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Zervas, K and Maronitis, K

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Abstract
This study explores the social dynamics and communal experiences of gamers within online gaming clans, highlighting the transition from solitary play to social interaction in digital spaces. Through an ethnographic approach and qualitative interviews with active gamers, we investigate the significance of joining a clan, the formation of identities, and the multifaceted nature of communication within these communities. Findings reveal that acceptance into a clan elicits feelings of joy and belonging, akin to traditional social activities, while the anonymity provided by online interactions fosters open expression and the development of unique social bonds. Communication within these communities encompasses both game-related and non-game-related discussions, highlighting their multifaceted nature as social spaces. The adoption of unique language and codes among clan members enhances their sense of belonging. Notably, we explore the concept of "imagined communities" illustrating how gaming transcends demographic boundaries, creating a global network of individuals united by shared passions.

Keywords: esports, socialisation, imagined communities, social interaction, clans

In Ernest Cline's dystopian futuristic sci-fi novel – and movie, directed by Stephen Spielberg - "Ready player one" the world has been transformed into a massively multiplayer game. The protagonist, nicknamed "Parzival", explains in the beginning of the movie that another player, nicknamed "Aech" is his best – and only friend, but as he adds, they have never met in person.

Online gaming has become a business of considerable size and interestingly a social phenomenon. It has also sparked a debate about whether it's a sport or not (Franke, 2013; Jenny et al, 2017; Scholz, 2020), its contribution to skills development (Bányai et al, 2019; Zhong et al, 2022) and its future position in relation to our way of life (Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010; Holden, Kaburakis, & Rodenberg, 2017; Çavuş, 2020). Undoubtedly esports, or online gaming, has received a growing academic attention over the last decade due to its emergence and meteoric rise (Hamari and Sjöblom, 2017; Scholz, 2020) and its significance as a growing business (Newman et al, 2020; Gawrysiak, 2020), but it is becoming obvious that esports community is a multifaceted and ever-evolving ecosystem, marked by a wide range of interactions that can be both constructive and detrimental (Shen et al, 2020; Huston et al, 2023). Gamers within these communities often grapple with issues such as internal conflicts, strong factionalism, and pervasive toxicity (Hayday, 2020).

These above elements create a landscape where camaraderie and rivalry coexist, reflecting the intricate social dynamics at play. Despite the challenges, online gaming offers a social space where socialisation and quite often, a sense of common identity can be formulated (Seo & Jung, 2016; Xue et al, 2019; Zhao and Zhu, 2021). We recognise that despite the increasing academic interest in online gaming and esports, much of the existing literature is limited by a focus on competitive gaming and esports, often neglecting or misunderstanding the broader gaming community. Researchers frequently concentrate on aspects such as competition, toxicity, and skill development, yet rarely explore in depth the social experiences, identity formation processes, and community-building practices as understood by gamers themselves. Consequently, there is a notable gap in our understanding of the social mechanisms that drive identity construction and community dynamics from the perspective of those actively immersed in these gaming environments.

This paper aims to fill this gap by investigating the social underpinnings of socialisation within gaming communities, as platforms for social interaction and community building. By examining how gamers join gaming communities, actively participate through social interactions and construct a sense of identity within them we aim to further explore the social mechanics of this community-building. Finally, drawing on Benedict Anderson's (1991) concept of "imagined communities", this study aims to establish an epistemological understanding of online gaming communities. It explores how shared language, rituals, and technological infrastructure contribute to the formation of a global gaming community, transcending traditional demographic and geographic boundaries and redefining notions of community in the digital age.

Theoretical context (and a note on terminology)

Most researchers these days are using the term "esports" to refer to every form of online gaming between human players. Hamari and Sjöblom (2017) plainly define esports as "*competitive (pro and amateur) video gaming*", while Witkowski (2012) defines it as "*an organized and competitive approach to playing computer games*". However, we argue that this definition's competitive orientation neglects casual gaming activities, social interaction, and community participation, which do not necessarily focus on professionalisation or formal competition. Drawing upon the concept of "play," we emphasize intrinsic motivation, creativity, and spontaneous interaction inherent in casual gameplay (e.g., social interactions in Minecraft or community-building in World of Warcraft guilds). Hence, we adopt the term "online gaming" throughout this study to include the broader range of playful activities—whether players compete directly against each other, collaborate cooperatively, or engage informally in social interactions. This broader definition allows us to better examine how online games function as platforms for socialization, entertainment, and community-building—often for players who have no interest in competition.

