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Between gamers and fans: performance and identity of videogame players[1][2]

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to discuss the relationships between two actors: gamers and videogame fans. The debate includes the self-recognition of players as fans or as gamers, the elaboration of their identities in relation to these denominations, and the stigmas attached to them. Analysis is done with data from a survey with gaming communities and in-depth interviews with players. Results point to two main player profiles in the community: the one who produces content (player-producer) and the one who consumes it (player-viewer). Amongst the main contributions, we highlight the perception of online players' encounters as fan communities, the valorisation of fans' self-recognition process, as well as similarities and differences between fans and gamers, from players' perspective themselves.

Introduction

In the last decade, the gaming audience has established itself as one of the great niches in the entertainment market. According to *Abragames*, the national market for digital games grew from 9% to 15% between 2013 and 2018, moving 900 million reais and amassing an engaged audience of young people who play an average of three hours a day on their mobile devices and consoles. In addition to their dedication and consumption of games, players develop affective bonds with each other and with some games, creating communities to share this practice and recognising the role of games in the formation of their identities. They therefore build their relationships with products on this market as true fans.

Many players recognise themselves as fans — be it by attachment to the very act of playing, preferring a specific title, or defending a brand or company (as in the Xbox vs. PlayStation battle). However, within the universe of digital games, another figure emerges in the process of constructing players' identity: the gamer. The expression appears many times in comments on social networks, magazines, or informal conversations as a synonym of player. In other moments, it defines the hardcore players, closer to the idea of a fan – referring, however, to digital games.

In 2017, during an interview with a digital game developer, in response to a question about whether or not the respondent considered himself a gamer, he stated: "I'm not a gamer, I have a social life". We thus realised that he was referring to the idea of young people who play alone and who, isolated in their rooms, have no contact with other people or even social skills for that matter. For many years, similar kinds of stigmata haunted — and, in some context, still do — fans as a literally fanatical individuals, capable of no critical thinking, whose identity traits, in turn, have been the matter of interest for academics in fan studies for decades now (especially since the 1990s). In this sense, our main research problem is: *what are the overlaps and distinctions between these two individuals — the gamer and the game fan?*

Empirical research, in addition to game observation on streaming platform Twitch, was based on an online survey and on qualitative interviews with digital game players, focusing on collecting information that would allow us to gauge their practices as well as their perceptions about the gamer identity. The first stage encompassed an online survey with players and the second one, a qualitative interview with selected players who had taken the survey. Results point to similarities between the figure of the fan and the gamer, such as heavy stigmata and strong affective ties between individual and cultural product. At the same time, particularities emerge especially in relation to content production: whilst the fan is associated with amateur content, the perception of the gamer individual is associated with the professionalisation of the player's activity.

Fans and gamers: performance and stigmatisation

The concept of the fan has been discussed in fan studies for at least three decades and touches on the creation of affective bonds, the construction of identity, the production of content (fan labour) and the performance of the individual, especially when in contact with other fans within communities. Reflections on game fans, or the typical fan behaviour observed in players, have been the topic of research in both its analogue aspect, such as board games, puzzles, or RPG (Booth , 2017; Mason , 2012) as well as in terms of performance within gaming communities (Booth , 2020).

In general terms, the fan can be defined for their affective ties with a cultural object, a narrative, or a text. This regular emotional involvement thus becomes part of this individual's identity. In this sense, the shared *habitus* amongst the fandom has communicative and identity-building functions all at once. The notion of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 2008) is understood here as a group of individual dispositions that are built collectively and therefore are the foundation of social distinction. In the conception of Setton (2002) the *habitus* would be a notion that helps us to think about social identities or "a cultural matrix that

predisposes individuals to make their own choices" (p. 61, free translation from Portuguese).

For Sandvoss (2013), in fandom culture the *habitus* works simultaneously as a form of communication and a way of building identities. Based on these functions, the options of consumption articulate the subject's complex class position and the construction of his/her identity, thus forming a perception of who he/she is or who he/she believes to be. Taste, therefore, would work as a form of social orientation guiding the individual's place in society

For Dutton, et. al. (2011), being a fan is not necessarily about taking on a unique identity but, rather, about performing an identity by participating in activities within particular interest groups or communities. The concept of performance, in turn, has supported studies on fan practices and on the role of players in these communities (Booth, 2020; Paz and Montardo, 2018), thus helping to unpack players' identities based on individuals' performance. We conceive the concept of performance here, according to Goffman's (1989) classic definition of it, as any activity carried out by a certain participant that, to some extent, influences other participants. This definition establishes, in other words, that fan groups approach certain topics in a particular manner so as to draw attention to themselves, or possibly to draw attention from the gaming industry itself.

