



## Introduction

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# Introduction: games and subcultural theory

This issue of *GAME Journal* offers an overview and a series of case studies on video games from the point of view of subcultural theory. There has been little work in game studies from this perspective, which offers a theoretical frame for the ever growing complexity of the audiences involved with the medium of the video game. The study of subcultures on the other hand has a long standing and complex tradition which culminates in what has been recently defined as the “post-subcultural” theoretical scenario.

This introduction provides, firstly, an overview of how subcultural theory could contribute to a study of games and gamers. It will discuss the implications of a study of video game subcultures and the complexity of such an endeavour. The first section will mostly review some of the most recent literature that addresses this topic, trying to evaluate how much has been said, and how it could contribute to a cultural study of video games. Secondly, the introduction will look at the pieces that are collected in this issue. The curated contributions are divided into two sections. The first part collects peer-reviewed essays that critically analyse specific cases and assess the relevance of a study of video game subcultures for the theoretical understanding of game culture as a whole. The second part, the “critical section” (now a constant presence in issues of *GAME Journal*), is comprised of texts that look at cases that have a geographical specificity.

## AN OVERVIEW OF (POST)-SUBCULTURAL THEORY

This collection of essays on video game subcultures is naturally far from even attempting to summarize the complexity of the debate on subcultural theory. Moreover, the social reality of video games cultures (and subcultures) is in turn too complex to also allow for anything more than a broad appreciation in this issue of *GAME Journal*. Yet the critical rethinking of the concept of subculture appears as a key, timely notion through which to tackle the overlapping families of practices and media to which we commonly refer under the umbrella term of “video games”.

Some of the most recent works on subcultural theory have focused on the polyvalence of the very term “subculture”. In a turning point in the debate, Rupert Weinzierl and David Muggleton (2003, p. 3) have showed that subcultural phenomena might have to be re-theorised and re-conceptualized “on the shifting social terrain of the new millennium, where global mainstreams and local substreams rearticulate and restructure in complex and uneven ways to produce new, hybrid cultural constellations” (p. 3). This process, argue the authors, involves a critical revision of what have been seen as past theoretical and political “orthodoxies” on the matter, such as the seminal 1970s approach of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) from the University of Birmingham – a revered although still criticised benchmark “against which to mark out and assess subsequent developments” (Weinzierl & Muggleton, 2003, p. 4). Part of the paradigm shift consists in challenging a model in which working-class youth subcultures would heroically resist subordination to dominant structures through semiotic guerrilla warfare. Nowadays, research would tend to reflect a more pragmatic approach compared to what could be seen as the “romantic” approach of the CCCS (Weinzierl & Muggleton, p. 4). In the wake of this critical shift, the cultural studies approach of the Manchester Institute for Popular Culture (Redhead, 1990, 1993, 1995, 1997; Redhead, Wynne & O’Connor, 1997) was followed by the “post-modern” developments like the ones by Bennett (1999), Muggleton (2000) and Thornton (1995).

In the process, the evolution of the critical debate has generated a vast array of new concepts and definitions. Singh (2000) has conceptualized youth groups as “channels” or “subchannels”. Weinzierl (2000) categorized “temporary substream networks”. Bennett (1999) proposed the formulation of “neo-tribes”. Redhead (1997) wrote about “clubcultures” and global youth formations. As Hodkinson noted (2002, p. 23) “it is not readily apparent what to make of this remarkable plethora of concepts and explanations”; save that some of the confusion that it entails can be alleviated by acknowledging that different concepts are often used to define different aspects of social reality. Weinzierl and Muggleton (2003, p. 20) argue that the multiplication of perspectives opens to a world which may be seen as populated by formations as diverse as “bondage punks and anarcho-punks”, “DiY-protest cultures”, “techno tribes”, “Modern Primitives”, “Latino gangs”, “new-wave metallers”, and “net.goths” amongst others. This panorama may seem to have more resonance with what Polhemus (1994) described as a “supermarket of style” than with 1970s British subcultural theory (Weinzierl and Muggleton, 2003, p. 20).

