Towards a Hopeful Understanding of Masculinities in Gaming: An Autoethnographic Exploration through *Kind Words (lo fi chill beats to write to)*

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an exploration of masculinity in gaming through an autoethnographic engagement with *Kind Words (lo fi chill beats to write to)* (Popcannibal, 2019). Highlighting the shortcomings of the current understanding of men and masculinities in gaming, I identify a need to move towards a more hopeful understanding of masculinity in gaming. This autoethnographic exploration contributes to this in two ways. First, by highlighting masculinity as situated and relational, I put forward a direction that future researchers can take when studying men and masculinities in gaming. Second, I argue that scholarly engagement with gender and gaming requires researchers to more clearly situate themselves within their research practices. I argue these directions are necessary to imagine futures in which men contribute to positive social change in gaming.

Keywords

Masculinities, Gender, Autoethnography, Cozy Games, Affect

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the concept of masculinity in videogames through an analysis of my autoethnographic engagement with *Kind Words (lo fi chill beats to write to)* - referred to as *Kind Words* from this point (Popcannibal, 2019). I will offer a direction for future research into masculinity and videogames that is both theoretical and methodological. It is theoretical for it poses a way of making sense of masculinity in videogames as situated and relational, showing how context influences the ways in which masculinity is experienced, constructed and made sense of. It is methodological because it puts forward an emphasis on positionality and reflexivity that should be considered essential for scholarly engagement with gender in videogames. In order to make these arguments, I will first discuss the literature on masculinity in videogames. Consequently, I will discuss my methodological approach to *Kind Words*, followed by an analysis of my autoethnographic engagement with *Kind Words* that puts this in conversation with the literature. In the concluding section, I will then move back to

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the theoretical and methodological argument that I briefly highlighted in this introduction.

Kind Words is an online multiplayer game that revolves around sending and receiving small letters whilst listening to lo-fi music. The title of the game gives away the aim of the game; exchanging kind words with strangers. The game is promoted as being a "positive context" in which you can "use your words to lift others up and be lifted in return (Popcannibal 2019)." Players can send out 7 lines of text and receive 14 lines of text in return. With that exchange, the interaction ends. Interactions in *Kind Words* are anonymous, with no embedded metrics to indicate performance or social status. Players are encouraged to talk about serious topics, and many do. I felt drawn to the game, not in the least because its promise as a 'positive context' gave me hope.

As this paper will show, this autoethnography is colored by my conflicting experiences with masculinity and 'being a man' as someone understanding themselves as a cishet, White, middle-class man in Northern Europe. *Kind Words* has been a vehicle for reflection, and interactions with others through requests and responses have been a crucial element in this reflection. A critical interrogation of the identity positions I occupy and through which I enter, inhabit and move through *Kind Words* and other contexts, will allow me to direct us toward a more hopeful reading of masculinity in games. It is important to note here that this is not a study *of Kind Words*. Rather, it is an exploration of masculinity through my engagement with *Kind Words*. This autoethnography, an analysis of my own experiences and practices as part of a broader social and cultural context, is analytical in nature (Denshire 2014). In the following section, I will discuss the gaps in the literature in critical studies of men and masculinities and games studies.

WHAT WE DON'T UNDERSTAND ABOUT MASCULINITY (IN GAMING) YET

It has become common sense in critical studies of men and masculinities (CSMM) to approach masculinities as multiple. Connell's (2005) widely applied theorizing on hegemonic masculinity identifies multiple concurrently existing forms of masculinity that struggle for hegemony. This theorizing has carefully shown how masculinities are contextually dependent by taking into consideration historical, cultural and temporal factors (Connell 2005). However, in centering masculinities instead of men, Hearn (2004) argues CSMM fails to properly hold men accountable for the practices that help sustain patriarchy. The self-evident use of (hegemonic) masculinities as a concept is not problematized enough, according to Hearn (2004).

Along these lines, Waling (2019: 90) argues that we still do not know how to properly talk about masculinities in ways that account for men's 'agentive and reflexive engagement with masculinities and masculine practices.' According to Waling (2019), masculinities theorizing risks producing disembodied analyses of men's everyday practices and she cautions CSMM scholars not to rely on hegemonic masculinities as the only viable theory for analysis. Besides, Connell's (2005) conceptualization of multiple forms of masculinity has left room for a typological application of masculinities. This leads Allan (2022) to argue that this typological application becomes tautological and thereby leads to a reductive understanding of men's identities that is detached from direct experiences. Instead of analyzing men's practices and experiences, finding a 'new' form of masculinity seems to be the predetermined result of any of CSMM's endeavors (Allan 2022).