For Lopes et. al (2015), performances and expressions of taste on social networks involve a set of actions that explain the personal medium of each fan, unveiling cultural aspirations, desires, and social distinction – that is, the construction of their own identity on a specific networked space. It is thus possible to infer that the self is constructed and performed, induced by a network of motivations emerging from social relationships as well as by the way fans want to be identified in these relationships. Taste, therefore, as a conception of the individual's place in society, is at the base of the very perception of who they believe they are.

So, the individual's own conception of himself/herself, as someone who has an affective connection and dedication to a cultural object, permeates issues such as performance, sense of belonging, and stigmatisation. Whether they are a self-proclaimed fan, player or gamer, their perception of themselves in relation to playing also reflects their group's impressions. Precisely because this is an image with collective dimensions, the perception of oneself as a fan or a gamer poses an obstacle to recognising the stigmata that these terms carry in themselves.

According to Goffman (1980), the condition of the stigmatised individual in society is determined by how their distinctive characteristics are perceived. The author uses the term visibility to determine this degree of the stigma *appearance*. Stigmatised social identity carries a mark that informs the individual's recognition of themselves in a singular, oppressive manner whilst a real identity exists in society: the one that we present in social environments and our virtual identity, the one that is expected of individuals or groups.

In fan communities, there is a schism in the fanatic's stigma, as individuals with similar traits come together in their freedom to express their common affections. By adhering to these common interest groups (communities) as a form of building their identity, there is change in such a way that "more people may accept that they are fans today, rather than seeing it as a stigmatised identity. But even so, certain fan objects can still be pathologized, and certain fan cultures can still be pathologized." (Hills, 2015, p. 149)

These concepts help us to reflect on what the symbolic systems used by digital game players might do and whether the symbols used provide a representation in social fields that stigmatise them. If to perform is to represent an identity that accepts the other, the concept of performativity de-emphasises identity as a description, introducing the idea of *becoming* (Hills, 2015). Somehow, being a gamer, assuming this set of signs and representations, requires – especially if this identity is itself stigmatised – a repetition of its identity production acts in social fields.

Even when Brazilian players do not identify themselves as gamers, it is useful to understand if they refuse to accept the term (as was the case with the idea of fans as *fanatics* and with the player who claims

not to be a gamer because he has a social life), if they just do not recognise themselves as such, or even if they would like to be, but do not feel worthy of receiving the title of a gamer (in the case of understanding the gamer as a professional). That is because, just as there are different levels of fan engagement, there are also different types of player engagement.

Between developers and marketers, the gaming industry focused on two specific types of players, solely considering their dedication and frequency of consumption: there were hardcore gamers and casual gamers. In the case of the latter, those are players who consume a lot of titles, are familiar with current conventions, find in gaming either a lifestyle or a priority, and are driven by challenges. In the case of the former, casual gamers play few titles (albeit they can play these for a long time), dominate little or none of the conventions of current games, and ultimately play for fun. Other authors (Salen & Zimmerman, 2012; Bartle, 1996) and even associations alike, such as Parks Associates, set themselves to classify players due to an understanding there might be different types of performance. Identifying a specific type of player can be a difficult task because, in doing so, players can jump between types. Likewise, the many types of fan performances have been researched and followed by categorisation efforts (Fiske, 1992; Sandvoss, 2013).

The purpose of categorising individuals' activities and performances in relation to cultural products is to understand these practices in an environment that offers a plethora of possibilities in terms of production and interaction – be it liking it, commenting, sharing, watching, chatting about it, playing, streaming, creating, etc. These activities also appear in communities where players – or game fans – exchange comments, tips on how to overcome levels, list *Easter eggs*, share their gameplays, or just watch them as a group. Publishing recorded matches or streaming live gameplays are some of the main activities on platforms that bring those fond of gaming together.

