

# The Phenomenon of Trophies in Digital Games

Dinko Jukić

**Dinko Jukić, Ph.D.**

Trade and Commercial School "Davor Milas" Osijek  
Ivana Gundulića 38  
31 000 Osijek  
CROATIA  
[dinkojukic.phd@gmail.com](mailto:dinkojukic.phd@gmail.com)



Dr. sc. Dinko Jukić, MPA, MLIS, MA, is professor at Trade and Commercial school "Davor Milas" in Osijek, Croatia. An active member of Croatian Marketing Association and Croatian Pedagogical-Literary Society. He has published various scientific articles on cultural marketing, brand theory, brand image, game marketing, neuromarketing, media pedagogy, and school management. He has participated in 35 international scientific conferences. He has two master's degrees in the humanities and social sciences. He received his Ph.D. in brand perception, more specifically in brand as an emotional and rational consumer impression. His current research interests include marketing in culture, phenomenon of brand, media pedagogy and game studies.

## ABSTRACT:

The study research phenomenon of trophies in digital games. It starts from the analysis of the trophy hunter and trophy community constructs. The phenomenon of collecting trophies in digital games and its impact on gamers, but also on the gaming experience, is researched. The trophy concept is a paradox because it simultaneously creates gamers who choose games according to the difficulty of the trophy, and play games they do not like because of the easiness of the trophy. The aim of the paper is to investigate, present and analyse the phenomenon of trophies in digital games from cultural, anthropological, and marketing aspects. Collecting trophies was observed in the context of the phenomenon of narcissistic culture according to Lasch's theory. Also, the study draws a parallel between the phenomenon of trophies as a reward for gamers, but also the development of niche marketing. Trophy hunters represent a more detailed segmentation of consumers who we understand as brand ambassadors for digital games. Also, trophy hunters encourage each other to collect trophies and thus shape gamers. To obtain a precise insight into the phenomenon of trophies and trophy subculture, the method of virtual ethnography was used.

## KEY WORDS:

consumer behaviour, digital game, narcissism, referent group, trophy.

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# Introduction

We are all fascinated by the mirror. (Holmes, 2003, p. 7)

If it is true that we play digital games for pleasure, fun and beauty, the question arises why some play games that do not provide them with pleasure, fun or beauty? Is it a *job* or a habit? If gamers play digital games and do not enjoy it, but only *routinely* play, does this mean that fun and enjoyment turn into work? Is there a *flow* (Miškov, 2021) at that moment or has collecting trophies become more important than the game itself? Is collecting digital game trophies a form of gaming? What if trophy hunting became fun and enjoyment, a game within a game?

The digital game as a cultural phenomenon (Rokošný, 2018) goes beyond subculture and turns into the culture of modern society. In this sense, we can understand digital games as a reality (Kłosiński, 2018) that is projected in the form of symbols (Baudrillard, 2017). Observing such digital reality as one of the forms of human *essence*, the question arises: can we observe trophies in the context of digital values? These are not educational values (Vuk-Pavlović, 2016) that we find in digital games such as ethical (Magová, 2020; Ntelia, 2022) and family games (Jukić, 2021, 2023), but rather added values in a segmented gaming community. In other words, we can view trophies in the context of achievement, narcissism (Lasch, 1986) and promotion (Solomon et al., 2009).

The topic of this study will try to answer the questions that are in the subtext of gaming: the phenomenon of trophies in digital games. The phenomenon of trophies is observed in

accordance with phenomenological research (Frykman & Gilje, 2003). In this sense we start from the research question on what trophies represent to gamers. From this comes the analysis of the trophy hunter construct, which creates a kind of paradox because trophy communities create a segmented group of users who play games for trophies, regardless of whether they like the games or not. This means that this study begins with two key paradigms: the anthropological understanding of digital games and trophy hunters, but also the marketing understanding of trophy hunters as brand ambassadors of digital games and *trophy consumers*.

## Theoretical Approach

The key starting point for studying the phenomenon of trophies and trophy hunters is the understanding of two concepts: reference group (Evans et al., 2006; Kesić, 2006) and narcissistic culture (Lasch, 1986). A reference group is an actual or imaginary group conceived of having significant relevance upon an individual's behaviour (Solomon et al., 2009). Some of the most important characteristics of consumer behaviour are group influences that are the basis for adopting attitudes and beliefs. The concept of narcissistic culture was observed according to critical theory (Katunarić, 1990; Kellner, 2004; Therborn, 2011), i.e. the understanding that the entire mass culture is part of a certain ideology. Such a phenomenon, the digital trophy, should be viewed from several perspectives to better understand and analyse it.

It should be noted that in this study narcissism was observed from a sociological-cultural aspect, where the psychological dimension is understood in the context of self-esteem, image, and the illusion of an ideal idea. This means that such a form of narcissism becomes socially conditioned and normal in postmodern times, where it is not considered a psychological deviation, but a paradox and a form of adaptation (Matjašević, 2016). Precisely in such a context, trophy hunters are looking for an audience that admires them and their freedom of choice does not give them the freedom to be alone. More simply, narcissism becomes a metaphor for today's society.

## Reference Group in Marketing

The context in which we will observe the phenomenon of trophies refers to the concept of beliefs and attitudes (Myers, 2012). According to Blythe (2008), attitude can be defined as a learned tendency to respond to an object in a consistently favourable or unfavourable way. One of the most enduring approaches to attitudes is the proposition that an attitude has three components: cognitive, affective, and conative (Evans et al., 2006).

The behaviour of gamers depends on the behaviour of other people, and it is a constantly changing process. A group is two or more persons who share a set of norms and whose relationship makes their behaviour interdependent (Blythe, 2008). Such behaviour of reference groups is influenced by subjective and objective categories (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2010). In this sense, the members of the reference group learn the norms and values of their group and condition the roles that follow the existing behaviour.

This means that if an individual has not played a digital game, they are likely to look for it in a reference group, i.e. an online forum. As such, the reference group has an extremely strong influence on changing consumer attitudes towards digital games. According to Myers (2012), we are the most persuaded by people in our reference groups.

A virtual community of consumption is a collection of people whose online interactions are based upon shared enthusiasm for and knowledge of a specific consumption activity (Solomon et al, 2009). From a marketing point of view, virtual communities are still a new phenomenon that has a significant impact on consumer behaviour. Some of the most important determinants of consumer behaviour are certainly group influences that serve as a foothold when adopting attitudes, beliefs, and models of consumer behaviour. The group to which an individual belongs or aspires to belong has the strongest influence on attitude change (Kesić, 2006).

The way we behave in a certain situation is often influenced by how important one value is to us compared to others (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2010). It is crucial to emphasize that beliefs represent what consumers think and know about digital games. In the broader sense of the word, the values of the reference group (online forum) can be seen as characteristics of culture. Gaming culture is created in correlation with ideology (game studies), technology (informatics development) and reference groups (gamers).