Masculinity in games studies has often been applied in the way criticized above. 'New' phenomena have encouraged the development of new models to account for the specific kind of masculinity present in gaming contexts. Some examples of this are gamer masculinity (Dashiell 2023), geek masculinity (Salter 2018) and technomasculinity (Kocurek 2012). Most of the work on masculinity in videogames focuses on issues of representation (Blackburn 2018, Conway 2020), on marginalized groups of gamers' (including queer men) experiences with harassment (Brenner-Levoy 2023, Butt and Apperley 2018, DeWinter and Kocurek 2017, Friman and Ruotsalainen 2022, Ratan, et al. 2015), or on what different forms of gaming *do* for masculinity (Taylor and Voorhees 2018, Zhu 2018, Taylor 2021). These works have contributed to our understanding of how exclusion takes place, how this is experienced, and how this seems inextricably tied to masculinity. However, little work has been done so far in highlighting men's lived and embodied gendered experiences in videogames.

Taylor and Voorhees (2018: 6-7) argue that game studies have obscured masculinity by mostly tending to the outcomes of masculine behavior, instead of tending to its active construction and negotiation. Jenson and de Castell (2010: 63) similarly argued for a need to problematize the static and reductive understandings of identity that overwhelmingly dictated research on gender in games up until that point. More recent literature reviews on masculinity in research on competitive videogames by Rogstad (2022) and on masculinity in human computer interaction research by Seaborn (2023) suggest that Jenson and de Castell's (2010) call for action has been insufficiently taken up. This has led to relatively monolithic understandings of masculinity that often contain elements of dominance and toxicity. Studies that directly highlights the experiences and gendered practices of men, show how men engage with their gendered identities in nuanced ways that are not easily described with a singular definition or 'type' of masculinity (e.g. Maloney et al 2019). In similar vein, Taylor and Voorhees (2018: 8) argue that studies on masculinity in videogames should consider masculinity's constantly changing nature; the multiple manifestations that it takes; the intersections with other identity categories; and the fundamental role played by 'media, texts, technologies and industries to buttress patriarchal dividend'. Taylor and Voorhees' (2018) reading of masculinity, inspired by post-structuralist theorizing, helps understand masculinities' interlinkage with questions of power. However, the question remains how men and masculinities can become part of developments for positive social change.

This issue exists more broadly in the critical studies of men and masculinities (Ralph and Roberts 2019). Various scholars have attempted to extend Connell's (2005) structuralist masculinities theorizing to address this seemingly embedded pessimism. Bridges and Pascoe (2014) argue hybrid masculinities offer vocabulary to talk about masculinities adapting and transitioning, reaching a hybrid state in which subordinated masculinities' elements are adopted by hegemonic groups. These adaptations and hybrid states can both subvert and perpetuate unequal power relations (Duncanson 2015). However, Bridges and Pascoe (2014) acknowledge that this theorizing continues to have trouble identifying meaningful systemic change. In contrast, Anderson's (2009) Inclusive Masculinity Theory makes sense of positive social developments (e.g. the decrease in homophobic attitudes in society) as a change in masculinity that moves towards more inclusive forms. However, Anderson and McCormack (2019) are cautious to link men's practices and attitudes to the reproduction of unequal power relations, but in doing so they end up with an understanding of masculinity that places structural gendered issues largely outside of

the practices and experiences of men. Alternatively, Elliot (2016: 240) proposes to apply feminist care theory to understanding masculinities, and coins the concept of caring masculinities to describe "masculine identities that reject domination and embrace values of care". Elliot (2016) follows Connel (2005) in arguing that a fundamental characteristic of "traditional hegemonic masculinity" is domination. Therefore, the rejection of domination is crucial for an understanding of caring masculinities as challenges to the reproduction of unequal power relations and efforts towards positive social change (Roberts and Prattes 2024). Although I find caring masculinities the most potent of the attempts discussed in this paragraph, it carries the risk of becoming a diagnostic tool rather than an analytical tool.

