

Gamer Identity: How Playing and Gaming Determines How Those Engaged in Gaming See Themselves

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ABSTRACT:

The issue with gamer identity has been troubling researchers for the last decade. Despite trying to assign different parameters such as time spent playing, individuals themselves do not identify along such lines and the reasons why one person defines themselves as a gamer and another does not have not been clear. The goal of this paper to demonstrate, by applying B. Suits ontology of games and understanding identity in accordance with H.-G. Moeller's concept of proficity as a form of identity construction, the existence of two separate constructs of the gamer label. To demonstrate this, a series of interviews were conducted with two groups of people engaged in gaming: those who sought fun and those that desired winning. Both groups show clear differences in self-identification with their identity and the observed differences explain inconsistencies and issues observed by prior studies. Playing for fun is a factor that acts against seeing oneself as a gamer while playing to win is a factor inducive towards identifying as a gamer. Those that seek winning are likely to seek validation of their identity by comparing themselves to known gamer influencers while those that prefer playing over gaming will construct their definition of a gamer in an authentic manner.

KEY WORDS:

digital game culture, digital games, gamer identity, proficity, second-order observations.

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Introduction

'Who is a gamer' is a question that has been touched upon by numerous researchers and scholars,¹ along with the similar question 'what does it mean to be a gamer'. While it may seem semantic in nature, such questions are important to answer, as, especially in current research in the field, the label gamer is used as a variable and predictor. Research titles such as "personal distress as a mediator between self-esteem, self-efficacy, loneliness and problematic video gaming in female and male emerging adult gamers"² demonstrate this. The problem with answering this question is its interchangeability between the term 'gamers' and the phrase 'people who play games'. As D. Muriel and G. Crawford have shown,³ what it means to be a gamer varies from individual to individual. This goes in tangent with popular culture and general stereotypes. Historically, people perceived the

1 For more information, see: ĆWIL, M., HOWE, W.: Cross-Cultural Analysis of Gamer Identity: A Comparison of the United States and Poland. In *Simulation & Gaming*, 2020, Vol. 51, No. 6, p. 785-801.; MURIEL, D., CRAWFORD, G.: *Video Games as Culture*. New York, NY : Routledge, 2018.; HOWE, W. et al.: Concerning Gamer Identity: An Examination of Individual Factors Associated with Accepting the Label of Gamer. In *First Monday*, 2019, Vol. 24, No. 3, p. 1-20. [online]. [2023-11-15]. Available at: <<https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/9443>>; SHAW, A.: Do You Identify as a Gamer? Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Gamer Identity. In *New Media & Society*, 2012, Vol. 14, No. 1, p. 28-44.

2 CUDO, A., KOPIŚ, N., ZABIELSKA-MENDYK, E.: Personal Distress as a Mediator Between Self-Esteem, Self-Efficacy, Loneliness and Problematic Video Gaming in Female and Male Emerging Adult Gamers. In *PloS One*, 2019, Vol. 14, No. 12, p. 1. [online]. [2023-11-16]. Available at: <<https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0226213>>.

3 See: MURIEL, D., CRAWFORD, G.: *Video Games as Culture*. New York, NY : Routledge, 2018.

label gamer to be associated with white, pale skinned men with poor social skills,⁴ as well being associated with misogyny.⁵ Recent studies, however, show that the demographics are changing with more diverse groups playing specific games⁶ who perceive the term differently and are actively engaged in changing the perception of gamers – as they see it. Other recent studies in the area of gamer identity focus on the *body* aspect of identity⁷ (as in creating an avatar that reflects how one sees themselves as opposed to their own body), a topic which this paper will not discuss, and will focus instead on the division between *mind* and *society*. Research such as G. Crawford and D. Muriel's work shows how difficult it is to understand the label as each respondent gave their own, almost unique answer to the question. Further still, using time spent playing as a metric deciding who is a gamer has proven ineffective as either time spent playing is underestimated by individuals, especially women⁸ or excludes those that no longer play themselves but enjoy reading about games and regularly watching others play. Therefore, the questions 'who is a gamer' and 'what is a gamer' remain without satisfactory answers. All that is known is that different groups and individuals have different definitions and explanations. We agree with prior research that the most accurate way to understand who is a gamer is achieved by asking those who play games themselves if they consider themselves as such.

This paper will demonstrate, primarily through a qualitative study, how two factors play a vital role in shaping how individuals identify in relation to gaming: whether one plays or games. These two concepts are taken from B. Suit's conceptualization and definition of games, where games evolve from play but still contain elements of it.⁹ In order to give context to this division – especially in our current era, a theory of identity formation is provided based on H-G. Moeller's concepts.¹⁰ By understanding that identity, especially for gamers, is primarily performed digitally, the application of H-G. Moeller's concept of profile-based identity construction, or proficity, is used to clarify the answers provided by respondents. The paper will demonstrate that individuals not only reference other profiles when seeking references to who or what a gamer is/looks like, those that prefer playing over gaming will either trend towards rejecting the label of gamer or perform their identity in a non-profilic fashion. By establishing this distinction between play and game, this paper aims to build on studies such as B. Yim et al.¹¹ where the population studied belongs to dedicated gamer groups with aspirations of becoming professional gamers.

4 See also: McCCLURE, R. F., MEARS, F. G.: Video Game Players: Personality Characteristics and Demographic Variables. In *Psychological Reports*, 1984, Vol. 55, No. 1, p. 271-276.

5 For example, see: McCULLOUGH, K. M., WONG, Y. J., STEVENSON, N. J.: Female Video Game Players and the Protective Effect of Feminist Identity Against Internalized Misogyny. In *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 2020, Vol. 82, No. 5-6, p. 266-276.

6 See: WILLIAMS, D., YEE, N., CAPLAN, S. E.: Who Plays, How Much, and Why? Debunking the Stereotypical Gamer Profile. In *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 2008, Vol. 13, No. 4, p. 993-1018.; PAAËN, B., MORGENROTH, T., STRATEMEYER, M.: What Is a True Gamer? The Male Gamer Stereotype and the Marginalization of Women in Video Game Culture. In *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 2017, Vol. 76, No. 7-8, p. 421-435.

7 For more information, see: KIYIJÄRVI, M., KATILA, S.: Becoming a Gamer: Performative Construction of Gendered Gamer Identities. In *Games and Culture*, 2022, Vol. 17, No. 3, p. 461-481. [online]. [2023-11-01]. Available at: <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/15554120211042260>>.

8 See also: WILLIAMS, D. et al.: Looking for Gender: Gender Roles and Behaviors among Online Gamers. In *Journal of Communication*, 2009, Vol. 59, No. 4, p. 700-725.