This means that gaming culture is an adaptive process that changes, as confirmed by numerous digital games through the emergence of new genres, ways of playing (Buček & Kobetičová, 2020; Foxman, 2020) and new theories (Andrade & Medeiros, 2018; Slezáková, 2018; Mago, 2018; Farkaš, 2018; Balážiková, 2019; Boszorád, 2020; Yi, 2020; Dupont & Malliet, 2021; Terrasa-Torres, 2021; Jukić, 2022; Kvetanová, 2023). However, gaming culture is transmitted, and the influence of socialization is important when forming and shaping attitudes and beliefs about digital games. Also, it is important to note that values start from impressions, therefore, they are subjective categories that are subject to emotional interpretation, and beliefs allude to knowledge about brands, which are also built on perception, image, and identity.

## Narcissistic Culture and Marketing

Another concept that is related to the study of the phenomenon of digital game trophies is related to the concept of narcissistic culture. The term narcissism can be used in several different ways (Holmes, 2003). In the broadest sense of the word, it means a person who is preoccupied with himself and who always puts himself first. This is implicit in the concept of narcissism because psychoanalysis interprets how acceptable it is to be self-oriented (Kohut, 1990), i.e. interprets development and regression in the area of self-aggrandizement. The psychoanalytic understanding of narcissism warns us that we have repressed remnants of narcissism that have not been rejected but have been partially transcended in favour of the satisfaction of object relations (Holmes, 2003). According to Holmes (2003), the narcissistic self contains three layers of feeling: external denial of dependence and consequent self-admiration. Underneath that lies strong anger and envy, and at the root of it all is a frustrated desire for attention.

We observe the concept of narcissistic culture in the context of critical theory (*Kritische Theorie*). Critical theory does not want to make materialism acceptable (Therborn, 2011), but to bring it to self-awareness. In this sense, critical theory starts from the understanding of man as a subject of society (Horkheimer, 1982). The attitude of critical theory stems from the understanding that the entire mass culture is ideologically coloured (Kellner, 2004). According to Horkheimer and Adorno (1989) critical theory must not have a structure that is formal because that would mean that people have separated

themselves into abstract categories. The dialectic of the Enlightenment starts from a rational subject who deceives nature and other people (Katunarić, 1990). In other words, the subject is alienated, and culture is seen as a commodity to be sold.

Narcissistic culture is a term that observes the phenomenon of narcissism from cultural and sociological aspects. According to Lasch (1986), each time carries with it a *pathology* that arises from the current state of society. What is metaphorically related to the psychoanalytic concept of narcissism refers to the social symptom of a culture of consumption and image building. It is the so-called the passion of living for the moment. According to Lasch (1986) the symptom of modern people is an inner emptiness that they try to fill with trivial content, and man in his vanity tries to present himself as better than he is. In this sense, postmodern man develops an image cult (Lasch, 1986) and becomes a modern Narcissus.

The combination of narcissism and media culture developed in parallel. On the one hand, the digital world has enabled users to create their own identity and image, while on the other hand, the same digital world has complicated the recognition of moral, educational, and historical values (Radošinska, 2018; Magová, 2020; Jukić, 2021, 2023). Culture is reproduced through the media (Lasch, 1986), on which the modern consumer becomes dependent. Such a world is like a society of spectacles (Debord, 1999) which is subordinated to digital media, and the frequent use of such images destroys the sense of reality.

Also, according to Lipovetsky (2008), a society dominated by material focus and hyperconsumption is doomed to a feeling of alienation and emptiness. In such an understanding of critical theory, consumer and narcissistic society, consumption takes over the individual's identity. It is precisely in this sense that the concept of narcissism and trophy hunters in digital games is observed.

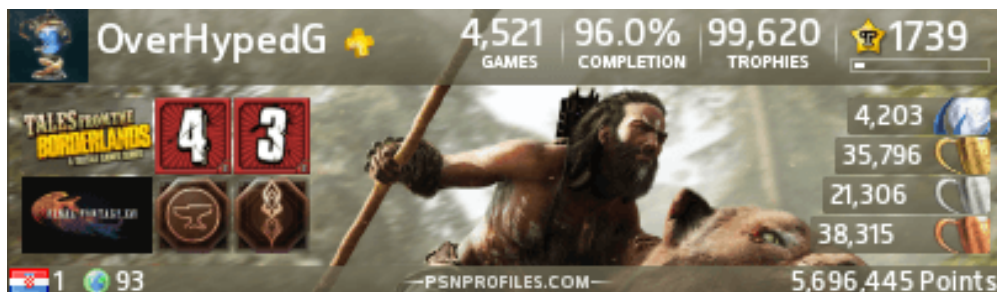
## The Trophy Phenomenon

The phenomenon of trophies or an achievement point have gained relatively little academic attention (Hamari & Eranti, 2011; Cruz et al., 2017; Lu et al., 2020). Trophies are optional sub-goals (Björk & Holopainen, 2005) which represent virtual rewards for gamers and are not necessary to progress in the game. In other words, gamers may or may not collect trophies and the enjoyment of digital games will not affect the content of the game. In this sense, trophies represent a meta-game, a game within a game that is optional. However, according to Hamari and Eranti (2011), such an understanding becomes problematic, because, if trophies are collected in and through the game, they are no longer *per se* optional or secondary. On the other hand, trophies are integrated into games, and they represent game defined goals that gamers do not have to fulfil. That is exactly where the dilemma is.

Trophies represent a reward to gamers for completing goals in the game. These goals are not necessarily related to the content of the game and are often determined by the number of specific repetitive actions, such as killing, collecting items, passing the game on the hardest level, playing certain maps, or playing certain maps in multiplayer. Therefore, we view trophies as optional additions to the game, add-ons that serve specific tasks that may or may not contribute to the enjoyment of gameplay.

The trophy system was launched with PlayStation 3 in 2008. The first digital game to have a platinum trophy was *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune* (Naughty Dog, 2007). Trophies are earned as rewards for certain achievements when playing games. We distinguish bronze, silver, gold, and platinum trophies. Picture 1 shows the gamer with the most trophies in Croatia. On the right side we see the gamer's trophies and on the left

side we see the current games he is playing. Specifically, the games he is currently playing are *Tales from the Borderlands* (Telltale Games, 2014) and *Final Fantasy VII Remake* (Square Enix, 2020). As can be seen, trophy categories are displayed hierarchically. At the top are the platinum trophies (4,203), and at the bottom are the most common, bronze trophies (38,315).



Picture 1: Gamer with most trophies in Croatia

Source: PSN, n.d.

Platinum trophies are awarded for winning all trophies in the digital game and they are the most important and rarest. Also, apart from the categories of trophies, it is necessary to mention the concept of rarity, which indicates the additional *importance* of trophies through four categories: common, rare, very rare and ultra rare. Down in the corner, on the left hand side, there is the country's flag and ranking, and next to it is the symbol of the globe and the world ranking.

As can be seen from Picture 1, the user with the most platinum trophies in Croatia has 99,620 trophies, of which 4,203 are platinum, which ranks him 93rd in the world out of a total of 4,936,421 registered gamers. Judging by the number of platinum trophies, the user belongs to the very top of the world's gamers. He played 4,521 games, and game completion is 96%. As a confirmation of recognition for collecting trophies, the Slovak digital game *The Hippo G* (Webnetic, 2022) named the platinum trophy after him, and integrated Croatian motifs (lakes and flag) into the game.