This distinction between esports and online gaming is essential because it shifts the research focus toward understanding gaming as a social and playful activity rather than one primarily centred on competition and professionalisation. Emphasising "play" underscores the spontaneous,

intrinsically motivated, and creative aspects of gaming that facilitate social bonds and identity construction. By adopting this broader view, we aim to explore how online communities are built and maintained through shared playful interactions, rituals, and language—often occurring in informal, cooperative, and non-competitive contexts. These casual forms of participation are critical for understanding the full social potential of online gaming communities and how players construct identities and meaningful relationships within these digital spaces.

Online gaming is about cooperation and competition, it is designed to enhance interaction between players (Chen, 2009; Kowert et al, 2014) and it is this socialising aspect which significantly contributed to its massive expansion over the last decade. Video games existed for many years, but it was the merging of gaming with social networking and the development of the internet which led to the expansion of this phenomenon. The rise of online gaming (esports) became explosive, especially in the second decade of this century, with the release of games like "League of Legends" and "DOTA" and the creation of "twitch" (Li, 2017; Scholz, 2019). Effectively, it became possible for online gamers not only to participate in very lucrative leagues and competitions, but also to produce and stream content, which massively expanded the revenue size of gaming (esports) industry (Ahn et al, 2020).

The skills of players, along with the individual and team strategies employed by online gamers, have also undergone significant evolution (Witkowski, 2012; Kokkinakis et al.2021). These advancements have reached a level that not only matches but often surpasses the quality demonstrated by their counterparts in traditional elite sports. The precision, reflexes, and tactical planning displayed by top-tier esports competitors rival the physical and mental prowess seen in conventional athletes. This evolution is evident in the sophisticated training regimens, strategic depth, and high-stakes competition that characterize the esports landscape today, highlighting the impressive development and dedication within the community.

Socialisation in Online Gaming Communities

Online gaming has often been associated with the typical stereotype of the "antisocial loner" (Schiano et al., 2014) and misuse leading to gaming addictions (Grüsser et al, 2006). Additionally, lately there is an increasing phenomenon of anti-social behaviour, or "toxicity" within gaming communities (Shen et al, 2020; Irwin et al, 2023; Huston et al, 2023). An article by "The Economist" claimed that there is evidence that online gaming communities have increasingly been infiltrated by far-right radical groups and used as a medium to spread and bread far-right extremist ideologies (The Economist, 2021). Additionally, numerous studies associate online gaming with gambling addictions Macey and Hamari, 2018; Lelonek-Kuleta and Bartczuk, 2021; Marchica et al, 2021).

Furthermore, girls and women who engage in predominantly masculine gaming spaces often encounter gender-specific obstacles, including sexism, harassment, and discriminatory treatment (Jenson and de Castell, 2018; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018; McLeod et al., 2022; Rogstad, 2023; Piggott & Tjønndal, 2024). More specifically Piggott & Tjønndal (2024) found that leadership experiences in esports organisations are strongly shaped by gender and intersecting identities. All women leaders reported experiences of discrimination and marginalisation, though these varied in severity based on factors such as race, sexuality, and professional status. In contrast, none of the male leaders reported such experiences, and most lacked awareness of gendered exclusion. And for players, it becomes even worse: women gamers are often subjected to derogatory comments, sexual objectification, and targeted abuse during gameplay and in associated online communities (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018).

Online gaming communities are shaped by shared interests and cultural affiliations, often constructed around "nerd" identity and collective belonging, however, this social space is also marked by contestation and exclusion, where community ideals mask underlying inequalities and reinforce insider/outsider boundaries (Hayday et al, 2020). So, quite often, while these communities proclaim inclusivity, they actively encourage misogyny and discrimination. Xue et al (2019) highlight how online gaming communities actively construct identities and boundaries through digital narratives, specifically on platforms like Reddit. They (Xu et al, 2019) reveal how storytelling both shapes community cohesion and reinforces exclusionary dynamics, particularly related to gender. While some narratives emphasise positive dimensions, such as shared knowledge, technological collaboration, and entrepreneurial innovation, others perpetuate problematic discourses including sexism, misogyny, and discrimination. Consequently, these findings underline the dual role of seemingly democratic online community platforms, illustrating their capacity to simultaneously foster inclusive, engaged communities and facilitate the reproduction of exclusionary and toxic cultural norms within online gaming contexts (Frommel & Mandryk, 2024).