Thus, we see that the search for kinds of fans and players is a complex task and deserves attention. Albeit the purpose of this article is not to classify individuals and their practices, it is important to understand that this web of possibilities affects the identification of each individual as a player, a fan, or a gamer. These ways of acting inside these communities inform the ways in which players recognise themselves. For the purposes of this article, that is, when referring to players, we will limit ourselves to two main types we found in our sample, namely: player-producers, who make and publish content on the gamin universe, and player-viewers, who declare to be mostly dedicated to watching this kind of content.

Sociability and Play: Digital Platforms as Communities

Lupinacci (2021) points out that the largest conglomerates of digital capitalism seem to have noticed the market potential of streaming and thus started incorporating this function into their platforms: YouTube Live, by Google (Alphabet); Amazon's Twitch, Facebook Live, and Instagram Live Stories are some examples. Those fond of games were not left out. On these platforms, players meet and share information. The largest of these platforms is Twitch, followed by YouTube Gaming (a YouTube space dedicated to games).

The platforms also enable transmission of original content and interaction with those who are watching. We will henceforth call player-producers those individuals from our sample who make and share content on the gaming universe, especially gameplay streaming, and player-viewers those who admitted to mostly consume said content in the digital environment, more specifically by watching all sorts of content about gaming.

Lupinacci (2021) calls this type of real-time broadcast – such as watching gameplays – *company lives*, where the goal is to maintain a social or affective bond with viewers in which being together is as (or more) important as (than) what is being broadcast. According to her, activities such as gameplays are amongst the most popular and monetisable type of content available on these platforms, further arguing

that they have acquired a new level of relevance following mandatory social isolation.

Similarly, fans are mostly thought of in terms of their participation in communities, or so-called fandoms. In the digital environment, fans, unlike mere followers or viewers, absorb and share individual values, contributing to the construction of their cultural and identitary repertoire. Therefore, player gatherings fulfil the role of a community.

Twitch.tv stands out as the main video-sharing gaming platform. Created in 2001, Twitch is a streaming website that emerged as a spin-off from the US platform Justin.tv. With live or on-demand broadcasts, it offers a variety of content on gaming and several e-Sports competitions. Exchanges in these communities, especially competitions, are hybrid phenomena, as they encompass media, technology, games, entertainment, and even sports (Falcão, 201 9)

In 2018, Twitch gathered 41.100 live channels, with an average audience of 1 million viewers, 4 million streamers, and 560 billion minutes of videos watched.[1] To have an idea of the reach of an influential player-producer on the platform, American Ninja (Richard Tyler Blevins) has, himself alone, about 13 million followers and more than 406 million views on his channel. Presented as a professional Battle Royale player, he has Fortnite-playing session that can last up to 18 hours non-stop.

There is also an expressive presence of Brazilians. The number 43 on the ranking of streamers with most followers on Twitch is Brazilian. His name is Alanzoka (Alan Ferreira) and in 2012, he migrated his YouTube channel to Twitch, a competitor platform. Now he has approximately 1.5 million followers, more than 2.800 broadcast hours and 46.6 million views on his channel.

Covering a wide range of topics related to the gamer subculture, the player-producer exerts a strong influence on their followers. They express opinions that range from preferences and technical issues over a particular title – such as gameplay, graphics, sound quality – as well as their own performance on that title. Their performance attracts a segmented audience who are looking for texts about the gaming universe in virtual communities, often with a more comical or uncommitted discourse when compared to the usual market of large corporations and sponsors. We then have the concept of the self-construction of identity, closely associated with the Goffman's concept of representation (1989). According to the author, representation includes "all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by [their] continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some kind of influence on the observers" (Goffman, 1989, p. 34). The social interaction established between the act of producing and the act of watching in this digital environment creates the self, acting in the construction of specific social roles that make sense, not always consciously, for each player of this dynamic.

As for audiences, player-viewers can be attracted to video-sharing platforms because of specific events. One of the modalities most attractive to fans is called speedrun. A game can have a significant increase in audience when targeted by this modality. In speedruns, players perform stunts in the shortest time possible. An event that can take days or even weeks takes place in a few minutes, putting the game's standard mode, rules, and mechanics to test. Players can also share information from the gaming market, such as Easter Eggs or walkthroughs.

Such tools encourage practices that go beyond the act of playing itself, such as live streaming a game, recording and sharing the overcoming of steps in a game, as well as interactions between users in the chat box (with audio and text chat features). Players create one or more channels where they broadcast their videos, previously recorded or live, often arranging the date and time at which the content will be broadcast with their followers. They therefore create a sense of community, commitment, and belonging.