To move away from the structuralist theorizing in CSMM, Waling (2019) argues for a post-structural approach to masculinities that understands men's agency and experiences in relation to gendered power relations. Pointing towards phenomenology, Allan (2022) proposes to break with structuralism by forefronting affect. Allan (2022) argues this should result in a more reparative reading of masculinities that starts with lived and embodied experiences, and contextualizes this in broader political and affective structures. Bringing post-structuralism and phenomenology together, Berggren (2014) proposes to approach masculinity as 'sticky'. This approach takes phenomenology's strength in accounting for bodies and lived experiences, as well as post-structuralist ability to account for the complex and contradictory nature of masculine subjectivity. These approaches have not yet been applied in empirical studies on men and masculinities.

In conclusion, current theories account for (White) men's privileged position in society and gaming spaces, but do too little to ground masculinity conceptually in the everyday practices of men. Following Waling (2019) I argue that game studies need to look much closer at what it *means* to be a man, and what 'masculine' agency looks like. This shift of focus must be accompanied with a deliberate effort to envision how men can contribute and bring about positive structural change on gendered issues. For this, we need to explore new methodological and theoretical approaches to masculinities that go beyond Connell's structuralist framework. This is where I would like to take us back to *Kind Words*. My engagement with the game aims to respond to this gap in critical studies of men and masculinities and game studies literature. This autoethnography follows the post-structural and phenomenological directions that Waling (2019), Allan (2022) and Berggren (2014) argue for. By doing so, I will provide a future direction for the study of men and masculinities in games that allows for a more hopeful reading. Before I make this argument, I will first discuss the game's fundamental characteristics and my methodological approach in the next section.

SETTING AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

As described in the introduction to this paper, interactions in *Kind Words* are short, anonymous and often touch on serious topics. When players write requests, they end up in a semi-randomized pile that works with a priority system. The size of the pile depends on the amount of requests in circulation. Players can pick a request to respond to from the pile, where responding and letting time pass will cause the pile to refill or refresh. Requests are limited to 7 lines of text, while responses are limited to 14 lines of text. A sticker can be attached to responses, and be sent after a response has been received as a sign of appreciation. Received responses can be saved and favorited, but sent responses cannot be saved. Sent requests and responses do not include any personal details, except an initial that can be modified by the player at

any given time. In an attempt to secure anonymity and kindness, players can report messages that are mean; inappropriate; 'gibberish'; worrying; off-topic; or include personal information. The reported messages are then manually checked by the games' developers.

Kind Words' framing as positive context and the way it encourages and allows serious topics to be discussed, fit the definition of a cozy or wholesome game discussed by Waszkiewicz and Bakun (2020). The 'cute' and soft aesthetics in pastel-like color schemes; an animal postal delivery non-playable character; and relaxing lo-fi music in the background add to the cozy feel of the game. Building on Waszkiewicz and Bakun's work, Bódi (2024) and Andiloro (2024) argue that cozy games can offer comfort from out-of-game struggles and issues, while at the same time cozy games may be invested in the reproduction of neoliberal ideology. Later in this paper I will highlight how this duality comes forward in my engagement with *Kind Words*.

To engage with *Kind Words* through autoethnographic methods is partly informed by the game's fundamental gameplay elements. In *Kind Words*, the player ultimately plays alone as someone who writes texts to anonymous others. The player decides when to write and engage with others, and this is a fundamental aspect of text-interaction based games (Hine 2000). Considering its emphasis on short, anonymous and serious interactions, I believe it to be unethical to break anonymity in order to conduct the research. Encouraging people who are not yet playing *Kind Words* to play the game as participants in the research (e.g. through game-diaries) felt similarly unethical and disruptive. The serious and vulnerable nature of request coming from other players would make 'artificially' introducing players for research purposes an issue. A focus on 'self' appeared more productive, both because of how I was personally drawn to the game and the way in which engagement with the game involves reflection.

As a feminist methodology, autoethnography is invested in interrogating power structures and highlighting the embeddedness of researchers in their own research (Ettorre 2017). Conducting autoethnography and interrogating the identity categories through which I make sense of myself help simultaneously interrogate unspoken assumptions about the blueprint (game studies) researcher as White, masculine, middle class and able-bodied (Ellis, et al. 2011, Phillips 2020). In this paper I put my personal experiences, observations and reflections in relation to a broader cultural context in conversation with scientific literature (Stahlke Wall 2016), in a way that breaks from hegemonic research practices that emphasize "objectivity, rationality and separation from the self" (Taylor and Coia 2020: 579). This approach is inspired by Gannon's (2006: 477) notion of an "explicit and disruptive post-structural autoethnography" in which 'the self' is simultaneously represented and problematized.

