

# “Love’s a Game, Wanna Play?” Games in and around Taylor Swift’s Music

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## Keywords

Taylor Swift, music industry, lyrics, audience engagement, engagement strategies

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Games can often be found at the crossroads of different cultural settings. For example, games and gamification are nowadays integrated into many (other) artistic industries, including the music industry. We explore these aspects in Taylor Swift’s music, specifically within lyrics, as well as in her audience engagement strategies, which include gameful elements such as easter eggs and mysterious teasers.

Taylor Swift might currently be the most popular artist on the planet; she has been continually breaking records (Legaspi, 2023), she is the first musician to become a billionaire "solely based on her songs and performances" (Dellatto 2023) and the first TIME’s Person of the Year recognized by their success in arts (Jacobs, 2023). Furthermore, she has, herself, become a topic of academic research (see e.g. Avdeeff 2021, Driessen 2022, Ryan Bengtsson & Edlom 2023), as well as her music and lyrics (see e.g. Fatikha & Masykuroh 2022), that she is known for writing herself (Dellatto 2023).

A classic example of how games and other cultural phenomena can be found within music, is how they are presented within the songs as texts. There are countless definitions of games (Stenros 2017), and ‘play’ as well is a highly debated concept (Stenros 2015), and this is why it is interesting to analyze how these concepts are used in music, especially when the artist’s lyrics are known by such a wide and diverse crowd. What meaning is Swift trying to invoke with these concepts? We analyzed lyrics of the ten first albums of Taylor Swift (the latest album to be added to the analysis), including bonus tracks, remixes that have additional lyrics and the “From the Vault” songs from re-recordings of albums, altogether 205 songs, with 33 of them having references to games and play. The games she mentions are sometimes actual activities (e.g. football, tee-ball, video games, playing as a child) but more often than not, they are metaphors for relationships and communication and actions between

Proceedings of DiGRA 2025

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two people, who might be “playing relationship games”. The theme of love as a game is frequently found in Swift’s songs. Swift also uses several classic games in her songs as metaphors such as chess, poker, hide-and-seek, dominoes and solitaire, to reflect on other emotions, relationships, or strategic behavior in life. She also mentions games related elements such as rules, cards, ace, dice, prizes, pawn, game token and card sharks, and play related elements such as toys and playgrounds for similar reasons. In general, games and play related lyrics can be found in all Swift’s albums, except for the first, self-titled one. Yet, it can be viewed as an overarching theme in Swift’s music.

Games and play do not only appear in the artist’s lyrics, but she further uses them as means of engaging the audience (see also Ryan Bengtsson & Edlom 2023) with more modern tactics. Swift (2019) has talked about how she started to intentionally leave “easter eggs” for example in the printed lyrics included with her albums, to hint to the audience as to who she might be talking about in said lyrics. Gradually, the audience started noticing and responding to these easter eggs. “It got out of control” as Swift (2021) says, when the audience started to ascertain that these easter eggs were not random and attempted to interpret what they mean collectively on social media through elaborate theories. These theories can be very complex, combining easter eggs from various sources, events and timepoints, without any confirmation from Swift on whether those are actual planned easter eggs and furthermore if fans’ interpretations of them are accurate. Swift has however admitted leaving easter eggs in the visuals, lyrics, photos and videos she releases, presumably encouraging this interaction with the audience. This is acknowledged in her lyrics as well, when in *Mastermind* she describes herself being “cryptic and Machiavellian because I care”.

The result of this playful audience engagement strategy, we argue, is the development of a strong parasocial relationship with the artist, perhaps stronger than we would have otherwise seen. Rather than being a mere artist who produces stellar music, Swift provides, or perhaps herself represents, puzzles that the audience cannot help but want to crack. While other celebrities may be shrouded in mystery, Swift appears mysterious enough to pique intrigue, but approachable enough to engage with, rather than set the mystery aside. Explained through Csikszentmihalyi’s (2014) concept of flow: she employs an engagement strategy that provides the optimal challenge to ensure engagement.

Our goal is to document 1) how games are visible and presented in the lyrics of one of the most influential artists of our time, asserting the position games hold in arts and society nowadays, where it has become a ventral culture or cultural phenomenon for many audiences regardless of initial gender and age stereotypes around games and 2) the influence of games on the music industry, in terms of audience engagement strategies. What appears now to be a strategy relatively unique to Swift, could be hinting at larger developments in the music and games industry. Overall, this study gives a glimpse into how games are perceived in pop culture and how games, gamification and music are converging.

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