technique, seen in the fiery release of Pandora’s power in *God of War III* (Santa Monica Studio, 2010), or the awakening of a population in the dystopian *Enslaved: Odyssey to the West* (Ninja Theory, 2010).

Resident Evil Requiem adds a modern twist to this trope, leaning into parallels with Dashner’s (2009) dystopian novel *The maze runner*, particularly through the concept of a “Cure” physically residing within a single person. Grace Ashcroft herself becomes the vessel for this narrative burden. However, the game masterfully subverts player expectations through the recurring dialogue of Leon pleading, “Promise me you’ll destroy Elpis”.

This directive – fed to both Grace and the player without full context – serves as a catastrophic trap of false information. Suggesting that good intentions based on incomplete truths can lead to ruin, the narrative forces us to question the very mission we are tasked to complete.

In the game, the relationship between hope and trauma is symbiotic. Leon is a character constructed from a concoction of trauma-induced motivation. We have watched him evolve from the bright-eyed, happy rookie of the RPD into a man defined by his losses: the foundational death of his mentor Marvin Branagh, the near-failure to protect Ashley Graham, and the catastrophic loss of the President and 70,000 citizens of Tall Oaks in *Resident Evil 6*. This emotional weight is mirrored in Grace's own 'bass-like' theme of guilt, particularly following the loss of Emily – the child she cared for deeply. Her character arc embodies the series' core theme of finding strength in impossible situations.

For someone who originally just wanted to arrest bad guys and live a peaceful life, the strain on his consciousness is almost palpable. The gameplay mechanics reflect this psychological divide by allowing players to switch between first-person and third-person cameras. This dual mode of expression is brilliant: Grace's first-person segments ensure her fears become ours, pent-up rage and anxiety. In these sections, the use of light becomes a vital atmospheric symbol; as the game works mostly in near-total darkness, light provides the only temporary relief to Grace's plight and serves as a metaphor for her flickering knowledge of the horrors surrounding her. Conversely, Leon's third-person gameplay provides the catharsis, satisfaction, and classic action style fans expect from a veteran. This sense of isolation is further heightened by the total absence of a merchant, a departure from series tradition that strips away the safety net of resource management and leaves the player truly alone with their trauma.

Suggesting a *Bildungsroman* – a coming-of-age story – for a survival horror game might sound outrageous, but it fits perfectly here. We see it in Grace's growth from a meek agent into a courageous force, and in Leon's tragic 'delayed' development. He is suffering from the dormancy of the T-Virus depleting, a slow viral spread among 1998 Raccoon City survivors that acts as a visceral metaphor for the decaying human will to strive toward retribution. Returning to Raccoon City traps Leon in a Sisyphus-like loop with no desirable outcome. Entering the RPD again causes a moral overload, forcing him to face past demons both figuratively and literally. The reappearance of Mr. X, the stalker nemesis of his youth, serves as a powerful callback to the terror he once faced as a rookie. Defeating him now, as a seasoned fighter, provides a level of satisfaction that was technically absent in the original *Resident Evil 2* (Capcom, 1998).

This sense of finality is embodied in the "Requiem" Magnum revolver that Leon carries – a literal and metaphorical Chekhov's Gun. While the Magnum has traditionally been a niche mercenary tool, it takes the narrative spotlight here. To Leon, it is a reminder that strength is needed; to Grace, it represents the finality required to end the cycle. The tension culminates in a shocking climax where heroic egoism and righteousness are put to the ultimate test. When Leon is forced to gun down a little girl named Emily to stop the spread of the virus, Grace gives up the "Requiem" gun in a sign of rebellion. The decision to destroy Elpis ultimately initiates the 'bad ending' – a subtle, devastating nod to the destruction of the fans' hope. It renders Leon's long-fought battle for naught and suggests, quite bleakly, the destruction of the franchise's heart. Grace's choice to eventually cooperate with Zeno – a figure whose design serves as a haunting homage to the original Albert Wesker – is a logical conclusion to 28 years of biological trauma. Grace's submission represents a transition from 'moral heroism' to 'bio-terror realism' – a state where the survival of the species outweighs the sanctity of the soul. To save Grace from the clutch of Zeno, Leon stands before the Raccoon City Police Department's welcome banner

and then Lieutenant Branagh's name plate and says, "Hey, Lieutenant Branagh, Kennedy ... Reporting for duty".

