

From Gamer Identity to Game Cultural Agency

Usva Friman

Tampere University
Pinni B, Kanslerinrinne 1
33014 Tampere, Finland
usva.friman@tuni.fi

Keywords

agency, gamer identity, gamers, players, gender

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to demonstrate how game cultural agency can and should be conceptually separated from gamer identity, especially when studying players who are marginalised in the hegemonic digital game culture, such as women. This is important because game cultural participation of these groups still often remains hidden or marginalised in mainstream digital game culture, and they do not easily identify with the stereotypical idea of a ‘gamer’ – imagined as a White, young, heterosexual, cisgender man (Cote 2017; Richard and Gray 2018). This leads to these groups’ further marginalisation in game culture, game research, and game industry alike. Many voices, including game creators, game journalists, and game researchers, have suggested critically examining or letting go of the idea and identity of a gamer (Shaw 2013; Alexander 2014; Golding 2014; Houe 2020). Gamer identity is seen as inseparable from the norms of the hegemonic core game culture and, as such, too limiting (Houe 2020). As digital gaming is growing more common and many interesting and important new forms of digital play continue to emerge, it is getting increasingly questionable to evaluate the value and authenticity of a person’s gaming through the narrow idea of a gamer. At the same time, trying to expand the idea of a gamer to cover all different types of players and forms of play does not seem useful either (Shaw 2013). Focusing on game cultural agency instead of the narrow lens of gamer identity allows us to examine the great variety of practices and meanings related to gaming in people’s lives – and to deconstruct the barriers limiting their opportunities for participation.

In the context of game studies, Mäyrä (2019) has described player agency in digital game cultures as subjectivity emerging from involvement with the contents, cultures, and technologies of games, manifesting on two levels: the micro level containing elements such as individual choices and actions, and the macro level containing elements such as cultural history and cultural expression. In game cultural agency, the focus is on the latter: on all the ways in which we participate in game culture beyond the act of gaming. Importantly, we also need to understand game cultural agency as situated, embodied, and relational to specific social and cultural contexts (McNay 2016), and consider how a player’s intersecting subject positions come to play in their game cultural activities and related social environments. In the case of women gamers, while they are actively participating in game culture on many levels, their game cultural agency is still enabled and limited by the cultural expectations regarding their gender in these contexts. As such, it is crucial to note that women players’ subjectivity and agency in the field of game culture does not emerge only from their involvement with games and their culture, but also from how they are perceived as women inhabiting this field.

Proceedings of DiGRA 2023

© 2023 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

This study is a continuation of a doctoral dissertation (Friman 2022) based on interviews with 20 and online questionnaire responses from 737 adult women who play digital games. Based on this material, I will describe how women gamers negotiate their game cultural agency while actively rejecting – and being rejected from – the idea and identity of a ‘gamer’. Women who participated in the study were generally very active players and played a great variety of game genres on different platforms. They also actively participated in game culture in other ways beyond gaming as an activity, by for example following game media, watching esports, and participating in gaming events. In many ways, these women were very active members at the core of mainstream digital game culture. However, as we have learned from earlier studies (e.g., Duggan 2015; Shaw 2014), being a ‘gamer’ does not directly or necessarily follow from the activity of playing games – or other forms of game cultural participation – especially in the case of players who are marginalised in game culture.

When asked to define a ‘gamer’ in their own words, women who participated in the study described cultural aspects generally attached to gamer identity. They saw a ‘gamer’ as someone who does not ‘just’ play but plays specific types of games on certain platforms (team-based, competitive, online games on a device specifically built for gaming), plays skillfully and in a goal-oriented manner, possesses wide expertise regarding games and their culture, participates in gaming communities, and may even have professional aspirations regarding gaming. Their responses reflected what Consalvo and Paul (2019) have described as games and gaming practices that are considered ‘real’ or legitimate in contemporary game culture.

In their responses, participants communicated that they are well aware of the cultural status and power attached to gamer identity. Furthermore, they demonstrated filling its cultural conditions through their active gaming, versatile game cultural participation, and vast game cultural expertise. However, when asked if they would define themselves as a ‘gamer’, they often declined. Importantly, this was not because these women would not view themselves ‘sufficiently’ gamers – on the contrary – but rather because they chose to reject this cultural position and its implications. Instead, these women chose to take active control over their own game cultural agency and to define it in their own terms, separate from gamer identity.

To understand players, particularly from the perspective of game culture studies, we should not only investigate gaming practices, different forms of game cultural participation, and the question of who ‘count’ as gamers through gamer identity (Shaw 2010), but the wider sphere of game cultural agency, and how its opportunities and limitations manifest differently to different player groups. Due to the central role of digital games and play in today’s world, game cultural agency also impacts individual’s positions and possibilities in many areas of life – far beyond gaming.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alexander, L. 2014. “‘Gamers’ Don’t Have to Be Your Audience. ‘Gamers’ Are Over. *Gamasutra*. 8 August.
http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/224400/Gamers_dont_have_to_be_you_r_audience_Gamers_are_over.php
- Consalvo, M. and Paul, C. A. 2019. *Real Games: What’s Legitimate and What’s Not in Contemporary Videogames*. Cambridge, USA: MIT Press.
<https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/12109.001.0001>
- Cote, A. C. 2017. “‘I Can Defend Myself’: Women’s Strategies for Coping with Harassment While Gaming Online. *Games and Culture*. 12 (2), 136–155.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412015587603>

- Duggan, M. 2015. *Gaming and Gamers*. Washington, D.C., United States: Pew Research Center.
- Friman, U. 2022. *Gender and Game Cultural Agency in the Post-Gamer Era: Finnish Women Players' Gaming Practices, Game Cultural Participation, and Rejected Gamer Identity*. Turku, Finland: University of Turku.
- Golding, D. 2014. "The End of Gamers." Video. Tumblr, 28 August. <http://dangolding.tumblr.com/post/95985875943/the-end-of-gamers>
- Houe, N. P. 2020. "The Death of Gamers: How Do We Address the Gamer Stereotype?" In *Proceedings of DiGRA 2020*. <http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/the-death-of-gamers-how-do-we-address-the-gamer-stereotype>
- McNay, L. 2016. "Agency." In *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory* (Vol. 1), edited by L. Disch and M. Hawkesworth, 39–60. New York, USA: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199328581.013.2>
- Mäyrä, F. 2019. "The Player as a Hybrid: Agency in Digital Game Cultures." *GAME: The Italian Journal of Game Studies*. 2019 (8), 29–45. <https://www.gamejournal.it/the-player-as-a-hybrid-agency-in-digital-game-cultures>
- Richard, G. T. and Gray, K. L. 2018. "Gendered Play, Racialized Reality: Black Cyberfeminism, Inclusive Communities of Practice, and the Intersections of Learning, Socialization, and Resilience in Online Gaming." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*. 39 (1), 112–148.
- Shaw, A. 2010. "What Is Video Game Culture? Cultural Studies and Game Studies." *Games and Culture*. 5 (4), 403–424. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412009360414>
- Shaw, A. 2013. "On Not Becoming Gamers: Moving Beyond the Constructed Audience." *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media & Technology*. (2). <https://doi.org/10.7264/N33N21B3>
- Shaw, A. 2014. *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*. Minneapolis, USA: University of Minnesota Press.