Yet such a multiplicity, while inevitable, does not mean that these different social formations should not be approached through a consistent theoretical approach. As Hodkinson and Deicke note (2007, p. 15), it is important that the desire to avoid the structural determinism and the

clearly cut collective identities with which subcultural theory has been traditionally associated “does not lead theorists to settle either for under-theorized (and arguably rather obvious) assertions that young people’s identities are changeable and complicated, or for sweeping assumptions about electivity, individual distinctiveness and consumer choice”. In other words, while it is necessary to consider the complexity of individual identities, the pursuit of ongoing significance for identifiable youth formations must not be overlooked.

For Weinzierl and Muggleton (2003, p. 20), “liminal” youth cultures attempt to accumulate subcultural capital (in Thornton’s definition, 1995) while also maintaining distinction (consistently with Bourdieu, 1993) from other groups or sub-groups based on “authenticity” and “identity”.

The complexity of the relations of power and identity that the subcultural terrain thus entails for research may be approached through what Weinzierl and Muggleton (2003, p. 4) define as the three main notions, or “contenders [...] for theoretical supremacy”, in the analysis of youth culture: Bourdieu’s definitions of “taste”, “distinction” and “cultural capital” (1984); Butler’s analysis of performativity and subcultural identities (1990 and 1993); and Maffesoli’s (1996) post-modern framework for youth analysis which challenged traditionally conceived socio-structural identities.

It would seem as if the theoretical scenario highlighted so far would find an interesting terrain in the context of gaming cultures. As a large and complex “family” of audiences and cultural and social formations, the phenomenon of gaming may be approached through the diffraction of audiences and formations based on both specific or broader, trans-media genres and streams (FPS and MMORPG games; horror, sci-fi, sports, fantasy genres), on the frequency of playing habits or attitudes towards the medium (“casual” or “hardcore” gamers, “retrogamers”, “early adopters”), or even on company and product-based affiliation (Nintendo aficionados, Sony supporters, Final Fantasy fans, Amiga and Psygnosis collectors). Each of these classifications possibly cuts in a peculiar and distinct way through a complex web of social intersections which may overlap with other lifestyles, contexts, scenes, consumption of other media, etc.

An attempt to “map” video game cultures specifically via youth and subcultural formations has been proposed by Crowe and Bradford, who defined through the term *virtua-cultures* the practices within the virtual worlds of online gaming communities, considering how young people “construct and maintain virtual identities within virtual social systems” through an analysis of the game *Runescape* (2007, p. 217). In this case study, argue the authors, power relations emerge through struggle and consensus throughout the dynamic of a *virtua-culture*.

While the notion may be useful to describe similar cases, we argue that it hardly might be considered to describe the variety of social formations falling under the umbrella term of the “gamer”.

It is true that at the discursive level, gamers have been described according to a consistent type of media consumers. The gamer has often been characterised as belonging to a broad group of “geeky”, or “techy” individuals, both by the “dominant” culture or media, and also by gamers themselves, as a means of asserting and affirming their identities. In many cases, the gamer has been conceived as possibly overlapping with the hacker and his or her practices of cyber-resistance. The constellations of gaming practices, however, seem to bring us far from actual identification with any stereotype or unique profile.

(Post-)subcultural theory offers a complex view of the notion of the subculture and the parent culture against which it is supposedly defined. It challenges the idea that there would be coherent and homogenous formations at play that can be easily and clearly demarcated. It also suggests that contemporary youth cultures seem to be characterized by levels of stratifications which are far more complex than what might be suggested by simple dichotomies opposing a monolithic “mainstream” against “resistant subcultures” (Weinzierl & Muggleton, 2003, p. 7).

From this perspective, subcultures may be seen from case to case as either places of symbolic resistance, or as formations which are complicit in the niche marketing of their own identities and thus call for a less-than-clear-cut perspective on discursive and political interaction. Subcultural affiliation certainly offers “belonging, status, normative guidelines and, crucially, a rejection of dominant values” to contrast against the “outsiders” (Hodkinson & Deicke, 2007, p. 3). Yet, as Weinzierl and Muggleton have argued (2003, p. 8), commodity-oriented subcultures may also live out “of consumerist ambitions since their very beginnings”: for instance, bikers (Willis, 1978), snowboarders (Humphreys, 1997) and windsurfers (Wheaton, 2000).