It serves as a simple, haunting message: the past is never truly done with him, he faces it beginning with his own end spreading in his body, a requiem indeed. *Resident Evil Requiem* is a beautiful, tragic swan song that proves some wounds never heal; they just become the armour we wear.

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ESPORTS PSYCHOLOGY

Staněk, J. (2025). *Psychologie esportu*. Grada.

Magdaléna Balážiková

Several recently published international works engage with the psychology of esports (e.g. Sharpe & Poulus, 2026; Al Noman, 2025; Hoffmann & Camara, 2024), however, Jakub Staněk's publication fills a gap in the Czech and Slovak markets, where a comparable work has so far been absent. A focus on this topic brings both epistemic and practical contributions. It shifts the discourse surrounding digital games from gaming as a leisure and recreational activity toward a performance-oriented system. It is the professionalization, industrialization, globalization, and monetization of gaming that is increasing the importance of studying the psychological aspects of topics such as performance, players' mental health, and career sustainability. In this context, the perspective shifts toward gamer's functioning in what can be understood as somewhat extreme conditions (training demands, performance pressure, challenging team dynamics, working with mistakes and risks, as well as potentially toxic environment).

The central thesis of *Psychologie esportu* [Esports psychology] lies in the application of the psychological approaches traditionally used in sports to the context of esports, that is, in the assumption that methods derived from sport psychology may contribute to improving esports performance. Fortunately, the author does not adopt sporting concepts uncritically. On the contrary, he approaches the topic with considerable reflection, and throughout the publication he continuously enriches the discussion with findings from his own doctoral research, which is described in greater detail in the last chapter.

The publication has the character of a well-structured and clearly organized overview with a strong didactic focus. Its chapters are coherently interconnected, yet the publication is constructed in a way that allows target audience to select topics according to their own preferences – the chapters do not necessarily need to be read sequentially. Various target groups may benefit considerably from its content: aspiring professional players are offered insights into themes and pitfalls they have likely not yet considered, while established professional players are introduced to the background of training guidance, which may indirectly facilitate mutual understanding between players and their coach. At the same time, the author attempts to reduce the social stigmatization associated with seeking psychological support in dealing with everyday/professional challenges. The publication also holds substantial potential as an introduction to the topic for parents of (aspiring) esports players, with opening chapters defining key concepts in a highly accessible manner and introducing the most common esports game titles, thereby providing a strong foundation even for complete newcomers to the subject. For coaches, the book presents essential psychological concepts alongside thematically oriented goals and concrete strategies for working with players. Psychologists, in turn, are offered a comprehensive overview of the psychological dimensions of competitive gaming, as well as theoretical and practical insights into player performance, stress management, emotional regulation, motivation, and communication. Although the author himself does not explicitly identify

academics as a target audience, the publication also has the potential to expand traditional approaches to game mechanics through the perspective of performance psychology and the functioning of player teams, and it could also serve as a learning tool in a range of courses within study programmes focused on digital games.

The book contains fourteen relatively concise chapters, which in the first half of the book are predominantly theoretical, while from Chapter eight onwards they also include clearly defined goals and procedures for teamwork. The author begins by defining key concepts (esports, pro gamer, semi-professional player) and discussing whether esports should be considered a sport, while naturally taking an affirmative stance on this issue. He further addresses esports games, which he correctly does not treat as a single homogeneous category, since differences between game genres significantly affect not only game mechanics but also the mental demands placed on players. In Chapter three, Player Career, he describes the stages of a professional player's career, various aspects of motivation towards professional play, and challenging situations in a player's career, including their classification. The following chapter on the role of the psychologist in esports is, given the overall focus of the publication, rather brief; nevertheless, it interestingly summarizes possible expectations of players and coaches as regards an esports psychologist. Chapter five offers one of the main objectives of the author's related research – the psychological profile of Czech and Slovak professional players, which certainly deserves further academic attention and follow-up research. As with game types, the author appropriately highlights differences among professional players depending on the game in which they specialize. Later, factors affecting esports performance that can be actively shaped by players, referred to as performance competencies, are discussed. Another crucial element of the publication is the formulation of a *Model of performance in esports* based on five components of maximum potential performance. Also noteworthy are the sections devoted to the social competencies of professional players, where the author once again presents findings from his own research. These suggest that professional players achieve below-average scores in several dimensions of social functioning, which opens an important discussion on the need for the systematic development of social skills in professional players.