Therefore, trophies represent a kind of digital reward to the gamer, and they make it easier for the game producer to monitor the gamer's actions and help in the processing and statistical analysis of data. A new type of gamer who collects trophies in gaming communities is called *trophy hunter*. It is a community that grows every year (PSN, n.d.), and the influence of the reference group is very important, because of common attitudes, values and beliefs, cooperation during the creation of the trophy guide and assistance in winning the trophy.

## Research Methodology

The study is based on the understanding of cultural anthropology (McCurdy et al., 2005; Haviland et al., 2017), on anthropological ethnography (Tierney, 2007) as a scientific method. The main feature of this methodology starts from the observation and description of the phenomenon of culture and its constitutive parts. What is crucial in this approach is that ethnography means the study of users in their natural environment. This enables a detailed study of the reference group, where the emphasis is on understanding social phenomena from the perspective of gamers and shaping theoretical conclusions.

Virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000) is a form of anthropological ethnography (Bird & Barber, 2007) in which the space of observation becomes the Internet, i.e. in this case, an online forum, and the object of observation is the phenomenon of the trophy, which we understand as a phenomenon. The concept of ethnography means the study of gamers in the natural environment, where the researcher himself is a participant in the group (Potkonjak, 2014). What is specific in the context of virtual ethnography is that through such observation and participation, an attempt is made to understand the social world of gamers and their relationship to trophies. The basis of this method is in-depth observation of the participants (Murthy, 2008; Poynter, 2010).

A gamer community, such as an online forum, which gathers and exchanges experiences, knowledge and values around the same worldviews represents ethnographic *terrain* (Potkonjak, 2014) which explores the phenomenon of trophies. The role of online forums was observed according to the psychology of marketing (Evans et al., 2006; Foxall et al., 2007; Milas, 2007; Blythe, 2008; Solomon et al., 2009; Hoyer & MacInnis, 2010) where group influences, i.e. reference groups of gamers, are observed in the context of informational, comparative, and normative influence. The research goal is to gain in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon and detailed description of special patterns of behaviour in a particular situation (Cropley, 2022). It starts with the assumption that the form of collecting trophies, the method of collecting, as well as the complete consumer subculture of trophy hunters, represent a form of narcissistic culture.

Accordingly, we will research two key characteristics: the group where gamers gather and the cultural object of that group, i.e. the phenomenon of trophies. To achieve this, we start with the theory of social psychology (Eyal et al., 2009; Baron & Branscombe, 2012; Pennington, 2008; Evans et al., 2006) according to which a group is understood as a group of more than two people whose members have a clearly defined role and who strive for a common goal (Forsyth, 2010). The main research question is: What do trophies represent to gamers? In other words, can collecting trophies be seen as a manifestation of narcissistic culture? Finally, what is the role of trophies in digital games?

It should be noted that in this study the role of the researcher is seen as an ethnologist who historicizes the observed phenomenon. In this sense, the ethnologist's positioning explains the way in which they investigate the digital world and conclude about it. To avoid a reflexive, autoanthropological positioning (Potkonjak, 2014), a distance was made between one's own and personal understanding of digital game trophies. Precisely because of this, the researcher, in order not to be a stranger, also had to collect platinum trophies (50) to share group values, cultural knowledge and understand the trophy subculture.

The time of data collection was observed as the period from 2015 to 2023. The researcher spent 30 minutes on the online forum every week. The period was long because initially, platinum trophies could not be collected quickly. For certain digital games, it is necessary to go through the game several times at different difficulties or to play at a certain time when there are tournaments. Secondly, not all posts are relevant to research. There are posts on the forum that are not thematically or content related to the research question.

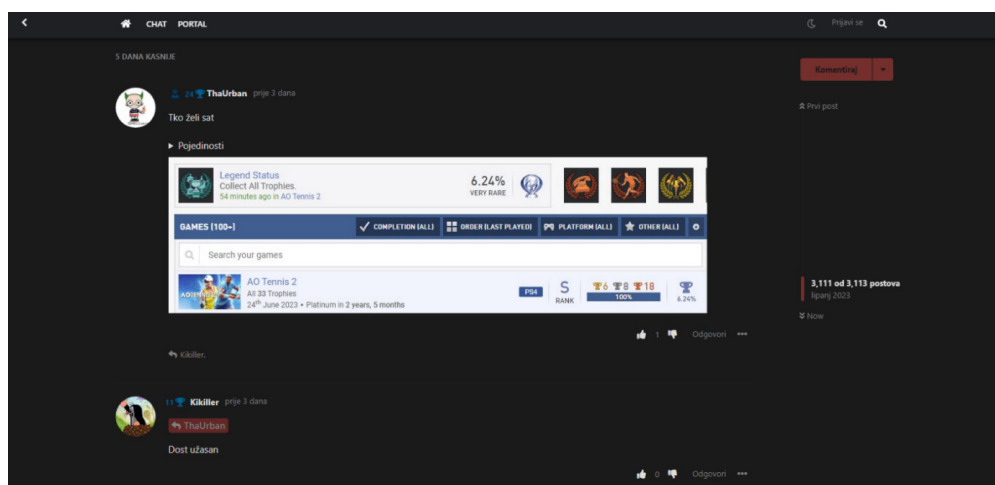
In the study, representative examples related to the phenomenon were selected. The sample consists of posts on the forum. The method by which the examples were selected results from the content analysis of the posts. The data were manually transcribed and then coded. The criteria according to which we analysed the posts are a) must be a sentence, b) not replies to comments, c) no emoticons. A total of 466 (15%) posts are related to the subject of the research. Themes were coded and sorted to identify data. Not all posts are relevant. Users who write messages about the trophy phenomenon were observed. This means that a certain number of users often impose their power and reputation through posts. The study used a qualitative content analysis.

# Research Results

Online forum FFA (Free for All) was founded in 2014 as a community of gamers in Croatia, which over time developed into a portal (FFA, n.d.). They have a total of 5,013 active users. The principle of operation of online forums dedicated to the culture of digital games are like other forums that nurture gaming culture, such as PSNprofiles, GameFAQs, Reddit, or GameSpot. The online forum has proven to be crucial in shaping and expressing beliefs and attitudes, as gamers often post their achievements (trophies won). The forum has the reference and normative value of the group. The reference value represents an idea with which gamers identify, and the normative value represents the acceptance of certain rules.

The study contains research discussions related to trophies, collecting trophies and gamer comments on trophies. This includes expressing beliefs, attitudes, brand loyalty, rhetorical and ideological statements towards digital games and gaming culture. Statements related to the PlayStation forum group were observed during the period from March 6, 2015, until June 30, 2023, according to the methodology of virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000). During that period, statements were analysed with the aim of exposing consumer behaviour, forming attitudes, and identifying trophy culture.