### **GAMES AND YOUTH (SUB)CULTURES**

In spite of the relative lack of specific inquiries into gaming practice from the standpoint of subcultural analysis, some tendencies in research and in the reception of games as subcultural may still be highlighted.

Firstly, gamers and video game cultures have been often acknowledged as parts of larger lifestyle formations to which they appeared as marginally tied, and yet closely entangled with – for instance, clubbing (Malbon, 1999), or the “virtual” which would comprise together media and practices such as the Internet, virtual reality parks and computer games (Chatterton & Hollands, 2003, p. 22). In these cases, gaming practices are subsumed within broader processes and spaces in which lifestyles are addressed by and shaped by the economic processes of production and leisure (Featherstone, 1991).

Secondly, and broadly speaking, gaming (indeed subcultures broadly conceived) has also been strongly associated with youth cultures. McNamee (1998) focuses on games as a youth phenomenon in relation to gender, discussing the way in which power and control in the home are displayed in the gendered uses of games made by the audiences. As Hodgkinson and Deicke argue, “the increasing relationship between young people and particular kinds of consumption has been a key theme of recent scholarship on youth cultures” (2007, p. 3). The long-standing association between games and youth is all the more important as it implies the equally enduring issue of media panic and deviance through which games have often been received and constructed, throughout a history of scapegoating that can be traced over many decades of media and moral panic (Drotner, 1992; Cohen, 1972).

Indeed, as Osgerby argues (2004), video games and media in general have been a pervasive presence in the cultural and social experience of young people. The average American child, note Rideout, Foehr, Roberts, and Brodie (1999) would grow up “in a home with three TVs, three tape players, three radios, two video recorders, two CD players, one video game player and one computer” (p. 10). The omnipresence of the media in young people’s lives is also attested in a country like Great Britain by Livingstone and Bovill (1999) who found that young people aged between six and seventeen spent an average of five hours a day using some form of media. This would increase the chance for games to attract negative connotations as cultural nasties associated with youth subcultures and deviancy. In the aftermath of tragedies like the Columbine massacre, as Osgerby notes (2004), “computer games were also blamed”, serving alongside rock music and other forms of youth entertainment as a useful “whipping boy” – as a scapegoat that journalists, politicians and moral crusaders conveniently exploited for problems whose origins are rooted in more complex social and economic issues. (pp. 50-53).

In contrasting these narratives, post-subcultural theory may be efficiently deployed in order to defy grand claims and to show how consumption has rendered young people’s already uncertain transitions increasingly characterized by ephemeral and individualized tastes, practices and identities (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997). This contrasts with the emphasis of previous scholarship on socio-economic aspects and categories which may be trivially employed for the construction of stereotypes.

From this point of view, subcultural and youth studies offer interpretative keys to tackle the social and political tendencies shaping up the reception of games and the ideas surrounding gamers in wide cultural contexts. Being games as a medium a relative novelty in the discourses the academic discourses of theory and critical approaches in the public sphere, subcultural analysis may help defy the tendency to frame them within excessively generalizing narratives.

Newman (2008) argues about what Johnson defined the ease with which videogames could be derided as “junk culture” that reduces their players “to blinking lizards, motionless, absorbed, only the twitching of their hands showing they are still conscious» (Johnson, 2006). For Newman, this speaks of an alarmist tendency that is seemingly “unaware of the richness and diversity of gaming cultures”, associating gameplay “with cultural decline [and] falling standards of literacy and educational achievement (Newman, 2008, pp. vii-4).

Yet this kind of bias seemed reversed, in a positive sign, in some of the enthusiastic approaches to games over the last few years, according to which games would have the potential to cross over from subcultural realms to not only a “mainstream”, but also a “healthy” and “salvific” medium (Carbone & Ruffino, 2012). While being positive rather negative, these takes reproduce a bullet-theory idea of media. The critical perspectives of post-subcultural theory may be especially useful in defying the cultural determinism at work both in the long-standing tradition of game-bashing and in the more recent trend of techno-enthusiasts, contributing to the understanding of how a “new medium” fits into this broader cultural debate. Part of the process through which a medium is defined certainly has to do with generational as well as technological and cultural aspects. As Bennet notes (2007), interpretations of contemporary youth often rely on a cultural bias in how they interpret them based on an idealized notion of the past: while “authentic” youth cultures are seen as “a thing of the past”, contemporary youth is often “lambasted by those who claim to know better than young people themselves what being young is all about” and “regularly criticized for its consumer-centredness”, which in this case, takes the shape of an “obsession with digital distractions, such as video-games and texting (p. 39)”.

