The expectation game:

Exposing hidden assumptions in a game studies classroom.

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper we report on a series of classroom exercises fostering dialogue between novice and expert players to collectively explore how assumptions about games and game culture, shaped beyond the classroom walls, impacts the learning activities and dynamics in the classroom. Our earlier work in this direction challenged the pedagogical paradigm often held amongst staff that novice players form a challenge to overcome when teaching about games (Glas and van Vught 2022). This paper shifts the focus from teacher to *student* to expose and challenge hidden assumptions around appropriate player skills and background knowledge. Like before, the exercises took place within a game studies course within a general media and culture studies programme, meaning not all students have signed up with a pre-existing interest in the medium. This makes for a greater variety of student interests and backgrounds and thus assumptions. We explore how the dialectic between novice and expert players highlights the ways in which a game supports different readings when coalescing with different backgrounds, and how it exposes student assumptions and expectations around what are deemed appropriate games, forms of play, and engagements with gaming culture. This, in turn, impacts what is discussed and analyzed in the classroom and who feels invited and comfortable joining that conversation.

THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM IN A GAME STUDIES CLASSROOM

In higher education, play is often considered a force for good, capable of countering neoliberal priorities like performance and individualism (Whitton and Nørgård 2025), and instead creating a "more inclusive and caring learning environment" (Holflod 2025, 214). However, once the classroom becomes the locus of games studies education, new challenges arise for inclusivity, with playing games requiring literacies that not all students possess equally. The role of the teacher is key in opening a more inclusive approach towards different degrees of playing skills, repertoire knowledge, and general access to the field of game studies (cf. Zagal 2010; Vossen 2018). However, pre-existing assumptions also exist within the student population. Shaped by their social, cultural, economic, and political upbringing, and through peer interactions, students build anticipations about appropriate games to play and appropriate ways of playing them. Such anticipations, even when unexpressed, also do "boundary-work" (Gieryn 1983), demarcating "real games", worthy of academic study, from "not-real games" (Consalvo and Paul 2019). It also valorizes certain players with certain skills, and by extension certain forms of scholarship.

In education, unexpressed assumptions about what is appropriate and what is not, are often considered part of the *hidden curriculum*: "that which is implicit and embedded in educational experiences in contrast with the formal statements about curricula and the surface features of educational interaction" (Sambell and McDowell 1998, 391-392). The hidden curriculum is known to negatively impact opportunities for study success of students who lack familiarity with these norms (cf. Collier and Morgan 2008; Yee 2016). And because the hidden curriculum may run counter to the *intended curriculum* (van den Akker 2006), it is imperative to expose and challenge it.

ENTERING GAMES OF EXPECTATIONS

The course consisted of two groups of around 20 students each. The exercise we engaged students in to expose the hidden curriculum was titled 'The Expectation Game'. Within small teams of two to three students, a game was selected by the student(s) with most expertise and then played by the team at home. Teams were asked to fill in two short questionnaires with questions focusing on the reasoning behind the chosen game, expectations before play, based on expertise or contextual information, and the experiences of the actual playthroughs. These student reflections, extended by class discussion as well as focus group interviews conducted after the course with a smaller subset of the students, form the basis for our reflection on gaming capital (Consalvo 2007) as part of the hidden curriculum our students engaged with.

Most of these hidden perspectives revolve around the in-group vs out-group dynamics which highlight being part of a subculture. Among themselves, gamers found pleasure in picking challenging games, seemingly confirming or reinforcing a relationship between certain skillsets and meaningful play. In the opposite direction, expert players would display an implicit urge to ease novices into their hobby, picking easy-to-learn games which aesthetically connected to other media (literature, film, art). As one student put it "to show games can also be art". Novice players did indeed approach the game often from what Mäyrä calls the shell, i.e., the representational layer. Gamers often emphasized the gameplay core (2008, 17). In the case of one game, *Walden*, the novice even highlighted that the student who picked the game focused largely on the survival aspect, while she engaged with social criticism she

found in various aspects of the storyworld. They both surprised each other in what they expected each other's game experience would be.

Within this dynamic of expectations, players would also spend effort justifying their choice of game, or game experience towards others and themselves. One student who chose *The Sims 4* was concerned that the player would dislike her pick ("a lot of players think it is boring") and saw the fact that this was not the case as a justification for her own history with the game. Another female student had concerns about picking *Valorant* for a fellow female student, as it might be seen as too masculine. She added specific assurance that the game sports a sizable female player base. It shows internalized perspectives on how players as well as outsiders see their game community. These examples show that students carry with them assumptions about what 'proper' games are, or how games or game communities are perceived. These assumptions, when left unexposed, could result in students being hesitant to share what they play and why.

Exposing the hidden curriculum starts with the notion that not all students play alike. There are typical gamers, yes. But within scholarship we should, as Droumeva puts it, also pay attention to "gamers who fail, gamers who dislike combat, gamers who enjoy the environmental world, are coming up with distinctly different takes on games as texts and games as experiences" (2024, 7). This is especially pertinent for educational programmes which do not primarily focus on games and play. Even before they enter play, students' backgrounds, identities, knowledge, skills, and attitudes towards the medium shape what they expect from games for themselves and, as we noticed, each other. Bringing these perspectives in dialogue with one another in the classroom broadens the horizon of expectations and associated meaning making processes. Our observations allow for discussion focusing on how those teaching game studies can facilitate a more inclusive classroom space where the implicit hierarchy established by gaming capital is exposed, discussed and questioned to make room for the value of a broader range of cultural capital.

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