The above deviances which are often attributed to online gaming, act as a barrier in accepting it as a *true* sport by the hegemonic view about the healthiness of *real* sport (Jonasson and Thiborg, 2010). Indeed, many scholars frequently emphasize negative aspects of gaming—such as toxicity, antisocial behaviour, gambling, and radicalization—while often overlooking the fact that these same issues can also be present in traditional sports. However, it is important to acknowledge that online games and active gaming engagement can offer significant benefits, particularly in fostering a social life that extends beyond an individual's immediate physical environment. According to Laato et al. (2021), engaging in online gaming can provide opportunities for social interaction, community building, and the development of relationships that might not be possible within one's local physical space. This perspective highlights the potential for online gaming to serve as a positive and enriching component of an individual's social life, counterbalancing the often-highlighted negative impacts (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006; Cole and Griffiths, 2007). Increased online social gaming has been associated with smaller offline social circles (Kowert et al, 2014), however, online gamers have the same (if not more) opportunities to develop and maintain strong friendships which can be transferred to offline socialisation (Trepte et al, 2012; Domahili et al, 2014; Reer and Kramer, 2014).7

Imagined Communities in Online Gaming

Online game interaction enables us to think about the concept and topic of community beyond the latter's traditional demographic and administrative associations. In particular, we focus on what the gamers in questions have in common and how do they communicate. In effect, we want to establish an epistemological understanding of community based on the theoretical and methodological principles of language, interaction and play.

Our understanding and association of gaming communities with language, technology and play is based on Benedict Anderson's (1991 [1983]) seminal study of the formations of nations and nationalism. Anderson (1991) argues against the primordial conceptualisation of nations and instead placed capitalism, and more specifically media capitalism, at the heart of nationalism. Up until the 18th century, publishers around Europe were dealing with a complex and fragmented cultural landscape dominated by a plethora of different languages and dialects. In order to maximise the circulation of their pamphlets, newspapers and other publications they started to homogenise languages with the ultimate purpose to construct a national language commonly understood by readers across wide geographical and cultural contexts. The formation of a common readership and consequently of a common understanding of problems, demands and state actions created the nation as we know it today.

Anderson's (1991) emphasis on media and technology elucidates another important aspect of the nation more germane to the present study. Anderson (1991) pointed out that the nation is an 'imagined community' precisely because it exists in people's imagination. Members of the nation, namely national citizens will never meet the vast majority of their fellow citizens. However, they have developed a community based on common language and a specific technological and economic infrastructure that enables them to formulate a common language and understanding (Buckler, 2017). For Anderson (1991) the nation is an imagined community because it implies a 'deep horizontal comradeship' which knits together all citizens irrespective of their gender, class and ethnicity.

Anderson's theoretical elaborations enable us to apply this type of 'horizontal comradeship' to gaming and analyse the formation, practices and rituals of gaming communities (Sherman, 2011). Here, we do not necessarily speak of a nation, but a community glued by hardware, software, ritual and play. Gamers are part of an imagined community enabled by the common (and global) language of gaming that has developed its own syntax and grammar that transcends nationality and ethnicity. In effect, the gaming community is a by definition a global community that transcends and at the same reproduces the dominant ideological structures of community and communication (Buckler, 2017).

The application of Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" to online gaming communities offers a robust theoretical framework for understanding how these virtual spaces function. The concept resonates powerfully in the contemporary digital media landscape, particularly in video games and online communities. Anderson (1991) emphasises how print capitalism enabled national identities to form by

disseminating newspapers and novels in vernacular languages. In the digital economy and landscape, video games, digital content creation and social media engagement perform a similar function by creating a new composition of imagined communities (Kalman-Lamb, 2020).

Anderson (1991) posits that nations are socially constructed communities, formed through shared language and a common technological infrastructure that enables individuals to develop a collective identity despite never meeting most fellow members. Similarly, gaming communities emerge as imagined entities where participants, regardless of their geographic or cultural backgrounds, come together through shared interests, rituals, and a common lexicon specific to their gaming experiences.

In practice, online gaming communities often cultivate a sense of belonging through shared language, in-game communication, and established norms. For instance, in games like League of Legends or World of Warcraft, players develop specific terminologies (such as "gank," "loot," or "raid") that facilitate interaction and reinforce group identity. These shared linguistic elements serve as a means of inclusion, helping to bridge the gap between players who may come from diverse backgrounds. Additionally, rituals such as community events, tournaments, or collaborative gameplay foster a sense of camaraderie and belonging among players, creating a robust social fabric that reflects Anderson's idea of "deep horizontal comradeship" (Anderson, 1991). However, digital media multiplayer game platforms are neither dissociated from the functions of nations nor they are immune to their inclusionary and exclusionary mechanisms. E-sports teams, online gaming groups and other similar communities have the capacity to create distinct cultures and subcultures by reinforcing a collective sense of identity through shared language, code of conduct and experiences.

