Gender Gaming Divide. An Analysis of Teenagers' Perception of Gender Inequalities in the Gaming Culture

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Gamer identity has become an emerging topic in the field of Game Studies. In recent years, relevant contributions have emerged, especially connected to Cultural Studies, highlighting the importance of structural inequalities in understanding players' relationship with video games (Shaw, 2012; Thornham, 2011). In this sense, previous studies reveal the multiplicity and complexity behind the concept (Muriel & Crawford, 2018) and, in turn, how socioeconomic and identity factors play a relevant role in understanding the definitions that emerge around the gamer category (Vilasís-Pamos & Pires, 2022; Vilasís-Pamos & Pérez-Latorre, 2022). In this context, it is interesting to analyse the historical formation of gaming culture and the hegemonic imaginary built around the figure of the gamer, feeding the positive association between masculinity and technology (Kivijärvi & Katila, 2022). This association would respond to the historical appropriation that models of hegemonic masculinity have made of rationality and reason, turning them into masculine attributes (Connell, 2005). Furthermore, this appropriation would have turned technical knowledge into a source of legitimacy for male domination, giving rise to models of masculinity, such as geek masculinity, which bases power on the mastery of the digital (Condis, 2018).

This article aims to analyse the role played by models of masculinity and femininity in constructing the gamer identity among teenagers, taking into account gender and social class. Methodologically, this research has been conducted with 48 adolescents between 14 and 15 years old in Barcelona and Vic cities (Spain). Specifically, eight focus groups were carried out, separated by gender and social class; eight semi-structured virtual interviews and eight online gaming interviews. The results of this study reveal that models of masculinity and femininity play different roles depending on teenagers' social class, being significantly accentuated among working-class teenagers. In this sense, we observe that working-class boys and girls seem to have a single reference rooted in the primordial idea of the hardcore-subcultural gamer (Muriel & Crawford, 2018).

On the one hand, the perception of the gamer identity seems to be fundamentally based on a technicist discourse of the medium, where dedication (time spent), competitiveness and skill are the defining characteristics of a 'good gamer' (gamer as a

'he', using the masculine) (Disalvo, 2017; Vilasís-Pamos & Pérez-Latorre, 2022; Witkowski, 2013). On the other hand, this definition, based on models of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Salter & Blodger, 2012), excludes any possibility of opening up the definition and, therefore, of including new groups in the community. This seems to feed and reinforce sensationalist and stereotypical discourses about the medium and, in turn, limits the possibilities for teenagers to identify as gamers due to the levels of self-demand imposed concerning dedication and skill with the medium (Kowert et al., 2014). All of this reinforces the hardcore versus casual duality, feminising and discriminating against certain gaming practices and titles while associating them with a certain pretension of gamer status that supposedly does not deserve recognition by the community and the industry (Vilasís-Pamos & Pires, 2022).

Conversely, the results obtained in the groups of middle-class boys and girls allowed us to observe a trend of openness of the concept. That is, a deconstruction of the defining limits of the gamer identity, moving away from the possibility of a single (exclusive) masculinised definition and, at the same time, redefining the limits of masculinity and femininity associated with the concept. In this sense, we observe the emergence of professional definitions, such as the gamer-professional or the celebrity-platform-gamer (Vilasís-Pamos & Pires, 2022), but also of a cultural nature, such as the foodie-connoisseur, proposed by Muriel and Crawford (2018), which reinforces the cultural-intellectual vision of the medium. In this way, middle-class teenagers propose a wide range of characteristics that may (or may not) define who is considered a gamer and why, among which stand out the interest in and knowledge of the medium (in an exploratory sense and, in some cases, of a cultural-intellectual nature), as well as the importance of having fun, away from competitive eagerness, and the possibility of learning.

In short, the study reveals that social class plays a relevant role in understanding how models of masculinity and femininity are intertwined in gamer identity definitions of teenagers and, in turn, their relationship with video games (Vilasís-Pamos & Pérez-Latorre, 2022).

Keywords
Gaming Divide, Masculinities, Feminities, Social Class, Gaming Culture, Teenagers.

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