Another aspect driven by platforms like Twitch is the hierarchy created amongst participants, from icons and emoticons visible in players' posts, showing who the channel's followers are. Exclusive use of some

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[1] Source: TwitchTracker. Retrieved on January 01, 2019 from <https://twitchtracker.com/statistics>.

emoticons indicates that the player has contributed to the channel and has certain benefits compared to a non-active visitor, also known as Lurkers. This common visitor is one who seeks information about the object of fandom, but who has little engagement in the production of texts in virtual communities. Transforming this visitor into a more engaged type of fan has become a lucrative task for the gaming industry in the hope to extract income from the number of followers, and, consequently, encouraging the production of new streams. Benefits offered to subscribers of the channel, from a marketing point of view, adopt a strategy of attracting followers and dominating internal articulations. From an audience perspective, conversely, these members' perks equate to hierarchy in fan communities, varying according to their interaction on the page or group.

Both in real-life and online conversations, these hierarchical social relationships reveal the need to profile these fans in order to understand their behaviour and involvement with the gaming culture. It is in the attempt to understand this interaction and the path from ordinary player to player-producer that it is possible to shed light on the outlines of the virtual environment in gamers' identity.

Player-viewers contribute, a priori, as audience, holding conversations amongst themselves in which they attribute values and judgment about the gameplay that is being performed live. They follow and unfollow Twitch and YouTube channels platforms according to their personal taste in titles, themes, playing styles, specific players – engaging in chats that are both originated and echoed in these virtual communities.

In order to think about the player-game relationship based on a fan's relationship with their object of affection, it is important to take into account individual transformations and the history of the players' identity, including the production of content on gaming. Jenkins (1992) describes this productive force as an intimate product of the fan by claiming that "there is something empowering about what fans do with those texts in the process of assimilating them to the particulars of their lives. Fandom celebrates not exceptional texts but rather exceptional readings." (Jenkins, 1992, p. 284). The digital environment is, therefore, as a meeting point for other players to weave a myriad of texts about what is intimate and what stimulates them: gaming. In other words, they work as a stage for empirical research on these individuals – be they players, fans, or gamers.

Methodological procedures

In order to study the elements that characterise gamers' identity, we have developed an online survey that was followed by qualitative interviews. The survey consisted in 21 mixed questions (close-ended and open-ended) for initial data collection. The first part of the survey sought to draw an initial profile of respondents. The second part encouraged them to reflect on the characteristics of a gamer and their role on the web as both producer and consumer of content about gaming. The questions collected personal information that were used to characterise active players, concerning average time, frequency and duration of games; preferred genres and platforms; as well as their performance with other players on the web in multiplayer sessions; and consumption of content on online video-streaming channels. Finally, it addressed the particular conception of what it means to be a gamer – a question that was then unpacked during the qualitative interviews.

A total of 46 responses were collected in two weeks of sharing in channels with the most followers on Twitch and YouTube Gaming. We sent the link to the survey on October 26 and 27, 2018 in chats from six previously selected Brazilian channels that broadcast their gameplays whilst players interacted with each other and with the player. After plotting the data, we invited three respondents to qualitative interviews based on a semi-structured script. The selection was made especially based on the answers that stood out concerning the topic of what it meant to be a gamer. Interviews were held between October and November 2018 trough audio calls on the multi-platform instant messaging application WhatsApp on days

and at times previously agreed upon with interviewees.

Meeting the players: online survey

The survey was taken by 46 people, outlining the following profile: 89% were men aged between 25 and 35 (45.7%), native from Southeastern Brazil, and with an average family income of 5,000 *reais* (48.9%). More than half (60.8%) of them are pursuing university degrees.

The second part of the survey addressed player's relationship with games, such as preferences, way of playing and participating in digital communities. Here, we highlight two aspects that are directly related to fan activities: belonging to communities of interest and the affective bond.

When asked if they belonged to a group of players, just over half (51%) said yes and some mentioned mainly online groups, specific pages about a type of game, or using a messaging application. More than half of the respondents also stated that they follow an online channel about gaming. Amongst those whom they follow, the most cited ones were Brazilian channels Zangado, BRKsEDU, and Alanzoka. Interestingly, twelve (26%) of the 46 players did not answer this question. The eight who said they did not follow any channels did not give any reasons.

