The gaming habitus: An exploration of gender and class differences among student gamers

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In this paper we study Norwegian students videogame practices as an expression of cultural dispositions in their habitus and as an element of their wider classed cultural lifestyles, focusing on two questions. First, how do preferences for specific game series differ among active gamers, and second, how and to what degree does variation in series preferences – as well as habitual practice and expressed interest in video gaming more generally – follow social differences, focussing on gender and social class.

These questions speak to debates both in game studies and in the cultural class analysis tradition. In game studies, the question relate to debates about how different game mechanics, aesthethics and playing styles tend to appeal to different types of pleasures and fascinations (Bartle, 1996; Bateman et.al, 2011; Manero et.al, 2016). For cultural class analysis, following the theoretical and methodological example of Pierre Bourdieu (1979), video games is a cultural practice which, while rapidly becoming more common in the general population, little is still known about how it relates to wider patterns of classed inequality in people's cultural lifestyles. The question is not only if we can see class distinctions between active and less active users of video games, but how differences in game preferences themselves are classed and might form new forms of cultural distinction. Mapping such patterns of differentiation in video game habits and tastes is also relevant to current debates on gender and gamer identity (Boudreau, 2018). After Gillian Andrews' pioneering study of US high school students (2008) – which found that students of low socioeconomic status tended to prefer sport games over long-form role-playing and narrative games – very little research has been done more recently on how social class relates to gamer practices, preferences and identities. An exception is Vilasis-Pamos and Peres-Latorre's study of 14-15 year old teenagers in Barcelona (2022), which finds that social class is important for understanding the role of video game play in socialization processes.

In this analysis, we examine these questions using data from Norwegian students surveyed in 2018 (N = 1,223) and 2020 (N = 1,589). We construct two statistical spaces using Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA).

The first, *the space of video game tastes*, is based on 110 favorite game series mentioned in open-ended responses. This space captures the main divides in game preferences and enables the construction of a statistical typology comprising four clusters of gamers, categorized by their overall preference for specific types of games. These divides and clusters are further analyzed in relation to other characteristics of the gamers, including gender, frequency of play, place of study, and indicators of parental social class.

The second analysis maps students' gaming habits, preference orientations, and expressed interests within *the space of classed cultural lifestyles*, using indicators of parental capital. We find significant differences in game preferences, general interest, and time spent gaming across social class lines.

Preliminary findings suggest that a high level of interest in video games is associated with somewhat lower and more culturally oriented class backgrounds than average. This socioeconomic profile also correlates with lifestyle traits such as frequent cinema visits, interest in fantasy and science fiction, habitual reading, and below-average interest in physical exercise. Additionally, students from backgrounds characterized more by cultural than economic capital (e.g., those studying humanities or teacher education) tend to prefer story-driven, non-competitive games, often set in fantasy or science fiction worlds. Female respondents who mentioned favourite game titles predominantly fall into this category, highlighting a structural intersection of social class and gender. Another dimension of class difference emerges among female players who prefer competitive action and online games; these individuals tend to have socioeconomic profiles that diverge from their male counterparts

Keywords

Habitus, Bourdieu, preferences, class, gender, demographics, identity, player typologies, sociology

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