### COMPLEXITY OF GAMING PRACTICES

An example of a complex issue which is often taken for granted and which could benefit from theory from a post-subcultural perspective is the commonplace identification of games with the consumption habits of young males (and relatedly, with the male gaze and its ideology). For Roberts and Foehr (2004), video games are a novelty medium that operates “through a TV screen” in a “changing media landscape” (pp. 3 and 128). For the authors, even though much has changed in recent times since the “rudimentary graphics and limited user control of early games”, the proportion of girls and boys who utilize them are scrutinized through quantitative analysis to conclude that video games are still “largely the domain of boys, particularly during the late childhood and early adolescence (8 to 14 years)” (Roberts and Foehr, 2004, p. 128). Also, “Clearly, video games hold the greatest attraction for middle-school boys– a finding very much in line with claims that the content of most video games is highly gender-stereotyped, appealing far more to boys than girls (e.g., Calvert, 1999; Funk, 1993; Tanaka, 1996)” (Roberts and Foehr, 2004, p. 129).



While this kind of analysis focuses on what is arguably one of the largest sub-categories that may be employed to describe gamers (teenage males), the conclusions show many possible limitations of this approach. Firstly, the claim that “much has changed since the rudimentary graphics and limited user control of early games” (Roberts and Foehr, 2004, p. 127), in the absence of clear criteria, does not seem to be justified by any argumentation. It also displays a poor historical understanding of the achievements of the medium, since examples of highly “sophisticated”, “artistic” or “complex” games may be traced back to the very beginning of the medium.

Secondly, although it is difficult to deny that gaming might have remained mostly a male-centred practice, the quantitative findings are probably not sufficient to investigate the diversity of audiences involved, including the gaming practices of women. Gender analysis in games, so far devoted primarily to a critique of female and normative stereotyping in a large part of “traditional” video games, might benefit from a subcultural take on possible areas of dissent and alternative consumption, for instance through ethnography of “atypical” or “creative” gendered gaming practices (Anthropy, 2012), or through historical investigation on fringe areas of female game development (Nooney, 2013).

Whether or not gaming subcultures will come to challenge, at the symbolic level, “the “inevitability”, the “naturalness” of class and gender stereotypes” (Hebdige, 1979, p. 89), it is nevertheless important to approach gaming cultures while avoiding the same kind of “masculinist bias” in British sub-cultural theory that had led to an exclusive concentration on male styles and subcultures (Muggleton & Weinzierl, 2003, p. 31). The issue of possible over-simplification in the analysis of video game audiences in relation to trans-media consumption brings up the necessity to deploy complex views of gaming’s underlying social, ideological, and political formations. Our impression is that many historical manifestations of gaming might have been overlooked, remaining fundamentally submerged, in contrast to more commonly understood or spectacularised areas. As Hodkinson and Deicke note (2007), even subcultural theory has often been criticized for its tendency “to present an overly fixed impression of the cultural boundaries between groups of young people”, placing emphasis in some cases “on an untypical deviant or spectacular minority”, in such a way that “differential and changing levels of individual commitment were under- played” – and perhaps, “the most significant group who were excluded from subcultural analysis were young women” (p. 7). As the contemporary relevance of so clear a dividing line between male and female youth cultures has been questioned, the male-centredness of gaming practices needs to be approached (and understood or challenged), thereby avoiding grand narratives in favour of circumstantial empirical, qualitative, and ethnographic analysis.