The main interest of respondents in these groups or online pages is to form teams for competitions in multiplayer sessions. That followed by chatting about gaming topics, such as titles, releases, technology, gadgets, etc. Finally, the third reason cited was getting tips from games and walkthroughs with other players. These reasons for grouping, as mentioned by players who responded to our questionnaire, are similar to the characteristics of fandom (Jenkins, 1992), such as exchanging messages about the object of affection and getting tips. In the fandom universe, this last feature appears in forums, where viewers try to discover the end of series or films based on behind-the-scene hints. Even the search for players to form teams could be seen as akin to cosplay meetings. These data therefore reinforce the argument that players' practices are close to those of other groups of fans.

The last question was whether players considered themselves gamers per se. The question aimed to identify their stance on the term and their own views on a possible identity in the gaming subculture. Here, respondents were asked to justify their answers. The question got 31 responses, indicating that 67% of all respondents consider themselves to be gamers. Reasons were grouped by proximity, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 – Respondents' reasons for considering themselves gamers

Reasons	Number of Respondents
I've been playing since I was a child	7
I love playing games	6
I am dedicated to this topic	5
I get involved with games	4
I have fun	3
I play a lot	3
I play lots of types of games	2
Because I chose to live many lives in one	1

Source: Dal Bello, 2018, p 87.

Most of those who stated that they considered themselves gamers showed a great emotional

involvement with the topic and the most often response mentioned playing since childhood. Thus, gaming becomes, like any other fandom object, "a connector to one's past, a reinvestment in what once made an individual feel comfortable and secure."(Geraghty, 2014, p. 82). By saying "I've been playing since I was a child" and "I love playing games", respondents associate the term gamer with an emotional involvement that goes beyond other qualities mentioned by those who said they did not identify themselves as gamers. These are largely players who were influenced by the gamer subculture in their childhood and who have accompanied, directly or indirectly, the technological evolution of digital games.

Also in response to the question about how long they have been playing for, more than half (65.7%) said that they have been played "since forever" or "since I was a child". This is linked to the generational issue observed amongst fans of audiovisual products, in which the affective connection with fandom objects often starts in childhood (Lopes et al., 2017). The nostalgia of belonging to the gamer subculture overlaps with justifications referring to the domain of knowledge on the subject or the time invested into playing.

By establishing an affective relationship with gaming cultural products, it is clear that the largest gaming audience in Brazil and in the world – adults and young adults born in the 1980s and 1990s – are those who experienced video games in their childhoods as a product already incorporated into their domestic routine and as a collective experience of media consumption. By experiencing and following the evolution of devices and gaming itself, gamers would admittedly recognise the affective bond that they have with gaming cultural objects.

Finally, one of the respondents stated that they had chosen "to live many lives in one", alluding to the possibility of controlling several characters in different narrative contexts as well as controlling scenarios and challenges that could never be experienced in real life. By basing their reasoning on this argument, the player demonstrates their preference for games that enable scene-setting, or more accurately, the wide range of games that can be classified as mimicry (Caillois, 1990). Representing only one answer in the universe of players who answered the survey, this particular response also points to the essence of entertainment: to escape from everyday life and reject the angst and frustration of real life.

Based on these hints about the perspective of a fan player or a gamer, we invited three respondents to an in-depth interview in order to further our reflection on this identity. We recall that qualitative research does not aim to generalise results but, rather, lends itself to being a laboratory of experiences that can later be reproduced (Lopes, 2005).

Being a fan or being a gamer: qualitative interview

After collecting data with the online survey, we selected and invited three players to carry out a qualitative interview. The initial script was meant to guide the conversation, whose main goal was to explore the understanding of a gamer's identity based on the participation of these players in digital video-sharing platforms.

Interviewee 1 is 38-years-old and has been playing since he was a child. He has been married for three years, has a two-year-old daughter, and currently works as a pharmaceutical sales representative. He describes himself as a player who likes to try out all kinds of games and platforms.

Interviewee 2 is a 25-year-old single player with no children and currently works as a producer in a recording and video-editing studio. She claims to play exclusively on consoles and smartphones since she was 10 and is fond of "lighter games", such as Nintendo's Mario Bros franchise games.

Interviewee 3 is 32-years-old, single, no children and works in the technology sector for a multinational company. He has been playing since he was about 5 years-old and says he has no preference for any specific gaming platform, even though he prefers RPG and Horror games, such as The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim and Resident Evil, respectively.