Between May 1st and August 20th, 2024, I sat down for 40 sessions of engaging with *Kind Words*. Some of those sessions were short (5 to 30 minutes), in limited amounts of time between meetings or other activities. Other sessions lasted for a couple of hours. In total, the autoethnographic material on *Kind Words* described in this paper spans over approximately 120 hours of 'gametime'. During these sessions, I systematically recorded both my sent and received requests and responses, including reflections, memories and emotions that came to me while engaging with the game (Ellis, et al. 2011). I coded this data thematically to identify patterns, while also being

attentive to unique but emblematic occurrences that did not fit in any pattern. I will discuss the results of this analysis in the following section.

FINDINGS

Reviewing the material I collected during my sessions revealed different findings for the interactions in which I was respondent, and the interactions in which I was the requester. Therefore, I will split the analysis into two parts and synthesize the findings afterwards. My engagement with *Kind Words* should nevertheless be considered as an integrated whole of both requesting and responding. The reflections coming up during gameplay often spanned across various requests and responses. These interactions often sparked new questions, 'unlocked' new memories or made me feel a certain way that I took with me into the following interaction. I will now discuss my interactions as a respondent, after which I move on to my interactions as a requester.

Respondent

In analyzing the responses I sent to others (N=74), I identify an initial tendency to give advice to others. Most of the texts, however, were not requests at all. They consisted of people sharing experiences, thoughts, emotions, but most of the requests (N=49) did not include a question. This is twice the amount of requests that did include a question (N=25). My initial tendency to give advice to others is exemplified by the following excerpt of a reflective note I wrote on 28th May 28th:

> I cannot tangibly help others, but I can share my understanding and compassion with them. I have no idea if that helps or not. … I do feel a need to do something, to help out, and to see the result of what I am doing. What if the game is helping me unlearn these patterns? … I often feel myself unable to say something that is properly helpful. … But what if instead of looking for ways to help, I just share and be compassionate?

This move away from 'helping' to what can be categorized as 'caring' is significant, as helping here is grounded much more in a logic of production (i.e. to produce a certain outcome in which the person writing the request is 'helped') whilst caring is not. My comments about feeling unable to 'help' others 'tangibly' show an attachment to the (potential) outcome of my response. As a mechanic, sending out requests and not being able to revisit those therefore helps me as a player reflect on and unlearn a default move towards 'helping'. I learned that helping could be meant well, but risks assuming an authoritative position in which one is allowed to help even if this is not explicitly requested. In this position, I claim to know what is best for the person I am replying to. Instead of *feeling* for them through care, I *reason* for them in an attempt to help.

Shifting from 'helping' to caring is then a move away from this position of authority. I reflect on this shift away from 'helping' to caring during a later session on June 13th:

> I unlearned the urge to 'help'. Now, when my advice is not explicitly requested, I deliberately choose to send Kind Words instead of 'helpful' words aimed at solving the presented issue. I am not in a position to solve, but I can share kindness.

Although my claim that I had unlearned the urge to help by then was pre-emptive, this passage shows me becoming increasingly aware of how I relate to others in *Kind Words*. Instead of assuming authority over the situation, I increasingly try to position myself as a compassionate stranger.

Care in *Kind Words* could be considered unconditional, as the reciprocity expected in this relationship is excluded from the game through its mechanical structure. However, other conditions for care came to the fore. Initially, I thought of *Kind Words* as a game I could play in in-between moments, short time windows and on-the-move. However, the serious nature of requests made me feel the need to sit down and take my time to respond to others. The often deeply emotional and personal stories needed careful attention, and I envisioned a human on the receiving end of the exchange who was genuinely struggling with something and in need of compassion. It felt right to take this seriously. Besides, I often found myself spending a considerable amount of time constructing 14-line responses that felt adequate, indicating how challenging the game could be to play. As a result, I opened the game only when I had at least half an hour available.

This consideration is not just about time, but also about space. Taking the time to sit down and engage attentively with the requests requires a space in which this is possible. I realized this on the 4th of May, whilst playing at the airport:

> Scrolling to the requests of other people at the airport I realize that the airport might not be the best place to play Kind Words. I do not feel comfortable opening up some of the more complicated, personal and emotional requests and type responses. … I would do the others a disservice if I would compose responses right now.