As Newman (2008) argues, we are only beginning to scratch the surface of what we might call “videogame culture”, ranging from inherently social, productive and creative practices implied in their large scale production to “the extensive “shadow economy” of player-produced walk-throughs, FAQs, art, narratives and even games [...] that have emerged in terms of grass-roots production (p. vii). Newman notes that while some of these activities and communities are “reasonably widespread”, others – such as the production of in-depth walkthroughs, fan fiction stories or game-inspired costumes – “are altogether more niche”: for instance, “cosplay” would be more specifically located within other cultures such as science fiction fandom and contained with their institutions; likewise, within wider computing cultures, proficiency at games modding might be seen as “a necessary condition of entry”, for instance “as a vital part of the cultures of FPS gaming (Newman, 2008, pp. viii and 175).

According to King and Krzywinska (2006), games, in order to be understood fully, should be situated within the cultures in which they are found, which includes looking at their wider industrial and economic context. For instance, the combined influence of “military-industrial funding, hacker experimentation and science-fiction oriented subcultures” on first-generation games such as *Spacewar* “made a significant contribution to the genealogy of the videogame”, as did “the subculture of table-top *Dungeons and Dragons*, a primarily male-oriented sector in which many older game developers were involved”; it is through tendencies like these that a transition was made between relatively closed military and subcultural realms and commercial entertainment (King & Krzywinska, 2006, p. 207).

King and Krzywinska (2006) borrow Huizinga’s definition of *play* to show its tendency to generate communities based on the feeling of being “apart together” or “mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world” – a quality similar to that invoked in more recent studies of subcultural forms; however they also point out that “far from all game players would regard themselves as part of a subculture defined in this manner, particularly those who play games more casually”; while on the contrary, “for many regular or hard-core gamers, gaming can provide a strong sense of identity and might, in some cases, frame the way they present themselves to others” (p. 219). Although diverse in its manifestations, it would seem that a “game culture” could be said to exist. King and Krzywinska (2006) quote Fine (1983), who showed how gaming magazines, websites and chat rooms devoted to gaming have become central to establishing a “general” gaming subculture as well as particular, “specific” subcultures related to individual games or genres; from this point of view gaming culture would appear like a large domain that “cuts across national boundaries and in which game players are particularly likely to be adept because of the computer-based nature of the medium”, which promotes “a distinctive shared language that helps to mark gamers off as a subsection of society” (King & Krzywinska, 2006, p. 220).

King and Krzywinska argue that Fine's (1983) definition of an "idioculture" captures a sense of how, on the one hand, single games and genres can generate more localized and idiosyncratic subcultures; nevertheless, on the other hand, gaming has also established itself as a practice located in the "much wider landscape of popular culture and entertainment in recent decades", becoming the basis "of a very large industrial enterprise", to the point that "the mainstreaming of the games industry is seen by some as a threat to its roots in the kinds of smaller and more particular subcultures" (King & Krzywinska, 2006, p. 225).

### IDEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

In the cultural debate on the social potential of technologies, "both advertisers and Utopian visionaries (such as Timothy Leary) have extolled the potential for digital technology to open up new vistas of dazzling creativity" (Osgerby, 2004, p. 167). As we have already argued, games, too, have been considered as sharing the "the utopian potential of the Internet as subcultural community and bearer of a gift economy" (Muggleton & Weinzierl, 2003, p. 302), in the same way that it might be argued to happen in the case of the proximity between hacking practices and "elite" gaming subcultures (King & Krzywinska, 2006, p. 227).

In the domain of video games, another example of ideological resistance may be seen in the emergence of "serious games" as niche areas of resistance to the capitalist logic which is at the basis of the video gaming industry. Yet, as the Authors of this Introduction have already argued (Carbone & Ruffino, 2012), video games, in their contemporary heyday of growing social and academic recognition, have also been a-critically indicated as a redeeming medium, a position which only inverts the previous attitude of demonization and academic negligence, while being based on discursive myths and a techno-enthusiastic faith. Theorists should be particularly cautious of celebrating how "young people" can become "liberated" from old categories or conditions through being introduced by new media "into a world of active consumption and choice" (Hodkinson, 2007, p. 16).