We started the interviews by revisiting the question about whether or not they identified themselves as gamers and these are the responses that we got:

> I think I'm a gamer, yes. I've been investing in a collection of old consoles, controllers, and games... And everything I find, good stuff, in mint condition. I insist on collecting, do you know what I mean? These are things from back in my day and few people know about them. I've played them all. (Interviewee 1, 2018)

Interviewee 1 justifies his position as a gamer by the fact that he knows and collects some of the consoles from his childhood. In another sense, collecting old consoles and accessories implies holding part of the knowledge of fandom objects, close to a materialisation of the experiences that he has had with the gaming subculture.

On the same question, interviewee 3 values the level of knowledge that any gamer must have about elements that make up the gaming universe. Therefore, by dedicating himself to the topic and having a lot of knowledge on it, he believes himself to be a gamer.

> I consider myself a gamer not only because of the time I spend playing games, but also because I spend it on researching, looking for information on top of the time I spend on games themselves. So I'm always on top of what's going on, what games are coming out, that kind of thing. (Interviewee 3, 2018)

When we asked them about the possibility of there being different types of gamers, all of them agreed, highlighting dichotomous possibilities in their answers: "old school or less experienced", "hardcore gamers and casual gamers", "professionals and amateurs".

Amongst justifications of what being a gamer is and what it is not, two of the interviewees showed to have greater prior knowledge about the subject. Drawing on classifications of players (hardcore, casual, etc.), Interviewee 2 referred to the gamer community when using the expression "different gamers' tribes". She also pointed out the possibility for gamers to dedicate themselves to a certain game genre or try out all types of games, as well as a specific type for those who play off- or online:

> There are different tribes amongst gamers: there are hardcores, hardcores who only play one type of game, FIFA, COD, BF, GTA, etc. There are platinum players, there are those who play everything, there are also those who prefer certain types of games, others prefer playing offline and others play more online (Interviewee 2, 2018)

Interviewee 2 argues that, personally, she does not consider herself a gamer because the term would be linked to e-Sports or any other professional activity. But, when considering this perspective, which, according to her, is the common sense, she would then be given the label of gamer, for playing a lot and knowing a lot about the topic:

> It's a little complicated, because that word, for me, it can mean two things: first, for me, a gamer is someone who makes a living off it, he kind of plays professionally. So, for me, gamers are e-Sports athletes, right? Those people who play professionally – LOL, a CS or any FPS [she laughs], who make money with this, the championships, they are, in my view, gamers, but, in everyday life, on average, anyone who plays more, whoever is more interested in gaming is seen as a gamer. So, roughly speaking, if you look at it from that angle, then yes, then I'm a gamer because other people label me as such, but I don't consider myself to be one. I consider gamers to be those who make a living off this. Anyone who just plays for fun, I don't consider these people to be gamers, like, personally. In my mind, they're gamers only when they're professionals. When it's not professional, it's more of a hobby, it's more fun, it's about having fun. Entertainment. (Interviewee 2, 2018)

In this quote, we found an element that distinguishes a player and a fan: the tendency to act professionally. The professionalisation of gaming was highlighted by Falcão (2019) as a recent phenomenon

that, to some extent, is now consolidated. Much of this recognition stems from the popularisation of championships on streaming platforms in the mid-2010s, which, added to the grand prizes for the winners, fostered the practice of digital games as a sport. In 2018, prizes at a single event totalled over $41 million and involved a tireless online audience. Thus, a spontaneous recognition of these players' activities is established during official tournaments. They are dedicated to the topic, playing for many hours and being paid for that.

We saw that players' behaviour is similar to that of fans of other cultural products, both in terms of practices and group characteristics. Nevertheless, the relationship with the word gamer, in this sense, is different. A fan is seen as an individual who loves something, has knowledge of it, collects and participates in groups, but ultimately occupies the space of an amateur, not a professional. This lead to another difference: depending on the class and the cultural product, there is some resistance to recognising oneself as a fan because of the supposed behaviour of giddy, crazy, fanatical people. Here, just the opposite happens: they would not identify themselves as gamers because they did not take it seriously enough.