When writing this passage, I was sitting in a row of chairs that was empty. There was no risk of people looking over my shoulder and reading what I wrote. Still, it felt uncomfortable to play the game and I noticed how I could not tap into a vulnerability that I had been comfortable with in my earlier sessions at the office. I learned there was a time and place to play the game, but maybe even more importantly there was a time and place for me to be emotionally vulnerable or show affection to others. The kind of care I give in *Kind Words* does not feel similarly acceptable or comfortable to me in other spaces.

I locate this experience partly with the affective affordances of the game. According to Caravà and Benenti (2024), affective affordances should be understood as the ways in which we perceive people, space and material to afford us with "regulative opportunities to amplify, suppress, extend, enrich, and explore the phenomenal and temporal character of our affective experiences (Krueger and Colombetti 2018)." While this concept was introduced and applied to explain psychopathological emotional processes, I find it particularly useful in conceptualizing how *Kind Words* as a space helps foster certain emotional connections and engagements over others. I apply an understanding of affect here that is inspired by Ahmed (2006). Ahmed (2006) argues affect to be an interplay between bodies and the social, spatial and material conditions that bodies enter, inhabit and move through. In this interplay, bodies and space connect and affect each other in ways that orient them towards certain forms of action and emotional engagement over others (Ahmed 2006). Importantly, Ahmed (2006) adds that different bodies are affected differently and should not be seen as a universal given in a particular context.

The concept of affective affordances helps contrast how affect takes shape in *Kind Words* compared to other (game) spaces in a way that moves beyond a mechanical reading of games and their affordances for action. In *Kind Words*, the emphasis on anonymity combined with a lack of longitudinal relationship building allows for me to engage in interactions with a smaller risk of being emasculated for being 'too soft', 'too emotional', or 'too clingy'. At the same time, vulnerability is encouraged by both the game and the people playing it. Other players sharing their seemingly vulnerable stories in requests, and responding well to my vulnerable requests, helped foster an environment in which vulnerability can happen.

Even though the affective affordances of *Kind Words* as a space orient me towards care, it is ultimately an elective aspect of the game. Engaging in both requesting and responding is encouraged, but not obligatory. Being able to pick requests from a pile adds to the elective nature of responding to other players. Care in this sense only exists insofar I as a player decide to engage in the act of it. Reflections like the following are emblematic of this:

> Scrolling through requests, I do not feel like responding to any of them. (May 21st)

> Sifting through requests, trying to find one that speaks to me. (May 27th)

This kind of reflection comes back more often during my gameplay, and shows how choosing what to respond to, and what to care for, is fundamentally conditional. Care is dependent on the requests that 'speak to me', or that I feel equipped to speak to. The result of this is that I found myself often oriented towards requests that I recognized myself in. Speaking to others then became a way of also speaking to myself.

My capacity to care is as dependent on how requests 'speak to me' as it is on my mental capacity to deal with requests. I note down the following on the 31st of May:

> I do not have the headspace to deal with other people's problems right now. I do not think I can share Kind Words, and I decide not to play any further.

Identifying I am not in the right state of mind to do justice to other people's requests, I decided to terminate my session. In some instances this is influenced solely by factors outside of the game, but in other instances the heavy emotional and personal nature of requests resulted in me feeling unable to respond to subsequent requests. In these occurrences, I resorted to writing requests myself, taking a break, or terminating my session altogether.

The above highlights the conditional foundations of care in *Kind Words*. Although unconditional in the sense that there is no tangible or perceivable outcome to the act, care exists under social, spatial and material conditions that make up how the player *is affected* and how the player in turn *affects*. I will consider these affective affordances of *Kind Words* further in the analysis of my interactions as requester in the next section.

Requester

Through discussion of my requests, I will show how I 'perform gender' (Butler 2004) in *Kind Words* a way that is situated, relational and embodied. Interactions in the

game are short and do not include a form of relationship building. Nevertheless, I noticed a continuity in the requests I sent out. During gameplay, I realized I was constructing a version of myself that was, in some ways, specific to *Kind Words*:

> I ask questions in a way that makes it clear I am a particular kind of man, having a particular kind of struggle.