A total of 3,113 forum posts dedicated to the trophy collecting group were analysed. Only 15% (466 posts) are related to the subject of the research. The FFA forum belongs to the category of reference group because the individual establishes their 'point of reference' in determining their own judgment, preferences, beliefs, and behaviour. This means that the FFA forum represents a framework in which gamers learn and accept points of view, values, attitudes, lifestyle, and behaviour. As an example, the FFA online forum was analysed (Picture 2).



Picture 2: Online forum FFA.hr

Source: author's screenshot from FFA (n.d.)

The group's influence on an individual gamer is related to the group's power, which we observe through two categories: the power of experts and the power of rewards. The power of an expert implies the provision of expert opinions, recommendations and advice resulting from greater knowledge and competence. These skills are determined by the mutual appreciation of the group and actual knowledge (playing experience and number



of trophies). The power of awarding starts from the assumption that an award to the individual reflects a form of acceptance to the group, which is manifested by giving the sign 'like' (thumb up) as a form of acceptance, approval, and support, by quoting on the forum or by direct address.

What is crucial is that reference groups can stimulate consumer behaviour in an informative way. In particular, the power of experts can take place through trophy hunters whose opinions are respected by the members of the group. The reason for accepting such an opinion stem from the fact that users trust their knowledge and experience. This makes it easier for consumers to choose between information. The study is focused on two positions of the FFA forum (Table 1): *expert power* and *reward power*.

Table 1: The group power of the trophy hunter

The power of experts	Rewarding power
Knowledge and expertise	Reputation
Appreciation of the leader	Acceptance of the group

Source: own processing

To present the phenomenon of trophy hunters more simply in the context of narcissistic culture in an online forum, it is necessary to explain the context of the group power of trophy hunters. The strength of experts is seen here in the context of a reference group where categories of knowledge and expertise are derived from the number of platinum trophies won, which gives such gamers recognition in the form of their expertise and knowledge, especially from the aspect when the conditions for winning trophies are determined by the difficulty of the game and the percentage chance of winning. In other words, the rare platinum trophy is reciprocal to the reward power because it increases the reputation of such a gamer. Likewise, appreciation of trophy hunters is causally related to group acceptance. The thematic analysis revealed four main themes (Table 2): *narcissism*, *snobbery*, *pleasure*, and *burden*.

Table 2: Main topics in the online forum from trophy perspective

Topics	Characteristics
Narcissism	Users are bragging and proud
Snobbery	Users create categories and divisions
Pleasure	Users feel satisfaction and success
Burden	Users are unhappy and dissatisfied

Source: own processing

Below we present examples for the categories of expert power and reward power, as well as the contrast between gamers who like digital games and those who do not. The examples are listed with coded names and are presented according to the set research questions. This is only a representative part of the corpus, which, due to its extensiveness, we cannot present in its entirety. Also, the findings of this study are unique in the way data was collected and interpreted.

# Qualitative Analysis

## a) Theme: Narcissism

Both groups on the forum (Table 1) are manifested through expert power and reward power. In the first group are users who impose their opinion and attitudes through the knowledge and expertise and reputation of the leader. As an example, we will analyse the post of a user who differentiates trophies according to additional values: "Of course, not all trophies are equally valuable and not all games deserve to have a platinum trophy". As we can see, the user distinguishes platinum trophy winners into those who are worthy and those who do not deserve to have platinum trophies. This is confirmed by further discussion that there are different values within the trophy, and they add: "That for some digital games you need to invest effort and skills. These are the trophies that distinguish a gamer from a gamer".

From the above example, we see how narcissists distinguish a gamer from *the gamer*. According to the reference group, gamers are those who make the most of the game and win trophies that are worth winning. This is also an example that is borderline because it mixes narcissistic and prestigious elements that tend towards snobbery. "I only play quality games. My trophies are not some silly games. I don't want to ruin my image".

Another example is found in a user who states that the genre of the digital game is not important to them, and that difficulty does not represent any problem for them. They are a typical example of a self-sufficient person found in online forums:

I play whenever I can, and I play everything. I don't care about genre, difficulty, or how long the game lasts. I have always completed games and done transitions on all difficulties, even at a time when there were no trophies and achievements as such, and no PlayStation as a console. I have 90 ultra rare platinum, like *Super Meat Boy*, *Devil May Cry 5*, *Max Payne 3*, *Ninja Gaiden Sigma 2*, *Catherine*.

A narcissist worships *heroes*. They are unconsciously fixated on idealized objects of the self that they continue to long for (Lasch, 1986). Narcissists are in eternal search for an external divinity from which they draw strength. That, conditionally speaking, *divinity* and *heroism*, is a metaphor of narcissistic extension. Such users represent, according to Lasch (1986), an extension of ownership. Such a connection of narcissistic possession can be compared to the famous quote, "the medium is the message" (McLuhan, 2008, p. 41). Therefore, we can compare Lasch's notion of narcissistic culture where digital game trophies represent an extension of gamers.

The topics of narcissism and snobbery are often intertwined. As an example, we can analyse a user who admires another user for winning rare trophies. "Congratulations, I just looked at your profile on PSNprofiles, the best thing I have seen. I appreciate even more that you solved every game 100%". Or when they compare trophy quality by rarity. In other words, users impose a burden and prestige on themselves:

I have already mentioned a couple of times that I adore rare trophies – some ordinary, some platinum – and I have that kind of excitement when I win a trophy that is not common. And, preferably, that it is an RPG and that I need at least 80 hours.

The examples listed complement Lasch's theory of narcissistic society, according to which narcissism represents a psychological dimension of dependence that needs others to experience self-esteem (Lasch, 1986). In this sense, a narcissist cannot do without an audience that admires them (gives a thumbs up). For example: "The quality of the trophy is important. Congratulations!" However, according to Lasch, a narcissist admires and identifies with winners for fear of being labelled a loser. They try to warm themselves in their reflection of brilliance (Lasch, 1986). In short, a narcissist lacks confidence in their own abilities.

Therefore, narcissistic freedom is a closed freedom that does not allow them to be alone. They depend on others and for them the digital world is a mirror. In this sense, narcissism is a metaphor for the human condition (Lasch, 1986).

### **b) Theme: Snobbery**

Snobbery means belonging to a certain group. What is specific about such members of the group is manifested in their attitudes and beliefs of being superior to others. If we analyse the example of a user who says:

Five years ago, all I wanted to do was try out as many games as possible, and now that I'm 30+, I still like to try out a game as much as possible and brag about it. Let's say, I would never buy those useless games that only serve to increase the number of platinums.

We could conclude how the user justifies his platinums. It is clear from the statement that the user considers themselves more important because they have more experience in trophies. Also, a user would never buy a digital game just to rank higher on the trophy leader board.

To achieve prestige, snobs play digital games just to have as many platinum trophies as possible. They accumulate trophies just to gain prestige in their community. "I made a new profile again. There are a bunch of games that are too difficult like San Andreas, VR Worlds, Oddworld, and now all over again". This understanding is close to Lasch's analysis of narcissistic culture. Narcissistic society worships fame, i.e. representatives of this group look at the number of platinums won, although they do not admit it. When caught in a lie, they are ashamed of their narcissistic obsession (Lasch, 1986) with fame and often hide their trophies on the PSN list. "You only play games that have easy platinums".