Interesting insights are also provided in the chapters on emotions, communication, and discipline in esports. The author identifies happiness and anger as the most frequently experienced emotions during gameplay. In this context, the omission of frustration in its entirety is notable, as it may function either as a motivational factor or lead to stress, anger, and even quitting. In the chapter on team communication Staněk notes that effective communication in esports differs from traditional communication models, as its primary function is not merely information transfer, but especially the support of team cohesion. In the context of the discussed issues, the author also highlights the importance of discipline as one of the fundamental prerequisites for long-term sustainable performance in esports. He particularly aptly illustrates the difference between motivation and discipline.

Despite its undeniable qualities, the publication – by attempting to cover an exceptionally broad range of topics – at times treats certain areas too briefly. In the chapter addressing challenging situations in a player's career, insufficient attention is given to misunderstandings by close persons regarding the choice of an esports career, even though this represents a significant factor influencing player stability, motivation, as well as the temporal perspective of a career (i.e. how long player intends to pursue it). At the same time, the text would benefit from a clearer definition of how success is understood and perceived within the esports environment, and whether this perception is consistent across the team. Addressing issues such as gaming addiction, burnout syndrome, conflict resolution or gender aspects of esports should also be considered, as the publication treats the representation of women only marginally.

Staněk's publication represents an important step in the establishment of esports psychology within the Czech and Slovak context. Overall, the author delivers a professionally valuable and up-to-date text that successfully connects theoretical knowledge with both the author's own research and his practical experience as an esports psychologist, which lends the text a high degree of authenticity. The book offers an important perspective on esports as a complex phenomenon, while also demonstrating that professional gaming requires expert support. It can be recommended to students of game studies, researchers, coaches, players, psychologists, and all those interested in contemporary forms of digital culture and competitive gaming.

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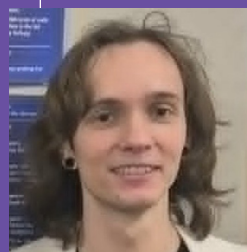


Will You Press Any Key to Join? A Reflection on the Olomouc Games Conference

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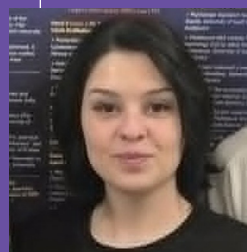
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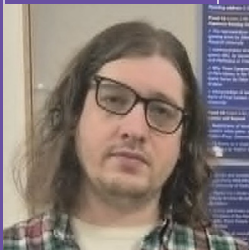
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Game studies in the Czech Republic exist the way many unique things exist in academia: scattered, polyvocal, and sustained by a few enthusiastic experts. There is no canonical syllabus, and the first formal degree in game studies was established this year (Springorum, 2025). Researchers working on games and play tend to come from backgrounds of media studies, psychology, cultural anthropology, or linguistics, each carrying the methodological assumptions and institutional expectations of their maternal discipline. And yet dissertations get written, papers published, and courses find their way into curricula.

The idea for the first Olomouc Games Conference, which took place on April 23-24, 2026, emerged from this decentralised landscape. During our doctoral studies, we encountered many scholars unmoored at our university who were interested in game studies but had little support in their initial steps. The first step in building a support structure was establishing an undergraduate game studies course. Experiences from attending game studies conferences, such as Central and Eastern European Game Studies (CEECS), inspired us to organise a dedicated event in the Czech Republic. The ambition was not to plant a flag, declare a new discipline at our university, or challenge the institutions that precede us. The aim was to create a space where people already engaged in this discipline could connect with one another, from undergraduate students to tenured professors, while also providing an opportunity to explore and broaden the boundaries of what games scholarship might encompass. A conference seemed like the most direct remedy.