This reflection comes after writing a handful of requests about society's expectations of men, and how I find it hard to accept those. This exemplifies what drew me to *Kind Words* in the first place; its potential to be an *alternative* space. However, in voicing my struggle to fit into the societal expectations that I experience, I am positioning myself as different from those expectations. I note what informs my gameplay on May 5th:

> We not only lack a theoretical understanding of how men can be in the world beyond notions of toxicity and hegemony. It is also a personal understanding that I am lacking, honestly. I identify as a man, even though I have an oppositional relationship to some things considered 'masculine'.

This reflective passage cannot be understood as an isolated statement. Ahmed (2006: 28) argues that "we move toward or away from objects depending on how we are moved by them". My moving towards *Kind Words* should be understood as a search for hope that developed through experiences prior to my engagement with *Kind Words*.

The understanding of masculinity I describe in these passages is largely colored by memories of experiences in contexts that could be described as societal venues for the reproduction of masculine domination, like sports (Messner 1988, Messner 2007, Connell 2005) and (competitive) gaming (Taylor and Voorhees 2018, Taylor 2021). I grew up playing football from early childhood until adolescence. I enjoyed football at first, but as I grew older, the game got more physical, 'tougher' and in many ways 'more serious'. I quit football as an early adult and I make sense of this as a distancing from physicality and toughness. I started playing *League of Legends* as a break from that, but ultimately my experience there has become similarly tainted by insults, 'toughness' and violence. I have spent considerable time in both football and *League of Legends* (my main game throughout early adulthood). I could, because I was able to exist in those spaces and access benefits that came with 'performing well' and acting 'tough'. Especially for sports, it is well argued how this context is a venue for (White) men to establish a dominant position over other genders and other men (Connell 2005, Messner 2007). I have lived this, but at the same time I feel distance from the norms and expectations I experienced in those spaces. Dyer (2004) underscores the unfulfilling nature of spaces in which masculinity is defined through struggle, which I deeply relate to. *Kind Words* offered the idea of a hopeful break from this, and I have approached the game with that hope as a foundation. My argument is therefore not that the game is or has potential to be transformative in and of itself. Rather, I have engaged in the game in a way that had the potential to be transformative to me exactly because of the way I was moved by it.

Feelings, emotions, masculinity

Kind Words as a break from other contexts similarly became visible in how emotions and masculinity came up in interactions. On May 22nd a reflection made me realize I appreciated a friend for the times we had played games together a lot. I decided to share this appreciation with him, and it felt slightly uncomfortable. I wrote a request a day later, sharing this experience, and one of the responses noted it is sad that it is not normalized. I reflect further on this:

> I agree it is sad that we do not really share those feelings so openly. Even writing him the message yesterday made me feel weird. It is not common to say to another person, especially another man, that you appreciate them. Does it come off as too sentimental? Will it overstep a boundary? It is not just that I have to keep up an image of myself as an emotionally stable and reliable friend (and man?), but also that the other has to still perceive me as such?

I argued earlier in this paper that the kind of care I give in *Kind Words* does not feel similarly acceptable in other contexts. I have learned to deal with emotions privately and inwardly. When putting this into a request on May 29th, I received a response that noted bottling emotions up is unhealthy. I reflected on this further:

> There is also something [outdated] about this discourse around bottling emotions, and the idea of it as necessarily bad. I think the issue might not be in bottling it up itself, but in the experience of emotions as something that cannot be shown, as something that should not be there, as something that destabilizes you, and potentially as something that deteriorates your social status (as a man in society).

A day later, sparked by another request-response interaction, I noted the following:

> Suppressing emotions seems to be a well-known fact about masculinity. Anger being perceived as the only acceptable emotion for men, too.

The above echoes Pease's (2012: 128) observation that most literature on men and emotions claim men are out of touch with their feelings and fail to properly express their emotions. Importantly, Pease (2012: 127) adds that these claims are made about White, heterosexual, cis-men. However, emotions to Pease (2012) play a role in sustaining privilege and are involved in the reproduction of social, structural inequalities. At the same time, emotions could be utilized to transform unequal power relations (Pease 2012: 134-135). A more critical engagement with men's emotions is therefore necessary (ibid.), and this is underscored by de Boise and Hearn (2017). They call for scholars to highlight "men's emotions as both affect*ive* and affect*ing* rather than individual states (de Boise and Hearn 2017)." This means when looking at the cultural significance of emotions we do not simply look at an individual's emotional states, but look at the ways in which emotions travel between bodies. This latter point ties back to the affective affordances of *Kind Words* that I have discussed earlier in this paper. For me, *Kind Words* seems to enable kinds of emotional expression and engagement that I do not experience in other contexts. Similar to what I argued in my discussion of care in *Kind Words*, if we focus on the kinds of emotional engagement and expression enabled, this is a move away from what is typically associated with domination and power.

