

An “easy life” or “no freedom of expression”? Men’s experiences of game culture

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

What does it mean to be a man and a game enthusiast? How does being a man and masculinity intersect with games and gaming? Although player research in game studies tend to be overly dominated by male respondents, men are rarely being treated as *gendered* within this research. This paper will present the results from an interview study of men’s gendered gaming experiences carried out in 2024.

Gender research within game studies has a long history (Cassell and Jenkins 1998; Jenson and de Castells 2010; Richards 2013). In a subculture dominated by men and hypermasculine game content, it is little surprise that gender perspectives in game studies have focused on issues of marginalization, exclusion and harassment experienced by women (e.g. Consalvo 2012; Cote 2017; Crothers and Scott-Brown 2024; Fox and Tang 2017; McLean and Griffiths 2018; Zhou and Peterson 2024). Interestingly, this has also led to a situation where most of the research focusing on men and masculinities are based on women’s experiences with a male-dominated culture, rather than what it means to be gaming man. This paper aims to further develop the foundational work on gaming and masculinity by Maloney et al (2019) and Taylor & Vorhees (2018) to help fill this knowledge gap by offering new research on men and masculinity in game studies. Rather than reinforcing the idea of the pervasiveness of toxic masculinity in gaming, our study documents a more nuanced picture of a variety of expressions of masculinities at play in gaming culture. While acknowledging Raewynn Connell’s theory of masculinities (2005), this paper will lean on Andrea Waling’s (2019) call for a less structuralist and more phenomenologically oriented approach focusing on the practices of masculinity and manhood in a

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discussion of how our study participants articulate their gendered experiences of being a man in gaming.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA

This paper will present and discuss the results from an interview study with 21 Norwegian individuals identifying as men between 16-57 years who consider videogames as an important part of their everyday lives. Taking a phenomenological approach in which focus is on the study participants' personal experiences, our interviews have been conducted with basis in interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), a method in qualitative psychology developed for research on major events in people's lives (Smith et al 2009) and which have been successfully applied to making sense of player experiences in game studies (Ahm 2021; Jørgensen 2011, 2016; Moran 2023).

Among our respondents, we find that while all have a clear sense of themselves as being men, they associate in different ways with the categories of masculinity idealized in game culture and in the main culture. Likewise, although have a clear sense of games and gaming as having a special place in their lives, many are hesitant to use the contested term "gamer" as an identification marker. Still, the respondents find that games and game culture are indeed a gendered space, and offer different interpretations of why this is so. Our analysis will use this data to add more nuance to previously discussed understandings of concepts such as *gaming masculinity* and *gamer masculinity* (Backe 2018; Braithwaite 2016; Chen 2016; Choi et al. 2020; Condis 2015; 2016; Condis & Morrisette 2023; Cote & Mejeur, 2018; DiSalvo 2017; Falcão et al. 2021; Ictech 2021; Raffel 2018; Ruberg 2018; 2019; Taylor and Vorhees, 2009).

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