Furthermore, technological platforms like Discord and Twitch have transformed how gamers communicate and interact, allowing for real-time collaboration and engagement. These platforms not only enable players to connect but also to share experiences, strategies, and even narratives that contribute to a collective identity. For example, Twitch streamers often cultivate communities around their channels, where followers engage not only with the streamer but also with each other, forming relationships that extend beyond the gaming experience itself. This dynamic illustrates how technology serves as a backbone for constructing and maintaining imagined communities in the digital age.

To join an imagined community, as theorised by Benedict Anderson (1991), one must internalise the shared narratives, symbols, and values that construct a sense of collective identity among people who will likely never meet. This process involves adopting the community's language, engaging with its media and cultural practices, participating in its institutions—such as education, government, and civil society—and, most importantly, imagining oneself as part of the group. Joining is both a personal and collective act: individuals come to see themselves as members of the nation, emotionally identifying with its history and destiny, while also being recognized by others as belonging. Thus, membership in an imagined community is less about physical presence or formal boundaries, and more about psychological and symbolic integration into a shared national consciousness. In both national and gaming contexts, the sense of belonging is constructed through shared narratives, symbolic practices, and emotional identification, illustrating how imagined communities extend beyond geographic borders into digital landscapes and virtual realms

By exploring how shared language, rituals, and technological infrastructures contribute to the formation of these global gaming communities, we can better understand how they transcend traditional demographic and geographic boundaries. This examination not only enriches our theoretical understanding of community in the digital age but also sheds light on the complexities and contradictions inherent in online gaming interactions.

Methodology

In this paper we have adopted an inductive ethnographic approach to research, collecting observational, participant- observational, and interview data, thus being able to have a greater understanding of participants' lived experiences (Prus,1996). Furthermore, we did so by focusing on the "three Rs" approach, which stands for culturally Responsive, Relational, and Reflexive ethics (Lahman et al. 2011). This method emphasises on being reflective, including in relation to power dynamics in the research interaction, but also identifying and valuing cultural differences, exhibiting respect for, and appreciating relationships with participants and the social group being studied, and appreciating relationships with them (see also Smith et al. 2009). Additionally, we draw upon Bourdieu's notion of "reflexivity" in ethnographic research (see Grenfell, 2018), as a mean of critically re-evaluating our own positions and biases within the fluid context of gaming community, by recognising our role both as researchers and gaming enthusiasts.

The data and information used for this study were collected using online ethnography (Garcia et al, 2018). More specifically, this study draws specifically from participant observations and semi-structured interviews with players (n:13) from "world of warships" over a period of two years (September 2021 – December 2023). The researchers participated in approximately 5000 battles (each lasting up to 10 minutes) over the course of this period and actively participated in three clans: [-GR-] 29/9/21 – 14/01/22; [-YOLO-] 4/2/22 – 25/6/22 and [2PTS] 1/7/22 – 28/12/23. In online gaming environments, joining a clan typically requires an invitation from a moderator (or a "mod")—a role generally offered to players by existing mods, who have gained the trust of the group, developed familiarity with the clan's culture and dynamics, and demonstrated sufficient expertise in the game. Much like scouting in traditional sports, moderators often assess potential recruits based on current skill or perceived potential. As our proficiency in the game increased, we received more invitations to join new clans, reflecting both our improved performance and growing integration into the community.

 In terms of engagement, we participated daily (apart from holiday breaks, during summer, winter and spring), for approximately a few hours, which gave us the opportunity to immerse ourselves into the gaming culture and the social patterns of the clan. As gaming enthusiasts, it was not difficult to engage in the "rituals" and the language, but the challenge was always to maintain an unbiased research perspective. Upon

joining each clan, we explicitly informed members of our study, clearly stating the voluntary nature of participation and their right to withdraw or decline involvement at any time; consent was obtained verbally and reaffirmed prior to interviews. They were mostly positive about this aspect, but usually forgot about this after a period, only to be reminded when invited for an interview.