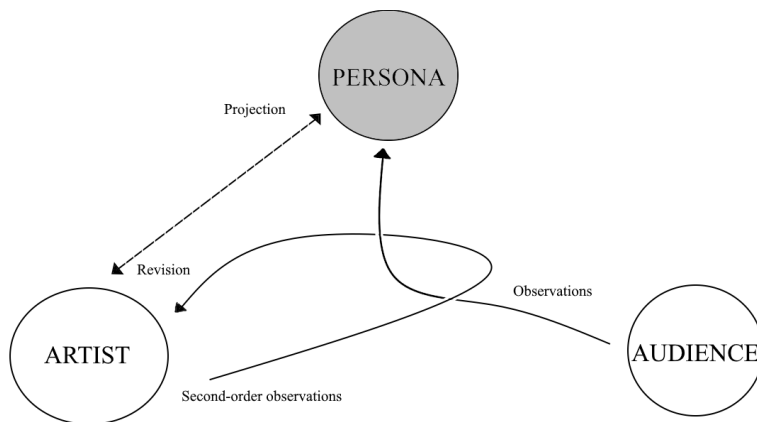
9 For example, see: SUITS, B.: Tricky Triad: Games, Play, and Sport. In *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 1988, Vol. 15, No. 1, p. 1-9.

10 For more information, see: MOELLER, H-G., D'AMBROSIO, P.: *You and Your Profile: Identity After Authenticity*. New York, NY : Columbia University Press, 2021.

11 YIM, B. et al.: The Gamer Identity Scale: A Measure of Self Concept as a Video Gamer. In *Computers in Human Behavior*, 2023, Vol. 138, No. 3. [online]. [2023-11-01]. Available at: <<https://linkinghub.elsevier.com/retrieve/pii/S0747563222002965>>.

Identity in the Digital Age

What is identity and how does it manifest itself in the digital age? Overall, identity can be understood as a set of “kits of cultural tools that people utilize to define and understand themselves and others and to act in a concrete way”.¹² The meaning of identity and the way we understand it has changed. The plethora of postmodern theories¹³ illustrates the uncertainty of the concept and its meaning while modernity declines. We agree that this situation of uncertainty is also about uncertainty of meaning which feeds into unstable identity formation.¹⁴ People find it hard to establish an identity without the need to consume in this period as late-stage capitalism has intrinsically tied identity formation with consumption. Historically, games were marketed as a male pastime with early digital games being designed with a male player in mind – this is reflected in studies showing the majority of people playing games at the time were indeed white males.¹⁵ As Z. Bauman noticed, individuals are no longer as certain of their identities as they were in production-based societies.¹⁶ Under consumerism, constant curation of one's identity is required if it is to be validated. Having said this, all these ideas neglect the key aspect of identity underlined by theorists N. Luhmann and E. Goffman: the observer and the mask/persona.¹⁷ The mask is the necessary part for the social to understand the individual. How one chooses to construct the mask of the self, what technologies and strategies one employs is vital in order to understand that person more so than asking them who they are, as in most cases this occurs without conscious effort (Picture 1). Does one's identity construction necessitate validation from others and how much can one control what one chooses to perform? After all, identity is a performative act.



Picture 1: The nature of the mask of identity – the impact of second order observations on the performer

Source: own processing; FORMILAN, G., STARK, D.: Moments of Identity: Dynamics of Artist, Persona, and Audience in Electronic Music. In *Theory and Society*, 2023, Vol. 52, No. 1, p. 42.

- 12 GUITART, E.: The Consumer Capitalist Society and Its Effects in Identity: A Macro Cultural Approach. In *Revista Psicologia Política*, 2011, Vol. 11, No. 21, p. 159.
- 13 See: BAUMAN, Z.: *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge : Polity, 2000.; GIDDENS, A.: *Runaway World: How Globalisation is Reshaping Our Lives*. London : Profile Books, 2002.; LYOTARD, J.-F.: *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis, MN : University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- 14 MURIEL, D., CRAWFORD, G.: *Video Games as Culture*. New York, NY : Routledge, 2018, p. 144-162.
- 15 McCLURE, R. F., MEARS, F. G.: Video Game Players: Personality Characteristics and Demographic Variables. In *Psychological Reports*, 1984, Vol. 55, No. 1, p. 271-276.
- 16 BAUMAN, Z.: *Liquid Life*. Cambridge : Polity, 2005, p. 3.
- 17 CALHOUN, C. et al.: *Contemporary Sociological Theory*. Malden, MA, Oxford : Wiley-Blackwell, 2012, p. 46-54.; LUHMANN, N.: *Theory of Society, Volume 1*. Redwood City, CA : Stanford University Press, 2012, p. 236-238.

The picture above is taken from a study interested in musical artists and how they construct their identities.¹⁸ By using Luhmanian second-order observations, and the notion of personas, D. Stark and G. Formilan show how there is a constant curation of the identity based on feedback of second-order observations. For N. Luhmann, these observations refer to, in simplistic terms, reacting to what others say and do.¹⁹ As seen in the picture above, the artist's persona is validated by the audience and revisions are made in response to the feedback given. In gaming this is near identical. One creates a profile and curates it to reflect one's own identity. One receives feedback from observers and based on the observations of observers one modifies and revises the persona to better match the expectations of the audience. Take a hypothetical gamer who constructs their identity around being good at a specific role in a team based game. He will display metrics of success and advertise himself in numerous ways to demonstrate this fact about himself. Yet, if he fails to meet these expectations in practice, the audience (fellow players and peers) will consider his persona disingenuousness leading to a crisis of identity. The individual might declare and promote himself as being good at his role, but the observers will disagree and undermine his self-construct. Identity therefore is an amalgamation of societal observation, individual second-order observation and the individual constructing their persona/mask as a reflection of the mind, body and society as per N. Luhmann's definition of the core elements of identity construction.

Going back to the basic definition of identity, another question needs answering – what kind of kits of cultural tools are available and prevalent? How do people construct themselves in relation to second order observations? Philosophers H-G. Moeller and P. J. D'Ambrosio present their concept of the procession of technology of identity up until 2020. By building on prior works, they establish the procession going from identity based on sincerity, which transitions into authenticity being the dominant form of identity formation in modernity towards the current dominant trend they call profilicity. Sincerity as identity is defined as the demand to commitment to roles. The outside is real, and the inside must back it up honestly, otherwise it is considered a dishonest fake.²⁰ This technology has been with humanity for the vast majority of our existence as a society. One's identity was tied to the role one played within society and any deviation from the expected behaviour assigned to that role was seen as insincere. Authenticity is the opposite of this logic – it demands the pursuit of originality. The inside is real, and the outside must be an accurate representation of it, otherwise it is considered a *hypocritical façade*.²¹ Thus, under an authenticity-based technology of identity, society and our roles within it become the oppressor, the labels that need to be disinherited in order to achieve a 'true' identity based on how one feels on the inside. These two concepts of the technology of identity are familiar to those well versed with M. Luhmann and M. McLuhan. These identities are still present within the current developed world and are still being curated by communities. What H-G. Moeller and P. J. D'Ambrosio propose is that since the proliferation of social media after 2004 (when Facebook launched), a new technology of identity has proliferated. Profilicity, as they call it, demands the curation of profiles.²² The outside is real, and the inside must be truly invested in it, otherwise it is considered a deceptive fraud. What

18 See: FORMILAN, G., STARK, D.: Moments of Identity: Dynamics of Artist, Persona, and Audience in Electronic Music. In *Theory and Society*, 2023, Vol. 52, No. 1, p. 35-64.