A snob, philosophically speaking, lives in the future. Its future is simulation. Therefore, in the previous example, we see how such users can create new profiles to hide the trophies they did not achieve. This is the reason they constantly create the image of a better trophy hunter. Also, they feel the burden of collecting trophies because they know how much effort and time it takes. "A very stupid game I play. Not even on the trail of Rima and the likes that are played on. I only play for trophies".

Every society reproduces its culture, its norms, experiences, and assumptions. In this sense, the collective mind of the online community reflects the needs of the group. This means that the symbol of digital trophies can also be viewed from the aspect of digital prints. With such an understanding, the reality is more like what we see on the PSN list.

Snobs no longer play games for the sake of the game, but for the prestige of the trophies won. The culmination is when a gamer plays digital games because of the number of trophies or the speed of winning platinum. "Stop collecting the same games to 'prove' your PlayStation devotion. Come on brother, buy something else, play something you haven't played before, have fun. Opening new accounts is running in circles". In this sense, snobs realize themselves as an extension of others. If there are no others to admire them, the snob loses their meaning.

### **c) Theme: Pleasure**

The third topic refers to the category of user satisfaction (Table 2). It is the theme that is most intertwined in all the other groups that appear in narcissism, snobs, and burdens. An example of the expressed satisfaction felt by a gamer after winning a trophy can be seen below: "I won the platinum trophy half an hour ago. *Bloodborne* is a game that simply deserves it". The feeling of pleasure that occurs in gamers after winning the platinum trophy is a form of satisfaction and happiness. However, this is not the feeling of satisfaction that Csikszentmihalyi (2006) is talking about, at least not in this way. He

distinguishes pleasure from satisfaction. Pleasure is characterized by a sense of fulfillment and achievement.

Precisely in this sense, we achieve pleasure with a certain effort, for example: "After 400 hours in *The Division*, I finally have a platinum trophy. I have been working intensively on trophies in the last few days. I had to have that trophy because I love the game". At the same time, success in something the user considers trivial will not bring a sense of satisfaction. We can see the game as a form of culture. In this sense, we can compare the game with culture (Csikszentmihalyi, 2006). However, such an understanding of game and culture starts from norms. According to Csikszentmihalyi (2006), culture can be understood as a form of adaptation. In this sense, games can be compared to culture, i.e. the whole culture turns into a game.

It is precisely in such an experience that the *enchanting preoccupation* (Csikszentmihalyi, 2006) of the trophy hunter emerges. A user who constantly worries about winning trophies and how others will perceive them has a constant lack of satisfaction. We can analyse this using the example of when gamers experience collecting trophies as a burden and pleasure:

Here, today I platinumed the hardest game in my 100% collection. Injustice. I don't know where to start, how many hours spent with this game, how much effort, cursing, crying and happiness when I finally passed it. The game is fun at first until you start collecting trophies, and then it goes to hell.

Pleasure is a feeling of happiness, enjoyment, or gratification that typically comes from an immediate sensory experience. Pleasure and satisfaction are both positive feelings, but they have different origins and implications. The act of collecting trophies in digital games can provide a quick burst of pleasure due to the immediate reward and recognition that comes with it. This can be particularly appealing because it offers a tangible way of marking progress and achievement, which can be very satisfying in the short term.

Pleasure appears when the gamer's expectations are fulfilled. In this sense, the trophy hunter experiences pleasure only with a certain effort. We understand this effort as an action, and the trophies won as a reward for the invested time of the user. We will analyse two different user statements that confirm the theory. "I go over each game first for the soul, and then if I like it, I go hunting for trophies. It's a gaming filter for me". As can be seen, users can play the game for the pleasure of the game itself. Only under the condition that they like the game, they can pay respect to the trophies and collect the platinum trophy. With such an understanding, trophies calm the players.

Another example refers to the statement: "I don't have any sense of prestige from winning the platinums I have. Trophies are just an incentive to spend more time in the games I love, or to try some challenges that otherwise would not have occurred to me". We can conclude that satisfaction with collected trophies does not always mean prestige. It can be associated with emotions when a gamer loves the game, when the game is important to them and when trophies encourage them to try something new in the game.

Unfortunately, the problem arises that this satisfaction lasts a relatively short time. Trophy hunters seek new confirmation of the community and themselves through new trophies. The pleasure of collecting trophies goes beyond the digital game itself. Trophies become more important than the game. It is a paradox because trophies are an addition to the game.

#### **d) Theme: Burden**

Collecting trophies often becomes a burden to the gamer. Regardless of whether trophy hunters want to have as many trophies as possible or want to have platinum trophies in games that are relevant to them, collecting is a burden. This is best seen from the

example: “Trophies kill the charm of the game”. It is obvious that trophy hunters represent a subspecies of users who are drawn into the circle of collecting. Their desire to collect trophies also represents the dark side of gaming.

If we compare the statement of users of the online community, we get a detailed insight into the seriousness of the preoccupation with trophies. “I’ve been losing my temper for a month now! The game is a drug and constantly pulls you to break those records, but it’s hard to go crazy. Some levels are designed to throw the joystick into the wall”. The burden placed on gamers due to collecting trophies not only limits the choice of the game but also imposes obligations to play those they do not like.

As an example of emotional exhaustion and the closed circle of collecting trophies, we will analyse in the following examples: “I am dead inside after the platinum trophy” and “You’re even crazier when you play games you don’t like and then go hunting for platinum trophies”. The question arises: why do they collect trophies if they represent a burden? We can find the answer in the theory of narcissistic culture according to which the modern narcissist presents himself as a better gamer than other gamers. What does that mean?

Trophy hunters create the image of a Gamer who is superior to other casual gamers. They build their identity from fragments of other images, roles, and experiences. To perfect their role as the ideal Gamer, they represent a narcissist who constructs their role through collecting trophies. In this sense, trophies become a meaningful part of the game for them. Then, only then the trophies are part of the game because they collect them. At the same time, trophies represent its extension.

This is what Lasch (1986) calls *shaping his personality*. In this sense, trophy hunters live surrounded by mirrors in which they seek confirmation of their own ability to attract others. Then it is a cultural and anthropological representation of a gamer who does not collect trophies just for confirmation. The modern narcissist is self-absorbed and self-indulgent. Modern narcissists, who are often characterized by a heightened sense of self-importance and a constant need for attention and admiration, may use digital games as a platform to fulfil these needs.

The act of collecting trophies in digital games can be seen as ritualistic behaviour. These trophies serve as a tangible representation of their achievements, which they can showcase to others. This aligns with Lévi-Strauss’s (1977, 1988) theory where the ritual, i.e. collecting trophies is effective if accompanied by the recitation of the myth, i.e. sharing, and showcasing these achievements to others. Moreover, the confirmation and approval they seek from others when they share their achievements in games can be compared to the social function of rituals in Lévi-Strauss’s theory.