The decision to join different clans was clearly associated with the aims of this study: We wanted to have a wider understanding of the gaming communities, therefore we needed to experience first-hand the dynamics and rituals from a variety of social and cultural settings. Acknowledging the fact that both the researchers, we were white males, in our forties, both from Greece and with similar upbringings and gaming enthusiasts, the choice of clans had to offer the opportunity to challenge our perceived notions and cultural biases: [-GR-] was a Greek clan entirely consisted of Greek males, rather inexperienced in the game; [-YOLO-] was a much more multicultural clan, mainly consisted of British males, but with members from different nationalities and of mixed gaming experience; finally, [2PTS] was a clan of highly-skilled players (as we had already developed in the game), mainly consisted of Greeks, but with some members from our nationalities. In this study, we employed online participant observation to immerse ourselves in the digital communities mentioned, enabling the collection of rich, contextual data on user interactions, cultural norms, and communicative practices (Kozinets, 2010; Hine, 2020). This involved both passive observation and active engagement within the selected clans, allowing us to better understand the dynamics of the community from an insider's perspective. Ethical considerations, particularly around informed consent and the public–private nature of online spaces, were addressed in accordance with established guidelines for internet research (Markham & Buchanan, 2015).

The data collected through online participant observation were instrumental in shaping the semi-structured interview guide, ensuring that the questions were grounded in the communicative practices and social dynamics observed in the digital field (Kozinets, 2010; Hine, 2020). This alignment between observation and inquiry facilitated coherence between online interactions and participants' personal narratives. Subsequently, 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted using a convenience sampling strategy, with participants selected based on two inclusion criteria: membership in the gaming clan under study and prior experience within gaming communities. The interviews were carried out via Zoom and lasted approximately 60 minutes each, a format that has been shown to be both methodologically sound and conducive to participant engagement in virtual qualitative research contexts (Archibald et al., 2019). It has to be noted that the gamers in that specific game "world of warships" were largely consisted of higher age groups than in most games, mostly due to the fact of the slow pace and its relevance to World War II, which attracted older people.

We incorporated a narrative data analysis to complement our inductive ethnographic approach, drawing particularly upon Xue, et al (2019) narratological framework. Narrative analysis was integral to exploring how gaming participants construct and articulate their identities and experiences through storytelling practices within gaming communities. By analysing the narratives shared by participants during interviews and

observational interactions, we examined how these stories functioned to establish social boundaries, express communal belonging, and navigate inclusion or exclusion dynamics within the clans studied. We specifically explored how gamers' stories reflected their past experiences, present interactions, and future aspirations within the digital community. Thus, the narrative data approach provided rich insights into how participants actively shaped their gaming identities, managed social relationships, and negotiated power dynamics within the different clan settings we studied.

Reflexivity is a critical aspect of ethnographic research that entails recognizing and reflecting on the researcher's own influences, biases, and positionality throughout the study (Bourdieu, 1990; Grenfell, 2018). In our research, we are mindful of how our identities as white male gaming enthusiasts in our forties from Greece may shape our interpretations and interactions within the gaming communities we studied. To address these dynamics, we maintained a reflexive journal throughout the research process. This journal documented our thoughts, feelings, and observations as we navigated various gaming environments and engaged with participants. By reflecting on our experiences, we aimed to uncover how our backgrounds and perspectives influenced our understanding of gaming cultures, social interactions, and community-building practices.

While the ethnographic method provided rich contextual insight, it also introduced potential biases related to our dual roles as researchers and community members, possibly affecting our interpretations. Additionally, the relatively small and culturally homogenous participant group may limit broader generalisability. Moreover, we acknowledged that our enthusiasm for gaming could lead to biases in how we perceived and reported on the interactions within clans. For instance, our familiarity with gaming culture may have predisposed us to interpret certain behaviours as positive or negative based on our personal experiences. To mitigate this potential bias, we engaged in regular discussions with each other as researchers to critically evaluate our observations and interpretations, ensuring that we considered multiple perspectives on the data we collected.

Additionally, we made concerted efforts to create an environment of openness and trust within the clans we joined. By being transparent about our research objectives and inviting feedback from participants, we encouraged them to express their perspectives and experiences candidly. This not only enriched our data but also helped us recognize areas where our assumptions might differ from those of the participants.

Finally, we are conscious of the power dynamics inherent in our roles as researchers. In online gaming communities, the interplay of knowledge, skill, and social standing can influence interactions. We actively sought to level this playing field by approaching participants as collaborators rather than authoritative figures, acknowledging that they possess valuable insights and experiences that are crucial to understanding the complexities of gaming communities. Through these reflexive practices, we aim to ensure that our research remains grounded in the lived realities of participants while critically interrogating our own roles in shaping the narrative of online gaming and community-building.