Next, we asked if someone who would only watch gameplays could be considered a gamer. This was aimed at revealing interviewees' stance on what we call player-viewers inasmuch as these only watch other players' broadcasts. More than half of them claim that those who only watch it cannot be effectively seen as gamers. For them, there is a factual need to play, akin to the perception of the fan as an active individual (Hills, 2015).

Conversely, the other interviewees argued in favour of individuals' lust for sheer fun, –"somehow they for fun behind the game [sic]", or as a quest for knowledge: "watching it teaches you some things, just like with YouTubers" and "It's a strategy. Watch it and you'll learn how to play that level or play better with that character".

The last question was about whether they saw themselves as fans. By not guiding them towards a specific object, we hoped that interviewees would articulate their answers more freely, even abandon the spectrum of players-producers (streamer) altogether if that were the case. Interviewee 1 said he is a fan of the gaming subculture and mentioned his collection of old items, another typical fan activity (Geraghty, 2014), but he explains the importance that he sees in building gamers' identity based on the high investment that some players make when purchasing titles as they come out.

> I think I'm a fan, yes, but I know some guys who are much more of a fan than I am. Like, guys who spend a lot of money on video games and don't really care. Guys who are married and such and they spend a lot on it [he laughs]. They don't wait for the game's price to drop; they just go and buy it. I only buy it when I think it's really worth the price... Or when it's really hard to find. (Interviewee 1, 2018).

Respondent 3 also claimed to be a fan of the gaming subculture, but generally speaking, not leaning towards any platform, game genre, or mode of play. He stated that:

> I consider myself a fan, but I don't have a preferred platform. I go for the one that offers me... That attracts me with more games, so much so that, in the past generation [of consoles], I was more attracted to Xbox and today, in this current generation, I am more enthusiastic about PlayStation 4 and so on. I consider myself a video game fan, generally speaking. (Interviewee 3, 2018).

Then, he points out the importance of the characteristics that he has and which he considers to be attributes of a fan – not to mention that these are the same ones that were previously mentioned by him to qualify a gamer.

> I like to be always following things that are happening, I'm enthusiastic, I like to get familiar, I think about how games could be made...how...I analyse the games that come out, I see what's good and bad about them...What could improve, what could be worse. I think I am a critic! It's...I think because of that. I keep thinking, I'm idealising

what would the next generations will be [of consoles]. Anyway, I think I would consider myself a fan for those reasons. (Interviewee 3, 2018).

Interviewee 2, after expressing some uncertainty, ended up demonstrating her preference for a specific platform and brand.

> I don't know, this question is difficult because... Like...There are some brands I support. For example, I like Xbox a lot more than PlayStation [sic]. Like, Xbox is, in my view, in my experience...the experience of playing it online is much better, so I like Xbox a lot more than PlayStation, but like, being a fan of a game or a company, no. (Interviewee 2, 2018).

Something similar happens with fans of other cultural products. Just as football teams get their fans captivated and have them defend their interests, conflicts between those who prefer Star Wars or Star Trek tend to compete over which narrative universe is better. In the gaming universe, FIFA players (Electronic Arts) and Pro Evolution Soccer players (Konami) engage in enthusiastic discussions when it comes to which is the best football game.

There were also players who declared themselves fans of some specific artifact, such as Xbox or PlayStation consoles. This nuance reveals, in addition to a practical preference, a relationship with the act of collecting which materializes identification and nostalgia. However, beyond that, it encompasses another common characteristic amongst fans: disputes and internal preferences. Since the first studies on fans and fandom, there are references to conflicts, whether between fans and producers, between fans of rival products, or even between fans within the same community (Jenkins, 1992).

Interviewee 2 explains why she is a fan of Xbox over PlayStation. What caught our attention here are the names given to those who are fans of each console, something that she was very keen to explain.

> I just like Xbox better because I think Live is a thousand times better than PSN. PSN crashes... It doesn't work right... No matter what internet connection you got, it always gets a bit stuck, games don't develop well. I think Live easily beats it, do you know what I mean? So, in that sense, I'm more of a fan, more of a boxer, right, as they say...Those who like Microsoft...And those who like Sony are sonyists. I don't have a favourite company, a developer. I have a crush [sic] on Rockstar because I like the titles they put out, like GTA, Red Dead and all of that. I kind of like the titles, but I'm not the bedazzled [sic] type about Rockstar. (Interviewee 2, 2018).