19 LUHMANN, N.: *Theory of Society, Volume 2*. Redwood City, CA : Stanford University Press, 2013, p. 330-332.

20 MOELLER, H-G., D'AMBROSIO, P.: *You and Your Profile: Identity After Authenticity*. New York, NY : Columbia University Press, 2021, p. 135-163.

21 Ibidem, p. 163-193.

22 MOELLER, H-G., D'AMBROSIO, P.: *You and Your Profile: Identity After Authenticity*. New York, NY : Columbia University Press, 2021, p. 35-135.

they are arguing here is that all forms of identification online are moving towards measuring oneself up to a standard set by our internal expectations of what others see in us. This has become even more pronounced, they argue, with the rise in popularity of influencers, hosts and social media celebrities but is not limited to their influence on individuals. Rather, it is an expression of the collective will of others who comment, like, subscribe, comment, upvote and so on. How one views oneself becomes focused on how others react to us, events and others based on online rankings. An example of how this affects gaming identity is the popularity of certain gaming styles over others. Playing games designed for one player on a streaming platform is a fairly common practice, yet it is considered 'un-gamerlike' to use cheats when playing by oneself – regardless if it is authentic to one's own style of play/gaming. At the same time using exploits in the code of the game (programming errors) is considered acceptable and part of the gamer culture – even though the outcome is the same as with cheating – the only difference is semantics. The true gamer will play the correct way – the way that is chosen by the consensus of specific people who like, comment, subscribe, upvote and so on. The gamer will play games that communities of engaged gamers recommend – for the engaged gamer, is active online and will write reviews, comment on videos/streams and press the like button on YouTube. Thus, the validation of one's identity becomes tied to how popular online that identity is. If a game is unpopular and has garnered outrage in some form or another, it is not a valid part of what gamers are and liking it will result in a lack of credibility as a gamer from others.

Proficiency, with the procession of the technology of identity still coexists with authenticity and sincerity. This is explained by M. McLuhan in his rear view mirror analogy: as the new technology replaces the old, it tries to appear familiar and garner a sense of security by appearing as part of the old.²³ In a sense we are all driving in a car, looking in the rear-view mirror as if it is still part of reality, even though what is ahead is vastly different than the old. In gaming identity this would be the desire of individuals to appear authentic while curating their profile. Their goal is to appear authentic to others – the viewers, readers, listeners and so on. But the means by which they achieve this is through proficiency. If a woman wants to be an 'authentic' gamer, she must have all the props that come with performing the gamer identity tied to her online profile, and the validation of her as a gamer comes from the community which she decided to join. She cannot just say she likes digital games. Her profile needs to resemble that of other gamers, who are seen to be predominantly male, or influencer gamer girls that are references to what a woman in gaming should be like – simply based on the popularity which validates that reference. The audience who validates the identity does so not based on knowing the performer, but the profile of the performer. The reference to the real is not the inner self as is the case with authenticity, but what the person curates on their profile.

Reality in gaming is the perception of the majority. When choosing which gaming community to join, one does research. This involves looking at others playing a game, reviewing it, enjoying it, discussing it and so on. One's tastes and opinions become shaped primarily based on how others view an object through their perspective via the medium of the internet. Thus, if a game has a user's review score of 10/10 and another has a score of 1/10 the one with the better score will be the one canonized into the halls of classics, while the one poorly reviewed will go into obscurity. This perception can change over time; however, most are bound by the observations of others – something reinforced by technology through likes and upvoting comments. In simple terms – the more popular something is (regardless of its subjective qualities), the more valid it appears to the observer. If authenticity was the dominant form of identity production, there would be no congregations

23 McLuhan, M., Fiore, Q.: *The Medium Is the Message*. Corte Madera, CA : Gingko Press, 2001, p. 100.

build around certain games – everyone would be striving to be unique and creative with their gaming instead of the opposite. It still plays a role and revolutions do occur in game design and conceptualization. In such a cauldron, identity becomes built around N. Luhmann's concept of second order observations²⁴ in both directions – one is curating one's identity based on the anonymous online community one belongs to and in turn one is curating one's profile to match expectations of second order observations. If one seeks acceptance one no longer looks for the validation of peers – people one is in direct contact with. Instead, the anonymous and the influential become the targets of validation of our identity.

Proficiency, according to H-G. Moeller, is similar to the technology of sincerity – the only difference being the referential. One is not born into proficiency – the idea is that the *general peer* is the reference. It is similar in this instance to the 'big Other' from S. Žižek's and J. Lacan's work.²⁵ J. Lacan's 'big Other' can be seen as: "The first type of Other is Lacan's 'big Other' qua symbolic order, namely, the overarching 'objective spirit' of trans-individual socio-linguistic structures configuring the fields of inter-subjective interactions. Relatedly, the Symbolic big Other also can refer to (often fantasmatic/fictional) ideas of anonymous authoritative power and/or knowledge (whether that of God, Nature, History, Society, State, Party, Science, or the analyst as the 'subject supposed to know' [sujet supposé savoir] as per Lacan's distinctive account of analytic transference)".²⁶

The main difference between H.-G. Moeller's and N. Luhmann's general peer and the big Other stems from the understanding of what the public is. This tradition that the public is a whole sphere in itself goes against the described process of forming proficiency which on the other hand is an assortment of peers who have access to the profile. Unless talking about very rare cases of videos online with billions of views, most shape their identity not in reference to a big Other, but to their own smaller community. This goes in line with N. Luhmann's conceptualization of society. The academic public exists alongside and simultaneously with the gamer public but as any observer would note, both publics have different semantics, languages, norms and behaviours. The identity one chooses to communicate with the academic public will be different than the one chosen to communicate with the gamer public. This is due to N. Luhmann's second order of observations. If we pardon the use of systemic logic and think of it as the science of observing the general peer, second-order observations are the simulacra of reality that postmodern philosopher J. Baudrillard was referring to. In his laments over the loss of authenticity,²⁷ we can see how a constantly changing identity based on proficiency functions in the second order of observations. A gamer streamer who is performing his gamer identity is accompanied by an audience in the chat which is visible to all that watch him/her. On the one eye the viewer is watching the first order – the game itself, but with the other eye, the observer is drawn to the general peer in chat (in essence reading Twitch chat is a second order observation). Positive reinforcement of an act that was performed by the streamer coming from the chat will shape how the viewer will judge the inherent gamer identity on show. This is the reason why cheating in games is shunned upon – not because of morality, for there is no harm in cheating in a game against a machine, but the general peer's expectations placed on the streamer and viewer which becomes internalized through proficiency. This

24 MOELLER, H-G., D'AMBROSIO, P.: *You and Your Profile: Identity After Authenticity*. New York, NY : Columbia University Press, 2021, p. 97.

25 ŽIŽEK, S.: Melancholy and the Act. In *Critical Inquiry*, 2000, Vol. 26, No. 4, p. 657-681. [online]. [2023-11-13]. Available at: <<https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/448987>>.