The limits of kindness (and care)

As argued earlier, this is not to say that *Kind Words* should be seen as a transformative force on its own. *Kind Words* is presented as a positive context, but I found this positivity not to be a given. Instead, I have had several interactions that made me feel unheard or unseen, or that I did not perceive as helpful. I reflect on this on May 22nd:

> These responses do not give me the feeling that I am being seen and heard, even though they are not ill-intended.

The latter part of this reflection became a recurring observation; for most requests that I didn't receive as helpful, I could still see they were intended well. This is important when considering the interplay between the game's affective affordances and the players. Although the game presents a positive context that orients the player towards a certain kind of action with a certain kind of intent different from other contexts, *Kind Words* is not isolated from out-of-game contexts. This becomes clear from my appreciation of a particular response on the May 3rd:

> "You have the ability to make your own choices" and "do what makes you happy" are nice things to say, but they are also cruel.

Later adding:

> My resistance against these notions might very well be a resistance against the assumption of a certain kind of masculinity that comes with the notion of individual responsibility.

Here I link a neoliberal logic of individual responsibility (and possibility) to what I experience as societal expectations about masculinity. The cruelty of the neoliberal discourse around individual responsibility is often seen together with discourses around masculinity (self-discipline, pick-up artists, hustlers), where struggles in life are framed as individual lack rather than institutional or systemic issues. *Kind Words* is built not to include any metrics of enumeration, and the only thing you can collect are stickers attached to requests and responses. However, *Kind Words*' players can and do still bring with them norms and values from outside the game, and reproduce these through their responses. *Kind Words* is not an escape from 'outside cruelty' just as much as any other game is not. I take this insight to expand the arguments of Bodi (2024) and Andiloro (2024) about cozy games' potential reproduction of neoliberal logics and ideology. Not only should the game be considered in this, but also the role of players themselves should be considered.

When sharing struggles, thoughts and feelings related to my gendered experiences in requests, I was particularly susceptible to feeling frustrated when I felt like I was misunderstood in responses. On June 25th, I wrote a request indicating I felt weird being referred to as 'male' even though I identify as a man. One response noted this was odd and suggested me to explore different gendered identities to see if they fit me better. Reflecting on the response I note:

> I feel misunderstood here, maybe also belittled. The person assumes I am not very aware of my gendered identity, based on a 3-line request. That feels a bit frustrating, honestly.

While the responder seemed to genuinely want to help me sort my thoughts, I felt like they misunderstood my request and jumped to a conclusion I was not looking for. Another response to the same request similarly encouraged me to explore this discomfort with identity categories, but read as a much more compassionate and understanding response.

Being vulnerable in requests opened up the possibility to be misunderstood, or for others to make claims about the situation that were not applicable. In my frustrations we see not only how kindness, care and positivity are not a given in *Kind Words*, but also how I value constructing myself a certain way and being perceived as such. Here it becomes clear that my self-construction in *Kind Words*, even though it is merely through text, is an embodied process. I experience misunderstandings of my requests partly as a misinterpretation of me as an embodied being. This indicates that I am attached to the way I make sense of myself -as a man- even though I am conflicted about this identity position. As shown before in this paper, when I engage in *Kind Words* I take with me everything I have lived through before. I construct a version of myself in *Kind Words* in relation to this, but this version is not stable. I have argued earlier that my engagement in *Kind Words* should be situated within the affective affordances, with a focus on the social, spatial and material conditions that constitute those affordances. When zooming in specifically on the social, it becomes clear that my gendered self-construction is relational in that it is negotiated through interactions with others. By confirming, challenging and differently interpreting my self-representation, others' responses to me inform how I represent myself in future requests. How I perform gender in *Kind Words* is therefore also fundamentally relational.

