

# Winter is gaming: study of gamers' habits throughout the year

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## INTRODUCTION

While video games are increasingly recognised as culturally situated media practices rather than purely technological artefacts, little attention has been paid to how gaming preferences shift in relation to seasonal rhythms and environmental conditions. In keeping with the DiGRA 2026 theme of *Intersectional Pleasures*, this presentation approaches seasonality not merely as a contextual variable but as a site where pleasure, affect, and everyday play intersect with broader social and embodied dynamics. Although existing research (Palomba; 2019) demonstrates that factors such as daylight, temperature, and time of year influence patterns of media consumption, the ways in which players themselves experience, interpret, and narrate these seasonal shifts in their gaming habits remain underexplored. This presentation addresses that gap by examining how video game genres, aesthetics, and play styles change across the calendar year from a player-centred, qualitative perspective.

Methodologically, the research uses semi-structured interviews, following established qualitative interview principles that emphasise flexibility, reflexivity, and meaning-making through dialogue rather than rigid questioning. The empirical material will be collected through interviews conducted with students of the Faculty of Humanities at AGH University of Science and Technology in Kraków who self-identify as regular video game players with at least one year of continuous gaming experience. This purposive sampling strategy is intended to ensure that participants have sufficiently established gaming routines and reflective awareness of their own play habits, thereby allowing for meaningful accounts of seasonal variation. In addition, we want highlight that semi-structured interviews are particularly well suited to this project because they allow participants to reflect on personal routines, moods, and seasonal associations while still maintaining a coherent thematic structure for comparative analysis. What's more, this approach supports an exploration of both explicit decision-making (for example, "I prefer cosy farming games in winter") and more subtle affective influences tied to weather, daylight, and emotional states.

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The interview data will be analysed using qualitative content analysis, a systematic procedure that balances structure and flexibility by developing a coding frame grounded in both existing theory and emergent patterns from the data. Starting with codes they will be developed from sensitizing concepts drawn from media-use and mood-regulation literature; next the coding frame will be iteratively refined in light of recurring empirical themes; and finally, validity will be checked through inter-coder discussion and reflexive researcher notes. In other words, the analysis is designed to identify recurring seasonal themes while still capturing the nuance of individual player experiences.

The theoretical framework draws on media-use theories and game studies such as (Svend Brinkmann and Steinar Kvale; 2018) including research on mood regulation and seasonal affect, which suggests that reduced daylight in winter may increase engagement with more immersive, emotionally-regulating games, while warmer seasons may be associated with lighter, more social, or faster-paced gaming experiences. Having said that, these theories are treated here as sensitizing concepts rather than strict hypotheses, thereby guiding interpretation of player narratives rather than constraining them.

The expected contribution of this work is threefold. Firstly, it offers a player-centred typology of seasonal gaming behaviours, highlighting how genre, aesthetic preference, and play style evolve over the course of the year — a topic that has been relatively understudied to date. Secondly, it demonstrates the value of semi-structured qualitative interviewing as a method for studying game culture. Thirdly, it provides practical insights for game designers and marketers with respect to seasonal content planning, event timing, and aesthetic design choices. Overall, this paper argues that gaming habits are not stable preferences but dynamic, situated practices through which players negotiate pleasure in relation to seasonal rhythms, affective needs, and everyday constraints.

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