26 JOHNSTON, A.: Jacques Lacan. In ZALTA, E. N. (ed.): *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford, CA : Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018. [online]. [2023-11-13]. Available at: <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/lacan/>>.

27 BAUDRILLARD, J.: *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor, MI : University of Michigan Press, 1994, p. 69.

explains the modern trend of 'reaction content' which is based around a person filming their reaction to something that is currently popular or trending. The audience of such a performance has most likely already seen the object of the reaction and thus the performer is judged if their reaction is within the acceptable parameters for the second order of observations. If the reaction has received a high number of dislikes, downvotes etc, the viewer of such a performance is informed by this manifestation of the second order that anything within this reaction goes against the rules, norms or preferences of the general peer of that specific community.

The key implication from this theory is that there is no such thing as a 'right' or wrong way to construct an identity. All these technologies of identity creation are merely tools with which one is genuinely performing their identities to the best of their abilities.²⁸ It does not matter if one is building an identity based on sincerity or proflicity. Whichever identity technology one employs, identity is an artifact that functions in accordance with the used technology. For J. Baudrillard, who views the hyper-real as something negative, we have to remember that any technology of identity is stressful and distorts the real. Even if an individual strives to be authentic in all forms of social interactions, one is still doing their utmost to perform and convince the general peer of their authenticity – and it is the general peer that ultimately decides on said authenticity. This is without mentioning the impossibility of one being truly authentic as anything one does is always built upon the existing. Radical individualism would position one as being able to invent without the need for societal help and as such places itself in a position where every action has to be a pure manifestation of said individuals' consciousness. Since the social informs the consciousness about reality, the only innovation possible is to shift the social. Therefore, the dream of pure individuality and authenticity is akin to the resentment of being human as the social is a defined part of our species. This is not a general public – rather a select group of people with similar tastes recommended to us by our own tastes and views by our invisible internet profile. This is visible and pronounced on services like Netflix where after watching and finishing a movie, one receives the prompt "You might also like this movie". This is the general peer informing us through the company algorithm. People who watched the same movie as us also watched other movies and 'liked' them too, therefore our tastes are being validated through our profile. In turn we are more aware of the tastes and identities of our general peers from whom we seek validation of our own identities. It is because of this that Europeans share a common general peer that validates them – most of the discourse surrounding gaming is regional – .pl, .de, .fr, etc. and as such the idea of gamer identity differs from culture to culture.²⁹ One's peers with whom one plays or socializes on social media with are within similar time zones but the referential other needs to speak the same language. In the end, everyone is genuinely performing who they think they are in relation to who they think their audience is and what expectation that audience has on genuine performance.

To conclude – the dominant form of identity formation in our current historicity is proflicity: the construction of oneself in relation how one is seen by others. These others are not a general public. They are a general peer – someone with similar tastes and values. The gamer identity, while can be performed in an authentic manner, is most commonly performed through the technology of the profile with most interaction occurring online by profiles interacting with one and other and validating each other. This means that there have to be two types of gamers who view the identity and perform it in different ways.

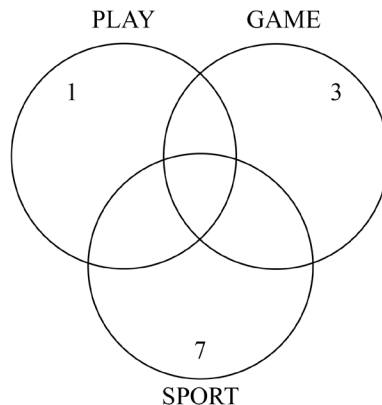
28 MOELLER, H-G., D'AMBROSIO, P.: *You and Your Profile: Identity After Authenticity*. New York, NY : Columbia University Press, 2021, p. 253.

29 See: ĆWIL, M., HOWE, W.: *Cross-Cultural Analysis of Gamer Identity: A Comparison of the United States and Poland*. In *Simulation & Gaming*, 2020, Vol. 51, No. 6, p. 785-801.

The Typology of Gamers

Before one can talk about gamers and gamer identity, it is vital to establish a definition of what a game *is* and what it offers the players. When one defines themselves as a judge or Japanese it is impossible to understand that identity without knowing what a judge does or what Japan is. If one was to look at gaming as only as something to pass the time, one would quickly find that there are many non-digital games being played all around the world where people pass the time by counting cars on the bus or another similar 'game' to pass a mundane activity. There is a plethora of differing approaches to answering this fundamental question.³⁰ A broad definition would encompass almost every person on the planet, thus making the theoretical tool useless for analysis so, we will favour a narrower definition.

Before going over the possibilities and arguing our position, it is particularly important to understand the difference between *play* and *game*. There are two possibilities when we examine the meaning of the two³¹ from a modern perspective. Either play is a component of games or games are a subset of playing. If we assume that games are a subset of play, then we logically assume, that games are more formalized, rules based and requiring other people, while play is available to an individual without the need for others at all. A child playing alone in the sand is not playing a game but he or she is playing. The question though, in our mind is, can that child learn how to play in the sand without others? And if the child does, will he/she introduce rules? The other argument is that playing is something an individual does while enjoying a game. It is not the focus of the game, nor is it the goal, it is just something that happens while one is gaming. This is perhaps best seen in another language than English. In Polish, when one is playing a game one is literally 'gaming a game' (transl. *grać w grę* as opposed to *bawić się w grę* – to play a game). This means, that games do not have to be 'fun' all the time. This approach has many implications and reflects the theories of B. Suits (Picture 2).³²



Picture 2: The distinction between play, game and sport

Source: own processing; SUITS, B.: Tricky Triad: Games, Play, and Sport. In *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 1988, Vol. 15, No. 1, p. 7.

30 SALEN, K., ZIMMERMAN, E.: *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. Cambridge, MD : The MIT Press, 2003, p. 73-78.

31 Ibidem, p. 71.

32 See: SUITS, B.: Tricky Triad: Games, Play, and Sport. In *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 1988, Vol. 15, No. 1, p. 1-9.

In picture 2, (1) would represent a child on a beach playing in the sand, (3) would be a gamer engaged in a chess tournament while (7) would be the hammer thrower at the Olympics – to use a few examples. This way of thinking allows sociological analysis as opposed to merely looking at the psychological aspect of play. Play and fun are vastly subjective topics that relate to the individual and are not the domain of sociology under normal circumstances. If gaming is its own activity, that's heavily based around social rules and norms and is restricted by knowledge and time investment, then gaming can be analysed and understood by sociological methods. It also limits the scope of the definition of a game. By eliminating play as a necessary component of gaming and making it merely a possible part of gaming, the activity is no longer a not-so-serious pastime, rather can be a serious part of someone's life and time. For this reason, B. Suits conceptualization is not complete for there are two diagrams – one for the designer who is designing a game and one for the player. As with any medium, what the individual sees and interprets is different from that of the author. A serious game by design can be a pure playful experience for some people – as was the case with wargaming which went from being a serious practice of survival to a global phenomenon for people of all ages to socialise and interact over a gaming table.