Findings and discussion

The Significance of Joining a Clan: From Solitary Play to Social Inclusion

The feeling of being accepted in a clan for the first time in a game can only be explained with joy and fulfilment (usually you have to look for one and apply, only when you're very good some clans might invite you in). It's the same feeling you get, as a kid, when you are accepted to play in the game at the playground, or the park (similarly you're only invited when you're very good). It feels like the fruition of all your efforts and your time playing the game. This transition from solitary play to social interaction is a significant milestone for many gamers (Seo and Jung, 2016; Xue et al, 2019; Zha and Zhu, 2021). Finally, you can call yourself a gamer, or at least part of the game. Most of the gamers agreed that this is one of the memorable moments in gaming and a turning point from solitary playing to social interaction. In some online games (and usually in mobile games) joining a clan is part of natural progression, or the introduction to the game; so, in that case, being accepted to a good clan becomes the objective. Still, this is a key benchmark for socialisation. One of our interview participants (Fuzzy_pd), noted about his experience:

> …look I am 43 years old, I 've started this because my friend "windigo" (another username) was already playing and we were spending time together. But then… when started hitting (meaning playing well) and other players were starting to invite us to join them (in clans). That was really something… I mean, you have your life, you don't expect to get excited by a silly game…

Seo and Jung (2016) also highlight the fulfilment during the transition from "playing" to a "serious activity". This transition occurs both mentally and through practical initiation steps: In online competitive games, usually after joining a clan, the player would be invited to meet the other members of the clan, usually through "discord", and rarely through other social communication media. According to most players the reason why "discord" is so popular with gamers has to do with the fact that it requires (or used to) less resources from your pc, and therefore you can use it while playing without affecting the performance of your game. The interesting thing about chatting through "discord" within clans is that you do not need to show your face, even when meeting other clan members. Unlike normal social interactions where "meeting the team" often requires putting a face under each name, in the gaming world you rarely (if ever) need show your face. Only popular streamers would show their face, while playing, or streaming, but the norm of online gaming is that faces are irrelevant.

This preference for Discord arises from its lower resource requirements, allowing for simultaneous gameplay and communication and highlights the importance of technology in facilitating these interactions (Li, 2017; Scholz, 2019).This anonymity facilitates open expression and dialogue without the biases often present in face-to-face interactions, which resonates with findings by Bányai et al. (2019) regarding the role of online environments in shaping social identities. The use of platforms like Discord for communication

Apart from the faces, the other thing which is usually irrelevant is… real names. When you are introduced to other gamers you always use your nickname (or username) and people would always call you by this. Casually people might ask your real (life) name, but in gaming communities that becomes an irrelevant information and never used. Your game-name becomes your identity – people can see your achievements, your level, and your gaming preferences, therefore your real name has no significance, as your profession, marital status, or age. It must be noted that this *indifference* to real identity facts is not associated with hiding, or misleading – as would be the case in mafia or illegal communities: most gamers would happily share stories and facts from their real lives, but all these as side-stories to the main discussion, which is the game, or the "game-verse" itself.

Daily Life within Gaming Clans

These daily interactions not only build community but also foster a unique social culture with its own language and rituals, as explored next. The typical day of an active gamer depends largely on his age and lifestyle: those ones who do not have to go to work (usually student, self-employed, unemployed, or retirees) usually wake up late and get on with their normal lives. The rest, go to work, take care of children and finish their chores until they all meet when the gaming world really turns on, the evening. Most gamers we've met "enter the game-verse" and play in the evening hours and during the night – those ones who don't have to go to work, until early morning, one interviewee - "Captain_Mamo" - explains:

> Sometimes when I have a difficult day, I think about the time I log in… I wait for this all day, and really… sometimes when you spend time playing and fooling around with the rest of the jerks, I find solutions, or ideas the next day and I get better at work… seriously!

This excerpt links with the notion of "escapism" as one of the main reasons we people engage with online games (Hamari and Sjöblom, 2017) but it is also points to the recreational and highly sociable nature of online gaming – you need to blow-off some steam in the afternoon, meet your friends and have fun. Similarly, to casually go to your local pub expecting to meet your familiar friends, or drink-buddies, gamers join the game and "discord" on the evening (usually around 7-8pm) and meet up in an undeclared, but ever-occurring "clan meeting" every single day. The daily routines of gamers and their evening gatherings reflect the social nature of online gaming, similar to traditional social activities (Chen, 2009; Kowert et al, 2014).