Rituals, according to Lévi-Strauss, are performed for a specific purpose and are often tied to a myth or a belief system. However, when the ritual becomes too demanding or loses its meaning, it can feel like a burden. Similarly, when modern narcissists feel compelled to collect trophies to maintain their self-image or seek validation, the act of collecting can become more of an obligation than a pleasure: “I’m trying to find some pleasure in trophy hunting, but if it’s going to turn into an obligation, a job where I have to work to get trophies, waste time, be stressed, I don’t see the point anymore”.

## In-depth Analysis

The model according to which the trophy phenomenon was analysed was observed in the context of the binary relation of trophies that gamers like and dislike (Table 3). Those digital games that gamers love, provide them with pleasure, satisfaction, a sense

of competence and personal growth and development show intrinsic motivation. On the contrary, those digital games that gamers play but do not like because they play them because of the need for trophies, PSN list, rare trophies, praise on online forums and platinum numbers, represent extrinsic motivation.

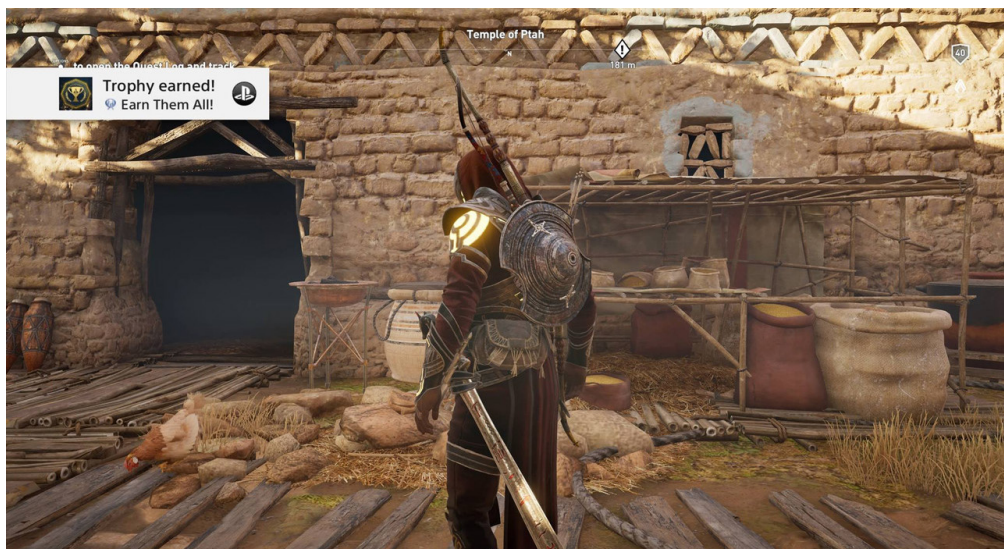
Table 3: Trophy hunting

They love the game	They do not like the game
Satisfaction	Job
Content	Form
Easiness	Frustration
Loyal consumers	Impulsive consumers
Reflection in the mirror	

Source: own processing

As can be seen from the above examples, the discussion that takes place on the FFA forum starts from the strength of experts who impose themselves as leaders of the reference group. Their statements are respected, and group members agree by showing trust and recognition. However, at the same time, there is a different perception of the value of the trophy.

The pattern of behaviour that occurs on the forum can be shown through the concept of a trophy hunter who expresses admiration for the digital game and promotes themselves at the same time (Cruz et al., 2017) and another pattern of behaviour in which there are trophy hunters who play games in order to have as many trophies as possible, but do not enjoy it (Lu et al., 2020). Also, it is important to note that gamers who are intrinsically motivated and love digital games show a tendency to promote the game more often, posting photos and identifying themselves with won trophies as a symbol of mutual respect for the game and for their own success (Picture 3).



Picture 3: Platinum trophy from Assassin's Creed: Origins

Source: FFA, n.d.

We can interpret this as a form of brand loyalty (Keller, 2013; Jukić, 2020) in which satisfied and motivated gamers promote a digital game using the WOM marketing method (López, Sicilia & Hidalgo-Alcázar, 2016), they give their own judgment, performance rating and trophy hardness. Also, such trophy hunters show a tendency to complete the same digital games on different consoles, such as *Uncharted* (Naughty Dog, 2007-2016) and *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft, 2007-2023) series in parallel on PS4 and PS5. Finally, the strongest affirmation of brand loyalty occurs when customers are engaged (Keller, 2013). In such a case, gamers become brand ambassadors.

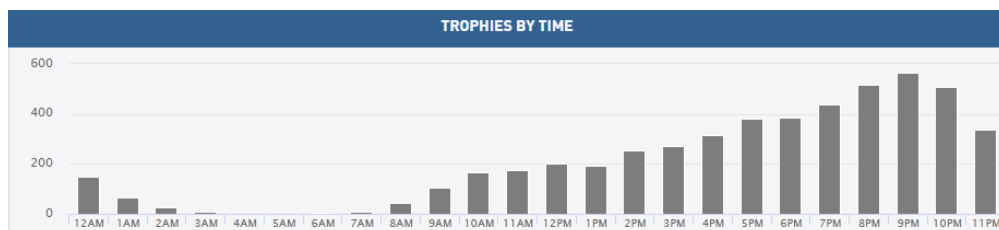
Also, it is noticeable how trophy hunters reveal their satisfaction after achieving their goals, a sense of pride and satisfaction, as well as the fulfilment of their own. Encouraging intrinsic motivation requires the game developer to choose an activity that gamers enjoy and want to actively participate in. This is especially evident in the example when gamers state that trophies destroy the enjoyment of playing and go as far as to never want to hear about these games again.

It is interesting to compare the extrinsic motivation of trophy hunters, which is associated with successfully performed tasks, and is based on reinforcement, feedback, and symbolic rewards. As can be seen in the example of users, who achieve the recognition of the reference group on the forum for the achieved success, but at the same time self-realization because they have achieved the given goal. At the same time, gamers who play solely for the sake of increasing the number of trophies express frustration, anger, and senselessness. Every gamer becomes an advanced gamer over time and will look for added value in the digital game. If trophies are purpose, saturation occurs. Trophies should provide some new value such as new characters, weapons or discounts when purchasing DLC.

Reward power is a construct of the need to belong within a reference group. The need for belonging, if satisfied, creates a motive for cooperation, by accepting group norms and goals. This is reflected in the reputation of trophy hunters who distinguish trophies according to hardness and rarity. Also, disdain for easy trophies that do not require any skill and investment of time appears here.

## Marketing Perspectives

We can present the influence of the reference group of the FFA forum as normative because it causes similar behaviour in similar situations. It is interesting to compare the time when the trophies are collected (Picture 4) with which the others in the group agree. As can be seen, most trophies are collected from between 5 p.m. until 11 p.m. which tells us how focused gamers are on collecting, but also the conclusion of how they are at work during the day.



Picture 4: The time when most trophies are collected

Source: FFA, n.d.