Another way of looking at it is by thinking of play and game as a spectrum. No one activity is pure play or pure game after all. Going further, for this to occur, like in the history of games, play has to precede game. What is meant by this is that the activity has to attract others through play and only then it can develop into a game. As B. Suits argues by creating a parable, first there must be fun and satisfaction in kicking an object around with another before that interaction can evolve into a game revolving around kicking a ball.³³ This is further reinforced by our knowledge that play is pre social – games evolve from play and contain it. All the successful games in history and of today primarily attract new players through fun. To game on the other hand is to exist in the sphere of strong social laws (rules as boundaries of interactions as a part of what is a game) with a singular understanding of what the goal of the activity is: to achieve the socially constructed idea of winning. By applying and slightly modifying Suits and his concepts, we have a much richer understanding of games and the people who interact with them.

Having established how identity formed, was maintained and the different technologies of the self-prominent in society, as well as understanding that games consist of play and game, the first major typology can be introduced: The divide between passive and engaged gamers. D. Muriel and G. Crawford point out,³⁴ there are people who dedicate their spare time to playing games but do not consider themselves to be gamers. Some individuals may want to play it for fun or to past the time – after work or school while others will try their best to win at all costs or view games as their primary method for socialization. As D. Muriel and G. Crawford's research shows, many people, who play games for a substantial time (7 hours plus a week) have trouble identifying as gamers, while others who play less gladly accept the label. This conclusion is shared by others who researched this issue.³⁵ This *liquidity* in the association between their identity and their main hobby is a problem. Then there is the division between the 'hardcore gamer' and the 'casual gamer'.³⁶

33 See also: SUITS, B.: Tricky Triad: Games, Play, and Sport. In *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 1988, Vol. 15, No. 1, p. 1-9.

34 MURIEL, D., CRAWFORD, G.: *Video Games as Culture*. New York, NY : Routledge, 2018, p. 60-83.

35 For more information, see: ĆWIL, M., HOWE, W.: Cross-Cultural Analysis of Gamer Identity: A Comparison of the United States and Poland. In *Simulation & Gaming*, 2020, Vol. 51, No. 6, p. 785-801.; HOWE, W. et al.: Concerning Gamer Identity: An Examination of Individual Factors Associated with Accepting the Label of Gamer. In *First Monday*, 2019, Vol. 24, No. 3, p. 1-20. [online]. [2023-11-15]. Available at: <<https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/9443>>; SHAW, A.: Do You Identify as a Gamer? Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Gamer Identity. In *New Media & Society*, 2012, Vol. 14, No. 1, p. 28-44.

36 See also: POELS, Y. et al.: Are You a Gamer? A Qualitative Study on the Parameters for Categorizing Casual and Hardcore Gamers. In *Iadis International Journal*, 2012, Vol. 10, No. 1, p. 1-16.

The task of basing the gamer identity on such divisive self-definitions is a difficult task. 'True gamers', 'hardcore gamers', 'casual gamers', 'social gamers', 'serious gamers' – these are but a few of the labels one can encounter as parameters and typologies of gamers in research. We propose, for the time being, that all different definitions be grouped into two – the engaged gamer and the passive gamer. Passive gamers are those individuals who are unaware of the general peer of gaming or unwilling to interact with said general peer. Engaged gamers on the other hand are those that construct their identity in relation to the general peer of gaming and validate their identity based on the feedback loop – either rejecting the need for validation (but being aware of the general peer observing them) or accepting it.

The passive gamer is not someone who defines themselves via gaming as they view play as the literal English meaning – fun and non-serious past time. For them, meaning is not generated from playing, rather it is a break from the issues of the day and from life. Meaning is generated in other ways for this group. Passive gamers make up the vast majority of the gaming population in the same way casual football fans make up the majority of all the people who watch the World Cup in football. Associating this identity group with any coherent beliefs is difficult by the very nature of this concept of them. Any predictions on how this group views society and gaming based on them playing is just speculation. What can be said is that this group is not strongly associated with gaming thus will not participate in gaming based social movements unless they coincide with their own personal beliefs, and these beliefs are strong enough to be a call to action. Since these people do not draw meaning from games, this relationship is reversed compared to engaged gamers. Secondly, this group is not aware of the fact that they are a social group and will lack any cohesion and ability to mobilize. Simply put – gaming is a part of their lifestyle not their lifestyle. They will not watch gaming content online, will not read about games or participate in online discourse. These individuals, if defining themselves as gamers will do so in an authentic manner – the reference being themselves rather than others when seeking validation. They focus on play (passing time, gaming as a facilitator of social interaction, pure enjoyment). All gamers start out as passive.

The engaged gamer is a person who is more likely to focus their spare time and income on gaming, balancing working and personal life to include games in their daily lives. This group includes those who either play or game or enjoy a mix of the two. Games give meaning to this group and will use gaming language, gaming cultural references and be aware to an extent of the happenings in the world of gaming they are a part of. Due to the prolific nature of their identity formation, they will be aware of optimal ways of playing and are likely to enforce normative structures in play. It is this group that people commonly refer to as gamers and it is divided itself between those who favour play and those who favour game with both groups having different general peers. This results in conflicts around what does being a gamer mean and who is a gamer and who is not. It is due to prolific identity formation that these two groups rarely interact. Play focused engaged gamers will consider game focused engaged gamers as *the other* and vice versa.

Research Questions and Hypothesis

Having established a conceptualization of gamer identity, the research questions can be posed. The main aim of this paper is to explain why in similar

studies,³⁷ researchers found that gamer identity does not correlate with time spent playing and appears to be a matter of agency. Additionally, with the theoretical framework, the paper will explain why people who play on phones are significantly less likely to identify as gamers.

The main factors that were chosen were the following: being passive or engaged (does one read, watch or partake in digital game discourse surrounding the games one plays), does one prefer to play or game, the individual's perception of who is a gamer with an example being required, reasonings behind it and if the individual belongs to a gaming community. Gender was not a factor as previous research has demonstrated that men are more likely to consider themselves gamers and have provided explanations for this phenomenon.³⁸ Their explanations align with the conceptualization of play and game-oriented gamers, with women preferring to play rather than game. The following are the primary questions this study will answer:

- Are people who engage with digital games more likely to consider themselves gamers than those that are passive?
- Are people who game rather than play more likely to consider themselves gamers?
- How important is having an audience (a general peer: friends, community members, viewers) for the individual to identify as a gamer?
- What, if any, are the differences between those who construct their gamer identity based on authenticity and those that do so based on proficity?

Our assumptions were the following: (1) Passive gamers will be unlikely to define themselves as gamers. This is because they do not construct themselves based on the dominant profic, game oriented vision of a gamer; (2) Engaged gamers will be divided between those that choose to play for fun and those who game for winning. Individuals who associate their preferred mode of engagement with gaming rather than playing will likely identify as gamers as their approach towards games dominates the discourse; (3) Engaged gamers, when asked to describe a gamer, will reference profiles of other gamers and validate or invalidate themselves as gamers based on that profile; (4) Play orientated engaged gamers will paint the identity in a more negative light, with references to stereotypes and online profiles that fit those stereotypes. This is likely due to antagonisms that exist between the two approaches towards games; (5) Game orientated engaged gamers will be less inclusive towards labelling people as gamers and will justify this stance with feats of skill (achievements, time spent in a game, rank, points and so on) – in other words, only those that curate their profile and reference it will be validated.