By saying that she is a *boxer*, Respondent 2 says that she is a fan of the Xbox console (a free translation of box into the Portuguese *caixa*; hence *caixista*) and highlights the reasons for that, but, when it comes to the US company Rockstar Games, she makes it clear that her preference is for the company's games and not the company itself. By establishing her arguments between "boxers" and "sonyists", Interviewee 2 highlights the influence of the two big worldwide brands that dominate the console market and, on the other hand, the way in which fans describe themselves, embodying the brand name of their choice.

One of the answers given by one of the respondents when he said he could stop playing for years was intriguing. He stated that:

> I consider myself a player and not a gamer. For me, a gamer is someone who knows everything about games and basically lives in this universe. My tie to it is only for entertainment, I could easily stop playing and go years without turning on the console if I need to (Respondent 14, 2018).

Initially, by saying that he is not a gamer, the respondent rejects the qualities that he describes in a gamer. In addition to considering gamers as those who know a lot about gaming and maintain a high degree of involvement with elements of the gaming subculture, when he says "[...] I could easily stop

playing and go years without turning on the console if I need to", the respondent reinforces a characteristic that he believes to exists essentially amongst gamers: performing play. There are two possible readings for this quote: the first reading considers that, in the respondent's view, gamers must constantly play so that they can sustain such label – in other words, playing too little or even pausing would disqualify some from being called a gamer. The second reading demonstrates a player's control over the activity of playing, suggesting that gamers find it hard to control themselves, with gaming being an addictive practice. In both readings, we can consider his denial of gamers' identity as a way of assuming instead the identity of a common player.

Silva (2000) states that an identity is reinforced in a relationship where difference is the result of a symbolic and discursive process. In the second reading of that respondent's justification, we may see gamers' identity as a stigmatised identity, thus reinforcing what one does not want to come across as. In this sense, we can highlight one more overlap between the notions of fan and gamer: the difficulty of recognising individuals as fans or gamers due to the homogenisation or stereotyping that surround these labels.

A noteworthy example is the current discussion, at fan studies conferences, on a type of whiteness that plagues both academics who study the topic and the very notion of a fan as a 'nerdy white lad'. The subject became a topic at conferences and even in publications, such as the recent chapter written by Mel Stanfill (2018), entitled *The Unbearable Whiteness of Fandom and Fan Studies*, in the book organised by Paul Booth. At the same time, a recent article by Folha de São Paulo reported that, even though the majority of players in Brazil are black or brown (data from the 2021 Game Brazil Survey), they do not see themselves represented on the screen. Events like PerifaCon and PerifaGame try to problematise this issue. Such considerations urge us to try to understand the stereotypes and stigmata that surround the entertainment and gaming market, in order to accompany the changes in the audience and likewise understand it from a perspective of nationalisation and inclusion.Introduction

Final remarks

We saw that digital game players perform in communities through interactions, dialogues and sharing of content about games, which are configured as objects of affection. Thus, we can think of groups of players on online platforms as true fan communities. This is because, in these spaces, players develop affective bonds with each other and with some games, exchange information and recognize the presence of games in the formation of their identities

By analysing the profiles of the respondents of our questionnaire and the discourses of the players interviewed, we realised that some characteristics that define a gamer are similar to the definitions and behaviours of fans of other cultural products. The main similarities between gamers and fans that we have noticed among the players in our research sample are: dedicating time and having an emotional relationship with gaming objects; high technical knowledge; defending their preferred product (be it a film, series, game, or company/console); nostalgic relationship; and participation in communities.

On the other hand, we could not argue, based on the this research, that being a gamer is the same as being a fan of games. The idea of the gamer as a professional gamer seems to be the main difference between the notions of a gamer and a fan, as the latter, when thought of in relation to other cultural products, would be precisely that individual who, despite being committed, possessing knowledge, collecting, and participating in groups, occupies the space of the non-professional – i.e., the amateur. We attribute this to the current context of professionalisation of gaming (Falcão, 2019) and the growing number of e-Sports championships as triggering factors for a broad and current wave of recognition, as well as a profitable and sustainable source of income for young people.

By exposing the reflections and opinions of some players about their gaming practices, we also

seek to enhance the self-recognition process of the gamer (or fan) based on the voices of the players themselves. Through the interviews we encouraged a new look from the player to himself and to the process of playing games. The image of boys who played alone, locked in their rooms for countless hours, is now reconfigured in young people who play, share experiences, are proud and are recognized for it.

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