A normative group is important from a marketing point of view because the members of the group are expected to accept the attitudes and behaviour towards the mentioned trophies. If we compare trophy hunters who collect trophies solely for the purpose of building an image of an ideal gamer that is superior and can affect a gamer's sense of self (Cruz et al., 2017), then we can conclude that Lasch is right when he states that we are overly preoccupied with ourselves and our own image. Comparing Table 2, the division of trophy hunters into those who collect trophies for the sake of form (the number of platinum and rankings are important to them), and not for the content of the game, leads to the appearance of dissatisfaction and frustration that we associate with the metaphor of the narcissistic mirror. Paraphrasing Lasch (1986), trophy hunters who play games just to get as many trophies as possible are digital narcissists who care about self-presentation.

What is important comes from a deeper understanding of the psychoanalysis of narcissism in the context of Lasch's understanding of contemporary society, where the feeling of frustration and inner emptiness prevails (Matijašević, 2016). This is especially noticeable when trophy hunters feel the guilty pleasure of owning easy trophies. It is this feeling of guilt and shame that is inherent in the *narcissistic vulnerability* (Holmes, 2003; Kohut, 1990) that represents the trapped gamer: the need to feel special and the need to fit in with the group.

In this sense, buying digital games that have easy trophies, the same digital games that have been remastered for a newer console, buying DLC to have a 100% complete list of trophies, cannot fill the inner void that the gamer feels and constructs a fictitious identity. This is exactly what Lasch claims when he says that for Narcissus the world is a mirror (Lasch, 1986). Holmes (2003) claims the same, explaining how it is a form of normal narcissism. However, this is no longer a question of the degree of normality, as psychiatrist Archer (2013) explains stating that people have traits on a continuum from dominant to super dominant. In other words, self-centredness, when it becomes dominant, does have elements of narcissism.

Consumers compare attitudes and behaviours with those demonstrated by members of the reference group (McKenna & Bargh, 2006). In this way, gamers seek confirmation and support for their own opinion and behaviour. The same applies to trophy hunters. The goal of the individual is to improve their own self-concept by identifying with the group, which provides reinforcement and inner satisfaction. However, the question of the trophy hunter's motivation remains open.

Motivation towards collecting trophies, i.e. *need for achievement* (Cruz et al., 2017) was observed in the context of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Vizek Vidović et al., 2003). Intrinsic gamer motivation represents internal motivation in response to gamer needs, such as curiosity, the need for development, and a sense of competence. Intrinsic motivation due to the enjoyment of gaming is the highest level of motivation. Extrinsic motivation is an external incentive, i.e. when it has its source outside the gamer and refers to a good result on the PSN trophy list, praise on the forum, rare trophies, and platinum.

The context of narcissistic culture in which the phenomenon of trophies and trophy hunters was observed is understood as an anthropological and marketing phenomenon. From the marketing aspect, trophies represent an example of a new niche marketing that is growing and, judging by the analysed FFA forum, represents a market that will grow even more in the future. The reason for this is the emergence of digital games that are based exclusively on quick and easy trophies that gamers buy to increase their rating and reputation in the community. At the same time, trophies are presented as a form of *reward* to gamers that is integrated when starting the game and is imposed as a need that gamers satisfy by winning platinum trophies.



At the same time, an anthropological phenomenon appears in which such a need becomes an impossible desire, because through the continuous appearance of new digital games that can enable the consumer to acquire trophies in 30 minutes, the space of gamer satisfaction is closed, and the desire is disguised as an obsessive longing and need for trophies. In simpler terms, trophy hunters become trapped in their narcissistic mirror because they are in a paradox between the desire for trophies and the need to build a trophy list. The beauty of collecting trophies becomes a mask in front of other gamers.

## Discussion

In this study, we researched the trophy phenomenon from the perspective of online forum users. We analysed the context of trophy hunters from cultural, anthropological, and marketing aspects. More precisely, from a cultural aspect, we observed the phenomenon of trophies and trophy hunters and analysed it in the context of gaming culture. We started from the theory of narcissistic culture and media culture, according to which we interpreted the role of trophies, collection, and community.

From an anthropological point of view, we observed the gamer community that gathers around digital game trophies. We observed the phenomenon of trophies in the context of the user's experience and classified them into four themes: narcissism, snobbery, pleasure, and burden. This means that the individual is viewed in the context of the 'normality' of narcissism (Lasch, 1986), i.e. as a gamer who plays games for their own presentation and self-representation in the virtual world.

In the end, we connected two perspectives from the marketing aspect and indicated the possibility of creating a niche. Trophies are presented as a form of added value of the digital game. In other words, buying DLC represents a gamer's need not only for expanded game content, but also a new perspective of marketing communication. In this sense, the need to collect trophies represent an additional market for digital game producers. DLC, as well as *easy platinum*s, indicate a consumer need.

At the same time, we provided a deeper insight into the trophy phenomenon. The main research question: what do trophies represent to gamers, is analysed. In the study, we showed that there is a link between the four topics that we classified by analysing the gamer community. The analysis was conducted using the method of virtual ethnography, and the topics were observed through content analysis.

Therefore, research questions were analysed: trophies are a pleasure and a burden to gamers. Satisfaction results only in the case when gamers like digital games and if they meet their preferences, for example, they like the content of the game, get recognition from the reference group, share the same attitudes and beliefs in the forum. Only then does collecting trophies become easy, and repeating the same patterns becomes an inherent brand of loyalty. Also, dissatisfaction, frustration, and *narcissistic rage* (Lasch, 1986) appears when gamers play games for form, when playing becomes a *job* and they no longer enjoy it. They become compulsive consumers, buying, and playing games for easy trophies.

The concept of playing digital games and winning trophies (bragging about trophies, collecting trophies, and obsession with trophies) can be linked to the concept of narcissistic culture in several ways: a) self-promotion, b) self-satisfaction, c) achievement obsession, and d) materialism.

Narcissistic culture often promotes self-promotion. In the context of digital games, gamers may use trophies to brag about their achievements on social media or to their friends. Narcissism often involves self-satisfaction. Collecting trophies in digital games

can provide players with a sense of satisfaction and achievement. This can be particularly pronounced in a narcissistic culture that values individual achievements. Narcissistic culture is often obsessed with achievements. In the context of digital games, this could mean that players are obsessed with winning as many trophies as possible, often at the expense of other aspects of the game or even their personal lives. Narcissistic culture often bases itself on materialism. Although trophies in digital games are not physical objects, they can have material value in terms of status and recognition within the gaming community, like the FFA online forum.

Lasch (1986) understands narcissism as a lack of object relations, as a glorification of oneself, which we can see in the examples that show how individuals suffer because they did not win trophies or show frustration that trophies are difficult for them. In this sense, we can connect the understanding of narcissistic culture in the gaming industry with the analysis of the self, where the number of platinums won restructures the self as an ideal representation of gamers in the community. From a marketing point of view, such image restructuring signifies a consumer who consumes trophies. This is a trophy marketing niche that produces and consumes trophies and puts them on a throne. So, the problem is in the fundamental reference group that promotes and encourages the trophy metamorphosis of consumers where the formation of identity is shown to be an illusion.