Method

Due to the nature of the topic (a question of identity), statistical analysis would not provide satisfactory answers in explaining the profic nature of identity. The need to answer questions and analyse what individuals mean when they say gamer requires a more

37 See: ĆWIL, M., HOWE, W.: Cross-Cultural Analysis of Gamer Identity: A Comparison of the United States and Poland. In *Simulation & Gaming*, 2020. Vol. 51, No. 6, p. 785-801.; HOWE, W. et al.: Concerning Gamer Identity: An Examination of Individual Factors Associated with Accepting the Label of Gamer. In *First Monday*, 2019, Vol. 24, No. 3, p. 1-20. [online]. [2023-11-15]. Available at: <<https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/9443>>; SHAW, A.: Do You Identify as a Gamer? Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Gamer Identity. In *New Media & Society*, 2012, Vol. 14, No. 1, p. 28-44.

38 BURCH, A., WISEMAN, R.: *Curiosity, Courage and Camouflage: Revealing the Gaming Habits of Teen Girls*. Paper presented at International scientific conference Game Developers Conference (GDC) 2015. San Francisco, CA, presented on 4th March 2015. [online]. [2023-11-17]. Available at: <<https://www.gdcvault.com/play/1021899/Curiosity-Courage-and-Camouflage-Revealing>>.

in-depth approach. Therefore, in-depth interviews were the method chosen for this study. However, for the purpose of clarity, minor quantitative results based on answers given are provided in the form of tables. These tables are aggregates of answers to the first three questions in the interviews.

The interviews were a part of a larger PhD thesis study and were conducted on 64 individuals who were recruited through discord communities that played either specific games or were long standing social groups that game across different genres. Game times were set accordingly to European time zones and every respondent was from Europe. The specific gaming communities were built around the following games and divided with accordance with how central winning was to the design of the game (Table 1).

Table 1: The selection of gaming communities and their preference to either play or game (based on the title or gaming style)

Play communities	Game communities
<i>Dota 2 (custom map players)</i>	<i>Dota 2 (ranked players)</i>
<i>Hearts of Iron IV (Role Play communities)</i>	<i>Hearts of Iron IV (competitive communities)</i>
<i>Don't Starve Together</i>	<i>CS:GO</i>
<i>Football Manager 2021</i>	<i>League of Legends</i>
<i>World of Warcraft (social guild)</i>	<i>World of Warcraft (hardcore guild)</i>
<i>Super Mario Maker II</i>	<i>Overwatch</i>
<i>Diablo III</i>	<i>Diablo III (hardcore mode players)</i>

Source: own processing

The main weakness of this selection is that most interviewees are already part of a gaming group or interact with one. This means it is difficult to state what effect belonging to such a group has on their identity construction, as there is no comparison between engaged gamers who belong to gaming communities and those that do not. The main reason for this was accuracy. It is difficult to recruit someone who participates in gaming discourse but is not a member of an online forum or other group. The most direct access to active engaged gamers was through discord.

Both game and play orientated gamers were identified through their group advertisements which they use to attract new members. The selection was intuitive and straightforward. If a group openly stated that it is looking for players to socialize, have fun, have a good time and described themselves as friendly, they were treated as a play focused group. Game groups were identified if a community advertised itself as hardcore, progression orientated, warning potential members that inactivity will result in removal and any form of 'serious'. Despite appearing as an arbitrary selection, both groups had no trouble in understanding the differences between those that play and those that game and were interested why such an 'obvious' typology isn't established in research. The group consisted of 50 males, 13 females and one individual identifying as non-binary with a mean age of 26 years old.

Additionally, in order to account for passive gamers as a means of comparison, a further 50 brief interviews were conducted at Warsaw Central Station. Individuals who were seen playing games on their phones were approached and asked a brief questionnaire consisting of four questions: do you identify as a gamer, do you play for fun or do you play for high scores, winning, points etc, do you read, watch or participate in discussions relating to games you like to play and do you belong to a gaming community. The questions used from the 64-person sample were as follows:

- Do you consider yourself a gamer?
- Do you read about games, watch others play and discuss games with others in your spare time?
- Are you an active member of a gaming community (forums, Facebook groups, discord servers etc)?
- What, in your opinion, does it mean to be a gamer?
- Describe someone who you would consider to be a gamer.
- What is more important to you when playing digital games – fun or winning? (labelled as play and game)
- What do you think of those who play for fun/What do you think of those who game to win?
- How would you describe them?

Results

The first assumption that can be answered is based on the passive gamer group. By adding three factors that the theoretical assumptions suggest, it becomes clear just how important a referential peer/audience is needed in order to validate oneself as a gamer. Fun also is a predictor.

Table 2: Mobile players and their identification

Passive gamer group (n=50)	Identifying as a Gamer (2 out of 50)	Does not Identify as a Gamer (48 out of 50)
<i>Prefers to play over game</i>	2	45 (3 individuals stated they play to win)
<i>Participates in gaming discourse</i>	2	48
<i>Belongs to a gaming community</i>	2	2

Source: own processing

Knowing that fun stems from the actor not the social in the structure versus agency divide is also vital. In both cases where individuals chose to identify as gamers (the respondent's gender and age are given here in brackets after their answer, and hereafter), their reasoning was the following:

- “Yeah, overall I guess I am a gamer... because why not (chuckles), I play every day on the train so I am a gamer (laughs)” (female, 31).
- “I think I am a gamer. I like games, always have... I know you are looking at me and thinking – hey this guy doesn't look like it – but it's just how I feel. When I am bored at work, the first thing I do is reach for my phone and start up Galaxy of Heroes” (male, 30).

Both statements are from a perspective of authentic identity construction. They are gamers because they feel like gamers – the social is not an important factor in their self-identification and association with the label. Another important factor that needs to be

mentioned here is their choice of games. One individual played *Star Wars: Galaxy of Heroes*³⁹ while the other was playing *Raid: Shadow Legends*⁴⁰. Both games have strong social elements encouraging players to join guilds/clans to fully experience all the features the game has to offer. This means both respondents were exposed to a general peer of gaming within their preferred titles – something which the first respondent admitted:

- “At first, I was reluctant to join thinking it was going to be just children and teenagers, but when I found out the average age of the guild was around 30, I thought, why not. I have to admit that fact is what drew me in” (female, 29).

This response shows that proficiency is still a factor, possibly akin to the M. McLuhan⁴¹ rear view mirror analogy when it comes to identity construction technologies. Normative reassurance clearly played an important role for this individual. Overall, it is clear for this research and prior works that mobile game players are significantly less likely to view themselves as gamers. What this approach shows however, is that through the introduction of social aspects to games, individuals do see themselves more as gamers, as they get access to a general peer that can validate them. More precise research quantitative research is needed to establish the impact socializing and playing versus gaming has when it comes building gamer identity, however it is apparent that these factors play a role. Moving on, the next question is how passive gamers compare to engaged gamers (Table 1, 2).

