

Competitiveness and Meritocracy in Super Smash Bros. Ultimate: An Ethnography of Gaming Practices in Santiago, Chile.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Video games express ideological discourses through their ludic designs and narrative proposals (Pérez Latorre 2015; Flanagan and Nissenbaum 2016). One of the most recurrent discourses in popular video games, as perceived by developers and players alike, is meritocracy: the belief that a player's performance, triumph, and ranking depend solely on individual merit, disregarding the concrete conditions of play or the role of chance (Paul 2018). This approach reinforces neoliberal rationalities that emphasize individual agency by attributing outcomes to personal efforts and skills, overlooking the influence of structural economic, cultural, and social factors (Muriel and Crawford 2018).

While Paul's (2018) study analyzed the ludonarrative design of video games and digital press sources, Muriel and Crawford (2018) conducted ethnographic research, focusing on semi-structured interviews with developers, players, and communicators linked to the gaming world in Global North countries such as Germany, Sweden, Luxembourg, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Spain. This article aims to continue this line of research, introducing two innovations. The first one, from a methodological nature, will focus on observing and participating in everyday gaming dynamics. The second one, related to the sample, will examine video game players' gaming modes in Santiago, Chile—a Latin American city located in the Global South. This region is known for having a gaming circulation and usage history distinct from hegemonic centers of production and consumption (Penix-Tadsen 2016)

The objective of this study is to analyze the relationship between the ways in which *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* players engage in their daily lives, both in public and private spaces in Santiago, Chile, and the meritocratic discourse. This game was chosen due to its popularity, multiplayer mode, the existence of a professional gaming circuit, and the possibility it provides users to introduce 'chance' by activating objectives and mechanisms in the game scenarios. This choice makes it ideal for

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observing how players appropriate the video game and how the meritocratic discourse influences their interpretations and deployment of gaming practices. Additionally, it facilitates fieldwork in the urban environment and the comparison of different gaming experiences with the same video game.

The theoretical framework of this study has been constructed by combining the cultural studies approach in Game Studies with Latin American cultural communication studies. From this perspective, it is acknowledged that the mode of playing a video game cannot be inferred solely from its ludonarrative design (Sicart 2011). Playing is a practice in which the player interprets the game rules and appropriates them to subsequently use them to express themselves meaningfully and, at times, chaotically (Sicart 2017). This approach involves studying how people play video games, rather than merely the discourse coded in the game. Such an approach represents an epistemological shift similar to that proposed by Latin American authors like Martín-Barbero (2010), who have developed theories to understand the interaction between politics, communication, and culture through social mediations and rituals present in the daily and situated media consumption from the Global North by audiences in Latin American countries.

The methodology of this study consisted of participant-observer ethnography and ethnographic interviews conducted in public and private spaces in the city of Santiago, Chile. The sample consisted of 50 participants, of whom 43 were men and 7 women, ranging from 18 to 35 years. Participants reported varying levels of skill with the game, spanning from beginners to professional players participating in international Super Smash Bros. Ultimate tournaments. Fieldwork took place between October 2022 and January 2023. Data collection and interpretation were based on the relational ethnographic model (Desmond 2014) and the abductive model (Stuart 2018). Playable interviews were implemented when possible (Schoot and Horrel 2000), along with in-depth interviews with key informants.

The results indicate that in gaming modes, a hybridization is observed between the meritocratic discourse of the video game and the historical social experience of playing video games at home and in public spaces in Chile. Four gaming modes were identified in which, although participants maintain the importance of meritocracy in their discourse, in practice, it often serves other purposes based on observations of player interactions and their interactions with the game's rule system. These modes include meritocratic competitiveness, aligned with the meritocratic discourse and neoliberal rationality whose sole purpose is winning; social competitiveness, where the goal is to enjoy the moment, strengthen bonds, experiment, or serve as an accompaniment to conversations about other personal or social topics; educational competitiveness, aiming to establish a teacher-apprentice relationship, helping others improve their gaming skills; and egalitarian competitiveness, which, unlike meritocracy, allows players to create game conditions through creativity so that those with less skill have more opportunities to win.

Finally, the study will evaluate the contribution of findings, epistemological innovations, and the introduction of new concepts to research that has traditionally focused on countries like the United States or Europe. As a regional study, it aims to contribute to the global discussion in game studies, in line with the suggestions of authors, such as Liboriussen and Martin (2016) and Penix-Tadsen (2019).

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