If we put the individual in the relation of the inner world to the self (Kohut, 1990), towards the *normality of narcissism* (Archer, 2013), and the image with which we present ourselves in society (Matijašević, 2016) then only the trophy hunter gets an insight into the inner monologue and motives of collecting. However, when we look at trophy hunters from the aspect of narcissistic culture then we see that individuals close in on themselves and become alienated so that they do not see anything beyond their horizon. Not only do they announce their successes with frequent forum posts and brag about the trophies they have won, they also do not recognize that they are trapped in that mirror metaphor. The problem arises when the self-image becomes more real than the person behind those trophies.

In this sense, the concept of the narcissistic culture of the trophy hunter was observed as a symptom of social changes, the spread of image and form over content. And although this form, in Kant's sense, can reveal beauty (Jukić, 2022), here we are not talking about unobjective beauty, but about an inner emptiness that has often become more important than the content itself. It is the competitive spirit that Lasch (1986) speaks of that contributes to the cult of image where the gamer puts a price on everything and even on the trophies they collect. In this paradox, the gamer develops a double absurdity: they play games for trophies and distinguishes trophies from trophies that are categorically indistinguishable.

The concept of playing digital games and winning trophies can be seen as a manifestation of narcissistic culture, as it promotes self-promotion, self-satisfaction, achievement obsession, and materialism. This aligns with Lasch's description of narcissistic culture as a culture that promotes self-satisfaction, self-promotion, and self-obsession at the expense of common values and social good. The concept of collecting trophies in digital games can have a significant impact on game marketing and sales. Based on all the above, we can list four marketing strategies in the context of collecting consumer trophies: a) impact on game purchases, b) a new niche of gamers, c) branding, and d) encouraging community.

Gamers who are obsessed with collecting trophies may be motivated to buy certain games just to win more trophies. This can lead to increased sales of 'easy' games that offer trophies for a little bit of effort. Collecting trophies can create a new niche of players – those who are particularly interested in winning trophies. This niche can be attractive to marketers (Kimura, 2006) because it represents a specific group of consumers with clearly defined interests. Games that offer satisfying and challenging trophies can

improve their reputation among players. This can lead to brand loyalty. Collecting trophies can encourage the creation and growth of online player communities. These communities can become platforms for sharing experiences, tips, and tricks about winning trophies, which can further increase engagement and game sales.

Themes and characteristics that are present among users of digital games (Table 2) can be linked to narcissistic culture. Each of these four perspectives (narcissism, snobbery, pleasure, and burden) that online gamers show towards winning trophies in digital games can have a significant impact on marketing strategies. Marketers can take advantage of this tendency of users to brag and be proud of their in-game achievement. They can create platforms where players can share their trophies and achievements, which can encourage others to buy and play the game to achieve similar.

The creation of categories and divisions among players can be used for market segmentation. For example, games can offer exclusive trophies or rewards that are only available to the top players, which can encourage greater competition and spending. The sense of satisfaction and success that players experience when they win a trophy can be used to promote the game. For example, marketing campaigns can emphasize how satisfying it is to win trophies in the game, which can attract new players.

Although dissatisfaction or unhappiness when unable to win a trophy may seem negative, marketing professionals can use this as an opportunity. They can offer additional resources, guides, or even paid upgrades that can help players win more difficult trophies, like easy *fatality* in *Mortal Kombat* (NetherRealm Studios, 2020).

The practical implications could be significant for various stakeholders in the gaming industry, including game developers, marketers, and psychologists. Understanding these characteristics can help game developers design more engaging and balanced games. For instance, if they find that trophy hunting is causing a sense of a burden among players, they might consider designing their trophy systems to be more optional or less grind intensive. On the other hand, if players derive pleasure from trophy hunting, developers could consider ways to make this aspect of the game more rewarding and enjoyable.

This information can be valuable for marketers in positioning their products. If a significant part of a game's target audience values trophy hunting, this can be highlighted in marketing campaigns. Conversely, if trophy hunting is seen as a negative aspect (e.g. due to perceived snobbery), marketers might focus on other aspects of the game in their promotional efforts. The link between trophy hunting and characteristics, like narcissism and snobbery, could be interesting to psychologists.

Limitations of this study include the language barrier. The researched online community belongs to the Croatian speaking area, so replication of the research is possible for speakers of the same language. However, the insights gained from the trophy hunter community can be viewed in a broader context. Additional limitations include the discrepancy between the qualitative methodologies. Quantitative methods were not used in the study because virtual ethnography and content analysis did not require a sociodemographic approach. The observed community is independent of gender, age, income, and level of education. What they have in common is collecting trophies.

## Conclusion

Trophies are both an oxymoron and a paradox of digital gaming. The act of collecting trophies in digital games can seem paradoxical if it arises from the enjoyment of the game itself. This could be seen as an oxymoron if the *play* in *playing a game* becomes more

about trophy hunting than the game itself. This phenomenon can be linked to the way digital games are designed and how they reward players. Some games place a significant emphasis on achievements and trophy systems, which can shift the focus from the core gameplay experience to a more completionist approach. This can lead to a situation where players might spend more time and effort collecting trophies than enjoying the game's story.

In Lasch's concept of narcissistic culture, the act of collecting trophies in games could be seen as a manifestation of narcissistic culture. The trophies are a form of external validation, providing immediate gratification and a sense of accomplishment. This aligns with Lasch's description of the narcissistic individual as someone who is constantly seeking validation and affirmation from external sources.

Translating an oxymoron on a literal level becomes meaningless, because an oxymoron as a stylistic figure connects opposite concepts. However, when we understand the oxymoron in the denotative and connotative senses, its meaning becomes a game of thought. In this sense, playing digital games for trophies, or not playing digital games, takes on a deeper meaning. This means that the game as entertainment can be tedious, difficult, and frustrating. A paradox, unlike an oxymoron, requires interpretation and is always enigmatic. Trophies are a gamer's paradox in which gamers play digital games without realizing that they are in a marketing game.

In this sense, trophies do not affect the game, but are part of the *record* of the game. Their *save* was marked on the trophy list as soon as gamers started playing the game. Their winning the platinum trophy does not mean that the gamers enjoyed the game. Also, their failure to win the platinum trophy does not mean that gamers have not moved on to digital gaming. This means that trophies, viewed *a priori*, are paradoxically determined like Camus's Sisyphus, exposing the absurdity of gaming. This absurdity is determined by the moment of *realization*, about the illusion of freedom of gamers (Camus, 1998). The realization that a digital game is played for the sake of the game, not for the illusion.

This is precisely what Lasch (1986) called *pathological narcissism*, because contemporary gamers, in their longing to present themselves and others as better, build an image of the ideal (completionist) gamer. Such an exemplary gamer who has a perfect trophy list represents the media-created construction of the ideal over-gamer. His goal is to collect as many trophies as possible, even at the cost of not enjoying the games. In that imaginary picture, the question is reflected: Is the digital game being played with us or are we playing with it?

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