DISCUSSION

This autoethnography presented an exploration of masculinities in gaming through a post-structural and phenomenological approach. In this, I follow Waling (2019), Allan (2022) and Berggren (2014), who argue that new approaches are necessary for critical studies of men and masculinities to advance its understanding beyond dominant structuralist theorizing. This exploration should be seen as a first step, and not a final destination. This autoethnography has modestly highlighted the potential for an approach that combines a focus on lived experience and affect, as well as the complex and contradictory nature of 'masculine subjectivity'.

The focus on affect and the affective affordances of *Kind Words* in relation to other spaces highlights how I am oriented towards a certain kind of emotional engagement over others. This enables an analysis of the conditions under which this orientation takes shape, and what the implications of such orientations are. I have shown how in *Kind Words* I was oriented towards care, but that this orientation changes under different social, spatial and material conditions. Especially when combining the findings of both requesting and responding, 'care' in *Kind Words* is evidently unstable. The added value of focusing on affect lies in how it reveals these nuanced effects of changing conditions on players' gendered experiences.

These insights are complemented by the post-structural mode of simultaneously representing and problematizing 'the self' in this autoethnography (Gannon 2006). I have highlighted how I constructed a particular version of myself, which carries a sense of continuity and stability. However, in identifying 'the limits of kindness' I reveal the unstable and relational nature of these self-representations. It is crucial

here to see these self-representations not as authentic representations of self. I cannot be defined by how I am presenting myself in *Kind Words*, nor can I be defined by how I present myself in this paper. However, these self-representations show the ways in which I make sense of myself within *Kind Words*, and they can as such be related to the affective affordances I discussed earlier. How I am affected by *Kind Words* depends on how I make sense of myself within this context. This approach extends Taylor and Voorhees' (2018) theorizing on masculinities in gaming, in that it centers the affective interplay between game and player.

Returning to the question of care specifically, the autoethnographic findings highlight the analytical limitations of a concept like caring masculinities (Elliot 2016). At first glance, my shift from helping to caring as a responder could be understood as an embrace of caring masculinities. However, this use of caring masculinities would be diagnostic and thereby essentializing my gendered performance instead of explaining it. This exemplifies the tautological application of masculinities Allan (2022) critiques. Instead, by applying a phenomenological and post-structuralist lense, this autoethnography highlights my gendered performance and 'caring' practices as necessarily conditional, complex and unstable.

While structuralist approaches to masculinities (e.g. Connell 2005) account well for gendered power hierarchies, they have a hard time identifying and envisioning positive social change that involves men (Ralph and Roberts 2019). This autoethnography does not describe a change in masculinities, neither societal nor individual. Yet, I argue it shows the potency of applying a post-structuralist and phenomenological lense in providing a more hopeful reading of men and masculinities in gaming. This paper shows that it allows for an analysis of masculinities that accounts for the complexities and contradictions of gendered performances. It seems adequate in addressing Waling's (2019) call for an approach that highlights "men's agentive and reflexive engagement with gender and gendered practices." Translating this approach to other qualitative methodologies for researching men and masculinities in gaming will produce valuable challenges to the field's current understandings.

CONCLUSION

In applying a phenomenological and post-structural lense, this autoethnography reveals the complicated interlinkage between social, spatial and material conditions in which gamers perform gender. I have critically interrogated how I enter, inhabit and moved through *Kind Words*. This underscores that we should not see players as stable gendered beings moving from one game to another. Instead, a focus on affect and affective affordances allows for an understanding of players as gendered beings influenced by changing surroundings, including videogame spaces. This will allow us to highlight not only how gendered experiences and acts in various spaces differ (or not). Additionally, it will allow for an analysis on what these different spaces do for how men are oriented towards certain acts over others. The approach to masculinities in gaming applied in this paper is more hopeful, because it centers the contradictions, negotiations and reflections of men in ways that enable an account for individual and structural social change.

Furthermore, it is crucial for researchers engaging with these issues in their study on men and gaming to apply a reflexive stance through which they position themselves within their research practices. Otherwise, we risk obscuring the interactions between researchers and 'the researched' through which knowledge is produced. Additionally,

as Phillips (2020) argues, game studies have been largely dictated by (cishet, White, Western) men and there are strong normative assumptions about the blueprint game studies researcher. Positioning ourselves in our research should be a tool to interrogate these assumptions (Mainsah and Prøitz 2015). A more nuanced understanding of men and masculinities in gaming that simultaneously shows the conditions under which knowledge production takes place is necessary to imagine futures in which men positively contribute to meaningful social change.

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