Nevertheless, it would be cynical to deny the "enormously heightened media awareness" and potential of "computer-mediated communications" in their providing enhanced possibilities "for more encompassing and political forms of subcultural organization" (Weinzierl & Muggleton, 2003, p. 22). However most active practices activities beyond particular subcultures could be viewed as unserious, as "messing around" (Sefton-Green & Buckingham, 1998, p. 74, cited in Osgerby, 2006, p. 167) – an argument which challenges notions that access to computers in itself necessarily allows young people to become creative cultural producers – it is fair to acknowledge that "a broader, and perhaps less romantic, conception of creativity" (Sefton-Green & Buckingham 1998:77), may effectively blur the boundaries between production and consumption, so that what counts as a "text" or as a creative work of art may become subject to a wide range of definitions (Osgerby, 2006, p. 167).

Weinzierl and Muggleton (2003) argue that Thornton's (1995) work is able "to dispense with the (inaccurate) assumption that such subcultures are "inherently" resistant or oppositional simply by virtue of their positioning vis-à-vis a dominant cultural formation", thus challenging "the idea of the latent political nature" of subcultural practice (p. 13).

While the CCCS may have over-politicized youth formations, the risk with post-modernist and other post-subcultural positions is that they may under-politicize them, by assuming – according to Weinzierl and Muggleton (2003) – that youth cultures tend to be mainly hedonistic, individualistic and politically disengaged, or exclusively concerned about the assertion of their authenticity via the accumulation of subcultural capital – which would lead to an understatement of "the political activism and media visibility of new post-subcultural protest (p. 14).

As games are increasingly evoked for their interplay with other media and their role in defining and shaping our cultures, carrying artistic, cultural and social meanings – both ideologies and conversely "engaged", "alternative", or "redemptive" discourses – it becomes increasingly important to accompany the merely descriptive and (inter)textualist analysis shared by many approaches in game studies with elements of social and subcultural theory that could provide perspectives through which to de-essentialise the patronising or enthusiastic perspectives through which games are often observed.

Although technologies ought not to be treated as neutral tools, their effects depend on the contexts of their use (Kendall, 1999). In this respect, more empirical research is needed in order to bring to light the complexity of gaming cultures and subcultures and their relational positioning in broader social formations.

### **THE CONTRIBUTIONS IN THIS ISSUE**

This introduction and the collection of essay in this issue merely tackle some of the many possible approaches and cases in the study of video game subcultures. In their entirety, we believe, they advocate for the adoption of fluid rather than fixed categories, and for empirical analysis rather than grand narratives. Perhaps the subcultural notion should be seen not as a point of arrival but rather, of departure, as a very useful albeit not universal key that we could use to enter the complexity of these practices.

The variety of the contributions collected in the present issue testifies how a study of video game subcultures is necessarily centrifugal: if we imagine the studies of the tendencies of the mainstream market as oriented towards the "centre" of video game culture, then analyses of marginalised and under-represented forms of reception look instead towards unlimited and dispersed directions. In this issue we proudly welcome papers with very diverse geographical focuses, based on a variety of methodologies and interested in phenomena which occurred in different periods in the history of the video game industry.

**The peer-reviewed part of the issue includes essays by Rob Gallagher, Alison Harvey, Israel Márquez, Gabriel Menotti, Theo Plothe, Heikki Tyni and Olli Sotamaa, and Ge Zhang.**

Two of the papers are symptomatic of the geographical diversity we hope to emphasise in this publication. Both Zhang and Gallagher look at particular examples of the reception of video game products. **Ge Zhang** looks at how players who live in Hong Kong received the video game *Sleeping Dogs*, set in the same city. The game, sold on a global market, presents the city through what Urry (1990) would define as a tourist gaze, filling it with martial art fighters and gangsters – the sort of things a Western gamer would expect to find in Hong Kong. However, the contemporary Hong Kong does not match such a description in the perception of younger generations who live there. Zhang draws on Lefebvre's (1991) spatial theory to re-map the city of Hong Kong through the video game *Sleeping Dogs* and the criticism offered on the message boards by local players. The conclusion depicts *Sleeping Dog* as an allegory, rather than a representation, of the real. This is an allegory which also disturbingly caricatures the networks of power and violence who are currently undermining the future of a generation of citizens.