Unlike what you would expect from joining a gaming community, such as a clan, not all conversations revolve around the game, or gaming in general. In order to explain this we would suggest that there are two types of conversations within the clan meetings: the "game related" and the "non-game related". Someone would expect that the former would be the dominant ones, but in reality, it seems rather balanced, with a slight

tendency to the latter. Most members enjoying sharing moments of the personal life (like an incident in the car park, or an encounter with the neighbour), or casual views about the day's news – politics, sports and headline news. In some clans, the discussions can focus on common interests shared by several members: in the last clan which this research took place there was a particular interest in old-school Rock bands (like the "guns & roses") and several conversations repeatedly revolved around this topic. The balance between game-related and non-game-related conversations within clans underscores the multifaceted nature of these communities (Steinkuehler and Williams, 2006; Cole and Griffiths, 2007).

Another significant finding around "life in the clan" has to do with the fact that most members adopt a specific language, or "codes" for communication: certain jokes, game-related stories, or calling each other with their usernames (similar to "Ready player one"). This tribal behaviour transcends to extends beyond the boundaries of a certain clan, or even a certain game; but is characteristic to gamers around the world from different genres. Notably, one participant noted: "I know when someone is a gamer… they are smarter and use specific words, and you know… I trust them more – a gamer has values and can be trusted". This was a view which was quite widespread amongst the members we interviewed, gamers trust other gamers and believe that they have developed specific characteristics and skills that make them more "compatible" with them. Several participants agreed that "when you hear people using terms like *farming* or *grinding* you know they belong to this world, and this is very special". The adoption of specific language and codes within clans enhances the sense of belonging and identity among gamers (Hamari and Sjöblom, 2017; Witkowski, 2012). This shared language and the anonymity provided by online interactions allow for open expression and the development of unique social bonds (Anderson, 1991).

Yet, while language and rituals unite clan members, they also contribute to subtle exclusionary practices, highlighting complex internal tensions. While Anderson's (1991) concept of 'imagined communities' effectively captures the global, transcendent nature of gaming clans identified in our data, it may be somewhat limited in addressing internal community tensions such as gender-based exclusion or toxicity. Our findings highlight that despite a broad sense of horizontal comradeship, subgroups within clans can reinforce boundaries, potentially challenging Anderson's assumption of equal inclusivity within these communities. Thus, while the theory is beneficial in conceptualising global connections, it does not fully account for complexities arising from social hierarchies, conflict, or marginalisation within gaming clans.

Our findings also expose an inherent paradox within clan dynamics: the same mechanisms that foster a strong sense of identity and belonging (shared language, rituals, camaraderie) can simultaneously enable exclusionary practices or reinforce toxic behaviour. Though participants often highlighted trust and companionship as positive outcomes of clan membership, these tight-knit social bonds could also become sources of division, particularly regarding skill level, gaming attitudes, or even non-gaming identity markers such as nationality or gender. This underscores the multifaceted and occasionally contradictory nature of social dynamics within online gaming communities.

Identity Formation and Social Bonds

One of the most important findings of this study relates to the socialisation and comradeship of the clan members in gaming. Gaming clans (or "guilds" in other games) are self-managed teams consisting of players than can participate together in teams' events. In this particular study we found that within the clan there is a core of dedicated players, who are actively involved in communicating, recruiting and encouraging other members to be more active. These core groups – usually 8-10 members, develop strong social relationships, which according to some individuals, can be translated to "friendships". Rarely these relationships transcend to offline interactions, but nevertheless remain strong and consisted in the online level. At least eight individuals explained that they already had some sort of social interactions with members of the clan before joining the game, some even "brought" to it following "friends". One participant (windigo) explained:

> I consider everyone here as my "friend", but would I take him out for a drink? Maybe not, but that's not the point… some here I know them outside, some are only "friends" here… I don't even know their names, I call them with their nicks (nicknames). But they are all important, even if we get lost after this…

Another interesting finding has to do with the comradeship between players who might not have social interactions with each other. In September 2022 the gaming company decided to monetise a premium, and very popular asset, which until then could be acquired through achievements (for free-to-play games this usually becomes a casus belli). Players throughout the game univocally expressed their contempt (sic), within games players (even from opposing teams) agreed that "enough is enough" and discussed ideas for common action. Community developers (who are usually produce online content in YouTube and Twitch) called for collective action, like unsubscribing, or abstain for logging in; the "uprising" ended when the gaming company yielded to demands. One of our participants argued:

> That was really special (laughs). You see, Wargaming (the company who owns the game) is only interested in making money – that's all they care about, making money (pause). If they could realise how big this is, but I guess they have to pay salaries… but anyway, that was special.