There is a Czech phrase, literally “to build on a green meadow”, meaning to build something from nothing, on bare ground. The first conversations about the conference in summer 2025 were full of uncertainty: Are we, PhD candidates at various stages, capable of running an academic conference on game studies at a university with no game studies program and barely any game studies history? The final product proved it was possible, but it was not a *free win*, using gaming terminology.

What made this possible, and we are aware this may not be a given in every department, was the institutional context. Faith and unconditional support had been provided by our leadership, yet we were also given free rein to make the event our own. It is easy to imagine a version of this story in which every meeting with an authority involves explaining what game studies *is*, why it counts as scholarship, and why the university should fund it. Thanks to enlightened leaders and good timing, we were spared that fight.

We issued the call for papers in November 2025, intentionally leaving the call open-ended for a variety of topics and approaches. It was distributed to as diverse an audience as possible across disciplines and geographical regions, ranging from numerous universities and research institutions to mailing lists and individual scholars. The timeline from call for papers to conference was six months, which, in retrospect, was too short for comfort. One casualty of this tight schedule was the conference subtitle “Press any key to join”, which, despite being part of the call for papers, got lost somewhere along the way. While we believe this omission had no negative impact on the conference’s overall vibe, we want to reintroduce the subtitle here, as it embodies the event’s core message.

While we ultimately decided to expand the event from an intra-university student conference to a larger event, we did not fully anticipate the response. The interest came quickly, and from directions we had not necessarily expected. Submissions and expressions of interest arrived not only from researchers we knew personally or by reputation, but also from institutions across the Czech Republic and beyond. Among them were the Czech Game Developers Association, Pixelarchiv.cz, and the publishing houses Grada and Intellect Books, who were kind enough to help further promote the conference. This response was the point at which most of our doubts evaporated; there is clearly a point and a demand for such an event.

The argument that game studies deserve to be more than a subspecies of media studies is easy to state but harder to demonstrate (definitely in the Czech Republic and also in Slovakia). However, the conference did exactly that – the speakers and audience who gathered for the Olomouc Games Conference came from an unusually wide range of academic backgrounds. The conference unfolded over two days, and was filled with invaluable discussions among literary scholars and software engineers, philosophers and ethnographers, designers and historians, educators and event managers. Two keynote speakers, Luis Emilio Bruni and Jan Švelch, showed that the topic of games has a place in the cognitive sciences and that researching games must also include production processes, not just the final cultural artifacts.

From the beginning, one of our core convictions was that game studies cannot afford to be a conversation held only among researchers. Games exist in a complex ecosystem – conceived by designers, programmed by IT experts, published by studios, played by communities, criticised by journalists, and shaped by markets. Any serious attempt to understand that ecosystem should involve more than only one of its parts. We therefore deliberately sought participation from a broad spectrum of actors, who, for the most part, joined us. The symbolic culmination of this collaboration came during the informal meeting after the first conference day, where games and gaming were being discussed against a backdrop of live digital game music performed by the Sukuba Ensemble.

Just as with game development, the first version of a project always leaves space to improve. From scheduling to technical infrastructure to panel cohesion, the future Olomouc Game Conferences have room to grow. Yet the positive feedback we received during and after the event, along with the contacts, partnerships, and knowledge shared, fills us with vigour and enthusiasm to continue. These are also the strongest arguments for any authority that may have reservations about game studies, as well as a reassurance for those who are otherwise friendly towards game studies. We will not go into the usual *spiel* about the profits of the game industry, the implications of gaming for mental health, or the cultural value of games. These can be found in countless foundational texts of this discipline. Rather than that, we would like to encourage any hesitant scholars or administrators to take the step into the unknown. The Olomouc Games Conference is proof that the interest is real, the work is real, and the people doing it are no longer quite as isolated as they once were. And most importantly, building on a green meadow, while not a simple task, is not impossible. Whether in the Czech Republic or elsewhere, all you need to do is press any key to join.

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Editorial Policy

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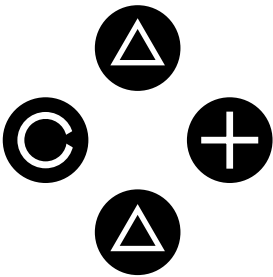
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