Table 3: Game-oriented gamers and their identification

Engaged gamer group who games (n = 32)	Identifying as a Gamer (27 out of 32)	Does not Identify as a Gamer (5 out of 32)
<i>Participates in gaming discourse</i>	27	3
<i>Belongs to a gaming community</i>	32	0

Source: own processing

Table 4: Play-oriented gamers and their association

Engaged gamer group who plays (n = 32)	Identifying as a Gamer (17 out of 32)	Does not Identify as a Gamer (15 out of 32)
<i>Participates in gaming discourse</i>	17	7
<i>Belongs to a gaming community</i>	17	13

Source: own processing

Tables 1 and 2 show clearly the difference playing versus gaming has on self-perception as a gamer. While both groups are more likely to identify as gamers due to being active in communities and more likely to participate in discourse compared to passive gamers, the difference playing versus gaming is pronounced. Consider the contrast between these two statements:

39 EA CAPITAL GAMES, EA MOBILE: *Star Wars: Galaxy of Heroes*. [digital game]. Redwood City, CA : Electronic Arts, 2015.
 40 PLARIUM GAMES: *Raid: Shadow Legends*. [digital game]. Tel-Aviv : Plarium Games, 2019.
 41 McLUHAN, M., FIORE, Q.: *The Medium Is the Massage*. Corte Madera, CA : Gingko Press, 2001, p. 100.

- “I don’t think I am a gamer in the sense of how people call it. I see Twitch streamers with their gaming chairs and flashy keyboards and don’t particularly relate to that. I just like playing games, sometimes a lot (laughs). Do I need a label or can I just enjoy what I am doing and who I am?” (male, 25).
- “For me, a gamer is someone who plays more than one game regularly, someone who puts in a lot of effort into those games. Playing just one, even if you are good at it is like saying ‘I like rock music’ but only listening to one band... I will agree that someone is a gamer if that person has the ranks or achievements to prove it – in more games than just one” (male, 23).

The first respondent plays *Counter Strike: Global Offensive*⁴² (GS: GO) twice a week with a group of online friends and has done so for the last four years. The second respondent games *Dota 2*⁴³ with a group of people dedicated to reaching the highest rank possible. The CS:GO player is choosing to construct themselves authentically while the Dota 2 player is building the gamer label on proficiency. What is interesting is that the response of the second gamer mirrors statements observed by D. Muriel and G. Crawford⁴⁴ except instead of a foodie metaphor, this respondent prefers to use an audiophile analogy. Similar logic was given by other respondents who favoured gaming over playing. For this group, it is clear that to be a gamer, one needs to present evidence that can be judged and validated by the general peer. This is the similarity between sincere identity formation and profillity. The individual needs to present themselves to society and convince them that they are where they belong.

- “I mean, can you call yourself a gamer and be bad at games? For me that’s impossible. A gamer will keep playing until he is good at a game. I think that’s what makes someone a gamer” (male, 29).
- “A gamer is someone who understands games – how to play them and how to be the best at them. That person doesn’t have to be the best, but, like, has to know what is best, like, knowing what the meta is and how to play it” (male, 22).

This form of understanding the term gamer noticeably invalidates those who wish to play: role players/LARPerS, social gamers and so on. This is the *otherness* that is forming between the two understandings of what games are with each group having derogatory terms to describe the other. When asked, what words are often used to describe gamers who try to win at all costs, those that play gave these examples: tryhards, no-lifers, virgins and basement dwellers. In the other direction, game orientated players gave these examples: casuals, noobs, mouth-breathers and general insults relating to low intelligence. This cleavage impacts the way those that play view the label gamer:

- “When I think of someone calling themselves ‘gamer’, I see that guy... from South Park. I know it’s an unfair stereotype, but I think anyone who has played online games or has discussed anything related to games online has had the pleasure of talking to someone like that: elitist, poor social skills” (female, 29).
- “You know, I will tell you a story. One time I went down to my local hobby store to sign up for some Warhammer games. The second I opened the door I smelled it: the sweat and farts were thick in the air... What was worse is everyone was being a stickler for the rules and in general being power gamers in friendly matches... If you are looking for gamers and their culture, well, that is it” (male, 30).

42 VALVE, HIDDEN PATH ENTERTAINMENT: *Counter Strike: Global Offensive*. [digital game]. Bellevue, WA : Valve, 2012.

43 VALVE SOFTWARE: *Dota 2*. [digital game]. Bellevue, WA : Valve, 2013.

44 MURIEL, D., CRAWFORD, G.: *Video Games as Culture*. New York, NY : Routledge, 2018, p. 143-180.

This difference in understanding what a game is at the core of why 17 out of 32 play-orientated gamers rejected the label. The advantage of profile-based identity construction is that it homogenises social groups allowing for easy comparisons between individuals and the validity of their identities. An individual has a high rank and powerful items: that person is a gamer, or so the logic goes. For those that focus on the play aspect of games, there exists no referential template of authentic gaming, no unifying trait or quantifiable feature to include or exclude individuals. Out of the 17 play gamers that chose to identify with the label, 11 identified themselves as being 'good' at the games they play. It has to be stated that the use of negative stereotypes weren't the responses of the majority of play and game-oriented gamers though were more prevalent in the latter. 20 play-oriented gamers were generally complimentary with 8 of the 15 who rejected the label also being positive about game-oriented gamers:

- "I wish I had the time and energy to invest in the games I play. I miss the days when life was just about chilling with friends and playing video games. I have a large amount of respect for those 'hardcore gamers'. I know that in a few years they will be just like me" (male, 34).

For game-oriented gamers, 17 had generally positive remarks to make about 'casual gamers', ranging from understanding different preferences and approaches towards gaming to hypothesising that the others simply do not have enough time to play digital games as frequently as they do (due to real life commitments). For the remaining 15, the low opinion of play as a form of gaming can be divided into two categories: 'cringe' and low intelligence. The feeling of cringe is a reaction by the observer to social awkwardness (validation by the social) or a lack of normative behaviour exhibited in an observed individual. Some have linked it to Foucauldian and Deleuzian form of societal control⁴⁵ while other see it as a tool for the groups in power to impose their will on normativity.⁴⁶ Regardless of one's precise stance on the ontology of cringe, it is clear that it is an external source of validation of one's own behaviour. One can ignore it or be oblivious to it, but the fact that groups of individuals are actively demonstrating their 'cringe' towards that individual informs that person of his or her lack of normative behaviour. As one respondent put it:

- "I just think it's kinda cringe... A few years ago, me and a few of my friends decided to mess about on an RP server in WoW. I felt like I was in an alternative universe: people were throwing virtual parties, having virtual picnicks in Stormwind and talking all in character. I found it all, I don't know if I can say it... Autistic" (male, 27).