The level of comradeship within and outside the clan was truly heartwarming and according to several study participants further contributed to a sense of belonging and inclusion. The collective action against monetisation changes by a gaming company demonstrates the strong communal bonds and collective identity within gaming communities (Shen et al, 2020; Huston, et al, 2023). This sense of comradeship and trust among gamers is rooted in shared experiences and common values (Trepte et al, 2012; Domahili et al, 2014; Reer and Kramer, 2014).

The collective action observed against monetisation changes highlights an important tension between community ideals and the commercial realities of online gaming. While this instance of community mobilisation illustrated impressive solidarity and collective identity, it also revealed underlying vulnerabilities. Players' resistance to monetisation practices underscores broader concerns about how commercial imperatives may compromise the authenticity and sustainability of online communities, ultimately threatening the communal bonds and shared identities that gamers value deeply.

Interestingly, our observations appear to contrast with several prominent studies (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018; Hayday et al., 2020; Rogstad, 2023; Huston et al., 2023; Piggott and Tjønndal, 2024) which have emphasised toxicity and negative behaviours within gaming communities. While such behaviours were occasionally evident, our participants more frequently discussed supportive, constructive interactions. This discrepancy may reflect the specific demographic profile of our studied clans, the nature of the particular game, or our own positionality as accepted insiders possibly affecting the openness or transparency of participants. Further comparative research across multiple gaming platforms and genres would clarify whether our findings represent broader community patterns or more isolated experiences.

In summary, while our findings strongly support the view that online gaming communities play a critical role in facilitating socialisation, identity formation, and collective action, a nuanced interpretation must account for methodological limitations, theoretical tensions, contradictory dynamics, and external commercial pressures. Recognising these complexities provides a more comprehensive understanding of digital gaming communities, highlighting their potential, their fragility, and the broader societal implications of their continued evolution.

Conclusion

This study has examined how online gaming communities, specifically gaming clans, serve as significant platforms for social interaction, identity formation, and community building. Through an ethnographic investigation of the "World of Warships" gaming community, we have identified key social mechanisms underpinning gamers' experiences—from the transformative act of joining a clan to the daily social rituals, shared language, and collective identity that emerge within these digital spaces. Our findings contribute theoretically by extending Benedict Anderson's (1991) concept of 'imagined communities' to contemporary digital gaming contexts, emphasising the critical role of informal, non-competitive interactions in shaping social identities and community belonging.

Significantly, our analysis highlights that clan membership is not merely a strategic choice for competitive advantage, but a meaningful social milestone marked by deep feelings of acceptance, identity validation, and comradeship. The distinct communal languages, rituals, and shared experiences documented in this study reinforce a global sense of community that transcends traditional demographic and geographic boundaries. This underscores the significance of online gaming spaces as dynamic, socially enriching environments where identities are actively negotiated and redefined beyond conventional offline parameters.

Practically, this research offers insights for the ethical and sustainable development of gaming communities, emphasising the importance of fostering inclusive, playful, and supportive community environments. Recognising the paradoxical coexistence of camaraderie alongside exclusion or toxicity, our findings encourage game developers and community managers to carefully design and manage online spaces to balance competitive elements with opportunities for informal socialisation. Ensuring these spaces remain favourable to positive social interactions could mitigate toxic behaviours and enhance overall community sustainability.

Ultimately, while our investigation provides critical insights into the social dynamics and identity processes within one specific gaming context, it also signals the importance of further research across diverse gaming genres and communities. Such comparative analyses will deepen the broader understanding of digital socialisation, identity construction, and community dynamics in an increasingly interconnected digital world.

Limitations and future recommendations

While this study provides significant insights into the social dynamics of online gaming clans, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, our ethnographic approach, based primarily on our experiences within the single game World of Warships, might limit the generalisability of findings. The specific historical theme, strategic gameplay, and demographic profile of this game's community may not directly transfer to other genres or communities. Future comparative research exploring diverse gaming contexts—such as MMORPGs or battle royale games—would significantly enhance our understanding of how gaming genre and community composition influence identity formation and social dynamics.

Future research should address these limitations by expanding sample sizes, diversifying participant demographics, and including multiple gaming genres and platforms to achieve broader generalisability. Investigating the impact of online gaming on mental health, both positively in terms of community support and negatively concerning potential addictive behaviours, would offer valuable insights into individual well-being. Further studies could also explore community resilience and response mechanisms to negative behaviours, such as harassment and toxicity, enhancing our understanding of the supportive potential of digital communities. Finally, future comparative research between online gaming communities and traditional offline social groups could yield deeper insights into processes of identity construction, social affiliation, and the shifting contours of community engagement in an increasingly digitised social landscape.

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