**Rob Gallagher's** paper brings us to a completely different period and location, and yet focuses also on the particular case of reception of a video game product. Gallagher looks at how the console Sega Saturn was received in the United Kingdom during the 1990s after the console had been mostly dismissed in Western countries by the original manufacturer, which preferred to focus instead on the Japanese market. Publications such as *Sega Saturn Magazine* addressed an audience that quickly became peripheral, and which focused its attention on the products being released in Japan and not on the “local” European market. Gallagher's understanding of that period, in which the author has been personally involved, does not indulge in nostalgia. It is, instead, a compelling case in favour of nuanced and personal forms of interpretation of video game products, as opposed to contemporary trends towards the individualisation of the playing experience. Here Gallagher draws on Sedgwick's distinction between the “camp” and the “kitsch”. Metrics and users data are seen as moving towards the kitsch: a form of cynical manipulation which assumes a gullible audience. The “camp”, on the other hand, is a form of excessive erudition and sophistication, a form of “hermeneutic ingenuity”, a quality which Gallagher attributes to the community of Sega Saturn fans of that period. Gallagher keeps the question open as to whether camp could somehow re-emerge through new forms of independent production of video games.

**Theo Plothe** takes us in a completely different direction. He looks at how video game players are depicted as a subculture in the TV show *The Big Bang Theory*. Here qualitative analysis mixes with quantitative

data: the author traces 79 scenes, in 39 episodes, where video games are mentioned or take part in protagonists’ jokes. Digital games are depicted as texts through which a specific community creates its own boundaries and identity. Spectators of the TV show are supposed to understand a subculture, its codes and processes of identification, through the reification of its tropes. However, the TV show is also oriented to a mass audience. The show plays precisely with the conflictual boundary between what makes video game players a subculture, and the immediate identification of such subculture by a mass audience. Interestingly, references to video games become less and less as the show became more and more popular, with the last two seasons having significantly fewer references than the first four. Márquez and Menotti look at communities built around the re-use of old video game technologies.

**Israel Márquez** presents the chiptune subculture as built on a process of reinvention of 8-bit consoles and home computers for the purpose of playing music. Márquez finds particularly interesting how such a community defines itself through the use of abandoned or outdated technologies, and how this practice is entangled with political statements of opposition against contemporary technological developments. The re-fashioning of old media is a practices that contributes in this context to a broader perception of video games as tools for the creation of the identity of a community.

On the other hand, **Gabriel Menotti** looks at *videorec* – the practice of video game recording. An apparently marginal phenomenon, videorec was developed in conjunction with other practices such as retro-gaming and machinima production. Menotti sees it here seen as an “interface” between players and industries. Drawing on studies on new media (Manovich, 2011 and 2013), cinema of attractions (Gunning, 2005), remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 2000) and machinima (Lowood, 2006), Menotti traces an analogy between video game play-throughs and the cinematic genre of documentaries. What is documented in a videorec also contributes to the establishment of the values of a video game within the community of players. As such, videorecs can also work as a communication tool between the subculture and the mainstream culture, documenting not only what the video game is, but also what else it could be. Referring to Newman (2008), videorec is seen by Menotti as a way of playing with video games, thus altering their meanings and values.

The following papers look more specifically at practices of production as they are developing in marginal contexts, and yet always already in relation to an “official”, mainstream industry. **Alison Harvey** discusses about the emergence of the development tool Twine. The logic of (economic) success, central to the production of mainstream titles, is approached by Harvey through Halbestram’s (2011) definition of queerness as that which does not conform to the status quo. Queering game design therefore favours an anti-hegemonic, de-individualised struggle against capitalist economies.

In such an approach, Harvey sees as an opportunity for the community of Twine developers, at risk of being de-legitimised and deprived of their political value by forms of capitalist co-optation.

Last but not least, **Heikki Tyni and Olli Sotamaa** offer an insight on the Finnish game convention Assembly. The convention is discussed as a context of production at the margins of an “official” industry. However, at the same time the convention has been offering to generations of video game programmers a place in which to receive necessary training to later work in the industry. Assembly is discussed in its historical developments and for the ways in which old and new generations of “outsiders” are hosted within the event. Three concepts frame the perspective of Tyni and Sotamaa: the notions of scene, taken from Gosling and Crawford (2011), technicity (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006) and gaming capital (Consalvo, 2007). As Assembly became more “normal” in the last years, it still preserves an interesting interplay between hobbyism and professionalism, as well as both marginality and affinity with the video game industry

**Moreover, the critical, non-peer reviewed section of this issue offers three important critical contributions on region-specific subcultures which together provide an important additional commentary.**

Ideally connecting to Tyni and Sotamaa’s look at the Scandinavian event Assembly, **Mathias Fuchs** provides a deeper look at the Nordic Game Culture, focusing in particular on the LARP (live action role playing) scene. The scene is put in context and connected to other avant-garde communities that have been specifically grounded in Scandinavian culture.