This is a symptom of profile-based identity formation with the social being the validator of identity. Avoiding or controlling one's behaviour to avoid cringe indicates an internalization of the general peer. The status of those that game in their respective communities is based on performances and general perception, as per the definition. Others are willing to game only if that individual can guarantee they will give it their all and be 'good' at the game – with chronic underperformance leading to social rejection – something openly advertised by all game orientated groups. It becomes paramount to maintain profile in accordance with others expectations. Further still, the opinion that low intelligence is associated with preferring to play appears also to reflect the nature of current profile construction:

45 BRODY, C.: "Cringe" Content in Societies of Control. In *Pitt Sociology Review*, 2022, Vol. 12, No. 1, p. 24-31. [online]. [2023-11-29]. Available at: <https://www.sociology.pitt.edu/sites/default/files/pitt_sociology_review_2022.pdf>.

46 VERMA, T.: Cultural Cringe: How Caste and Class Affect the Idea of Culture in Social Media. In *Feminist Media Studies*, 2021, Vol. 21, No. 1, p. 159-160.

- “The worst thing in gaming, at least for me, is when you get a random on your team who is clearly there just for the vibes. With all the guides and videos online, if you do not understand the game you are playing, there must be something wrong with you” (male, 25).
- “I understand that different people have different tastes, but, as you say, doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results is the sign of insanity. The goal of a game is to win, end of story. You don’t get an award for losing to the tutorial boss in a single player game... losing with friends is never more fun than winning alone – no matter what anyone says” (male, 30).

Not playing (or rather gaming) a game in accordance to widely accepted standards, or per the definition of a pure game – to seek out a win, is, as other research has shown⁴⁷ considered rude and in extreme cases a sign of poor social intelligence or ignorance. It is for this reason game designers have been segregating players in MMOs and other on-line games. *World of Warcraft*⁴⁸ has roleplay servers and player versus player servers for example, while games like *League of Legends*⁴⁹ include separate game modes such as ARAM⁵⁰ which by design are less win focused (no external validation for winning on the player profile). The goal is to prevent conflicts from arising between the two groups, allowing them to engage with the medium however they prefer, however, it has the added effect of further entrenching the existing cleavage and segregating individuals based on their understanding of what a game is.

Discussion and Conclusions

The goal of this study was to demonstrate that by building on H.-G. Moeller’s concepts of identity, applying the distinction between play and game, accounting for being aware of a game’s general peer and belonging to a group that plays games regularly together, a clearer picture emerges about the nature of gamer identity, as well as explains issues encountered by previous studies. From the interviews a pattern emerged. Individuals who belong to gaming communities were invested in their gamer profile and their standing within a specific community identified as gamers while those that were ambivalent towards their profile and preferred to play were less likely to do so. Belonging to a gaming community and participating in gaming discourse significantly increases the likelihood one will chose to identify as a gamer – with the concept of the general peer explaining this relation. In fact, being aware one is being observed by others and internalizing it to the extent it affects one’s style of play was a key divider between play and game-oriented gamers, with the latter feeling cringe for non-normative behaviour during gaming. Gaming gamers admitted to self-policing their gaming styles, playing with accordance to the meta⁵¹ and were aware of the expectations the group placed on them.

47 *Why It’s Rude to Suck at Warcraft*. Released 26th November 2022. [online]. [2023-11-28]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BKP117locYU>>.

48 BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT: *World of Warcraft*. [digital game]. Irvine, CA : Blizzard Entertainment, 2004.

49 RIOT GAMES: *League of Legends*. [digital game]. Santa Monica, CA : Riot Games, 2009.

50 Remark by the author: ARAM stands for All Random All Mid as is a game mode described by players as a way to relax and unwind after playing ranked mode. Winning is meaningless in this mode as there are no points gained and strategies and tactics are difficult to have as the name implies one has no agency in selecting one’s hero (random).

51 Remark by the author: Meta refers to the socially constructed and understood optimal way to play a digital game.

“To be honest with you, I wouldn’t want to play with someone who isn’t familiar with the current top meta picks and how to play around them. It is even part of the rules for this community” – the interviewee (male, 22) is referencing the rule: Be familiar and up to date with the game. Play gamers on the other hand frequently (29 out of 32) pointed out that they do not care how members of their community decide to play as long as it does not harm the collective fun. They also appear to be less likely to consider themselves as gamers – either finding the label redundant or representing a style of engagement that goes against their own style. Gaming gamers, on the other hand, were quick to identify as gamers with 27 out of 32 choosing said label.

Due to the dominance of prolificity in the construction of gamer identity, those that do not fit into the profile of how a gamer is expected to look / sound / behave, etc. will feel alienated from the identity. Building on this and previous studies in the area of gamer identity it is safe to assume that most women who play games would fall into the categories of passive or play orientated engaged gamers. This is demonstrated by studies⁵² that found that women prefer games designed to be played more than gamed. This could be explained by factors such as socialization (competition and winning at all costs are seen as the domain of the male sex), marketing and the dominance of the male image and stereotypical masculine culture being associated with the gamer identity leads those who choose to game to pursue it authentically rejecting the term and requires further study.

Observations made in this study demonstrate how important a referential profile is in shaping the vision of who is a gamer. Those that stated their identity is authentic (they are gamers because they feel like gamers – no validation was provided) predominantly preferred to play: 14 out of the 17 play-oriented gamers. Going further, prolific identification was based on constant curation of the profile – having higher ranks, one’s win rate and so on, causing individuals to experience greater uncertainty with their identity – in some cases a feeling of inadequacy. One interesting observation that should be addressed relates to the 5 engaged gaming gamers who did not identify as a gamer. In each case, the main argument given was a sense of inadequacy in relation to the general peer. Either the person had a low budget computer and no accessories (3 out of 5), considered themselves not a gamer because they only specialize in one game (1 out of 5) or were distancing themselves from the stereotype of a gamer (1 out of 5). This stems from individuals observing other, more visible and pronounced profiles, who are validated by the general peer as gamers. In 4 of the cases the reference was a popular streamer/youtuber. Game-oriented engaged gamers were, in fact, very selective with whom they decided to label a gamer. In general, their vision of who is a gamer is based on empirical observations – quantifiable facts provided to them by the medium itself with this numerical approach reinforced by influencers.

Future research on the topic of gamer identity should consider the cleavage between players and gamers, as it appears to explain the possible reasonings behind why someone who engages with games on a daily basis refuses to associate themselves with the term gamer. Due to the limitations of this study, with its focus on identifying the possible factor causing this disassociation, it is unable to answer questions related to distribution of these two groups, as well as provide the exact relationship between playing and its exact impact on gamer identity.

Overall, this study has demonstrated that the main two predictors if someone considers themselves a gamer are being part of/aware of the discourse surrounding games one plays and belonging to a group that plays games. This is the division between passive

52 For example, see: YEE, N.: *Beyond 50/50: Breaking Down the Percentage of Female Gamers by Genre*. Released on 19th January 2017. [online]. [2023-11-21]. Available at: <<https://quanticfoundry.com/2017/01/19/female-gamers-by-genre/>>.

and engaged gamers. Engaged gamers can be divided into those who play and those who game based on B. Suits conceptualization of what a game is. Those who favour play are less likely to see themselves as gamers and build their identity in relation to gaming in an authentic manner. Those who favour game are very likely to view themselves as gamers and build their identity using proficility thanks to quantifiable feedback received from games that allows them to validate themselves and others.

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