A second critical note is provided by **Thaiane Oliveira, Andre Boechat, Emmanoel Ferreira, and Louise Carvalho**, who take us far away from the Scandinavian countries. The authors look at the Brazilian context and how numerous forms of fan-game production have been emerging in the last decades. The historical perspective is also enriched by looking at how participatory culture has been shaping in Brazil, and to what extent fan-made modifications of existing games have been dependent on the success of the original product, in a complex ongoing interplay between “tribute and resistance”.

The interest for the relation between producers and consumers is also central in the contribution by **Rossana Sampugnaro, Salvatore Mica, Salvatore Fallica, Ambra Bonaiuto, and Marta Mingrino**. Their sociological research collects and analyses data taken at the trans-national Global Game Jam events. The authors are specifically interested in understanding how the demographics of the attendants of the event has been changing in the last years. Originally intended as an industry-only event, the new demographic of Global Game Jam is symptomatic, according to the authors, of the emergence of a wider, participatory culture of the kind discussed by Jenkins. In this case, it is the industry that opens its boundaries to welcome a larger group of potential “producers”.



The number of peripheral sites where we could have wandered with this publication is indeed innumerable. In this issue we have made a selection of a series of possible ventures beyond the most frequently illustrated mainstream locations and commonplaces of video game culture. We are aware that to wander at the periphery of an idea also means to trace and reinforce those very same boundaries that separate the “periphery” from its centre. However, the authors who have contributed to this special issue have all shown, through different cases and approaches, how those boundaries collapse at every reading, and how they seem to be established by contingent interpretations more than any radical separation or “quantitative” analysis. We hope that this special issue will contribute to the study of digital games especially by encouraging further research on under-represented forms of play, surpassing the cumbersome fascination of game studies for texts and practices already discussed in mainstream media – which are often packaged, defined and sold as “new” by marketing strategies, more than anything else.

#### **ADDENDUM: A NOTE ON OUR COVER ARTISTS**

This issue is also enriched by the work of two Italian artists who have contributed with their visual work. Although not explicitly intended to appear in an academic journal, both works fit in well together with the collected essays. **Giovanni Fredi**'s *Kinshasa vs Akihabara*, on the cover of the peer-reviewed part of this journal, compares and analyses the habits of video gamers from two very different locations. On the one hand there is Akihabara, the technological district of Tokyo, Japan, with its individualised gamers completely absorbed in their playing activity with a Nintendo DS handheld system. On the other hand there is Kinshasa, Congo, and the communities of gamers who gather to play Pro Evolution Soccer 2008 on Sony's PlayStation console. Apart from highlighting the well-known economic disparities between the areas, the project visualises a practice (playing video games) that keeps these two distant cultures together, although in very different ways. It provides a visual commentary on two game subcultures, one largely represented and discussed (Japanese gamers), the other less known and confined to a restricted number of people in the city of Kinshasa.

The other visual project, which visually accompanies the cover of the critical, non-peer reviewed section of the printed version of this issue, is *Contradictions* by **Filippo Minelli**. Although not directly mentioning video game products (apart from *Second Life*) the work ironically displaces the names of brands, social networks and online services by re-writing them in contexts that are completely extraneous with the experiences they are usually associated with. *Contradictions* is about how the “first world” dream of a 2.0 reality appears completely displaced in the “third world”

– or in any of the many places of the planet that is not connected, not sharing, not viewing, not liking and not playing. It is about contradictions we are probably all well aware of, but often tend to forget or overlook while evaluating the alleged effects of online technologies in “our” world. We believe both Minelli’s work and this issue intend to multiply our ideas of and on the world(s) we live in, establishing and framing a multitude of worlds and possible uses and interpretations of video games.

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